CONVERSATION

THE INTERLOGICAL TURN IN MEDIA ECOTLOGY

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GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

ABSTRACT This dialogue foregrounds the interological nature of media ecology as a style of exploration into the human condition. Besides Marshall McLuhan, it also brings Gilles Deleuze, field theory, and the I Ching, et cetera, to bear on media ecological inquiry. The idea is to reveal a pattern instead of defining a term.

KEYWORDS Interology; Deleuze; Assemblage; McLuhan; Field theory; Leibniz; I Ching

RÉSUMÉ Ce dialogue met en relief la nature « interologique » du style d'exploration de la condition humaine que propose l'écologie des médias. Pour ce faire, il fait intervenir, en plus des réflexions de Marshall McLuhan, la pensée de Gilles Deleuze, la théorie des champs et le « Livre des transformations » (Yi King). Il s'agit moins ici de définir un terme que de révéler un « motif » (pattern).

MOTS CLÉS Interologie; Deleuze; Assemblage; McLuhan; Théorie des champs; Leibniz; Yi King

PREAMBLE This article is one among a series of dialogues on media ecology the authors have written since 2011. The idea is to play, probe, and provoke, while keeping from putting things to bed in a premature manner. Marshall McLuhan points out: “The future masters of technology will have to be lighthearted and intelligent. The machine easily masters the grim and the dumb.” In the same vein, the authors believe playfulness is perhaps humanity’s best defense against the shaping power of its own prostheses. Over the past few years, the authors have been practicing fragmatics and interology in an intersubjective, intergenerational, and intercultural interval, first unwittingly and then self-consciously. In this interval, purposeful symbolic action and ludic verbal play often become indistinguishable, and innocent mishearing often results in penetrating insight. The authors realize that this is the very mode of operation of McLuhanesque explorations and thus feel increasingly comfortable with the unfinished nature and
mosaic-like texture of the pieces that have emerged so far. As our life world becomes increasingly technologized, the study of man necessarily becomes inseparable from the study of media, and vice versa. As a matter of fact, to study the ontology of man or the ontology of media is precisely to miss the point. Whether one takes man or media as the starting point, one necessarily ends up studying interality (间性) or the “play” in between, which is to say, one necessarily ends up doing interology (间性研究). Interality is precisely the preoccupation of most sections in this article.

Media understood as assemblages

Peter Zhang (PZ): The strategic shift of perspective is a rhetorical exercise. The term “assemblage” at least offers us a fresh vantage point.

In the final analysis, “media” and “assemblages” are synonymous terms. The difference is in the terministic screen each invokes. The one implies a mediumistic view of the world—what milieu the technical object (e.g., the stirrup, which makes possible the affect of courtly love and the social posture of chivalry) creates, and the affect, social posture, and ethos this milieu in-forms. The milieu is invisible and therefore invincible. It conditions man. The ethical question is a question of creating a counter-milieu to make the immediate milieu visible. The other term implies an assemblage orientation: what assemblage or social machine takes up man and the technical object (e.g., the stirrup) alike, what mode of being is immanent in this assemblage. The social machine can be virtual, or it can be actualized or occupied. Either way, it is real. The ethical question for the human agent is a question of autopoiesis: what social machine to be taken up by, what technical object to enter into composition with, or, which virtual profile of oneself to recognize and actualize. Jackie Chan’s character, for example, typically is capable of recognizing a virtual profile of himself in more objects than his rivals. He perceives more contrapuntal relationships between himself and objects in the environment. Therein lies his versatility.

Eric McLuhan (EM): I do not find much here to quarrel with. It seems a restatement of figure/ground relations. Why bother to translate into other terms? Is there an audience for the more complex version? One feature of translations: much is inevitably added, and much is also inevitably lost or sidelined.

PZ: “Assemblage” implies a compositional ontology, or, to be more accurate, an interology. Each technical object extends an existential invitation to its intended user. The invention of a technical object means the invention of a social machine. The introduction of a new social machine means more than the addition of an extra thing to the social field. Rather, it changes the entire milieu.

A Platonist impulse is plaguing the discipline of media ecology. McLuhan’s explorations have been driven by a sophistic spirit, which celebrates simulacra. To play with the notion of “assemblage” is to honour that spirit.

Media and modes

PZ: In “Media Ad-Vice: An Introduction,” McLuhan points out: “All of my recommendations, therefore, can be reduced to this one: study the modes of the
media, in order to hoick all assumptions out of the subliminal nonverbal realm for scrutiny and for prediction and control of human purposes."  

The Human Equation takes modes as a given, and as the basis of technological extensions. Mode in this sense is a matter of humans’ extendibility. (The flipside would be affordance.)

Through the Vanishing Point, however, suggests that modes are a result of media-induced modulations of our sense bias. Put differently, modes are a matter of closure. When we engage the world and “close” our experiences with all of our senses equally, we are in a “primitive” mode, to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’ vocabulary. Neo-primitivism is an outcome of humanity’s retrieval of this mode in the electric/electronic age. The distinction between the eye mode and the ear mode is a big deal for McLuhan. The same distinction can be called the distinction between the left-hemisphere mode and the right-hemisphere mode, or that between the visual mode and the acoustic mode. I like this line from Laws of Media a lot: “When the senses dance together transformation is the common-sense mode of experience; when vision reigns over the others the universe turns static.”

There is a direct correlation between media, modes, and affect. Here is why this correlation matters: The “same” message affects people differently depending on what medium is used and how the medium is appropriated. The point is that when the medium changes, the message no longer stays the same—we get a different message (i.e., overall communicative effect) entirely. So a medium implies a mode.

If we take a closer look, however, we can see that the same medium can be appropriated in different modes. For example, writing can be appropriated in a prosaic mode, or a poetic/rhapsodic mode. McLuhan operates in the latter mode. Film can be appropriated in a classical mode, or an animation mode. Vilém Flusser suggests that telematics can be used in a discursive mode or a dialogic mode. The former is how control is exercised, whereas the latter leads to the production of new information and the sensation of freedom.

Gilles Deleuze would say the assemblage is the mode. The assemblage that takes one up bespeaks one’s mode of being, mode of perception, and mode of consciousness. Humans switch modes by entering into composition with different assemblages, for real or in fantasy. Examples of the latter can be found in Dr. Seuss’ book And To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street, which is about the young protagonist’s mode switching while he is daydreaming.

For Baruch Spinoza, mode is a passive term, perhaps because mode is a matter of humans’ affectability, namely the capacity to be affected. Affectability and extendibility are more or less synonymous terms. It is a measure of our passion, pathos, or passive power.

Affect is a pivotal term here. Humans can be affected in more ways than ticks. The tick is the symbol of the Stoic—capable of being affected by, and patiently awaiting, three stimuli but totally indifferent to all others. Therein lies the Stoic’s power—the freedom from pointless arousals and the freedom to do a few meaningful things well.

When we are in an eye mode, we can be affected visually but we tend to be deaf, tasteless, blunt-nosed, and callous. When one sense is intensified, other senses are
narcotized. As a result, we enter a specific sensory mode. When we are in a tactile mode, we can be affected through all of the senses working together. In the final analysis, our senses are the physiological basis of our modes. Media modulate our sense ratios and put us in different modes.

The eye mode is an outcome of print media's modification of our sensory equilibrium. The post-literate ear mode is an outcome of electric/electronic media's retuning of our sense ratios.

Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* is a tantalizing book.9

EM: My impression is that you are taking something simple and making it complicated. Now this is normal/expected/required academic procedure, I know very well, but it runs counter to my own instincts, which are always to clarify and to simplify.

I have in hand a book on academic responses to my piece on formal cause: a dozen or so essays try it on everything in sight, in their own fields and outside them. By the end of the book I feel impressed by all the learning on display, and completely confused about the nature of the subject, formal cause. (The editors asked me to write the introduction.)

Richard Cavell did something similar, writing a large book about our idea of visual and acoustic space—even after our exhaustive essay at the front of *Laws of Media*. Same result: impressive, and utterly confusing.10 But in both cases, the academic response is to write even more essays, critical of the books and so on. In Cavell's case, the solution is available: both my father and I and the two of us together have written one-page expositions of the kinds of sensory space. It can even be done in a single paragraph. So his book is unnecessary. I have talked with a few readers of the book and found them not a bit wiser about the subject, though they now know a heap of peripheral things and facts and arguments they did not know before. It might have appeared in a more useful form, as a small article.

Think of the oyster and the pearl. The irritant (the original essay or whatever) invites commentary and explanation—layers of wisdom that surround the provocation and eventually obscure it completely, but those pearls of wisdom become the new end of it all and quite bury the original. Even distort it.

I always ask myself, what is this or that piece of writing for? What effect does the writer aim to have on the reader? Much time is devoted to the word “mode.” It appears prominently in the two-sentence conclusion, but the word there adds nothing new, and the conclusion itself is not news.

Incidentally, while my father did make much use of the eye/ear contrast, he settled on it as a teaching strategy. It was a big deal, that is, a frequent resort, only because the contrast was an easy way to help people come to grips with what he was trying to discuss, but of course the matter is hugely more complex than a simple dichotomy. The audience, though, ran with it and bypassed the complexity—maddening.

A side note: the four Modes of Action in *The Human Equation* are not modes in your sense, as I understand it. That is, they are not forms of closure but of utterance. We might have called them Forms of Action, or Kinds of Action, et cetera, with equal
felicity. (Want to know why we chose “modes” instead of something else? We liked the sound better.)

PZ: I agree “eye” and “ear” are better treated as heuristics or cover terms.

I like the oyster and pearl metaphor and feel like reworking it a bit. If your essay on formal cause is the original irritant (the grain of sand for the oyster), then each academic reader needs to come to grips with it on his or her own terms. Writing a response essay is a ritual process of developing a counterirritant (growing a pearl around the original irritant) out of one’s own being.

If your essay on formal cause gets people to think up a profusion of fresh thoughts on a range of topics, be it emergence or morphogenesis, I would not dismiss those derivative essays as sheer simulacra but as a sure sign that your notion of formal cause has served the function of a potent heuristic. This, of course, is a sophisticated attitude, as opposed to a Platonist one. On the other hand, some simulacra are more useful (provocative, pregnant) than others.

If an existential pressure is the irritant, then a technological response is a counterirritant. If a technological invention is the irritant, then art might serve as a counterirritant. If the clamour of the technologized cityscape is the irritant, then Stravinsky’s music is a counterirritant.

The irritant is the ground (formal cause) out of which the counterirritant emerges.

If we start to talk about discursive formations as formal cause, then we are building a bridge between media ecology and rhetoric, or constitutive rhetoric in particular.

The peculiar thing about our world today is that statistics has become a salient formal cause. Many of the things we do are driven by stats. Information literally is the formal cause (artificial ground) that in-forms. This is the insidious side of cybernetics. The entailment is that “cybernetic categories must be used for criticism,” as Vilém Flusser puts it.11

EM: Well, a quick riposte …

First, not sure what you mean by rhetoric: Aristotelian or real (Ciceronian)?

Second, rhetoric is essentially ecological: that is the function of the third division, elocutio.

Third, I would want to know, what is the ground (i.e., formal cause) for statistics and for information (quite different things) and for cybernetics?

PZ: By “Rhetoric is essentially ecological,” do you mean it is ground driven? That is to say, the right thing to say is a function of the ecology of communication.

EM: Ecology derives from “oikos,” the Greek word for a house, a household.

Note the word for master of the house: “oiko-despotes,” house-despot—very witty, no?

PZ: How would you work the etymology into “Rhetoric is essentially ecological”? 

EM: Cannot think of a way to work the two together as you indicate. Ecology generally refers to natural environment, the state of one’s natural “house,” and only
lately to mental or cultural affairs. Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*? Never read it but you might have. Is there a path there?

**PZ:** Martin Heidegger comes to mind: “Language is the house of being” is a close-to-literal translation of “Rhetoric is essentially ecological.”

**EM:** A quibble: Heidegger’s image means language might be ecological. Says nothing about the art or science of rhetoric.

**PZ:** On the other hand, language as a mode of action cannot but be rhetorical.

**EM:** Or it could be grammatical instead, or even dialectical.

**PZ:** Wonder what your answer to your third question would be. Intriguing and provocative! Here is my guess:

The ground for statistics: mass media, which bring into being a mass society—a society of crowds.

The ground for information: experience.

The ground for cybernetics: electronic and digital media. Formal cause is not that far from “conditions of possibility,” or “the circumstances that call something into being,” or simply “in-forming ground.”

Do statistics and cybernetics not also create an artificial environment/ground (a second nature) that in-forms the way many things are done?

Also, what do you think is the ground for informatics?

**EM:** I might have thought that the ground for stats is the alphabet. “Information” is a rather woolly notion, don’t you think? What is the difference between it and informatics?

Does cybernetics not depend on the feedback loop?

Please forgive me if you have told me before, but have you got into Elias Canetti’s *Crowds and Power*? He proposes two modes of crowd, and the third, of which he is unaware, is the ground for his observations about the first two.

**PZ:** What is the third mode of crowd, please?

**EM:** It is the “mass audience.” Disembodied. All mass audiences are the same size. They have their being not by size but by speed: the speed of light.

**Medium and content**

**PZ:** The medium is something that “has us.” “The content” is something that “we have.”

**EM:** If the medium “has us,” then the content is … us (“being had”). Still assuming that “the medium” means the environment.

**PZ:** Books have become the content of digital media. Books no longer have us. Instead, we have them. Now digital media have us.

**EM:** Right on!

**PZ:** Put otherwise, nowadays technical images are the medium, while concepts are
the content. We are freeing ourselves from our concepts by illustrating them with technical images. After being alienated from the world by images, and then concepts, and now technical images, we are now thrice removed from the world.

**EM:** First removal from the world: speech. That is, names of things draw the speaker back from direct experience, direct contact with things named. But they also have a dramatic effect on perception and the “right” name for a thing—*le mot juste*—is the word that replays the experience of the thing when first encountered. T.S. Eliot called this the “objective correlative.” We are still in the world of perception here. At what point do names flip into concepts and out of the domain of perception? Wouldn’t that be when they cease to invoke perception? That is the sort of nomenclature that scientists seek and poets abhor.

**PZ:** Percept is the ground. Concept is the figure. The flip marks the distinction between the intuitive man and the rational man, to use Friedrich Nietzsche’s categories. Are you suggesting the flip has to do with the phonetic alphabet?

When we “language” (used as a verb here), the things being referred to are the content that we have. The words are the medium that has us. This is where media ecology and general semantics intersect. Media ecology is general semantics writ large.

**EM:** Your first sentence ties my brain into knots. I have never seen the word language used as a verb and cannot imagine its meaning here. And the rest is too gnomic …

A language is one thing, words another. Brings to mind the Structuralist pairing of *langue* and *parole*, which they used roughly as figure and ground. A language is a repository (or codification) of the experience and sensibility of the users, and as such is used by the poets whose job it is to track changes in perception and to keep the language in good operating condition.

**PZ:** Perhaps instead of dying out, literacy will be widespread in the age of post-literacy. But books will not be the medium that programs people. Instead, people will be programed by technical images.

**EM:** Already happened. Literacies abound; new ones every day. I gave a speech on the topic at York University some time ago. The title is “Literacy in a New Key.” It is part of a book I am doing on literacy past, present, and future.

People programmed by images is the basis of modern advertising: that was well underway when “lifestyle ads” made their appearance more than 30 years ago. The “technical” part refers to the content of the ad, the subject matter, which is of course not the area of effect.

“The user is the content”

**PZ:** The chief task of interlocutors is to serve as each other’s mediator and falsify each other’s provocations.

“‘The user is the content’ is something we need to demystify. It is polysemous.
Any instance of communication, whatever the apparent content, is ultimately about the user.

The user/reader is the ultimate arbiter of the content.

The user is the content of the medium—literally, contained within the hidden milieu, which shapes him in an all but irresistible way.

Here is the interpretation offered by McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt: “You ‘put on’ the poet’s medium and become its content by adjusting yourself to use his poem in altering your perception of the world.”

EM: Sometimes poetry is best left as poetry: the reader learns by reading and reaching for understanding, dancing among the words.

The chief task of interlocutors, surely, is to talk to each other, to kick ideas around.

**Gestalt theory, field theory**

PZ: There is a strong resonance between Gestalt Theory and field theory in modern science. Both would be good ways to grasp “media.”

EM: How about this: let us begin with a tetrad on each? Let us see where that leads us.

PZ: My gut feeling is that they will be similar.

This point made by Flusser can be understood in terms of Gestalt Theory: “The industrial products made in Japan that are flooding the world do not breathe the same atmosphere as that breathed by the Industrial Revolution since the Enlightenment.” Atmosphere is the equivalent of “ground.”

Gestalt Theory enhances awareness of figure/ground interplay, obsoletes the ideology of efficient causality, retrieves the philosophy behind traditional Chinese medicine, and, pushed to an extreme, flips into ground determinism, an attitude of resignation, disbelief in individual agency, and therefore, a disinclination to take action.

I have developed a (pseudo) field theory on the spur of the moment: We all create a field of energy around us, and inhabit each other’s field. We influence others and get influenced through such fields. The “substance” of a Zen master or a great pedagogue, for example, lies more in the atmosphere or field he or she creates than in what is contained within his or her skin. What is a person if not the milieu he or she creates? Thus it makes sense to treat a person as a medium. The medium, milieu, or field created by, say, Deleuze, is still very much alive and is becoming increasingly vibrant.

In Chinese calligraphy, each stroke creates its own field. So do each radical and each character. The “air” between the strokes, radicals, and characters are as important as the strokes, radicals, and characters themselves. More precisely, the strokes, radicals, and characters are the fields they either create on their own or co-create with other strokes, radicals, and characters. A virtuosic calligraphic piece is one in which issues of the interzone or zone of proximity have been artfully resolved.

The needles on a pine tree create a special field around themselves. When wind passes through this field, we hear a unique hum. Chinese artists of old were very much drawn to this audiovisual complex, which they called “pine-wind” (松风). It
takes extraordinary genius to capture the quality of the field created by a pine tree on a windy day with brush and ink. Grammatically there is a difference between “wind filtered through a pine tree” and “pine tree and wind in a contrapuntal relationship, as an integral happening,” but existentially there is none. So the semantic ambiguity created by the hyphen in “pine-wind” is a non-problem. The artistic will is the only difference that makes a difference.

A field orientation is none other than an interological orientation. When two fields come into contact with each other, a resonant interval is created. The contact zone is where the action is. Probing is all about releasing energy by means of artificially created contact zones.

Paul Virilio displays a field orientation in the way he talks about antiform.17 Carl Jung’s notion of synchronicity, which is informed by his work with Wolfgang Pauli, the quantum physicist, is a field theoretical interpretation of quantum mechanics.

Alan Watts’s joyous cosmology is field theoretical in nature.

Media ecology McLuhan style is a field theoretical study of media.

The fourfold processes diagrammed with tetrads are loosely synchronous or simultaneous, although we tend to think “flip” comes a bit later than the other three. If there is a word that crystalizes the gist of field theory, what is it? Emergence? Synchronicity? Interdependence? Interconnectedness? Interlockedness? Inter-ness? Interality?

For McLuhan, the field is acoustic and simultaneous. Simultaneity is not just temporal, but spatiotemporal. “Coincidence” is a good synonym. A field is a field of potentials. It exists at the level of the medium, the virtual, rather than at the level of contents qua actual events. The virtuality of the field, however, tends to be underemphasized, because the virtual as a category is more or less precluded by the materialist, positivist demands of scientific method. Field is ground, which can only be comprehended through apposition and ratio. Therein lies a retrieval of Keplerian archetypalism (music of the spheres) and medieval organicism in general.

McLuhan’s (1999) view of the global village seems to be a field theoretical view, as indicated by the following passage from “Communication Media: Makers of the Modern World”:

Let us start directly with a mention of ... the global-village atmosphere of the twentieth century. Whether you conceptualize it or whether you verbalize it, you live in a global situation in which every event modifies and affects every other event. Not at some remote time, not long after the first one, but at the same time. In other words, whatever happens today affects everything that happens TODAY, not tomorrow.18

In a sense, the global village is a field of media events.

Our sense of “ontology” is constrained by a visual bias. Interology is meant as an acoustic corrective. But the “logy” (logia, “writing about, study of”) in “interology” may still imply, oddly, a figure orientation. McLuhan criticized Karl Marx and Georg Hegel precisely because ground cannot be figured directly without conjuring up another ground. That is why he adopted the analogical method of the tetrad. Lo-
gos, logocentrism, is essentially figure oriented. Hence McLuhan’s suggestive style of writing.

Field theory is a critique of the ideology of efficient causality. It postulates that the entire field causes (or mediates) the chain of events that take place within it. Something specific that appears to happen “here” is actually a side effect (i.e., an unintended consequence) of a field deformation or fluctuation, which is to say, a side effect of an energy passing through the field. The apparent vector of the event, seen as “content,” is orthogonal to this energy. Instead of linear cause and effect, field theory believes in obliquity, perpendicularity, orthogonality, side effects, and unintended consequences. The well-known butterfly effect makes a good example. There are affinities between field theory and systems theory.

Cosmic consciousness is field theory writ large. In ancient China, a severe flood or a locust swarm was easily perceived as a sign of the illegitimacy of a ruler. A hurricane in the US, by contrast, almost never gets read as a sign of an unjust social system. Instead, it is easily dismissed as an act of God. In a sense, field theory is a species of neoprimitivism. It is highly compatible with ecological thinking and media ecological thinking. It is a much better way of encompassing meteorological happenings, climate change, and myriad other things than a linear model.

Field theory arguably started with electromagnetism, but there are obvious forerunners in intellectual history. The practice of consulting the I Ching for clues about a situation implies a proto-field theoretical Weltanschauung.

Put in tetradic form, field theory enhances acoustic thinking and interological thinking, obsolesces visual thinking and entity orientation, retrieves ancient cosmologies (e.g., the ones that had informed yoga, taiji, and qigong), and pushed to an extreme, flips into paranoia, psychosis (conflation of fantasy and reality), or mysticism.

Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716)

PZ: Is Leibniz a notable figure for McLuhan? If so, in what way?


PZ: I think Leibniz inhabits a pivotal position between the East and the West—his work foreshadows the flip of the alphanumeric into the digital, which, according to Flusser, is ideographic and synthetic in nature. Between the East and the West lies a space for involution. This peculiar involution is particularly worth looking into. Once the two blur into one, such involution will be out of the question. With the digital becoming the unified code for East and West alike, humanity stands to lose the most significant interality.

I really have the I Ching in mind when I mention Leibniz, who is often referred to as the father of the digital revolution. The hexagrams of the I Ching are a predecessor of the binary system Leibniz reinvented. The undivided line, the yang, is the equivalent of one, and the divided line, the yin, is the equivalent of zero. In the digital age, the binary system is the hidden medium or milieu of our existence, the formal cause of our mode of being and manner of doing things. Probabilistic thinking
is valorized over again. Happenings tend to be grasped less in terms of linear causation, and more in terms of the fusion of chance and necessity.

McLuhan and the I Ching

PZ: Do you see any resonances between McLuhan’s work and the I Ching?

EM: I do not see any relation between the two, though I know that my father read through the I Ching once (at least), but never did he “consult” it, as others do. He found a few things there, though, that appeared to confirm things he was working on—such as reversal.

PZ: I am curious which edition of the I Ching he read. Is there a copy in the Marshall McLuhan Collection? I wish I could be there to take a look at the entire collection and read his marginalia in the I Ching, if he did have a copy.

EM: My father did not own a copy of the I Ching, and so there is not one in the archive. I used to have one, but I doubt that he read it. Probably he used a library copy. His office was about 50 yards from the door of the St. Michael's College library, so he was a frequent visitor there.

PZ: Both the I Ching and McLuhan's work manifest a departure from the ideology of efficient causality.

EM: Was the I Ching conscious of departing from sequential causality? I did not know efficient cause had made inroads into Chinese culture before or at that time. Certainly both it and Marshall McLuhan work with formal cause (i.e., environmental cause).

PZ: You are right. My point is anachronistic, or post-historical. Sequential causality was still largely unheard of at the time. The Orient is at least two millennia ahead of/beyond the Occident. Both statements would make sense.

Is there a difference in kind between the kind of randomness, chance, or alea implied by the I Ching and the kind of randomness simulated by the computer? Jung suggests there is a fusion between chance and necessity when one casts a hexagram. To cast a hexagram is to locate a random and necessary focal point for that moment, or a random and necessary interpretive scheme vis-à-vis an impending, indeterminate situation. Is there something postmodern about the I Ching? Put otherwise, does the electric environment make it necessary to retrieve the I Ching?

People into psychedelics—a species of medium—might think of certain sacred plants as transmitters of ancestral wisdom. For the Chinese people, the sacred plant that transmits ancestral wisdom is yarrow. As Richard Wilhelm puts it:

This procedure [of learning the nature of a situation through the manipulation of yarrow stalks] was regarded as mysterious ... simply in the sense that the manipulation of the yarrow stalks makes it possible for the unconscious in man to become active. All individuals are not equally fitted to consult the oracle. It requires a clear and tranquil mind, receptive to the cosmic influences hidden in the humble divining stalks. As products of
the vegetable kingdom, these were considered to be related to the sources of life. The stalks were derived from sacred plants.20

EM: The sixties—the age dominated by colour TV—went gaga over the I Ching. Colour TV is a distinctly different experience from monochrome TV. It is hugely more tactile inasmuch as the beholder fills in (i.e., makes) every colour except “pure” RGB (red, green, and blue). The filling in with black and white programs aired on the colour set is total: “white” in that formula consists of all the colours at once, R and G and B together at full blast. That is to play up the resonant intervals between those three colours in the macula of the eye to the hilt.

Does not the I Ching emphasize resonance and experience in a nonlogical mode? It is certainly nonvisual. The hexagrams and the trigrams seem to me to be musical compositions, sheer poetry. And poetry has one foot in music and one foot in dance. Ezra Pound noted that the meaning of a poem came about through “the dance of the intellect among the words.” Would that be a useful way to imagine the tri- and hexagrams?

Could it be said that the I Ching treats the world as an information environment? All of these probes are reaching for the suitability of the I Ching to sixties sensibility: the sixties environment of sensory intermingling paved the way and there was the I Ching, ready to play on that instrument.

PZ: What is peculiar about the digital age is the simulation of chance. If the hexagrams of the I Ching embody chance, then computers now simulate chance. There is a world of difference between a hexagram worked out ritualistically through the manipulation of yarrow stalks or the tossing of coins, and a hexagram that randomly pops up on the computer. The one derives from the fusion of chance and necessity, whereas the other derives from the simulation of chance. Real chance, and therefore, serendipity and a genuine future, can be programmed out of existence—that is a major threat more or less hidden from humanity in the computer age, an age of algorithms.

The four actions in the I Ching

PZ: Thunder—to move.
Wind—to distribute.
Mountain—to stand still.
Valley/Marsh—to collect.

EM: They appear to align with the Modes of Action (MOA):
Movement: displacement.
Distribution: articulation.
Stillness could be balance: isometrics.

That leaves one orphan MOA, posture/configuration, and one orphan action, collect. Do you see how they too might align? I am not confident of the pairing, but then I know next to nothing about the real essential meaning of the four actions in the I Ching.
PZ: To collect means to assume a receptive posture, to turn oneself into a receptacle, to not expend energy—the opposite of dissipation.

Among the four actions, there are two yings and two yangs. A: B = C: D.

Two series of technical inventions

PZ: Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) have a passage on technical inventions in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*:

... Kafka distinguishes two series of technical inventions: those that tend to restore natural communication by triumphing over distances and bringing people together (the train, the car, the airplane), and those that represent the vampirish revenge of the phantom where there is reintroduced ‘the ghostly element between people’ (the post, the telegraph, the telephone).

Thoughts?

EM: “The post” is the sour note in the chord. I would put it with the first lot, if anywhere. Unless it was junk mail ...

PZ: Indeed the post belongs with the nonelectric lot, as far as speed is concerned. Deleuze and Guattari see a different distinction, though: whether we end up seeing each other in a fully embodied manner or merely seeing a disembodied message from each other. The latter is ghostly and vampirish: this very moment, by crafting this electronic message, my blood is being sucked away. Might as well take a walk outside of the house, listen to cicadas and crickets, and look at the moon. Or take an eastbound Greyhound and find you somewhere near Toronto. Facebook is another vampirish invention.

Facebook and social capital

PZ: Facebook has a manifest interest in maximizing interconnectivity. It seeks to make the social texture legible.

EM: Facebook makes no bones about the fact that it is in the business of designing and constructing new cultural forms. It is in the business of providing identities for lonely, disembodied people. Your list of friends is your “in group” of people who recognize you. Recall Gertrude Stein’s pitiable wail, “I am I because my little dog knows me”—or words to that effect. Or the old Newfie joke about the man who goes into the bank to cash a cheque. The teller asks, “Do you have any identification?” whereupon the Newfie pulls out a pocket mirror, looks at it, and exclaims, “Yup; that’s me.”

PZ: Princes of old, because they were rich and ambitious, could keep as many as 3,000 swordsmen and sophists under their roofs. Today Facebook turns us all into royalty. Some of us have over 1,000 surgeon-like word crafters, image mongers, and information gatherers on call for free. Do we pay a price somehow? Is this social capital, or social deficit?
EM: Reminds me of an old offhand remark by an aristocrat: “As for living, we have servants who do that for us.”

**PowerPoint**

PZ: We are better off with a blank sheet of paper. David Harvey says, “Power corrupts; PowerPoint corrupts absolutely.” Writing on the board puts on display the stuttering, groping process of live thinking; PowerPoint reduces it into a thing, a mummy. Plain paper opens up a smooth space; PowerPoint striates thought.

EM: Heartily agree. Paper—reflected-light medium—is FAR better than any screen. For one thing, paper promotes detachment and objectivity; critical thought, for another. And pen or pencil rather than typewriter.

Too, a fountain pen is superior to ballpoint: it is even closer to handicraft. Pen and paper slow the writing process down so that more thinking goes into the crafting of a sentence, more deliberation and choice of word and phrase.

There is a reason why writing on-screen is called word processing: the result resembles pabulum: it is not actually writing.

PZ: Flusser makes a similar point: “Critical thinking results from the praxis of linear writing.”

Speaking of paper, there is an interesting book so far ignored by the media ecology community: *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History* by Nicholas A. Basbanes.

**Internet**

PZ: In the olden days, tools were extensions of humans; now humans have become the tentacles of (digital) megamachines.

EM: Is tentacles the right metaphor?

We were, for a long while, the reproductive organs of machines …

What bodily organ or function does IoT (Internet of Things) extend?

It links all of our little extensions, our gizmos and apps, this Internet of gadgets.

Each gadget is a little narcosis …

What is the cumulative effect, I wonder.

What will result when we are hit by all apps (etc.) at once.

Or when we make our narcoses aware of each other …

This move would effectively demolish the private, individual subconscious.

What else?

PZ: Could you spell out the last point? To answer your question, I think the internet extends the brain and creates a global super brain.

EM: It seemed to me that hauling our neuroses out of the subconscious and into the light of conscious awareness would leave precious little about which to be sub- or unconscious, i.e., about which to be private. What is the self-love of one without a self?

PZ: “A hyperconscious dream world,” as Flusser puts it.
High-definition television

PZ: The following passage suggests that high-definition (HD) television is more book-friendly than mosaic television, which is more tactile than visual.

French television ... has an 819 line picture definition as compared to our 525 line definition. If we used 819 lines, this would help us out of a lot of nasty school problems, right now. Our kids would find school easier because if the visual photographic level of the medium were pushed up a bit, there would be a bridge between their electric world and their school room which would ease their problems.26

EM: Quite right. But it omits one little thing: our HD version is digital, not analogue, and the screen is a computer screen, not a scanned TV screen. (But the digital screen also presents a mosaic image of dots—pixels.) What Dad said about HD possibly helping assumed that the screen would be a TV screen, like the British and French (and the rest) use: so that, yes, the additional lines would heat up the TV image somewhat, but no experiments were ever performed to verify this result.

Driverless automobiles


EM: Let us try a tetrad. A quick sketch:

Enhances: AUTOnomy.

Obsolesces: control(ler).

Retrieves: car as robot.

Reversal: driver becomes passenger.

Your thoughts?

PZ: I think it actually maximizes control—of passenger and vehicle alike. The vehicle can no longer work in a relatively self-standing manner. It has become an element in a cybernetic assemblage. So I would say the driverless automobile ...

Enhances: passivity, dependence, the feedback loop.

Obsolesces: windshield, traffic tickets, minimum driving age, rearview mirror, “to be in the driver’s seat” (the metaphor).

Retrieves: the idea of a black box (pun intended).

Pushed to an extreme, (the driver’s) control reverses into letting go; driving flips into being driven; autopilot as figure reverses into autopilot as ground (proliferation as a sign of obsolescence). “Auto-mobile” gets literalized on a massive scale.

EM: How about these refinements to Robocoupe? (Like that name?)

Amplifies ...

Obsolesces responsibility, insurance.
Retrieves luxury, leisure; privacy or solitude.

Reverses car into space capsule (if no windshield, could eliminate all windows). Turns the road system into a machine.

**PZ:** It does diffuse responsibility. The risk of “the integral accident” (à la Virilio) becomes imaginable. I would say it amplifies humans’ alienation from one another and from their “mechanical brides.” There will be a total loss of privacy. The passenger will be under surveillance all the time. I think the allusion to Aldous Huxley in the title is great.

**Proliferation as a sign of obsolescence**

**PZ:** Money is an understudied, nihilistic medium/milieu. Georg Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* is a good source.²⁷

**EM:** And the digital environment put paid to the fortunes of money!

One sign of obsolescence is, as you know, proliferation. Look at how many forms of money now surround us. Among the conspicuous ones: air miles.

**PZ:** And bitcoins, too.

“Proliferation as a sign of obsolescence” applies to art. As Virilio puts it: “... if everyone is an artist there’s no more art, and that’s what’s happening. That’s the reason why I say that for me, the plastic arts are finished, it’s over, *alles fertig*. I’m not joking!”²⁸ This is also a retrieval of, or a reversal into, the Balinese state of affairs.

**Neoprimitivism**

**PZ:** This is an age of neoprimitivism and neonomadism. I cannot stand or write mono-linear papers anymore. McLuhan’s practical criticism is a species of neoprimitivism. *Sayonara* to the reign of literacy.

**EM:** Finally I get what you mean by neoprimitive! You mean what we call empiricism—that is, using the sensibilities instead of theory and detachment; using observation and experience.

But beware of being alienated from linearity itself: it is too valuable a resource to set aside or allow to atrophy. We have to become, as it were, bilingual. Probably what you find repellent is bad writing. In this age, good writers (and instances of good writing—that is, writing that is a joy to read) are exceedingly rare. But there are the odd ones to be found here and there ...

Take heart! Have a look at some good prose or poetry. Perhaps visit Pound’s *ABC of Reading* for ten minutes.²⁹ Or Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, ditto.³⁰ Or the Chinese equivalent.

**Education as damage control**

**PZ:** Perhaps the focus of education in this age should be media literacy—what an irony: education as damage control! Media are drugs, and vice versa.

**EM:** Actually, so-called media literacy is little more than an extension of the marketing departments of media manufacturers. It teaches people how to become
more proficient users of this or that medium or gadget. It has zero relation to study of the nature or psychic and social effects of media, new or old. That is, media literacy as currently practiced is the opposite of media ecology, which is not about adapting to new media environments but about their power to restructure cultures and each other. There is nothing ecological about media literacy: it trains users into addicts. Note that media literacy is exclusively oriented toward content, that is, efficient cause: media ecology ought to be (and seldom is, but the potential is there) focused on formal cause, on the media as agents of transformation.

Education ought to focus on perception and how media change and distort it and in the process create new cultures while wiping out old ones—education as damage control, but also education as civil defense against media fallout. Education as training for environmental action and programming—just like natural ecology, which seeks to understand natural processes and how to regulate them, while stemming pollution and environmental degradation.

**PZ:** Media literacy in a robust sense should be synonymous with media ecology, but the typical media literacy class seldom goes beyond content analysis, critical as it is.

**EM:** I do not see how it is possible. Media literacy is inextricably tied to proficiency with using this or that technology. Media ecology is, in a robust sense, the study of environments and their effects and modulations and internecine wars. Only the latter, ecology, would lead to the awareness of addiction and cultural transformation.

**Media ecology as poetics**

**PZ:** To struggle with a language, to commit crimes against it—therein lies the poetic impulse. Put otherwise, the true poet goes beyond mere content and works on the code or the medium itself. In this sense, poets and media ecologists are natural allies. Media ecology is a species of poetics.

**EM:** Well, media ecology OUGHT to be a species of poetics. Thus far, though, it is more a species of bureaucracy and academicism. Consider these remarks by T.S. Eliot on the matter of poetics.

... I may say that the great poet should not only perceive and distinguish more clearly than other men, the colours or sounds within the range of ordinary vision and hearing; he should perceive vibrations beyond the range of ordinary men, and be able to make men see and hear more at each end [of the spectrum] than they could ever see without his help. We have for instance in English literature great religious poets, but they are, by comparison with Dante, specialists. That is all they can do. And Dante, because he could do everything else, is for that reason the greatest “religious” poet, though to call him a “religious poet” would be to abate his universality. The Divine Comedy expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity’s despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing. It is therefore a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no
words for them; and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted.  

PZ: The poet’s mission is to render visible the invisible, to render audible the inaudible, and to render effable the ineffable. Although “the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness” may call to mind a psychedelics user, the poet or artist can get there by other means, and a yogi or Zen master can stay there all the time. Nietzsche’s rapture is most probably a psychedelic experience without psychedelics.

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