

A Note on "Convergence"

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MCLUHAN CENTER SAYS A-BOMB MAY BE GOOD screamed a headline in The New York Times on Sunday, February 12, 1984, page 20. The article--by Douglas Martin-- elicited predictable comments. As an item of news, as distinct from an idea, the proposition that the headline blared was bound to prompt patellar reflexes; which says more about the Times than it does about Douglas Martin or the designated heirs of Marshall McLuhan.

Inspecting the text of that item of reportage, one finds an oddly familiar pattern. The article is a kaleidoscope of the déjà vu.

"I'm absolutely delighted that the bomb is there," Derrick de Kerckhove, acting director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, said. "It's about time we had something to bring us together."

The essential thought appears to be that the bomb has become a modern myth, holding a power over the culture's thinking previously held by religion. Further, that myth has become a physical part of everyone's brain and is now acting as a strong unifying force.

. . . [T]he nuclear bomb is the ultimate information medium, an idea that Mr. McLuhan had only begun to toy with. Just as Mr. McLuhan shocked intellectuals by suggesting that television was a good thing, his followers are beginning to say the same thing about the bomb.

Indeed, Mr. de Kerckhove, a Belgian, argues that the more bombs, the better. He favors deployment of Pershing 2 and Cruise missiles in Europe, and says he is sorry that warheads are not widely distributed in public places, such as markets.

When asked directly, he swears he is not crazy. "I've done my homework," he said.

His theory is that atomic weapons represent a new universal myth, inescapable for all but the completely ignorant. "You can't do what you want with the bomb," he said. "The bomb does what it wants with you."

The bomb thus binds people together in a way they have not been linked since the Middle Ages, albeit on the brink of collective suicide.

. . . The idea is that the shared myth of imminent destruction has physically changed the manner in which the billions of synapses connect in people's brains.

Neurologists basically agree that changes in thought and perception physically affect the brain.

"The brain can re-wire itself and can re-organize under environmental influences," said W. G. Tatton, the director of the University of Toronto's Playfair Neuroscience Unit, who is beginning to work with the McLuhan program. "If you've got massive trauma laid on a culture, there are similar modifications."

Mr. de Kerckhove says these changes will create a new attitude that will insure that the bomb will not be used. He is so confident of this that he is against disarmament, not just because he considers it unattainable. He says the certainty of continuing to hang on the precipice is necessary for the new attitude to emerge.

His only qualm is the growing talk about the efficacy of limited nuclear warfare by military strategists.

How to react to such propositions in 1984? Thomas Pynchon's readers will not be unduly ruffled by a complex of ideas elaborated in Gravity's Rainbow (1973). "The Bomb" rides on a missile which is the direct descendant of that Nazi terror-weapon, the V-2; and there is nothing that Derrick de Kerckhove says about the nuclear bomb that was not shown, implied, parodied, or iterated in the text of Gravity's Rainbow, which is about a terror-weapon that now seems quaint. Indeed,

Mr. de Kerckhove's name, as well as his job, seem to be, though they are not, Pynchonisms.

Those "at home" in Pynchon's alienating world are familiar with Henry Adams' centrifugal vision of the displacing and dislocating Dynamo; familiar with the perplexities of communication theory; familiar with the fusion of terror and sexuality, behaviorism and conspiracy, all focused in Gravity's Rainbow on the central image of what was The Bomb of its day, the V-2, a god, a power, a mandala, a reorganizing principle and charismatic object. Pynchon's "historical novel," being neither historical nor a novel, was never "about" the V-2, but used it to interpret us to ourselves in a distanced mode. Pynchon's subtext was always "the balance of terror" that the public has known since Hiroshima and the Cold War. That's why Mr. de Kerckhove's suggestions seem so familiar. Art has anticipated Nature--and History--once again.

Such reflections may suggest to others as they do to me that disciples of the late Marshall McLuhan either have read their Gravity's Rainbow, in which case they should cite Pynchon; or they have not, in which case they should emulate their master, who seemed to have read everything, and who wouldn't have neglected a text that so powerfully embodies his ideas about media and messages.

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