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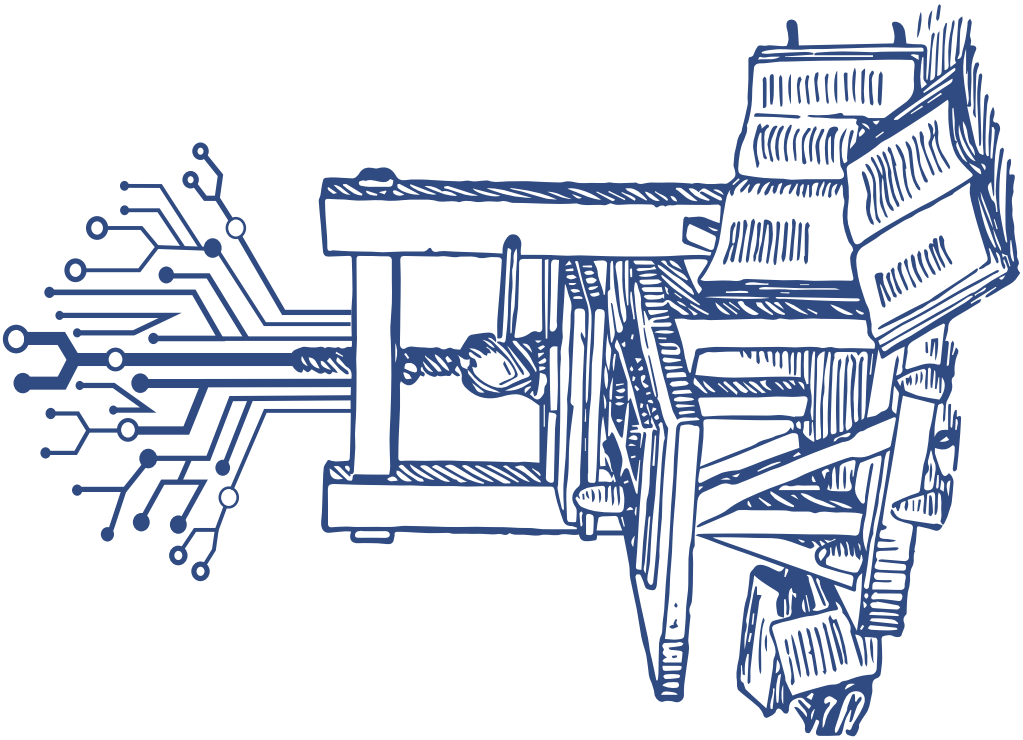

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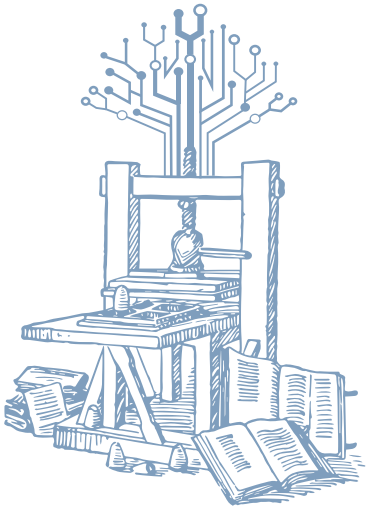

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The *Humanities and Technology Review (HTR)* is an annual publication of the *Humanities & Technology Association* (HTA). *HTR* offers a publication outlet for interdisciplinary articles on a broad range of themes addressing the interface between the humanities and technology. *HTR* is a refereed journal, and all decisions about the acceptance of articles for publication will be made by the editors. The production and printing of the current issue of HTR has been funded by the *Humanities & Technology Association.*

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The HTA was founded in October 1978 to promote understanding of the cultural interaction of the humanities, science and technology and to help define how humanistic concerns interface with technological advances.

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Richard Wagner's Blueprint for Multimedia

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Abstract:
Writing thoughtfully about the 19th century composer Richard Wagner without offending some people is no easy task. To do so, one must acknowledge his antisemitism and set it aside to review his work as an artist, a theorist and a composer. In this essay, my hope is to address his ideas as a music and drama theorist with regard to what he called, "The Art-Work of the Future." At the heart of his theory was an abstract idea he described as "the total work of art," which he identified as *Gesamtkunstwerk.* To achieve the "total work of art," he suggested that the artist of the future would find a way to artfully blend what he described as the muses for "dance," "music" and "poetry" to create a complete and total work of multimedia storytelling. Wagner published his thoughts on this idea back in 1849, which means, the concepts for multimedia storytelling have been around for over 170 years. In this essay, I address the blueprint for multimedia as

prescribed by Richard Wagner and then review some of the recent experiments produced by legacy media during the last decade. Along the way, I make some observations about Wagner's understanding of "dance," "music" and "poetry" and close by offering some conclusions about where multimedia storytelling may be headed.

Introduction

Somewhere near the heart of the humanities is a percolating theory of multimedia storytelling. Given the broad nature of the humanities as a discipline, one cannot help but muse over the idea of seeing several different media artforms converge to create a narratorial collaboration, a multi-modal, contextual tapestry of story. As modern and exciting as this concept sounds, the prospect of multimedia storytelling is not a new idea.

In 1827, a German intellectual named Karl Friedrich Trahndorff lifted the fractured idea of multimedia storytelling from Aristotle's "Poetics," defined it as "striving within the entire territory of art towards a total artwork on the part of all the arts" and declared that the ultimate success here would be a project, which succeeded at "[flowing] together into one presentation." Trahndorff then gave it a name: he called it "*Gesamtkunstwerk*," a German word which translates into "a total work of art" (Rubin, J.H., & Mattis, O., 2018).

Two decades later, composer Richard Wagner borrowed the idea (possibly from Trahndorff but most likely from another German theorist Friedrich Schiller) and made it his life's work (Imhoof, Menninger, & Steinhoff, 2016). To Wagner, *Gesamtkunstwerk* was a fusion of his muses—he

gave them the Germanic names "Dichtkunst," "Tonkunst" and "Tanzkunst" — and collectively called them his "three Hellenic sisters;" which, when translated become the muses for "poetry," "music" and "dance" (Foster, 2010). To make his argument, Wagner reached back through history to the vestiges of Greek theater believing that the playwrights of the great Greek tragedies got it right. The original Greek dramas successfully blended "dance," "music" and "poetry"… but he believed that somewhere along our path through literacy and the literature movement, we lost track of the purpose of the multimedia storytelling. As a result, he dedicated a fair amount of his life's work hoping to create a masterpiece that achieved "the total work of art" (Roberts, 2011).

> Aesthetic redemption in the Gesamtkunstwerk is comprehended as an act of loving self-sacrifice that mirrors the truth and necessity of the tragic action. In and through this sacrificial act the arts find their freedom as art in the dramatic union of the three purely human art forms: dance, music, and poetry—the language of the body, the language of the heart, and the language of the spirit. (Roberts, 2011, p. 75)

And later:

> United however, dance, music, and poetry draw the other—plastic—arts into their redemptive orbit: "Not a single richly developed capacity of the individual arts will remain unused in the Gesamtkunstwerk of the future. (Roberts, 2011, p. 75)

Central to Wagner's thinking is the fact that he perceived *Gesamtkunstwerk* not as an outward expression of an artform, but rather as the end result of the performance, one that

successfully established an emotional connection with the audience.

> This ambition, then brings [poetry, music, and dance] together for Wagner, both at the level of personal reception and collectively within the opera house: in the mind's eye and in the spectacle of Bayreuth. The Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* aims not to *represent* a sensory field, but to *be* a sensory field. (Rubin & Mattis, 2018, p. 45)

So, he believed that by bringing together the three sisters, if done properly, the presentation of *Gesamtkunstwerk* would be realized in the emotive connection established between the performance and each audience member. To him, the elemental parts would unify to create an emotional *whole* experience. Of course, Wagner was absent any contemporary examples of this standard and, instead, attempted to resolve his beliefs with examples from inside each of the three basic artforms. For example, to Wagner, Shakespeare's dramatic works achieved the ultimate examples of "poetry" or something he called "absolute literature;" while, to him, Beethoven's *9th Symphony* was the embodiment of "absolute music."

> ...and perhaps the most important dimension of the Wagnerian synthesis, the introduction of the musical language of Beethoven into the drama through the orchestra: the living body of harmony, which immerses audience and dramatic action in the sea of shared feeling. (Roberts, 2011, p. 75)

Richard Wagner's Blueprint

For his part, Wagner hoped to meet his own standards for art when he crafted his four-part opera series, *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* which attempted to fuse elements of dance, music and poetry, but nothing ever seemed complete. Concurrently, Wagner also wrote about his vision and, in an essay entitled "The Art-Work of the Future," addressed his ideas. To him, "dance" was artwork for the body; "music" was artwork for the heart; and "poetry" was artwork for the mind. Body, heart, mind. In the future, wrote Wagner, the artist would address all these things, and his three muses would perform together again. Of course, that was 170 years ago and a lot has been written on the subject.

On this point, Germanic expert Nicholas Vazsonyi bats around the origin of the term "Gesamtkunstwerk" and all but accuses Wagner of appropriating it from theorist Friedrich Schiller.

> The missing and often ignored element in discussion of the Gesamtkunstwerk's genealogy is Friedrich Schiller. He, too, never used the word Gesamtkunstwerk, nor did he outline a mixed-media or even a mixed-genre aesthetic vision. Nevertheless, the politically utopian and fundamentally ethical stakes inherent in the work of art, its existence as a response to the social and ethical environment in which it is created, and the significance of the artist who creates such works, are formulated by him with a forcefulness and an eloquence that are unprecedented. (Imhoof, Menninger, & Steinhoff, 2016, p. 27)

Vazsonyi even goes as far as to suggest that the over use of the word by a litany of artists and writers has all **but** stripped

the word of its meaning (Imhoof, Menninger, & Steinhoff, 2016). But I don't quite believe that. Instead, I saw the possibility that Wagner did create a modern package for the idea, shaping it to define the values of his three muses, and it is from this packaging—or, more precisely, these basic building blocks—that I found my inspiration about the future of multimedia storytelling. Clearly, I am not alone.

Collectively, media theorists have been writing about multimedia for some time. Like Wagner, many seized upon the idea but, instead of using Wagner's German names, applied Aristotle's Greek terms for these three artforms: Those include *melos* for "music," *lexis* for "poetry," and *opsis* (which can be defined as "visual motion" and "spectacle") for "dance" (Rubin & Mattis, 2018). In his essay on the subject, author Simon Shaw-Miller reviews the various theoretical approaches to these three artforms and how they are performed together. Shaw-Miller rightly concluded that Wagner saw the final form not as the representation of a sensory field but as the embodiment of the sensory field (Rubin & Mattis, 2018). In this interpretation, the *whole* is greater than the sum of its parts and the catalyst here is the emotive reaction of the audience member. In other words, by inspiring an emotional response from the audience, those people join the performance, transforming themselves into participative actors alongside the muses for "dance," "music" and "poetry." For the sake of this essay, I'd like to define this last muse as the sister of "emotion" or *motus.*

> Based on the Romantic notion of the artist as a conveyer of the sublime, Wagner's interest in appealing to the deepest emotions by way of a fusion

> of media elements is surprisingly contemporary. In a strange way, Wagner already had command over what many contemporary creators are still trying to sort out: the design of media carefully choreographed within a specifically defined architected space to create a complete and total immersion of the spectator's senses, literally sweeping them into an emotional hypnotic vertigo. (Salter, 2010, p. 2)

This term, "hypnotic vertigo," is really just another way of saying emotional engagement, which is the end-purpose of the Wagnerian idea for *Gesamtkunstwerk* and, thus, generates need for the fourth muse for "emotion." Adding her broadens the gathering of Wagner's list of muses changing it into a melding of *melos*, *lexis*, *opsis* and, finally, *motus*. By enjoining the first three, the audience will discover the fourth creating an end result of "the total work of art." Given the recent advances in the digital age, I think the timing is right to revise Richard Wagner's ideas about *Gesamtkunstwerk* and how they might apply to multimedia storytelling as we move forward.

A Little History

Looking to the media theory, Canadian theorist Robert K. Logan listed the media ages, breaking them down into epochs which included the ages of orality, literacy, secondary orality and digital orality (Logan, 2016). We are currently living in the midst of the digital orality, or the age when most media are presented digitally.

> Although the dissemination of digital information parallels in some ways that of electronic information,

> there are some very important differences. The users of electronic media are merely passive consumers of information, whereas the users of digital media can interact actively with information they access. They can also use the these digital media to reorganize and remix information and create new forms of knowledge. There is a cognitive dimension to the use of computers and the Internet that is totally missing from mass media and the telephone. (Logan, 2016, p. 30)

Translated, Logan writes that traditional broadcast media are presented to the consumer in formats that offer little opportunity for interaction; we can listen, read or watch but we have few opportunities to respond. If we were offended by a newspaper article, we could write a letter to the editor, for example, but little more. When we arrived in the digital age, we also developed the ability to communicate actively with mass media. Now, some media theorists have identified this as the age of the Internet but that idea is somewhat incomplete; the Internet is just a component of the digital experience.

Looking to the theories of media economics as outlined by Gillian Doyle, media presentations actually have a three-phase pattern, which include "production," "packaging" and "delivery" (Doyle, 2006). In the digital age, the Internet actually represents this last phase… delivery. But, if the digital age is taken in total, one needs to take into account the value of each of these three phases: the production, the packaging and the delivery.

If the Internet was officially commercialized with the U.S. Telecommunication Act of 1996, one needs to look at the

inception of digitized content as the true beginning of the digital age. So, when did we actually begin digitizing media? Apparently, in 1971, an American grad student named Michael Hart started something called "Project Gutenberg" when he began converting books into electronic files (Tomaiuolo & Quint, 2004). Today, Project Gutenberg is attached to the Library of Congress but, more importantly, this little digital effort may have marked the birth of the pending digital age. Of course, other analog media including film, photographs, radio and TV would follow.

Returning to Doyle's three-step process, Hart's decision to digitize books may mark the final phase in the first-step: production. When he transformed the analog pages of the books into a digital form, he prepared it for the next phase—packaging—and with the commercialization of the Internet, a delivery system emerged. Taken together, digital production, digital packaging and digital delivery – all the key components – by 1996, were finally in place. And given that the basic building block of the digital age was a computational binary code transmitted by the electron, we had a tool or a basic unit common to all media. Digital content was electronic: Therefore, today, it is absolutely possible to convert text, photographs, music and video into a common translatable language and then transmit it by the electron. And, given that all these different media can be assembled from electrons, it is absolutely possible to deliver these various media forms as a complete and total package. In other words, with the birth of the Internet came the opportunity to finally deliver a series of different digitalized media and thus achieve the final step in the process of multimedia storytelling: Today,

it is finally possible to achieve *Gesamtkunstwerk.* So why haven't we yet? There are still a few variables in play.

First, what would a total work of art actually look like? Second, how would this work of art be presented? And finally, is contemporary man cognitively prepared to appreciate complex multimedia storytelling? Let's address each of these issues one at a time.

What would *Gesamtkunstwerk* look like?

In Wagner's time, he saw "the total work of art" as a stage performance, and he presented a series of operas designed to engage the audience, inviting them to engage his stories. He defined this experience, this cognitive meddling of the author and the audience, as "bridging the mystic gulf." And to facilitate this process, Wagner designed an opera house—the building is called the Bayreuth Festspielhaus—in a way that he hoped would bring the audience emotionally closer to the performance. So, it was Wagner who elevated the stage, sunk the orchestra pits and turned down the lights (Imhoof, Menninger, & Steinhoff, 2016). He did this to make the stage performers the focus of the attention. The elevated stage was a stark departure from the Athenian model, which included building theaters in the round, with the stage performance appearing below. This was done to elevate the sound in an open-air setting. In Wagner's Germany, his theaters had roofs, which contained and amplified the sound, a benefit that allowed him to lower the orchestra into a pit before the stage thus packaging the sound in such a way as to project it from the foreground while keeping the musicians hidden, and that allowed the audience an unfettered view of

the actors and dancers. Turning down the lights only forced the audience to gaze forward through the darkness towards the lighted figures on the stage (Barron, 2000). This model for theater continues today.

> What the audience's collective eye sees was framed at Bayreuth in an unprecedented manner. Wagner and Brandt countersank the pit beneath the stage, removing the orchestra from sight and creating what Wagner called a "mystic gulf" (mystischer Abgrund), from which the music would seem magically to emanate. Before this pit they placed a second proscenium, which had the dual effect of further obscuring the gulf and of making the actors on stage seem larger and more distant through forced perspective. (Imhoof, Menninger, & Steinhoff, 2016, p. 186)

Taken together, the performance was raised up and amplified, making it the focal point for each viewer; nothing else mattered. The audience needed only to dwell on the action of the characters in his operas, who performed over and above them like the Wagnerian deities they portrayed. This emphasis on the "mystic gulf" should illustrate Wagner's mission to evoke an emotional connection between the audience and the performance. By engaging their *motus*, Wagner was adding the fourth element with the purpose of elevating the wholeness of the performance.

> The stage itself was a traditional proscenium arch stage. A raked floor supported a chariot and pole system for shifting wing and drop scenery. Steam vents let fog in to complete the illusion of mythic

> reality. For his dramatic mythologies, Wagner insisted on the latest technology and the most faithful detail in accurate scenery and costume. Wagner wished to hypnotize the audience into hushed, reverential passivity. His vision of ideal reality left nothing to the imagination (Kuritz, 1988).

As for the performance itself, Wagner's operas were a venue for music and for dance; but there was no opportunity for poetry. In its purest sense, "poetry" was a term he used for the written word. On stage, his actors could recite the words, but when he defines "poetry" as literacy, he suggests that the words must be read. And unlike music and dance, poetry—or reading—is an intimate exercise. When one reads, one reads alone. How does a producer present this aspect of totality in a way that fuses *lexis* with the *melos* and *opsis*? Is it even possible to present music and dance and the written word together collectively?

Media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, would likely suggest that music and dance are "hot" media, while the written word is a "cold" medium. "Hot" media, McLuhan wrote, is immediately apprehensible while "cold" media take time to understand (McLuhan, 2001). Given the time it takes to consume the written word, is it even possible to present these mixed media together? Sure, music and dance flow together evenly; and in print media, photography and text are presented alongside each other. But is it possible to commingle text and music? Or text and dance?

> McLuhan saw in this contrast an underlying pattern. He discerned a distinction between "hot media" where information was, as it were, pre-packaged, with a high

> degree of organized material, and "cold media," which required a greater amount of effort on the part of the user, where the beholder's share was greater. (Veltman, 2006, p. 357)

There are actual temporal differences here. While it may take a viewer an instant to perceive the content of a photograph, it can take several minutes for a reader to finish a short news story. In the mixed-media setting of a traditional newspaper, the reader might see the photograph and then turn his/her attention to the news article. In a theater setting, however, adding text to a live multimedia performance would be a complex and complicated addendum. Instead, the process of multimedia storytelling may have to be presented in a way that each audience member is allowed to control the pace at which they digest the content. We'll talk more about this later.

On *Lexis* and *Melos*

As for the modern interpretations of Wagner's theory, I'd like to tinker a little more with Wagner's vision. As I've written earlier, he defined his three muses as "dance," "music" and "poetry." In this essay, I've already suggested that when Wagner wrote about "poetry," he was really writing about the presentation of *lexis*, or the "printed word." In fact, in his essay "The Art-Work of the Future," he addressed each of these art forms. However, on the issue of poetry, he writes about the function of rhyme and meter, but he doesn't specifically address the issue of publishing; instead, he hints at it:

> The Lyrics of Orpheus would never have been able to turn the savage beasts to silent, placid adoration, if the

> singer had but given them forsooth some dumb and printed verse to read: their ears must be enthralled by the sonorous notes that came straight from the heart, their carrion-spying eyes be tamed by the proud and graceful movements of the body. (Wagner & Ellis, 2019, p. 47)

In the phrase, "...some dumb and printed verse to read...," Wagner suggests that the written word is something to be read aloud but, when read aloud, I believe the work is transformed from a static bit of writing into an oral performance. To me, there is a stark difference here and while Wagner is blending these ideas, the core value of *lexis*—in the modern age—is when text is presented in its literal form: writing, as a medium, has a complex relationship with its audience; reading is a private and intimate relationship between the author and the reader. This is the essence of *lexis*, but when the written word is recited, it becomes something else, it becomes *melos*, or music.

On this point, theorist Northrop Frye agreed:

> There is however another type of *melos*, and one which more naturally comes to mind when we think of the musical element in literature. This is the melody and rhythm of *lexis* itself, the *melos* produced by the rising and falling inflections and the pattern of emphasis in the spoken word. (Frye & Warkentin, 2006, p. 245)

So, in an effort to update Wagner, I believe that poetry in the modern context is a reference to literacy or the written word. When the written word is recited, the producer transforms the words from *lexis* — or a medium that is consumed internally — to *melos* — or a medium that is performed outwardly.

Media theorist Walter Ong has also written extensively on this topic and believed that reading aloud was part of the global tradition dating back to the Middle Ages and stretching into the early half of the 20th century.

> We have not yet come to full terms with the fact that from antiquity well through the eighteenth century many literary texts, even when composed in writing, were commonly for public recitation; originally by the author himself. Reading aloud to the family and other small groups was still common in the early twentieth century until electronic culture mobilized such groups around radio and television sets rather than around a present group member. (Ong & Hartley, 2012, p. 154)

So, at the time of his writing his essay, Wagner was living in a time when writing and the oral recitation were commonplace and were actually opposite ends of the same process. It wasn't until after his death with the introduction of electronic media that people began primarily reading alone and to themselves. Again, this idea suggests that while he might have been unaware, Wagner's understanding of *lexis* lacked a pure distinction, one which separates literacy from orality.

Now, let's look at how this affects music.

When Wagner wrote about "music" as artwork for the heart, he was suggesting that both instrumentation and the song were art forms that communicated with the human heart. Instrumental music, for certain, speaks to the human heart; so, too, does a singer with a song. If done well, Wagner wrote, this engagement can be enthralling. He offered these lines about *melos:*

> She is the heart of man; the blood, which takes this heart for starting-point, gives to the outward-facing flesh its warm and lively tint,—while it feeds the inward-coursing brain-nerves with its welling pulse. Without the heart's activity, the action of the brain would be no more than a mere automation; the action of the body's outer members, a mechanical and senseless motion. Through the heart the understanding feels itself allied with the whole body, and the man of mere 'five senses' mounts upward to the energy of Reason. (Wagner & Ellis, 2019, p. 36)

But, again, what about the idea of the spoken word? For my argument to work, there must be a clear distinction between Wagner's use of the muse for *lexis* and for *melos.* In the section about *lexis,* he writes about poetry, but I believe that the form of poetry he was writing about here is one found in the written form. In his section about *melos*, his ideas about poetry are about the lyrical performance or the orality of the form.

Advancing this idea further, I'd like to return to Frye's idea that the pre-recorded spoken word, while not exactly a musical form, does present as a lyrical medium and as such, is a medium that also communicates with the human heart. To believe this, one must accept that when Wagner wrote about "poetry" and "music," he must have been allowing for a distinction between the written word and the oral recitation of the poetical form. The first case is literacy, the second form—oral recitation—is really a reference to just a spoken song. Translated: all forms of oral performance—instrumentation, singing and oral recitation—are elements associated with

melos, the Wagnerian muse, or goddess of "music." Of course, Wagner was also writing at a time three decades before the ability to produce sound recordings (which didn't occur until Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877).

That said, we might consider contemporary examples of how the spoken word can be perceived as a form of *melos* in modern age. Take, for example, the music forms of rap, hip-hop, scat singing, rock operas and the oral presentations of stand-up comedy routines and recorded poetry. In each case, these utterances have mellifluent components. There are elements of the spoken word and there are elements of the musical word. The variants here are based upon how the words are used: are they presented as percussion elements—as with rap and hop-hop—; or as melodic lyrics designed to advance a narrative theme—as with opera—; or as word sounds are presented as "place keepers" for song lyrics that don't exist—as with scat singing; or as articulated sentences strung together to create meaning as with a comedy routine.

Searching for examples, I'd like to suggest that Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" has roots similar to rap and hip-hop music. In this example, the lyrics from the Dylan song are driven by the rhyming patterns, or beats, which propel the listener towards the next rhyme and, ultimately, onward towards the song's conclusion. The Who's entire "Tommy" album is a rock music version of the opera genre and includes some of the traditional elements, including an overture. I could cite many examples form the Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra catalogues, with their *shoo-bee-doo-bees* and so forth, for scat. With scat, this free-form style of singing is an improvisational vocalization where sounds are

exchanged for words. In this instance, the voice becomes an instrument. LP recordings of comedians—including George Carlin, Red Fox and Richard Pryor, and others—all have musical performance elements, too. For example, when listening to George Carlin, his comedy routines are spoken presentations broken up into tracks, which share the same properties of songs on LP records; and each track has a narrative form, not unlike the forms used for pop songs. Finally, before his death, The Doors' lead singer Jim Morrison recorded a series of his poems, which were later set to music. The compilations were released in 1978 as the album "An American Prayer." On the LP record, Morrison tells stories and reads poetry. Producers later added music from the Door's catalogue to illustrate a familial connection between Morrison's written work and the music catalog created by his 1960's rock band.

In each case, ideas crafted as written words are presented orally, and the examples above all flow along a spectrum that goes from the almost instrumental to the merely spoken. Because they are recorded, these examples are presented on media similar to the traditions of recorded pop music and, as such, share many of the musical traits found in *melos*. Those would include oral forms of written verses and an aural-oral relationship common among singers and their audiences.

Opsis

Which leads us to the last Wagnerian muse: *opsis,* his goddess of "dance." If dance is the art form for the body, one might conclude that this includes the human body in motion.

When Wagner presented this idea, elements of the moving image had not yet been developed. But had they been developed, Wagner might argue that the moving image—or video—is a form of dance. In the modern theater experience, just as it was in Wagner's day, the audience sits stationary in the dark, but each member of the audience experiences motion by watching the performers move across the stage and/or the screen. In the 19th century, the performers would be humans moving around a stage; and in the modern age, these performers are actually moving images dancing across a screen. The technologies are different but the effect is the same. The audience experiences the sensation of motion by watching others move. Therefore, the moving image is also a form of *opsis* (or "spectacle") or dance.

Let me offer some modern conclusions about Wagner's vision: *lexis,* his goddess of "poetry," is a referent for the written word; *melos,* his goddess of "music," is a referent for musical or oral presentations; and *opsis,* his goddess of "dance," is a referent for the spectacle of the body in motion or the moving image. Armed with these building blocks, I'd like to review how these components could be placed to create a packaged end product.

How should *Gesamtkunstwerk* be packaged?

In 2012, *The New York Times* published a full-on multimedia presentation entitled "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek" on its website (Branch, 2012). The cumulative work included 10,000 words, a dozen videos, animations and photographs. Within weeks, the celebrated work became the talk of the news community and the model

for multimedia storytelling (Franklin & Eldridge, 2019). A year later, *The New York Times* followed the achievement with another package entitled, "The Jockey," which included many of the same multimedia concepts. But things were slightly different. In "Snow Fall," the producers placed the video and the text alongside each other. As readers scrolled through the story, the videos would appear at the bottom of the page with a static black-and-white image, which transformed into a color image when the icon reached the center of the page; this transformation suggested that the reader should click on the image to view the associated video. At the University of California at Berkeley, a pair of journalism professors, Richard Hernandez and Jeremy Rue, called the process of clicking on the image to launch the video a "cold trigger" (Hernandez & Rue, 2016, p. 93).

Looking to Wagner for an explanation, one could argue that the three muses were all there, but the sister for "poetry" was clearly separated from the other two. Given the length of the written story, *lexis* is certainly well represented; and while the other sisters are there, *melos* and *opsis* are presented as add-ons or late additions. So, during the process of reading the story, it was incumbent upon the reader to pause and click on the "cold trigger" to view the video, thus releasing the muses of "dance" and "song" from their respective packaging. To its credit, *The New York Times* was experimenting and the work was groundbreaking. Still, the three sisters remained divided in this experiment.

When *The Times* launched, "The Jockey," a year later, the producers opted to replace the "cold triggers" with more active video (Bearak, 2013). This new packaging worked like

this: As readers scrolled through the story, the last text paragraph at the end of a section would freeze and a video frame would emerge and begin playing automatically; these videos opened with a still frame of the last paragraph of text and an oral recitation began, which featured the author reading the paragraph aloud. When his oral recitation concluded, the video advanced through several seconds of moving images, which worked to illustrate elements of the story; at the conclusion of the video, the frame disappeared and a block of text representing the next chapter of the story was presented.

Now, while these video packaging experiments might seem slight, the success here is the fact that all three sisters are presented together. As the reader/viewer finished the last paragraph of a section, the scrolling process—which becomes habitual for the reader—launched a "hot trigger" and the video appeared and began playing. Because the producers wanted to smooth the transition from the "cold" text to the "hot" video, they added the text of the last paragraph to the opening moments of the video and included an oral recitation from the author, (which actually adds his voice to the story) before showing moving images of the jockey. Looking to the Wagnerian model, these producers were integrating *lexis* with *melos* and *opsis*, if only for a moment, to adhere the literal content of the written story to the oral and visual content of the moving images, thus creating a softening between the divergent media forms. Overall, "The Jockey" is text heavy and the domination of *lexis* in the presentation is overwhelming but, in this slight instance, as the reader is guided through the transition from the text to the moving images (or *melos+opsis)*, we might feel the light emotional

touch of *motus* as our interest swells with curiosity over this new thing. This is magazine journalism and this is documentary film blended—packaged—in a new way because the technology is finally here for us to experiment with this new form. And to its credit, *The New York Times* was breaking new ground with this work, but they weren't the only ones experimenting.

Concurrently, *The Guardian* released its own multimedia package, entitled: "Firestorm: The story of the bushfire at Dunalley," which—in its presentation—outdoes "Snow Fall" and "The Jockey." In "Firestorm," the producers at *The Guardian* presented a multimedia story about the 2013 brushfires that burned across Tasmania (Henley, Topham, Khalili, & Panetta, 2013). To tell that story, the producers found a family whose farm had been destroyed. With the opening of the digital essay, the website opens with a video showing a body of water along the Tasmanian coastline. The video is just a few seconds long but loops over and over again. To read the companion text, the reader must scroll down (just as they did with *The New York Times* projects) but this time, the text flows over the looping video, which becomes kinetic wallpaper on the site. The effect is this: As the reader is reading the words (which appear in white scrolling text) the video of moving water complete with sounds indigenous to Tasmania play beneath the words.

Looking at Wagner's model, all three of his muses for dance, music and poetry appear on the stage at the same time and with equal measure. As the reader moves further along, a "hot" trigger activates a video featuring one of the farmers, who explains some of the events leading up to the fire. When

she's finished, the video disappears revealing another short looping video, which becomes the background for more scrolling text. The work, as you can imagine, is definitive. Again, we see the elements of *lexis, melos* and *opsis* presented on the same stage but in equal measure. The text paragraphs are short, the video interviews are brief, and the sound—while ambient in nature—unifies the setting. Again, we see a blending of magazine-style print journalism with the visual elements of documentary film. Of course, the wholeness of the story is there, which we learn as we skate between the various blended media, or dance between *lexis, melos* and *opsis.* The end-result is a tapestry of story.

But these are only early works indicative of the move towards a total work of art. To view each of these examples, the reader must be at a computer and on a web browser. After 25 years as the conduit to the Internet, the computer + browser formula is looking dated and, in spite of the efforts that created these works, very little is being done to preserve the integrity of the presentation; there isn't an apparent archive in development.

Which leads to the next issue: When it comes to the way these works are packaged, the platform on which they are presented will matter. Watching video in a movie theater and watching video on a tablet computer—even if it's the same video—makes for two different viewing experiences. And, frankly, looking at video on a desktop computer is boring. Soon, a new consumer electronic device is going to emerge and it will replace the current computer offerings—desktop, tablet, cellphone—with something less reliant on a tethered Internet connection. Right now, there are several variations of

augmented- and virtual-reality devices in development, which will likely result with a hybrid mixed-reality device that allows the audience mobility and, perchance, active participation.

Are we cognitively prepared for *Gesamtkunstwerk?*

So what would mixed-reality multimedia storytelling look like? Right now, most virtual-reality devices look similar to the masks SCUBA divers use. When a user places a VR device over their eyes and ears, the device supplants the natural environment with a digitally enhanced sensory experience; the perception of the real world is replaced with a digital realm. Right now, most applications for these devices are either recreational or for vocational training. The trouble here is when the user places the device over his eyes, he loses his sensual perception of the real world and becomes clumsy. Enhancements to the VR device now include ocular cues which report physical barriers including walls, furniture and people. So, it is possible to be aware of oneself in the real world while participating in the digital realm. Because these devices are untethered, the user is also allowed to "free roam" or walk about absent the obvious constraints associated with, for example, traditional video gaming (a stationary monitor attached to a tethered gaming device) (Halliday, 2019). Absent these constraints, gamers might be represented with a free-roaming environment like a ballpark or playing field where they can actively participate in digital combat exchanges. Imagine a laser-tag experience where the players are in different cities at different times and yet they are

participating digitally in the same gaming event. With the computers and the Internet, we can do these things.

Looking at the Wagner model, one can certainly see that the sisters of "dance" and "music" are apparent. While wearing the VR device, the user is both hearing the sounds and seeing the movement; what is also interesting here is the fact that because they are also moving around, the element of "dance" is enhanced further because the audience member becomes the dancer or part of the *opsis*. This is a new idea. Until now, *opsis*, as I've explained it, proposed a static relationship between the audience and the performance where the former sat and watched the latter move. With this new variable, the audience member is moving and, in doing so, joins the performance.

Also, and on a narrative level, the "voice" of the action as compared to the traditional theatrical experience has shifted from third-person (where the audience is witness to the experiences of the hero) to the first-person (where each member of the audience becomes the hero). Let's pause for a minute and consider this element. Given that the audience is now in a position to be the hero, I'd like to return to the fourth sister I added to the Wagnerian model: *motus* or the sister of "emotion." If the VR experience is complete, the audience member becomes the actor/dancer, which is a successful associative conveyance of identity: One that fuses the actor/dancer with the audience member. If true, the Wagnerian "mystic gulf" has collapsed entirely away and the audience member becomes the performer. Now, while this wasn't necessarily Wagner's intended meaning when he wrote about "Art-Work of the Future" in 1849, how could he possibly

know that a technology would emerge offering the possibilities of merging the audience with the performance? Could VR be the final step in the quest towards *Gesamtkunstwerk*? We're close but not quite.

Absent from this VR scenario is *lexis,* the Wagnerian muse for "poetry." There is no literal component in this forum, which leads to the larger question about human cognitive development: Is it possible for the contemporary human to consume complex multimedia stories rich with a hardy mixture of literal and oral media?

In a practical sense, the experience would be thus: As the user is moving through the digital realm wearing a VR device in a video game scenario, is it possible for the user to be reading text-based information as projected on the screen inside the device? I'm certain, in short bursts simple words and phrases can be presented but what about longer literal passages? I think not.

Let's take a step backward for a second. Imagine a user is wearing VR goggles inside a digital museum. In this setting, the VR goggles are less-opaque, a move that allows more of the "real" environment inside the experience. In this setting, the device would actually qualify as a "mixed-reality" experience, or one that mixes both the reality of the physical host environment and a digital overlay, which enhances the experience with media cues. As the user moves through the real hallways of an existing museum, the VR device would augment the experience offering music, spoken comment and other sound cues; while standing before a piece of artwork, the user would be presented with text explaining the origins of the artwork, the biography of the artist and any other written

content associated with the work. Given the walking pace of a traditional museum setting, the user would be able to manage the timing of the presentations, consuming complex content with an element of leisure. In this setting, all three of Wagner's muses would be present: *opsis,* the movement of the user would be "dance;" *melos,* the oral recitations presented through the headset would be the "music;" and *lexis,* the text presentations projected inside the VR mask would be the "poetry."

Comparing the two experiences, the combat setting of the gaming environment with the observation setting of the museum environment, the key variable here is pace or frenzy. Given the tumultic nature of the gaming forum, it's difficult for the user to pause long enough to perceive literal content at length. In the museum setting, the user is less frenetic and, thus, capable of observing all three elements of the multimedia experience, including the written word.

So the X-factor here is tumult. How much multimedia content can the human consciousness endure before the information becomes noise?

Clarified down to its basic building blocks, the question becomes this: Is it possible for someone to walk and read at the same time? At this point in the human evolutionary cycle, I'd suggest that the answer here is no… not yet. People can pause and read billboards and people can pause and read placards but in these instances, they must stop what they are doing. There is a notion that people might be able to walk and read at the same time but the question here is really about the perception: How complex can the content really be? Absent this ability, it will be difficult for humans to experience true

multimedia storytelling—one rich with the virtues of Wagner's three muses that includes as well my fourth muse — until we reach a point in our cognitive maturity to both walk and read at the same time. Difficult, yes—but not impossible.

In the psychological sciences, there is research underway looking at the process of multitasking, which has an official name: Researches call it "threaded cognition" and believe that while we may think we're multitasking, we're actually rapidly trading our attention between tasks in a sequential order because the human mind must prioritize cognitive focus one task at a time. "Threads acquire and release resources in a greedy, polite manner," is how it is described. The research also determines that with some practice, the cognitive ability for multitasking improves (Salvucci & Taatgen, 2008). Basically, to read and walk at the same time would be a process that allows the body to move forward through habit as the eyes scan the pages of a book but, to maintain a sense of direction and balance, the person must look up from the book from time to time, which interrupts the process of reading. So instead of doing one thing well, the person is doing two things poorly. However, the research suggests that with practice, the plasticity of the human mind improves the coordination, allowing the person to have greater ability. In the process of this practice, there is the prospect of an evolutionary transformation taking place. Of course, this was the case when Europe began learning to read.

Looking back to the 15th century and the inception of the printing press: In Europe, before Johannes Gutenberg, literacy rates were below 20-percent but by the end of the 16th

century, those rates had more than doubled; literacy, after all, is really just a form of cognitive training: One had to learn to read and the process of reading altered human biology. When we learn to read, the human mind binds together our abilities to see and recognize symbols with the human ability to perceive sound:

> Learning to read involves connecting two sets of brain regions that are already present in infancy: the object recognition system and the language circuit. Reading acquisition has three major phases: the pictorial stage, a brief period where children photograph a few words; the phonological stage, where they learn to decode graphemes into phonemes; and the orthographic stage, where word recognition becomes fast and automatic. (Dehaene, 2010, p. 287)

Over the centuries, reading—a complex association between signifiers and signs—became commonplace and given the plasticity of the human mind, the next phase of evolutionary human literacy is now upon us. Given some practice, it may one day become possible for the human animal to walk and read at the same time.

Conclusions

Gesamtkunstwerk is one of many possible destination points in the evolution of storytelling. To arrive at this place in the future of storytelling, the audience must be presented with the three elements of media: production, packaging and delivery. This audience must also be prepared to perceive these works and engage empathetically with the story. In each instance—production, packaging, delivery, and perception—,

the technologies related to these processes are evolving. We are experimenting with production protocols; we are developing methods for packaging; we are improving delivery systems; and human cognitive perception is evolving, changing. What is missing, in each instance, is a mature sophisticated model. For producers, there still is no clear production formula, and the packaging and delivery forms are inherently dependent upon a presentation system that is both intuitive and ubiquitous. Finally, for the human cognitive abilities to improve, the audience needs practice, which means content, which means a forum that allows for the viable presentation of multimedia stories.

Which brings us back around to Richard Wagner. In the 1840s, he addressed the idea of the multimedia performance. He assigned values to the various forms and suggested that for the story to be complete, it must include all these values. In his day, the opera was the premier setting for this experience and he even built a theater to advance his ideas, but in the end, he came up short. Today, in this modern age, this digital age, we have new opportunities for various media presentations that are both local and global. It is possible to broadcast packaged elements of dance, music and poetry over the Internet and to a waiting audience armed with the tools to experience these performances. In Wagner's day, the performance was bound by a sense of place and by a sense of time: You had to be inside the theater at the precise moment when the lights went down and the curtains went up. Today, both place and time are set aside, and the performance, properly packaged, can be presented at the convenience of a

waiting audience at a time and in a place of each audience member's own choosing.

Towards that purpose, the media community needs to continue experimenting with the practice of digital storytelling. We need more examples of story production, we need more examples of packaged work, and we need to present these new projects in a forum that makes them portable, personal and interactive. Given some practice, we may one day achieve this unfinished quest for the totality of art, this fusion of human thought, this *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

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Striking Back: Nam June Paik's Response to Technology and His Role in American Social Transformation

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Abstract:
Nam June Paik, a Korean-born artist (1932-2006) who worked in New York and Germany, was able to communicate the effects of technology on society in profound and subtle ways. His works harness the power that technology can bring to artistic creation. He is considered the father of video art, a genre which leverages the power of television and video production. Paik is known for his massive video installations, some of which include hundreds of television sets. On the whole, Nam June Paik's artistic contributions are surprisingly unexamined. Paik's ambivalence toward technology positions him as a leading figure in American social transformation. He embraced technology as a key component of his artistry and also admonished its ability to compromise humanity. Paik's video art functions as physical embodiment to Marshall

McLuhan's philosophies on technology and communication. In addition, Paik's ambivalence toward technology, his integration of technology with the human body, and his ability to bridge cultures all work to identify him as a leading figure of American social transformation.

Striking Back:

Few artists equal Nam June Paik in terms of his experiments with technology, video, and large-scale installations. On the whole, Paik's work is surprisingly unexamined. For several reasons, it is important to revisit the importance of his artwork. His work gestures towards the writing of prominent technology critics, including Marshall McLuhan. In addition, by displaying ambivalence toward technology and by humanizing it to an unprecedented degree, Paik's work repairs a gap between the technological culture and the artistic culture.[1] These are incredible achievements for any artist; however, Paik's contributions to American society are unique in several ways. His video art as a response to McLuhan's appeal to artists, his ambivalence toward technology, his integration of technology and the human body, and his ability to bridge cultures all work to identify Nam June Paik as a leading figure of American social transformation.

[1] Many scholars have remarked upon technology's potential to be a divisive element toward the arts. It is not the goal of this paper to expand upon or explain the separation of these cultures. Instead, the focus here will be on Paik's position as a figure of social transformation.

Striking Back

Nam June Paik, a Korean-born artist (1932-2006) who worked in New York and Germany, was able to communicate the effects of technology on society in profound and subtle ways. At the same time, his works harness the power that technology can bring to artistic creation. He is considered the father of video art, a genre which leverages the power of television and video production. Paik was known for his massive video installations, some of which included hundreds of television sets. Like the pixels that make up the digital images seen on monitors and other screens, the television sets in his work often formed larger objects, mostly robots or other figures resembling a human being. Spikes in attention to Paik's video art coincided with a number of significant technological advances, including those with computers and the Internet.[2] However, his art mainly focused on the influence of media and television in the late 20th century. Why is it important to examine Paik's reaction to technology?

Arguably, the impact of technology in society is perhaps best examined by artists who often step outside of their role as social participants and hold up a mirror to society. It has often been part of the artist's role to subvert subjective responses and offer images that best represent society's relationships with machinery, inventions, and technological progress. At times, images of technology in art are presented as simply another brick in the social construct. However, since the Industrial Revolution, and perhaps even before, ambivalence toward technology can be readily identified in many artworks. In Western art, particularly in the

[2] See Figure 1, *Electronic Superhighway*, and Figure 2, *Untitled*, below.

contemporary era, images of technology are often in opposition to what artists traditionally hold most dear: relationships with the transcendent, connections with the natural world, and identification with self and society.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to step back a bit. In the past, technology and art have been seen as conflicting entities. Traditional artists have been known to retain conventional modes of expression and to renounce new modes offered by technology. With the advent of graphic design and other mediums spawned from technology, the digital age promises to bring new approaches to artistic study and creation. In all stages of production, contemporary artists create their works on the computer. They are even creating on portable devices in turnkey fashion. Social media, gaming, and software / application tools have revamped impressions of the nature and value of art. In the future, it will be difficult to distinguish between new technology and new art. Once again, it is not the goal of this paper to provide context for, or to establish an argument about, any separation of technology and art. Rather, the goal is to highlight the rarity of an artist who simultaneously utilized advanced technologies to express his thoughts on technology.

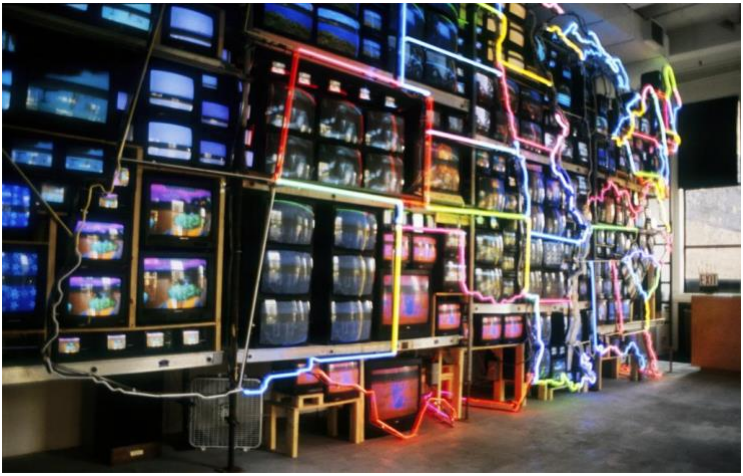

Figure 1. Nam June Paik, *Electronic Superhighway*, 1974-1995.

Upon first impression of Paik's work, one might think that the artist embraced technology in all its wonders. Indeed, it is difficult to look past the vastness of his televisions to think otherwise. However, behind the canvas of these sets was an artist who, like many of his traditional predecessors, strived to send messages about technology's impact on society. His work, of course, is not without conflict and ambivalence. Paik was a vocal supporter of Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian sociologist and noted critic of media and technology. Like Paik, McLuhan exhibited ambivalent attitudes toward media and the technological advancements of the day.

The dominating presence of television in American homes and the widespread impact of other technological media during the latter part of the 20th century provided opportunities for social critics and artists to express new ideas about technology. Nam June Paik's attitude toward

technology was ambivalent; his artworks attempted to humanize technology by using television as a canvas, as an extension of the human body, and as a tool for cultural dialogue. His works function as physical manifestations of Marshall McLuhan's writings on technology. Before offering brief analyses on selected works from Paik, it is important to provide a better sense of the social context of Paik's world, with particular attention given to McLuhan's work.

Before 1960, the television in the American household was not viewed as an important or pervasive cultural artifact. Though its frequency in American homes was surely rising, it had not taken a prominent social position until the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s. A common statistic notes that by 1960 ninety percent of American households had a television set. Despite that number, the programming that was available at the time had not become deeply embedded into the personal lives of viewers. The dynamic changed shortly after the funeral of President Kennedy in November, 1963. Marshall McLuhan (1967), a key voice in the field of sociology at the time, says that Kennedy's funeral cemented the power of television:

> [it] strongly proved the power of television to invest an occasion with the character of corporate participation...It involves an entire population in a ritual process. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point. This creates a sort of inwardness, a sort of reverse perspective which has much in common with Oriental art. (p. 125)

The communal mourning that took place after the death of the president turned the television into an immersive mirror.

Viewers looked to television for an accurate reflection of American society; at the same time, they used it as a tool for self-definition and identity. Television became the emotional conduit through which ritual took place; in this way, television seemed to create a culture of its own rather than adding to the existing culture. Prior to this time, there was little connectedness to, and emotional investment in, communication technologies like the television.

The technologies of television and other media penetrated all aspects of American society; the change was undeniably ecological. Despite its rising popularity, very few individuals had a sense of whom to consult for perspective on its influence. Aside from their positions as purveyors of culture, sociologists like McLuhan deferred to artists for an explanation of its impact. In a collection of essays published in 1970, Jean Creedy remarks on the artist's challenge in the age of television: "Painter, sculptor, designer develop a unique visual language which has to be sufficiently arresting to break through a certain acknowledged apathy in an already over-stimulated society, bombarded by every sort of verbal and visual message that man and technology can devise" (p. 5). The statement is very contemporary, despite the date of Creedy's remark. By 1970, American society already felt overwhelmed by the onslaught of images found in television and other media avenues. Yet, there is a sense, even from non-artists, that there were aesthetic challenges brought on largely by technology. In his book, *Through the Vanishing Point*, McLuhan (1969) identifies that challenge and reiterates the importance of the artist as interpreter of technology: "the artist has a crucial role to play in alerting human awareness to the

meaning of technology" (p. 267). Earlier in the text, he offers a revealing statement about technology: "men have groped toward the arts in hope of increased sensory awareness...The artist has the power to discern the current environment created by the latest technology" (p. xiii). Careful McLuhan readers may notice the deliberate syntax in that statement. The language in the quote suggests that McLuhan thought technology, not human beings, creates the current environment. Perhaps McLuhan and others saw the artist as the only individual exempt from technological assimilation. That presumed exemption can be one reason why he looked to artists for an alternative position on the social effects of technology.

Figure 2. Nam June Paik, *Untitled*, 1968.

McLuhan's perspective on media and technology fluctuated between viewing them as beautiful and awe-inspiring, and, at the same time, terrifyingly oppressive. The

wonder of technology is that it has the awesome power to bring people together, yet it has the ability to compromise that which human beings find so dear: their humanity. In his work, McLuhan (1970) often notes the "effect of human artifacts and technological environments on language," which presents a clearly deterministic view of technology (p. 20). At the same time, McLuhan also seems to view technology as a magical entity with psychedelic powers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, that feeling is not unlike other attitudes held by citizens in American society. The attitude toward technology at that time can best be described as ambivalent, yet the spectrum of opinion on the topic of technology seems to go beyond the normal parameters of ambivalence. Through the process of becoming an immersive mirror, television and other media technologies began to be viewed as separate entities capable of being personified. In his text, *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), co-authored by poet Quentin Fiore, McLuhan's key phrase reiterates this belief:

> All media work us over completely. They are so persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage....All media are extensions of some human faculty. (p. 26)

McLuhan stresses the penetrating effect of technology in every component of culture. Notably, McLuhan makes a clear connection between media and the human body, an insight that Nam June Paik addresses directly in his work. In several examples, Paik's works embody McLuhan's idea.

While it is true that McLuhan had ambivalent attitudes toward technology and, thus, influenced many others into holding similar feelings, his thoughts have not escaped criticism from those who downplay adverse technological influence. Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh (2004) note that McLuhan's work exhibits "mood swings between paranoid and mystical attitudes about media and between defeatist visions of technological control and grandiose fantasies of a 'global village' of electronic interconnection" (p. 560). While they admit that the popularity of the Internet has brought new life to McLuhan's "global village" image, their perception of McLuhan is important because it supports McLuhan's ambivalent attitude toward technology. Though McLuhan's work can be characterized by a kind of technological polarity, his thoughts serve to capture a moment in American history. His insights continue to influence a wide range of social and communication theorists as well as artists. In several ways, McLuhan's insights have greatly impacted Nam June Paik's work.

With the rising influence of television and other technologies during the latter part of 20th century America, some artists began using technology as both the medium and the subject in their work. Social critics like McLuhan highlighted the need for artists to negotiate their relation to and use of technology. One of the artists who responded to this invitation was Paik, who was associated with diverse artistic movements and who admired McLuhan's writing. Paik was a trained musician from Seoul, who worked in New York and Germany. He had been associated with the Fluxus artistic movement, a movement characterized by its non-

conformity to any established belief or genre. Though the messages in Paik's early work aligned with Fluxus, it is difficult to associate him closely with this or any other movement. Nam June Paik's use of television technology as a medium helped him to transcend the movements in which he was operating. Stooss and Kellein (1993) report that while the Fluxus artists were "anti-everything," Paik thought this attitude changed in 1971: "the new video generation were pro-something – 'constructing' a new society with the new tool of video" (p. 57). The impact of television on American society, coupled with the call from social critics to artists, resulted in a dynamic cultural dialogue. Along with others interested in video art, Nam June Paik decided to use that which society had found arresting and overwhelming as a tool for social transformation.

His ability to leverage technology in that unique way helped to earn him the title, "father of video art." It is widely believed that video art sprang from American counter-culture, associated with idiosyncratic artists such as composer John Cage and Yoko Ono. Historically, video art was linked to this counter-culture and displayed one or more of the following characteristics: "the utopian desire for an expanded perception through new technology, [strong feelings toward] the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, and a rebellion against the institutional authority of mainstream television" (Phillips, 1999, p. 255). Paik's work shows intimations of these elements, but it is certainly not limited to them. Over his career, he constructed dozens of television installations; some installations consisted of hundreds of television sets. Many viewers overlook the integrated video clips displayed on the

television sets in his video art. The clips were a central component of the piece for Paik, who spent as much time editing video as he did constructing the pieces. Interestingly, he viewed video art not as a new development but as a natural development of tradition. Stooss and Kellein (1993) cite Paik:

> Until recently, illumination and information were two different things....In medieval times, in a church window, information comes through as an illumination. In the age of video, this overlapping phenomenon has appeared again. (p. 76)

Admirers of Paik not only enjoy his aesthetics, but they also enjoy his philosophical approach to video art. However, a more important feature of his work was its transient nature.

Paik's work was always changing; it always harnessed new technologies. His work was not simply a mirror. He wanted to construct and transform society as much as he wanted to reflect it. Citing a poem found in one of his journals, Stiles and Selz (1996) show how Paik views the changing nature of his work:

> My experimental TV is
> not always interesting
> but
> not always uninteresting
> like nature, which is beautiful,
> not because it changes beautifully,
> but simply because it changes (p. 431 ll. 1-7).

For the time, Paik was astonishingly in tune with the cultural placement of television. He understood its ability to effect change and likened it to changes in nature.

Striking Back

Not only did Paik have a keen knowledge of the social impact of technology; he also had the technological and artistic skills to send messages through the medium. In this way, he had responded to McLuhan's (1969) appeal: "the artist has a crucial role to play in alerting human awareness to the meaning of technology" (p. 267). These attributes put him in a position of great influence; he became as much a social transformer as an observant artist.

On the surface, Paik's work demonstrates how contemporary society thrives on the beautiful, electric power that images, television, and technology offer. Indeed, his message is tough to miss. Like McLuhan, Paik believed that technology had psychedelic powers that were not completely understood. In one interview, Paik comments about an Eskimo village in the Canadian arctic that established communication with the rest of civilization. One of four stores constructed in town was a video store: "Video must have immeasurable magical powers. This means that the Eskimos' ancient traditional culture is in danger of being rapidly crushed by the bulldozers of Hollywood" (Stiles & Selz, 1996, p. 436). Paik was fascinated by the power technology has to transform (or even "crush") culture. He was also keenly aware of how technology magically determines human vices: "The Five principles of the media are sex, violence, greed, vanity, deception" (Stooss & Kellein, 1993, p.17). These principles were often depicted in his work. Paik had great understanding of how technology could impact self and society.

Technology provided the canvas for Paik's artwork, and it was often the subject of his creations. However, like

Marshall McLuhan, he was ambivalent about its influence in society. One might say his way to combat the overwhelming influence of technology was by embracing it to the extreme and this strategy obscured his distrust in it. One of his famous quotes supports this view: "Television has attacked us for a lifetime, now, we strike back" (Stooss and Kellein, 1993, p. 12). Paik saw both the beauty and the threat of technology. In the quote, he suggests that human beings wage war against an inanimate box. The image is not unlike the science fiction movies of the current day that thematize technology overtaking humanity or play out the narrative of watching or being watched. With that point in mind, it is important to note that in addition to television sets, Paik also incorporated video cameras into his installations. Stooss and Kellein (1993) report that "while strongly attracted to [the videocamera] as a medium, he sees its Big Brother potential" (p. 13). Therefore, as a whole, Paik's mixture of television and video cameras advertise a loop of watching and being watched, with technology at the heart of the ambivalent attitude found within his art.

One of the central themes in Paik's work focuses on technology's relation to the human body. Paik saw the potential of technology to act as an "extension of a human faculty," a view McLuhan also had on the role of media. At times during his career, Paik paired up with musician Charlotte Moorman and gave public performances that blended technology and music. Often, Moorman's body was partially clothed and adorned with small television sets fastened to her breasts. That image is repeated throughout several of his works. Though he was apprehensive and

defensive regarding technology's influence on humanity, he found ways to "strike back" by closely controlling its relationship with the human body. Much of the technology problem simply has to do with the locus of control. In terms of social transformation, Paik's experimentation with technology and the human body reinforced McLuhan's view of media as an extension of it and encouraged members of society to break the barriers that exist between the screen and the human body. He wanted to humanize and poeticize technology. In an interview, Paik comments on the body's similarity to television: "One promising way [to humanize technology]: feeding computer-generated signals directly into the various inputs of the cathode ray. This is a good symbolization of the human body which has seven inputs from ears and mouth to genitals" (Yalkut). All figures who are poised to challenge paradigms of their craft pair opposites against one another. Therefore, another way in which Paik sought to "strike back" against television was to pair it more closely with that which society conceived (and, in some ways, still conceives) as its opposite: the human body.

Paik's work includes other specific areas of ambivalence as well, such as technology's relationship with nature. Stooss and Kellein (1993) report that "as early as 1962-63, Paik's basic ambivalence toward electronics could be seen in his work... It can still be seen... [in] high-quality electronically produced images – images whose colors occur neither in nature nor in traditional art." (p. 12). However, similar to McLuhan, Paik resists sending fixed messages in one modality. The key, when dealing with technology, is to think and act ephemerally, similar to the subject itself.

Therefore, like the nature of his work, his messages constantly change. This artistic practice is both exhausting and exhilarating. Paik sometimes alluded to the difficulty of keeping up with technology:

> If I were a "clean leftist," I would have to say, "I shall no longer use the paint box." Because I am a video artist, I cannot accomplish my art without the paint box. Not only art would be impossible...At that moment, I sensed I had found the limit of the idea "Human use of technology." But every human endeavor has its "Karma." There's no way around it. (Stooss and Kellein, 1993, p. 124)

Here, one senses that the artist felt a lack of control over technology. He examines the human use of technology and technology's use of humans. He also questions the ephemeral nature of artworks, which is, in most circumstances, determined by advances in technology. While Paik admits he has a very "anti-machine" mentality, his ambivalence toward technology "ends up making something unforeseen" (Serwer, 1994, p. 90). Perhaps this dynamic artistic exploration is what attracted Paik to technology. Nevertheless, Paik's video art as a response to McLuhan's appeal to artists, his ambivalence toward technology, his association of technology with the human body, and his ability to bridge contemporary technological culture with traditional artistic culture all work to identify him as a leading figure of American social transformation. To see these connections more closely, it is important to provide a brief, close examination of selected Paik works.

Striking Back

Paik's large video installations reinforce the technological grandiosity that existed in the culture of the time. However, early in his career, one artistic piece in particular brought him much praise and attention, perhaps for its relative simplicity. Paik's *TV Buddha* (Figure 3) is a piece of video sculpture in which a figure of the Buddha sits and faces a small monitor. The image on the monitor is that of Buddha himself; he is recorded via closed circuit television with a video camera behind the monitor. (The video camera is not shown in this image.) *TV Buddha* accomplishes several things: it indicates an ambivalent attitude toward technology; it symbolizes an extension of the human body into the technological realm; and it serves to build a bridge between ethnic cultures in the United States and abroad. In these ways, *TV Buddha* is a physical manifestation of McLuhan's thoughts on media and technology.

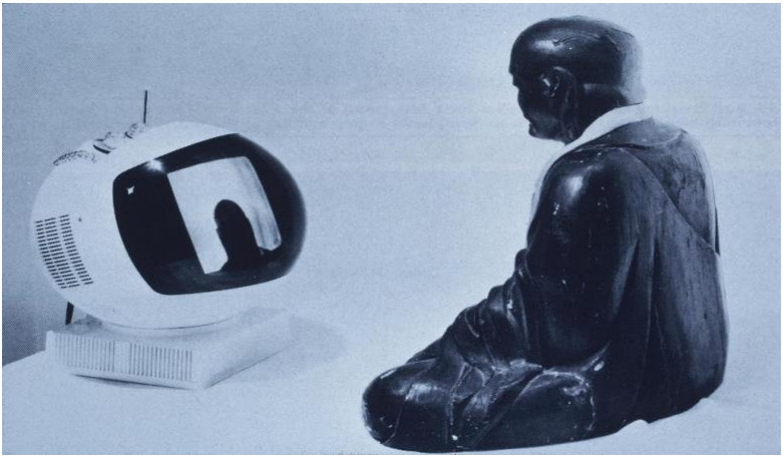

Figure 3. Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, 1974.

TV Buddha captures the ambivalent attitudes people had toward television and technology. As indicated in McLuhan's works, the spectrum of opinion on television and technology varied greatly during the latter part of 20th century America. The contrast, therefore, of a religious figure facing the object of ambivalence confronts the issue directly. The use of technology in Paik's work was a landmark in itself. According to Sook-Kyung Lee and Susanne Rennert (2010): "Paik employed art as a projection screen for the constant questioning of social, political, technological, and economic processes" (p.10). Paik's goal was to have viewers consider and reevaluate their degree of ambivalence toward technology. In a like manner, the viewer is also encouraged to imagine herself in the spot of the Buddha, in order to consider her relationship with the machine. Critics of this piece have considered the transformative message in *TV Buddha*. One commonly held view is that it prompted a shift in how one engages with a work of art: from a passive viewer to an active participant. As McLuhan (1967) noted, the immersive experience of television was meant to make the viewer the "vanishing point" in terms of engagement: "The images wrap around you...This creates a sort of inwardness, a sort of reverse perspective which has much in common with Oriental art" (p. 125). Though Paik was highly aware of the Big Brother quality of technology, *TV Buddha* approaches that topic in a subtle way. There is a peacefulness that exists here, one that suggests the humanizing capabilities of television. The predominant attitude that technology dehumanizes the human being, stemming from and, perhaps, existing prior to the Industrial Revolution, is therefore reexamined. In this new

cultural dialogue, ambivalence toward technology becomes a major topic of discussion. As mentioned earlier in this paper, McLuhan noted that media and technology are extensions of the human body. The idea is quite clearly demonstrated in Paik's work, especially in *TV Buddha*.

The contrasting images of technology and religion conjure many possible interpretations. During the twentieth century and certainly today, the media began to portray images that nourished human vice. It was not uncommon to find images of sex, gluttony, and greed in various media. The images certainly contributed to the public's ambivalent attitudes toward technology. *TV Buddha* suggests a different response to technology: instead of perpetuating the negative images that so often offended the public, the piece encourages the idea that television and technology can, in fact, enhance spirituality. In fact, Paik's work strongly demonstrates the idea that spirituality could exist in the new technological world. The relative simplicity and peacefulness of closed-circuit television provided Paik with a perfect medium to express this message. Stooss and Kellein (1993) report Paik's response: "the quick success of my *TV Buddha* was because it was what the younger generation was looking for, a protranscendent aesthetic...it was all slowly repeating patterns" (p. 58). Therefore, the artist's work during the time was not without lofty goals. In order to indicate the "safety" of technology, Paik leveraged it so that it served a quintessential human quality: spirituality. Stooss and Kellein (1993) say that while Paik embraced technology to the extent that he believed human perception "has been programmed as a receiver reacting to electronic signals," *TV Buddha* suggests

that human spirituality can transcend the power of media and television (p. 28). In this way, *TV Buddha* can be viewed as a spiritually transformative piece.

Paik's *TV Buddha* also worked as a bridge between ethnic cultures in the United States and the world. In his book, *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan (1967) notes: "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village" (p. 67). In the contemporary technological world, it is not difficult to see how this is the case. Modern technologies have contributed greatly to the rise and fall of countries and play a significant role in globalization. In Paik's time, that message was slow to develop. Since Paik was an admirer of McLuhan, one might imagine how this message could be manifested. In one way, *TV Buddha* develops the idea that ritual should be a community activity. In the United States some years prior to *TV Buddha*, the funeral of President Kennedy marked one moment when this community activity occurred. With *TV Buddha*, members of society imagined themselves in a kind of closed-circuit system. The idea behind the artwork propelled the thought that technology could serve as a venue for community ritual. Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh (2004) support Paik's idea: "even as he was led to attack television, he also wanted to realize it -- that is, to transform it from an apparatus of passive spectatorship into a medium of creative interaction" (p. 560). The community activity associated with television is, therefore, one of the goals for Paik's piece. In the true spirit of protest, involving community is a key element to "striking back."

Striking Back

Paik's *TV Buddha* clearly conveys messages about connectedness in the United States. It also conveys messages regarding the desire to connect East and West cultures. Paik brought the stereotypical image of the ancient East into the modern West: "Paik [is one of the] 'modernizer[s]' of Buddhist art, using media and techniques of their own times to transform traditional iconography — a folk style...on the one hand, and video on the other" (Smith, 2000, p. 363). The use of technology as an artistic medium, though it has limits and drawbacks, served here to transform the impression of Eastern cultures on the minds of viewers in the United States. The message was well-timed, especially given its creation shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. Thus, with the universal language of technology serving as a diplomat of sorts, *TV Buddha* created a bridge between individuals within the United States and between countries. The breadth of social transformation found in Paik's *TV Buddha*, however, was not limited to this piece alone. Other works, such as *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, examine the relationship of television, technology, and the human being.

Paik recognized the ambivalent attitudes many members of society had toward technology. Thus, he worked with Charlotte Moorman to model the value and safety of connectedness between human being and machine. Moorman was a professional cellist who often toured with Paik. *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (Figure 4), a piece of performance art, is an example of how Paik's experimentation brought innovative attitudes toward technology and the human body. At the time, the expansive growth of television, video cameras, and other technologies created a chasm between human beings and the

objects which they were expected to operate. The tendency to view technology as antithetical to the human body was very much present during Paik's time, the late twentieth-century, indicating a reluctance and hesitancy toward intimacy with the machine. One might argue the feeling exists today in various outlets. When sociologists like McLuhan began to see technologies and media as extensions of human faculties, the attitude began to change. Those with access to video cameras began exploring the boundary between the body and the technology itself, providing new insights and encouraging new social attitudes. The attitude can be found in Paik's *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*. Paik, of course, goes a step further: "Paik sought to resolve – in his own words, to humanize, even to eroticize, technology" (Foster et al., 2004, p. 560). Paik's small televisions represent one of the more personal items of clothing, the female brassiere. Though Paik's approach to technology was to "strike back" and humanize that which was immediately invasive, his push toward human sexuality, a highly-sensitive topic, dramatically highlights his efforts to steer technology into a position of servitude. One of the ways he demonstrated the safety of technology was by broadcasting the possibility of intimacy between the human being and technology.

Figure 4. Nam June Paik, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1973.

In *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, Paik attempts to humanize technology by making it appear to be a part of a classical performance. The piece suggests that even though technology's influence on culture is undeniable, upon invitation it might also be a part of a very human, intimate, artistic performance. He therefore makes a strong aesthetic statement about the place of technology in art. Stooss and Kellein (1993) support this view: "Paik has negotiated an aesthetic that relies on a humanist belief in the playful enlightenment of technology and expresses the hope that artists, embodying the creative spirit, can use technology as a constructive tool for reshaping our culture" (p. 82). This creative interplay of performance, music, the human body and technology typifies Paik's aspirations: while his works are artifacts that reflect commonly-held cultural attitudes toward television and technology, they are also tiny engines of transformation that attempt to humanize technology. Paik paired technologies with activities and images that are indelibly human, in order to encourage and advise others that, although powerful and culturally dominating, they are safe and familiar.

Traditionally, the artist has been the ultimate social critic. Periods of significant change and social transformation are understood more completely by examining works of art by those who have expressed conflicts stemming from political, economic, philosophical, diplomatic, religious, environmental or technological influences. The artist holds up a mirror to society; at the same time, he provides its members with powerful tools and symbols. These artistic images provide fuel for negotiation and perspective. In an increasingly

technological world, the messages are integral for a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, humanity.

The history of the dynamic between technology and art parallels the development of humanity. It is a dynamic that beckons the attention of all leaders in a culture, not just the artist. Such is the reason sociologists like Marshall McLuhan reached out to artists to provide additional insight into that relationship. Artists like Nam June Paik simultaneously utilized advanced technologies and artistic methods to send a message. He synthesized McLuhan's thoughts with his own works, and produced an accurate and illuminating depiction of the technological environment of the time.

Similar to McLuhan, Nam June Paik's work exhibits ambivalence toward technology. Paik's use of video art as a venue to humanize technology prevailed because he recognized ambivalence toward technology in McLuhan's work and in society at large. He used television as a canvas of expression, reassigning technology to serve human purposes once again. He took the image of the human body and provided an alternate area of transcendence, an area which had hitherto been avoided and resented for its putative lack of human intimacy. In doing so, he positioned technology as a positive tool for cultural dialogue and he positioned himself as a leading figure of American social transformation.

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