

Preface

ALLUQUÈRE ROSANNE STONE

WELCOME TO THE PRESENT

Ends of millennia are angst-ridden occasions when reality shifts gears, and it appears that the synchromesh doesn't always work properly. We find ourselves in the paradoxical situation that the more we call "that which becomes known" by the name "reality," the further we distance ourselves from it. Because with time and increasingly sophisticated tools, reality seems more and more intelligible—as images on screens, images of events that we will never ourselves experience, subatomic collisions, the DNA helix, movement of ions within synapses. What's actually happening is that our understanding of the world and of "nature" increasingly becomes secondhand, like a story. Part of the shining thread that runs through the accounts presented in this book is a story of questioning certain deep cultural dreams and growing infatuated with others.

Scientific practice was based on a kind of rugged, hands-on experimentation—the students learned to pith and dissect frogs, to roll balls down inclined planes. The outcomes of those experiments are maps, too; they also describe phenomena we can't see; the rolling ball demonstrates something about gravity, the frog demonstrates something about life—but we learn to link them tightly with this thing called "the real," to think of them as unbreakable and natural links to an absolute experience of physical phenomena. It is against this background of a hard, obdurate, understandable real world that we fight the wars over who gets to tell the stories about that world. And who gets to tell the stories gets to say what it means to think and to exist as thinking beings.

In his landmark study of scientific discovery, *Laboratory Life*, sociologist Bruno Latour showed that much of producing scientific facts consists of "inscription machines"—little technologies that convert some process of observation into marks on paper. The scientists study the marks, not the objects, and here again is the implied link between the event and the story. Some of this continual process of converting reality into stories is visible to us, but most of it isn't. The

mechanism for carrying out that conversion is a kind of thought-virus, erasing the evidence of its work as soon as it is finished.

We still get our idea of a stable, "real" world muddled up with mechanisms for perceiving that world. Stephen Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* marked another watershed in this process, in which the digital artists at George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic mingled images of live actors with computer-generated dinosaurs, not models, like King Kong, but completely derealized objects that never existed outside a computer. It's much the same phenomenon Latour saw happening in science work, a loss of boundary distinctions between levels of experience, letting the machine act as an emissary from the invisible. The transition from solid models to digitally generated images has gone to completion in an astonishingly short time: Douglas Trumbull and crew created the visuals for the motion-control ride at Luxor in Las Vegas using laser-carved plastic models photographed by a motion-controlled camera moving on an overhead crane; immediately following that, Trumbull sold off all his photographic equipment and thereafter has designed exclusively in the digital domain. That was in 1993. Makes me feel old, and it certainly makes my 1978 Altair computer feel old.

We, the academic researchers and critics, are as caught up in this as anyone else. Privileging vision has a long history that involves not only photography but text; witness that as a culture we chose to embody our knowledge in the form of books—and until very recently books, too, possessed that ineluctable quality of existing only in discrete locations. With the onset of everything being everywhere, we began to question the authority and mechanism of the specular gaze—i.e., looking at something from a single viewpoint. Specularity, it seems, is tenacious, if not precisely persistent; and in complex ways it's at the heart of debates over how consciousness works. A single visual viewpoint seems to require a single awareness that does the viewing. In the age of Xerox and TV, the presence of an infinity of instantly replicable images hasn't (yet) managed to dislodge our stubborn sense that we exist as individual beings, fixed in space and time. And yet . . . we do change. But it's the other guys who get to take advantage of our senses of singular selfhood, the guys with the credit-checking databanks and consumer profiles. Out of the snail track of our passage through a world of myriad simultaneous opportunities for consumption, they build their own images of who we are, freed from the constraints of linearity or sense. Our database doppelgangers are already free of the tyranny of localized subjectivity; they follow the geodesics of capital and of ideal citizenship. It's ourselves that haven't yet caught up.

In the vast interweaving of stories by means of which we create and maintain our human cultures, the story of progress has been one of the deepest and most powerful. It appears and reappears in an infinite variety of guises. Stripped of any baggage, it is the simple idea that time has an arrow and that one end of the arrow is different from the other. Stories have beginnings and ends, actions have consequences. The entire structure of narrative depends upon this simple relationship.

Implied in this way of thinking about the world is the idea that we are going somewhere, that the end of everything, like the end of a story, is going to be satisfying (otherwise by definition it isn't the end), that it will be in some sense definitive. That's what "end" means, with perhaps the sole exception of personal death, and we don't think about that much anyway. The invention of salvation — the idea that we're going *somewhere*, and that that somewhere has *intrinsic value* — must have been a hell of a kick. Among other things, it provided a structure of purpose, intention, reason; it's an immensely powerful idea, so powerful that it's become part of the epistemic wallpaper still driving things along while being more or less invisible.

SPEAKING OUT OF THE MODERNIST PARADIGM

So, the linearity of narrative and the singularity of consciousness jacks in (or smacks in, as into a food processor) to electronic culture — which, in its current guise, is neither linear nor singular. How to generate a useful critique of this moment? Unfortunately, the easiest error is to examine it from within the modernist paradigm. After all, we're all children of modernism, raised within that mighty architecture and so steeped in it that not only is it invisible but we view with deep suspicion or outright derision ways of circumventing or fracturing its hegemony. This has been the extremely thorny problem for the "post"-foo contingent since its inception. If modernism is the only language you know, how do you make a statement that isn't modernist and still have it understood? Audre Lorde's acerbic comment was that the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house — or, I would add, comment on it.

Nevertheless, there has been a considerable body of work in which thoughtful critics have attempted to come to grips with the beast while living inside its belly, and they haven't done too badly. The real action is where it always is and in all probability always will be — not within an existing discipline, which by nature has already achieved a stability from which it will fight any attempt to tinker with its episteme, but out at the margins and in the cracks, the Temporary Autonomous Zones and unlicensed areas that several contributors here have playfully and provocatively suggested. As long as knowledge systems continue to be born and die we will be at war with our own creations — dynamic wars of growth and change in which we will continually battle to surpass ourselves.

CYBERSPACE: RESISTANCE, OR SAME-OLD SAME-OLD?

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our latest instantiation of the complex idea of electronic culture, because it seems to be implicated in so many of the accounts presented here, and perhaps to point beyond them in complex and sometimes troubling ways.

It's been my pleasure to study cyberspace as an emergent phenomenon in a number of fields, from philosophy to cultural theory to computer science and beyond. In and of itself, the Net, the Infobahn, the whatever-you-call-it that's having its moment of deification/demonization, is nothing more than a physical manifestation of pure opportunity, neither liberatory nor restrictive. It's only one aspect of cyberspace, but it's come to stand for the entire epistemic enchilada. However, the global distributed communication system within which the Netfobahn is embedded is an example of the exceedingly rare situation in which designing to military specifications turns out to offer a terrific advantage to everyone else. This is because the very things about the Net that make it nearly indestructible in event of enemy attack also make it nearly uncontrollable by a single, central entity.

However, that situation, while rich with promise, doesn't in any way guarantee that what happens in cyberspace will be liberatory in character or purpose. Our species is endlessly inventive in coming up with new and exciting ways to shoot itself in the foot. On one hand are those, taking after Net architect John Gilmore, who claim that "the Net treats censorship as damage, and routes around it" (it's tempting to add the cognate, "American society treats intelligence as damage, and routes around it.") On the other hand are those who claim that cleverness, religious zeal, fear of the new and strange, and simple downright perversity will be more than sufficient to kill off any transformative potential the Net may possess. It's important, however, to remember that the arrival of cyberspace as a specific concept — oddly in step with the millennium as it may be — neither nullifies any of the philosophical inquiries that preceded it nor valorizes the later work that critiques it; though it certainly provides toothsome opportunities for rethinking some hoary problems of vision and representation.

What I mostly hope is that cyberspace doesn't turn out to be merely a distraction, an energy drain that turns our focus away from deeper changes in the workings of capital, information, and thought — the kinds of issues that various authors in this book address. The most visible debates here in the U.S. are over shallow, hot-button, class issues such as clean versus dirty thinking. Personally, I don't agree with either the cyberutopians or those who believe that freedom of speech must mean unbridled kiddie porn. Value neutrality at the level of the infrastructure has little to do with what happens in the metastructure, which is the level at which we all participate in such electronic culture as it exists. As fledgling social formations struggle to find their identities in the Net, I take heart from CompuServe's early withdrawal from attempts to censor communications between its enclave and the rest of cyberspace, choosing instead to leave issues of appropriate access up to individual subscribers.

At this juncture there is plenty of software available with the ability to limit access to the new electronic communities. In the U.S., our biggest problem in that regard is still the segment of the population, minuscule but powerful in the way

fanaticism can be powerful far beyond its measure, that would rather see abortion providers shot dead than permit individual citizens to make their own decisions about issues perceived as possessing moral scope. So long as the world contains those who would have everyone else step to one tune, the ancient battles over control of both technology and thought will continue to rage as they always have.

The simple point of all this is that it's up to us. We can pay attention or allow ourselves to be distracted. Questions about whether cybereculture will be repressive or liberatory or anything at all ultimately devolve to what each of us, individually, is willing to contribute. It is quite possible that the greatest potential force for change since movable type is at this very moment at our doorstep, or maybe our phone line. In and of itself, that means nothing. What do we bring to the table? Do we understand the stakes? Are we willing to risk? Are we willing to go beyond that which we know, to accept that which is different, or unintelligible, or threatening? Or, should we prove craven as the worst of us would have it, will the train of opportunity stop here again?

AND FINALLY . . .

We're back to the basics. I began by saying that part of the thread that runs through the accounts presented in this book is a story of questioning certain cultural dreams and embracing others. In the narrow view, some folks can't wait to demonize the products of our flirtation with the episteme of pure information and its ecstasies; some find them an unqualified boon. Some say that any way you tell our tribal stories is the right way, but I don't believe all cautionary tales are equal. Does rage against the machine mean rage against antibiotics? Can we just rage against parts of the machine? What, if anything, have we learned from our trip down Ol' Man Timmer? In the wider view, perhaps Ursula LeGuin had it right once and for all in *Always Coming Home*—if you become ill we can sing you well, but if that doesn't cut it you can always hike up to Wakwaha and check into the hospital. Technology and culture lying down sweetly together in the green fields of High Irony.

Regardless of how we tell those stories, what we seem to learn from observation is that human civilization proceeds not by neat, smooth advances but by a collection of patches and workarounds. Maybe the fact that this is precisely the way the Internet was designed to work tells us something about the blurring of boundaries that herald—some might say “pathognomize”—our moment of time. Could it be that Technology treats Culture as damage, and routes around it? □

