

Eric McLuhan

On Simulations, the Alphabet, Primitive Art, Drugs

and the second law of thermodynamics:

An Interview

Peter Zhang: *Flusser seems to suggest that each medium simulates a particular function of man. As he puts it: “Simulation is a kind of caricature: it simplifies what is being imitated and exaggerates a few aspects of it. A lever is a simulation of an arm in that it neglects all aspects of an arm except the lifting function, but because it exaggerates this one function to such an extreme, it lifts much more effectively than the arm it is simulating” (2011a: 146).¹*

Eric McLuhan: Do you suppose that if Flusser keeps at it for a few more years he will arrive at the idea that media and technologies are “the extensions of man”? He has not yet stumbled on the side effect of extending: numbness or narcosis of the organ extended. I wonder if he has ever seen a copy of Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*. Do you think it might have saved him a few years of work?

Peter Zhang: *In Does Writing Have a Future? Flussers points out: “First among those things we must relearn in the context of the new as it emerges is process-oriented, progressive linear thought, the way of thinking that is articulated in linear thought. We will have to erase the alphabet from memory to be able to store the new codes there.” Flusser is in the habit of playing with ideas in the spirit of dialogue. He regularly falsifies his own ideas. As such, there is a probing quality to his writing. In the above passage, “relearn” sounds synonymous with “unlearn” (2011a: 149). The question here is: is the alphabet worth keeping at all?*

Eric McLuhan: He has the right of it: the challenge posed by electric technologies really is a matter of the survival of the alphabet and all of its side effects, including private individualism, individual identity, objectivity and detachment, linear thought, logic, rationality, and Western civilization. And that is no exaggeration, though it sounds extreme. That is the point, really: it is not the alphabet alone but the alphabet and all that it brings with it (and takes with it when it departs). Your question

¹ *Flusser Studies* thanks “The Estate of Eric McLuhan” for the permission to republish a shortened version of Peter Zhang’s interview with Eric McLuhan in this issue. The complete text “Media Ecological Moments”, was first published in the “Canadian Journal of Communication”, Vol, 40 (2015): 503–517.

resolves into this: is Western culture worth keeping at all?

Some years ago, in the mid-to-late nineties, I proposed that we ought to begin crafting a syllabary to take the place of the alphabet and to work as a bridge between alphabetic culture and what was clearly in the offing. My reason had to do with preserving our literate and literary heritage. When the alphabet succumbs—and it is doing so now in slow motion—the entirety of our literature and our literary heritage will simply subside into desuetude, quietly, unremarkably, totally. As a literary man, I could not allow that to happen if there were anything I could do about it. I tried for years to drum up some support for the project, and nobody was willing to give it a thought. Nobody was interested. I have no reason to think the situation has changed.

I very much doubt that even today it would be possible to obtain support for designing a syllabary for the purpose of saving some shreds of literacy. Make no mistake: this is a war to the death between the alphabet and electric media, and the latter will prevail—except perhaps in a few backwaters here and there.

Designing the syllabary is not itself difficult: I got well into the job at one point. The main problem is one of restricting the number of characters to about 70. A syllabary of 200 characters is an easy job, but it is massively unwieldy. Imagine trying to teach grade-schoolers to write and read with a 200-character writing system.

My starting point was the realization that literacy was fading quickly, coupled with the awareness that if literacy went, then so would access to literature and our entire literary tradition. Time hack: the early-to-mid-eighties. I was working at McLuhan and Davies Communications (MDC) at the time. It is a company a partner and I formed in the eighties to teach writing and editing to professional writers and editors inside large businesses and in government agencies and departments.

What to do? How to preserve access to the tradition from Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose to the moderns? Postliteracy was clearly spreading apace and people were not reading in droves, etc., etc. I was looking for some sort of middle ground between solid capital-L Literacy and full-blown post-literacy (which now is developing apace). A syllabary seemed the only workable solution.

Now, a syllabary is not a remedy; it never would be; but it could provide a bridge for those mired in post-literacy who are willing to cross into the former Literate world and experience it firsthand.

A syllabary has to be read aloud, so oral performance is a given. But there is no question of a syllabary being a way to make folks literate: it will not. At least none of the extant syllabaries, not even Hebrew, can do, or has ever done, that.

As for timing: given the rate at which matters are developing, I expect that once the present generation has passed away our culture will be completely post-literate and the phonetic alphabets, all of them, will be as obsolete as Etruscan.

Peter Zhang: *In Post-History, Flusser has an intriguing chapter called “Our Shrinking,” in which he points to the tendency toward miniaturization (Paul Virilio associates it with nanotechnology) that has emerged since the Second World War. He perceives a counter-revolution of chips that transforms models into information, and argues that, “In miniaturization, man becomes a particle, ‘information data,’ ‘bit,’ or worthless entity” (2013: 80).*

Eric McLuhan: Behind his remarks, I see lurking the tensions between Plato’s Ideas and Aristotle’s retrieval of them as his final cause, but enough of that ... It is rather obvious and easy.

Peter Zhang: *Platonists betray the tendency to treat “ideal types” as the formal cause. Their formal cause is something that descends from up above. For Marshall McLuhan and you, formal cause is the medium or ground that informs whatever emerges from this ground. The two attitudes translate into two very different ways of doing politics. Deleuze’s notion of immanence puts him in the same camp as Marshall and you.*

Eric McLuhan: Aristotle improved on Plato, as I demonstrated in my little essay, “On Formal Cause” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2011: 83-139), which could easily be expanded into a large book, in fact needs to be. But I will leave that to a philosopher. My job is to explore and report.

On pages 78 to 80 of *Post-History* there is much familiar territory. The transformation into information began of course with the telegraph and reached its present zenith with the digital computer and the satellite/information environment. Flusser misses the importance and significance of the satellite as a miniaturized world (which is a main theme in Bucky Fuller). As also the transformation of the physical body into image. Is not the discarnate condition an epitome of miniaturization?

At this point, I think it would be useful to begin using *The Human Equation* tools (Constantineau & McLuhan, 2010). All of Flusser’s discussion of bits and pieces can be found in the mode of action called “articulation.” Man the measure is become man the root, the etymology, which is straight *Human Equation* (not to mention *Understanding Media*).

When he speaks of the tiny being less human than the gigantic, he misses the point that they are the same process; they are the same thing and both are essentially human, particularly in their inhumanity. Again, if you use *The Human Equation*’s four modes of action (i.e., isometrics, displace-

ment, assuming a posture, and articulation) you can see both there, among others. Are there not echoes of chaos theory and repeatable patterns in his analysis?

Peter Zhang: *“Articulation” can mean dividing, separating, but also the flip side: joining, connecting. I wonder in what sense you are using “articulation” in The Human Equation. I do hear echoes of chaos theory in the way he talks about calculation, computation, and nomadism. This calls to mind James Joyce’s notion of chaosmos and Félix Guattari’s 1995 book Chaosmosis. A model is a repeatable pattern. In the preindustrial age, a model is an ideal form, which is immutable. In the industrial age, a model is an improvable form. In the digital age, a model is a smart form, which is so adaptive that we do not feel its existence. Therein lies its formidable power of control. Nomadism and control are the two faces of the digital age.*

Eric McLuhan: Articulation is bits and pieces. I think you will find much in *The Human Equation* that will be useful in your forays into folks like Flusser. Keep in mind that every human artifact, whether material or immaterial (information et al.) or large or small, gigantic or infinitesimal, is a human extension and is “birthed” through one or another of the four modes of action. That alone clears up a great deal of the mystery surrounding the sort of matters that Flusser and others raise.

Peter Zhang: *Which is to say, The Human Equation presents an anthropocentric, anthropomorphic, anthropotropic understanding of human artifacts. What about the extra-human side of bionics—technologies based on the capacities of plants and animals (e.g., insects and squids)? What about machine-centric technologies? I mean to suggest that human capacities do not have to be the only etymology for inventions. This is not to deny the midwifery performed by human intellect.*

Eric McLuhan: There is no evidence to suggest that animal and plant “technologies” have anything like the significance that human extensions do. But the evidence does suggest that such “technologies” never detach from their makers, that they remain part of the maker, animal or plant. The key it seems to me is that the animal and plant never get to the retrieval stage, the aesthetics of the thing. So beavers, for example, never vie for recognition for making the ideal dam or a beautiful dam or a pretty dam, they never try to see the dam as an aesthetic object or to admire another’s production. They all (beavers or birds or bees or arachnids or foxes or rats or ants or whatever) simply respond to their circumstances. They have no arts, no aesthetics. That we humans do is a side effect of speech—and that is an entirely different argument so let us set that aside for now. We have arts be-

cause we can stand back, and we can look at our products objectively and discuss them in a detached manner. They all “live in the now,” and apparently have no choice but to do so, so they cannot discuss the past or envision the future. If they abandon the hive or the dam, it is simply gone, dead, not even junk. They do not discuss. The animals and plants cannot be objective. They do not have the faculty of retrieval. They do not have language in the sense that we have language: a human language is an organ of perception.

Peter Zhang: *Like Nietzsche (1896: 316) said, “Speech is a beautiful folly. Thereby man danceth over all things”. On the other hand, “To live without clocks is to live forever” (R.L.S., cited in McLuhan & Parker, 1968: 97). But I meant to bring up technologies invented by humans based on the capacities of plants and animals.*

Eric McLuhan: So the conversation took an unexpected turn, as conversations often do ...

Peter Zhang: *Came across this curious line in Flusser’s 1999 book, The Shape of Things: “Whole branches of knowledge such as ecology, archaeology, etymology, psychoanalysis, are concerned with studying waste” (Flusser 1999: 90). In Post-History, he calls these “coprophiliac sciences, the study of the undigested” (Flusser, 2013: 111). The subject matter of etymology is “trash as treasure.” Flusser himself was obsessed with etymology.*

Eric McLuhan: I forget the name of the book just now. But I recall a very astute observation by one researcher that “garbage never lies.” He meant that nobody ever tries to dress up his garbage to make it suggest this or that or to conceal or falsify some idea or some fact. So garbage is a rather useful resource, all in all.

Peter Zhang: *The Flusser line implies “retrieval.” Your observation calls to mind the image of the corporate spy who rummages through competitors’ garbage for commercial intelligence. I was curious whether the British military did actually “dress up their garbage” during the war against Nazi Germany for purposes of spreading disinformation.*

Eric McLuhan: They certainly did—the Brits and the Americans and the Germans and everybody else. The Brits mounted an operation to deceive the Germans about the planned invasion, using a fake—a dead “courier” who carried pertinent documents. They launched the body from a submarine for the Germans to discover ... The book about that business was called *The Man Who Never Was*, written by Ewen Montagu. Fascinating story! There was also a movie about the operation.

Peter Zhang: *In The Shape of Things, Flusser points out: “If one observes the post-industrial situation, one is impressed by the slow but irreversible disappearance of wheels. They no longer tick away inside electronic equipment” (1999: 117). Does this sound familiar? What we need is a symptomology.*

Eric McLuhan: Well, the wheel, which rotates, has been replaced by the circuit, which is instantaneous.

Peter Zhang: *The wheel is to history as the circuit is to post-history, so Flusser seems to suggest. “The wheels on the bus go round and round” is history.*

Eric McLuhan: Good analogy. Perhaps the circuit is to pre-history as well, in the form of myth, which is also instantaneous.

Peter Zhang: *The wheel can be a mythical symbol, though, for the eternal return of the same. This is Flusser again: “The difference between prehistory and history is ... that during history there are literate men who experience, understand, and evaluate the world as a ‘becoming,’ whereas in prehistory no such existential attitude is possible” (2002: 63).*

Eric McLuhan: Perhaps the key is that “history” is an invention designed to turn the eternal round into a sequence, to lend it visual properties. Detachment is a side effect of the visual stance. Post-history discards the sequence and the objectivity, and that rusty old contrivance, history. It has no use for becoming as all possible futures are here and now. That is the meaning of living in the now; it is to live forever at once.

Peter Zhang: *There have been two shifts: first from images to writing, and then from writing to images. As there is a distinction between orality and secondary orality, so there is a distinction between prehistoric images and post-historic images or techno-images. The latter “are themselves products of texts ... they feed on texts” (Flusser, 2002: 67).*

Eric McLuhan: That is, texts are the content of the latter?

Peter Zhang: *Precisely. Writing is subservient to image making in the post-historic period. The difference between*

prehistoric and post-historic images, according to Flusser, is: “prehistoric images mean the world, posthistoric ones mean texts; prehistoric imagination tries to seize the world and posthistoric imagination tries to be text illustration.” Flusser (ibid) further remarks: “... prehistoric magic is meant to propitiate the world, whereas posthistoric magic will be meant to manipulate people”(2002: 67).

Peter Zhang: *Line and surface are Flusser’s (2002: 114) categories. Traditional images are two-dimensional surfaces abstracted from a four-dimensional lifeworld. The invention of writing means the reduction of two-dimensional traditional images into one-dimensional lines. Technical images are two-dimensional surfaces projected from zero-dimensional calculations (ibid.). Written Chinese involves a combination of line thinking and surface thinking. On the one hand, the characters are laid out linearly. On the other hand, the characters are imagistic so each character makes a self-standing surface. Reading a Chinese text feels like watching a motion picture. How many frames per second is up to the reader.*

Eric McLuhan: Watching a movie: great analogy! Both media call for immense participation on the part of the beholder.

Peter Zhang: *The following passage by Flusser (2013) calls to mind Nietzsche’s intuitive man; there is something Dionysian about it. Flusser treats drugs as a medium that dispels culture’s veiling of the immediate. The passage also calls to mind Aldous Huxley’s book The Doors of Perception and Walter Benjamin’s book On Hashish. Drugs are a medium for overcoming cultural mediation in order to reach immediate experience. Drugs are the mediation of the immediate. The inebriated man reaches, thanks to alcohol, hashish, and LSD, the concrete experience of the immediate, which is veiled for the sober man by the barrier of culture. He reaches, thanks to such media, the “unio mystica,” through which he dissolves into the concrete. He dives, thanks to such artifices, into the ineffable (Benjamin 2006: 132). If language is the medium in question, then drugs are the anti-medium. But I believe language can also be appropriated in a minor mode so it produces a psychedelic (i.e., mind-opening) effect. Deleuze (1997: 225-230) calls such appropriation the invention of a foreign language within language. Turning to art, Flusser (2013: 136) points out: “There is no doubt that art is a drug. That it is a medium in order to propitiate immediate experience.”*

Eric McLuhan: Not in our time, not since, say, Paul Cézanne and the symbolists. Since then, i.e., in the electric age, art serves as a counter environment. The environmental elements and forces are the drug that anaesthetizes the denizen. Have you taken a gander at Ezra Pound’s (1954) “The Serious Artist” yet? It might explain a bit; either way, I think you would like it. He is a no-nonsense type of

writer. Incidentally, only a literate person would separate language and images: to the non-literate, they are simultaneous. Poets, on the other hand, work on the borders of the two.

Peter Zhang: *Flusser perceives a functional equivalence between drugs and art, both of which seem to be conducive to empiricism, to the forgetting of language. This is precisely where Zen is headed, and what Zarathustra's convalescence is all about. On the other hand, Flusser could use a finer, more rigorous taxonomy. Some drugs blunt perception; others sharpen it. Alcohol and LSD do not seem to belong together. A moderate dose of alcohol can disinhibit a person. But alcohol is by no means psychedelic the way LSD is. Too often, people use the word "drugs" in a loose way, thus conflating narcotics and psychedelics. Flusser's point applies to the latter for the most part. But I suspect he has Nietzsche's notion of the Dionysian in mind when he mentions alcohol. Personally, I side with Deleuze and believe in the endogenous. As Deleuze (1995: 11) points out: "any effects produced in some particular way (through homosexuality, drugs, and so on) can always be produced by other means."*

Eric McLuhan: Well, you are right about the difference between alcohol and LSD. It is no coincidence that civilized—i.e., alphabetically literate—people have little or no trouble with alcohol but cannot accommodate to LSD and peyote and company. Conversely, tribal people have no problem with peyote, mescaline, pot, etc., but have no defenses against alcohol. The reasons lie in the organization of sensibilities, in the *sensus communis*. Alcohol mimes the effects of the alphabet; it numbs the senses, particularly the interior forms of experience, just as the alphabet does in translating the senses into one mode: the visual. The alphabetic man is outer-directed and individualistic; the tribal man is inner-directed and group-oriented.

Peter Zhang: *One man's "meat" (i.e., sacred mushroom, known as "the flesh of God"), another man's poison. It is a matter of "which interality?" Flusser suggests that the digital age is an age of neo-nomadism. The nomad does not possess but experiences. Is it a mere coincidence that cannabis is being legalized these years? Are the multitudes in postindustrial societies now inclined against possessive individualism? Or is it because the authorities need the multitudes to hold a "just be" attitude since production is increasingly being outsourced to developing countries? Suppose there were a chapter on drugs and psychedelics in *Understanding Media*, what points do you imagine Marshall McLuhan would have made?*

Eric McLuhan: In 2007, I gave a talk on neo-nomadism at the Media Ecology Association (MEA) Annual General Meeting. The title was "Media Ecology and the New Nomads."

Peter Zhang: *Flusser has an interesting line on primitive art: The bison's image on the cave wall is a suspended perception, a suspended experience, a suspended value, and it is a model for all future intersubjective perception, experience, and conduct, for all future hunting parties (2002: 71). My sense is that for the most part what Flusser says about the bison's image on the cave wall applies to Chinese characters as well.*

Eric McLuhan: Ted Carpenter, the anthropologist, taught me that the image was not ON the cave wall so much as IN it—found/located there by the exploring hand, and articulated in place with strokes of paint. The hand found the bison (or whatever animal) in the shapes and indentations of the rock surface and marked them with paint—for later reference as it were. So the shape might be in any orientation, upside down or right side (more or less) up, or curving around, following the surface of a shelf or declivity.

Anthropologists have of course no real idea what the images were for but they were of the opinion that they functioned somewhat as mission control does for the astronauts—as a way to control the quarry from a distance. Another analogy they used was advertising: intended to exert control over the quarry (buyer) at a distance. Pure magic.

Every posture is an arrest, a suspended movement, a snapshot of the sensibilities. Cannot the same be said of Chinese characters? That they are snapshots of a dramatic movement? And then, what of the dramatic interval BETWEEN the characters? What takes place there?

Peter Zhang: *That is precisely why I am interested in interology. Written Chinese is a cool medium. It is more like montage, animation, symbolist art, or impressionist music. What takes place between the characters is active sense making. A page of Chinese text makes an acoustic space, a vortex of energy, a field of force where resonances and dissonances, affinities and clashes play out. Flusser (2011a: 65) has an incisive line about Chinese: "In some isolating languages (say, in Chinese), there are no sentences, but there are juxtapositions of syllables, and instead of a projectile character, their universe therefore has a mosaic character." There is an unmistakable Oriental ring to McLuhan's work and media ecology in general. A shift from an ontological orientation to an interological orientation has been underway in numerous realms. As a cover term, "interology" is necessary and useful. It has been called forth by a larger ground. The time is ripe.*

Eric McLuhan: I am continually reminded of Pound's observation that meaning in a poem is the dance of the intellect among the words.

Peter Zhang: *Saw this in Essential McLuhan: “The age-old conflict between the Eastern integrity of the interval and the Western integrity of the object is being resolved in oral culture” (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995: 208). Wonder what you make of this.*

Eric McLuhan: I suspect that what they intended to convey is that the West is adopting the Eastern sensibility—or rather reinventing it in its hesitant, clumsy way. The integrity of the object melted away from our art in the hands of the impressionists and the cubists, nearly two centuries ago ...

Cézanne was on the borderline, pushing into new territory, but his work led directly to cubism and what followed ... Cézanne is nowadays called a Postimpressionist and lumped together with Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh and Georges Seurat. Our critics have for ages substituted descriptive terms and classifications for insight and real awareness: that is one example. Another is the almost fanatic urge to classify media as “hot” or “cool” as a substitute for understanding them. The same urge underlies their need to classify media as good or bad on first encounter. Wyndham Lewis (1986) wrote about the critics’ assessments of Cézanne that: Cézanne came up rather crabbed and reluctant, a little aloof, and with something in his eye liable to awake suspicion. And sure enough suspicion awoke. In fact, what the journalist would describe as a “shrewd” suspicion grew up that this till then thought to be second-class artist, rather incompetent, though well-meaning old fellow, had something very useful and new in him; and was probably more a portion of the new sensibility, and possibly of more intrinsic importance altogether, than any of his Impressionist contemporaries.

This suspicion grew into a furious conviction that a very great artist had been unearthed. He became the most fashionable figure in the world. So much so that it is impossible to write three lines about painting to-day without mentioning his name. Matisse has not much to do with Cézanne. But the whole Cubist movement comes out of him... (pp. 99–100)

Peter Zhang: *Put otherwise, interality resurfaced after a long interlude.*

Eric McLuhan: Aha! “Interality” is what Dad and I called resonant interval. Oral culture is based on interval, not connection—ear and touch instead of eye. Eye displaces the other senses in favour of connection and objectivity/detachment; hence Yeats’s tug-of-war with eye as pollution of his poems. He was not fighting imagery, but the visual sense itself.

Peter Zhang: *Do you know of good sources on “ma” (i.e., negative space)?*

Eric McLuhan: It took a while, but I found a copy in some old files! In March 1969, Fred and Barbro Thompson published a small article in a campus magazine at the University of Toronto, the *St. George Dragon*. It carried the title, “The Japanese Concept of Ma,” and filled eight pages of the magazine (8½" x 11", typewriter font). I have been unable to find it on the Internet, so I may have the only copy extant. This article was the basis of McLuhan’s observations on the subject of the Japanese sense of space. (One or both of the Thompsons had been students of his.) The entire article is worth a look. There are eight illustrations.

Peter Zhang: *Wonder what you make of this passage from Flusser: “... [C]hamber music can serve as a model of telematic social structure. In itself, it precedes telematics, the apparatus, and automation. It is a preindustrial form of communication. And yet it is now possible to see in it (and perhaps in jazz, so strongly reminiscent of chamber music) many aspects of postindustrial communication, above all the camera obscura aspect. This may, incidentally, explain the otherwise remarkable contemporary interest in chamber music (and jazz): we recognize in it the form of a future society” (2011b: 163).*

Eric McLuhan: Chamber music was music intended for playing at court or in someone’s living room with perhaps a small group of guests present—an audience of six or eight or ten, perhaps, and a group of three or four or five performers (trio, quartet, quintet). Chamber music afforded a particularly intimate experience.

As a form of communication it continued right through the industrial period and continues now, thanks to recording. The big innovation in the industrial age was the symphony orchestra, the 100-piece group that could make a terribly loud and dramatic sound. There is not much that is contemporary about the big orchestra today. It is an obsolete form. Any rock band can beat it for sound.

Joyce wrote a book of poems titled *Chamber Music*. His meaning was not at all related to string quartets and company. His “chamber music” was a slang term for the sounds emitted in the toilet and the outhouse. Can you explain to me what Flusser means by his reference to the dark room/camera obscura?

Peter Zhang: *Flusser envisions a telematic society in which “[p]eople will be in contact with one another through their fingertips and so form a dialogical net, a global superbrain” (2011b: 161). The following line explains the camera obscura (literally, dark chamber) reference: “The superbrain will play internally, it will dream – a universal specta-*

*cle as a montage game of tiny parts, a black box composed entirely of darkened rooms, a universal orchestra made up entirely of chamber musicians” (2011b: 162). Remember for McLuhan, the Hula-Hoop characterizes the electric age—an age when people move on the spot, or voyage *in situ*. For Flusser, chamber music characterizes the telematic society—a dialogic, negentropic, cerebrally orgasmic society.*

Eric McLuhan: “Movement on the spot” is another term Wayne Constantineau and I used for the mode of action called “isometrics” in *The Human Equation*. That is, movement without displacement. Any breakdown in isometric balance of tensions and compressions results in displacement. Isometrics flips into displacement. A propos Flusser’s chamber, have a look at the novel by John Fowles called *Mantissa*. “In contact with one another through their fingertips” echoes an old telephone company advertising line: “Reach out and touch someone.” Touch is all the senses at once, whole-body knowing.

Peter Zhang: *In Flusser’s telematic society, people are in contact with one another by touching nothing more than keyboards. The phrase “isometric balance of tensions and compressions” applies to Chinese calligraphy. The constituent elements of a character are supposed to be in dynamic equilibrium. Interality lies behind calligraphy and chamber music alike.*

Eric McLuhan: That is a most revealing observation, and very helpful. When I was in China I learned a term for the imaginary space in which a Chinese character is composed: the “magic square.” I immediately recognized it as a character of our tetrad: it too inhabits a magic square, which I describe in terms of analogical proportions (ratios among ratios). That is, the four constituent elements are supposed to be in dynamic equilibrium. Exactly the same dynamics characterize *The Human Equation*.

Peter Zhang: “Interality” runs through all of these examples. I think you will like the following passage from Chiang Yee (1973: 117), one of your favorite sources on Chinese perception: “Although ... no Chinese character exactly represents a living thing, yet the main principle of composition is in every case a balance and poise similar to that of a figure standing, walking, dancing, or executing some other lively movement. In criticizing a piece of calligraphy, the first desideratum is that the thing should be living; the next, to discover where the life lies. The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, not of designed and motionless shape. A finished piece of it is not a symmetrical arrangement of conventional shapes, but something like the co-ordinated movements of a skillfully

composed dance – impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole.” Put otherwise, there needs to be internal tension, which comes from the dynamic interplay between constituent elements.

Eric McLuhan: Yes, this is wonderfully perceptive, exactly how I remember Chiang Yee’s observations. Again, he is describing that mode of action we call isometrics. Just as formal cause contains/is all the other causes, and the literal level of interpretation contains/is all the other levels, so isometrics contains/is all the other modes of action at once, and touch is the meeting place of all the senses at once.

Peter Zhang: *Flusser refers to the second law of thermodynamics often. What do you perceive to be the media ecological significance of this law—the one about entropy (熵)? Here is an analogy: information is to order as entropy is to disorder.*

Eric McLuhan: Entropy, running down from a higher energy state to a lower one is not ecological and vice versa. Could it not be said that ecology is a movement in the opposite direction? That the point of eco is a steady state? And therefore ecology defeats the entropic tendency? Certainly things human do so.

Peter Zhang: *I think Flusser’s emphasis is more on information. The process of evolution is a process in which nature creates and accumulates new information by blind chance, thereby defying entropy. It is a very slow, haphazard, inefficient process. Humans have exponentially accelerated the creation of new information. Telematics is by far the greatest accelerator in this regard, so much so that Virilio has found it necessary to come up with the metaphor, “the information bomb.” This is where Virilio and Flusser differ from each other. Virilio perceives the information bomb as a threat, not just to green ecology but also to grey ecology (the chief concern of which is the pollution of distance), whereas Flusser celebrates information and takes the “global super brain” to be a good in and of itself—so long as the channels of communication are dialogic, instead of fascist.*

Eric McLuhan: This is a complicated one. Right off, let us not anthropomorphize [mother] nature. How can nature—an abstract idea (it means “about to be born” in Latin)—create or accumulate information? Where does “she” store it? Of what does “she” consider information to consist? Of what use is it to her? Second, note that Flusser is working with efficient cause—and morality: the

“global super brain” is either good or bad, depending. Nuts! As long as he continues on that track he will get nowhere in understanding the effect or the structure or the nature of the information environment. He is still dealing with the content level.

Virilio does not seem to have advanced much beyond Flusser’s position—tell me if I am wrong in this. (And what is meant by “pollution of distance?” “Pollute” comes from a Greek word meaning “dilute.”) Does not “information bomb” simply recognize that we live in an information environment? That has been recognized for dozens of years. And you have used a term that is new to me: the grey ecology. Is there, then, a spectrum of different coloured ecologies? That idea has some appeal, though I wonder at its usefulness. I would really appreciate some enlightenment here!

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