

When the Map Becomes the Territory:  
Korzybski and Cyberculture

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**Abstract:** I examine in this paper the direct and indirect influences that Alfred Korzybski had on contemporary cyberculture. I consider two different but sometimes intertwined lines of thought, genres and/or disciplines: (1) science-fiction, and (2) communication and/or media studies. In the first case, I consider Korzybski's direct influence on William Burroughs and Alfred van Vogt and thus his indirect influence on Philip K. Dick (PKD) and the 1980s genre of cyberpunk literature. In the second case, I show how Korzybski's direct influence on Gregory Bateson, among other cyberneticians of the first hour (McCulloch and Northrop), and Neil Postman, contributed in shaping one of the leading modes of thought in this domain, i.e. "media ecology." Altogether, I argue that Korzybski's legacy in contemporary culture greatly exceeds the "map is not the territory" slogan: instead, through such notions as "the unbearable aporias of being", the power of the conjunction and the relation between language and power ("control"), he helped shape today's modes of thought.

## Introduction

This paper is about maps and territories, but about special kinds of maps and territories; digital (and not virtual) maps and territories. So I start with a serious question: say at the satellite resolution of Google maps, for instance, doesn't the map look like the territory? And if the territory itself is digital (as in cyberspace), isn't the map the territory? In order to give some elements of answer to these questions I examine here the direct and indirect influences Alfred Korzybski had on contemporary cyberculture. In this process, I draw a genealogical map. But first the obvious question: "What is cyberculture?", or more accurately if I follow the e-prime directive: What do I mean by "cyberculture" here?

I would like to avoid any essentialist bias, and, in a way true to Korzybski's teachings, also avoid at any cost an improper use of the verb "to be". This is why I feel that I must answer that cyberculture is no-thing, i.e. not a thing, but rather a complex *assemblage* of discourses and ideas, *dispositifs* and artefacts, practices and materialities, human and not... But most crucially for my talk today: cyberculture is a process, what they made and we make of it. So it begs the next question: Who, "they"?

They are a whole bunch of people, singular individuals who contributed to this collective production of discourses and ideas, *dispositifs*, etc. Note here that if I consider (cyber-)cultural production a collective process, I no less insist that its expression stems from the workings of *singular individuals*, actual people who lived and wrote, filmed or designed the discourses and ideas, *dispositifs* etc. that actually constitute cyberculture. In other words, in spite of the death of the author and his replacement by a function, I still personalize the issue here. So I will talk about some of these singular individuals, and, most importantly, about the links between them, with the following hypothesis: They are somehow all related to Alfred Korzybski.

**I.**

Starting with a bold proposition: cyber-culture is, above all, a reflection on the world Philip K. Dick (PKD hereafter) made. This speed intoxicated pulp writer *actually created* this cyber-world, or in his own words, *remembered* it first. PKD first saw through the iron cage of reality, got the first glimpse of the final *anamnesis*. From the power invested in him by the Logos, he actually created this world. He felt it in his bones and in his mind, and he recognized it like some long gone impression, like somebody who would wake up from a long cultural coma (and this coma was named *modernity*). He is the mastermind behind it all, the paranoid android, the schizophrenic demiurge who first remembered it into being. Cyberculture is a figure of his anamnesis.

But you might ask: what is the link with the strange count? The short answer: through Alfred Elton van Vogt, one pioneer of the kind of pulp science-fiction PKD enjoyed so much:

There's no doubt who got me off originally and that was A.E. van Vogt. There was in van Vogt's writing a mysterious quality, and this was especially true in *The World of Null A*. All the parts of that book did not add up; all the ingredients did not make a coherency the thing that fascinated me so much was that this resembled reality more than anybody else's writing inside or outside science fiction.<sup>1</sup>

Van Vogt (1912-2000) was a Canadian-born science fiction author, and one of its early pioneers. Born in Winnipeg, the son of a lawyer, he grew up in a rural Saskatchewan community. Without money for education (like many children of the great depression, his father lost a good job), he did not attend college. He worked at a series of jobs and then started writing true confessions, love stories, trade-magazine articles, and radio plays. In the late 1930s, he switched to writing science fiction, influenced by his teenage passion for fairy tales. In December, 1939, he published his first SF story, entitled "Discord in Scarlet", in John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science*

*Fiction*, the ultimate science-fiction serial of all time. In the same issue appeared Isaac Asimov's first *Astounding* story, "Trends"; Robert Heinlein's first story "Lifeline" appeared a month later and Theodore Sturgeon's "Ether Breather" a month after that. In his numerous production, van Vogt showed PKD the way to create this unstable reality, this consensual hallucination (William Gibson's very definition of cyberspace) that redefined reality, albeit in a digital way (and again not virtual), and, as we shall see, this way was a null-A way.

*For van Vogt was a General Semantics alumnus*; moreover, he is this alumnus who actually popularized G.S. into S-F pulp and thus into pop culture (that and being the missing link between G.S. and Dianetics, for instance). Not only through his famous null-A trilogy, but also through his first short story, which eventually became his first novel (*The Voyage of the Space Beagle*). In this novel, G.S. appears as "Nexialism" and his protagonist, Elliot Grosvenor (a clear allusion to the relationship between G.S. and cybernetics<sup>2</sup>) is the first graduate of the Nexial Institute. Van Vogt defined Nexialism as "the science of joining in an orderly fashion the knowledge of one field of learning with that of other fields. It provides techniques for speeding up the processes of absorbing knowledge and of using effectively what has been learned." In fact, "nexialism" is van Vogt's fictitious rendering of two of his main influences: Korzybski's general semantics and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. It is a little known fact that this first story eventually turned into... *Alien*, the 1979 Ridley Scott movie. Believe it or not, Sigourney Weaver actually enacted a G.S. graduate!

Ridley Scott, of course, went on making *Blade Runner*, three years later, thus adapting for the screen Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and thus giving our cyberculture its look and feel. Androids, and thus replicants, are the ultimate representation of

artificial life, the merging of cybernetic circuits and organic life (the infamous cyborg). As such, they carry the representations ascribed to machines since the dawn of the mechanical age, and, especially as “perfect” replacement of human labor, i.e. slaves. In fact, the name chosen by PKD to call the ultimate generation of replicants, the “more human than human” *Nexus-6*, happens to be highly evocative of their function, since from the time of early Roman Law, *nexi* are quasi-slaves, free persons unable to pay their debts and given (annexed) to their creditors. In PKD's Gnostic worldview, these are names that can be given by extension to the human person still captive of the iron jail of reality, somebody who needs to be awoken to find redemption. But there is yet another connection to the strange count at play here...

*Blade Runner*, the title of Scott's movie, came from another screenplay that was never shot: a screenplay by William Burroughs. In Burroughs' adaptation of Alan E. Nourse's eponymous book, a “blade runner” is an underground trafficker in medical equipment. The screenplay is set in New York in 2014, a city that “has less a look of having been rebuilt than resettled”, and the general ambiance is also build around decay and debris, “derelict skyscrapers and public transport.”<sup>3</sup> The movie's title, but also its overall ambiance, the Mayan architecture of the Tyrell Corporation, the ruins and junk, all this belong to Burroughs's vision. So if PKD created this world, Burroughs named it, and refined its look and feel.

William Burroughs was yet another General Semantics graduate: he took Korzybski's seminar in 1938-1939. In his Cut-Ups trilogy of the first half of the 1960s (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova Express*), he experimented with the stuff of words. In the early 1970s, he eventually synthesized the experiment in one fundamental thesis: language (and especially written language) as virus. The use of the verb “to be”, the first of the forms of the

virus, was, of course, highly problematic for him, to the point that it is quite accurate to consider him the detective-doctor of the antiviral fight. In the true tradition of G.S. the principals of this fight began with a reform of language itself.

Burroughs's emphasis on the virus strengthened the series of equivalences that eventually got to be buried deep into the heart of cyberculture and has served since then as its ontological axiom:

LANGUAGE = VIRUS = JUNK CODE<sup>4</sup>

Through Burroughs's mediation, GS indirectly influenced many a philosopher, including most of the representative authors of the so-called "French Theory".<sup>5</sup> This is the case for instance of Jacques Derrida, who realized only later that his whole philosophy was nothing but a virology. Between *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *The Dissemination* (1972), Jacques Derrida started a philosophical enterprise attempting to introduce the Other in the I, a redefinition of the subject. Eventually, this "introduction" became translated into "infection", and the Other was radically recast as the virus.<sup>6</sup> Like Burroughs, Derrida first found traces of the process in writing itself. This is also the case of Gilles Deleuze, and his famous understanding of our present condition as subjects of societies of control, a term he borrowed directly from Burroughs.<sup>7</sup> This is finally (or maybe even terminally) the case of Jean Baudrillard for whom PKD and Burroughs' influences are so strong in his work that a citation would beg here for a *passim*.

Or maybe not... Here the genealogy of ideas becomes quite complex. In my knowledge, Baudrillard never actually quotes Korzybski directly. In the famous opening lines of his groundbreaking *Simulacra & Simulation*, instead, he refers to Jorge Luis Borges' short story entitled "On Rigor in Science".<sup>8</sup> This four-sentence short story, itself an apocryphal quote, evokes

a long-past historical episode where the “Art of Cartography” reached such a level of perfection that geographers created “a map of the Empire which had the size of the Empire itself and coincided with it point by point.” Baudrillard considered that this fable “has nothing but the discreet charm of second-order simulacra”, an industrial era obsession with production, and especially with serial reproduction. And it seems indeed that the origins of this fable are to be found at the acme of the industrial revolution: Borges seems to have gotten it from the works of Josiah Royce, a pupil of William James and long-time friend and intellectual opponent of Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>9</sup>

In his 1899 book entitled *The World and the Individual*, Royce muses on the logical conundrum created by a thought experiment where he imagines that “a portion of the surface of England is very perfectly leveled and smoothed, and is then devoted to the production of our precise map of England.” Every student of logics since the Greek knows this logical inconsequence as a set of paradoxes connected with the notion of the infinite regression. Royce was fast to remark, of course, that if it were to be done, “This representation would agree in contour with the real England, but at a place within this map of England, there would appear, upon a smaller scale, a new representation of the contour of England. This representation, which would repeat in the outer portions the details of the former, but upon a smaller space, would be seen to contain yet another England and this another, and so on without limit.” Actually, Royce’s invention seems to be an instance of Zeno’s paradox of place, where “place” is equated with “map”. Aristotle gave the following formulation of the paradox of place: “... if everything that exists has a place, place too will have a place, and so on *ad infinitum*.”<sup>10</sup>



Korzybski too, it seems, followed on Royce's steps. He actually dedicated *Science and Sanity* to the works of various individuals, and among them Royce, "which have greatly influenced [his] inquiry." In the first section where he develops fully the analogy of the map and the territory, he wrote:

A map is *not* the territory it represents, but if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness. If the map could be ideally correct, it would include, in a reduced scale, the map of the map; the map of the map, of the map; on so on, endlessly, a fact first noticed by Royce.<sup>11</sup>

Korzybski was right to insist that these propositions amount to "two important characteristics of maps" (my emphasis): (1) the structural similarity, and (2) the metonymic recursion.<sup>12</sup> I will come back to structural analogy later but first let me say a word of metonymic recursion. It usually is of no concern to the map-maker (or for that matter to the map-user). At a "normal" scale, the map itself cannot be represented on the map—it is too small a detail on the territory—and the infinite regress is but an impracticable after-thought. Like in all instances of Zeno's paradoxes—and maybe even in all instances of calling on the figure of the "infinite" on which depends the recursion<sup>13</sup>—reality has a way to ignore the subtleties of the mind.

There are in fact two different criteria for the usefulness of a map: (1) accuracy, of course, since you probably want to find on the map something that you look for on the territory, and (2) scale.<sup>14</sup> A pocket-map is also useful because you can put it in your pocket (and a printed book was a revolution *because* you could carry it on the pockets of your saddle, thanks to the 12point font, not so much to the Gutenberg Press). Precision and scale can go hand in hand, but not necessarily so. In Borges's version, this lack of practicality actually means the end of the cartographic enterprise:

The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

This lack of practicality in the “real world”, however, depends in turn on a certain conception of “the real”. Charles Sanders Peirce, reflecting on Royce’s conundrum, merged it with Carroll’s insight and reached the following conclusion:

If a map of the entire globe was made on a sufficiently large scale, and out of doors, the map itself would be shown upon the map; and upon that image would be seen the map of the map; and so on, indefinitely. If the map were to cover the entire globe, it would be an image of nothing but itself, where each point would be imaged by some other point, itself imaged by a third, etc.<sup>15</sup>

Ivan Almeida, to whom I owe this quote, argues convincingly that if it is so, the map “becomes not only a self-representative (solipsist) representation, but also an infinite representation of itself”; but quite crucially, he adds: “*consequently, it is possible and justifiable to conceive a map without territory, in which each enclosed map represents the next enclosing map in a universe in which there is nothing but maps.*”<sup>16</sup> This, he keeps on arguing with success, is the presumption (not to say the axiom) that makes possible the Borgesian universe: “what is supposed to be ‘the real’ is only ‘a dream’ (fiction, representation) that encloses another dream.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, I will argue here that to understand this point, theoretically and practically, is particularly helpful when one wants to understand cyberspace and cyberculture. I will sum up it in three propositions:

- i.* Cybernetics is (and is not, but is, after all) a science of codes, i.e. mappings.
- ii.* Recursivity is (and is not, but is, after all) its operating concept.
- iii.* Cyberspace is (and is not, but is, after all) this map without territory (and hence, no space at all).

Cybernetics, the word, was not coined in the twentieth century. Plato first, in the old age, and André-Marie Ampère<sup>18</sup> (1775-1836) second, at the interface of classical and the modern ages, had

already used it. To them, it meant the governance of men, the steering of people. This world, of which the Subject was once the measure, became a loopy machine inasmuch that he, in return, needed to be steered, cared for, disciplined and punished.<sup>19</sup> The loop, it is said, came with the steam engine and its regulator, Watt's governor.<sup>20</sup> Under a new name, the loop became one the key concepts of a formidable synthesis, uniting animal and machine under the hospices of this great mechanism: *feedback*.

Feedback is indeed another name of the loop, the technical name under which went this other key concept of cybernetics. Cybernetics, the science of communication and control, rests on these two pillars: a theory of communication (information and code) coupled to a theory of control (feedback). Control is of major importance; it is the insurance of performance, the process of maintaining equilibrium or aiming towards something. Thus control and regulation go hand in hand in the virtuous circle of *negative feedback*: "when we desire a motion to follow a given pattern the difference between this pattern and the actually performed motion is used as a new input to cause the part regulated to move in such a way as to bring its motion closer to that given pattern."<sup>21</sup>

Cybernetics finally reached its metaphysical accomplishment when both of its main theories, through their conceptual foundations on communication ("code") and control ("feedback"), successfully redefined the living, when it thus managed to fulfill its boldest pronouncement: to be an adequate theory for both the machine and the animal. That happened not so much through computer science and technology at first<sup>22</sup>, but rather through the formidable fable of the molecular biology of the gene. This is why DNA, and not the computer, is the true "prophet" of the metaphysics of code (says Baudrillard).

What is especially ironic about this fable, is the fact that biologists and historians of science still debate whether the so-called “genetic code” is actually a code in the sense of the cybernetic theory of information!<sup>23</sup> Here two basic definitions of “code” are worth recalling: (1) code as algorithm, i.e. “a method for solving a mathematical problem (...) in a finite number of steps that frequently involves repetition of an operation” (Webster’s), and (2) code as a table of equivalences.<sup>24</sup> In Shannon’s information theory, “code” is the algorithm solving the “problem” of the relationship between the message alphabet and the signal alphabet: this method works on a set of rules that establish the relationship as a set of equivalences. Some, including Lily Kay, have argued such is not the case of the so-called “genetic code”: “this critique applies also to the use of ‘code’ in information theory (but not a Morse code) where, according to Weaver, it is used to change a ‘message’ into a ‘signal.’ But a code is a relationship between two distinct linguistic systems; it does not ‘change’ anything into anything else, neither do encoding and decoding. They simply amount to more metaphors.”<sup>25</sup> Umberto Eco concurs and writes that “the so-called ‘genetic code’ seems to be a system like (c)”, i.e. “a set of possible behavioral responses on the part of the destination” and thus a “s-code” rather than a “code” proper.<sup>26</sup>

In the terms of interest here, “code” can thus be defined alternatively as map or mapping. The second option supersedes the first since “mapping” both means the process and result of map-making (and such is also the case of Eco’s /code/ and /s-code/<sup>27</sup>). So when Baudrillard says that it is no more a question of map and territories, he might still mean that it is a question of “mapping”, with a specific proviso that actually dates the so-called “simulation” era: the criteria here for mapping is not reference (i.e. “accuracy”) but rather *generation*, as is intended in the virtuous understanding of recursion, the always possible nesting of a further map inside the map.

This, however, requires a different metaphysics, or to put it in slightly different terms, *a different logic*. That this logic requires a different relationship between identity and difference, between cause and consequence, in other words *a non-Aristotelian logic*, is the focal point of this paper; but before we establish this, we need to address yet another difference where Korzybski's influence partially made a difference: that of medium and message.

## II.

It is maybe Bateson's take on cybernetics, and more crucially his Korzybskian re-articulation of the concept of information as a "difference which makes a difference," that epitomizes the best this intersection between the two contingencies, between cybernetics and relativism. Here is the key to the notion of "structural similarity" that I evoked previously: the structural similarity between map and territory is the result of the transcription on the map of actual differences present in the territory. Such is Gregory Bateson's take on this idea, in his Korzybski memorial lecture:

Let us go back to the map and the territory and ask: 'What is it in the territory that gets onto the map?' We know the territory does not get onto the map. That is the central point about which we here are all agreed. Now, if the territory were uniform, nothing would get onto the map except its boundaries, which are the points at which it ceases to be uniform against some larger matrix. What gets onto the map, in fact, is difference, be it a difference in altitude, a difference in vegetation, a difference in population structure, difference in surface, or whatever. Differences are the things that get onto a map.<sup>28</sup>

Bateson was also very interested in the recursive conundrum that we addressed previously. He devoted much of his thinking to paradoxes and loops, and most famously recurred to Russell's theory of "logical types" to try to "solve" them. The theory of logical types, in Bateson's translation is "the theory that asserts that no class can, in formal logical or mathematical discourse, be a member of itself; that a class of classes cannot be one of the classes which are its

members.”<sup>29</sup> Bateson’s used this theory to formulate his ideas about content and meta-content: in other words, paradoxes could be avoided, claimed Russell, if no error of logical typing was made, i.e. if no proposition held simultaneously statements of different logical types, no content and meta-content, statements and statements about statements. But Bateson also understood early on that “Russell’s rule cannot be stated without breaking the rule.”<sup>30</sup> So the aporia persisted.

It is also such a sense of aporia that Bateson found in General Semantics. Korzybski, he wrote, “was, on the whole, speaking as a philosopher, attempting to persuade people to discipline their manner of thinking. But he could not win.”<sup>31</sup> But he also provided the most general translation of Korzybski’s aphorism, and the point of view, the all-encompassing metaphor, that will allow me to tie-up all the remaining knots:

Korzybski’s statement asserts that in all thought or perception or communication about perception, there is a transformation, a coding, between the report and the thing reported, the *Ding an sich*. Above all, the relation between the report and that mysterious thing reported tends to have the nature of a *classification*, an assignment of a thing to a class. Naming is always classifying, and mapping is essentially the same as naming.<sup>32</sup>

Thus are the relationships between mapping, naming and coding. The metaphor I alluded to here, however, is not that of the map and the territory, nor that of the map and the name. There is yet another, more englobing metaphor that characterizes Bateson’s contribution to this whole debate: the ecological perspective. In the nested hierarchy of metaphors, this set of maps inside maps, the ecological perspective appears as the most encompassing level: whatever the map or the territory, the name or the symbol, *they always belong to an ecology*; an ecology of bodies and minds, an ecology of ideas and behaviors:

At the root it is the notion that ideas are interdependent, interacting, that ideas live and die (...) You’ve got the sort of complicated, living, struggling, cooperating tangle like what

you'll find on any mountainside with the trees, various plants and animals that live there—in fact, an ecology.<sup>33</sup>

In his Korzybski Memorial Lecture, the notion of an “ecology of ideas” was already present, and Bateson credited Sir Geoffrey Vickers for it.<sup>34</sup> It was itself an idea whose time had come, and that would be rich of further developments. So, let us consider now a final line of development in our genealogy: if Dick made this universe, and Burroughs named it, then Postman et al. further refined the study of its means of expression. “Media Ecology,” “the study of media as environments” in Postman’s own terms, is “General Semantics writ large.” In his contribution to the twenty-third Korzybski memorial lecture, Postman wrote that he merely tried to improve on a map, the map made by Korzybski, who, according to him, had “a most curious and paradoxical blockage in his vision: he did not see that media must be considered as languages and therefore did not seriously reflect on how their structures influence the perceptions and values of an historical epoch.”<sup>35</sup> In his “Notes Toward an Intellectual History of Media Ecology”, Casey Man Kong Lum summarizes the ensuing research tradition around three main theoretical propositions:

- (1) “A medium’s symbolic form entails the characteristics of the code in which in the medium presents information (...) and the structures in which symbols are put together. Similarly, a medium’s physical structure refers to the characteristics of the technology that carries the code and the physical requirements for encoding, transmitting, storing, receiving, decoding, and distributing information”;
- (2) “each medium’s unique set of physical, as well as symbolic characteristics carry with them a set of biases”;
- (3) “communication media facilitate various psychic or perceptual, social, economic, political, and cultural consequences that are relative to the media intrinsic biases.”<sup>36</sup>

Casey Man Kong Lum further insists that three theoretical propositions must be located into a larger perspective describing a continuum going from soft to hard (technological) determinism, and centered on “culture/technology symbiosis,”<sup>37</sup> “a perspective on looking at human culture as the result of the ongoing, interdependent and therefore mutually influential interaction between

people and their technologies or media.”<sup>38</sup> So when considering media as languages, Postman’s original intuition pushes a nod further Korzybski’s thesis by adding technology to the equation. In other words, the media ecology tradition focuses on the form and the consequences of the form of linguistic mediation, and thus on the technological configuration (both as process and result) of the forms of expression. In fact, Postman did to General Semantics what Douglas Engelbart, an early pioneer of personal computing and the inventor of the mouse, did to the Whorfian hypothesis: extend it to media and tools, and thus to cyberculture.

The Whorfian hypothesis states that “the world view of a culture is limited by the structure of the language which this culture uses.” But there seems to be another factor to consider in the evolution of language and human reasoning ability. We offer the following hypothesis, which is related to the Whorfian hypothesis: Both the language used by a culture, and the capability for effective intellectual activity, are directly affected during the evolution by the means by which individuals control the external manipulation of symbols.<sup>39</sup>

This connection would prove especially crucial for cyberculture: it shows that the notion of cultural (or linguistic) relativity was there as much in the mind of this theoreticians as it was in the hands of its engineers. The Whorfian connection did not escape Postman’s theorizing either, and he wrote on his second book about “the Sapir-Whorf-Korzybski-Ames-Einstein-Heisenberg-Wittgenstein-McLuhan-EtAl. Hypothesis... that language is not merely a vehicle of expression, it is also the driver; and that what we perceive, and therefore can learn, is a function of our languaging processes.”<sup>40</sup> The inclusion in this list of the names of Einstein and Heisenberg—two physicists who did not write much about media and/or language—firmly locates Postman’s theoretical proposition inside a more global perspective which begs for the name “relativism.” This identification was by no means new to the late ‘60s; in fact it was there from the start for what concerns us here: cyberneticians, and especially social scientists among them, had already



noticed that the conflation of Einstein and Heisenberg's (physical) relativism and Whorf-Sapir's (cultural) relativism was both a very potent and potentially dangerous idea.<sup>41</sup>

Whatever be the dangers and confusion of physical/cultural relativism, it is however this broad perspective that allows to understand how Postman and his fellow media ecologists could enroll Marshall McLuhan in the list of "hypothesers" founding their research tradition. According to Lance Strate, it was Louis Fordale's<sup>42</sup> comprehension of McLuhan that "his understanding of media is essentially an extension of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis."<sup>43</sup> Postman himself credited McLuhan for coining the very expression "Media Ecology" around 1962-1964.<sup>44</sup> Since then, McLuhan seems to have been regularly included in the list of "founding fathers" of the Media Ecology field of study. If there is not much doubt about this understanding of media and environment and his sharing of the three theoretical propositions introduced previously, his position on the topic discussed here is however less obvious. McLuhan was obviously aware of the existence of the Sapir-Whorf "hypothesis"<sup>45</sup>; his proximity to the ideas and theses of Alfred Korzybski is, however, more doubtful.

I am not aware of a direct reference to Korzybski in Marshall McLuhan's writings. The only reference I found was in his son Eric and Franck Zingrone's introduction to an anthology of his key ideas entitled *The Essential McLuhan*: they wrote "in the information age we should remember Korzybski's notion of 'a world of words and a world of not words.' Paradox and ambiguity must exist if the interplay between these two worlds is to be balanced humanely."<sup>46</sup> It might be exactly because of this kind of interpretation of Korzybski's ideas that McLuhan never actually quoted him. McLuhan would have never agreed on a "two-worlds" theory, nor would he

have ever been comfortable with a non-Aristotelian logic. Marshall McLuhan could have never agreed with some version of a Gnostic heresy. Or maybe, he would have, and would have not.

I would not dare claiming here that Korzybski was himself a Gnostic.<sup>47</sup> I feel pretty confident that Benjamin Lee Whorf would not have condoned such a misreading of his specific—and not so deterministic— notion of cultural relativism.<sup>48</sup> But most of their followers, and especially many of the writers discussed in the present paper, definitely fall into his category. It is the case of Philip K. Dick, without a shadow of a doubt.<sup>49</sup> William Burroughs was also suspected of such an affinity, and Borges wrote about his admiration for the “desperate and admirable men the Gnostics were” and confessed having studied their “passionate speculations.”<sup>50</sup> The case of Gregory Bateson is not too doubtful either. In his Korzybski Memorial Lecture, he actually characterized his reading of Korzybski’s ideas following this tradition:

Let us go back to the original statement for which Korzybski is most famous—the statement that the map is not the territory, This statement came out of a very wide range of philosophic thinking, going back to Greece, and wriggling through the history of European thought over the last 2,000 years. In this history, there has been a sort of rough dichotomy and often deep controversy. There has been a violent enmity and bloodshed. It all starts, I suppose, with the Pythagoreans versus their predecessors, and the argument took the shape of, “Do you ask what it’s made of—earth, fire, water, etc.?” Or do you ask, “What is its pattern?” Pythagoras stood for inquiry into pattern rather than inquiry into substance. That controversy has gone through the ages, and the Pythagorean half of it has, until recently, been on the whole the submerged half. The Gnostics followed the Pythagoreans, and the alchemists follow the Gnostics, and so on.<sup>51</sup>

Anyways, it is not much news anymore to repeat that cyberculture as a whole is Gnostic through and through.<sup>52</sup> Have you ever asked a cyberaddict if he enjoyed coming back to this world? Ever heard of the Matrix?

Since his conversion to Roman Catholicism in the end of March 1937 (he was then 26 years old), Marshall McLuhan remained a devout believer, whose main theological inclination

was towards Thomism. He was also, however, a “trickster”, probably as paranoid and schizoid as William Burroughs or Philip K. Dick ever were. He did not make much mention of Korzybski, but here is what he wrote about Dr. Junk: “Burroughs is not asking merit marks as a writer; he is trying to point to the shut-out button of an active and lethal environmental process.”<sup>53</sup> On the same occasion, he provided yet another meaning to his most famous aphorism that seems a far cry away from the beatific optimism many ascribe to the father figure of the “global village”: “it is the medium that is the message because the medium creates an environment that is as indelible as it is lethal”, he wrote.

McLuhan was either a Thomist, i.e. an Aristotelian onto-theologian, or an artistic gadfly prone to Luciferian probes and other Menippean satires. He was “bipolar”, which might explain why he could simultaneously “influence” the French Theorists<sup>54</sup> and the Media Ecologists, the Borgesians and the Korzybskites (without mentioning too much the staff and readers of *Wired*); thus achieving the goals he had picked for himself, in the mapping metaphors of the period: “I'm making explorations. I don't know where they're going to take me,” he once said, “I want to map new terrain rather than chart old landmarks.”<sup>55</sup> Many still vacation by his maps, be it on the secure shores of the Omega Point<sup>56</sup>... or the bleak shoal waters of the Neuromancers:

It's our nature to represent. We're the animal that represents, the sole and only maker of maps. And if our weakness has been to confuse the bright and bloody colors of our calendars with the true weather of days, and the parchment's territory of our maps with the land spread out before us...never mind. We've always been on our way to this new place, that is no place, really, but is real.<sup>57</sup>

### III.

Now that it is time to conclude, I want to attract your attention on Bruno Bosteels’s recent reading of “the entire field of critical theory and cultural studies” as being “split among

the melancholy admirers of McLuhan, for whom *the medium is the message*, and the hopeful followers of Korzybski, for whom *the map is not the territory*.” Bosteels follows up on this polemical characterization with an attenuating gesture that seems crucial to me: “the irreconciliation of both positions is perhaps only a lure, as such inseparable from the kind of semiology for which radical alternatives are also available. Perhaps Baudrillard’s descriptions of simulation should then be reread in light of a different semiotic framework altogether.<sup>58</sup> Jean Baudrillard was indeed an admirer of Marshall McLuhan. He credited him with having coined the definitive aphorism of the Hyperreal, “the key formula of the era of simulation,”<sup>59</sup> *The medium is the message*. Gregory Bateson was an admirer of Alfred Korzybski. The instances of his reflection on the famous aphorism of the Count are countless in his work: *The map is not the territory*.

But rather than talking about Bosteels’s “different semiotic framework”, we might want to ponder about a different logic. For that was, after all, the most important proposal Korzybski ever made: move from an Aristotelian to a non-Aristotelian logics (that and the synchronous moves to a non-Euclidian mathematics and a non-Newtonian physics). That means concretely to replace, displace or plainly do away with Aristotle’s classic “three laws of thought”: the law of identity<sup>60</sup>, the law of non-contradiction<sup>61</sup>, and the law of excluded middle.<sup>62</sup> Applied to language, Korzybski’s main interest since he diagnosed at this level the root of all modern pathologies, the proposal goes as follows:

- (1) If the traditional Aristotelian metaphysics says that something (a word) is something else (a thing), then I say that something (a word) is "nothing" (that is, not a thing);
- (2) if Aristotelian grammar says that a word has a definite meaning (that is means what it means as a defined term), then I say that a word has an indefinite range of meanings (that is, means what it means as an undefined term in a particular context or structure); and
- (3) if Aristotelian logic asserts that something cannot both *be* and *not be* at the same time (that

is, must be *either* one thing *or* not be that one thing), then I say that according to modern quantum physics and relativity theory, something (light) can both *be* one thing (matter) and *not be* that one thing (that is, it can be a quantum of energy) at the same time.<sup>63</sup>

Korzybski was thus aware that his proposal included three inter-nested epistemological levels: metaphysics, grammar, and eventually logics: a new image of the *Trivium* so dear to Marshall McLuhan (and the rest of the General Semantics program took care of the *Quadrivium*). Among these levels, that of metaphysics is indeed first, and now begs for a renewed conception of identity, a relative conception of identity: “relative to the history of the things considered, relative to the environment the thing is in, relative to our own practical purposes, relative to the frame of reference from which it is viewed, etc.”<sup>64</sup> That this proposal has somehow become the basic mode of functioning of our present culture, under the rule of its most common prefix, *cyber* (or its alternative qualification, *post-*), is no news anymore. Consider for instance Frederic Jameson’s conclusion to his “cartographic digression” at the end of his introduction to *Postmodernism. Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as a spatial scale.”<sup>65</sup>

Jean Baudrillard, too, has noticed this elision of the Symbolic, and, moreover, made of the “origins of the semiotic in the abolition of the symbolic, [and] the characterization of our society as defined by this transformation”, “the central organizing principles of his work”.<sup>66</sup> His fate in the “representational dialectic”, however, was long gone... Instead, he, like McLuhan, recurred to satire and aphorisms, probes and provocations (and a photographic practice). It was no satire or provocation, however, when he found the metaphysical foundation of the Hyperreal in a move away from Aristotle:

...this is an Aristotelian logic which is no longer our own. Our virtual has definitively overtaken the actual and we must be content with this extreme virtuality which, unlike the Aristotelian, deters any passage to action. We are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in a hyperrealist logic of deterrence of the real by the virtual.<sup>67</sup>

But instead of “the deterrence of the real by the virtual”, that leaves not much room for grace, let alone for hope, could one still, like William Gibson asserted, keep on going to “this new place, that is no place, really, but is real”? Could one find again “a sense of place”<sup>68</sup> in a place that is really no place? An element of a possible answer, I hope, is provided by the exploration I just offered on the null-A genealogical map of cyberculture. It is thus to Borges, this dreamer of dreams nested inside other dreams, that I will leave the last word, with his reaction to Coleridge’s dream:

“If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul has really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke—Ay!—and what then?”

I wonder what my reader thinks of such a fancy; to me it is perfect.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Arthur Byron Interviews Philip K. Dick”, *Vertex*, 1(6), February 1974.

<sup>2</sup> The governor is the name of flyball regulator on James Watt steam engine, usually considered as the first cybernetic device (i.e. working on the feedback principle).

<sup>3</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Blade Runner: A Movie*, Berkeley, Blue Wind Press, 1989, volume is not paginated.

<sup>4</sup> For the final term of this equation, see my book entitled *Junkware: From DNA to Cyberculture*, forthcoming at the University of Minnesota Press in the Posthumanities book series.

<sup>5</sup> François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co, Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of the importance of the trope of the virus in contemporary cyberculture, see my paper entitled “Hypervirus: A Clinical Report” in *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader*, edited by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker at the University of Toronto Press, 2008, pp. 143-157.

<sup>7</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October* 59: 3-7, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Also translated by “On Exactitude in Science”. The story was first published in the March 1946 edition of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires, año 1, no. 3* as part of a piece called “Museo” under the name B. Lynch Davis, a joint pseudonym of Borges and Adolfo Bioy; that piece credited it as the work of “Suarez Miranda”, *Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV*, Lerida, 1658 (*Wikipedia*).

<sup>9</sup> Borges acknowledges this intellectual debt in a few instances in his work, including in “When Fiction Lives in Fiction” (*El Hogar*, June 2, 1939) and “Partial Magic in the *Quixote*” (*Otras Inquisiciones*, 1952).

<sup>10</sup> *Physics* IV:1, 209a25.

<sup>11</sup> Chapter IV, “On Structure”, pp. 55-65 of the Fourth Edition, 1958, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> I borrow this term to Louis Armand, in a footnote entitled “a topographics of the virtual” in his introduction to *Rhizomes.06*, “Codeworks and Surveillance”, Spring 2003 [web page] last accessed December 26, 2008 at <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue6/armand5.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> See Brian Rotman, (1993). *Ad infinitum: the ghost in Turing machine. Taking God out of mathematics and putting the body back in*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Actually one should add a third criteria, i.e. size, for size and scale do not amount to the same. For clarity and brevity’s sakes, I will however conflate them here.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*. vols. 1–8, edited by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss and A. W. Burks. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1935-1966, 3.609.

<sup>16</sup> “Borges and Peirce, on abduction and maps”, *Semiotica* 140: 13-31, 2002, p. 24, my emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Essai sur la philosophie des sciences*. Paris, Bachelier, 1834.

<sup>19</sup> “Practically and historically, this signified the substitution of social control by the *end* (and by a more or less dialectical *providence* which surveys the accomplishment of this *end*) for social control by anticipation, simulation and programming, and indeterminate mutation directed by the code.” “The order of simulacra”, *op. cit.* p. 111. Or, more succinctly, “Sweep away teleology in favor of a teleonomic principle?” “DNA or the Metaphysics of Code”, *op. cit.* p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> But it can also be argued that it was there since the dawn of the technological ages, with knitting: “The most distinctive feature of knitting is its loops”, Sadie Plant, “Mobile Knitting” in *Information Is Alive*, pp. 26-37, Rotterdam, V2\_/NAi publishers, 2003, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994 [1948], pp. 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Not at first, but eventually, when molecular biology turned to bioinformatics, and the gene reentered the hyperreal it should have never left, in the 1990s.

<sup>23</sup> See Lily Kay, *Who Wrote the Book of Life? A History of the Genetic Code*, Stanford University Press, 2000, and its review by Richard C. Lewontin, “Molecular Biology: In the Beginning Was the Word”, *Science* 291(5507): 1263-64, 2000. As Lily Kay so eloquently puts it: “the genetic code is ‘a period piece,’ a manifestation of the emergence of the information age.” (p. 2). The genetic code is *the* period piece.

<sup>24</sup> This distinction is analog to the one Umberto Eco makes between /code/ and /s-code/. See *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, 1979, pp. 36-40.

<sup>25</sup> *Who Wrote the Book of Life?*, *op. cit.* p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> *A Theory of Semiotics*, *op. cit.* p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> “Since an s-code deserves theoretical attention only when it is inserted within a significant communication framework (the code), the theoretical attention is focused on its intended purpose: therefore a non-significant system is called a ‘code’ by a sort of *metonymical* transference, being understood as part of a semiotic whole with which it shares some properties.” In other words, the recursion is pragmatically metonymical from the start, but these pragmatics are deeply paradoxical. Eco adds, “thus an s-code is usually called a ‘code’ but this habit relies on a rhetorical convention that it would be wise to eliminate.” *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Bateson, “Form, Substance, and Difference”, *XIXth Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture*, 1970, available on-line at the General Semantics website [last accessed December 28, 2008] : <http://www.generalsemantics.org/misc/akml/akmls/37-bateson.pdf>



- <sup>29</sup> “The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1964], p. 280.
- <sup>30</sup> “A Theory of Play and Fantasy”, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1954], p. 189.
- <sup>31</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, New York, Bantam Books, 1980, p. 33.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.
- <sup>33</sup> Gregory Bateson, “Ecology of Mind: The Sacred”, in *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, edited by Rodney E. Donaldson, New York, HarperCollins, 1991 [1974], p. 265.
- <sup>34</sup> In *Value Systems and Social Process*, New York, Basic Books, 1968.
- <sup>35</sup> “Media Ecology: General Semantics in the Third Millenium”, *XXIIIth Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture*, 1974, available on-line at the General Semantics website [last accessed December 28, 2008]: <http://www.generalsemantics.org/misc/akml/akmls/41-43-postman-johnson.pdf>
- <sup>36</sup> In *Perspectives on Culture, Technology, and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition*, edited by Casey Man Kong Lum, pp. 1-60, Cresskill, Hampton Press, 2006, p. 32-33.
- <sup>37</sup> The use of the biological term “symbiosis” here is very representative of the “ecological” perspective and highly reminiscent of J.C.R. Licklider’s 1960 paper, “Man-Computer Symbiosis” (*IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics*, March: 4-11). This major contribution can be rightly considered as the founding paper for most of the 1960s research in computing in the U.S. and thus of the then-nascent “cyberculture”. Licklider would eventually contribute another major paper (with Robert Taylor) in 1968, “The Computer as a Communication Device” (*Science & Technology*, avril: 21-31), that would change forever the perception of the computer: from tool to medium.
- <sup>38</sup> Lum, “Notes Towards an Intellectual History...”, op. cit. p. 34.
- <sup>39</sup> Douglas Engelbart, *Augmenting Human Intellect: A Conceptual Framework*, 1962. For more on Engelbart see my *Bootstrapping : Douglas Engelbart, Coevolution and the Origins of Personal Computing*, Stanford University Press, 2000, and especially its pages 36-56 for the relation between his framework for the Augmentation of Human Intellect and the Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis (which by the way is not an hypothesis at all, and even less a deterministic proposition).
- <sup>40</sup> Neil Postman and Charles Wiengartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, New York, Delta, 1969, p. 101, cited in Lance Strate, *Echoes and Reflections: On Media Ecology as a Field of Study*. Cresskill, Hampton Press, 2006, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (second edition, New York, Morrow, 1928, p. 145), and Steve Joshua Heims' commentary in *The Cybernetics Group*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1991, p. 269.

<sup>42</sup> Louis Fordale was Postman and Weingarter's professor at Columbia University's Teachers College.

<sup>43</sup> Strate, *Echoes and Reflections...*, op. cit. p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> See Lum, "Notes Towards an Intellectual History...", op. cit. p. 9 for the contention that it could have been the case.

<sup>45</sup> Philip Marchand and Neil Postman dates this awareness from the early fifties, probably sometimes between 1953 and the 1956 posthumous publication of an anthology of Whorf's papers edited by John Carroll (*Language, Thought, and Reality*, New York, John Wiley & Sons). They characterized Whorf and Sapir work as having theorized that "human beings learn to perceive reality through language and that language shape the experience of the world" and add, "not a startling thesis for someone exposed to the work of I.A. Richards on language and communications or to the belief of the ancient grammarians that the order of language was analogous to the order of reality." *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger: A Biography*, MIT Press, 1998, p. 126.

<sup>46</sup> Eric McLuhan and Franck Zingrone, "Introduction" in *The Essential McLuhan*, Concord, Ontario, Anansi, 1995, pp. 7-8.

<sup>47</sup> Although some Gnostic interpretations of his thesis exist, and are even documented. See for instance the case of Ralph Moriarty deBit, aka Vitvan, the founder of the School of Natural Order in Baker, Nevada. See "Highlights of Vitvan's teachings, v. 1.3" in relation to General Semantics [webpage last accessed December 29, 2008] at [http://m\\_euser.tripod.com/articles/vith11.htm](http://m_euser.tripod.com/articles/vith11.htm).

<sup>48</sup> Whorf was a Methodist, and as such, belonged to the Protestant Church the least amenable to such a characterization. For this theological insight, see for instance Michael J. Christensen, "John Wesley's Reformulation of a Patristic Doctrine" on the Wesley Center for Applied Theology Website [last accessed December 29, 2008] at [http://wesley.mnu.edu/wesleyan\\_theology/theojrnl/31-35/31-2-4.htm](http://wesley.mnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/31-35/31-2-4.htm)

<sup>49</sup> PKD was indeed a self-proclaimed Gnostic, and even believed that he was the reincarnation of a Gnostic of the first Century.

<sup>50</sup> In "A Defense of Basilides the False", in *Jorge Luis Borges. Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger, London, Penguin, 1999, p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Bateson, "Form, Substance, and Difference", op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> See for instance Slavoj Zizek's "Against the Digital Heresy", chapter one of *On Belief*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 6-55, and Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York, Random House, 1999.

- <sup>53</sup> “Notes on Burroughs”, *Nation*, 28 December 1964, p. 519.
- <sup>54</sup> See Donald F. Theall, *The Virtual McLuhan* (McGill/Queens University Press, 2001) and especially his chapters 6, “McLuhan and the Cults: Gnosticism, Hermetecism, and Modernism” pp. 108-124, and 7, “McLuhan as a Prepostmodernist and Forerunner of French Theory”, pp. 125-137
- <sup>55</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Playboy Interview*, March 1969.
- <sup>56</sup> See Pierre Lévy (*passim*) and Douglas Rushkoff, announcing his 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture on *Boingboing: A Directory of Wonderful Things*, October 10, 2008 [website last accessed December 30] <http://www.boingboing.net/2008/10/05/sets-and-settings.html>
- <sup>57</sup> *William Gibson: No Maps for this Territory*, a documentary by Mark Neale, this excerpt (with music from U2) available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLmgrYS781A>.
- <sup>58</sup> Bruno, “A Misreading of Maps: The Politics of Cartography in Marxism and Poststructuralism” in *Signs of Change: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern*, edited by Stephan Barker, pp. 109-142, SUNY Press, 1996, p. 134
- <sup>59</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The implosion of meaning in the media”, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston and Paul Patton, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983 [1978], p. 101.
- <sup>60</sup> “Whatever is, is.”
- <sup>61</sup> “Nothing can both be, and not be.”
- <sup>62</sup> “Everything must either be, or not be”
- <sup>63</sup> Korzybski cited in R. E. Paulson, *Language, Science, and Action. Korzybski's General Semantics--A Study in Comparative Intellectual History*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 1983, p. 47, emphasis in the original.
- <sup>64</sup> Oliver L. Reiser, “Résumé: Aristotle, Newton, and Einstein,” in *Logic and General Semantics: Writings of Oliver L. Reiser and Others*, edited by Sanford I. Berman, pp. 80-88, San Francisco, International Society for General Semantics. 1989. [1940], pp. 85-86.
- <sup>65</sup> Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 54.
- <sup>66</sup> William Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media. A Critical Introduction*. London, Polity, 2005, p. 28.
- <sup>67</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Gulf War Did not Take Place”, in *Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, pp. 231-253, 2001, p. 233.
- <sup>68</sup> Joshau Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, Oxford University Press, 1985.