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## **Beyond The Orality/Literacy Dichotomy: James Joyce and the Pre-history of Cyberspace**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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*Donald F. Theall*

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*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, a book which redirected the way that artists,

critics, scholars and communicators viewed the role of technological mediation in communication and expression, had its origin in Marshall McLuhan's desire to write a book called "The Road to *Finnegans Wake*." It has not been widely recognized just how important James Joyce's major writings were to McLuhan, or to other major figures (such as Jorge Luis Borges, John Cage, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Jacques Lacan) who have written about aspects of communication involving technological mediation, speech, writing, and electronics. While all of these connections should be explored, the most enthusiastic Joycean of them all, McLuhan, provides the most specific bridge linking the work of Joyce and his modernist contemporaries to the development of electric communication and to the prehistory of cyberspace and virtual reality. McLuhan's scouting of "the Road to *Finnegans Wake*" established him as the first major disseminator of those Joycean insights which have become the unacknowledged basis for our thinking about technoculture, just as the pervasive McLuhanesque vocabulary has become a part, often an unconscious one, of our verbal heritage.

In the mid-80s, William Gibson first identified the emergence of cyberspace as the most recent moment in the development of electromechanical communications, telematics and virtual reality. Cyberspace, as Gibson saw it, is the simultaneous experience of time, space, and the flow of multi-dimensional, pan-sensory data:

All the data in the world stacked up like one big neon city, so you could cruise around and have a kind of grip on it, visually anyway, because if you didn't, it was too complicated, trying to find your way to the particular piece of data you needed. Iconics, Gentry called that.<sup>1</sup>

This "consensual hallucination" produced by "data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system" creates an "unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding."<sup>2</sup> Almost a decade earlier, McLuhan's remarks about computers (dating

from the late 70s) display some striking similarities:<sup>3</sup>

It steps up the velocity of logical sequential calculations to the speed of light reducing numbers to body count by touch . . . . It brings back the Pythagorean occult embodied in the idea that “numbers are all”; and at the same time it dissolves hierarchy in favor of decentralization. When applied to new forms of electronic-messaging such as teletext and videotext, it quickly converts sequential alphanumeric texts into multi-level signs and aphorisms, encouraging ideographic summation, like hieroglyphs.<sup>4</sup>

McLuhan’s *hieroglyphs* certainly more than anticipate Gibson’s *iconics* and McLuhan’s particular use of hieroglyph or iconology, like that of mosaic, primarily derives from Joyce and Giambattista Vico.

It is not surprising then that McLuhan’s works, side by side with those of Gibson, have been avidly read by early researchers in MIT’s Media Lab<sup>5</sup>, for these researchers also conceive of a VR composed, like the tribal and collective “global village,” of “tactile, haptic, proprioceptive and acoustic spaces and involvements.”<sup>6</sup> The experiments of the artistic avant-garde movements (such as the Dadaists, the Bauhaus and the Surrealists) and of individuals (such as Marcel Duchamp, Paul Klee, Sergei Eisenstein or Luis Bunuel) generated the exploration of the semiotics and technical effects of such spaces and involvements. Duchamp, for example, became an early leading figure in splitting apart the presumed generic boundaries of painting and sculpture to explore arts of motion, light, movement, gesture, and concept, exemplified in his *Large Glass*<sup>7</sup> and the serial publication of his accompanying notes from *The Box of 1914* through *The Green Box* to *A l’infinif*. His interest in the notes as part of the total work echo Joyce’s own interest in the publication of *Work in Progress* and commentaries he organized upon it (e.g., *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*). Joyce also explores similar aspects of motion, light, movement, gesture and concept. So the road to VR and MIT’s Media Lab begins with poetic and artistic experimentation...



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