

# boundary 2

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## **Additional Information**

# Thinking at the Edge of the Galaxy:

Pierre Lévy's World Projection

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Not even the most insignificant detail of human knowledge arrives full-blown and ready for immediate assimilation. The slightest morsel of human thought about thought reaches consolidation only after centuries, even millennia, of continuous and discontinuous elaboration. Moreover, the constant unearthing of more and more of humanity's debris, which includes all materials marked by human intervention, from written inscriptions to material artifacts, offers only modest aid in capturing this historical character of thought. Historical understanding, forcefully anchored in the present, quietly effaces the historical foundation of concepts and presuppositions that make sense of that debris, linking and arranging its diverse components. In times when change occurs at a glacial pace and remains almost imperceptible, there is no need to confront the historicity of thought, which always seems to be adequate to the world it seeks to describe. Today, however, the historical underpinnings of thinking, which by definition adapts to new historical and epistemological phenomena, have pushed their way into the foreground and **[End Page 64]** constitute a major problem for thinking the contemporaneous moment in all its splendor. The modern paradigm of understanding, which brings together a mass of assumptions about collective intelligence, historical progress, cultural identity, and political economy, has come up against a world that no longer operates squarely within its parameters. At the same time, contemporary thought is so inseparable from the concepts and ideas bequeathed by modernity that a starting point for radical rethinking is not at all apparent.

In a very real sense, this turn of the century falls directly within a new incunabular period of massive scale; unlike printing, however, which emerged only gradually even if it created the conditions for secularized thought, for the modern state, and for certain forms of globalization, the across-the-board mutations of the present proceed with exponential speed. Boosted by technology and by a global economy that increasingly triggers all innovation, contemporary knowledge production incessantly outdistances the capacity of thought to trace its contours, seize its significance, and project its implications into the future. Modern thinking, whose concepts are deeply ensconced in the institutions of civil society, seems unable to escape its built-in anachronism, oscillating between a nostalgic turn toward some irrecoverable Garden of Eden and a glassy-eyed gaze into a Toffleresque future. In this context, launching into a truly critical assessment of contemporaneity takes a certain steadfastness and not a little audacity, and those who attempt such a venture are few and far between.

The French thinker Pierre Lévy, author of a number of books that seek to rethink the configuration of knowledge in the contemporary epoch, is among those who have begun laying the foundation for accomplishing this task; the distinction of Lévy's work derives from its specifically philosophical engagement with the network of global knowledge currently under construction. While the primary impetus for the emerging economies of knowledge comes from North America, much of the abstract reflection on its transformations comes from Europe. Often this reflective engagement coming from Europe is of the nostalgic variety, full of longing for the high civilization gradually being swept away by uncultured barbarians who are unable to think critically. Lévy's work, however, does not adopt the discourse of decline and retrospective desire, even if he repeatedly acknowledges the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as his source of inspiration. His most extensive statement about what rethinking our small corner of the universe entails is published in *Cyberculture: A Report to the European Council in the Framework of the Project "New Technologies: Cultural Cooperation [End Page 64a] and Communication."*<sup>1</sup> As the subtitle indicates, the book takes the form of an official report, in which Lévy attempts to delineate all the areas of thought affected by the technologically enhanced mechanisms of contemporary knowledge production. In this sense, the report serves as a summary and extension of Lévy's previous analyses of more specific themes in the current landscape of knowledge and multimedia.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it constitutes an effective point of entry into the general questions posed by the immaterial networks of the twenty-first century, as well as a glimpse of how Lévy envisages answering them.

Although wide ranging in its portrayal of the issues, the report has a specific mandate: "This report requested by the European Council treats the cultural implications of developing digital technologies of information and communication" (*Cyber*, 17). The cultural domain is as broad as it is fuzzy; it includes the products of human action (that is, the material artifacts that result from human intervention) as well as the thought that permits, accompanies, and follows from it. In other words, the realm of culture has an intimate link with history, which requires both a material component that exceeds thought

by its physical existence and categories of reflection that serve as a prism for producing its account. In this cultural projection, then, “cyberculture” takes on what seems at the outset a more limiting connotation. The necessity to understand the stakes of Lévy’s interrogation is facilitated by a peculiar institutional practice. In the rigorously guarded world of the Académie Française, new words such as *cyberculture* must be precisely and logically defined if they are to have any chance of entering into the standard usage guaranteed by dictionaries. Therefore, the text furnishes the reader with a clear definition: “As for the neologism ‘cyberculture,’ it designates here the bundle of techniques (material as well as intellectual), practices, attitudes, modes of thought and values that develop [End Page 65] conjointly with the growth of cyberspace” (*Cyber*, 17). The concept covers thought and practices emerging alongside cyberspace, which seems to be gradually evolving into a mind of its own.

Succinctly, therefore, the task involves confronting the economies of intellectual (what might be better expressed as *geistliche*, or nonmaterial) and material representation, along with the links and associative logic that accompany them. This novel network of representations creates a new worldview, with new cultural and political apparatuses, even if the actual scope of their implications has not yet become fully visible; the immediate goal of *Cyberculture* consists in wrestling with the figures of thought, the paradigms of understanding, that allow for reflection on that emerging dimension of history, culture, and politics. At the same time, it should be underscored that this new worldview does not arrive *ex nihilo*. Its newness does not result from a miraculous coming-to-be along the lines of a theological apparition; on the contrary, it literally bursts out of the categories of modernity, transforming them beyond recognition, beyond any imaginary those categories permitted. The idea of history itself is historical, along with the presuppositions that enable any particular history to be conceived and rendered in language. For example, any history requires a protagonist, whether individual, collective, or divine, but the way one conceives of that protagonist, how one idealizes its possibility to act, its power to affect change and to become self-aware, conditions what kind of history will result, as well as its future projection. In this sense, modernity is not simply the epoch when world conceptions become possible; rather, it launches a secular thinking that claims to transcend its historical basis by being generalizable to other historical times. From this modern perspective, other historical periods are viewed as no more than variants of the truly objective history that modernity supposedly represents.<sup>3</sup> The overarching theory of history, whether explicit or not, marks the parameters of the possible within which any reconsideration of the world deploys itself. If a transcendent God [End Page 66] is viewed as daily meddling in terrestrial affairs, the independent historical, political, or scientific action of any given human proves difficult to conceive. At the same time, there is an infinity of potential views of human or immanent history that are not equivalent either in their effectiveness or in their political and interpretive consequences.

Delving into the details of Lévy’s conceptual reevaluation requires a preliminary consideration of its horizon; Lévy’s updated picture of the world has an imposing frame

that holds the picture at the same time that it constitutes the space of its projection. Lévy readily acknowledges this conceptual framework, which has real nooks and crannies even if they are only intellectual presuppositions, and rendering it explicit takes no great effort of interpretation. “The emergence of cyberspace accompanies, translates, and favors a general evolution of civilization” (*Cyber*, 27). This slight sentence inscribes a series of basic assumptions that are repeatedly underscored in Lévy’s commentaries. Captured in the reference to “civilization” is the entire apparatus of modern European historical understanding. Cyberspace is a historical phenomenon that may represent danger to civilization (it only *favors* an advancement); it needs to be harnessed to ensure that civilization will continue its evolutionary unfolding toward ever higher levels. The linearity of this historical projection, as well as the general notion of civilization, is one of the most important precepts of Western modernity. Whether nefarious or not, this projection or model of historical understanding has dominated thought for the last two hundred years: It has, for example, given a firm theory of knowledge to modern science, underwritten colonialism, and instituted European superiority.

In its secular form, of which Lévy’s work is an overt partisan, each present surpasses earlier presents in light of a specific constellation of terrestrial values and beliefs that involve no otherworldly reference. Dispensing with the divine referent calls for another figure to occupy its place, and, in this context, Lévy’s historical and theoretical predilections exhibit their most modern trappings. The report aims to show how “cyberculture extends and realizes the ideals of Enlightenment philosophy and of the grand European current directed toward human emancipation” (*Cyber*, 289). Even if, against this backdrop, it “calls for a radical renewal of social and political thought and provokes a metamorphosis in the very notion of culture” (*Cyber*, 289), the fundamental framework remains that of the Enlightenment. The human or humankind (what the French call *l’homme*) serves as the idealized point of reference, the figure that gives sense to history and in whose name civilization [End Page 67] evolves. “In sum,” as Lévy remarks in another of his texts, “humanization, the human species’ process of emergence, is not yet finished.”<sup>4</sup> The human being, man, humankind, humanity: All of history, and the civilization that fuels it, derives from this idea of the human.

Far from any notion of history exuding the merest whiff of materialism, in which ideas themselves never rise above the history producing them, the divine agent has simply moved from the transcendent realm to the land of immanence. Beyond the conceptual repercussions of this historical paradigm, this orientation gives Lévy’s analyses a modest polemical tone: “In contrast with the postmodern idea of the decline of Enlightenment ideas, I maintain that cyberculture can be considered as the legitimate (if distant) heir of the progressive project of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*. . . . It develops out of an assiduous practice of exchanging information and knowledges that the Enlightenment *philosophes* considered to be the principal motor of progress” (*Cyber*, 302). The so-called postmodern seems to serve as a counter to the lights of reason in their eighteenth-century rendition, even if the text does not specify which version of the postmodern is under

censure. But the essential aspect of its evocation concerns Lévy's project for seizing contemporary transformations of knowledge production. In this perspective, what is happening today in all spheres of knowledge does not disrupt the calm historical vision erected and institutionalized by the eighteenth-century agents of reason: The theory of progress is maintained, knowledge of the present moment receives its legitimacy, and a renewal of the "fundamentally humanist project" (Cyber, 244) takes place. At the same time, the sort of irrational arbitrariness associated with the "postmodern" displays its inappropriateness to grasp the present-day dynamics of media knowledge.

Rather than getting bogged down in the details of this seamless snapshot of the contemporary epoch, it is more worthwhile to reflect on what is gained from Lévy's proposed model of understanding that gives a face-lift to an older historical figure. The most obvious benefit concerns the availability of a ready-made constellation of concepts through which to view and evaluate the present. This theoretical advantage should not be taken lightly; its domains of application range from the highly abstract (such as the notions of collectivity and of the universal, which grew out of the eighteenth century and together constitute a guiding thread for Lévy's reflections) to the more mundane and historical motifs of equality, freedom, and brotherhood, [End Page 68] which continue to be the skeleton of contemporary humanism. In this latter, Lévy glimpses a reborn revolutionary potential:

Cyberculture would not be postmodern but continuous with the republican and revolutionary ideas of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. But in cyberculture, these "values" are embodied in concrete technological apparatuses. In the era of electronic media, equality is realized in the possibility for individuals to put in circulation for everyone; freedom exists in encrypting software and in transborder access to multiple virtual communities; lastly, brotherhood appears in global interconnectivity.

(Cyber, 302)

This is a French-style revolution writ large, extending to the globe; although Lévy might be able to inscribe it in a Marxian tradition (Cyber, 302), it stops far short of being Marxist. Ultimately the sense of this gesture concerns the theory of history that will prove simultaneously an obstacle and a gateway. Rather than considering the media sea change as opening a hairline fissure in the modern organization of knowledge, so well institutionalized and codified, Lévy prefers to conceive the contemporary mediatic morass as just another step in the interminable march of progress. In other words, *Cyberculture*, and the perspectives it focuses, holds fast to the historical horizon of modernity without pausing to reflect on how that modern vision came to be, what interests it has served and continues to serve, and what medium dominated it (that is, printing).

Although the epistemological implications of this historical projection turn out to be both negative and positive, as with any transformative model of knowledge and culture

(not to mention “civilization”), it guarantees that certain aspects of the current knowledge revolution simply cannot be addressed in their specificity. A case in point is the issue of the material basis of knowledge, which Lévy’s presuppositions systemically exclude from consideration, even if such a reflection is seemingly at the heart of his project. For example, “far from being resolutely postmodern, cyberspace can appear as a sort of technological materialization of modern ideals” (*Cyber*, 302). Even as it proceeds to disrupt the social, political, cultural, and economic institutions of modernity, including the quaint globalism inherent in the modern worldview, the materialization associated with the Internet becomes merely another in a series, taking its place alongside print, photography, film, and any other material form. The material of the computer screen, so unlike the print object that it mimicks and swallows along with all the other media forms of materialization, remains just a secondary, external manifestation **[End Page 69]** of the same lofty ideals clumped together and named “modern.” The epistemological straitjacket of modernity, which has been so imperturbably elaborated in taking for granted the supremacy of print, permits no fundamental reflection on the idealized economy of meaning ushered in by the gluttonous mix of media called the Internet. In sum, one of the principal issues of today’s multiple media and the notions they spawn concerns the potential impact that proliferating matter and modes of inscription have on thought. Although Lévy’s numerous studies—particularly his consideration of virtuality, which I will return to below—nudge up against the issue without seeking to engage it, it cannot be broached without jettisoning the clunky epistemological baggage of the modern worldview. In contrast with reflection on the material aspect, Lévy’s work concentrates on the idealities that new media materializations might convey.

Within the well-defined parameters of this panorama, Lévy’s project takes on an important swatch of modernity. In this perspective, Lévy’s proposed conceptual anchor, which takes the form of a relatively banal model of history and knowledge, has a lesser importance than the results it allows him to produce. Although the modern panorama, with its unexamined plethora of presuppositions, can certainly be subjected to massive criticism, no model of knowledge production is innocent; each and every one creates real and imaginary victims and crushes other paradigms of understanding that serve less well the historical and epistemological interests of the status quo. Moreover, grasping the workings of contemporaneity has its own hazards and pitfalls whose avoidance is deeply embedded in Western thinking, as exemplified by the literary traditions’ tendency to integrate new productions only after the authors have long been dead and the original publics irretrievably fragmented. Today, the very speed that is rendering the concept of literary tradition anachronistic if not obsolete makes it imperative to venture into the swamp of contemporary transformation. The rhythm of assimilation has been upset, and the present offers itself necessarily as an object of reflection, despite the simplemindedness inherent in thinking any present whose sense can come only from an unimaginable future. Lévy’s forceful investment in the historical and conceptual paradigm of modernity is best understood in this context; the modern vision of history, with the

multiple concepts that serve it, offers itself as a logical lesser evil, even if it is far safer than it is daring.

Much as in an adventure novel, the conceptual backbone of this modern skeleton of history and knowledge is the protagonist who achieves self-consciousness and assumes responsibility for wreaking havoc in the **[End Page 70]** stable order bequeathed by earlier generations. This protagonist, in whose name history is transformed, becomes the chief object of Lévy's deliberations. *Cyberculture* gives this fundamental description of what it evokes as “contemporary acceleration”:

It involves rather a movement of civilization as a whole, a sort of anthropological mutation that, alongside the extension of cyberspace, brings together demographic growth, urbanization, a greater density of transportation networks (and the correlative growth of individuals' circulation), technical scientific development, the (unequal) elevation of the population's level of education, media omnipresence, globalization of production and exchange, international financial integration, the rise of large transnational political entities, not to mention the evolution of ideas inclining toward a global coming to awareness of humanity and of the planet [*une prise de conscience globale de l'humanité et de la planète*].

(*Cyber*, 285–86)

The linear shift of civilization, the catch-all concept of modernity that exists primarily to express historical progress, with its concomitant notion of “advanced” and “backward,” “superior” and “inferior,” consists in an anthropological mutation, a transformation in the nature of the human. The enumerated characteristics of this mutation are familiar to any reader who peruses the work of commentators seeking to summarize the contemporaneous essence. In Lévy's articulation of the problem, this summary of unforeseen upheavals constitutes the backdrop against which his own preoccupations and principal contribution take place. In fact, even if in the last part of the lengthy sentence Lévy does mention it, his primary concern goes without saying because the entire book deals with the evolution of ideas—as do all of his books. Lévy's application of modern progress, of linear history whose unfolding needs only a touch of human will prompting every present to surpass itself, hooks up an old new idea with the notion of evolution. That idea has to do with a conscious awakening, a *prise de conscience*. This notion, which, after Hegel, is inextricably linked to the political domain, belongs to the revolutionary model of historical explication: A group, a people, whose disparate members think and act as the fractured multitude that they are rather than as the singleminded awareness they have the potential to be, becomes conscious of itself as a collective agent and therefore capable of historical action. In the global context, collective awareness becomes a sort of planetary “conscientization,” a word Lévy also invokes.

Juxtaposing “humanity” and “planet” in the final phrase of this sentence **[End Page 71]** makes for a curious formulation that merits comment. An *evolution of ideas inclining*

toward a global coming to awareness of humanity and of the planet: How might one explain the importance of distinguishing between a coming to consciousness of “humanity” and of the “planet”? Despite its ethereal abstraction, the consciousness of humanity has a certain metaphoric logic in expressing the collective human mind. But what does reference to the planet signal? It is seemingly not reducible to human consciousness of the planet, because the phrase explicitly names both humanity *and* the planet. At the same time, only a far-fetched imagination could assume that the passage underscores that the planet’s animals and plants are also going to achieve global awareness. Although this phrase evokes what appears to be a minor detail in Lévy’s schema, a great deal hinges on this humanity-planet distinction because it concerns the status of the universal—that is, the notion of universality—that cyberculture is in the process of transfiguring.

Ultimately, the notion of the universal provides the means to establish the great divide between the idea of humanity and the vast planetary expanse:

One might say that it is not properly speaking a question of the universal but of the planetary, of the raw geographical fact of extending the networks of informational and material transport, of the technological confirmation of cyberspace’s exponential growth. . . . Of course, this new universal contains a strong dose of the global and the planetary, but it is not reducible to it. The “universal by contact” is still the universal in the deepest sense *because it is indissociable from the idea of humanity*.

(Cyber, 140)

The planetary, that is, the “raw geographical fact,” describes the empirical space whose multifarious local points are increasingly becoming interconnected. Television and the Internet mobilize and transmit images simultaneously throughout the globe, achieving an empirical, experiential universality. Linking together the vast array of different places into sameness means placing them in virtual or potential contact with one another, creating a universal space that is nevertheless more “real” than “ideal,” so to speak. This real/ideal distinction, the axis along which much of Western philosophical reflection has built its layers of concepts and theories of understanding, necessarily enjoys a privileged status in any vision of history. In Lévy’s projection, the ideal realm of thought is captured by the idea of humanity, the most elevated, least empirical idealization that allows for **[End Page 72]** historical understanding. The idea of humanity—a humanity that cannot be palpably grasped and that transcends the empirical or geographical space technologically unified—provides for historical continuity and also establishes the bonds with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment at the origin of the universal concept (Cyber, 141).

As an idea, humanity exceeds the possibility of any real human fully incarnating it; its affirmed existence, not unlike that of the idea of God, furnishes a nonmaterial referent or perspective from which history draws its unity. “What is the universal? It is humanity’s (virtual) presence to itself” (Cyber, 143). Although nonempirical, the universal becomes



made over in the planetary age and includes as well as accompanies the physical interconnections of the four corners of the globe. Humanity, as an idea, exists in thought—in real thought that (virtually) thinks itself as it is thinking; in less abstract terms, this notion championed by Lévy means that the sum total of human agents has their thought harnessed together, reacting to and interacting with one another (at least potentially, in a world where Internet access would become really universal). Lévy's reflections concern this burgeoning human mind and the theory of knowledge and history he sees embodied in its networks: This is the basic impulse underlying the floating idea of humanity.

Consciousness takes on a life of its own, becoming a sort of specter that inhales and exhales in the absence of material, corporal lungs; its only presence is its presence to itself. For Lévy, this very Hegelian understanding of mind can be understood only by projecting the idea of humanity and the universal that is humanity's presence to itself.

In this relatively traditional global vision, *Cyberculture's* most original contribution derives from the way it conceives the modalities of the supposed universal. In effect, the report attempts primarily to rescue it from the clutches of hegemonic statehood and its attendant epistemology:

We have become distrustful in the face of what presents itself as universal because universalism has almost always arrived by way of conquering empires, of those striving to dominate, whether that domination was temporal or spiritual. But cyberspace, at least until now, is more receptive than dominant. It is not an instrument of diffusion from centers (like newspapers, radio, and television) but an apparatus through which human collectivities interactively communicate among themselves and heterogeneous communities enter into contact. Those who see in cyberspace a danger of “totalitarianism” are simply making an error in diagnosis.

(*Cyber*, 280) **[End Page 73]**

This new universal draws its newness from the specificity of the media through which its manifestations circulate. Contrary to the mass media of modernity, such as print publishing, the cyberculture model of knowledge transmission does not involve the movement from an original locus to a multiplicity of loci, from center to periphery, from a production point to a multitude of destinations. The modern paradigm, which lends itself well to the binarism of domination and has underwritten the sociopolitical configurations associated with modernity, including the hierarchical state-to-state and state-over-state conception of globality, has in Lévy's view given way to a model in which no center lords over its outer expanses. Consequentially, the unidirectionality of modern information production explodes into a bundle of directions in which no collective or individual agent is reduced to a binary emitter or receiver of knowledge. As this passage implies, the question about how to interpret the emergent *dispositif* of cyberculture, the apparatus or mechanism by means of which it establishes and perpetuates itself institutionally (which includes the paradigms of knowledge it creates, maintains, and renders necessary), has

striking political repercussions. Just as with twentieth-century fascism and the totalitarian worldview it activated, theories of epistemology are profoundly intertwined with concepts of the polity as well as with the historical understanding framing their temporal justification. In this instance, Lévy claims that the new cyberculture situation can neither be read nor interpreted from notions of the political elaborated on the basis of other mass media. To expand on the passage's metaphors, the symptoms may look the same, but the underlying economy imposes a different diagnosis. Nonetheless, determining the degree of confidence one might place in the doctor's analysis requires an understanding of the theory of knowledge he develops to counter knee-jerk assertions of totalitarianism. Because of the inextricable intertwinement of presuppositions and interpretations, underlying and often implicit assumptions—whether methodological, conceptual, or political—merit careful consideration.

The Western tradition of knowledge and politics, permeated with made-to-order oppositions between progressive and reactionary, status quo and revolution, offers little help for thinking a situation in which the terrain has shifted from localizable collectivities to global consciousness. In marshaling the conceptual forces to make his case, Lévy makes repeated reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose formulations literally pepper his works. Among these notions are all the primary suspects, including: a collective becoming (*devenir*); lines of flight (*lignes de fuite*); de-territorialization (*déterritorialisation*); rhizome; and oppositions [End Page 74] such as molar/molecular, immanent/transcendent, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> Lévy's various studies and analyses evoke these terms and the phenomena they are to conceptualize to provide for a global and globalizing vision of the polity that runs counter to the ingrained precepts of statehood, the simplistic logic of one-to-one domination, and the presuppositions of modernity's narrowly construed theory of knowledge. But the most effective expression of the innovative thrust to Lévy's argument involves his own efforts to articulate the epistemology that should accompany the cyberculture paradigm. His ultimate goal consists in attempting to excise the notion of totality from the universal, even while buttressing the concept of universality over against "postmodern" claims of unstable relativism. In *Cyberculture's* appraisal:

Postmodern philosophy has confused the universal and totalization. Its error was to throw out the universal baby with the dirty bathwater of totality. . . . [Totality] can be defined as the stabilized unification of a multiplicity's meaning (discourse, situation, a set of events, system, etc.). That integral identity can close itself off at the horizon of a complex process, result from life's dynamic instability, emerge from thought's oscillations and contradictions. But whatever the complexities of its modalities, totality still remains within the horizon of the *same*.

(*Cyber*, 143)

In a cyberculture world, rescuing the universal as a concept means abandoning the drive toward unity and knocking down the metaphoric pedestal that supposedly furnishes a

locus from which an ultimate unity can be glimpsed. The universal, purged of its totalizing fiction, becomes the basis for a transformed model of knowledge production, reception, and acquisition. Lévy is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that the universal concept has always integrated an implicit assumption of totality, and the epistemological and political consequences have made themselves felt throughout the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Lévy's scarcely veiled polemic with postmodernism—which in his rendering rejects the universal precisely because it has been identified with a totalizing, unidirectional perspective—hints at the difficulty in grasping the specificity of this “new” universal. If it goes counter to the totalizing model, this universal renaissance—which presumes that there is no overarching sense, that difference proliferates to **[End Page 75]** dismantle all claims to sameness, even if it breeds and then feeds off of contradiction—would seem to be nothing more than a new, even contradictory name for the dead universal of postmodernism. In other words, what is the point of calling it a universal if it has nothing of an atemporal, transcendent universal? What is the investment in this historically significant word and the concept it encapsulates?

In modernity, mass media build on the totalizing universalism of writing, in which dissemination goes from the singular to the many conceived as sharing a mental commonality (*Cyber*, 136). This vision of cultural production enjoys a massive generalization:

A number of cultural forms derived from writing incline toward universality, but each totalizes on a different gathering point: universal religions on meaning, philosophy (including political philosophy) on reason, science on reproducible exactness (facts), media on drawing attention to a stupifying spectacle baptized as “communication.” In each case, the totalization acts on the meaning's identity. Each in its own way, these cultural machines attempt to reenact, on the field of reality they invent, a way for the collectivities that they assemble to coincide with themselves.

(*Cyber*, 137–38)

Thus, universalism inscribes itself into the very formation of collective agents as well as in the various disciplines of knowledge or sectors of cultural production that have constituted modern society since the eighteenth century. The fundamental presuppositions are easy to state: They assume a stable collective mind, even if the actual members change, and a stable point of reference that anchors the perspective in which meaning is produced and consolidated. More practically, in the domains of knowledge themselves, there are institutional implications; religion, philosophy, and science, for example, require validated agents—such as theologians, philosophers, jurists, and scientists—who determine the meaning for collective bodies, just as mass communication takes the form of a linear model of transmission in which cultural representations pass from a point of origin to a collective public. In this sense, the media repeatedly activate

collective consciousness, the collective's—whatever its number or whatever issue crystallizing it—coincidence with itself. In addition to the real power to instill a very specific sort of collective awareness, this paradigm puts in place a theory and practice of understanding, of interpretation, that underlies cultural production in the modern age, before the displacement occasioned by new networks of knowledge. Outside of the control of individuals, these [End Page 76] machines of cultural meaning and the theory of knowledge supporting them have permeated modern thought that was first and foremost elaborated out of the mechanical power of printing.

In this context, then, what about the new universal that just gets rid of the dirty bathwater of totalization? At bottom, the quest for a stable sense, the ground of a totalizing projection, becomes a futile task:

Rather than constructing itself on the basis of the identity of meaning, the new universal is accomplished by *immersion*. We are all in the same bath, in the same flood of communication. It is therefore no longer a question of semantic closure or totalization.

A new ecology of media becomes organized around the extension of cyberspace. I can now assert its central paradox: *the more universal (extensive, interconnected, interactive) it is, the less it is totalizable*. Every supplementary connection adds still more heterogeneousness, new sources of information, new lines of flight, so that the overall meaning is less and less readable, more and more difficult to circumscribe, to close off, to master. This universal opens access to possession [*jouissance*] of the global, to the species' collective intelligence in operation.

(*Cyber*, 141–42)

No longer localizable and graspable by the available discourses of knowledge, the stable identity of sense is gone, swept away by the exponential explosion of global media. As with physicists striving to describe an unverifiable idealization of the way some infinitely small segment of nature operates, *Cyberculture* slips into an array of metaphors to suggest this new flux that does not prevent sense but renders it unmasterable from any single point of reference. These metaphors, typically, have to do with water, which is untamable in essence: Its currents flow with a force beyond human consciousness, even though human intervention can channel it, build dams, and harness its energy in general. This idealized space created by the cyber network calls for a new worldview, both in its content and in the way in which it is constituted.

In this context, the regenerated universal squashes the local into the global, withdrawing the binary relationship that held sway before the epoch of global wiring and satellite plotting, when morse code was still possible as an international language of communication. Through the mechanism of this remade universality, the global becomes readily, even necessarily, accessible; the local, the singular, can enter into the planetary

collective or, in legal terms, can enjoy the right to usufruct the global. Furthermore, **[End Page 77]** the dimension opened up is more than simple access or a domain of legal possession; as global *jouissance*, it is also a realm of autosensibility, one in which self-titillation enters into play, a sort of mental masturbation of the collective mind contemplating itself at work. The seemingly provocative description has more than a grain of truth, for the issue of introducing or resuscitating the universal in an epoch when universality becomes more and more real, less and less ideal, concerns the perspective from which that universal can be thought. If the collective mind is everywhere, in contact with itself, how can it think itself as an object? In the terms of *Cyberculture's* careful distinction between empirical universality, in which the globe is universally networked, and the ideal universal, which exceeds that empirical global networking, this particular passage emphasizes the empirical dimension. Beyond the empirical, however, wiping out the totalizing aspect while keeping the universal creates a logical obstacle that proves difficult to surmount.

Thinking the universal requires an external point of reference, a small nook in ideal space, that enables thought to constitute the universal as an object without being subject to its empirical globalization. The solution offered by Lévy's schema comes back, once again, to the idea of humanity to express the "universal without totality": "It is still a matter of the universal, accompanied by all the resonances one would like with Enlightenment philosophy, because it maintains a profound relation to the idea of humanity. In effect, cyberspace does not engender a culture of the universal because it is everywhere de facto, but because its form or its idea implies de jure the entirety of human beings" (*Cyber*, 141). The surgical removal of totality, a vanishing point guaranteeing a structure of universal interpretation with all the political and epistemological drawbacks Lévy so conscientiously outlines, seems to have left some traces in the idea of humanity. This idea, which becomes a de jure concept, a principle theoretically outside of history, seems to reestablish a structure of thought supposedly abandoned with the dirty cesspool of totality. This sort of legalizing universalism merely rewrites the problem, as Michel de Montaigne remarked at the very beginning of modernity: "There is little relationship between our actions, which are in perpetual mutation, and laws that are fixed and immobile."<sup>6</sup> The same can be said for ideas, even ideas as banal as that of humanity, for it sneaks in a totalizing gaze through the back door. **[End Page 78]**

That is not to say that all totalizing ideas or visions are the same, and, in comparison with the models it would replace, Lévy's projection certainly allows for a deeper, less idealistic reflection on contemporary cultural production. Rather than simply claiming the death of the author, following in the wake of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and a host of others, *Cyberculture* diagnoses the figure of the author as an epistemological anchor to the stable meaning of outmoded collective formations and equates its passing with the emergence of new knowledge production (*Cyber*, 176, 181–82). This analytical critique of a historical figure whose effectiveness is dwindling is no negligible matter and entails yet another interrogation of the consciousness of mastery—the singular

consciousness of the author that serves as the fictional focal point for providing the horizon within which meaning resides. Over against this authorial notion, Lévy poses the figure of the “engineer of worlds,” who becomes “the principal artist of the twenty-first century. He provides for virtualities, designs the spaces of communication, arranges the collective equipment of cognition and memory, structures sensory-motor interaction with the universe of data” (*Cyber*, 173). This figure has no connection with the totalizing gaze of the author, just as its products have no resemblance to the finite and well-polished artifacts existing by virtue of a self-conscious creator. All the products have ragged edges and can never be closed off, not unlike the process of consciousness itself. In a similar vein, artistic production appears under another guise best exemplified by contemporary music production: “Techno-music and, in general, music from digital raw material illustrate the unusual figure of the universal without totality” (*Cyber*, 171). Assembled together from bits and pieces forced to cohabit the same tracks, with scratching and other extraneous sounds and movements, never to form a finished production, digital music melds refuse to congeal into a clean object and to serve as a locus for totalization. The borders between subject and object, between agent and action (or, more traditionally, between “creator” and “creation”), can never be satisfactorily drawn, and the epistemological model they mobilize proves ineffective. In this sense, for Lévy, techno-music incarnates the new forces of production and calls for the elaboration of new figures of knowledge.

These various examples hint at the potential explanatory power residing in any bundle of presuppositions and the model of knowledge they constitute. But they also underscore the sclerotic power inherent in the circulating concepts of modernity as well as in the institutions they buttress. The necessity to engage these presuppositions and the supposed objectivity they manufacture goes beyond feeble efforts to collapse worn-out **[End Page 79]** paradigms and search for new models or figures of cultural production. The bottom line always comes down to a question of history, not solely how it is told and who becomes its dominant protagonist, but which conceptual tools are used to think it. On a most practical, concrete level, historical transformations inevitably call for developing novel figures designed to grasp newly unleashed economies and processes of meaning. However, new figures—such as the “engineer of worlds” to replace the author—can be proposed and employed without provoking even the least disturbance in the prevailing paradigms of historical knowledge. This is not the case with ideas and conceptions that underlie such paradigms, and the specificity of Lévy’s self-imposed historical problem, the historical conceptions his model permits, hangs on his vision of the universal and on his muffled attempts to choke off its totalizing impulse. More precisely, the universal in question refers to the realm of ideas, the universal as a concept, and not merely to the fact that the network of knowledge is becoming “universal,” globally present.

In this connection, *Cyberculture’s* historical account of contemporary universality proves revealing. From the outset, the historical projection that Lévy derives from lopping off the totalizing members of the universal body seems strangely traditional. In unfolding his account of historical progression, Lévy identifies four stages that integrate an agent of

knowledge production, on the one hand, and the technology of knowledge reproduction, on the other. These stages can be succinctly summarized. Beginning prior to the invention of writing, an early technique to inscribe thought that outlives the being that inscribed it, the first stage has no materialization; it is a “living community” whose knowledge is deposited in human memory: “When an elder dies a library burns” (*Cyber*, 196). In the second stage, after the emergence of writing, the book becomes the dominant form of materialization, and the human agent assumes the role of interpreter, one who deciphers and actualizes meaning couched in a textual corpus. The third stage follows the invention of printing, when mechanical reproducibility provokes a shift from the book to the “library” as the material apparatus of the organization of thought—symbolized for Lévy in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*—and the scholar or scientist becomes the dominant agent of knowledge. This transition is a key moment in the mini-history: Although Lévy does not belabor the issue in this context, the eighteenth century elaborated the modern universal that institutionalized knowledge according to its print materialization and according to the secular scholars serving as its guardians.

The contemporary world serves as the backdrop for the fourth stage **[End Page 80]** of historical unfolding: In a technological turn toward orality, “living human collectivities” are the repositories of knowledge, but “contrary to archaic orality, the direct bearer of knowledge would no longer be the physical community and its memory in the flesh, but *cyberspace*, the domain of virtual worlds by means of which communities discover and construct their objects and recognize themselves as thinking collectivities [*collectifs intelligents*]” (*Cyber*, 196–97). Expressed with a methodological rigor whose trappings are not always readily visible, this history proceeds with relentless logic, piggybacked on transformations in the technology of registering thought, of giving it some semblance of physical existence. In this sense, this microcosm of historical development presents nothing startling; human history has been excessively taught and told as an unfolding time line progressing from prehistoric primitive craftsmen to future masters of the universe. The distinction of Lévy’s view of linearity derives from the specific interaction he conceives between human consciousness or thought and its technological reproduction. To state it bluntly, the organizing principle of Lévy’s historical account takes the form of a gradual development away from the empirical toward ever greater idealization. Consequently, the economy of representation, of thinking and consciousness, has only a secondary role to play in this spiritual unfolding: The orality characterizing human groups before the advent of writing returns in the contemporary global networks of knowledge and reflection. But the tangible world, the physical flesh, becomes farther and farther removed from that orality, which, while remaining “oral,” operates on a more idealizing plane even than the real/ideal *mélange* associated with writing and print. In this sense, Lévy has brought reflection on the relationship between matter and spirit, between media and thought, into the twentieth century, on a level with other sectors of knowledge production, such as that of “science.” For example, in laying the conceptual groundwork to distinguish between empirically based Newtonian science and quantum physics, Albert Einstein and Leopold

Infeld remark that “physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world.”<sup>7</sup> Thinking this basic theorem in the context of the materialities of media production may in fact turn out to be Lévy’s most important insight into the mechanisms of knowledge.

But this insight, however formidable, brings the question back to the conceptual anchor of this historical and philosophical enterprise, that is, **[End Page 81]** back to the universal. Despite Lévy’s rejection of totality in recasting the universal, the precise procedures to grasp that universal, to ascertain and certify its manifestations, introduce a dilemma whose parameters are still not clear. Since by definition the universal exceeds the empirical and functions as a sort of mental “horizon” of thinking, its distinction with totality, which shares the basic characteristics, is elusive at best. Any idealized understanding of the world and its interconnections implies some sort of imaginary referent, whether it be God or the final judgment, the epitome of sublime beauty or the abyss of horrifying ugliness. Although this idealized image or referent would seem to belong more to the literary domain, it is inseparable from the cognitive process that necessarily accompanies human thinking in all its guises, from the hardest of science to the softest of creation. In the continuation of Einstein and Infeld’s remarks on scientific thinking, for example, they assume that the human being “believe[s] in the existence of the ideal limit of knowledge and that it is approached by the human mind”; for them, this “ideal limit” is none other than “objective truth.”<sup>8</sup> This objective truth is never reached, however, although the projection of this idea guides thinking about the “object.” The faith that God watches over us, stands at the distant end of history to salute or condemn us, is no less an idea, no matter how forceful one’s belief in its truth or in its objectivity.

In dealing with such notions as human consciousness, collective intelligence, and history of the spirit, the intangible nature of the conceptual enterprise becomes magnified. There is simply less and less material debris to hold on to. Not surprisingly, therefore, the issues deriving from this ideal or figural problem permeate virtually all literary traditions, and critical reflection on literature has furnished various paradigms for considering the nonmaterial basis of thinking. In fact, even the figure of Lévy’s universal has existed since the nineteenth century in Goethe’s notion of world literature, or *Weltliteratur*, always translated into French as *littérature universelle* (universal literature): The notion refers empirically to the global presence of literature as well as to the *idea* of a universal or global literature. In a world dominated by writing, cultural understanding has been shaped by so-called great works or masterpieces, concrete literary manifestations of that benevolent idea of the majestic human spirit. As with all *idées préconçues*, this idea has tremendous power; there is much less inherent in the object—say, a “great” work of literature—than in the imaginaries that invest them.

The symbolic investment in Lévy’s historical and conceptual model **[End Page 82]** becomes most evident in the fault line between the universal and totality, a fissure supposedly created by the arrival of cyberculture: “But cyberculture shows precisely that



there exists a way to institute humanity's virtual self-presence (the universal) other than by the identity of meaning (totality)" (*Cyber*, 143). It needs to be remarked, however, that there never was an identity of meaning; the idea of meaning's identity provides the impetus and the conceptual basis for establishing institutions to pronounce meaning. That meaning, which Lévy indicates to be proper to the domain of religion, in the same way that reason functions for philosophy or facts (or objective truth) for science, and so on, signals the name in which knowledge can be produced, history recounted, and transformations legitimated. To each baby universal its own totality, dirty water and all; without an idea on which to hang the clothes of universality, there is no universal. Ultimately, Lévy's revamped universal, sans totality, installs the idea of humanity as the nonempirical, even extrahistorical referent that smuggles the bathwater back into the tub. His model represents "a fundamentally humanist project, which takes up as its own, with today's instruments, the grand emancipatory ideals of Enlightenment philosophy" (*Cyber*, 244). The history he elaborates in reference to this idea exhibits a linear plausibility, just as conducive to modernity, with all its supposedly rejected means of totalization, as the eighteenth-century ideals that first institutionalized linearity as a historical mechanism.

The human idea stands as the wall beyond which thought loses its significance; it marks the ideal limit of Lévy's vision of contemporaneity as well as his historical exposition of how the contemporary constellation emerged. History, with its periods, its technologies, and the human mind swept along in its linear unfolding, exists in reference to this idea of humanity and its accompanying civilization. Thus, contemporary humanity gets a new face, manifests itself anew: "We are present at one of these rare moments when, by virtue of a new technological configuration, that is, a new relationship to the cosmos, a new style of humanity is being invented."<sup>9</sup> Trying to understand the import of this planetary plastic surgery gives rise to a host of images to depict the global mind, the interaction of its members, and its human identity in the face of the cosmos: "A whole cosmopolitan society thinks in us."<sup>10</sup> This vision gives a contemporary twist to Kant's cosmopolitical notion of critical reason, representing a more advanced manifestation [End Page 83] produced along the same historical trajectory and filtered through the human idea. For a more Frankensteinian tone, though still in the same vein: "We become . . . the neurons of a planetary hypercortex."<sup>11</sup> The human idea, an idealized point of reference that gives unity to the disparate components of history, reintroduces the rhetorical effects of a totalizing view of knowledge, which is all claims to totality ever were. The personification that the idea of humanity embodies seeps into all descriptions of contemporary collectivity, to the point of gracing it with immaterial gray matter. In modernity, personification, along with the idealization it enacts, is the figure of history par excellence, and Lévy's account no more escapes the figure than it avoids the totalizing impulse.

In sum, the universal incorporates in its very nucleus the totality it was supposed to expurgate, and the figure or idea of humanity serves as the totalizing mechanism. This mechanism allows for the interface of temporal and spatial aspects reminiscent of the most standard of modern histories: "The universal? A sort of virtual here and now of

humanity” (Cyber, 138). Just as the divinity undergoes anthropomorphized expression as it is seized by the human mind, the humanity idea produces the *hic* and *nunc* coordinates of its manifestation. This *Jetztzeit* sets in motion once again the transcendent virtuality of literary understanding that has reigned supreme in modernity:

Moreover, the virtualization of the here and now produced by language extends . . . space and time beyond sensory immediacy. But this process of virtualization does not end with the construction of the object, an object independent of the individual subject’s perceptions and acts, an object whose sensible image, handling, causal effect or concept can be shared by other subjects. The objective world that emerges in language largely exceeds any world populated only by things. This is the stake of language: The existence of an objective world that, by the same operation, links beings and constitutes subjects.<sup>12</sup>

Language, the model Lévy uses for thinking the virtual, underscores the intangible, the nonmaterial; while these “objects” or ideas have no physical presence, they are nonetheless as real as any object occupying space. In a world becoming more and more virtual, less and less palpable, ideas [End Page 84] take on a new role and accrue an unforeseen power to bestow worldviews, including the histories they generate. Positing the universal and making it indissociable from the human idea give history a human face that provides for a stable, linear understanding projected forward and backward in time. But in a world of proliferating virtualities and idealizations, selecting the eighteenth-century imaginary as the end-all of history seems strangely anachronistic and more than slightly unimaginative. Unfortunately, the universal cannot be divested of its rhetorical totalization anymore than the Enlightenment categories of knowledge can be mapped onto the techno-culture of the twenty-first century. In throwing out the universal baby and totality’s dirty bathwater, it might not hurt to toss out the tub as well.

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### **Terry Cochran**

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### Footnotes

**1.** Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture: Rapport au Conseil de l’Europe dans le cadre du projet “Nouvelles technologies: coopération culturelle et communication”* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob/Éditions du Conseil de l’Europe, 1997). Hereafter, references to this text are cited parenthetically as *Cyber*, followed by the page number. All translations are my own.

**2.** A partial list of Lévy’s most important publications includes: *L’intelligence collective: Pour une anthropologie du cyberspace* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1994); *Qu’est-ce que le virtuel?* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1995); with Michel Authier, *Les arbres de connaissances* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1992, 1996); *Les technologies de l’intelligence: L’avenir de la pensée à l’ère informatique*

(Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1990); and *La machine univers: Création, cognition et culture informatique* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1987).

**3.** This is the primary insight of Heidegger's remark that "the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes a picture at all distinguishes the essence of the modern age" ("The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt [New York: Harper Colophon, 1977], 130). The epistemological transformation currently under way, with its concomitant global projection, suggests that Heidegger may have placed undue emphasis on the so-called modern and its constellation of concepts as the contrary of some sort of authentic being.

**4.** Lévy, *L'intelligence collective*, 12.

**5.** Many of these concepts are present even in the cyberculture report, despite its semiofficial nature; nonetheless, of Lévy's various studies, *L'intelligence collective* and *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?* make most vigorous use of these notions, inspired primarily by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Mille plateaux*.

**6.** Michel de Montaigne, "De l'expérience," *Essais*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: La Pléiade, 1962), 1042.

**7.** Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics from Early Concepts to Relativity and Quanta* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 31.

**8.** Einstein and Infeld, *Evolution of Physics*, 31.

**9.** Lévy, *Les arbres*, 97.

**10.** Lévy, *Le virtuel*, 93.

**11.** Lévy, *Le virtuel*, 94.

**12.** Lévy, *Le virtuel*, 130.

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