The Complexities of Seriation

N. KATHERINE HAYLES

GLOBALIZATION IS SUCH A LARGE CONCEPT THAT IT FORCES US ALL INTO THE POSITION OF THE BLIND MEN EXAMINING AN elephant—able to articulate the part we touch but not able to grasp the whole. So it is with the provocative papers in this issue by Mark Poster, Bruce Robbins, and Thomas Keenan, along with Emily Apter's introduction. Each makes excellent points but also mounts a different argument. As a group they present a more comprehensive view of globalization than they do when read separately, and I want to explore the shape that emerges from their interactions. I see my task less as weaving them into a seamless tapestry than as highlighting the ways in which they challenge and complement one another. By pointing out the incompleteness as well as the accomplishment of each, I want to show that together they suggest new interactions between the local and the global and, through these interactions, new possibilities for political awareness and action.

Poster provocatively suggests that digital networks are bringing about a transformation from the "citizen subject" to the "netizen." Pointing to the inadequacies of the idea of the citizen as it emerged from Enlightenment discourse, he wants a less naturalized and homogeneous notion that does not rely on the assumption of autonomous action independent of environment and machinic systems. He sees the Internet as a site of conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, it is used as an instrument to reinforce existing territorial politics—for example, in the struggle of the Zapatistas or, in a less savory mode, the nationalistic agendas proposed by neo-Nazis. On the other hand, the Internet fosters a new kind of politics that deterritorializes nations and creates free-flowing interactions not tied to national or regional identities. At least in part, the Internet alters the relevant political unit so it is no longer conceived as a person located in a territory and under the jurisdiction of a nation-state.

The netizen implies more, however, than deterritorialized global citizenship. It also implies a new kind of junction between human and machine that shifts the basis of humanness. Although this portion of Poster's argument is lightly sketched, behind his comments lies an impressive body of work that seeks to redefine the human as part of a

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distributed cognitive system rather than as an autonomous unit.[1] Cognition in this view happens between human and environment rather than solely in the brain. Other components in the distributed cognitive system have significant effects on how humans operate and therefore on what the human is conceived to be. Intelligent machines are intrinsic to a human's "extended mind," to use Andy Clark's phrase (85). Together with deterritorialization, this vision makes the human less an unchanging entity that can ground notions of human rights and human dignity than an evolving, historically contingent, and technologically enabled creature whose distinctive characteristic is continually and aggressively to enroll objects in its extended cognitive system. The vision implies new kinds of arguments to ground the netizen's efficacy as a political unit. Instead of being seen as an autonomous agent created in the image of God and therefore invested with inalienable rights, the netizen has power defined in terms of technological extensions of cognition, distributed global systems, and increasing connectivities.

Left unanswered, and indeed unaddressed, is a host of questions about how this vision of the netizen can lead to the more equitable, just, and democratic practices that Poster believes digital culture can bring about. Would not the concept of the netizen reinscribe power differentials that correspond to technological development, associating the more technologically developed netizens with a more developed form of humanity? Does not this formulation exacerbate rather than ameliorate problems of access to digital culture, reinscribing a particularly vicious form of haves and have-nots? Is the netizen, granted that it avoids the universalism inherent in Enlightenment views of the citizen, necessarily more politically progressive? What will ensure human rights and human dignity if these universals are deconstructed, and will their deconstruction involve more loss than gain in political struggles against oppressive regimes? In addition to not answering these questions, Poster's argument does not specify how the local and global are articulated together. Although he allows in passing that *netizen* "may only be a partial term because no one lives on the Net permanently," he does not explain how a territorially based identity will mesh with the deterritorialized subjectivity of the netizen, nor does he explicate the mediating structures that would permit both identities to coexist in the heterogeneous virtual-real environments that increasingly go by the name "mixed reality." Poster's article nevertheless makes a valuable contribution. In foregrounding the Internet's "internal architecture; its new register of time and space; its new relation of human being to machine, of body to mind; its new imaginary; and its new articulation between culture and reality," he points toward the magnitude and possibilities that the new configurations entail.

In the introduction to these papers, Apter refers to neomedievalism while exploring the downside of losing the local. Noting that neomedievalism has become a new focus in scholarship and fiction, she locates its driving impulse in the comparison of Europe before the rise of the modern state with the European Union of today, or "Euroland." As James Anderson has described, the emergence of the modern state required the displacement of the heterogeneous network of overlapping entities—political, religious, and dynastic—that characterized medieval authority. With the rise of the European Union, some critics think that the national state may degenerate into an anonymous and tasteless wasteland that can truly be called the new Dark Ages. Rather than an empowering of the netizen through new political configurations enabled by contemporary technology, as Poster imagines, here there is only a decline into a new European identity that loses the authenticity of local culture and so, as Apter writes, has "no claim to national identity whatsoever." In many ways the dystopia she evokes is the mirror opposite to Poster's utopia, and it may be worthwhile to look for a wormhole connecting these two uni-

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verses. We might find one in the neomedievalism prominent in computer games, computer-related magazines like *Mondo 2000*, science fiction focusing on virtual reality, and the dungeon-and-dragon traditions of MUDs and MOOs. What functions do these medieval tropes perform in futuristic technologies and entertainments, and what relation do the tropes bear to the neomedievalism about which Apter writes?

Although I have not space here to explore these questions fully, let me quickly sketch some ideas. Acknowledging the seriated nature of technological change is the special function of skeuomorphs. *Skeuomorph* is a term anthropologists use for a device that once had a functional purpose but in a successor artifact loses its functionality and is retained as a design motif or decorative element. For example, the dashboard of my Toyota Camry is covered with a synthetic plastic molded to look as if it had been stitched. Skeuomorphs are everywhere in our environment, ranging from lightbulbs fashioned in the shape of candles to Velcro tennis shoes with buckles to flesh-colored prostheses equipped with artificial fingers. The last example is startling because it suggests that the human body is an evolutionary object whose successor instantiation will be a technobiological hybrid. The prosthetic limb has an anthropomorphic form that harks back to the biological body without which human life is impossible. Carried into the intimate territory of flesh, the skeuomorph's psychological function becomes vivid. The device stitches together past and future, reassuring us that even as some things change, others persist. In its visible and material practice, it reminds us that historical strata are always uneven and that the arrival of new technologies does not necessarily mean the old are abandoned. We still use hammers and levers, some of the oldest human tools, right along with supercomputers and wireless phones. Neomedievalism is associated not only with the cultural changes that make anachronism a potent strategy for intervention; it has a wider range of connotation than regression to a dark past. Seen in a positive light, it helps to open the technological future to skeuomorphs that link where we have been to where we are going and thereby to mitigate fears about apocalyptic change.

Seriation thus appears not only as a characteristic of technological change but more broadly as a sign of cultural heterogeneity, in which older cultural formations exist side by side with the technologies that are supposedly rendering them obsolete. Postulating that local culture or the nation-state will disappear in the face of global connectivities and transnational politics ignores the ways in which heterogeneous formations persist even within a nation. While it is true that the overlapping medieval political entities were absorbed into the nation-state, local and regional differences persist and often function as sites of resistance to state and national authorities. Think of Chicano and Chicana activists who rally around Aztlán, of citizens of "North California" (not to be confused with northern California) who argue for secession, of Quebecois who have successfully changed the national consciousness of Canada. Remappings occur daily even without the reconfigurations prompted by the Internet, so it is unlikely that the instabilities brought about by advanced information technologies will result in the disappearance of local culture or the nation-state. Certainly change will occur, but it will result neither in the utopia of a new global collectivity nor in the dystopia of regression to a new Dark Ages. Rather, the change will take shape as it has in the past, as heterogeneous striations with overlapping and interpenetrating areas of innovation and replication.

It is this heterogeneity that Robbins seeks to mobilize as a source of political action when he explores the phenomenon he calls the "sweatshop sublime." Paralyzed by the complexity of globally interconnected systems of labor, transportation, communication, and monetary exchange, we sit stupefied before computers built by Malaysian women working for pennies an hour and wonder how we can possibly pull the

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"right thread" that will lead to correct political action. Like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, we stew for a few minutes and then forget about it, convinced we can do nothing in a global system so distributed and multilayered. The way out of our paralysis, Robbins suggests, lies partly in recognizing that there are connections between the local and the global, that the Mexican women cleaning our houses are as much a part of the phenomenon as Asian women working in electronics factories on the other side of the globe. The answer also lies partly in giving up the notion of right action even when we know our positions are noninnocent, products of political compromises and suspect motives, of partial solutions and imperfect knowledges. Here is a vision of political activism appropriate to the complexity and heterogeneity of seriated technocultural change. Robbins suggests that, rather than seek to evade the disgust that comes from acknowledging that one's "lovely home doubles as a sweatshop during the day," we see these entanglements as evidence of interdependencies without which any kind of civilized life is impossible. I am inclined to agree with Robbins that we must act even when we know the actions we take are ambiguous and only partially effective.

Yet I am taken aback by endnote 9, appended to Robbins's call for scholars to "ensure that we do not work in universities, libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions" that function "like intellectual sweatshops." The note qualifies this strong appeal by saying that the effort "will mean after-hours work; it can't be the content of our teaching and writing." I am taken aback all the more because such work is self-evidently the content of Robbins's present writing. Given this paradoxical situation, what can endnote 9 possibly mean? A generous interpretation would see it as a performative utterance indicating that we are always caught in conflicting allegiances, in this case between fashioning curricula that preserve the great traditions of the humanities and questioning not only the content of those traditions but also the very institutions that make it possible for us to have the leisure to teach and students the leisure to learn. Surely this conflict cannot be resolved so easily as relegating teaching traditional content to daytime and the subversive political work of calling assumptions into question to "after hours."

Like Robbins, Keenan deals with paralysis and inaction as the unhappy results of global interconnection, this time in the context of the media coverage in Bosnia. The problem lies, he astutely says, not in the mere fact of the United States' failure to intervene but rather in the utopian expectation of its journalists that effective intervention would occur once the public saw the TV images that eloquently testified to the Bosnian slaughter. But images "always demand interpretation, even or especially emotional images. There is nothing immediate about them." In Bosnia, the journalists' willingness to supply poignantly compelling images was unintentionally complicit with a political strategy in the United States to interpret them as signifying "only tragedy or disaster or human suffering," thus allowing "inscription or montage into a humanitarian rather than a political response." Moreover, the humanitarian response was carried out so as to forestall military action, for the peacekeepers were stationed in precisely the areas that would have been targeted for attack. Thus, the nation opted for an action that was in reality a refusal to act, committing personnel to being passive onlookers rather than active resisters of aggression.

Although Keenan focuses on television, the images he discusses were also on the Web—for example, at CNN's site. The "CNN effect" bleeds into digital environments as well. The globalization about which Poster writes must therefore be understood as a grid overlaying but not obliterating the intense ethnic identifications and regional rivalries that fueled genocidal atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia. The netizen may supplement the citizen, but those who suffered in Bosnia experienced the full horror of realizing that global media exposure could iron-

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ically allow the media-saturated United States to cast them in the role of victims to whom we would send an increasingly impotent humanitarian aid. During the cold war, activists spoke about nuclear numbing, the paralysis resulting from a deep despair that anything effective could be done about nuclear weapons, so that the best response was deemed refusing to think about them at all. Robbins's and Keenan's arguments illuminate the successor dysfunctionality, a phenomenon we might call global numbing. In this context, seriation implies not only the unevenness of cultural and technological developments but also the simultaneous intensification of regional conflicts and the emergence of global awareness. The global no more cancels out the regional than new technologies cancel out the old. With its overlapping strata and heterogeneous formations, seriation gives us a way to understand why action always takes place in entangled complexities. Our information-rich and computationally embedded environments partake of both past and present, citizen subject and netizen, regional wars and global peace, human empathy and posthuman complexity.

The larger pattern that emerges from the rich and compelling accounts by Apter, Poster, Robbins, and Keenan points to the necessity that we overcome paralysis and global numbing and forge ethical models and rationales for action that acknowledge the seriated complexity of the contemporary world. The posthuman should not mean a withdrawal from our fellow humans, whatever the circumstances in which they suffer or flourish. Rather, we should understand the posthuman as a call for us to move beyond the universalisms of the Enlightenment without losing sight of human collectivity and beyond the de- or reterritorializations of poststructuralism without abandoning the realization that the local is still where we all live. Although these essays raise more questions than they answer, together they represent a step in the right direction.

Note

[1] See, for example, Clark; Hutchins; Grosz; Steels and Brooks.

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