

MACHINE: MAPPING THE MULTIMEDIA TERRAIN OF POSTMODERN SOCIETY

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The purpose of this article is to describe and offer a rationale for what we have labeled cybertheory. Cybertheory attempts to use the current technologies of postmodernity, the personal computer, the VCR, and home recording equipment, to produce a multimedia theoretical "text," a video trilogy titled Machine, which explicates a postmodern view of late 20th-century culture. The theoretical background for this work is rooted in the works of Baudrillard, Virilio, the Krokers, and Deleuze. The Machine trilogy is briefly described and critiqued in light of current sociological understandings of postmodernity, and possible future projects are outlined.

"We are in uncharted waters," remarked a commentator on National Public Radio on a July evening in 1996. "We have to stay infinitely adaptable in this age of uncertainty and change." Although the person being interviewed was talking about the mercuric nature of the job market, these words seemed particularly relevant to the work we have been doing in visual sociology. American society, and other cultures dominated by the American media complex, have undergone profound shifts in the ways in which identity is understood (Clough 1994; Denzin 1995), the ways in which language is both used and constructed, and the ways in which people deal with information. These shifts have taken place in such a way that modes of communication are undergoing changes that are no less significant.

The purpose of this article is to use current understandings of postmodern culture to explicate the first multimedia social theoretical text in sociology, the *Machine* trilogy. *Machine* combines the theoretical work of intellectuals such as Jean Baudrillard

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(1996), Paul Virilio (1994), Gilles Deleuze (1991), and Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (1996) with the tools of postmodernism: the personal computer, digital recording techniques, and mass media and computer images. It is our contention that texts such as *Machine* are a necessary next step in a truly postmodern sociology, which must be, virtually by definition, a visual sociology. *Machine* is an attempt to map the course of Western culture from the industrial-modernist period to the present postmodern-postindustrial period, what Baudrillard (1995b) has referred to as the culture of the mediascape. *Machine* is meant primarily as a pedagogical tool. In the pages that follow, we provide a theoretical background for our work and, following from Denzin (1995), analyze our work from a critical perspective; the ultimate postmodern move into self-referentiality.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In a scant 50 years, society has gone from A-bombs to ANSI bombs, from Uncle Milty to recombinant bodies (Kroker 1993), from U.S. mail to E-mail. The leading edge of information-age culture is riding an incandescent shockwave of high-speed data transfer, technologies du jour, and new media springing up like silicon weeds on the information superhighway. As Electronic Frontier Foundation cofounder John Perry Barlow put it in a recent speech at Wake Forest University, "Everything we know is wrong." All preconceptions have been swept away in the postmodern age as we all wait for the dazzling new future that will arrive tomorrow, as promised by the high-tech, science-fiction-laden commercials put on the tube by the manufacturers of cybernetic junk food. And we stare in amazement, and in indifference, with what Denzin (1995) has called the "voyeur's gaze."

The rise to preeminence of the new media and emergent information technologies create serious questions for the social theorist at the end of the millennium. Can one comment through text alone on the increasingly complex issues created by a society that is transforming before our eyes in an ever-accelerating blur of telecommunications and digital media? That is to say, can the social theorist map out the terrain of the information-age society, thick with rapidly changing sound and imagery, with only the written word?

We believe that the written word alone possesses a relatively

narrow bandwidth for such an endeavor, and presents many limitations. As British rock performer Elvis Costello aptly said in a similar metaphor (Goodwin 1992:1), "writing about rock & roll is like dancing about architecture." In other words, to speak about mediated society, one must use media as a descriptor, and likewise use the technologies at hand to speak about technological society. This creates what we call a *discourse of equivalence*, which lessens the problematic nature of theorizing the mass media, using only the written word by creating a mediated, or "parallel text," through these forms of visual interpretation. By using these methodologies, the salient cognitive aspects of these visual (and later, multimedia, texts) are becoming more readily accessible to the postmodern mind, which is accustomed to the everyday visual barrage of popular media.

When formulating a methodology for speaking of a mediated information society of floating signifiers, shifting genders, and cultural panic sites in which the individual can no longer find social or cultural mooring, one would automatically begin with McLuhan's ([1964] 1994) notion that the form of media dictates its content. The concepts involved in our work are such that the ubiquity of McLuhan's work is implied, but proceeds into the realm of what some have called post-McLuhanism (Epstein and Epstein 1994). We have asserted the end of the premedia society and now speculate on society after the Baudrillardian implosion of the real into the hyperreal image, where there is an endless symbolic playing out of the end until the next apocalyptic crisis comes along (Baudrillard 1994).

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1993) wrote of the implosion of reality into the hyperreal of the digital domain of simulations and simulacra. This, to some extent, has borne itself out in the creation of the Internet, with its varied social, discursive, and simulated physical (VRML) spaces and in the emergent communications and multimedia technologies. Following from Baudrillard (1987), the postmodern era is oriented toward the representational qualities of visual images.

In *The Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard (1993) stated that many cultural spheres (aesthetics, politics, sexuality) have reached a point of "transparency." That is to say, in the postmodern, these spheres have reached their respective limits, or points of excess, but still continue to proliferate through a process of continuous self-reproduction. In so doing, the cultural spheres explode beyond

their limits, infecting the rest of the culture until all of its aspects are now interrelated, the politics of sport, the aesthetics of sexuality, ad infinitum. Baudrillard wrote,

Thus every category is subject to contamination, substitution is possible between any sphere and any other; there is a total confusion of types. Sex is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere—Everywhere else, in fact. Politics is no longer restricted to the political sphere, but infects every sphere; economics, science, art, sport. . . . Sport itself, meanwhile, is no longer located in sport as such, but instead in business, in sex, in politics, in the general style of performance. (P. 8)

This statement can be read as a descriptor of the amorphousness inherent in the postmodern. It only makes sense that the text itself feels these epistemological shockwaves imploding it into the realm of the image. The discursive location of itself within the aesthetic is reminiscent of the (de)evolutionary sequences of the movie *Altered States*. To quote Baudrillard (1995a), "Sooner or later, implodes." And so it happens with the text, as it implodes into itself, infecting all other spheres of the culture. In this case, it reemerges in the hyperreal world of the digital image: a transformation into the lingua franca of the Infobahn.

Throughout his writings, Baudrillard repeatedly described the cultural simulacrum placed before us, a *mise-en-scène* of event scenes with no apparent cause, a free-floating mediascape in which the endless reproduction of cultural forms speeds by us on computer and TV screens. As the staccato images flash before us, the transparency of the aesthetic or "trans-aesthetic" is clearly evident. Baudrillard's sociology privileges the visual of the media- and cyberscape. With Baudrillard, however, it is implied that the images are fixed, in stasis, and are to be confronted as individual pieces of the larger cultural landscape. The problem becomes the multiplicity of these images, which are presented at such a rate that they cannot be adequately deciphered individually. This issue is addressed by another French theorist, Paul Virilio (1986).

Virilio (1986) theorized that although the juxtaposition of static images into new formations begins to capture the contradictory nature of postmodernity, its limitations are revealed because the images are fixed. In postmodernity, motion, speed, and flux are deciding features as we implode our preconceptions of time and

space with ever-increasing advances in digital communications technologies. Following from Virilio (1991), we become telepresent bodies with no sense of near or far, with monitors for eyes that perceive the imagery of the mediascape approaching us with increasing intensity and speed. As images flash across our screens at rapid-fire intensity, they blur into motion, and we are held motionless, inert. The moving panorama of the media-cyberscape speeds before us, as we are held fast, prisoners of set and setting (Virilio, 1994).

According to Virilio (1991), the changes in society brought forth by the mobilization of the body and by the use of the motor and its immobilization through technological acceleration implies that postmodern society is one of speed, motion, cinema, and video. As the bandwidth from which we receive media imagery, communications access, and telepresent gratification increases, so do we move away from the still image as the primary transmitter of information. The sociology of the postmodern, then, must incorporate speed and motion if it is to address the cultural forms it confronts. According to Virilio,

The techniques of rationality have ceaselessly distanced us from what we've taken as the advent of an objective world: the rapid tour, the accelerated transport of people, signs, or things, reproduce—by aggravating them—the effects of pyknolepsy, since they provoke a perpetually repeated hijacking of the subject from any spatial-temporal context. (P. 101)

Even though the use of motion and speed further elaborates on the quickly changing nature of the postmodern, it does not convey the shallow, rapid quality and multiplicity of experiences evident in computer and media environments. Following from Deleuze (1991:28), the postmodern terrain is rhizomatic; a space in which speed creates a rapid, shallow movement across the discursive terrain. From this, the space is highly interconnected, much like a "strawberry patch" (Deleuze) of media. That is, a continuum in which the media-discursive loci operate in intricate webs of interaction at high speeds of movement that collapse the space to the point at which little depth in content can be introduced, sustained, or perceived when content is actually present at all. The user is presented with so much information, any depth of comprehension in its entirety is impossible. This is the realm of

multimedia, the World Wide Web, and postmodern culture in general.

MULTIMEDIA—THE NEED FOR A REFERENT

Before we go on, we must address the question of the text, its nature and existence. Could it be possible that Baudrillard (1993) and Virilio (1991) have destroyed the written word in the breathless rush into cyberspace? If one follows them to their logical conclusions, Baudrillard's text implodes into imagery, then Virilio's cinema and video, with only traces of the text left behind on the screen. However, we have not entirely thrown ourselves into the *Star Gate*-like abyss of the visual, never to return. The text has not virtualized into hyperreality, thus annihilating our libraries and academies. Lanier's dream of postsymbolic communication (Rheingold 1991) in the form of the virtual reality technologies has failed for the time being, and we are left in need of a common base from which to operate. The human mind, even in the cybernetic age, requires a point of least abstraction, a referent, a context in which to maneuver.

The use of multimedia in a sociology of the postmodern still holds true with Baudrillard, Virilio, and Deleuze. We can surmise that we have an intersection of several instances of Baudrillardian transparency, of technology, aesthetics, sexuality, and so on. The incorporation of technological media, such as video, CD-ROM, and Internet installations, agrees with Virilio's tenets of societal acceleration. And according to Deleuze, all these interrelations build on one another into the interdisciplinary web of multimediated discourse; this is where the sociology of the postmodern leads us, and it is the repository of the textual referent.

The rhizomatic space of multimedia, the Internet, and multimediated society requires a referent from which to operate, much like one requires a gateway or "socket" to cyberspace. The text is now only one of many cultural referents on which the sociology of the multimediated society draws. Text is now a billboard in the land of posts. It no longer enjoys the hegemonic privilege of the book. The sociology of the postmodern is now not only textual, but also aural and visual, and it encompasses as many senses as the technological media will allow, including, interestingly enough, smell. It is only in this way that we can truly speak accurately on the society of the information age.

What is created from this eruption are a series of concurrent, or parallel, texts. Comprised of the various sensoria of written word, sight, and sound, they now shift and arrange themselves in varying states of primacy or interaction as needed in a Foucaultian architectonic. It is from this point that we began our exploration of what we have labeled *cybertheory* with the multimedia text *Machine*.

MACHINE: INTERPRETATION, ANALYSIS, CRITIQUE

The *Machine* video trilogy represents our interpretation of the postmodern as discussed earlier to the shift caused by Virilio (1986) and begins our move into Deleuzian (1991) discursive strategies. The machine of the industrial is supplanted by the machine of the cybernetic; all wires, gears, silicon, and computer graphic displays. The velocity of the imagery has now reached cinematic speeds, combining the digitally produced animations with the hyper "real" of the televised image. The discursive strategy used by *Machine* to speak on the postmodern is one of music videos, cable TV, and cyberspace. The use of the new media delivers the message of the information society.

Machine is not the first project that has attempted to deal with social issues through the camera lens, whether virtual or physical. Other attempts worth noting are the MFA projects of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. However, the differences between these endeavors and *Machine* are many. First, *Machine* is an experiment in pedagogy, of the expansion of postmodern thought within the very media it describes, and of the transmission of these often complex and abstract concepts. It is not merely a vehicle for the explanation of social issues, but a theoretical work of its own accord.

Second, the works of Lucas and Spielberg were produced in the film department at UCLA, a facility directly beneath the wing of the Hollywood infrastructure. In the case of *Machine*, production was executed independently, using incredibly small budgets, off-the-shelf computer programs, standard Pentium desktop personal computers, and relatively low-tech analog home recording equipment such as a four-track cassette recorder. The video imagery used consists of scenes of the mediascape, visions pumped directly into homes via cable TV. Therefore, rather than a

terminal art project with the potential commercial backing of one of the world's largest media factories, *Machine* represents a grass-roots attempt to survey the mediascape on its own terms. It is an academic research project with few ties to the media juggernaut except what was presented to it as fodder. As a pedogological tool, *Machine* has met with a great deal of success.

The *Machine* trilogy explores the shift from the industrial, modernist society to the postmodern and the cultural borders transgressed by these paradigm shifts through a combination of information-age computer imagery combined with video clips from the mediascape. Through this visual methodology, *Machine* attempts to create a discursive space in which each of the concepts relating to the specific societal event scenes can be deconstructed.

Before delving further into the analysis of each section, we must discuss certain thematic elements of *Machine's* compositional structure that are particularly germane to its discussion. Following from Paul Virilio (1994) in his essay "The Third Interval," the information-age society causes an implosion of physical and ontological spaces, allowing the individual little time to reflect on the events transpiring in the surrounding mediascape. And so it is with *Machine*. The relentless barrage of imagery combined with the reinforcing visual repetition inherent in American popular media allow the viewer to experience the events, but not to assimilate or reflect on them, resulting in the existential info-blur that is 1990's cyberculture. These visual strategies build on the concepts discussed in the following critique to reiterate the multivalent sociological discursive space that *Machine* represents.

MACHINE I: CHEW ON THIS

Part 1, titled *Chew on This*, is meant to represent the angst felt by American mainstream society as it attempts to grapple with the dilemmas of rapidly changing technologies. It uses a visual metaphor that depicts the changes in the perception of the self and identity created by 1990s digital technologies. The video opens on a Baudrillardian note, with the vocal "Can you BELIEVE how little you care," along with visions of Cold War spokespersons stripped of their voices in a further recapitulation of the utter indifference of media society.

The next sections of *Chew on This* interrogate the future directions of societal constructs of group identity, such as religion,

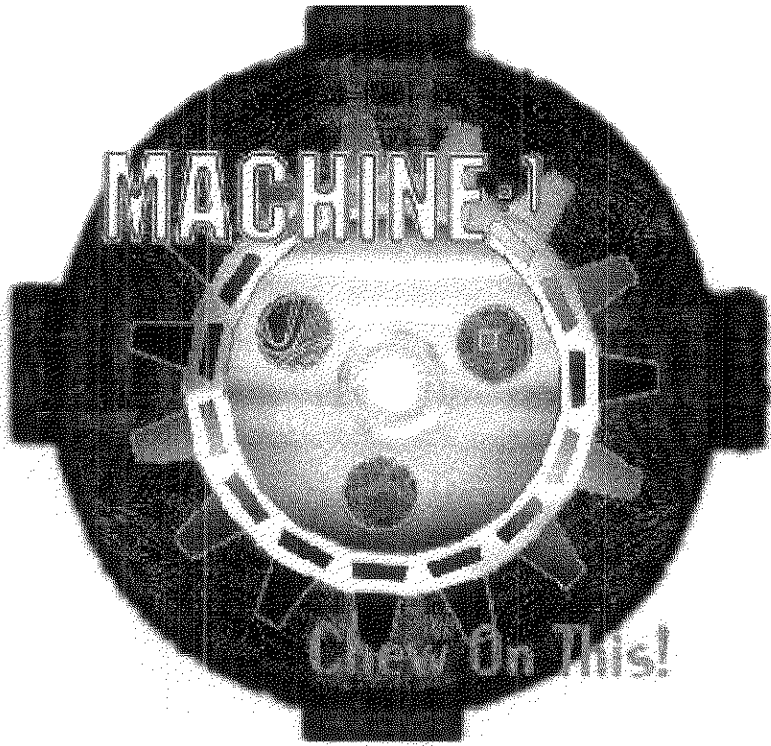


FIGURE 1. Still image from Machine I.

the military, and governmental figures. As the video progresses, these themes further question the boundaries of our societal memory versus those boundaries offered by the media. Salient imagery within the video are the Stonehenge-like machine altar and the gear-eyed androgynous CyberChrist (representing technology as the new postmodern religion, a theme that is returned to in *Machine III*) and the Lang-inspired *Metropolis* images (symbolizing industrial society reconstructed in the digital culture). These themes are repeated in the following two sections, as the recurring concepts in the series are embellished.

MACHINE II: ACCESS DENIED

The motifs in *Machine II: Access Denied* deal with the twofold manner in which technology stratifies society and culture. *Access Denied* begins with an apparently innocent entry into

cyberspace, greeting the viewer with a cheery welcome ("Welcome to Cybernet . . . Engaged"). However, the ramifications of the emergent technologies become evident as images of people from underdeveloped, politically oppressed, and impoverished regions flash, juxtaposed with the warning "Access Denied," culminating the ultimate denial: the now infamous footage of the execution of a citizen during the Vietnam War.

The technologically driven stratification of society along political, economic, and educational lines is evident by this time, and now that the privileged technocracy has blurred the distinction between the real and the virtual, the question of history and cultural memory in a technocracy comes to the fore. The cultural memory test begins as the head-mounted display, like that used in virtual reality computer games such as *Mechwarrior*, swings down.

To paraphrase Paul Virilio (1992), what is perceived is already lost. In the cyber-mediated society, the speed of information processing accelerates culture, identity, and history into a vanishing

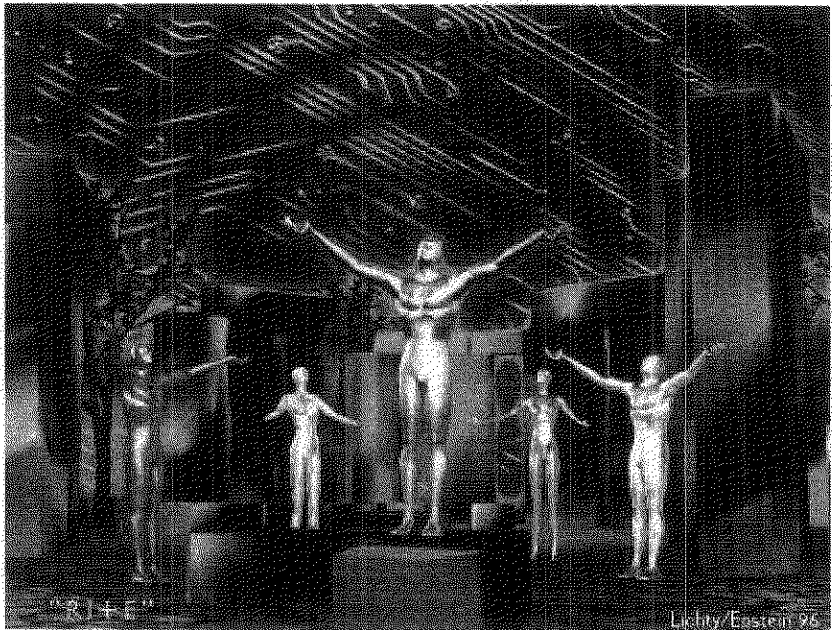


FIGURE 2. Still image from *Machine II*.

point that obscures memory in the lens, or "screen" (Baudrillard 1987), of the media. As the "cultural memory test" begins, the very notion of whether history can exist in the virtual mediascape becomes a panic site in which pop cultural referents mix with politics and media news records. This creates slippages between cultural signifiers, such as the historical and media perceptions of institutions like the American presidency, suggesting that the memory (history, etc.) is problematic in the age of E-mail. Reagan, Bush, and Clinton pastiche into a video as the Iran contra hearings are conflated with *Bedtime for Bonzo* and *Whitewater* is just another "-water" political buzzword following Watergate. The memory test fractures in the video blitz and ends in failure.

What is the result of this "virtual amnesia" for a mediascape that delights in creating events whose existence is dubious at best? The axiom that a society that cannot remember its mistakes is doomed to repeat them is extended to "war as global memory failure" and to Baudrillard's (1995a) perceptions of the Gulf War as a giant mediated video game. The striking similarities between *Super Mario Kart* and *Smart Bomb* video footage is obvious, and with advertising buzz slogans such as "It's Wild!/It's Madness!" the conflict is ready to be consumed by the American entertainment complex. However, ultimately the onslaught of the spectacle feeds on itself, resulting in its own ontological implosion as modernity implodes into the fragmented existence of postmodernity, in which technology becomes the primary mediator of the social.

MACHINE III: DEUS EX MACHINA

In an age that continually recreates itself around emergent communications technologies, we are all taken on the thrill-of-a-lifetime rollercoaster ride through the media. Culture becomes a vortex of endlessly repeating spectacles and panic sites, of riding the smart bomb of video culture out of the imploding bunkers of modernity. As 24-hr-a-day news reports constantly pump in through our television screens, the endless repetition of the image drains current and past events of all meaning, ensuring the indifference of the spectator. The O. J. Simpson trial is put on cultural parity with the Crucifixion; the Civil Rights movement becomes a vehicle for movies and books on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. The speed of information transfer increases until it reaches the vanishing point of human saturation; after a certain point,

information becomes noise. As *Machine III* states, "The Medium Implodes the Message."

The cybernetic media culture surrounds the spectator with technology and media spectacle up to the point in which it reaches ubiquity. According to Kroker, Kroker, and Cook (1989), the fast-paced frenzy of postmodernity has created a series of panic sites in which it is not possible for the individual to secure a social or cultural mooring. We are adrift in the dynamics of the postmodern cybernetic multimediandscape in which individuals are overwhelmed by the preponderance of information that is presented to them with relentless repetition. The idea of the panic site breaks down here, as corporate media enforce the ideology that technological "progress" is not just necessary but inevitable. This image serves as an opiate to the masses, asserting that the massive technological shifts inherent in the 20th-century fin de siècle are a force for positive social change. Therefore, the cybernetic society is not a panic site fraught with anomie, but one in which the corporate world proclaims the positive influence of technology on the life of the individual, while promising that same individual that to live in the assumption of the coming techno-utopia is to be truly

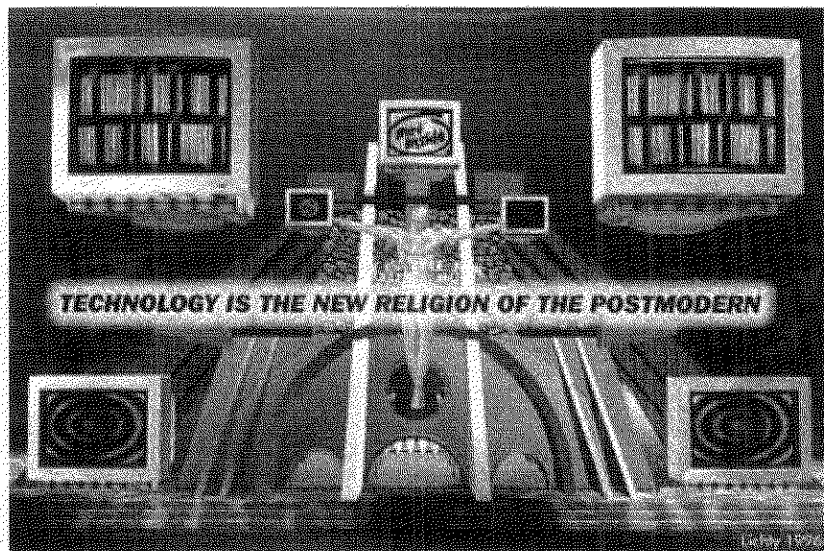


FIGURE 3. Still image from *Machine III*.

alive. In this manner, technology becomes the new religion of the postmodern.

In *Machine III*, the ubiquity of technology, the use of spectacle of any sort as a corporate media commodity, and the illusion of social stability as product of the Civil Rights movement provide the masses with the impression that the New Church is viable and continues to satisfy the needs of the faithful. Companies like Microsoft continue to define ontologies unto themselves through operating systems like medieval encyclicals. You can click on an icon and confess to the Holy Father online in the new nirvana of cyberspace. The un-WIRED heretics are then left to the sinfulness of the body and the physical world, or "meatspace."

Machine III, then, is a reiteration that the media implodes all meaning from any and all events through the opiate of the video screen to further the social imperatives of the entertainment megaconglomerates. Malcolm X and the Million Man March are now banalized into corporate pop culture referents ready for merchandising, and the underlying decay lies covered in a thin veneer of media spin doctoring. Apathy for any real social progress sets in as cultural manipulation disguised as entertainment becomes epidemic, but no one seems to notice, or care. *Machine III* ends with the civil rights protesters marching out of Washington in utter silence, to the words of Martin Luther King Jr. played in reverse; the fallen lay unaided, as Judas, signifier of the last righteous man, hangs beneath the gaze of the spectator's apathy.

IMPACT

From the results gained from several upper level classes at American universities (including Kent State University, the University of Colorado, and Wake Forest University, among others) using *Machine* in programs dealing with concepts in postmodern sociology, cultural studies, and media, the students resoundingly identified with the concepts presented. This would lead us to believe that the use of the multimediated, or parallel, text speaks to a culture that was raised on cable TV, Nintendo, and personal computers. This is the culture that routinely processes information in a multimedia way, through visual, tactile, and aural ways, and not only through the text. Through *Machine*, the participants can actually see what we, the theorists, mean.

The 20-somethings of the 1990s, the ones who have seen *Machine* most often, are a generation raised on hit-and-run media tactics of sound bites and MTV cinematography. For them, history is encapsulated in 7-s chunks and films are seldom longer than 4 min. Attention-deficit disorder is the syndrome of the day. This is the group that *Machine* seems to speak to most clearly. The fast-paced imagery, combined with original music, that is much like that heard on alternative rock radio stations, encodes culture in a media blast that creates a theoretical event scene that appears to resonate profoundly with the current crop of young people in the undergraduate classroom. *Machine* is sociology that these students understand viscerally.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Of our video-multimedia-based discursive spaces, *Machine* is only the first of a series of works to use our methodologies of visual sociology. *Machine* is currently up to date with our methods, and the next proposed work, *Web*, will expand on the content inherent within the cultural aesthetic form *Machine* establishes. However, there are new technologies, such as the three-dimensional VRML Internet spaces, online multimedia (Shockwave), and interactive meeting areas, that offer further exploration. As these emergent technologies develop, we will expand the discourse into these spaces. *Machine* is hardly a terminal point, but merely traces where process was shown, marks on our map of the postmodern terrain. The crucial point is that the medium is not the only message here; to say this would be merely rehashing McLuhan ([1964] 1994). Our sociology of the postmodern uses the media merely as tools to describe the cultural forms we wish to address directly with no translation into the narrow bandwidth that text alone presents.

Machine takes as its starting point the assertion made by Max Weber (1996:24) in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that "the peculiar modern Western form of capitalism has been, at first sight, strongly influenced by the development of technological possibilities. Its rationality is today essentially dependent on the calculability of the most important technical factors." In the late 20th century, commerce and technology have finally achieved the penultimate capitalist dream by becoming totally inseparable, made even more insidious by wrapping it all in the guise of "info-

tainment." Increasingly, it is more and more difficult to determine where entertainment and distraction end and the manipulations of the media corporate sales pitches and advertising begin. As Weber noticed at the turn of the 20th century,

Today the spirit of religious asceticism—whatever finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage—But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs to support it no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when on the other hand it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions. (Pp. 181–182)

What is distinctly troubling about this is the way in which the technologies of postmodernism have become the sacred cow of the governments, businesses, and educational concerns, all of whom are scurrying onto the Internet in record numbers without taking the time to weigh the potential benefits against the possible problems such action can, and undoubtedly will, create. *Machine*, then, can also be read as a warning, a plea as it were, to take care when considering our technologically mediated future.

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