

## "Is This a Great Time or What? ☺" Information Technology and the Erasure of Difference

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Several recent television advertisements for computer and communications companies embody the theme of erasing boundaries such as geography, race, and culture. Many of these ads, particularly the lead ad in MCI's "Is This a Great Time or What?" campaign, appear to parallel a postmodern political program based on the deconstruction of "common sense" binary oppositions. Closer analysis of these ads, however, reveals a move to transcend the mind/body binary by eliminating embodied action and identity, thereby reproducing an ascetic attitude that negates the value of humans' physical existence. Presented as promotions of human diversity, these ads work ideologically to deny the value of diversity by promising that computer mediated communication can create an ascetic utopia in which people become disembodied minds. Instead of opening up new possibilities for human social interaction, these ads serve to reinstate Platonic and Enlightenment ideals.

The world is information.  
Information can be digitalized.  
Digital information can be transmitted.  
Every book, every movie, every piece  
of knowledge in the universe: *right  
here.*

*-MCI television advertisement (1992-93)*

Many computer and communications companies emphasize a global view of information technologies in their advertising, as with IBM's "solutions for a small planet" and NEC's "empowering the planet" campaigns. MCI plays off the other side of the dialectic: the global made local, "every piece of knowledge in the universe right here," right now. The ultimate dream of control takes form as a synthesis of the dialectical opposition: The global

is now intimately local, instantly accessible through a home computer. The individual's boundaries expand so that, as AT&T's 1997 television campaign promises, "It's all within your reach." The constraints of cultural boundaries and physical embodiment can and will be transcended by reducing everything to digital code. A 1994 AT&T ad asks whether we ever thought we could be in instant contact with anyone in the world through a watch-sized device. Its prediction—"you will"—sounds suspiciously like a command (Krulwich, 1995). Students, teachers, workers, managers, parents, citizens, activists—everyone is being told that computers will be the easiest, most efficient way to accomplish their needs, whether learning, marketing, decision-making, researching, networking or community-

building. Everything is being touted and routed through computer terminals, fiberoptic cable, and the all-encompassing, socially transforming trope of "information."

Technology has become a central actor in the "new world order." It is something we must "keep up with," "adapt to," and predict "where it is headed," where it is "taking us." Information is the new commodity, the postindustrial fetish. It has been given almost transcendent powers to place us in control, diminish cultural barriers, maximize human potential, to "set us free" while keeping us "in touch." AT&T's 1996 Olympics ad promises that "When people communicate [through fiberoptic cable, of course] there's no limit to what they can do."

As feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway (1985) put it, "Our dominations don't work by medicalization and normalization anymore; they work by networking, communications redesign, stress management" (p. 69n). Haraway suggests we are leaving the social formation Michel Foucault (1977) termed "discipline," in which institutions such as the prison, the hospital, the asylum and the school produce and configure the body and the subject with the aid the discourses of science and statistics. Not only our metaphors but our institutions, structures of power, and epistemologies are undergoing radical transformations. We are not merely facing an increase in the speed and efficiency of communication. Dan Schiller (1994) argues that despite its aura of objectivity and sheer instrumentality, "information" is not acultural; information as a trope and information technologies as social realities imply new cultural forms and

hence new political structures (see also Oravec, 1996).

As with previous communication media, the global information network promoted through corporate ads, science fiction and pop socioeconomic theory will be built on existing media structures while simultaneously transforming human interaction. New forms of thought, behavior, and social organization will be enabled while others are constrained. Historical research into previous media revolutions indicates that profound psychological, epistemological, social, cultural, and political changes are inevitable (e.g., the shifts from primary orality to literacy and typography chronicled by Ong [1982]; see also Couch [1996], McLuhan [1964], and Postman [1992]). David Tomas (1991) argues that cyberspace "has the potential to not only change the economic structure of human societies but also overthrow the sensorial and organic architecture of the human body" (p. 32). As with previous technological and communication revolutions, significant resistance will have to be overcome through ideological indoctrination and the entrainment of youth into new technologies through advertising, video games, and computer literacy programs (Postman, 1992).

Given the enormous economic investments, political implications, and cultural transformations entailed in new communication and information technologies, an examination of the structures of meaning being utilized to sell those technologies and related services is imperative (Kaplan, 1990). While analyses of the television advertisements of companies such as AT&T, Digital, IBM, MCI, and NEC will not

reveal the current and future social and economic structures that accompany new information technologies, such analyses can reveal the ideological bases for the appeal of these technologies. As Paul Edwards (1995) argues, "We can make sense of the material role of computers as tools only when we simultaneously grasp their roles as cultural metaphors" (p. 70). Put in other terms, "common sense" is always a cultural and communicative construct; a structure of meaning achieves the status of "common sense" when it becomes a taken-for-granted part of a particular cultural context. At that point, it functions to achieve the *de facto* consent of those who have internalized it (Gramsci, 1971; Williams, 1977) and frames their experiences (Goffman, 1974; Kaplan, 1990). How are we being guided to interpret the social role of computer technologies? How do those structures serve to gain our consent to the pervasiveness of such technologies? How will the articulated forces of globalization and computer-mediated communication (CMC) affect our understanding of the role and importance of race, gender, ethnicity and culture in the "new world order"? How is the nature and role of human diversity being altered by digital communication and technofantasy?

## Data Set and Methodology

I will address these questions through a close reading of six computer and communication technology advertisements aired on U.S. television from 1997-1998 with particular focus on MCI's 1997 "Is This a Great Time or What? :-)" campaign.<sup>1</sup> These advertisements appeared across several cable and broadcast networks, during a wide

range of programming, and in a variety of time slots. While I do not claim that these ads are entirely representative of all advertising for computers and advanced communication technologies, I do hold that the themes they embody are prevalent in advertising as well as other discourses (e.g., science fiction) that frame our understandings of CMC. That is, these ads are not representative of all ads for CMC, but they exemplify one set of recurrent themes (eight additional ads will be referenced to further evidence the typicality of the themes identified).

Additionally, I believe television advertisements are particularly important insofar as their "target audiences" within the U.S. are diverse, ranging from those intimately familiar with CMC to those with no direct experience. Therefore, unlike promotional texts found on the internet or in specialized publications such as computer magazines, these ads have the potential to contribute to a cultural framing of CMC across many demographic categories. Finally, as many critics and theorists of advertising have pointed out, ads sell much more than products and services; they sell values, ideologies, pleasures, and ways of living (e.g., Berger, 1972; Ewen, 1989). Therefore, these ads have significance that extends beyond one particular type of economic activity or target market into diverse arenas of culture.

These ads were selected because they manifest certain common themes regarding computer and communications technology. "Anthem," the premier ad in MCI's "Is This a Great Time or What?" campaign, as well as Oracle's "A Revolution Is in Our Destiny" address issues of discrimination, violence-

and economic disparity while promising a world that will go beyond such oppressive structures. Other ads in MCI's campaign also reference current social problems, but only implicitly, as their explicit messages focus on the empowerment offered by computers and other new communication technologies. Racism, sexism, and economic deprivation are constructed as relevant only to the world before the current "information revolution." While these ads utilize both traditional narrative formats as well as "music video" style collages of words, images and music, they all offer the promise of erasing lines of social, economic, cultural and/or racial difference as well as liberating humans from the constraints of the material world.

My close readings will proceed by identifying the binary oppositions which the ads name, assume and/or promise to erase. Following one style of "postmodern" or poststructuralist critique, these close readings assume that dominant Western ideologies are based on an interrelated series of binary oppositions. The reinforcement of such dualisms is understood as maintaining oppressive social structures while the erasure or deconstruction of such oppositions is assumed to have liberatory potential (Kaplan, 1988; Nicholson, 1990). Therefore, my central focus is on how these ads reinforce and/or deconstruct lines of difference such as mind/body, ideal/material and public/private. The structures of meaning these close readings reveal will provide a foundation for my discussion of the larger significance of the ideological interpretation of the social role of CMC and other communications technologies.

## The Erasure of Boundaries

Two recurrent themes in computer and communications advertising are the inevitability of computers and the erasure of boundaries. AT&T's "You Will" and Digital's "Whatever It Takes" campaigns imply—as does much of the discourse about "the information age"—that computers are an independent, unstoppable force to which we will have to adjust (Kaplan, 1990). This sense of inevitability relates to the second theme because if computers are going to be *everywhere* then traditional boundaries will have to be transgressed. This erasure of boundaries theme is manifested in several ways. IBM's "solutions for a small planet" series plays off the boundary-dissolving oxymoron of a "global village" popularized by McLuhan (1964). AT&T's 1996 "Global Olympic Village" ad shows athletes dressed in stereotypically "ethnic" attire from around the globe (Japanese, African, Spanish, western U.S., southeast Asian) competing in various events while the voice-over speaks of the Olympics and AT&T as promoters of "a world without boundaries." MCI's 1992 ad quoted at the beginning of this essay similarly erodes spatial boundaries by putting everything in the universe "right here" via digital communication, by erasing the boundary between "the world" (the real) and "information" (the symbolic).

As with this earlier ad, MCI's erasure of spatial boundaries in the "Is This a Great Time or What?" campaign does not limit itself to the confines of the earth. In "Kids in Space," children in an elementary school classroom communicate with an astronaut via computer, posing questions such as

"What's it like floating in space?" and "What is zero gravity like?" After alternating scenes of the classroom and the astronaut floating inside a space craft, the two merge visually as the children begin to float and move about as if weightless, eventually flying out the window of their classroom. The narrator tells us, "It used to be we just launched rockets into space. Today, through distance learning, MCI can launch entire classrooms." Microsoft's version of the promise of the irrelevance of distance is simple and direct: "Where do you want to go today?"

### **Naming Disparity, Defining Revolution**

A particularly interesting CMC ad heavily reliant on images of global diversity begins by proclaiming "a revolution is in our destiny." Similar to AT&T's 1996 Olympics ad, this ad from Oracle relies on stereotypical ethnic imagery based on attire, phenotypic traits and architecture to metonymically represent culture. As we are told that a "revolution is in our destiny," scenes of violent unrest in urban Southeast Asia and South America cue a "traditional" sense of armed revolution. But the revolution offered by Oracle "will not be fought with guns or swords. It will not be a war of words or of countries. For this revolution will be about knowledge and access, about progress and opportunity." Specific images are synchronized with these goals of the information revolution: a young Asian boy, dressed as a Buddhist monk, represents "knowledge" while a young African-American boy in a ghetto represents issues of "access." "Where do we come in?" asks Oracle. "We make the software that manages information

that will enable anyone, anywhere to sit at the seat of knowledge." To represent "anyone, anywhere" we are shown a Southeast Asian girl dressed in a European-style white blouse and dark skirt. The "seat of knowledge" is a bright red chair sitting inside what earlier images lead us to believe is an ancient Buddhist temple. In this ad, "information" will serve to give everyone knowledge, access, progress and opportunity, implying (but never directly stating) that the economic divisions of the world will be eliminated. Oracle highlights ethnic differences, but the earlier images of armed revolution give way to a harmonious collage of global diversity.

However, choices about which ethnicities represent which issues highlight enough of our hierarchical differences to create a need for change. After the initial images of Khmer Rouge-style armed conflict, Asian images consistently come to be associated with knowledge, enlightenment and harmony through the music and words linked to them. Peace movements working to halt armed conflict are represented by "first world" Caucasians holding a candlelight vigil. Lack of access is represented by an African-American child residing in the inner city while affordability is linked to a white mother and daughter standing in front of their suburban home. These images of fragmentation and economic separation give way to the promise that "anyone, anywhere" can "sit at the seat of knowledge." This promise is manifested by an Asian girl and ancient "eastern" religious buildings preceded by images of modern offices and buildings in an apparently Asian setting. Global unity is achieved through the

"simpler, more efficient, and vastly more affordable" computer technology developed by Oracle. This ad is notable for its relatively explicit focus not just on cultural differences but economic divisions. The primary boundary this ad promises to dismantle is the one between the haves and the have-nots.

A more recent and not overtly "ethnic" ad that also addresses economic divisions is "Hackers," part of IBM's 1998 "e-solutions" campaign. In this ad we see two presumed hackers, a man and a woman apparently in their twenties, the male with long, dark hair and several days' growth of beard.

The man announces, "I'm in."  
The woman replies, "I can't believe you got in—you're in personnel!"

"This is the salary of everyone in the company."

"Look, this senior vice president makes twice this one. I'd bet he'd like to know that."

"They all know now—I just e-mailed everyone in the company."

The ad concludes with the statement "Stop hackers. Get IBM e-solutions." However, aside from this last statement, this ad embodies a fundamentally class theme about corporate unfairness. While the distinction between corporate vice presidents and CEOs may seem economically insignificant when placed in a larger context, the ideological pleasure this ad can evoke for some of its viewers is nonetheless one of empowering those with less in order to assist in the equalization of wealth; this is accomplished by making private information public through the use of

CMC (both "hacking" and e-mail). While IBM may be selling corporations tools to stop hackers, the ad nonetheless articulates the democratic impulse embodied by some hackers and cybervangelists as well as the larger project of opening up access to information (e.g., Rheingold, 1993). The bulk of the ad is a narrative of class warfare; this narrative is only briefly framed in an antihacker, corporate ideology. While this ad may have been directed at high-level managers and Chief Information Officers, it presents an oppositional ideology that can be enjoyed by many others lower on the corporate or social ladder.

The profound ambiguity of this ad (is it supportive of or critical of hackers?) can be understood as blurring the lines between public and private and between those higher and lower on the hierarchy, offering its viewers the simultaneous possibilities of identifying with and fearing hackers. Oracle's "Revolution" and IBM's "Hackers" present audiences and critics with polysemic possibilities that challenge simple ideological evaluations. Certainly, each ad can be critiqued for its channeling of oppositional ideas in the service of corporate wealth and control, but the potential polysemy of the ads complicates such evaluations. This kind of indeterminacy is part of what makes careful and sustained analysis of these ads so important.

## Parallel Shifts

Spatial, cultural, and economic boundaries are not the only ones erased by contemporary computer advertisements. At least two of the ads in the "Is this a Great Time or What?" series play off the distinction between the

public and private spheres. In "Confessions of a Telecommuter" MCI promotes telecommuting by juxtaposing activities from the private (home) and public (work) spheres: An apparently single mother (we see a child but no spouse) tells us that "I don't shower before I work. I e-mail over oatmeal. I take conference calls in my pajamas." The ad's playful language is predicated on viewers understanding the oddity of juxtaposing the "serious" world of work, e-mail and conference calls with the private and (as cued by the music) frivolous world of bodily maintenance (eating, showering and sleeping). The use of the metaphor of the confessional further cues the viewer's sense of the private being made public or, alternatively, that what is being confessed to is the "sin" of blurring the private and professional realms.

In another MCI ad entitled "Storm Clouds," a group of young siblings are threatened by an incoming storm. By calling a single number, they are connected to their mother's office phone, then her cell phone, then to her pager—"and mom rolls in right before the storm." One important theme manifested here is that nature is outmaneuvered with technological creativity. In terms of the public/private distinction, both of these ads claim that new communication technology allows women to pursue a career in the traditionally male public sphere. However, they assume that while the gendered nature of the public sphere is altered, the private sphere continues to be the province of women.<sup>2</sup> Communication technology opens up the world of work to women while allowing them to continue to fulfill their traditional obligations in the private sphere of the family. Therefore,

these ads confirm the earlier findings of Rakow and Navarro (1993) regarding the gendered meanings circulating around communication technologies such as cellular phones, specifically the ideas of "remote mothering" and "the parallel shift."

The erasure of these various types of boundaries—social, cultural, economic, gendered, and geographical—can be interpreted and evaluated in several ways. It can be understood as empowering, the ultimate extension of the human nervous system, the transcendence of geography and space as taken-for-granted limitations on human existence. This erasure can also be understood not as liberating, but as the ultimate mechanism of control. Telecommuting, for example, not only saves one from having to go to work, it means that work and the corporate structure invade one's home, privacy, and family life. In another vein, the erasure of boundaries can be seen as the transcendence of culture, the uniting of humans by increasing cross-cultural communication and understanding, or as the ultimate tool of cultural imperialism, infusing all cultures with a dose of Western digital logic. Perhaps most interestingly, the erasure of boundaries can be understood as paralleling many liberatory discourses such as postmodernism and some forms of feminism.

### Postmodernism/Feminism

The term postmodern and its derivatives (postmodernism, postmodernity) are polysemic, contested, and unstable. They have been used to refer to various artistic, media, literary, and architectural styles; to an era or condition; and to a set of diverse theoretical or

philosophical perspectives (see the collections of essays edited by Kaplan [1988], Nicholson [1990] and Foster [1983]). Some use the term postmodern to reference a disturbing loss of stability or morality while others use it to refer to new and emancipatory possibilities for thought and social organization (Kaplan, 1988). Nevertheless, a roughly defined cluster of meanings or implications can be associated with the term: a rejection of master narratives, a desire to deconstruct the binary oppositions which pervade Western thought, and a celebration of indeterminacy and multiplicity. Interestingly, this cluster seems to be finding its way into popular discourses such as the ads discussed above.

Postmodernism is often defined as a reaction against modernism, which in this context is positioned as synonymous with the enlightenment project (Foster, 1983). The enlightenment project is understood as the exercise of rationality as the legitimate means of attaining a fixed and objective truth that can lead to progress for "mankind." The concepts of truth, rationality and progress form "grand narratives of legitimation" (Lyotard, 1984) such as "science" that present a framework for understanding all domains of human activity.

Many versions of postmodernism understand these master narratives as based on a cluster of interrelated binary oppositions: true/false, reality/illusion, mind/body, rational/emotional, civilized/primitive, culture/nature, male/female, public/private. If the links between these oppositions were put in propositional form, they might read something like this: Truth is achieved

by exercising the rational capacities of the mind of man, in exchange with others in the public sphere, thereby cultivating civilization. Emotion, originating in the uncivilized body, if left to its own, unmitigated by reason (as with women such as Eve and Pandora), will deceive and be our downfall, pulling us back toward a primitive, natural state.<sup>3</sup>

Postmodernists argue that such binary oppositions perpetuate an interlocking system of oppressions and constrain the range of possibilities for human social and cognitive life. These binaries propose a fundamental division in existence that is also, inescapably, hierarchical. By transgressing or deconstructing these binaries—showing that they are not real, coherent or even conceptually defensible (Derrida, 1989)—the escape from the prisonhouse of modernism is made possible (Foster, 1983). Given the oppressive and gendered nature of these dualisms, many feminists have appropriated postmodernist critiques and methods (Nicholson, 1990). Donna Haraway (1985), for example, argues that the "cyborg" is potentially emancipatory as a trope and as a reality of the postindustrial world precisely because it violates, and hence makes untenable, many of these binaries. Technology and biology interpenetrate, cohabitate, blur. As a result, the social systems and ideologies built on the taken-for-granted, absolute nature of those binaries are undermined. When humans become part human, part animal, part machine and when machines can "think" then the exclusion of animals and machines from the category of the ethically protectable becomes less tenable. While not everyone under-

stands the cyborg as emancipatory, seeing instead a frightening extension of the technocratic dream of control (Edwards, 1995), the loss of clear and absolute distinctions is an underlying, unifying theme among many postmodernists and some feminists.

Another important theme among postmodern theorists is multiplicity. Modernism rests upon a meta-ideology of singularity—single truths, master narratives, stable meanings, singular identities for self-contained, internally coherent individuals (Nietzsche, 1967). Multiplicity is often invested with emancipatory or counterhegemonic potential, as with the appropriations of Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic theory of discourse (see, for example, Kristeva, 1980; Stam, 1988). Bakhtin argues that authoritative discourses (i.e., master narratives) legitimate themselves by appearing monologic: singular, stable, internally coherent, and objective. While all discourses are polyvocal, dominant discourses work to conceal their underlying multiplicity while "other" discourses celebrate the state of heteroglossia: composed of multiple and competing voices, resisting any closure. Postmodernists generally believe that texts are ultimately indeterminate, and since "reality" is textual, reality itself is multiple and indeterminate. There is no anchor, no foundation upon which reality, identity or any social order rests.<sup>4</sup>

The pervasiveness of the theme of dissolving boundaries (and therefore existing forms of sense-making and social organization) in computer and communications advertisements raises questions as to whether "postmodern" academic discourses and "popular" discourses have influenced each other and/

or whether the manifestation of these themes in both academic and popular discourses is a symptom of a deeper cultural current.<sup>5</sup> If any of these possibilities is close to the mark, then an initial response may be that these ads point to a potentially liberating transformation in dominant, Western ideologies. To examine whether the liberatory impulses of postmodernism are operating in these ads, I turn to an examination of the advertisement that perhaps most embodies these impulses, the premier ad in MCI's 1997 "Is This a Great Time or What?" television campaign.

## Or What?

The voice-over in this ad consists of multiple voices, often overlapping or echoing each other, creating a polyvocal narration in opposition to the conventional monologue (Bakhtin, 1981). The opening line, for example, is voiced almost simultaneously by an old man and a young girl. The aural linguistic message in the ad is as follows:

People can communicate mind to mind. [There is no race.] Not black to white. There are no genders. Not man to woman. There is no age. Not young to old. There are no infirmities. Not short to tall. Or handsome to homely. Just thought to thought. Idea to idea. Uninfluenced by the rest of it. There are only minds. What is this place? Utopia? No. No. No. The internet. Where minds, doors and lives open up. A nice place this place called the internet. Is this a great time or what?<sup>6</sup>

MCI offers an appeal to transcend certain social axes of binary difference, and thereby posits an implicit critique of the oppressions those differences have supported and justified.

The themes of diversity and the juxtaposition of differences are manifested in the visual construction of the ad. The people in the ad, many of whom voice some of the lines transcribed above, are a mixture of young and old, male and female, "able" and disabled, black, white, brown, and yellow. The footage is a mixture of black and white and color; the color scenes (which are in the minority) emphasize bright, mostly primary colors. The scenes often combine apparent opposites: a father and daughter at a kitchen table working on a laptop with an old white enamel stove behind them; an elderly black woman sitting on a bench while children dance around her; children in a conventional classroom praising the internet; words written on traditional greenboards ("age" and "race," the latter crossed out) and others typed on a computer screen ("there are no genders," "there is no age," "there are no infirmities," "there are only minds," "Utopia?"). Amidst the book stacks of a library, a presumably Deaf<sup>7</sup> girl signs "there are no infirmities" while that line is being spoken and the last image of the ad is her signing "MCI."

While the linguistic text (both aural and visual) calls for an erasure or transcendence of the binary oppositions, the visual images seem to celebrate those differences. In addition to the contradiction between the visual celebration and linguistic erasure of difference, several elements of this ad seem to resist any fixed or singular interpretation of its meaning. The title

of this ad campaign is itself open, not a proposition but a question: "Is this a great time *or what?*" During the ad, when the "or what?" is voiced, we see the older black woman surrounded by dancing children shrug her shoulders, her arms beside her shoulders, hands palm up. "Who knows?" she seems to say, "not me."

What sense can we make of this ad beyond saying that it is designed to be catchy and memorable, that its diversity may be designed to appeal to demographically diverse target audiences, that it is a manifestation of a "postmodern" televisual style (as the "MTV" style of editing is sometimes called)? Is this a liberating message as some postmodernists would define that? The ad appears, at least initially, to play off a critique of the dominant social system: we need to get beyond race, gender, age and infirmities because those categories have been used to justify oppression and exploitation. In other words, the elimination of race and gender can be interpreted as the elimination of racism and sexism. While discrimination is never named directly, it is given a residence in the ad in the latter part of the phrase "uninfluenced by the rest of it" (accompanied by two images, one of young black children and the other of neat and ordered mobile homes).

This MCI ad uses a rhetorical strategy common in advertising. In his analysis of the development of advertising, Stuart Ewen (1989) argues that ads must be understood as products of their historical circumstances. Ads not only inevitably reflect their historical context, they comment on and often critique it. Advertising

historically addresses the transfiguration of survival. It provides a social commentary, a sympathetic voice, *even a critique*, of the very historical conditions of which it is an inextricable part. While reinforcing the priorities of corporate production and marketing, advertising offers a symbolic empathy to its audience, criticizing alienation and offering transcendent alternatives. (Ewen, 1989, p. 86)

Ewen cites IBM's "little tramp" ads from the early 1980s which drew on the imagery of Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times*. In these ads, a Chaplin clone is "a victim of industrial chaos, overwhelmed by the assembly line" (Ewen, 1989, p. 87). But instead of taking that critique to its logical conclusion, additional technology—an IBM PC—is offered as the means of getting things back under control. This advertising strategy is an example of the raising and channeling of utopian desires toward ideological ends. Mass culture texts, Fredric Jameson (1990) argues, cannot simply impose the dominant ideology upon a passive audience. Instead, mass culture must work dialectically, raising utopian desires (whether in the positive form of utopian imagery or the negative form of a critique of the social order which implies a utopian vision) and then channeling those desires in such a way as to reinforce the very social system being critiqued.

Clearly the vision the MCI ad offers us is utopian: a world without discrimination. Does it stop there or is there a channeling or containment of that utopian impulse? This particular utopian promise concerning CMC is not unique

to MCI or this particular ad. Howard Rheingold, in his bestselling *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993), offers the same promise. In a society rife with discrimination, CMC offers a new kind of public sphere where everyone can speak without being judged by their bodies—color, sex, age, (dis)ability. However, Rheingold also addresses the flipside of this freedom from the body: "The authenticity of human relationships is always in question in cyberspace" because people can misrepresent their "real" identity (p. 147). While Rheingold refers to this as the "ontological untrustworthiness of cyberspace" (p. 172), some postmodernists might see it as a liberation from the constraints of ontology—from the fixed, essential characteristics (race, sex, age, ability) posited by science and other modernist discourses. Postmodernists often celebrate the idea that everything is image, everything is text, unconstrained by any sense of an underlying, anchoring, fixed, constraining "reality." CMC offers the possibility of the "free play" of image and identity that postmodernists often promote in the abstract.

While the MCI ad appears to offer us this kind of postmodern utopia, it denies that it is doing so. In response to the questions "What is this place? Utopia?" we are given a seemingly unambiguous answer: "no" repeated three times by three different voices, then the answer "the Internet." This, in some ways, furthers the sense that this ad represents a version of postmodern thought. Utopia is understood by postmodernists as a quintessentially modernist idea: a perfect place that resides at the end of the ongoing march

of human progress, the embodiment of a single and stable set of universal values, the product of a master narrative. The nonexistent ideal (utopia) is denied in this ad and replaced by a communication medium that substitutes image and text for physical reality (as MCI's earlier ad put it, "the world is information").

However, does this ad really argue for taking us into a new era, a new form of social relations? In *Virtual Community*, Rheingold (1993) argues that computer mediated communication will not so much take us forward but return us to something we have lost. He appeals to a nostalgia for community and argues CMC can enable community not only better than we do now but better than when we had "authentic" communities at some mystical point in the past. In somewhat narrower terms, CMC can revitalize "the public sphere" and hence democracy by creating an electronic *agora*, an international town hall meeting (Rheingold, 1993)—metaphors harkening to the "birthplaces" of, respectively, Western (Greek) and North American democracy.

Ultimately, I believe the MCI ad pushes us not forward into the postmodern world ("where minds, doors and lives open up") but backward into an all-too-familiar one. To demonstrate what world MCI promotes and how it does so, I turn to Kenneth Burke's (1969) discussion of the nature of dialectical oppositions and their role in persuasion. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke argues that persuasion is synonymous with identification: overcoming the fundamental divisions between people and fostering an awareness of their commonalities. MCI offers the internet as a place where people

can overcome their differences in order to communicate their ideas "mind to mind," thereby working to create identification based on their common nature as thinking beings.

The concept of identification is closely linked to Burke's understanding of the nature of dialectic. Burke (1969) posits a difference between two types of dialectical relations: "an unresolved, parliamentary jangle" in which competing voices have nothing in common and are therefore reduced to "horse-trading" (p. 195), and an ultimate dialectic in which competing voices are "like successive positions or moments in a single process," such that they can be united by their common, underlying principle (p. 187). In other words, in the first type of dialectic different voices are irreducible while in the second the differences are steps in a progression toward an "ultimate" or transcendent term. This second form has "rhetorical advantages," Burke argues, in that it provides a means for identification—for a transcendence of the divisions among the voices (p. 197). Identification, for Burke, "is a kind of transcendence" (p. 326).

A crucial concern, however, is not just that identification occurs, but on what basis. How is the commonality (i.e., the ultimate or "god term") defined and what interests does that definition serve?<sup>8</sup> Many postmodernists would critique Burke's valorization of the "ultimate dialectic" over the irreducible wrangle of the parliament, seeing "ultimate dialectic" as synonymous with "master narrative"—singular, exclusionary and hegemonic. Any transcendent term will serve, in effect, as the positive term in another binary opposition.

Postmodernists argue that the binary oppositions with which we structure our social and psychological existence must be deconstructed, opening up new and multiple forms of social organization and identity. What MCI offers us, however, is a *transcendence*, the achievement of one half of the binary at the expense of the other. Transcendence is not a deconstruction of the binary but the binary taken to its logical extreme, to its ultimate or "god" term. This ad's offer, in other words, is the *modernist* utopia whose roots can be traced back to Plato: the attainment of pure thought (enlightenment) by escaping the constraints of the body (Schott, 1988). Platonic idealism and its subsequent mutations in Western thought and philosophy are based on a profoundly ascetic world view: The truth is out or up there somewhere, and humans are trapped by their material existence in what amounts to, at best, an illusion or, at worst, hell (e.g., Plato's allegory of the cave). Only through denial and discipline can we transcend the limitations of our earthly and bodily existence and gain a glimpse of Truth/God. This ascetic ideology is clearly manifested in the MCI ad: "People can communicate mind to mind . . . thought to thought. Idea to idea. Uninfluenced by the rest of it. There are only minds." What the Internet offers us is an imagined purity "uninfluenced by the rest of it." We are not being asked, therefore, to reject racism, sexism and the rest, but to reject what race, gender, age and ability are taken as markers of: our physical existence.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulties with these neoplatonic promises and appeals are twofold. First, they obscure the ways racism, sexism, and other oppressive

structures systematically exclude the vast majority of the world's population from accessing the Internet. Second, the underlying ascetic ideology negates what the ad appears to promote. Platonic idealism and its descendants have been convincingly demonstrated to perpetuate certain destructive systems of thought and behavior. Plato and his intellectual descendants privilege men's ability to access the "ideal realm" by granting them the requisite discipline while associating women with the body and its pollution (Schott, 1988). Woman's status as "Other" in Western thought is built upon her stronger association with the body, sexuality and emotion. In addition, the negation of the value of the material world in favor of a higher realm is understood as an ideological basis for its mistreatment—nature's destruction and reformation into an approximation of the ideal (Diamond & Orenstein, 1990). The way out of racism, sexism, ageism, and environmental destruction, in other words, is not by denying that physical differences exist but by embracing those differences as valuable in and of themselves.

### **Cyberspace: Escape from Flesh**

The appeal of cyberspace as a place where bodies no longer matter is not unique to MCI's recent ad campaign (Springer, 1996). One of the most influential texts in framing understandings of the Internet is William Gibson's (1984) science fiction novel *Neuromancer*. Gourgey and Smith (1996), for example, have demonstrated the rhetorical impact of *Neuromancer* on the "cybertech" community by tracking the use of the meta-

phors provided by Gibson. At the center of Gibson's novel is a construct known as "cyberspace" (a word coined by Gibson), a new frontier of sorts traversed by, among others, "cowboys:"

Case was twenty-four. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the Sprawl. He'd been trained by the best . . . in the biz. He'd operated on an almost adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix. A thief, he'd worked for other, wealthier thieves, employers who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data. (Gibson, 1984, p. 5)

Case stole from one of his employers, so they made sure he would never work as a cowboy again: "They damaged his nervous system with a wartime Russian microtoxin. . . . The damage was minute, subtle, and utterly effective" (Gibson, 1984, p. 6). Case could no longer enter cyberspace, but this meant much more than a loss of his vocation. Case lost access to the "rich fields of data"—that is, to what replaced the earth and materiality in his social reality:

For Case, who'd lived in the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The

body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (p. 6)

This is the prison from which MCI promises an escape. Recall, for example, the "Kids in Space" ad described above. Because they can communicate with astronauts, the school children obtain the power to share in the experience of weightlessness and flight but without the brute force technology normally involved (as AT&T tells us, "when people communicate there's no limit to what they can do"). Yaakov Garb (1990), in an essay exploring the "whole earth image," argues that space exploration is motivated by a desire to escape—not simply the earth, but the confines of materiality. Among other evidence, he cites the titles of books on space exploration such as *Out of the Cradle and Breaking the Bonds of Earth*. This ad makes explicit MCI's affiliation with idealistic (anti-materialist) ideologies, as it promises its viewers the dream of escaping the fundamental constraint of gravity by means of computer and communication technologies.

## Incorporation

Decoding the meaning(s) of MCI's, Oracle's and IBM's ads is important beyond determining the particular message they attempt to send their audiences or the hook they use to get them to buy their products or services. Howard Rheingold (1993) and other observers of our emerging "cybertech" culture have argued that the PC and the internet are not only products of the military industrial complex, but are tools that emerged from the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, designed for empowerment and

grassroots activism. Their origins are not singular, and their uses are not pre-determined.<sup>10</sup> While it has been quoted to the point of becoming cliché, Gibson's line that "The street finds its own uses for things" has some validity (e.g., Fiske, 1989). As Douglass Rushkoff (1994) documents, computers are being used by oppositional subcultures who combine them with drugs, fractal geometry, music, and neoshamanism in order to resist dominant ideologies and construct new realities.

Therefore, the use of "postmodern" appeals—transgression of boundaries, celebration of multiplicity and indeterminacy—may be particularly effective in tapping into elements within the communication technologies market. The danger in such a strategy—not for MCI, but for those interested in the liberatory aspects of CMC and of postmodern theory—is that MCI can begin to "rework" what these "postmodern" appeals are about. This is the strategy of incorporation, the redefining of oppositional discourses in order to sap their oppositional potential and turn them toward the reinforcement of the dominant order (Fiske, 1989). In the case of MCI's "Anthem" in particular, "postmodern" style and content are used to associate its product with critique and social transformation when what it promotes in this ad is the continued negation and objectification of our bodies and of nature by means of digital technology.

Placed in a global context, the ideologies promoted by these advertisements—both the apparently "postmodern" (MCI's "Anthem") and more overtly "enlightenment" varieties (Oracle's "Revolution")—have pro-

found implications. They sell their viewers the belief that information technology is the solution to global fragmentations rooted in cultural barriers and economic inequalities. AT&T's Olympic ad implies that increased telecommunication across the globe will, in itself, bring about cooperation and understanding. Oracle's "Revolution" ad implies that CMC will remove barriers to universal economic opportunity. While MCI's "Anthem" overtly argues for the erasure of cultural and other differences, ads such as Oracle's and AT&T's do so implicitly by reducing culture to little more than colorful, aesthetic attire and by defining "knowledge," "information," and "progress" as acultural ideals instead of fundamental points of difference and struggle. The forces of homogenization are obscured in a cloak of "diversity" while "diversity" simultaneously becomes superficial or irrelevant. Desires for a global unity structured in diversity are redirected toward the construction and maintenance of a transnational corporate structure based on the power of digital information.

However, Oracle's "Revolution" resists any simple evaluation and stands out in contrast to the images of harmonious global diversity presented by ads such as AT&T's "Global Olympic Village." Few advertisements are so willing to name the fundamental unfairness of the current global distribution of wealth, let alone name it so directly. The images associated with certain themes—Asia and Latin America with armed revolution, African American children with urban despair, Caucasians with North American suburban prosperity—can be argued to be themselves a revolutionary form of "truth

telling" in the context of mainstream advertising and thereby something to be applauded. However, as with the IBM Charlie Chaplin ad from the 1980s analyzed by Ewen, the difficulty here is not so much with the critique the ad presents but how that critique is channeled. What is being offered as the revolutionary means to achieve some form of utopia—CMC—can itself be critiqued as a key element in the global maldistribution of wealth and power. In addition, the ad conflates access to technology and information with access to knowledge, power and capital, thereby complicating its appeal to "access" and "opportunity." Access to what? Opportunities for what?

This conclusion also points to a difficulty with the critical framework I am using to analyze these ads. When looked at from the perspective of commodification, hegemony and the rechanneling of utopian impulses, almost any ad is likely to produce the same evaluation: by perpetuating capitalism, specifically the fetishization of products and services, the ad is inherently problematic; it hides the "real" conditions involved in the production and dissemination of a commodity. If the evaluation of any ad is, in this sense, guaranteed in advance, then what value comes from analyzing any specific ad from this perspective?

My critique is not centered on advertising per se, but on the specific structures of meaning being circulated around and attached to computer and communications technologies. Advertising is one of several important means for these meanings to be cultivated, along with other discourses I have referenced (science fiction and "pop" social theory). Oracle's "Revolution" is

distinguished from MCI's "Anthem" not only by its direct critique of the contemporary situation, but by its overt embracing of a modernist narrative of progress and enlightenment through knowledge. It draws on deep cultural stereotypes (e.g., the Far East as a source of mystical enlightenment), but it does not overtly call for the erasure of cultural and other differences—indeed it celebrates (certain) metonyms of cultural diversity. In other words, in many ways the ad is more "honest" in its descriptions of the contemporary situation and its affiliations with the enlightenment project. Unlike MCI's "Anthem," it isn't modernism cloaked in superficial postmodern appeals—it is the quintessential enlightenment dream presented in a straight-forward fashion. It celebrates global cultural diversity, though it could still be charged with hiding its underlying monologic agenda in a kind of integrationist (i.e., illusory) pluralism.

## Implications

While there may be significant validity to technological determinism (the theory that the uses and implications of technologies are structured into the technologies themselves), it would be dangerous to use such a theoretical stance to dismiss the significance of the ways in which we are being guided to interpret the social role and economic implications of new information technologies. Advertisements, science fiction films and novels, and technophilic social theory predispose us to experience CMC through particular metaphors, metonyms and other ideologically loaded symbols. Even if the technological determinists are correct that the implications of a particular tech-

nology are structurally inherent in the technology itself, there is still the question of whether a particular technology will be embraced and become ubiquitous. The "consent" of at least certain groups of people will have to be obtained and maintained; therefore analyses of the hegemonic potential of ads such as these are essential if we are to make meaningful and informed choices about whether and how certain technologies will be used.

The insights of this analysis do not add anything substantially new to our understandings of the rhetoric of advertising and the creation of commodities. In this essay, I am less concerned about advertising as a unique medium than I am about how ads for computer and communications technologies are promoting ideologies that guide our interpretations of those technologies. I do not believe that these ideologies and appeals are unique to these ads. I have attempted to show instead how these ads further sharpen and disseminate ideologies developed in other discourses (such as Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Rheingold's *Virtual Community*), thereby working to make the ideas of science fiction fans, computer geeks

and information specialists the ideas of the general population. As Bill Gates once said of CMC, "saturation is part of the design" (Harrison).

Our understanding of CMC is not the only thing being shaped by these ads. Insofar as CMC is linked with internationalization, economic structures and identity, our understandings of power, culture and diversity are being (re)shaped as well. If cultural diversity can be used by MCI, AT&T and Oracle to sell CMC products and services, then what counts as cultural diversity can also be redefined. "Diversity" is defined in many of these ads as something superficial: as colorful costumes or, perhaps more importantly, as something located in the body and thereby something to be transcended through the mind (knowledge, ideas and information). "Diversity" can be celebrated because its celebration does not challenge the supremacy of the mind, and hence of CMC. Diversity's celebration by the forces of global capital and digital communication works to remove meaningful resistance to their homogenizing tendencies. Only by defining diversity as insignificant can its celebration be licensed.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the six ads that will be analyzed in detail, eight ads or campaigns with similar themes will also be referenced.

***Primary Ads Analyzed***

<i>Company</i>	<i>Title/Description</i>	<i>Year (approx.)</i>
IBM	Hackers (in the "e-solutions" campaign)	1998
MCI	Is This a Great Time or What?*	1997
MCI	Anthem	1997
MCI	Confessions of a Telecommuter	1997
MCI	Kids in Space	1997
MCI	Storm Clouds	1997-98
Oracle	Revolution Is in Our Destiny	1998

***Secondary Ads Referenced***

<i>Company</i>	<i>Title/Description</i>	<i>Year (approx.)</i>
AT&T	You Will	1994
AT&T	Global Olympic Village	1996
AT&T	It's All Within Your Reach (Rocket Man)	1997
Digital	Whatever It Takes (Escher)	1996
IBM	Solutions for a Small Planet*	1996-97
MCI	The World Is Information	1992-93
Microsoft	Where Do You Want To Go Today?*	1997-98
NEC	Empowering the Planet	1996-97

*\*Indicates a general campaign rather than a specific ad.*

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- <sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the gendered nature of the public/private distinction, see Griffin (1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Admittedly, the views of both modernism and postmodernism I have presented are oversimplified. However, for my purposes here I am less interested in the "reality" of, for example, enlightenment era philosophy and practice than I am in how these ideas are cultivated and cued in the contemporary popular imagination.
- <sup>4</sup> Countless critiques of this position have been elaborated from a variety of theoretical and ideological perspectives. See, for example, Cloud (1994)
- for a materialist critique of antifoundationalist theories of discourse.
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of other possible relationships between CMC and postmodernism, see Springer (1996).
- <sup>6</sup> There are two versions of this ad, one thirty seconds and one sixty seconds. While I am relying on the sixty second version here, both are substantively the same. The "there is no race" line I included in the transcript of the voice-over, however, is voiced only in the thirty second version, though it appears visually (in writing) in both versions.

- <sup>7</sup> My use of the capitalized label "Deaf" follows Padden and Humphries' (1988) distinction between "deaf" (a physiological condition) and "Deaf" (a cultural and linguistic identification). I use the latter because we are not shown a hearing impaired person using adaptive technologies but someone using sign language, a key feature of Deaf culture.
- <sup>8</sup> For a relevant discussion of this question in relation to Burke, see Lentricchia (1983). For similar discussions regarding essentialism in the context of feminism, see Spivak (1987), Fuss (1989) and Butler (1990).
- <sup>9</sup> An unintended but potentially important issue raised this analysis concerns cultural currents and academic theory. Postmodern theory and criticism presents itself as a radical alternative to modernist ways of sense-making. Yet my analysis of MCI's "Anthem" as well as many of the other ads discussed here demonstrates the relative ease with which not just postmodern "style" but postmodern "theory" can be incorporated into enlightenment narratives and global corporate discourses. While the force and ingenuity of ideological incorporation should not be underestimated, the apparently seamless ease with which this move is made should perhaps call for additional attention to the affiliations between enlightenment and postmodern thought. Are the differences between postmodernism and modernist concepts such as strategic ambiguity as clear as postmodern theorists would like to think?
- <sup>10</sup> This is comparable, to some degree, to Haraway's (1985) argument that the cyborg is not just a technocrat's dream, but a potentially emancipatory image.

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