AFTER Y2K:

Time, Andre the Giant and Other Democratic Avatars

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Jesus said—

And the New Year arrived. The New Millenium. Just another day in a lifetime of similar days. But each one of them crowded with possibility. The possibility of disaster, the possibility of perfection . . . What would become of them? I wondered. In another hundred years would they all be born in test tubes or perhaps evolve through computers to become groups of disembodied digitised intelligence machines . . . In a hundred years would they be living on other planets? Would the Earth still exist? Would they engineer themselves genetically so that disease was a thing of the past? Would they all become just one big multi-ethnic race? Will they discover the secret of the universe? . . . Will they all speak the same language in the future? Will they make love? Maybe there will be more than two sexes. Will they still believe life is sacred? Will it matter? Do we matter? (Hal Hartley, The Book of Life, Fr. 2000).

The Golden Clock

Bendigo is a small rural town, situated in an old goldmining area of Australia's southeast hinterland. There isn't much in Bendigo—an assortment of shops and service facilities, a recreation reserve, a public hall and clock tower. The tower, like many other nineteenth century public buildings in this part of Australia, was built from gold money. Not just the taxes provided by lucky strikes, but from a largesse that was formed from the energies of an immigrant population which quickly overcame its disappointment to engage in the creation of a new capitalist economy within a new democratic social order. The clock tower in Bendigo, therefore, marks a time in colonial history when men were mad; they tried their luck then turned their disappointment to the greater glory of democratic liberation and the authority of their own freedom.

In capturing and flattening time, the public exhibition of the horologe succinctly and subtly re-situates that madness. Time is the most precious and elusive of all human resources; its attachment to gold along with the authority
of the state and democratic freedom forcefully articulates the imperatives of modernism and modernization. To this extent, the golden clock of Bendigo might seem to represent the contiguity of contending ideas on time. In particular, the mathematical metering of a written time, a unity that returns time to its spatial correlative, the ticking onward of time over value, time as progress, time as growth, time as the end/means of prosperity. This time/value is the instinctive inscription of humanist teleology—from Hegel to Kant to Kierkegaard time is the constant, the unravelling of a destiny in which the variable of human values must divide itself.

Of course, the horologe captures time for the division of labour, the exchange of goods, and the rational order of industrial modernism. Writing time becomes the central motif for the inscription of value. To negate the clock is to surrender to the nihilism of a value-less social condition, the open and ambiguous will-to-value of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. But this too is emblemized in the Bendigo clock-face: the will of the gold men, the anarchy of wealth, the anti-authority of the gold rush seditions. The clock mediates the contentiousness of modernism by reducing it to a steady and cyclical order, an inevitability which expresses itself in the paradoxical convergence of the collective will, democracy and individual prosperity. The clock is all-time and particulated time; Bergson's infinitude captured in the space of a ceaseless and repetitive cycle of motion.

ATAVIZING AND DIGITIZING TIME

Commentators like Jean Baudrillard (esp 1994) have identified a radical irruption of time/value during the twentieth century. Even so, the symbolic concentration of modernization processes has its parallels in more recent events around Bendigo. The clock remains the central marker of time, though computer networked communication has replaced minerals and manufacturing as the primary denominator of social and economic value. The move from modernization through to what many call postmodernization clearly implicates communicative technologies, most particularly those engaged in digital information transfer. Digitization challenges the convergent and stabilizing effects of writing time; instantanaeity prises open Bergson’s paradox, exposing it to the conditions of a ‘quantum time’ where progress and history can be inverted and where the meaning of time, entirely surrenders its constancy. Moving beyond Jameson’s (1991) historical amnesia, this instantaneity might be understood as a resonance of values or meanings that can no longer be located from a spatial source. The meanings, like waves in a pool, interact, overflow and alter the paths of other waves.

In this context, economic and social values have become increasingly differentiated. The global trade of capitalist commodities, including listed companies, finance, currencies and product ‘futures’, is constructed around the
The capitalist system of symbolic exchange value is now entirely constituted through computer networking; value thus becomes a contingency of the moment to moment ascription of 'price' or market-derived worth/value. Of course traders have always traded present value against future value: that is, they have traded in the commodity of time. But this process of time/value exchange has intensified through digital networking and the irruptions constituted through instantaneity. Future value has been compressed in present value, creating a precarious and highly volatile market which perpetually seeks to stabilize itself through the exertion of the coded values of the system itself. That is, the convergent authority of the clock as moment in progress is being critically challenged by a new compression whereby the authority of the system is asserted in the instantaneous more than in the 'end' of a progression.

As a predicate of negative as well as positive portents, this system will necessarily be threatened by its own resonant brilliance. The clock tower in Bendigo, therefore, assumes an additional symbolic function for those Millennial observers who feared a cataclysmic collapse of the telecommunications system when the clock ticked over to 2000AD. The future became tradeable not merely for those who paid out millions of dollars to protect their company value against the anticipated catastrophe, but also for those who exchanged their First World lifestyles for the safety of a global outpost. This latter group of Millennial cultural refugees found alternative meanings in the Y2K; they looked beyond the salvation of pre-existing systems and sought safety in the spatial and social margins. The meaning of Y2K, therefore, was formed around new possibilities, a social and personal pilgrimage that would be as radical and revolutionary as the formation of the modern democratic state. The Millennial refugees 'prospected' the globe in order to locate a territory conducive to the creation of a new social order. With its fresh air and water, sparsity of population and mild climate, Bendigo was identified as an ideal site for the establishment of a post-Armageddon community, a virtualized community that could sustain itself against the horrors of a Y2K darkness.

These Millennials, however, were not Luddites rejecting the hegemony of technological capitalist culture, nor were they seeking the sort of Romantic naturalism that had inspired the hippie movement of the 1960s. Indeed, the leaders of the group were themselves 'cyborg workers' (Bogard, 1996), professional software developers, programmers and computer engineers. Their convictions were constructed, it seems, out of an intimate knowledge of digital network processing, its limits and possibilities. The Millennials were convinced that they would inherit the matrix, forming an alternative space for the reconstruction of the global community and its ideologies. The Y2K bug constituted a 'natural infection' by which the limits of time, and hence the
symbolic value of the future, were written as a death into the programming of
the original digital systems. In conceiving of the bug in these terms, the
Bendigo Millennials hoped to restore time, lever it from the resonance of
instantaneity, and re-capture the (atavistic) vision of humanist progressivism.
Like many other digital utopians (see Lewis, 1998), the Bendigo Millennials
wanted to re-capture time by refurbishing the meaning of computer networked
communication. The digital clock, therefore, would simulate the golden clock
of the democratic age of writing time.

This image of the past as fundamentally deficient is a critical property of
modernization's progressivist ideology. In order to heroize the future,
recalcitrant time is to be disciplined by the ascendant progressivism of the
present. To this extent the Bendigo Millennials were attempting to restore
history through a cultural politics which necessarily implicated computer
networked systems. The Millennials prepared themselves with enough
provisions to survive the dark hour and beyond. We can imagine them as the
midnights strike westward across the globe. The horologes click over to the
new millennium. Billions of dollars worth of consulting and re-programming
fees, the midnight cheers, the fireworks, Auld Lang Syne, embraces and
drunken sprawls. And all the while the Millennials sit nervously waiting in
their farmhouse in Bendigo. Of course nothing much happened. The
Millennials must have looked disconsolately at their cans of beans and
powdered milk. They would have switched on the radio and television as they
had always done. They would have heard the news, clicked on the internet,
trawled around to their various Millennia! websites and asked, 'What went
wrong? Why 2K?'

These electronic refugees, of course, personify a pervasive First World
anxiety about the prospects of a new millennium, most particularly as it is
experienced through networked communication systems. The new democratic
order they had imagined constituted a peculiar reciprocate of these anxieties, a
dialogic rejoinder to the fears and risks associated with (post)modernization.
To this extent, the new anxiety/idealism articulated in the Millennia!
changeover represents a re-engagement of the ongoing project of democratic
liberalism and capitalist culture. It is not that the new electronic culture
overtakes the earlier, Enlightenment-based ideological anxieties and ideals;
rather the force of these more recent democratic discourses resonates and
engages through the earlier democratic momentum. Gold and silicon, writing
and imaging, Constitution and freedom, citizenship and evasion—this mingling
of political 'dictions' is articulated through a contemporary culture of
democracy.

To this extent, Bendigo's clocktower marks the historical confluence of
political ideals. First, the cyclical scale that orders and contains time within its
rim constitutes an era, a discourse, of writing democracy where gold could be
imagined as the final referent, a material standard of value which was ideologised in terms of a temporal stability and perpetuity. Secondly, the clock and its relentless momentum present an alternative diction which emphasizes the instability of time as the instant where the past is an atavistic imagining and the present is inevitably incomplete; to this extent, the temporal relic stands at the centre of a constructed social order, an imagined distillation which is swept and particulated like electrons in a quantum dust. This new horologe is digitised, mediated and remediated through a concentration of instantaneities and meaning possibilities. The clock, therefore, is neither one thing nor another: it is a constituency or assemblage of cultural dictions, including democratic dictions. Writing democracy integrates and dissolves itself through new forms of computer networked expression, new forms of electronic culture. Our aim in this paper is to explicate democracy in terms of these mediatory technologic contexts. That is, we seek to present a theoretical framing which places the concept of democracy within a contemporary cultural ambit.

Democratic Cultures

We would want to state at the outset that 'culture' should be defined as an assemblage of discourses which operate in a relative and open collective in order to produce meaning. The concept of democracy, therefore, needs to be placed within a cultural assemblage. The limitation of recent attempts to re-theorize democracy derives from a fundamental resistance to this understanding of culture, and more specifically a notion of cultures of democracy. These assemblages of meaning are formed through social practices of meaning-making, including the deployment of media and media technologies in a globalist context. From this perspective, some recent attempts to re-theorize democracy as a more heterogeneous (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, Laclau, 1996), global (Held, 1995, Held et al, 1999), personal (Giddens, 1994) or participative (Habermas, 1989, McGuigan, 1996) facility for the fulfilment of the civic ideal remain fixedly ambivalent about the relationship between the media, culture and politics. In particular, these theorists are discomforted by the resistance of the media and its cultures to political theorization generally and a reformist agenda in particular.

Our argument here is simply that this resistance is constituted largely through the increasing complexity of contemporary culture and its mediations. 'Culture' in this sense is an epitome for those diverse assemblages of meanings we have referred to as cultures; for our purposes, neither the collective culture nor its constituent cultures is privileged since both refer to a broad and often disjunctive assemblage of overlapping and interdependent meanings (including non-meanings). Our preference for a notion of 'dictions' and 'heterodictions' (see Lewis, 2000) refers to subtleties by which contemporary subjects form and
articulate their specific meanings into unstable but necessary communicative modes; implicit in this notion of diction are the limits, deferrals and gaps that function to impede or deconstruct meaning-making. Contemporary culture, therefore, needs to be conceived as a discursive conglomerate of struggling parts. Amongst these struggling parts are the democratic cultures with which we are concerned here. Our aim is to relate these democratic cultures to another set of overlapping and disjunctive cultures specifically associated with media technology. As we shall outline below, these technological democratic cultures are formed in time though they are not restricted by time. That is, while technology and its culture are constituted historically, they may also adapt and change within evolving historical contexts. Technology and its meanings are as fluid and precarious as time itself and may be reconstituted in many ways through various contexts.

The concept of language wars (Lewis 2000) indicates how these multiplying meanings operate within and against one another, even through the less visible formations of history. Contests over the definition and ideological value of democracy are articulated through historical language wars. In our view, the two major historical phrasings of democracy can be identified through the formation of print culture and electronic culture. Unlike the historical and technological determinists, such as McLuhan and Baudrillard who tend to regard history in teleological terms, we would see the relationship between these two phrasings as complicated through the interweaving of continuity, discontinuity, competition and consonance. As noted in the example of the Bendigo clocktower and its confluence of historical meanings, the discourses which constitute these historical phrasings shift according to the position of their reading. In particular, writing culture continues today but its meanings are negotiated through its juxtaposition and interaction with electronic culture. Our own reading of writing and electronic democracies, therefore, seeks to understand them in terms of this cultural and historical contiguity, rather than through the isolating of their individual historical formation.

PRINT CULTURE DEMOCRACY

The development, or rather re-development, of the printing press from the fifteenth century facilitated the broadening of social complexity, including the formation of the industrialized, urbanized nation-state (Eisenstein, 1983). Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that the ideology of nation and nationalism was made possible through the disseminating power of printed information. Governments were able to administer increasingly complex and large social organizations, and citizens were able to 'imagine' their communal links, Anderson argues, because print facilitated the retention and exchange of dense players of information. This facility of record-keeping and compounding
legalism was necessary, we might add, for the expansion of commerce, consumerism and global capital. In this sense, however, mass printing facilitated the commodification not merely of information, but of ideology and time. The indeterminacy of time, in particular, could be fixed through the formation of fixed memory. Time which provided a mere backdrop to human activities within an occlusive framework of birth and death could now be held and measured through the invocation of particular ideology. The time it takes' could be chronicled not only in the repetitive scale of an horologe, but in the enduring frame of text and record. As the denominator of value, time becomes implicated in the operations of the capitalist system of discrimination—and hence in the operation of power and ideology.

To this extent, we would suggest that democracy was a political facility which was constructed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to deal with this increased density of cultural and social complexity. In a sense, democracy was formed in association with the textualization of time. This textualization represented the convergence of an infinitely distendable time in an unlocatable 'now' (absence), with an isolated and textualized time measured and fixed in horologes and written records (presence). This nexus of absence-presence, in fact, constitutes an underlying pattern informing the operations of Enlightenment-based modernization, most particularly in the progress of capitalism and its ideologies. In this sense, economists like Adam Smith attempt to solidify the arbitrary social construct of value by placing it within the ambit of textualized (writing) time. The unstable nexus of absence-presence is consequently, perhaps necessarily, obscured by the ideology of production/consumption 'choice' which, for classical economics, is the fundamental motivation of capitalism. Were the absence-presence instability exposed, then the arbitrariness of capitalist 'value' and hierarchical discrimination would be rendered vulnerable perhaps to challenge and repudiation by those less favoured by its operations. The ideology of choice, therefore, supports the obscuration of this internal instability by claiming it as a fixed presence in writing.

The freedom to choose, therefore, is implicated in the writing process inasmuch as writing is at the centre of modernization. Democracy is forged through this abstract rendering of value-over-time within a social framework which seeks to reconcile the interests of social elites, individuals and the collective mass. In order to achieve this complicated reconciliation, the concept of 'freedom' or 'choice' is formalised in time—that is, in writing. Old solutions to the problem of individual and collective interests—autocracy, bondage and corporeal coercion—became less sustainable in an increasingly mobile and abstract capitalist economy constituted around symbolic exchange, freedom and choice. Writing and writing culture contributed to the development, expression and management of this increasing abstraction and mobility. As we recall,
however, writing as representation constitutes an absence-presence: the world of phenomena is objectified as a fixed reality though this reality is only ever a representation of what is not actually present. When transformed into writing, choice (like time and all other phenomena) becomes a representation, an absence-presence.

This absence-presence nevertheless is critical to the operations of capitalist economy and the imagined reconciliation of the various gradients of choice by individuals and the assemblage of choosers. Thus, the economics of 'choice', like the economics of territory or resources, becomes constituted and 'protected' through culture, politics and various modes of institutional process and practice. The emerging centralization of choice and freedom in culture and economics contributes to the formation of new ideological fields of reference. Democracy is a key part of this re-formulation; its relationship to ideology, choice and writing can be identified in three distinct ways—

1. Democracy is part of the symbolic rendering of choice and the discriminations that are constituted as value-over-time. Democracy symbolizes an imprecise freedom which is necessary for the operation of an hierarchical economic system. The system discriminates between individuals but this discrimination is justified on the grounds of the individual’s freedom to choose. The democratic ideal, that is, seeks to reconcile the individual with the collective through the mediatory operations of choice.

2. The ideology of choice, therefore, commits the individual to the overriding system. Because the individual is no longer coerced physically but participates voluntarily, power becomes dissolved through the processes of mediation. That is, the individual subject becomes him/herself symbolically rendered in the value exchange system: the individual is another symbolic unit in the interactions of value-over-time. Significantly, the symbolism of 'choice' neutralises alternatives, creating the cultural conditions of an imagined autonomy within a system which seems constantly to return power and responsibility to the individual subject.

3. This symbolic rendering is expressed directly through the operations of democratic institutions. The valorization of the individual as a political chooser analogizes the valorization of the individual as a wealth-maker and chooser of capitalist products. The individual subject chooses his/her representative; the system reciprocates by protecting the individual's 'right' to choose.

Choice is not, therefore, absolute choice which would necessarily threaten the social bond. Rather, choice is concentrated through the ideals and ideology of the bond itself, of the individual to other individuals—the absence-presence of freedom to choose become articulated as the freedom for all, a protection as much as an emancipation.

Freedom and harm minimization in the exercise of choice are 'reconciled' through the formalizations of political and democratic discourse. Print culture has this same absence-presence at its centre. The sovereignty of individual choice represents a nexus of the individual and the social group. Of course this
nexus is ideologically complex, constituting in itself a language war between
the interests of particular members and whole groups of people. In particular,
Enlightenment-based democratic theory never resolves these competing claims,
but rather sustains them though the artifice of a discursive and orderly present.
In fact, the establishment of print-based democracy was essential, we would
suggest, to the distillation of tensions which were widespread through the
operations of cultural modernization. This collective-individual tension is
manifest through the many parallel tensions which underscore capitalist
culture—supply-demand, competition-community, hierarchy-equality, writing-
speech, order-freedom, mind-body, reason-sensitivity. While theorists of
postmodernism have often sought to neutralize these dichotomies by locating
them purely in the period of modernity, we would suggest that they continue as
part of the broad spectrum of heterodictions that constitute contemporary
culture. These print-based dictions may be seen as assembling around two more
or less distinct democratic cultures: representative government and
participative democracy.

A. Representative government is formed through the upward delegation of power
by the citizens to an imagined meritocracy. Unlike the classical Greek model,
representative democracy is formed through the rational surrender of power by
the citizenry to others whom they elect to rule them. Through the
Enlightenment theorizations of Hobbes and the Mills to more recent
theorizations by Schumpeter (e.g. 1987) and others, democracy is regarded as
the most practical and pragmatic option for a mass society. Social order is
assured as citizens will knowingly and willingly sacrifice absolute
independence and 'freedom' for the greater security and freedom provided by
the state. Rousseau idealizes this relationship by contending that the principle
of majority rule necessarily accords with the principles of self-interest and
personal freedom; the decision of the majority can never be at odds with a
deviating position since that position is necessarily neutralised by the greater
good of community accord.

Print, of course, facilitates this ideal—first, by providing the facility of complex
political processes such as constitution, election and legislation; and secondly,
through the paradigm of the text whereby the rational arrangement of individual
thoughts and word into an organic whole become an analogue for the rational
arrangement of the state. All parts contribute to the orderly operation of the
whole; each is a reciprocate of the other.

In practice, of course, the processes of representative government constantly
submerge the interests of individuals and minority groups. Moreover, the
rationality of representative government expresses itself perpetually through the
authority of the state. The power of the state to legislate (or not legislate)
necessarily increments that authority. Each gesture of government further
distances that authority from its supposed source, the citizenry. The history of
the nation state is replete with instances of excess—authority which is
indifferent, if not violently hostile, to the interests, desires and freedoms of
particular individuals and minority groups.
These failings in practice are fundamentally immanent in representative democracy's discursive embryo. As Hobbes, Rousseau and Schumpeter attempt to overcome the fundamental tensions of complex modernism, they necessarily privilege the authority and rationality of competitive capitalism; the delegation of power upward is necessarily inscribed with the ideology of authority, hierarchy, reason, writing and order. Rousseau's Romantic liberalism discriminates between different orders of freedom and individuality—as with Adam Smith, J.S. Mill, Immanuel Kant and Matthew Arnold, individual freedom remains a contingency of 'civility' and a social order which necessarily valorizes the (imagined) meretricious over the masses. As numerous critics of representationalism have pointed out, the system of delegation had its roots in the medieval nobility system; in adapting this model, the bourgeois reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constructed a political system which maintained their own class interests. That is, the social nexus produced by the expansion of 'freedom' was carefully measured so that the hierarchy of value-over-time and risk minimization contributed to the privileges of the bourgeoisie.

B. Participative democracy is closer to the classical ideal of Ancient Greece. However, for the advocates of representative democracy, participation is, as much as anything else, a necessary means of ensuring the viability of social and political authority and order. An informed and committed citizenry learn about their rights and responsibilities and willingly participate in the expression of their own interests which will necessarily accord with the interests of social order. A formal and informal process of 'civics training' would ensure that individuals and minority groups appreciate the need for representative government, authority and order; they would appreciate, that is, the imperatives of rule by the majority. Public education was an essential part of the social conditioning process whereby the uneducated would be able to access information that would enable them to make informed decisions in the principal arena of participation—elections. John Stuart Mill argued, further, that participation would aid this education process, providing for citizens the knowledge necessary for the successful functioning of society.

The ideology of political choice was disseminated through the official writing provided by schools. The concept of participation is formed around ideals of civility and citizenship whereby the state and the individual are conjoined through a system of mutual responsibility. Beyond the electoral process, citizens have also engaged in various forms of lobbying, committee activities, petition and legal protest. For Jurgen Habermas, the public sphere becomes an available resource for community-based politics, local activism and representation that is not bordered by institutional standards. Habermas's notions of intersubjectivity and communicative action in the public sphere suggest that this 'project' of print-based democratic modernization is yet to be fulfilled: what is needed, Habermas argues, is a greater degree of rational public participation so that the inflated authority of the state can be restored to the people.
A number of commentators (e.g. Ess, 1994, Lanham, 1993, Landow, 1997) have suggested that the shift from print to electronic and visual media as the primary communicative modes parallels a broader cultural shift from the preeminence of *logos* and lineal order. While many of these theorists regard computers as the central medium in this current communications 'revolution' (see also Poster, 1995), there is little doubt that the foundations for cultural transformation can be located in the emergence of electrical communications systems—telegraphy/telephony, cinema, radio and television. Remarkably, these media begin their ascent at around the time when print-based democracy appears to reach its institutional crescendo. The new technological cultures, however, do not obliterate print culture nor its influence; rather, the emergence of the new technological cultures stimulates a continuing period of hybridization and accommodation. Print-based democracy is sustained through the development of new democratic cultures formed around visualization and the mass dissemination of meanings and meaning-making processes. In a capitalist system which becomes increasingly based around the exchange value of symbols (Bourdieu, 1990), these proliferating images and meanings are engaged through the active imaginings, knowledge and experiential practices of 'audiences' as 'consumers'.

A number of twentieth century theorists (e.g. Heidegger, Benjamin, Baudrillard) have argued that this concentration of 'reality' through the projection of 'the image' intensifies the problematics of time and space to the point where 'presence' is actually dissolved. Heidegger (1977), in particular, pioneers this idea when he suggests that the 'age of the world as picture' is characterized by the oscillation of reality: the world of phenomena is 'objectified' in the image which is 'brought toward' and 'set before' the viewing subject. The 'objectified' presence of the image obscures its actual absence, creating the conditions for a centralization of the subject: that is, the subject is the centre of the world-as-picture since the world exists (is objectified) for him or her to view. Benjamin, similarly, discusses the loss of aesthetic 'aura' or 'presence' in the motion picture, while Baudrillard claims that all reality has been transformed through the proliferation of imagistic simulacra.

We have suggested above that the absence-presence dichotomy is characteristic of print-based culture and that it is formed primarily through the distillation of time. In fact, we would suggest that the concentration of information through the image, along with its rapid reproduction and dissemination, serves to intensify further the absence-presence dichotomy and its inevitable instability. It is not, as McLuhan and later Baudrillard argue, that time and meaning are obliterated by this visual proliferation. Rather, the nexus that supports the image's constituent 'reality' is forged through the opposite
processes of concentration and diffusion; meaning and time are unravelled in the moment of the image's presence. The image's exhibition is simultaneously an appearance, a presence and a dissemination. It is here, elsewhere and gone in the one moment. It 'goes out' and 'moves on' to be instantaneously replaced by another image, another concentration, another meaning, another possibility, another arousal. And it is not, as Heidegger suggests, that the subject is centralized and problematised in this motion, but that the subject is concentrated and diffused through the same instantaneous and erratic motion. In other words, the instantaneity of the image is simultaneously a movement of concentration and a movement of dispersal. The absence-presence which forms the text is rendered even more vulnerable as meanings rush inward and outward from the signifier to the signified. The greater precariousness of time and hence value-over-time leads necessarily to a multiple and immediate reproduction of significations, divisions and dissociations—meanings emerge and vanish with breath-taking rapidity.

The imagined distillation of time in print-based text marks the beginning of the absence-presence dichotomy; electronic and broadcast media produce an instantaneity which simultaneously associates and dissociates not only the meaning of time, but all signification. This of course includes the meaning of freedom and choice. The nexus of individual and social mass which is constituted through consumer choice and political choice is clearly destabilized through the processes of instantaneity. The proliferation of electronically constituted choice escapes the foundations of Enlightenment reason, escapes the controlling eye of print-based rationality. However, the challenge of these dissociations does not obliterate meaning or power or rationality. The electronic cultures operate in perpetual dialogues with print-based dictions and desires. The desire for presence, the desire for logos, remain. But they are mutants which must constantly communicate with and through electronic modes and their propensity for disruption and an accelerated engagement with the time-present. Consumption and consumption choice are captured in the mesmeria of the electronic image and by the demands of a new political condition.

To this extent, new modes of cultural democracy are being formed out of these new, electronically generated choices. Again, we can identify two democratic cultures that are constituted around electronic media technology—celebrity and visceral democratic cultures.

A. Celebrity democratic culture is formed around the pre-eminence of specific individuals within the media sphere. While many of these celebrities are drawn from the spectacle entertainment zones of music, film, television and sport, others such as Princess Diana are sourced from an hereditary imaginary. In any case, they are part of the cultural fantasies which are constructed out of capitalist competitiveness and the privileging of the image. In many respects, too, the ascent of the celebrity parallels the democratic fantasy of a just and
worrying meritocracy. The celebrity is paradoxically 'of the people' and yet has the capacity to shine brighter than the common star. The celebrity is special but necessarily 'among us'. This specialness is borne out of the devotions and interests of the commoner, which means celebrities belong to the lives and sensibilities of ordinary people.

Of course there is a hegemony associated with capitalist hierarchy systems; this is particularly evident in the corporatisation of entertainment and the capacity of large organizations to 'create' stars. Even these created celebrities, however, must constantly present and re-validate themselves to the consuming choices of the viewer. Celebrity authority is necessarily subject to the power of the public gaze. To this extent, celebrity hegemony is precarious since it involves a complicated pas-de-deux between consumer and image, a game-playing in which the meaning of the star is unstably rendered through the value-over-time of consumer interests and tastes. Within an unstable culture, the subject-as-consumer can never be assumed, but must constantly be re-negotiated in relation to perpetually changing subjectivities, fashions and conditions.

The celebrity, to this extent, represents another permutation of absence-presence. The subject consumer constructs the relationship with the celebrity as personal, the celebrity as a significant other. In the absence of community, personal success, intimacy, or leadership, the subject-consumer negotiates a presence for the celebrity as a genuine presence: that is, as a personal friend, lover, leader, family member and so on. However, this presence is always marked by the mesmerism of the celebrity's special gifts or merits, and so the celebrity, while present and personal, is always distanced by the specialness of the celebrity within a representational context. This absence-presence is formed through the complex associations and oppositions immanent to capitalist consumer culture.

Thus, just as state endorsed politicians must present themselves to the electorate for election, the celebrity is constantly negotiating a cultural hegemony within the imaginary of the cultural consumer. In this sense, the celebrities' status as 'cultural politicians' may be activated through a quite self-conscious participation in social issues— in support of indigenous people's rights, gay rights, environmentalism, endorsement of particular political parties or politicians. As well as this more print-based political activism, however, celebrity politicians may operate simply as 'alternative subjectivities', providing the raw materials for the consumer's more personal or 'visceral' liberation.

In either case, the celebrity is participating in the complex operations of power, most particularly as it is expressed and experienced through mediation and representation. Institutional parliamentary, print-based politicians, of course, have also been forced to accommodate celebrity and televisual democracy in a similar way. Personality politics have brought politicians and their subjectivities under the same gaze as entertainers. The proliferation of persuasion information has created a politician of the centre, one who responds constantly to popularity and opinion polls, one who perpetually negotiates a discourse which is least offensive to the majority of audience consumers. These poll-driven televisual politicians are trained to answer only the questions they
themselves invent; their principal communicative mode is the media release, the
doorstop interview and the five second grab. The presentation of policy is
formed around the advertising and promotion campaigns of electioneering,
including the cliche of the leaders' debate. As many recent political
commentators bemoan, electoral choice is now analogous to celebrity
popularity polling. The 2000 U.S. election is the most spectacular example of a
political contest which could not be resolved through print-based processes, but
which lingered through an excruciating popularity debate played out on
television and centring on the respective efficacy of human and computer-based
vote-counting.

B. Visceral democracy is not a re-rendering of participative public democracy,
even though there are some clear overlaps. In fact, a visceral democratic culture
is formed around the experiences of the body, most particularly as they are
associated with the discursive intonations or dictions which constitute
individual subjectivity. This permutation of democracy derives less from a
pluralism which is constituted through an overriding, homogenizing ideal such
as the 'American way of life'; rather, it is closer to the postmodern ideal of a
celebrational difference. A visceral democratic culture is somewhat more subtle
than particular areas of postmodern theory, however, as it remains unspecified,
operating at the level of everyday practice, experience or the 'unconscious' (de
Certeau, 1984). In this way, subjects interact with mediated discourses,
including the text of the celebrity, in order to form their own personal regime of
democracy and the political.

To this extent, visceral democracy is related to, but ultimately distinct from,
participative democracy which confirms the validity of political consensus or
authority and which seeks primarily the enhancement of the democratic forum.
Participation is formed around the logical ordering of issues and the direct
reconciliation of modernist tensions, most especially the dichotomy of
individual and collective interests. Visceral democratic culture operates through
and for the almost-anarchy of self-preservation and self-gratification, whether
or not that is logically or sensationally motivated. Ultimately, visceral
democracy is pleasure-centred, animated by the possibilities of subjective
ecstasy and the elimination or minimization of subjective harm.

For numerous theorists, the new mediated technologies provide opportunities
for greater individual engagements with visceral experiences. In particular, the
personal production capacity of computers and the distributive and
communicative capacity of networked computers allow users to create and
share text with like-minded others. This type of democratic culture is
fundamentally embedded in the problematics of consumption and choice. Many
recent political theorists (see McGuigan, 1992, 1996) reject this mode of
popular self-interest as either cynical and apolitical, or reactionary and
confirming status quo print-based hegemonies. Other theorists (e.g. Bakhtin
populism implicates a substantive liberational potential. At the centre of this
debate are contending views about the political worth of consumer capitalism,
and whether it is possible to step beyond the parameters of its ideologies. The
question collapses however, when we remember that electronic democracy is necessarily formed around the problematics of associating and dissociating culture. The nexus that bonds individuals to the collective whole is formed out of an increasingly complex and unstable interaction of dichotomous and competing dicions or heterodictions. These heterodictions move in variant directions seeking both a uniformity and stability on the one hand, and an uneasy self-interest on the other. Subjects function within this general condition of opposition where time and place are concentrated through the commodity image and its problematical instantaneity—the intensified absence-presence of time. The meanings constituted through these heterodictions are forged and dissolved within this general condition; their politics, including, their formations of democratic culture, can never escape this perpetual positioning, re-alignment and re-positioning.

The question, therefore, is not whether visceral democracy is liberatory or reactionary, but rather how can this mode of democracy be most adequately mobilised for the sake of liberation. The answer to this question is only partial, since this form of liberation needs to be measured and engaged through the other modes of democratic culture discussed above. Thus, we are contending that visceral democracy is only one mode of political engagement and its isolation as 'irrelevant' or transformative is misguided. In the multiple dicions and language wars that constitute the contemporary cultural assemblage, we can identify various modes that will produce various effects—some modes are complementary and others discordant. Visceral democracy is part of a broader ambit of deployable modes.

**Andre the Giant and other Y2K Democratic Avatars**

What needs to be understood very clearly is that democracy as a concentration of these political meanings cannot be restricted to operations of government and governance. The 'demos' of democracy cannot be discursively contained within a notion of citizenry where the citizen is conceived only in terms of an individual's relationship with the state. If we are to maintain a notion of citizenship, then the concept must be broadened and opened at the edges so that the 'subject-citizen' does not exist merely in terms of the state and its authority. Governance must reach beyond the parameters of political choice and delegation, beyond the parameters of initiations. The concepts of 'choice' and 'freedom' need to be interrogated in order to problematise the notion of democracy. Our preference for the concept of 'democratic cultures' facilitates a definition of the individual citizen as a social actor, or more specifically a meaning-maker, who operates in relation to complex cultural associations and communicative mediations.

Danilo Zolo has considered these broadening communicative experiences in terms of an increasing social and cultural complexity—
The essential concern ... [is] the relationship between democratic institutions and the increasing complexity of post-industrial societies. ... Our present theories of democracy fail to offer us conceptual instruments sufficiently complex to permit a realistic interpretation of that relationship. As we prepare to enter the third millennium, Western political theory appears increasingly unable to cope with the massive transformation which 'the information revolution' is bringing about in the primary subsystems of industrialized society. These transformations seem certain to speed up the processes of functional specialization and consequently ... to bring about still further large-scale growth of social complexity (Zolo, 1992: 54).

Part of the problem for political theory, however, is the privileging and hence separation of politics over culture. Zolo himself concedes as much in suggesting that political theory generally and democratic theory specifically transgress the general empirical trajectory of modernity toward increasing levels of differentiation, specialization and social complexity. Democratic government, according to Zolo, is formed against this trend since the 'general function of a modern political system is that of reducing fear through a selective regulation of social risks and a competitive distribution of "security values"' (Zolo, 1992: 55). This 'amelioration of social risk' operates hegemonically, privileging the interests of particular social groups over others in a competitive cultural and economic context. To this extent, 'the central categories of the political code are the inclusion/exclusion principle and the asymmetric power/subordination relation' (Zolo, 1992: 55).

Zolo rightly places the formation of representative government within a context of increasing differentiation. However, Zolo himself fails to appreciate fully the cultural tensions which produce politics generally, and the 'political system' of representative government specifically. As noted earlier in the current essay, modern cultures are formed through ongoing language wars and tensions; despite Rousseau's assurance, representative government neither obliterates nor resolves the tensions that are central to its own forming cultural corpus. Rather, representative democratic culture is replete with internal and external struggles which place it within the broadening field of complexity. This print-based democracy contributes to the complexity it was established to resolve and control. In fact, representative government constitutes another diction in the proliferating imaginary of contemporary culture. Part of the reason for Zolo's oversight is his tendency to place representative government at the centre of his readings of politics; even as critique, this approach to the relationship between culture and politics tends inevitably to distract from the very complexity Zolo himself identifies.
As with all cultural experiences, there may be individuals who participate in various forms of democratic culture. Moreover, the cultures themselves are effectively transcultural, unstable and subject to various forms of hybridization. The four democratic cultures discussed in this paper operate contemporaneously, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes discordantly. In many cases, the invocation of 'democratic principles' often mobilizes variant elements within the cultures discussed. In other words, we may have a political action in which the contesting parties draw on the 'democratic ideals' that operate through these complex political dictions. Our Y2K refugees, for example, are visceral politicians, seeking a utopian imaginary that is personally oriented and beyond the limits of modern, print-based institutional processes. They look beyond the choices provided by government and consumer hegemony, though inevitably their imaginary must appropriate the resources, including the computer resources, provided by that hegemony. Their aim, of course, was to transcend that hegemony, replacing it with a more compassionate, ecologically sensitive and creative cultural 'presence' that would replace the unsettling absence-presence through which their lives had been 'governed'. As in Marx's notions of social autonomy, the Y2K utopians envisaged a transitional anarchy through which self-governance would emerge as sovereign. The Y2Kers, therefore, were drawing on various democratic dictions in order to imagine their better future.

This permutation of the Y2K millenary was not, however, entirely escapist, nor was it illusory. In fact, the Y2Kers were seeking to mobilise various elements of their culture in order to reconstruct the functioning possibilities of choice and liberation. In many respects, this deployment of the newer media technologies is paralleled through the broader activities of computer networked political activism. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this newer media is its integration of broadcast, narrowcast and interpersonal/telephonic capacities; its integrative capacities combine elements of print and electronic broadcasting with oral cultural modes. This integration provides even greater opportunities for activation of democratic meaning-making than the previous, more separate print and electrical media. The networked media is facilitating greater hybridizations and contiguities in the democratic cultures.

To this extent, the networked media is not 'naturally' conducive toward lesser or greater democratic culture. It may be deployed, as with print, radio and TV, in the interests of despotism, surveillance and discipline, or individual and minority group liberation. Equally, the new media may contribute to, or detract from, any of the democratic cultures discussed above. What is interesting, however, is the capacity of the new technologies to be deployed
against their own value-over-time processes, their own instantaneous, their own hegemonic cultural impulses. 'Culture jamming', the deliberate clogging of capitalist instantaneousities by political activists, represents a self-reflexive assault on the underlying dichotomies over which contemporary capitalist culture is formed. That is, the absence-presence which motivates consumption practices is turned against itself in order to expose and ultimately 'deconstruct', in Derridean terms, its underlying 'assumptions'. Problematically, of course, and as we have stressed during the course of this paper, these assumptions are vacated or absent. The culture jammers, therefore, are exposing the dissociative core, the absence of value and the fatuousness or impossibility of instantaneousity. In other words, the culture jammers are exposing the vacant core of symbolic value—the evasiveness of meaning.

Culture jamming is sometimes regarded by serious political theory as an act of pure cynicism or vacuous delinquency since it generally offers no alternative structure and no clear manifesto. It targets and assaults global corporations' computer systems, it distributes pop culture graffiti throughout the networked system, it hacks into email systems and clogs their operations. As we have noted elsewhere (Best and Lewis, 2000), global computer viruses like Melissa often mimic the normal processing of corporate communication; they penetrate corporations' electronic walls through normal fissures in technological and human practices and simply behave like 'normal' communications though in a parodic, extended and accelerated manner until the whole system crashes under the weight of its own artificial intelligence. Shepard Fallrey, the creator of the culture jamming hero, Andre the Giant, claims similarly that his adaptation and distribution of the image of the popular wrestler is merely an act of cultural manifestation. Andre is 'flung down' into a world which may deploy him in any way that it conceives as 'valuable'—

The GIANT sticker campaign can be described as an experiment in Phenomenology. Heidegger describes Phenomenology as the process of letting things manifest themselves. Phenomenology attempts to enable people to see clearly something that is right before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they are muted by abstract observation.

THE FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The Giant sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings (Fallrey, 2000).

The broad dissemination and re-appropriation of the Giant graffiti constitutes a simple but effective political gesture. Beginning as a sticker for skateboards, the Andre icon has entered the Internet as a wildly unspecific politics of 'presence', combining celebrity populism with a broad desire by individual subjects to be heard amidst the cacophony of proliferating communication. In a sense, the Giant is a reflexive and radical phenomenology which uses the
means of its oppression against the oppressors. These oppressors, however, are unspecified and barely locatable in a culture which is constructed out of the absence-presence of meaning. In this sense, there is no enemy, no political adversary, only a series of historically formed processes which function as the conduit of oppression and surveillance, the source of personal restriction and deprivation.

To this extent, this combination of celebrity and visceral democracy is a good deal less self-conscious, but in no way less mischievous, than other forms of culture jamming such as hacking, clogging and targeted virus release. Even so, the Andre the Giant campaign operates as a political mirror, reflecting the extent to which our cultures are formed around dissociative meanings and a value-over-time which is fundamentally vacant at its core. Andre has a posse, but the posse is a parody of law-making and the artifice of constructed authority. 'Obey the Giant' is not like Orwell's Big Brother, but is a subversive refraction, a breaking up of the subtle and infinite rules that govern us. The popularity of the Andre icon in youth culture exposes how politics can be unspecific and generated through popular imagery and a self-gratification that has no source and no end. As Colin Berry has noted, Faltrey's aim is to 'open people's eyes to the system by participating in the process ... Andre is so ridiculous that there's nothing left but the process' (1996). In our view, it is not just the process that the Giant reveals; it is the presence-absence that operates through the instantaneity of our mediated meaning-making.

**Conclusion: The Golden Clock, the Democratic Shadow**

Culture jamming, electronic graffiti, virus release and hacking constitute more than just a baring of process. They constitute a form of radical cynicism which is often articulated through a parodic, comic or sexual gesture. The deployment of the new technologies in hegemonic processes necessarily stimulates the countermoves of opposition and deconstruction. Networked computer technologies, therefore, operate within a broad field of competing dictions: pleasure, individual self-expression, choice, and the desire for presence may be mobilised for the construction or deconstruction of capitalist hegemonies. Meanings may be appropriated, shaped and controlled by corporations in order to exert power and maximize the gratifications of directors, employees, shareholders and governments; simultaneously, these meanings may be re-shaped, deconstructed and dissociated through the conscious or unconscious operations of meaning-making and unmaking. The absence-presence of instantaneity upon which these corporate structures are formed render them necessarily vulnerable to the processes of deconstruction and dissociation.

The Y2Kers who sought relief from the threat of one of these deconstructive impulses—the Millennial bug—were mobilising the same
predispositions as other radical cynics. The shadow of an unfulfilled reality is cast over the lives of all Millennial citizens. As Heidegger argues, the essence of our modernism centres on our propensity to represent the world as picture or image. We may accept the diversity and plenitude of the world so long as it is objectified as representation and so long as our own individual subjectivity is centralised in the process. For Heidegger, however, the reality of the image becomes a 'shadow' as man becomes subject and the world becomes picture (1977: 135). In a metaphor which refers both to the technological miraculousness and aesthetic mysteriousness of the moving picture, Heidegger conceives of the shadow as casting itself across the breadth of modern life. But the metaphor also refers to the unknowable and insidious condition of modern life where 'the shadow ... points to something else, which it is denied to us of today to know' (Heidegger, 1977: 136).

As we have noted, a number of theorists of postmodernism suggest that we have moved beyond Heidegger's phenomenological doubts toward a more celebratory aesthetic. This pleasure of the text thesis, however, limits our capacity to understand the continuity and deepening of the problematics of representation. Heidegger's shadow reaches into our political domain, casting considerable doubt in the minds of many as to the continued validity of democratic theory and the ideal of emancipation. In our view, the instantaneity of the picture destabilizes both the image and the subject, rendering each a shadow of the other. The golden clock that stands in the middle of the provincial township of Bendigo marks this problematic. Its relentless and frequently inaccurate rendering of the progress and repetitiveness of time synthesizes the challenges posed by an incomplete modernism—that is, the alleviation of absurd and unjust authority. But the clock is also an assemblage of the minutiae of the temporal moment. It remains as a symbol of what it cannot adequately represent and what it cannot adequately mean. In a political culture which draws together the discomforting imperatives of global participation and local liberation, and where hegemony and the imperviousness of government has extended beyond national electorates, the golden clock of Bendigo stands as a relic of modernism's unenviable aspirations. The clock casts its own shadow over the eyes of those who behold it; it casts a shadow over their inquiry and the meanings they place on its answer.

References


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