artists. Interpretations and critical analyses help explain art—not so as to tell us in the audience what to think, but to enable us to see and respond to the work better for ourselves.

7

Digitizing and disseminating

A democracy of images

Everyone knows what the *Mona Lisa* and Michelangelo's *David* look like—or do we? They are reproduced so often that we may feel we know them even if we have never been to Paris or Florence. Each has countless spoofs—David in boxer shorts or the *Mona Lisa* with moustache. Art reproductions are ubiquitous. We can now sit in our pyjamas while enjoying virtual tours of galleries and museums around the world via the Web and CD-ROM. We can explore genres and painters and zoom in to scrutinize details. The Louvre's Website offers spectacular 360-degree panoramas of artworks like the *Venus de Milo*. Such tours may become ever more multi-sensory by drawing on virtual reality (VR) technology, which includes things like goggles and gloves. Lighting and stage set designers,

like architects, already use this technology in their work.

It is not just visual art that has been made more widely accessible by new technologies of reproduction. Operas, plays, and ballet performances are regularly broadcast on TV, and more people know the music of Bach and Beethoven from CDs or radio than from live concerts in churches or symphony halls. If I admire the movies of the late Stanley Kubrick, I can own copies in high-resolution DVD (letterbox format of course). And the new media make possible not just new interactions with 'old' art, but entirely new kinds of art as well: multimedia performances, Web-based art, digital photography, and more.

Human experiences of art have been significantly changed in this postmodern age of the Internet, videos, CDs, advertising, postcards, and posters. But for good or ill? And how have artists responded? In this final chapter, I will consider the impact of new communications technologies on art. We will look 'back to the future' by exploring how art's past is digitally disseminated by futuristic technologies across the global village. Three theorists will be our guides: Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, and Jean Baudrillard. Their attitudes range from enthusiastic endorsement to cynical doubts.

Benjamin and tarnished auras

Perhaps the power of the painter's images or the musician's sounds is eroded in reproductions so that we miss out on something that emanates from the original. Philosopher and social critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) called this missing quality the 'aura' in his famous 1936 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. He concluded, surprisingly perhaps, that the loss of aura was not a bad thing. Influenced by Marxism's materialist conception of history, Benjamin celebrated the newer, more democratic forms of art that photography facilitates. He believed that mass reproduction contributed to human emancipation by promoting new modes of critical perception.

The aura of older artworks stemmed from their special power in religious cults and their unique situation in time and space. Recall that we have encountered numerous cases—Australian Aborigine dot paintings, Chartres' windows, African nail fetish sculptures, and ancient Greek tragedies—where art is closely tied to communal ceremony and religious ritual. Special and unique objects were somehow decorated, used, and treasured as part of these ceremonies and acquired a precious, sacred 'aura'. But art evolved over many centuries as humans created modes of mechanical

reproduction, like engraving, to share and disseminate art. And in particular the invention of photography made the 'original' less relevant. Photography challenges the uniqueness of the work of art. However, Benjamin thought something *good* happens when auras are banished. Cinema, Benjamin's main example of the new media, supposedly enhances sense perception through techniques like slow motion and close-ups. Whereas other theorists of his time denounced cinema as a crude mass art form ruled by commercialism and purveying the political agenda of a nation (especially in the fascist era), Benjamin compared features of cinema to the aims and effects of avant-garde art, and endorsed them as potentially anti-fascist and pro-democratic.

Montage in cinema, or the use of quick cuts and rapid editing, was supposedly a shock to the viewer's normal perceptual patterns and rhythms. Benjamin thought that it broadened human perceptual power in ways sought by the Surrealist filmmakers like Dali and Buñuel. Benjamin also praised 'distance' in cinematic acting. Because audiences could recognize a star on screen through close-ups and prior knowledge, he thought people would not become as absorbed in a movie's false reality as in that of a play on stage. Benjamin praised this distance effect of cinematic acting and compared it to the avant-garde 'alienation effect' of

Bertolt Brecht's theatre. In Brecht's *Mother Courage* the actors speak directly to the audience, who are meant to realize they are watching a play, reacting thoughtfully instead of seeking emotional identification and escapist entertainment.

Benjamin argued that even ordinary viewers of popular Chaplin movies can achieve sophisticated critical awareness. By comparison, the avant-garde works of Picasso or Surrealism put viewers off, hinting that they are too stupid to understand why such art is important. Movies are more democratic and everyone can 'get' them:

> The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. . . . With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide.

Absence (of mind)

It is difficult to endorse Benjamin's optimism today. True, movies are very popular, but the contrast between high and mass art has not vanished in cinema, as Benjamin predicted—remember the findings of French sociologist Bourdieu, mentioned in Chapter 4. Films by

a politically radical director like Jean-Luc Godard are not generally seen (or understood) by the viewing public. New techniques introduced by filmmakers which differ from the features Benjamin highlighted may have a distinct impact that need not be progressive. Digitization enhanced the visual realism of films like *Starship Troopers* and *The Matrix*, but it is hard to interpret these movies, with their messianic heroes, bloody gun battles, and alien exterminations, as having progressive political messages. Besides, we could question Benjamin's belief in certain values, like distance and the alienation effect. Films that encourage distance by featuring ever more cynical, and recognizable, action heroes (like *Alien Resurrection* and the *Die Hard* sequels) seem very dehumanizing. Their originals seem stronger, with compassionate protagonists who both manifest and evoke emotional engagement.

Or, consider film directors who have succeeded Chaplin in winning both popular and critical acclaim, like Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick. Would Benjamin call their works 'progressive'? He praised Chaplin for providing the audience with a 'direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert'. Hitchcock too was a brilliant film editor, but experts notice many things that regular movie audiences might not, such as the intricate shot

22 Just a few of the numerous edits in the terrifying shower sequence scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), with Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins.

structure of the infamous shower scene in *Psycho*. 'Hitch' also was notorious for referring to actors as 'cattle'; the alienation effect of acting in his films (if it does exist) could stem from his seemingly low view of individual human value. His social messages are ambiguous: what does it mean when at the conclusion of *The Birds* the hero, his family, and girlfriend drive off, defeated by the birds, into a land under siege?

Again, experts are impressed by Kubrick's exploration of technical possibilities, as when he filmed by candlelight in *Barry Lyndon* (1975) or employed the new Steadicam camera in *The Shining* (1980). But cinematic features praised by critics and other directors might not be recognized by audiences. Nor do Kubrick's films use an alienation effect in acting to prompt critical audience perceptions. Audiences might instead be drawn into greater identification and empathy by Kubrick's use of handsome and popular actors like Ryan O'Neal and Tom Cruise. And, as with Hitchcock, some of Kubrick's most 'political' films like *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or *Dr Strangelove* (1964) present ambiguous messages that are hard to interpret. His film of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is another example: the novel was a critique of how mind-control reins in individuality, but audiences might instead respond to the excitement of the film's early

scenes where Alex (Malcolm McDowell) rapes and murders almost at random. Even critics who praised Kubrick's final film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) saw it as presenting a conservative position on the values of marriage and family.

Moreover, film has not made means of production more democratic and generally accessible than artistic media of the past. Benjamin seems naïve in attributing certain values and possibilities to the *medium*, which he thought had an inherently progressive political nature— as though it is not relevant to think more about who uses and controls it: about the vast corporate complexes (like Time-Warner or Disney-ABC) that link profit-making formulaic genres to burger outlet gimmicks, 'news'-source PR, and video sales. Some of Benjamin's remarks sound very paradoxical, as when he says, 'The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one'. An absent-minded public is dangerously close to a public with a vacant mind, or a controlled mind.

A final point to make is that the aura of major artworks from the past has *not* really disappeared, despite ever more vivid technologies of reproduction. The Louvre's CD-ROM offers a wonderful view of the *Mona Lisa*. One can almost see her very pores on the computer screen; the reproduction is brighter than the small and almost murky original, revealing more of the
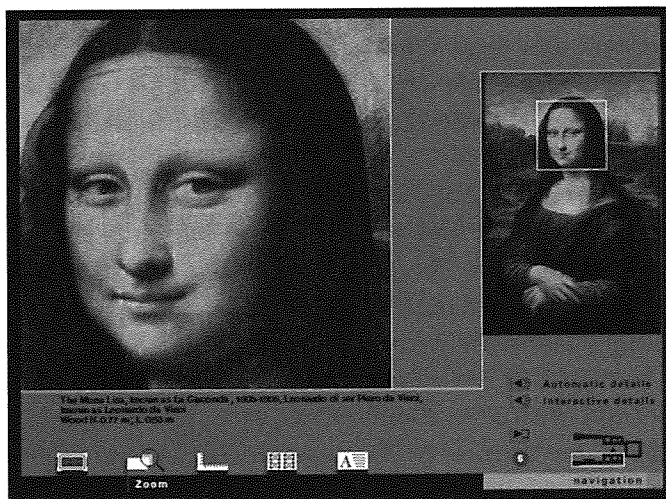
23 Using the zoom tool, the viewer can zero in on the face of the *Mona Lisa* (*La Gioconda*), by Leonardo da Vinci, 1503–1505, from Le Louvre: Collections and Palace, CD-ROM, 1997.

landscape in the background. The zoom tool permits viewers to scrutinize features as the commentator lists them: her high forehead, the rising left side of her smile, the serenely folded hands. Yet people *do* still make a pilgrimage to see Leonardo's original painting in the Louvre. The feeling of awe is almost religious as international crowds file past the mysterious visage that rests, smiling, in her closed glass box. The atmosphere is one of quiet excitement and people record the momentous occasion with videos and snapshots. La Gioconda's aura is by no means a mirage, though there is something sadly ironic about visitors' trying to capture her with their own mechanical reproductions.

McLuhan's mosaics

The Canadian Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) also believed that new technologies promote democracy and enhance human perception. Commenting on radio, television, telephones, and computers, he coined phrases like 'the medium is the message' and 'the global village' that have become universally familiar. McLuhan felt that new media are best understood and explored by artists, who are ahead of their time in grasping possibilities of new forms of thought and

connection. He referred to the artist in society as special—as a 'discarnate man' who has 'integral awareness'.

McLuhan's scholarly career began in literary criticism. He studied authors from the past along with modernists like Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, remarking how increased literacy altered oral cultures like Homeric Greece. The invention of print and books prompted many social changes, fostering individualism, linear thinking, privacy, repression of thought and feeling, detachment, specialization, and even modern militarization (written orders could be disseminated rapidly to an army). But the newer media, McLuhan thought, will restore aspects of right-brain functioning suppressed by literacy.

In claiming 'the medium is the message', McLuhan meant that content matters less than the structures of media; they shape human consciousness in profound ways. Whereas print media isolated detached individuals who read privately on their own, the new media promote connectedness and a new international community ('the global village') that transcends parochial political barriers. Like Benjamin, McLuhan was a fan of the new media, and he too de-emphasized the distinction between 'high' and 'mass' or common art. But where Benjamin focused on cinema, McLuhan studied electronic communications, television in particular.

McLuhan was less interested in who controlled the productive forces than in the kinds of thinking and sensory awareness facilitated by TV. New media offer an aid or 'prosthesis' that changes our senses and even our brains to promote non-linear, 'mosaic' thinking, as viewers must fill in the blanks in continuously updated inputs.

The new 'global village' with its broad participation will restore the 'primitive' human capacities that have been lost, as we return to something more like an oral culture that is communal and emphasizes hearing, touching, and facial expressions. Electronic media will restore not just right-brain capacities for connection and insight, but also our capacities for integration and imagination:

> Primitive and pre-alphabetic people . . . live in an acoustic, horizonless, boundless, olfactory space, rather than in visual space. Their graphic presentation is like an x-ray. They put in everything they know, rather than only what they see. A drawing of a man hunting seal on an ice floe will show not only what is on top of the ice, but what lies underneath as well. . . . Electric circuitry is recreating in us the multidimensional space orientation of the 'primitive'.

McLuhan meets MTV

As with Benjamin, I question McLuhan's enthusiasm for the new media. To explain, let us consider two kinds of video production: first, art by Bill Viola, and second, music videos on MTV.

Bill Viola has worked with the latest video technologies (supplied with equipment by SONY) in experiments before broad release. His work explores modes of perception through editing and installation displays. Viola creates entire atmospheres by projecting video images onto walls or across people in the gallery. But along with the new, Viola draws upon the old. Long interested in mysticism, he has travelled and studied a wide variety of world religious traditions. The result has been some unusual and fascinating exhibitions.

In his *Room for St John of the Cross*, Viola combined astonishing visual imagery with texts and readings. An entire room was filled with harrying sounds of wind and storms created through electronic static. In *Chott el-Djerid* ('A Portrait of Light and Heat', 1979), Viola captured on videotape what might seem impossible, a mirage (see Plate VII). Shimmering desert heat materialized into a vision of an oasis complete with ocean and palm trees. In *I Do Not Know What It Is I am Like*, Viola spent three weeks in wintry South Dakota, taping

extended scenes of a herd of bison. Their ponderous stillness became a mirror image of the silence of the desert, as the artist showed their grazing on the prairie as a form of meditation.

Viola is influenced by the Persian mystic Rumi, who wrote back in 1273: 'New organs of perception come into being as a result of necessity—therefore, increase your necessity so that you may increase your perception.' For Viola, a technology like video is not an end in itself. He contradicts McLuhan's view that the medium has inherent possibilities to alter perception, because he believes an artist must work in advance to achieve enhanced perception. Viola faults his fellow video artists by saying that 'the technology is far ahead of the people using it'. It is also striking that the mystical writers who inspire Viola used *writing* to express their non-linear thinking and desire to abandon logic—contrary to McLuhan's picture of how writing restricts thought.

Viola's meditative videos demand patience from viewers—which probably explains why my students, from the MTV instant-stimulus generation, complained that they were 'boring'. The elaborate three-minute videos broadcast worldwide on MTV specialize in rapid cuts and montage. Music videos do not require concentration; they can be watched off-hand while doing

something else, like homework or talking on the phone with friends. They foster a distracted and fragmented attention with their multiple screens, constant cuts, and throbbing sounds. McLuhan is right in one way, of course, that MTV does not promote linear thinking. Montage often connects scenes based on feel rather than on any narrative logic. Ironically, however, many of the videos narrate minuscule dramas (typically, boy meets girl, confronts the cops, or wins fame). And as MTV has grown older than most of its viewers, it plays more rock-star biography tapes and historical pro- grammes (even nostalgic programmes featuring its own now-aged former Video Deejays). So the linear is threatening to return with a vengeance!

Most disturbing about MTV videos are their domin- ation by market forces and promotion of homogenized mono-cultural values. To be sure, there are occasional innovative 'artistic' videos by directors like Spike Jonze and Joseph Kahn, but by and large the videos are mind- numbing, with formulaic glamour shots, stage sets, pseudo-documentary street scenes, or neon animations. Stage sets littered by flashy cars and beautiful women in fur coats or bikinis make MTV the perfect vehicle for product promotion—videos alternate seamlessly with pulsing ads for shampoos, Levi's, toothpaste, or even the army, MasterCard, Cadillacs, and life insurance.

These relentless ads, coupled with the fundamental marketing aim of the videos themselves—to sell the stars, from Madonna to Eminem and Sisqo—might alarm both McLuhan and Benjamin. They could hardly believe that MTV has facilitated greater democratic par- ticipation and fostered the critical awareness of viewers gathered around the world into a genuine global vil- lage. Instead it threatens to homogenize the world into a suburban American strip mall, crowded with McDonald's and Gap stores.

Baudrillard in Disneyland

The third and final theorist of the new media whose work I want to consider, sometimes referred to as the 'high priest of postmodernism', is French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard. His ideas are often cited in critical dis- cussions of postmodern artists. Benjamin and McLuhan were inspired by the movies and television, but Baudril- lard is the theorist of the new screen, the computer monitor. He describes an audience that is not simply absent-*minded* (recall Benjamin's phrase) but *absent*: lost in its own images, absorbed into its own terminals. His is in many ways (with a nasty pun) a 'terminal' philosophy embracing millennial disillusionment.

Baudrillard, who was influenced by McLuhan, is similarly famous for slogan-like remarks and clever (but perplexing) turns of phrase. Baudrillard writes in an exaggerated style (following his philosophical fore-father Friedrich Nietzsche), so that it is hard to know at times whether he is serious or tongue-in-cheek. Key terms in Baudrillard's postmodern lexicon include simulation, the hyperreal, implosion of the masses, self-seduction, and the transparency of evil. Along with computers, he has studied television (especially news coverage), modern art and literature, and even highways, fashion, architecture, entertainment, and theme parks like Disneyland. Let us begin delving into his vocabulary.

The *hyperreal* is something 'more real than real': something fake and artificial that comes to be more definitive of the real than reality itself. Examples include high fashion (which is more beautiful than beauty), the news ('sound bites' from staged rallies determine outcomes of political contests), and Disneyland. A *simulation* is a copy or imitation that substitutes for reality. Again, the TV speech of a political candidate, something staged entirely to be seen on TV, is a good example. A cynical person might say that many weddings now exist in order for videos and photos to be made—having a 'beautiful wedding' means that it looks good in the photos and videos!
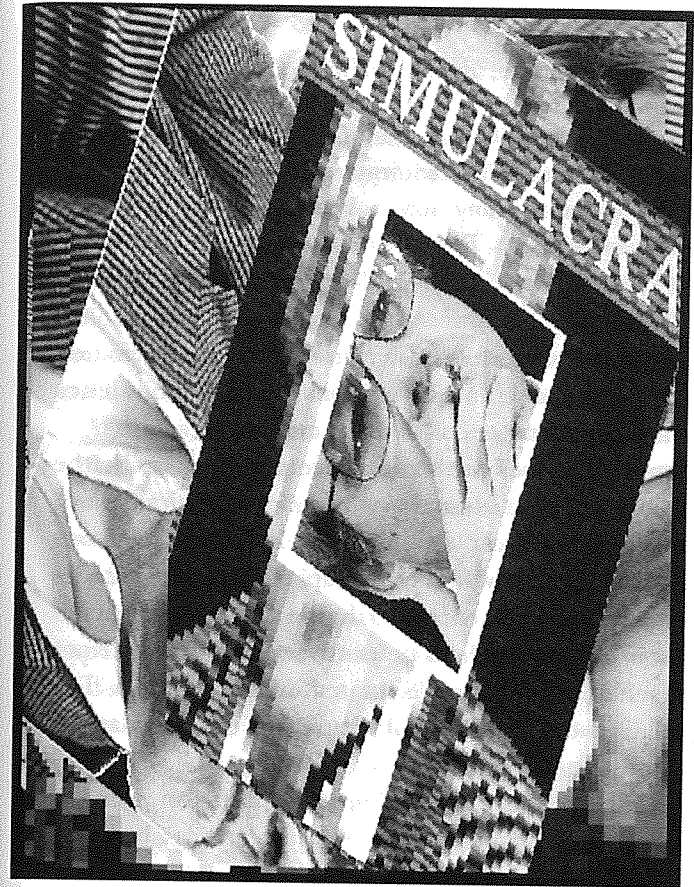
24 Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard meets the apt fate of being turned into an image by digital photographers MANUAL in *Simulacra* (1987).

One of Baudrillard's favourite examples is Disneyland. He explains,

> You park outside, queue up inside, and are totally abandoned at the exit. In this imaginary world the only phantasmagoria is in the inherent warmth and affection of the crowd. . . . The contrast with the absolute solitude of the parking lot—a veritable concentration camp—is total. . . . Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland. . . .

Baudrillard sounds like both a critic and yet a fascinated fan of Disneyland, and he exhibits similar ambivalence about other instances of the new media.

Baudrillard uses the term 'obscenity' to describe the seductive yet false immediacy of many television shows. Television reverses the Platonic relation between mimesis and reality, since the representation precedes the reality and even comes to define it. Baudrillard cites many instances, such as news coverage of soccer riots, the Gulf War, and the US incursion into Somalia. The simulation of live TV is obscene and too intimate: it becomes more real than real, or 'hyperreal.'

Since he points out problems of simulation, some of Baudrillard's writings seem not just critical but pronouncements of doom; he describes a millennial race to self-destruction in the dispersion of images of horror

through the new global media. Baudrillard's phrase 'the transparency of evil' suggests that old-fashioned evil, like the evil in the Bible, Greek tragedies, or even horror movies, has been reduced to nought—flattened out and copied into millions of indifferent images. As the spectacle becomes hyperreal, the depiction of violence sets the standard for reality. We can begin to see why even horrific disasters like Chernobyl or the Challenger explosion are, in Baudrillard's view, 'mere holograms or simulacra'. He would make similar comments about obsessive media coverage of the fatal crashes of Princess Diana or John F. Kennedy, Jr.

At times, however, Baudrillard sounds less cynical, and envisions options for resistance to spectacles of violence. He speaks about 'an original strategy' of 'subtle revenge' and a 'refusal of will.' Unfortunately, what he says is very sketchy. He suggests that certain aspects of the audience's enjoyment of and participation in the hyperreal are creative and even subversive. If we are 'self-seducing' ourselves in the spectacle, then we bear some responsibility. The 'self' here is crucial:

> The group connected to the video is also only its own terminal. It records itself, self-regulates itself and self-manages itself electronically. Self-ignition, self-seduction. . . . [S]elf-management will thus soon be the universal work of each one, of each group, of each

terminal. Self-seduction will become the norm of every electrified particle in networks or systems.

Cynical simulations

Baudrillard, like other postmodern critics and theorists, has been criticized as amoral and politically reactionary. If cynicism and doom are his message, then some people would prefer not to listen. But to many in the art world during the 1980s, Baudrillard's views seemed insightful—as when he wrote that 'Behind the whole convulsive movement of modern art lies a kind of inertia, something that can no longer transcend itself and has therefore turned in upon itself, merely repeating itself at a faster and faster rate.' He was understood as explaining that artists are reduced to empty repetitions of pre-existing imagery, an analysis that seemed to work well for many young artists of that decade. Baudrillard's message was that artists are marginal to other forces tending towards general social vacuity and despair, so that ideals of individual creativity and self-expression are no longer viable.

Ironically, this same message was used to hype a new generation of chic 'art stars' whose works sold for enormous prices. Baudrillard's theories were invoked

to praise artists like Cindy Sherman or David Salle, who recycle old, familiar imagery with a hint or aura of ominous disaster. Sherman (discussed in Chapter 5 as a deconstructive feminist artist) has created strange and elusive self-portraits, both in her early *Untitled Film Stills* and in her more recent works, which recreate ghastly versions of Old Master paintings of women. Because she draws upon pre-existing images, it is as if she herself exists as a simulation. Salle's paintings look lightweight and sketchy by comparison to a muscular modernist like Jackson Pollock. Salle too relies on numbingly familiar imagery. His canvases are pastiches, literally layered with familiar figures that seem to float in and mingle—Porky Pig, *National Geographic* 'primitives', and naked women with bodies splayed in standard porn poses.

Baudrillard seems less relevant to the artworld of the 1990s, when artists from various minority groups appeared to regain faith in the power of art to express feelings or to convey a 'message'. Black or Asian artists employed stereotypes critically and ironically to call attention to racism, and women artists like Orlan sought to reveal the damaging impact of the pervasive images of female beauty in Western culture. More recently, the hot 'Young British Artists' like Damien Hirst and the Chapman brothers have also shown faith

in the power of the image, to remind us of human mortality (as in Hirst's shark piece), or to evoke the prickly allure of sexuality. Cynicism may play a part in such works, but a cynicism linked more to the desire to shock and achieve fame, not Baudrillard's deeper cynicism about our absorption into simulation.

Cyber-art's immersive future

It would not be right to close a chapter about art in the digital era while neglecting the truest offspring of the new media. A discussion of where art is headed in the new millennium will take us away from high art—away from the London or New York City gallery and museum art scene, or the art written about in mainstream journals—out into the circuits of the society that Baudrillard, McLuhan, and Benjamin were all trying to describe. There are many examples of artwork, or at least of creative activity, developed and intrinsic to the new media, such as video games, Web-based art, hypertext literature, Japanimation 'anime' films, and more. Aspiring musicians compete with major recording studios by using MIDI and multi-track technology in conjunction with a computer in their basement or garage. By uploading files to the MP3.com Web site,

they bypass the music marketing system in the hope of making it big.

Multimedia arts productions can be ambitious, like dadaNetCircus's *Jonah and the WWWhale*, described as a 'Biblical techno-fantasy' (see Plate VIII). It revisited the comic yet moral story of Jonah using computer projection combined with live actors, singers, and dancers, along with Web-page 'sampling' inspired by the Rap music practice of sampling from recorded music. The group's dance-cum-Web productions are beamed out 'live' across the world via video-streaming.

I cannot discuss all the new artistic mediums here—and if I did, my discussion would be obsolete before this book is published. I will simply conclude by saying a few things about Web-based art and three of its key features: it is multimedia, hypertextual, and interactive.

A Web art site is more than an on-line gallery that provides static digital imagery. By using plug-ins and add-ons like Javascripts and Shockwave, video and audio samples, such sites create multimedia illusions of realism, depth, and movement through space—as with the 360-degree camera movements used to display the Louvre's courtyard and pyramid. It is only a matter of time before Web art can rival the astonishing 3-D visual realism of video-game technology. These games provide amazing renditions of three-dimensional space as the

player traverses through alien terrains, surfs on a synthetic ocean, races cars on a NASCAR track, or snowboards down a steep slope, crashing audibly into trees. Young fans of these games praise them not only for their eye-popping or jaw-dropping realism and immersive nature, but also for the creative complexity and variety of their rules and interactive options.

Some Web art is also exploiting interactivity, encouraging viewers to click on portions of the image to reveal a poem, new image, or branching pathways. Interactivity can conjoin viewers into a kind of global village. Many 'official' or established art Web sites sponsored by universities or museums demonstrate artists' experiments with the latest technologies. MoMA's Web site in New York features work by artists such as Jenny Holzer, who displays clichés on-screen and offers visitors the chance to suggest alternatives or modifications. This interactive page allows the viewer to type in an entry, which then gets displayed on a new screen, along with others previously proposed.

To illustrate the third feature of the Web, hypertext, we can consider another Web art project on the MoMA site, done by Tim Rollins with K.O.S. ('kids of survival'). Their collaboration grew out of Rollins's work as a special education teacher in New York City. Rollins and his students modernize classic literary texts

with new translations and visual imagery, then perform and discuss them with other young audiences. Their Web page for MoMA is based upon Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. Its animated links permit visitors to meander paths to find translations by Thoreau or Rollins himself, hear samples in Real Audio, read about performances around the globe, and visit a bulletin board (discussing, among other topics, whether Prometheus got a raw deal from Zeus).

Re-spinning the Web

What would our theorists make of the World Wide Web? Benjamin would be impressed that the Web is a fairly democratic space for art. It has opened up the productive forces of society—at least in advanced nations of the world economy—so that almost anyone can participate. You do not have to be an artist with a degree or a gallery to create a site that can be transmitted worldwide and earn instant recognition. Fan sites for movies and books attract huge numbers of visitors and 'hits'. Benjamin would probably be disturbed, though, by the creeping onset of crass commercialism into such sites; 'free' Web servers are supported by banner ads and pop-up screens, and e-mail is plagued with 'spam'.

McLuhan would be ambivalent about the Web. It fosters 'mosaic' thinking, since hypertext is non-linear: links tempt one to mouse-clicks and lead to further paths of exploration. But the Web's potent combination of words and images in hyperlinks muddles up McLuhan's basic distinctions between the verbal and the visual, the left and the right brain. The categories of oral and literary are blurred by Tim Rollins's Web site about *Prometheus Bound.* It uses the latest techniques of animation, bulletin boards, and audio feeds, but is centred on a linear *text*—indeed, one by Aeschylus, who wrote near the dawn of the very phenomenon of literacy which McLuhan targeted for dismantling! The Web's 'global village' effects seem ambiguous, too. It draws people together and cameras enhance the sense of contact across cyberspace. Yet users remain isolated before their screens. Here we seem to have McLuhan's 'discarnate man', but does he have 'integral awareness'?

Finally, Baudrillard has long predicted the disappearance of reality and our absorption into screens in the era of cyberspace and the Web. Avatars, or alter egos that people create for on-line games or singles spaces, would no doubt confirm his beliefs about the self-seduction of the masses by simulations. We have seen above that he seems ambivalent about this idea of self-seduction. It can seem bad, as when Baudrillard

describes the world of people sitting at their computer terminals as an immersion into absence, a flattening of the full-bodied self into the screen: '[T]he excess of information upon us is a sort of electrocution. It produces a sort of continual short-circuit where the individual burns its circuits and loses its defenses.' Baudrillard sounds cynical, but there may be more positive aspects of self-seduction; that is, it makes a difference who is in control of the illusions or seductions of the Internet or the mass media. Artists and ordinary Web surfers alike will have to determine whether cyberspace truly is a new form of absence and 'transparent evil', or whether, instead, it is a place for creative, intelligent, and beneficial sensory exploration and communal connection.