

## IMAGOCLASMS: ICONOLOGIES BETWEEN THE BODY CORPORATE AND THE MACHINE INCARNATE<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

On Wednesday 31st November 1994, Guy Debord killed himself in the village of Champot where he lived.<sup>2</sup> Too few months after the death of the French situationist and theorist *provocateur*, the spectacularity, and specularity, of the late twentieth century appears undiminished. This is evident in the prophecy that digitisation will bring wholesale transformation, from the level of the virtual individual body to forging the wired community and the cyber society.

In this paper, I would like to examine one particularly important version of the transformation, that of Esa Saarinen and Mark C. Taylor in their topical book *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> TAS argue for the fruitfulness of new communications technologies (a term which I will use interchangeably in this paper with "digitisation"). TAS argue that mass media has already had profound impacts on societies and the people who live in them. They call for different forms of engagement on the part of intellectuals who are interested in innovative cultural practice and social change. Such intellectuals can no longer resist the circulation of ideas by television, radio and newspapers, and the fact that cultural representations by these forms have largely superseded and displaced "high" culture. TAS believe that new communications technologies accelerate these changes and compel new cultural forms as well as forms of work, education and sexuality. Such technologies will revolutionise universities, which are otherwise becoming outmoded dinosaurs of high cultural status and privilege. They describe how the use of modems and electronic mail, television and video conferencing, computers and new software, can result in fundamental changes to pedagogical and

intellectual practice. These changes are commensurate with a philosophic valorisation of the fragment, contradiction, non-binary logic, "trivilege", the banal, and the image as a challenge to the traditions and canons of Western philosophy under print culture such as logic, unidirectionality and the written word.

There is no doubt that TAS hacks into the established power structures in universities, publishing houses, cultural journals and intellectual circles by virtue of its reading (and writing) of the discursive and institutional effects of new communications technologies. However I would like to highlight some problems in their project shared by a suprising range of other endeavours under the sign of new communications technologies. These problems derive from a neglect of questions of power around new communications technologies: in particular, in the areas of the restructuring of telecommunications and education. I argue that such questions of cultural, economic and social power need to be engaged with, at macro and micro levels, in order to discern how new communications technologies will be fashioned, if not to construct these technologies in more enabling constellations.

## The cyberversity: from ivory tower to virtual carpark

TAS tells a story of two intellectuals who use video conferencing between the USA and Finland to teach a seminar on media philosophies. The text comprises two narratives. One is a more modest quotidian epistolary story in Courier font telling how Saarinen and Taylor sought, and were given, corporate sponsorship and institutional space "to pioneer a new form of international education" by videoconferencing and electronic mail. The other narrative is the more overarching *grand récit*, to use Lyotard's phrase, though it is more fragmentary in its tone and content. It clashes with the eye in a Babel of fonts and directions on the page, Brody (*The Face* magazine) full-fontal riffs twisting straighter text into a aphoristic *Twilight of the Academy: Or, How to Philosophize with a Phone Line*. These fragments push beyond the synecdoche, and beyond the stuffy norms of university, to the dream of the road movie on that parent of all shibboleths, the information superhighway:

The modern metropolis is being displaced by the postmodern netropolis ('Netropolis' 1).<sup>4</sup>

In one of its guises, the university of the twenty-first century will be a cyberversity ... Instead of a group narrative, it would be possible to conduct a global seminar on the net ... The lines of the cyberversity are there for those who know how to read them ('Virtual Reality' 4).

In this multifontal narrative, TAS conduct a withering attack on the "expert culture" that has grown up out of the technology of print. They regard the university as a crucial node of this print culture and using the rhetorical figure of hyperbole to conduct a witty and sustained debunking of its pretensions: "[p]rofessional philosophers remain committed to elitist culture, which dismisses low or popular culture as insignificant" ('Ending the Academy' 1). The media philosopher, by contrast, is "committed to smuggling shit back into the house of thought". This is the stronger version of the claim that:

[i]nstitutions of higher education have not taken advantage of the resources and energies circulating beyond the walls of the academy. As a result, cultural analysis is separated from the very condition of its own possibility. To overcome the isolation of the intellectual critic, it is necessary to enter the mainstream of culture by leaving the confines of print ('Ending the Academy' 9).

But some significant contradictions in TAS' project start to emerge already. TAS try to dethrone the importance of the university, claiming that its power is rooted in privileging (or trivileging) certain cultural practices of print culture. But precisely at this point, they are also demanding that it needs changing *more* than any other institution. In a ghostly sense, TAS seem to allow the university to cast a longer shadow on contemporary culture than it warrants. Their prognosis for its transformation, nonetheless, is worth a closer examination:

The postmodern university will more closely resemble the decentred, disseminated and non-hierarchical "structure" of the net than the centred, segmented and hierarchical structure of the assembly line ... The "place" of the postmodern university is cyberspace ... all education is international ...

Conversations are not limited to one time or place but occur whenever participants can jack in ('Pedagogies' 3).

One form of a new cooperative practice and exchange that could spawn the cyberversity is videoconferencing, combined with use of email, hypertext and so on. In addition, TAS conjure up the the exemplary wired intellectual as the "imagologist". Pedagogically, this means that you can have an equivalent impact to a current affairs host, a soapie star, or Mr Bean, depending on the moment:

For my students in the teleseminar, your image — how you appeared when you made a point — always proves as important as any point you made. They remember your image long after they have forgotten what you tried to teach them. Contrary to the canons of Platonism, image is the medium of understanding ('Pedagogies' 9).

Instead of striving for enlightenment goals in a steady Fordist university career structure, the imagologist is the trickster figure of Esa Saarinen (a flex-spec image consultant who is equally at home in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as s/he is on Donohue or the Mid-day Show) — Socrates with a roving mike:

An artist of philosophy? A salesman and politician, developer and visionary: what is called for in the field of philosophy is management by wondering around ('Ending the Academy' 3).

Despite the seductiveness for some of this image, and the undoubted cachet of such a post-Baudrillardian theory of seduction, I would suggest that in these passages TAS posit a flawed opposition between culture and the market, high culture and the mass media; one that those fighting a rearguard action against restructuring of higher education — and particularly the humanities — have often presented.<sup>5</sup> The problem with TAS "management by wondering around" as a solution to the ills of the rapidly digitising postmodern academy is that in certain respects it is congruent with the dominant discourses of education restructuring, namely that of marketing, which is already transforming pedagogical practice in deleterious ways.

To further highlight this shortcoming in TAS' spruiking the imagologist as the intellectual for our times, I start from an account of changes to higher education in Australia, changes which are shared by other OECD countries to some extent. Over the last ten years, the move towards a greater market based approach to higher education has seen the humanities in large part pushed to the accounting margins of universities. A greater dependence on large corporations and government departments for funding of research and staff positions has made it difficult for many who practice intellectual and cultural dissent, who are to varying extents are being starved of resources for research, teaching and publication. In this period also, technology has been constructed as something which enables education to be delivered by working "smarter". Central to this has been changes to institutional structures, with a greater emphasis on "managerialism" as a disciplinary practice in the Foucaulian sense, and on "marketing" as form of reaching out to "consumers" of knowledge, and of presenting the academy to the wider society.

I give this sketch of changes in higher education in Australia because it is a quite different understanding to that of TAS. TAS's strategic move to take philosophy to the streets — or tollways of the information superhighway — neglects the fact that the market is in the academy, and that the massification of higher education post-world war II has meant that increasingly the academy is in the market. My account implies that universities are far more complex institutions than TAS's inside/outside polarity suggests. While I would mark my distance from Ian Hunter's account of the "governmentalisation"<sup>6</sup> of higher education, it nonetheless gives a dramatic sense of this complexity.<sup>7</sup> And I would submit, *contra* TAS, that the move to the market does need to be resisted — including in some different ways that Marxists have traditionally conceived.

## A Genealogy of Contemporary Telecommunications

One of the organising tropes in *Imagologies* is "compu-telecommunications", and it is a very productive one, acting as a switch between economic, cultural and symbolic registers of TAS' analysis of contemporary cyberspace. However, I am left with a sneaking suspicion that there is a certain amount of old-fashioned technological determinism in TAS's enthusiasm for the good things

that postmodernism and new technologies will bring. In this light, I would suggest a contrary view, informed to a large extent by work in alliance politics from the perspective of residential consumers of telecommunications.<sup>8</sup>

This alternative account would start with the multiple effects of telecommunications restructuring. One effect is the economic benefits that investors around the world expect from "growing the market", from new services such as pay television, interactive home shopping, mobile phones and wireless personal communications devices. The clash of the telecommunications, broadcasting and computing industries, and their different cultures and audiences, has been accompanied by a push for greater competition in telecommunications around the world. Marketing has displaced engineering as the dominant discourse in telecommunications companies — telecommunications users are now "customers" rather than "subscribers" and up and coming workers in the industry are expected to strive to show "customer focus". This is not necessarily in the interests of a number of different publics — particularly those who are "residential consumers" of telecommunications or those who are "citizens" with a stake in its content and carriage. At the same time, greater capital investment, especially in technology to bring greater digitalisation of telecommunications, goes hand in glove with wholesale staff cuts and attacks on the terms and conditions of workers. Globalisation of telecommunications has meant that more labour intensive work takes place in low-wage developing countries: for example, many components for computing hardware are assembled by migrant women in factories in Silicon Valley in California and since the enthusiasm generated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), these have moved to the *maquiladora* belt south of the USA-Mexico border.

By neglecting such key macro and micropolitical questions of existing and new communications technologies, TAS lean too heavily on these technologies as indeed causing some sort of radical rupture with previous educational and cultural practices as well as the formation of subjectivity without considering some of the intricate negotiations and exchanges that condition, and indeed, construct these technological systems.<sup>9</sup> Further, TAS substitute the expert culture of the intelligentsia for the media star circuit, a substitution that rests on the older notion of the media as mass broadcast media.<sup>10</sup> Saarinen compares his success in the mass

media, due to "a decade-long advertising campaign and product-development effort in my personal factory of philosophy", ('Speed 5') and his potential reader or viewership of most of Finland to the small circulation of the *Journal of Philosophy* in the USA of only a few thousand. Commending this posture of the media personality as an antidote to the university's fixation on print culture has a certain tactical shock value but ignores the often extremely anti-democratic nature of ownership, operation and programming in mass media in most countries — especially the USA and Australia. TAS's inflation of the category of media to posit all intellectual activity outside of traditional print based cultural institutions as radical is a valiant attempt to move beyond the sterile fustiness of the right, who have a self-interested nostalgia for older cultural practices, and the denunciation of media barons by the left.<sup>11</sup> But their concept of media philosophy is unfortunately based on a sense that the corporate structures of "compu-telecommunications" are here to stay. The reality is far more complex — not least because the relation between the monolith and the fragment in the polis of cyberspace is being shaped and reshaped in ongoing debates, battles and corporate takeovers.<sup>12</sup>

In the light of these changes, universal and equitable access to telecommunications and the means of cultural practices that it is embedded in, will need explicit state intervention to be achieved. This has implications on the symbolic level also — on the question of the cultural implications and representations of these new technologies. Who produces the software, texts, images and sounds for use in cyberspace are questions that need debate now and in the future. The role of community based media in providing alternative access here is critical. In Australia, there has been a concerted push from a coalition of community and public interest groups to put aside bandwidth and funding for community media, as well as provide for Australian content and other rules relating to cultural goals on pay TV. A great deal more resources need to be made available to ensure greater diversity in what gets watched, produced, written and created by whom in cyberspace — as well as in existing broadcast and print media.

## The Everlasting Digital Body

One of the images that haunts *Imagologies* is that of the body. TAS do a number of different takes on the body, centring on the proposition that cyberspace calls for and calls up different sorts of bodies. In a Baudrillardian register they plead that:

As the real disappears into the hyperreal, the body becomes an obsessive preoccupation ... ('Body Snatching' 9).

With a more Deleuzian inflection they intone that "[c]omputelecommunications deterritorializes every thing and every body ('Body Snatching' 4). They seize Haraway's notion of the cyborg. They make a few tantalizing remarks about new communications technologies and gender:

Something very interesting is beginning to happen in the students' email conversation. The women in the class are more uneasy about the "out-of-body" experience they are having than the men ... The men in the class are much less bothered by all of this ('Body Snatching' 7).

They privilege certain feminised concepts of their media philosophy such as the mediatrix and the matrix.

There is not the space in this paper to consider this more fully, but I would suggest that despite their trade in body theories, their text seems to reinscribe some conventional images of masculinity:

The ecstasy of communications is fucking at a distance. "What did you do before the orgy" ... "The mediatrix is the boudoir where doors are never closed"; "In simcult porno becomes interactive ... Playboy, Playgirl and Hustler as interactive, multimedia hypertexts! ('Telerotics' 6, 8, 9, 10).

Moreover, in their embrace of the body, they never really engage with some of the crucial issues in the masculinist construction (s) of cyberspace. Such discussions are important to counteract the phenomenon observed that "many campus discussions [and it might be added discussions elsewhere] about new information technologies are actually discussions about the reconstitution of race, sex, and class hierarchies in the new systems".<sup>13</sup>



## Rosebud's Digitised Return

While I was writing an earlier version of this paper, Paul Keating launched *Creative Nation*,<sup>14</sup> his cultural policy for Australia:

*Creative Nation* does not attempt to impose a cultural landscape on Australia but to respond to one which is already in bloom. I hope that in time this statement will be seen as the day we drew a line under our post-colonial era — and said good-bye to it.<sup>15</sup>

One of the Prime Minister's surprises was the New South Wales state government and Rupert Murdoch announcement of a potential "Hollywood by the Harbour" in what is now the Sydney Showground. And if the fact that 20th Century Fox announcing a studio in the heart of Sydney as a privileged transnational corporation advertisement at the centre of Australia's cultural policy statement was not enough, brushing aside community uses for the area, the link between Murdoch's aspirations concerning converging technologies and the government's hopes give further thought for pause.

*Creative Nation* relies on all hitherto existing cultural forms reinvented as "content" to be subject to "carriage" over the telecommunications network, an eminently commodifiable notion. Indeed one can then make sense of a statement such as the following:

Our cultural policy directly addresses the challenges which confront Australia in realms of information technology and multimedia ... Indeed Australia has the opportunity to become a world leader in the production of content (Keating 1994: 10).

This last sentence is a breathtaking flattening out of a diverse and contradictory range of cultural artefacts and forms. The national state survives in some cultural respect, it seems, by becoming some sort of best practice purveyor of avant-garde dance on CD-Rom.<sup>16</sup> The "forms" are produced overseas — by American, European and Asian corporations — and Australians provide the "content". Presumably this might happen with Citizen Murdoch's film studio in the Showground. He can dictate the length of a movie, how it is

to be distributed in movie theatres, CD-Rom and perhaps over the Internet, and just pop in a bit of local "content" — think globally, act locally. Competition is introduced into telecommunications - with the privatisation of Telecom Australia on the cards in the next few years - while any effect that this may have on local culture is denied.

## Conclusion

TAS is in many respects written against the grain of such *fin de siècle* state spruiking mercantilism. It represents a determined attempt to take cultural forms seriously and to look at what Marxists might call the ideology of those forms. However, in other respects it shares the assumptions of the US and Australian Government's enthusiasm for employing new communications technologies in their service.

TAS does provide a critical text for the engagement with the politics of the new media and new communications technologies. Part of this engagement does involve the use of philosophy in one of the senses that TAS give it:

Debate, rational discourse, the public use of reason in the open society of the media age must make full use of philosophy as a critical resource as well as a synthetic, non-institutionalized and non-disciplinary project ('Telepolitics' 3).

However, we will also need to look differently at cultural forms and practices outside the traditional university to discern the critical sites of engagement and reformulation of sources of power via new and reconstituted cultural forms. And finally, there will need to be a recognition of the need to fight for universal access to communications, information and cultural resources — a struggle given greater piquancy given the rhetoric battles surrounding new communications technologies.

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## REFERENCES

1. *I would like to acknowledge assistance with this paper from Mark C. Taylor. and Alan Cholodenko I would like also to recognise the debts I owe to many people in Consumers' Telecommunications Network, and particularly to Christopher Newell for our ongoing collaborative work on the politics of new communications technology.*
2. "Guy Debord, an avant-garde essayist who influenced the upheavals of French society in the late 1960s, has committed suicide. He was 62" (Associated Press, 1 December 1994).
3. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Hereafter, I refer to their text by an abbreviation of the authors' names - TAS.
4. There is no overall pagination in TAS, each section of the book starts afresh. Accordingly, I refer to the section of the book and the page number.
5. For instance, Simon Marginson notes that "it is difficult to sustain an argument that the role of universities has never been 'economic', in the sense that there are explicitly economic dealings between higher education and industry, and that many students are quite evidently interested in, at the least, the relationship between their own university course and the labour market" (Simon Marginson, *Education and Public Policy in Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993: 126). Ian Hunter concludes in relation to liberal education, that for "better or for worse the humanistic scholarship of the early-modern university was not liberal in the modern sense, and the historical claim that the humanities academy is the original, traditional or natural home of liberal education falls without much pushing", (Ian Hunter, *Accounting for the Humanities: the language of culture and the logic of government*, Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, 1991: 24).
6. The concept of "governmentality" comes from the later work of Foucault.
7. For instance, Hunter states that:  
  
In short, despite all talk of disinterested research and complete cultivation, the university in general and the humanities in particular have not proved impervious to the 'demands of society'. To the contrary, they have proved quite porous. And, far from constituting an ethical and theoretical cockpit from which all of social life might be guided, the university is in fact a shell for a divergent array of programmes, functions, knowledges, norms and objectives (Hunter 1991: 60).
8. For the past three years, I have worked for the Consumers' Telecommunications Network, the national coalition of community and consumer groups in Australia, representing residential consumers of telecommunications.
9. My understanding of technology is indebted to the work of Christopher Newell on the socio-political construction of technology:  
  
Drawing upon the tools of what is variously called the history and philosophy of science, and science and technology studies, it is proposed that 'information' is not given, but is essentially socially constructed (Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell,

- "Reflections from the Roadside: Residential Consumers and Information Superhighways", *Media Information Australia* 74 [Nov 1994:34].
10. In a number of countries, there are candidates for precursors to the role of philosopher as media star, for instance, Jacques Lacan in his appearance on French television in 1973. The difference is that Lacan acknowledges that his authority is derivative - in his view from his "analytic discourse" - something which Saarinen eschews: "you know that I've got an answer to everything, in consideration of which you credit me [ *vous me prêtez* ] with the question...Who doesn't know that it's with the analytic discourse that I've made it big. That makes me a *self-made man* [Lacan's emphases] " (Jacques Lacan, "Television", [1974], *October* 40 [Spring 1974]:31).
  11. My thanks to Mark C. Taylor for discussion on this point.
  12. For a entertainingly cynical and critical view of desire and the construction of cyberspace see McKenzie Wark, "What Does Capital Want?: Corporate Desire and the Infobahn Fantasy", *Media Information Australia* 74 (Nov 1994) 15-26.
  13. *Women, Information Technology and Scholarship*, ed. H. Jeanie Taylor, Cheris Kramarae and Maureen Ebben, Center for Advanced Study, Urbana, Illinois, 1993: 3.
  14. *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy*, Canberra: Department of Communications and the Arts, October 1994.
  15. Address by the Prime Minister, the Hon. P J Keating MP at the Commonwealth Cultural Policy Launch, Tuesday 18th October 1994.
  16. The Federal government has committed itself to spending just under \$100 million dollars over the next few years fostering Australian multi-media.