

Multiplying Mattes of Mass Media--

Examining Elements of Electronic Media-Overcrowding in Gitlin's 'Supersaturation, or, The Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling

(Read aloud, meditatively...) Framed only in what appears to be available light and shadow, “The Concert,” a painting by Dutch artist, Johannes Vermeer, gives window into a time when activity and imagery were given to hours, sometimes days at a time. Songs at the keyboard, a quiet breeze whispering in through a parted window frame, a poem read to the diffusion of soft sunlight, spending long moments in thought, allowing the mind’s eye to assemble any inviting picture it desires--all may be found within this classic masterpiece. Vermeer’s subtle use of color and light, combined with the feeling of three-dimensional space, allow the viewer immersion into a world of past delights and simpler pleasures.



It is a Renaissance depiction of a woman, seated at a harpsichord, giving “concert” before an audience of two: a man and woman. All take their place before a backdrop consisting of two paintings (by well-known Dutch artists of the time), against an off-white wall (Gitlin 557). The floor is of a checkerboard design; black and white tile. Close before us is a thick tapestry or rug, draped elegantly over the sculpted leg of a heavy table;

a cello lies lazily against the exposed leg of the table. Hinting a vista of blue sky and green trees, is a painted mural on the underside of the open top of the harpsichord. The man is seated in between the two women, aside the instrument, his back to us, and seems to be deep in thought, letting the music speak softly to him. The other woman, her face to us, holds in her hand a small note, or letter; a poem, perhaps, which she reads aloud as the other woman plays.

(The reader's voice grows cold...) Now imagine this painting hangs on the wall before you. You slowly pull back from it, enough to examine the frame in which it hangs: a cold, steel-clad, rectangular enclosure, about two inches wide at the bottom, four inches wide at the sides. The painting is actually an image under glass, and each side of the frame is riddled with tiny holes; tiny lights flicker in the bottom right of the frame. More images, as flickering ghosts, now appear in reflection, across the image of the painting, (*...the reader's voice grows ominous*). Pull back even more. Surrounding all this, floor-to-ceiling, stacks-upon-stacks of additional, electronic viewing monitors of all sizes, wires, cables, and connections line the wall. (*The reader's tone is now grandly foreboding...*) In fact, every opposing wall in the room is a myriad of constantly-changing images, some still, some in motion--all vying in silent fury for the viewer's attention.

This is not the 17th century, with its soft richness, as depicted in Vermeer's painting. It is the 21st century, and the images on the wall are not paintings of current artists, but instead represent hard, glass, photographic "mattes" of numerous themes and messages, products of today's media wizards and their machines.

In contrast, there is a simplicity to the communication taking place between the players in "The Concert," not found in today's world of criss-crossing chatter. Vermeer's paintings (as referred to in Todd Gitlin's essay "Supersaturation, or, The Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling") illustrated the "relative constancy of the world in which his subjects lived" (Gitlin 558). Gitlin goes on to suggest that, although, painted another day, perhaps even a week or month later, "The Concert" might well show minute changes (a new letter--or poem, a new song), but the room remains the same (Gitlin 558). This invites intentionality in the movement of human hands, the gaze of the eyes, the human voice falling on the ear, all giving opening to deliberate response--true communication.

One study has suggested the use of media images on an electronic screen, specifically internet "chatting," may contain similar elements as that of face-to-face communication (Rintel 507). In opposition,

some experts find mass media's predominance, and its power to captivate--perhaps even control, may serve to classify it as a kind of "drug," complete with drug-like induced side effects and addictions (M.E. Sharpe 82).

If the latter is true, Neil Postman, like Gitlin, in his book Amusing Ourselves To Death, when he compares the time and care involved, say, in writing a poem, versus "easy" media forms of mass communication--television, internet, gaming--sees an ever-thickening weave of "wires," attaching us not to each other, but to our electronic devices (Postman 69-70). Our responses, nay, even our very emotions become "self-actuating" reactions to a digital stimulus. Where is the sound of the human voice in the ear? What does a "byte" feel like to the human hand? Does the flat screen monitor open to wisp a breeze across the human face?

Reflecting on these questions, I think of my own experience with mass media...

Born at the dawn of the space age, two years prior to man's first walk on the moon, and growing up in a period of rapidly-expanding technology, I've witnessed first-hand feats of electronic engineering, such as those before me only read and dreamed about. I watched the launch of the first space shuttle, Columbia, and sold a first-generation cell phone (as big as a brick, and it took nearly an hour to program--*go do your other shopping; I'll have it finished for you when you return*). I've seen vinyl LP's turn to CDs, video discs turn to DVDs, hard drives turn to flash cards, letters and stamps turn to email, and I've witnessed the extinction of 8 track tapes (*a moment of silence, please*). My own recording studio has changed: from two "shoebox" tape recorders, set end-to-end, to a state-of-the-art digital workstation, complete with 22" flat-screen monitor, which doubles as my television, and a computer tower boasting a terabyte of storage space (*a terabyte!...I can't even count that high!*). Through the use of high-speed internet, all the world's information is now, quite literally, only a click away. Mass media has had easy access to me for some time now. At times, I don't even think I realize the extent of its influence--that is, until someone brings up some item of movie or television trivia...yes, there it is again! I am captive!

These observations leave me wondering about Todd Gitlin's motive in contrasting the peacefulness and simplicity found within Vermeer's painting, "The Concert," with the manic menagerie of mixed media found in many American homes today. Is he revealing in us an area of neglect, is he over-exaggerating a natural progression of human expansion, or is he sounding to us words of wise warning?

For Gitlin, there does exist the desire for a kind of “solitude” in each family member. This solitude, however, according to Gitlin, is quite crowded and busy, tirelessly feeding him or her a bombardment of electronic images and concepts. Because so much of this media-overcrowding is self-actuating, needing little or no initiative on the part of the human participant, Gitlin says, there remains little or no motivation to interact and engage in satisfying moments in “concert” with other human beings, not unlike those depicted in Vermeer’s painting (Gitlin 558-559).

These effects of mass media, especially to those of us who call America home, stands in stark contrast to the world in which Johannes Vermeer once lived. In the book entitled simply, Vermeer, we are introduced to the Dutch painter’s hometown of Delft, in the Netherlands, which appears today perhaps as it did 500 years ago: a city of grand stone churches, homes and castles, quaint, arched footbridges over still canals, lush green parks, and local street markets. We are told it is a place of education, of history, and compared to larger metropolises, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, is “quiet and peaceful.” It is described as a place of “activity without bustle, earnest endeavor without rough and rowdy noise, cleanliness...and good manners” (et al. 10). According to the authors, there is always time to enjoy a rustling of leaves, the odor of fresh, oven-baked breads, and from the patio, experience a romance in the human exchange of dreams and ideas, noised only by a passing bicycle.

Could gilding in paint his love for this kind of intimate community have been Vermeer’s underlying desire? Were he alive today, would he be willing to, as Gitlin suggests, produce an unrecognizable “video montage,” or create images “on pages meant to [merely] be leafed through” (Gitlin 558)? Or is Vermeer’s motivation of the simpler sort: the musician’s craft, voiced verse, and the cool of a room?

Unlike those of Vermeer’s place and time, David Kinnaman, President of The Barna Group, a nationally-recognized research think-tank, states that today “Americans of all ages are inundated with media and entertainment options” (Kinnaman 23). Gitlin writes that ten years ago, “a television set was on in the average American household more than seven times a day,” and that number remained “fairly steady since 1983” (Gitlin 560). Quoting a major researcher, he adds that at least 40 percent of our free time is spent watching television (Gitlin 560). This figure might be lower today, but perhaps only due to the added influx of new media (the internet, pod casting, gaming).

Is this all a natural consequence of media's growth and influence, or is it in the growth that media finds life and influence? Is necessity truly the mother of invention, or has invention become the father of necessity?

Indicating support of the latter, research presented in a 1999 University of Michigan study found, among other things, that although effective at generating trust, printed media advertising is compelled to offer more elaborate language than that of simple word-of-mouth communication. Even more so, according to the study, the results also indicate electronic communication scored even lower than printed media, in gaining this same trust (Lee 5).

If this is true, are we constantly inundated by increasing torrents of mass media *so that* our need for media will increase? Would this constitute a conspiracy on the part of mass media to entice, weaken, capture, enslave, and addict us, so much so that we would willingly give up our desire for interaction with anyone or anything else around us?

Todd Gitlin would tend to agree it might, and he would be qualified in doing so. Having received his doctorate in sociology "from the University of California at Berkley," Gitlin has some notable citations to his credit: "chair in American civilization at the [School of the High Studies in Social Sciences] in Paris," represents North America for "the Web site openDemocracy.net," and once held the office of "president of Students for a Democratic Society"(Gitlin 557). He has authored at least 13 books and periodicals, and teaches "culture, journalism, and sociology at New York University"(Zeringue, Gitlin 557).

In one of his best-selling books, Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives, Gitlin proposes that although we may enjoy touting our freedom to think and feel whatever we want, this is merely perception. Gitlin observes how interesting it is that we express this emotional "freedom" often while tethered to some kind of electronic medium, like television. Our laughter comes with a cleverly-scripted joke from a sitcom, and our tears flow out of sympathy for dying masses shown to us in a video documentary.

Here the "natural" human element of interaction has been rendered fundamentally reactive, automatic, dare we even say...robotic?

Let's take a moment to gaze again at the trio in the tiny room of "The Concert." There are some obvious inferences we might make, when we take a closer look. For example, the woman holds her letter (or poem) with her left hand. With her right, she seems to gesture in the air, in an open invitation toward the man in the chair.

His arms remain inward, his hands perhaps in his lap; he doesn't seem to be looking at her; yet it would appear he is receiving some kind of communication from her, both verbal and visual. The other woman playing the instrument appears to have her right foot on a pedal, perhaps giving her musical work added form or dynamics. All seem to be either giving to, or benefiting from the other's exercises. If there is any argument given to self-actuating entertainment, it is that the man is seated, apparently doing nothing more than listening...but wait--is his head cocked ever so slightly over toward the maid with the poem in her hand?

The point here is that the exchange of information, both auditory and visual, pleasing and entertaining, seems undeniably human (with the small exception that the woman at the harpsichord must press the keys, which pluck the strings mechanically in order to create the music she plays). At some point, might we assume the poem will end, the fingers will tire of playing, and we can imagine that each of these gathered here will move physically from this space, into a new space, there to engage in a different activity? If so, the harpsichord would not remain playing on its own, but would stand still and silent; the cello, lying unplayed on the floor. The sheet of poetry might find itself eventually tossed aside.

These "manufactured" devices would therefore then hold no sway over their users, for it is the users themselves who create the action. If so, feelings, emotions, and reciprocation might come rather from the participants themselves, and the interaction ignited between each of them.

Furthermore, may we also assume the human intelligence would recreate at will, with or without regard to any devices given it? The players in the painting appear to be in control, and their need for face-to-face communication and feedback satisfied in each other. If so, wouldn't human opinion naturally then take center stage over artificial, mechanical reaction, and thereby determine the mode and message to be delivered and consumed?

The concept of the "human" factor held true even up until thirty years ago, when it was believed that our opinions controlled the kinds of media we exposed ourselves to. Evidence offered at the time suggested it might be directly affected by our perceptions of interpersonal communications within our own social groups (family, friends, associates, etc.) (Davison 118-122).

Not so with so much of our mass media today, according to a 2006 roundtable summit on “New Information Technologies and the Fate of Rationality in Contemporary Culture.” Here, three experts from the Russian Academy of Sciences, scholars in their respective fields of philosophical sciences, developmental education, media communications, and foreign journalism discuss varying aspects of mass media’s power to grab and hold us, emotionally.

Dr. Boris Pruzhinin, philosophical scientist, led the discussion by drawing “attention to the rapidity with which...new information technologies [such as the Internet] have burst into our” lives. There is little time for us, as sociable beings, to adapt ourselves successfully to a medium that is “fraught with the destruction of...the socio-cultural foundations on which they have directly arisen”. This, according to Dr. Pruzhinin, results in a new, but often contradictory social environment to the one which originally existed (M.E. Sharpe 67). He praises the immense possibilities for communication found online. This praise, however, is tempered with his observation that the kind of communication offered “is largely depersonalized, anonymous...[and]...virtual”(M.E. Sharpe 66).

This de-personalized invasion of information has an agenda for our minds. Next in the discussion, Nina Gromyko, leading education researcher at the Russian Academy of Education, in Moscow, suggested the concept of “consciousness wars,” waged on us by the “television screen, the computer screen, the advertising screen, [and on] the screen of the mobile telephone”--which now doubles also as a television screen (M.E. Sharpe 73-74). These are her observations:

Our reflexive structures find themselves captive to foreign reflexive games and foreign reflexive pseudo-explanations that block our regimes of understanding and reflection. The information machines that transform our consciousness are incomparably more powerful than we are (M.E. Sharpe 75).

This matrix of media-induced, mind-altering technology, when taken on a regular basis, then culminates in a master control over our human motivations. Addressing this is E.I. Lomidze, senior lecturer of both the media and communications studies department, and Foreign Journalism of the Faculty of Journalism department at Tbilisi State University, in the Republic of Georgia.

Lomidze looks at television, and proposes that like a drug, it can allow the user to slip painlessly into an alternate reality. Real cares and anxieties can “vanish suddenly, just like a ‘trip’ induced by narcotics or alcohol“(M.E. Sharpe 82).

All three conclude the effects of media technology to be the destruction of human self-initiation, in exchange for non-critical, passive, self-actuation. What was intended to be “an accompaniment to life,” according to this study, and according to Gitlin, “has become a central experience of life” (Gitlin 561).

If this is true, who is causing all this harm? Is the enemy somewhere “out there”? Where do we start looking?

Perhaps an answer may be found in research conducted by E. Sean Rintel, an English graduate, together with reader, Jeffery Pittam, both at the University of Queensland, Australia. Rintel and Pittam made study of internet relay “chatting,” comparing its effects to interpersonal communication (507). Certain controls were placed on their group of users, specifically in regards to choice of bandwidth (low), and in the “quantity and quality” of connections allowed to each volunteer. Observations were made, in regards to the “structure” of emotional openings and closings of messages (ie. “Hello’s” and “Good-byes”) (508-509).

The goal was to find, in chat, similarities to a “cordial face and positive gestures of acknowledgment” (513). Most notable among more experienced participants was their ability to quickly adapt an individual, textual style and “voice” which, although previously unknown, was immediately identifiable to the other users (523). This might be compared with the initial information gathered when we each meet face-to-face for the first time. Assuming we have a general understanding of the other’s spoken language (English-to-English, Spanish-to-Spanish, German, etc.), we usually are able to begin our communications with little difficulty. Much the same result occurred in the closings of these “chats.”

Rintel and Pittam stressed, in their conclusions, the importance in laying good opening and closing frameworks for each conversation, while “overcoming the technical aspects of connection,” (sending words across a screen vs. using the human voice), and “radical changes in self-presentation“ (creating a visually-inviting, textual environment for the recipient) (529-530).

So...where do we start looking? Who is to blame for this torrential media downpour?

If, according to this study, we ourselves are creating visually-inviting images, inviting other's interaction through the use of an artificial medium or device, who in turn, must send equally-interesting images to us...

hmmm.

Perhaps then, that great, animated philosopher, Pogo, was correct: the enemy...is us! How far we have truly come "down the wall," since Vermeer's "concert," held in that long-forgotten room, so many centuries ago!

Moreover, if we agree with Gitlin, that this is the distance mass media today has taken us, as it continues tirelessly pushing its electronic drugs to us from its digital street corner, where is our rescue? How do we recover? Do we really want to? What is it in our electronic addiction which will serve to save us, to point us back to simplicity?

Have the wizards so enchanted us to blindly consume their mainstream magic, senselessly receiving, so easily entertained, to the extent that our ability to see each other, to connect, to inspire and expire is completely relinquished?

In conclusion, are we to continue wandering aimlessly around this giant room, gazing emptily with glassy stare at the thousand random images now before us, bereft of will, save which from one or the other we happen to receive? Can all these cables and wires which connect us, mechanically, ever serve to unite us spiritually? The power we once possessed between us was supernaturally-stimulating, electrical and wireless, yet decidedly human.

Is there a way for us to recapture it again?

Can we find our way back, through the noise of now, to the peace of the past? Is it possible to return to that place where the soul finds solace in the simple? It is a small room, inviting, and cool; the soft glow of available light upon the wall. It is found through a mystic portal, which, if given to care and reflection before entering, lends the ear to human word, music, and the whisper of quiet wind across the human face.

They are there still today, in "concert," those players in Vermeer's room. To most, it is just a *virtual* room; an exclusive reality only to the determinedly-transcendental imagination...

...I'll see you there.

Annotated Bibliography

Bucy, E. Page, and John E. Newhagen, eds. Media Access : Social and Psychological Dimensions of New Technology Use. Danbury: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Incorporated, 2003. x

A “digital divide” is examined, proposing certain classes or groups of people today may get “left behind,” as communications in web technologies advance, not because of their lack of “interest in the internet,” but instead because of important ignorances present among them in regards to the navigation, and “information processing ability” required.

Davison, W. Phillips, James Boylan, and Frederick T.C. Yu. Mass Media: Systems and Effects. Praeger, 1976. 118-122

In a section entitled, “Person-To-Person Communication,” the argument is made that our opinions of what kinds of media we expose ourselves to can be directly affected by our perceptions of interpersonal communications of our own social groups (friends, family, associates, etc.).

Gitlin, Todd. Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002. 5-6

Gitlin, in his introduction, proposes that although we may taut about our freedom to think and feel whatever we want, we seem to do so while tied to some kind of electronic medium in order to facilitate that freedom (ie. laughter from a sitcom, tears from a documentary, etc.).

Gitlin, Todd. "Supersaturation, or, The Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling." The McGraw-Hill Reader : Issues Across the Disciplines. 9th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, The, 2005. 557-63.

Gitlin's essay, the focus of this paper, proposes a constantly-changing landscape of media images as the reason for deficiencies in society's need for inter-personal contact and relationship.

Kinnaman, David, and Gabe Lyons. UnChristian : What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters. New York: Baker Books, 2007. 23

David Kinnaman, President of The Barna Group, well known research think-tank, states that, according to his research, "Americans of all ages are inundated with media and entertainment options.

L., Hale Philip, Frederick W. Coburn, and Ralph T. Hale. Vermeer. Cushman & Flint, 1937. 10

Vermeer's hometown of Delft is described today as a simple, peaceful little town, clean and quiet, where most of its inhabitants travel noiselessly back and forth; not much of a change from the Delft Vermeer once knew.

Lee, Eun-ju, Jinkook Lee, and David W. Schumann. "The Influence of Communication Source and Mode on Consumer Adoption of Technological Innovations." Academic Search Premier. Ebscohost.com. Moody Library, Chicago.

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Results presented from a study by a 1999 University of Michigan survey finding, among other things, that although effective at generating trust, printed media advertising is compelled to offer more elaborate language than that of simple word-of-mouth communication. According to the study, the results also indicate electronic communication scored even lower than printed media.

M.E. Sharpe, Inc. trans. "New Information Technologies and the Fate of Rationality in Contemporary Culture: A Roundtable." Academic Search Premier. Ebscohost.com. Moody Library, Chicago.

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In this roundtable discussion, by the Russian Social Science Review, three scholars present varying aspects of mass media's predominance, its power to captivate--perhaps control, and its classification as a "drug," bringing with it similar drug-induced side effects and addictions.

"Matte (filmmaking)." Encyclopedia. 2005. Nationmaster.com.

[http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Matte-\(filmmaking\)](http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Matte-(filmmaking)).

Defines the technique associated with "matte painting," whereby a foreground image, painted on glass, and illuminated from behind, is inserted onto a background image to either be photographed or placed on movie film.

Postman, Neil. Amusing Ourselves to Death : Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business. New York: Penguin (Non-Classics), 1986. 69-70

College professor and writer, Postman defends the introduction of the telegraph, stating it was helpful, not hurtful in the bringing together of corporate communication, contrasting the time it takes to read or write a book, versus constantly being "fed" by self-actuating forms of communication.

Rintel, E. Sean, and Jeffery Pittam. "Strangers in a Strange Land: Interaction Management on Internet Relay Chat." Human Communication Research 23 (1997): 507-34.

This is an interesting study of email "chatting," and its effects on interpersonal communication, as compared to face-to-face interaction. The study finds both differences and similarities in both, but notes that "chatting's" power to elicit faux face-to-face feelings can be found in the strength of its openings and closings of each digital response.

Snow, Edward A. The Concert. Digital image. Essential Vermeer.com. 23 Jan. 2009

<http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/concert.html>.

This is the painting referred to by Todd Gitlin, by Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer, which he says hangs on his "bedroom wall." Rich colors, three-dimensional clarity, and believable use of light and shadow come together in this peaceful, renaissance depiction of a woman, seated at a harpsichord, giving "concert" before an audience of two: a man and woman. The man, who's back is to us, seems to be deep in thought, letting the music speak softly to him. The other woman, her face to us, holds in her hand a small note, or letter; a poem, perhaps, which she reads aloud (as the other woman plays?).

Zeringue, Marshal. "Todd Gitlin's most important books." Rev. of Gitlin's latest books. Weblog post.

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<http://americareads.blogspot.com/2007/10/todd-gitlins-most-important-books.html>.

This web post states Todd Gitlin has authored at least “13 books and articles in numerous periodicals.” It also gives attention to his latest books at the time of this posting: *The Bulldozer* and *the Big Tent: Blind Republicans, Lame Democrats; and the Recovery of American Ideals*.