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f2f 2 url & b ond: space/time and the dissemination of community
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The theme of this seminar is one to which I feel myself drawn with a great deal of sympathy. Critical contexts such as this are important in that they allow us to pause for a moment, to reflect on the speed with which global connectivity, via the internet, mobile telephony or satellite television has become so familiar, so habitual. Events such as this are important in providing a space of remembrance, of recognition of what we have forgotten. A number of years ago I edited an issue of Continuum on the theme of "Information Technology Now". As a way of drawing attention to both the importance as well as the difficulty of theorising the present, I drew an analogy with art historian Herbert Read's project in his famous 1933 text *Art Now*. In this work Read pointed out how difficult it was to theorise and critically describe and assess the current state of modern art, when the phenomena of his attention were still actively taking shape around him. But Read was also attempting to hold something in place before it became so familiar that the energy and violence of its emergence was forgotten.

Cyberculture is the name that we have given to what we have forgotten. And while the term has stuck as a sign of the times, like Modernism, it is nonetheless a formation, a discourse, a way of living in the world. But it is not the only way. To say as much suggests that we have not forgotten everything about its constitution. But cyberculture has impacted upon what it means to be in the world, to be present in it differently. Cyberculture is, as Bill Mitchell has argued, an economy of presence, a fluctuating exchange of states of being there. As a consequence it has unavoidably modified our interactions with community, of being present with others. An event such as this enables us, then, to critically reflect and comment on what crept through the door unnoticed as we enthusiastically alt.tabbed from face to face to cyberspace, from IRL to URL and beyond.

I can certainly remember the moment when it happened. When the two week delay of corresponding with colleagues overseas shrunk dramatically to same day or next day delivery, guaranteed. Professional communication with colleagues not only became faster, but enabled different formations to take shape, academic communities made up of remote individuals that could engage with ideas in a common time out of time, beyond datelines and geography (*fibreculture* being a recent example of the fruit of these early orientations into the new frontier). [1] It was an amazing elision of time and space, captured in an equally suggestive ellipsis of language, "email". The postal technology of electronic mail offered a counter-time, a dramatic intervention into the problem of delay, the unacceptable wait for presence to arrive. But I can also remember the same moment, with a difference. I can remember when impatience with one form of postal delay coincided with absolute tolerance of another. With the intervention of the world wide web as a graphic user interface, download time was a spectacle of wonder, a revelatory time, an evocative interface with that "other place". Watching an image gradually reveal itself on the screen using Mosaic or Netscape 1, or waking up the next morning in anticipation of the 60 second Quicktime movie that downloaded while you slept, revealed a fundamentally different relationship to space, to the "no there, there" zone of the network, conceived as an elaborate, contemporary theatre of memory. The fact that this something was coming from there made the

wait worthwhile. I remember vividly the experience of sitting with Swinburne multimedia and animation students, their contagious excitement that the page tantalizingly scrolling into presence was akin to receiving our first indisputable contact from outer space. But I also remember how quickly we became impatient, the abrupt transition when a tolerable degree of delay morphed with lightning speed into the interminable world wide wait. Like acceptable levels of background radiation of asbestos in the environment, our threshold of patience shrunk as the invocational capacity of the web became more streamlined. The pleasure of discovery transformed seamlessly into a need for speed.

This recollection of what seems to me another time is suggestive of other *fin de siécle* moments of change throughout history, such as the end of the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. However previous *fin de siécle* formations such as the Enlightenment or Modernism had the advantage of lingering for a while before their assumptions were subjected to critique. Late twentieth century cyberculture, on the other hand, is little over two decades old and its grand narratives are already looking frayed at the edges. By this I mean that there is already a robust body of criticism of the promises and possibilities of cyberculture, a healthy scepticism towards singing the body electric, the metaphysics of being digital and homesteading on the virtual frontier. Perhaps this is a lesson of the postmodern to be explained to our children, a hangover of the critique that dismantled the progressive narratives of modernity, a reluctance to embrace progress in advance, as the only possible outcome of social, cultural and technological change. In my own writings on cyberculture going back to the early 1990s, I have been mindful of falling into the alluring conceptual trap of defining cyberculture as an emergent rather than convergent phenomenon. It was predictable that publications such as *Mondo 2000* or *Wired* would invoke novelty and new age metaphors to describe the world taking shape at the time. But it was not so predictable and it was certainly disappointing to encounter invocations to paradigm shifts and information revolution in scholarly and critical writings from authors as diverse as Arthur Kroker and Manuel Castells. The mediation of presence did not come bundled with Microsoft enabled computers.

For example, as I indicated somewhat petulantly, in a recent essay on Australian net art, I'm really tired of the military-industrial-complex creation story of the internet. You know the idea, the reassuring grand narrative that in the event of a nuclear holocaust the network will have, always already, dispersed information and power, command and control to myriad peripheries, each of which is a centre. Far from dispelling or dissolving hierarchical models of centre and periphery, such a model actually sustains the binary logics of self and other, passive and active agency, town and country, city and region. Whose command and whose control is being dispersed? Under such conditions are we really distributing difference or merely invoking a different way of thinking about distribution? As we shall see, the very idea of cyberspace is predicated on a binary rather than distributed logic that sustains, rather than dissolves distinctions between here and there, local and remote.

I want to use the myth of the internet as a paradoxical space of centre *and* periphery to offer some thoughts on its associated concepts of telepresence, connectivity and virtual community. In what follows I want to argue that the intervention of the internet and other media of mobility, user-orientation and personal choice are in fact contributing to the diminution of the concept of community, not facilitating it. The shift from face to face to cyberspace gave rise to a prevailing spatial preoccupation with the possibilities of community, offering alternative e-environments (shouldn't that be simply environments?) for new forms of congregation. In fact the reverse now seems to be true. Community is increasingly being re-defined and compromised by a preoccupation with the temporal dimension of networked culture, with interactivity as a special form of individualised or privatised time, in which the very idea of communing with others is very much an optional extra.

Cyberspace

The spatial conception of the internet is most evident in the fascination with imaginary built

environments in which community can flourish. Think of the text-based MUDs and MOOs of the early 1990s, such as Hypertext Hotel and LamdaMOO, or more recent graphic, multimedia environments such as Habbo Hotel and the Palace, as well as massively multi-user online games, such as *Everquest*. Theorists such as Bill Mitchell were emphatic in their attempts to square the circle, to resolve the paradox that while the internet was anti-spatial ("there's no there, there" remember), telepresence was nonetheless an imaginary state of being somewhere, in the city of bits, the electronic agora, the virtual chat room, the customized dungeon. In other words, networked presence was heralded as an ambience lacking meaningful distinctions between centre and periphery, here and there. The virtual community, in this sense, implied an intermediate space that was neither here nor there, your place or mine, centre or periphery, but was rather an ambiguous middle ground, a utopia or nowhere, in the literal meaning of the word. Hence the concept of telepresence gained ground as a way of situating physically and geographically embodied individuals in a disembodied virtuality. It also purportedly resolved, for those who could be bothered with the abstraction, the paradox of a space being, at one and the same time, a centre and a periphery. As west coast US visionaries such as Howard Rheingold emphatically argued, life in the networked age was a seamless condition of dual being, in which one intuitively toggled between real and virtual lives, local and remote communities.

In the context of a networked world, then, the notions of centres and peripheries have supposedly imploded. Cyberspace was less a terrain than an inflection of a general perception of what it means to be somewhere, online, offline, or riffing between the two, like the characters in the *Matrix* films. Most critical attention to connectivity over the past decade reinforces this perception by focussing on discussions of globalisation, of a homogenised internet space/time that can be accessed from any point in different geographic space/times. Critics rediscovered forgotten but nonetheless conceptually robust ideas such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "noosphere" or collective thinking layer of the world, [2] or Gregory Bateson's "ecology of mind", to concretise the concept of a networked global culture in which the local individual can partake of a displaced community of belonging that can only be made possible by technology. There is an assumption at work here that technology facilitates community by dissolving distance and geographical co-ordinates. While this is of course accurate, it is problematic in that it regards distance as an *a priori* condition to be overcome for community to happen when media technology are involved. How, for example, does such a model work in the context of regional rather than global communities? Does the intervention of technology, in advance, have to resolve a problem of distance, of difference, between the local and the remote? To answer this question I want to briefly revisit an important moment in Australian history to do with the relations between community and technology that by-passed altogether the centre/periphery model and offered a different way of thinking about the relations between the local and the remote as a continuum, rather than a delay to be overcome, a space to be filled.

The Warlpiri Media Association was established in 1983 as an independent, not for profit television and video production/broadcasting initiative for the Warlpiri people in the Central Western Desert of the Northern Territory. Based in Yuendumu, north of Alice Springs on the edge of the Tanami Desert, the Warlpiri Media Association is an example of indigenous media autonomy, a community-driven initiative that preceded the Federal government's introduction of national television programming to remote regional communities with the launch, in November 1985, of Australia's first satellite, AUSSAT. As the late Eric Michaels famously wrote of Yuendumu television, it was "unauthorised, unfunded, uncommercial and illegal" and was "probably Australia's first public television service" (9). Produced locally by and for members of the Warlpiri community, it documented and preserved traditional ceremonies and local stories told in the Warlpiri language. In his important monograph on the introduction of media to Yuendumu, Michaels emphasises the crucial distinction between non-indigenous advocacy of the Warlpiri people's introduction to video and the autonomy of a traditional culture using broadcast media to connect and communicate with remote members of an extant community. In other words, here was a regional community bolstering itself as a networked community, reinforcing

important existing ties with local lands, stories, languages, dreamings and histories. The binary model of centre and periphery had no relevance in the Yuendumu region, since the concept of community was not in any way problematised by remoteness. The important conclusion to be drawn from Michaels' *For A Cultural Future* is that broadcast media didn't facilitate community among remote peoples, but rather consolidated a timely sense of self-determination, of the periphery pre-empting the centre in using technological connectivity to promote local culture. Here was a concept of community where the remote was another instance of the local, in which distance was not something to be resolved or overcome by introduced media technology. As Michaels argued, Warlpiri people "are continually positioning themselves in both social and geographic space" as expressions of kin and landscape (28). Broadcast media was an extension of existing practices of mediation between the two in the form of ceremonial events, in which such ties are enacted and renewed.

The emphasis here, then, is on a unified conception of locality and remoteness that, more so than the internet, is in keeping with the implosive model of centre *and* periphery. The example of the Warlpiri Media Association is important in the context of this discussion in a number of ways. First, it evidenced the galvanizing potential of media as "social software", to use a very contemporary term. In advance of the hyperbole to do with mediated communities in the 1990s, the Warlpiri Media Association foregrounded the connection between social need, adaptability and the local implementation of media, as means of concentrating both the idea and the reality of community. It also underlined the notion that in the context of community, media are not in advance spatial, nor are they always concerned with responding to distance. The temporal dimension of media and the age of the internet has been the focus of sustained discussion in recent years, such as Robert Hassan's *Chronoscopic Society*, a book that critically engages with the "accelerated life that has emerged through the processes of globalization and the ICT revolution" (Hassan 6). I'm actually more interested in the local rather than global dimension of acceleration, of the speed with which telecommunications, mobile telephony in particular, can connect remote individuals within the same city or region, thereby re-defining space as a concept of mobility.

Consider the phenomenon of Flash Mobbing. Flash Mobbing is a global phenomenon which involves the planning and staging of ephemeral events, coordinated via the internet and SMS messaging. According the to the Flash Mob Website, flash mobbing involves "sudden gatherings of people at a predetermined location at a predetermined time. People in flash mobs usually perform according to a written script, then disperse quickly". [3] On Thursday 28 th August in 2003 about seventy Melbournians congregated at precisely 5.24 pm on the steps of Flinders Street station, donned yellow rubber dishwashing gloves and pointed to the sky. They then disappeared into the peak hour traffic from which they had emerged. A cross between dada street theatre and Fluxus happening, such events are grounded in the rhythms of everyday life and are carnivalesque celebrations of the trivial, the absurd and the ephemeral. With their suggestions of speed and concentration of individuals in one place, they offer us a different way of thinking about the relations between technology and community. Communities in the traditional as well as virtual sense imply some basis of shared common interest and ground, a sense of locality, proximity and identity. Flash Mobbing to some extent embodies these characteristics, in that for a time a group of people congregate in the same place at the same time to perform a unified, consensual event; unified in their enthusiasm for the Flash Mob concept itself. However the difference here is that they meet *for a time*. There is no sense of continuity, longevity or community development when they meet and the location of the event is secondary to the event *having taken place*. Space is a mobile, shifting or nomadic occasion for a time-based event. The kind of instructions to be found on Flash Mob websites are indicative of this sense of the *having taken place* of the event, as they establish or plot a set of coordinates for a group of people to meet *for a time*. For instance, the Flash Mob UK website posted the following information in October 2004:

> On the 24th of October, at 11am, there will be a flashmob pillowfight taking place under the Jubilee Clock (outside Vodaphone) in Swindon. Rules and more details at http://www.pillowfightclub.tk/. Will David Brent turn up?

Whether or not David Brent turns up hardly matters. What matters is the way in which the web has been used as a portal to bring people together IRL rather than URL, precipitating a temporary, autonomous community that will dissolve as quickly as it was constituted. In this sense Flash Mobs invert the usual translation of presence into telepresence associated with the internet. They also reveal something about the ways in which people relate to new or emerging technologies, finding unexpected uses for them in the context of the social.

Flash Mobbing underlines the point I have made about the effects of media technologies not always being spatial, as having to overcome distances for community to be constituted. In the context of this discussion Flash Mobbing is illustrative of the idea of communities and networks as phenomena of mobility and distribution. Distributed networks of ephemeral communities transform the very idea of what a community can be by re-interpreting the centre/periphery model. The whole point of a Flash Mob is actually to bring people together in material space, not to simulate presence or intervene telepresence into the distance separating potential members of its community. But more importantly it is the temporary, ephemeral nature of the Flash Mob event that heightens what I am interested in moving on to now, the contemporary preoccupation with real time and its implications for the very notion of community.

Real time

In the context of virtual communities there is a sense of shared time, a common telepresent time that transcends the local time differences of remote participants. Telepresent time assumes a smoothing out of myriad different times, an overlap of actual times and represented time within the particular virtual space. This approximation of actual and represented time in virtual environments is part of a more pervasive fascination with the concept of real time in contemporary media cultures. From reality television and game-shows, to live web cams, video streaming and interactive digital television, media cultures prioritise the immediacy of direct engagement with and participation in mediated events taking place in real time. The Melbourne writer Daniel Palmer has recently drawn attention to the parallels between the popularity of reality entertainment television (such as *Big Brother*), 24/7 satellite news (*CNN*), digital media art, online gaming and web cam streaming (Jennifer Ringley's *Jennicam*, *GroundZero* cam). Palmer asserts that what all these media phenomena have in common is liveness, the provision of participation in mediated experience that is happening now, in real time.

Contrary to the public logic of broadcasting as a mass medium that delivers limited options to many, the cultural imperative of real time has contributed to a more profound sense of massive privatisation, a proliferation of available viewing times and discretionary options to individuals. Individualisation has led to a formation of time as something that is user-oriented and user-driven, customised and customis-able. The emphasis on interactivity and user choice in digital media (whether on or offline computer-based media, digital television, mobile phone content) is a sign of what Richard Sennett has called the "tyranny of intimacy". Participation, once the province of community, of social interaction, is the new currency of individual engagement with real time media. Participation has become shorthand for an individual interacting with their media. Take, for instance, the rhetoric of Foxtel's current subscription drive for its digital service:

> FOXTEL Digital will change the way you feel about television forever. You've never seen anything like FOXTEL Digital before. It's a whole new experience and best of all FOXTEL Digital is available on your existing TV.

> FOXTEL Digital gives you the ultimate choice and an enhanced viewing experience…

> In just the few months FOXTEL Digital has been available we've already taken steps to give you even more options, even more choice, and even more up-to-the minute information. Just look at these improvements available now and coming soon!

New Weather Active: No need to wait anymore. With the new Weather Active function you can access weather reports and forecasts for your suburb instantly.

Timeshift Channels: ensure you'll have more than once chance to catch your favourite programme at a time that suits you.

Here is the commodification of individual taste. Interactivity facilitates agency which, in the context of broadcast media, is significant in that it affects outcomes in real time, fulfilling fantasies of control over content being viewed in real time, a control akin to our experience of video or computer-based media. The appeal to individual choice in digital television recalls an earlier, more sublime model of consumption, of which Foxtel's advertising copy is an uncanny palimpsest. "Anything Instantly" for "The World of You" were the advertising slogans of Ted Nelson's elaborate but never built project Xanadu. The conceptual precursor of the world wide web, Xanadu was designed as a kind of information age take-away franchise; an on-demand content shoppe tailored exclusively to personal choice. Nelson's idea was that anyone could access and download whatever they wanted in the way of image-music-text from digital kiosks called SilverStands. Nelson's SilverStand's were to be the information age equivalent of ATMs, offering the individual fast and immediate access to, well, everything. What really mattered to Nelson, though, was that Xanadu was also an alternative publishing as well as content-delivery model. The idea that anyone could be both author and publisher appealed to Nelson's quixotic sense of technological possibility. The idea of an author with a capital A, as a kind of Romantic spokesperson for the rest of us, was an outmoded concept for Nelson. In a spirit more in keeping with Marcel Duchamp than Samuel Taylor Coleridge, everyone was an author and publisher to boot in Nelson's schema; the legacy of which, of course, can be seen in the rapid emergence in recent years of blogging and, more recently still, customized publishing interfaces or wikis.

But Xanadu is still vapourware and won't do any more as a concept. And anyway, it's so nineteenth century. Welcome to *iPod* culture, a self-determined and individually contoured archive of experience. What is real is real for me, now, at the moment of my viewing. At stake is the very notion of a viewing or interpretive community, in the sense that Ien Ang and Stanley Fish have theorised these concepts in relation to television and reading, respectively. As Palmer has persuasively argued, the effect of customised time in media cultures is that "no two people will see the same program at the same period". The exception to the rule, he argues, is that ceremonial or apocalyptic television, global media events such as the funeral of Princess Diana or the World Trade Towers collapsing, may be the only shared televisual experiences left to us. Such out of the ordinary televisual anomalies are instances of what McKenzie Wark has called "weird global media events":

"Events" in the sense of singular irruptions into the regular flow of media. "Global" in that there is some linkage between the sites at which they appear to happen and the sites where we remote-sense them. Some kind of feedback across national and cultural spaces takes place (Wark *Virtual Geography* vii).

This feedback is the concept of real time.

For Palmer, then, we are witnessing a "privatisation of the public" (126). The emphasis on private space as the interface with public media has resulted in the privileging of subjective rather than collective time. As he suggests, the world unfolds at home, "without us having to leave the television or computer screen" (126). On the basis of Palmer's analysis we can advance that the concept of community is under threat. "Otherness", he asserts, "entails a confrontation with the non-self – the time of others, other places and other times beyond the here and now" (204). His critique is consistent with American writer Jonathan Franzen's sense of a broader and more alarming crisis of the social. In an essay originally written in 1996, with the suggestive title of "Why Bother?" [4] Franzen transfers his despair to do with the state of the American novel on to a broader meditation on the relations between the personal and the social. Franzen identifies what

he calls a "breakdown of communitarianism" (71) in contemporary American society, the absolute lack of an ability to consider any interest beyond your own. For Franzen this enclosure in the private world of the self is most notably manifest in the fate of manners and social etiquette. "Rudeness, irresponsibility, duplicity, and stupidity are hallmarks of real human interaction", he asserts. Furthermore, the only escape from bad manners is the

> refuge in an atomized privacy. And such privacy is exactly what the American Century has tended toward. First there was mass suburbanization, then the perfection of at-home entertainment, and finally the creation of virtual communities whose most striking feature is that interaction within them is entirely optional — terminable the instant the experience ceases to gratify the user (69-70).

In a later essay on the theme of privacy, Franzen highlights a "privacy panic" in American society that is grounded in the constitutional "right to be left alone". Franzen identifies the American desire for privacy in its architecture, landscape, transportation, communication and philosophy. [5] At stake, he argues, is the public sphere. "A genuine public space", he suggests, "is a place where every citizen is welcome to be present and where the purely private is excluded or restricted" (50). In the previous year McKenzie Wark published an essay in *21C* magazine on the Republican victory in the 1994 US election that, in hindsight, reinforces Franzen's assertion. Wark was not so much interested in the result of the election as Newt Gingrich's use of the emerging vectors of information to communicate directly with "'target audiences', be they voters, political leaders, cultural elites or whatever" (Wark *The Price* 22). Wark's point was that the Republican campaign by-passed the public sphere of open debate and analysis and instead exploited computerised direct mail campaigns, computer bulletin boards and cable access TV channels to privatize or individualise the Republican cause. For Wark this campaign signaled the end of the public sphere and the ascendancy of the anti-public sphere, a degradation of the principle of negotiation and discussion of competing interests. The anti-public sphere is a place where the private is actively avowed, solicited and gratified. In a worrying trend for the status of public debate in Australian politics, think of John Howard's personalised phone calls to the homes of members of his electorate during the recent federal election. Isn't it enough that we have to put up with dinner-time interruptions by telemarketers without the Prime Minister calling to pitch his wares?

How do Franzen's and Palmer's emphases on privacy and individualism relate to my earlier remarks to do with technology and community? They evidence that we are a long way from the democratic e-topia promised by internet narratives of the 1990s. The techno-cultural imperatives of user-orientation, interactivity and choice are in danger of obliterating our peripheral vision altogether. The social avatar of the virtual community has its other in the internalised solitude of Gottfried Leibniz's "monads"; the self-sufficient networked being which "pursues its appetites in isolation from all other beings, which are also solitary". As Michael Heim has written of the concept of the monad as the subject of interface culture, "Monads never meet face-to-face". [6]

"What's it got to do with me?"

I want to tease this out a bit more and explore some possible links between the rise of a new individualism and our habitual use of portable media; media, such blue-tooth enabled palm pilots and mobile phones, media that have made electronic communications wearable, attunable to lifestyle and, ultimately, no longer fixed in relation to a particular space and context of use (such as a networked desk-top computer or land-line telephone or fax). I want to do this by way of a brief anecdote, a meta-anecdote, as will become apparent. It concerns the rise of a new sensibility among students in tertiary education, a user-oriented, user-pays sensibility. The increasing shift towards fee-paying university courses, at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level, is dramatic in so far as it compounds an already present system of commodified tuition in the form of HECS debts. As an academic I have been living with this sensibility for some time now, like many other colleagues throughout the country. However in the last couple of years there has been

a marked increase and stridency in its enunciation. Its motivation is a sense of consumer choice akin to that of deciding which cable TV provider you will subscribe to. There is an increasingly aggressive attitude of individual discretion with which students will determine whether or not it is worth coming to a particular tute or enrolling in a particular subject on the grounds that, in advance of any study, it is already irrelevant to their particular needs. This attitude is commonly articulated in the perception that learning is expendable and selective, a perception disclosed in the repertory statement, "I couldn't come to class last week. Did I miss anything important?" Why, not at all, we do nothing of importance in this subject.

However I recently heard of an even more alarming example of this attitude, which not only reflected an utter distaste for the principle of knowledge as a social conversation, of exchange and collective participation, but also an intense retreat from the communal world into the hyper-inverted solipsism of the world of "me". My Swinburne colleagues Lisa Gye and Esther Milne teach a subject called Issues in Electronic Media. It deals with ideas akin to the theme of this conference, with the ethical and social consequences of technology, virtual communities, surveillance and its problematic tensions between public security and invasion of privacy. Important ideas, one would think, to do with the place of technology in our lives, especially in the context of a world that has seen, for example, mobile phones shrink in size, accessorised and eventually affixed to the body in the form of hands-free, I'm-so-self-important-that-I-can't-possibly-be-out-of-phone-contact prosthetic headsets in just a few years. Anyway, in the midst of discussions of such issues one particular student groaned in a sustained performance of ennui for both tutor and classmates alike, "Oh, this is sooooooo boring". But it gets worse. The same student, when asked why the topic was boring replied in the vernacular of the new individualism (hold on to you hats), "well, what's it got to do with me?"

What's it got to do with me, indeed. Such remarks are, I hasten to add, not indicative of the student experience of education. But they are common enough to suggest that the kinds of crises in the social identified by Palmer and Franzen are real and not the product of a jaded and irascible academia feeling the squeeze of too much strategic thinking, key performance indicators and not having enough international students. I have my own catalogue of symptoms of the new individualism, from impatience, incivility and rage on the roads (where red is now the new amber), to rampant, proud and undisguised anti-intellectualism. And I'm talking about universities, not society at large. Consider the recent outrageous and appalling negativity and disrespect that characterised many of the journalistic obituaries for Jacques Derrida, particularly Jonathan Kandell's insulting contribution to the New York Times. As Judith Butler so eloquently asserted in her response, " Why would the NY Times want to join ranks with American reactionary anti-intellectualism precisely at a time when critical thinking is most urgently required?" [7] In the context of today's theme, though, I want to restrict my observations to the ways in which media such as mobile phones have perhaps contributed to the breakdown of particular kinds of communication and respect for the social, a breakdown of a sense of belonging, a sense that it matters to belong to something bigger than the self, beyond the privatised individual immersed in their own world of me.

The imperative to be always connected, to be here and there simultaneously, to simply be on the phone, is a conspicuous feature of the culture of mobile telephony. Of course I'm not in any way denying that there is a value and use in actually using mobile phones. They do have a function and use-value as an important means of communication, of keeping in touch. But there is a sense in which the mobile phone is simply a fetish, the sign of absent and indeterminate presences that can be contacted from wherever we are, simply because they can be (such as at the swimming pool, where the phone can be neatly attached to one's Speedos). This indifference to the need for a specific addressee, for the absolute anonymity of the other, was beautifully exemplified for me a number of years ago when I was walking through a park in Richmond. A couple of blokes had come from the pub with a slab and were settling down on a bench for a few quiet ones when one of them found a mobile phone. After taking a sip of his stubbie and reflecting on the situation, his mate said to him, decisively, "phone some cunt up on it". And so he did, though the motivation

was not the need to actually speak to someone, but the singular convenience of simply being able to speak to anyone without having to find a phone, or even have an occasion to phone.

Nowhere, though, is this imperative better illustrated than in the anti-social disease of driving and being immersed at the same time, either speaking on the phone or text messaging while changing lanes *sans* indication because, after all, you only have two hands (unless, of course, you belong to the multiplex class for whom the headset is the synaesthetic equivalent of a third hand). Sure, it's another form of parallel life in the actual and virtual world, *á la* Howard Rheingold. It's even, arguably, another instance of an imploded centre and periphery, being mobile and completely immersed at one and the same time, aloof to distractions beyond mobile mediation. But in the context of the tyranny of intimacy, it is an anti-sociality that hasn't the slightest cognisance of being anti-social. A while ago I was sitting quietly in a quiet Japanese take-away waiting for my lunch. The not uncommon spectacle ensued of someone walking into a public place and talking loudly on their mobile. Presumably they had come in to either order lunch, once they had finished their call, or perhaps it had already been pre-ordered as they were approaching the restaurant by car. I was patiently waiting until the end of the conversation, as we all do, unavoidably drawn into its sonic slipstream, like everyone else in the place: the speaker blissfully unaware that sound is ambient and therefore public, standing as he was in the middle of the tables among people eating their lunch. This went on for at least five agonizing minutes when the person finished the call and walked out the restaurant. They neither approached the counter to place nor collect an order. Slowly, with mounting phone rage, it dawned on me. He had come into the restaurant to escape the sound of the busy road traffic outside and complete his conversation in peace, without distraction.

The immersion of mobile telephony, in such instances, is in fact a form of a-sociality. I really had the impression that this guy didn't *not*care that his presence had an impact on others. He was totally oblivious, in his immersive mobility, to anything beyond the situation of himself speaking on the phone. This a-sociality is also glimpsed in the strange ritual of the person transfixed to the screen, texting with an intuitive facility and speed that resembles a kind of autism. Or the even more bizarre invocation of the spectre, the person standing next to you and talking loudly and animatedly to no-one, an unseen other. In this bizarre mime, speech, inflection and gesture are all signs of an absent presence. Contrary to what this may suggest, in the context of telephony as a dialogic medium, communication is the last thing that is brought to mind. What stands out is the spectacle of the individual alone with technology, absorbed in solitary acts of a-social immersion.

The great American critic Hugh Kenner once wrote that the image of a man riding a bicycle was an emblem of the human-machine interface, a hybrid body that ironically recalled the classical image of bodily perfection, the Centaur. For Kenner, Samuel Beckett's bike riding character Molloy was a tragi-comical emblem of the philosophical dialectic of the mind and body in co-operative harmony, a Cartesian Centaur, "*mens sana in corpore disposito*" (Kenner 121). The Cartesian Centaur suited an intellectual climate in which existentialism posited a different conception of the isolated self. In our time it is the image of self-absorbed, prehensile SMS dexterity— an image of social myopia that extends into networked mobility the abject portrait of William Gibson's cathetered and desk-bound character Case in *Neuromancer*, feverishly punching deck with the blind eyes of a man whose mind is elsewhere.

Another consequence of the effects of practices such as texting using a telephone is the status of the speech act itself. Telephone etiquette is a speech act in the strictest sense of Austin and Searle's theoretical frameworks, or Roman Jacobson's model of discourse. However from my own experience at least, telephone etiquette seems to be a thing of the past, well certainly among the friends of my thirteen year old daughter who regularly call the house to speak to her. I don't mean by this that they are in any way rude or impolite; quite the contrary, they are not. But rather that they speak with a blunt directness: "Can I speak to Lucy?" or "Is Lucy there?" While clearly perfunctory in a typically teenage way, this kind of address assumes a kind of *in medias res* flow, of a communicative act that has already, for them anyway, begun before they speak. They have no

sense of having to establish a social contract, of having to identify who they are as a speaking subject engaging with another speaking subject, in a mediated context where identity is not a given but has to be established in terms of a particular speech act. This directness is for me not so much a sign of a lack of understanding of this contract, but the overriding trace of another context in which it is not necessary. In other words, it is the trace of an abbreviated discursive mode precipitated by the conventions of text messaging. As the famous poststructuralist question of enunciation goes, who is this I that says I? Apart from the abbreviated expedience of SMS text (its economy and speed, the impatience with elongation), there is no need to establish a context for the message, to construct a framework of addresser and addressee. In text messaging, preliminaries, such as indicating who it is sending the message, are not so much expendable as simply not necessary, since the identity of the addresser is always already implicit in the delivery of the message. In the context of Jacobson's theory of discourse, the establishment of the dialogic contract is important from a semiotic as well as a social perspective. The temporal dimension of speech requires elongation, appropriate enunciation for the dialogic contract to be established for the addresser and the addressee. However the micro-writing space and foreshortened memory of the mobile phone screen means that the elongation of spoken conversation must be restricted, abbreviated and therefore codified for the communications requirements apposite to the medium and the contexts of its use. Text messaging, in this sense, is an instance of what the late Father Ong would call a nonce invention, a communications convention developed as an expedience to suit a particular occasion, but one that is not readily adaptable to other contexts. Text messaging doesn't translate so well to a phonetic medium, such as having to speak on the phone. However the habitual use of such a codified system of exchange seems to have modified another mode of address, such as telephone etiquette, in which the terms of the contract have to be established first.

Living with the free range rude

Now contrary to what you might be thinking I'm not working up to some kind of Eric Idle inspired tirade, hyperventilating as I trot out my most annoying stories of mobile phone outrages. Nor do I want to sound totally negative or cynical. And no, I am not a technological determinist, as some would have it. I'm not placing the new individualism at the door of mobile telephony or the internet or digital television. In returning to my opening remarks, I have attempted in this discussion to disentangle the skeins of our collective amnesia, to retrieve and identify the terms of the new contracts we have signed in the name of cyberculture. These contracts are social rather than technological, manifestations of particular uses of technology, of particular habits of consumption. And when it comes down to it, it is our sense of the fragile economy of self and other, of presence, that really matters; which probably means that while I don't blame mobile phones for rudeness, I do have a low opinion of many of the people who use them. For this reason I suppose I identify with Hannibal Lecter rather than the Dalai Lama when it comes to tolerating a-social and anti-social behaviour. And short of replacing sushi with mobile phone monads on my menu, I have decided to temper my impatience with the free range rude and trust that their dictum, "To thine own self be true", the distorted appropriation from a previous age of individualism, loses its currency very quickly. In the name of a renewed and re-negotiated concept of the social in the economy of presence, we should heed William S. Burroughs' call to arms in *Nova Express* and "Storm the reality studio. And retake the universe".

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Endnotes

[1] *fibreculture* was formed in 2001 by, among others, Geert Lovink, Danny Butt, Ned Rossiter and Anna Munster. It was conceived as an online forum for the critical discussion of the kinds of issues I am exploring here. See www.fibreculture.org.   [return]

[2] See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, trans. Bernard Wall, London, Wm. Collins Sons & Co., 1959. For a discussion of the application of de Chardin's "noosphere" to cyberculture, see Philip K. Dick's essay, "Man, Android, and Machine", reprinted in *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick. Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*. ed. Lawrence Sutin. New York: Vintage, 1995.   [return]

[3] http://www.flashmob.com/   [return]

[4] Jonathan Franzen, "Why Bother?" was originally published in Harper's magazine in 1996 and titled "Perchance to dream". It was re-written and published as "Why Bother?" in *How to be Alone: Essays*, London, Fourth Estate, 2003. Further references given in text. I am grateful to Lisa Gye for drawing my attention to this essay.   [return]

[5] "Imperial Bedroom", in *How to be Alone*, p.48.   [return]

[6] For a discussion of Leibniz's work in this context see Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. pp.97, 98 resp.   [return]

[7] For the full text of Judith Butler's letter to the New York Times, see http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering_jd/butler_judith.htm.   [return]

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