

## **“Touching Culture”**

***Comments on eCulture, Creative Content and DigiArts  
UNESCO Conference on ICT and Creativity, Vienna, 2005***

**By Mark Federman, Chief Strategist  
McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology  
University of Toronto, Canada**

What we are attempting to do today, and indeed over these two days, is to look ahead to the future of culture in the face of historic change, the likes of which our civilization has experienced only twice before. We are now literally in the midst of a transitional nexus, from an age dominated by visual literacy and all of its artefacts that began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, to a culture in which audility and tactility will define the underlying ground for cultural and creative expression. At each of the previous transitions, from orality to literacy in ancient Greece, and from the manuscript culture to that of Gutenberg’s iconic, mechanized printing press, Western society took about three hundred years to effect the transition. You see, it takes about three hundred years for the dominant effects of the underlying and defining technology of the new era to completely receded into the ground so that society can take it for granted – so that there is no one alive who never did not know that technology, nor a world created almost exclusively by that technology. The dominant society inhabits a world in which the prior era’s artefacts were mere historical curiosities, or the stuff of myths, legends and religious beliefs.

Roughly three hundred years is what it has taken Western society in the past to make the complete technological transition, and there is absolutely no reason to believe that we are any different. Ladies and gentlemen, we are now in year 161 of the three hundred year transition from the cultural era of the printing press to that of electric communication, marked from the invention and demonstration of the electric telegraph in 1844; we have just crossed the half-way point.

What this means is that we should be able to detect some of the subtle changes that have already occurred that provide us with indications of what our society and culture will look like about 140 years hence, and for several centuries thereafter. What this also means is that we will be sorely tempted to believe that our transitional artefacts created using the new technology to implement the old metaphors are “the real thing.” Further, we will be tempted to believe that we must, at all costs, hold on to them, even as they are evaporating like the morning dew by midday.

The dominant technology of the previous era was the book and the printed word. Among the artefacts that came along with the book were the acceleration, intensification, and reinforcement of vernacular languages, and with that the distinct cultural separations that created “the other.” Along with the book came the development of the private mind that could not exist without silent reading, and with that, the whole concept of the individual and the public as distinct entities, the notion of privacy, secrecy, guilt and shame. Among the creative classes, the iconic book created the author (and authority), it created the artist and the composer – and it also created the audience, again as a distinct and separate entity. And with that dominant technology, it was always the case that the “text” – the words, the art, the music – could be removed from both its creator and its creative context.

If we can take any lessons from history – that is, in process, not in specific form or content – our best predictors of what we are transitioning toward can be obtained by observing the reversals of the dominant effects of the technologies and media that

now are in the process of being obsolesced. And once we can anticipate the dominant ground of the future, we can effect the world of our choosing by acting in the present.

Already our technological capabilities have created a world in which ubiquitous connectivity is, or is becoming, a reality, even for emerging countries which, for example effect village to village connectivity to the Internet via a WiFi-enabled motorcycle that drives through the Cambodian countryside. With ubiquitous connectivity comes the effect of pervasive proximity. Our experience of reality – literally what we feel – inheres in the tactility resulting from pervasive proximity. We touch and are touched in ways that transcend the apparent visual barrier between the cyber and the physical. It is a only a conception, an artefact of a quickly obsolescent visual dominance, that the screen represents an interface that demarcates reality from non-reality that we often refer to as “virtual.” When measured against the test of the effects of our experience, it is clear that this interface is quickly vanishing. Experience effected through the processes of pervasive proximity means that what we feel online – those whom we touch and those who touch us – is quite real, despite its lack of physicality and materiality. What this means is that under conditions of pervasive proximity, experience transcends our traditional conception of media boundaries. And it is through transmedial experiences that we can begin to observe the emergence of a culture for the global village.

Marshall McLuhan observed that, “the artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present.” But remember that the artist, the creator, as a distinct entity from her or his audience or consumer, was an artefact that was created in the prior technological epoch. Today, we are no longer merely consumers of culture or cultural artefacts. We are instead – all of us – producers of our indicative cultural creations that exist for as long as we are experiencing them — and no longer. This goes beyond what we typically think of as “interactive media.” Where we once thought that we

“interacted” with our various media by effecting some pre-programmed action – clicking on a computer screen, or causing tableaux to shift in a museum exhibit when we push a button – we now give way to a new perception. These all-too-common modes of consuming culture are essentially no different than the television remote control, turning us into mesmerized “culture potatoes,” and clearly demonstrate the obsolescence of consumption-oriented cultural artefacts – what I call “*interpassivity*.” True *interactive* media are those in whose creation we actively participate. From the emergence of these new cultural forms we experience involvement in depth.

A mass medium was once thought of as one in which a mass of people experienced the same thing at the same time from different locales. It was typified by broadcast – radio, television and the early incarnation of the Internet, whose first use as a new medium was the emulation of the old media. But now, we can further refine our understanding of mass media culture as it is emerging today – that which allows massive participation in the creation of cultural artefacts at different physical times, from different physical locales, with the individual perception of simultaneity and immediate proximity.

The hallmarks of creativity that we are only beginning to recognize include collaborative creation, transmediality, and the elimination of the interfaces – the stark demarcations – among the world that nature created, the physical world that humanity has created and continues to create, and the world that exists in non-tangible experiences. Such a conception almost evokes aspects of magic and mysticism as, I would suggest, our experience of the iconic and almost clichéd metaphor of the global village becomes something more akin to the global tribe, and the creations of a new global culture emerge from the image of the shaman of that tribe, the one who acts as a medium between the visible and invisible worlds, practicing forms of magic that exert control over what otherwise appear as natural events.

But what does the shaman traditionally do? Borrowing from McLuhan's language, the shaman "puts on" the tribe and wears them as tribal masque, reflecting the totality of the tribal culture all at once, his utterings becoming the tribe's "outerings." In doing so, however, the shaman is the sham-man – the no-body – the man who is devoid of his own identity because he assumes the identity of the entire tribe all at once. But McLuhan observed that in the electric age, when we are "on the air," we are all no-bodies. We are discarnate – our presence is felt, but our bodies are not. In this age of instantaneous communication and pervasive proximity we are all "sham-men" and "sham-women," increasingly empty of individuality, putting on bits and pieces of the global village's socio-cultural matrix to wear as our skin.

Thus, we are driven to create ephemeral artefacts that seamlessly connect physical and cyber spaces in ways that correspond to our perceptions and experiences of transcendent reality. We are the embodiment of those artefacts – simultaneously the actors and the audience, the performers and the performance, the spectators and the spectacle; We are the musicians, the instruments and the music itself. It is not the global village that we inhabit, but the global theatre on whose stage we play. Without our presence and intimate involvement at the moment, there is no culture in our time – only cultures of other times. Any latent or lagged expression of culture, as when an ephemeral artefact is captured or fixed in another form, becomes a shadow of the experience, projected onto a different time with a different sensual dominance – typically visual or acoustic. Digitization of an ephemeral artefact is not the artefact – nor even an accurate representation of the artefact – because in capturing it for a different time, the artefact is, of necessity, mediated and hence, changed. A future experience of the artefact, even if it can somehow be technologically reconstituted with complete fidelity, must of necessity be a different experience, and thus will subsequently yield a different ephemeral artefact, because the cultural ground that we

embody as a tribe of no-bodies will have changed.

Although there are many consequences of such a leap into the future, I will leave you with one that transgresses the cultural and evokes the political. The future of culture for all of humankind depends on several aspects: the first is the preservation of transnational indigenous cultures – be they traditional, experimental, contemporary or popular. Simultaneously, its future depends on the combination of these indigenous cultures into collaboratively-engendered, emergent forms. Thus, the ability for *everyone* to actively engage and participate in creation and reflexive consumption of culture, and cultural artefacts, is paramount. This, however, flies directly in the face of cultural cartels in whose interest it is to maintain a monopoly on production and distribution of cultural artefacts, and who therefore seek to control the means of creation, connection, and collaboration.

Therein lies the role of governments, conventions, treaties and summits: to actively resist partisan commercial interests, in order to protect and nurture the subtle beginnings of the next cultural epoch, the beginnings of which we are privileged not only to witness, but privileged as well to actively participate as its midwives. Since we are all creators, creativity – and the means to express and experience creativity – belongs to everyone, collectively as a public trust.

Mark Federman can be contacted at [federman@sympatico.ca](mailto:federman@sympatico.ca). His weblog, *What is the (Next) Message* is located at <http://whatisthemessage.blogspot.com>