

# BEYOND LITERATE CULTURE?

## *A Response to McKenzie Wark*

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Ken Wark's assertion in *Meanjin* 4/1992 that literary theorists need to keep abreast of a rapidly expanding technoculture is an important one, and can certainly do with repeating.<sup>1</sup> Even within something as ferociously interdisciplinary as cultural studies there is a danger of specialization, and loyalty to a foundation discipline can blind us to what Wark calls 'the ever more abstract and mobile field of vectors that is contemporary communication' (687). I also commend Wark for shifting the debate about literature from the spatial to the temporal dimension. We have moved beyond the endless recapitulation of what is 'outside' literature; the demystification of literature as bourgeois ideology is old hat among critics who are concerned with different agendas, particularly with developing programmes that, in Gregory Ulmer's words, are 'capable of reuniting the advanced research in the humanities disciplines with the conduct of everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> Wark's essay contributes to the debate about the location of literature in contemporary society, and the fate of the printed word in the electronic discursive network of postmodern culture.

Wark, however, is a little too hasty in dismissing literature from the spaces of contemporary culture. His essay reads more like an eviction notice than a critical assessment of what comes *after* literature. Wark's argument depends on the premise that once assumptions of value and significance have been removed, literature can't possibly hope to compete with the media on the global discursive network. Wark derides literature's communicative impotence in the age of CNN and synchronicity. Admittedly, movable type was invented some time ago, and it may well be outmoded as far as speed and density of information exchange are concerned. It is also beyond doubt that within cultural studies the traditional, humanist pursuit of literature is something of an anachronism. But the corollary of this precept need not be that literature will become an endangered species, or that to exist at all it requires an ideological

or performative justification. If literature fails as a postmodern communication technology, does this mean that it also disappears from the space of everyday life, as one of the cultural activities available for people to participate in? I think not. People from different sectors of the community continue to read literature, often well aware that it has been dethroned from its historical position of cultural importance.

On the other hand, we shouldn't assume that whatever supplants literature as dominant cultural activity, be it Gameboy or holography, virtual reality or interactive multimedia, will or should acquire the spiritual baggage that once belonged to literature. A Society of the Friends of the Vector? Nah. There is much more at stake here than the questions of value and use, or the constitution of literariness. In asking what comes after literature, Wark is prompting consideration of much larger issues: of the degree to which *literate culture* has been affected by electronic networks and the like, and of the ways it has been integrated into the emergent technoculture.

The most obvious point of convergence between literate and post-literate forms is the electronic book. In Douglas Adams' *Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* such an object was taken for granted, elegantly adaptable to a number of services, from galactic map to Baedeker; though, like any repository of knowledge, it was always out of date. At present the electronic book is something to be encountered mainly in libraries with robust acquisitions budgets. It still has something of the rarity that once belonged to the illuminated manuscript. And, like its medieval predecessor, it is a wonder to behold. There is nothing to rival it for information storage and accelerated retrieval. The production of the CD-ROM version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that computer technology is well on the way to fulfilling the ideological and idealistic agendas of the electronic revolution: one compact disk replaces 20,000 pages, or 66 kilograms of tree. For pure research purposes CD-ROM databases will make precomputerized intellectual labour seem like a penance.

But what of the electronic novel? There is a growing library of computerized or 'expanded' books, and cyberpunk novelist William Gibson has written the first distinctly electronic novel, *Agrippa*, which anticipates a new culture of interactive fiction. In an assessment of the coming of the paperless book, Paul Fisher has indicated that at this stage the computerized book lacks one essential ingredient – user friendliness.<sup>3</sup> *Ulysses* may well fit onto one megabyte of CD-ROM, but you can hardly read it in bed. As far as literature goes, the electronic book is a cumbersome curiosity, the useless and impractical precursor of a technology that is still evolving. Fisher's claim that as soon as portable hardware is developed 'then the

generations raised on technology will discard their parents' bookshelves and send Penguins the way of the dodo'<sup>4</sup> suffers from the same hazy temporality as Wark's account of post-literate society.

Do we need to invoke a futuristic moment that is so drastically different from our own? TV and video have already helped to produce a generation attuned to the screen, and most of the energy put into the study of popular culture is devoted to electronic rather than literary practices. The problem with prognostications of electronic cultural hegemony is that they overlook the complexity of cultural change, and the staying power of older cultural forms. The fact that, as Wark puts it, 'post-literate cultural forms predominate' (685) does not signal the end of literate culture, for there is much more to it than the identity or existence of 'literature'. Wark's analysis is so entrenched within the Gramscian thrust of cultural studies that it excludes the possibility of discussing anything beyond sites of contestation. Literature may not mean very much to Wark or the Nintendo generation, but it is futile to reiterate the point that literature is beyond the pale as far as contestation 'in and of the postmodern' goes. It is well known that more students are acquainted with Shakespeare these days through TV or film adaptations than through actually reading the stuff. The terms of reference need to be much broader if we are to come to some understanding of how modes of discourse evolve. Walter Ong's concept of the 'shifting sensorium' is a more flexible theoretical model of how communications culture changes over time.<sup>5</sup> Ong locates human communication squarely within a particular configuration of the senses, and explains a given culture in terms of the way in which the sensorium is organized at a given point in time: oral cultures privilege the auditory, literate cultures the visual. His stress on shift and overlap as being kinetic and historically variable has done much to counter the idea that a communications revolution means the replacement of one mode by a dominant other. Ong views oral, literate and electronic cultures as phases in the transformation of the word, and he sets out to determine the status of the word as it is configured within the modern sensorium. Writing in the early 1960s, Ong noted that the modern sensorium was 'dismayingly mixed', and that the key to understanding the character of communications culture was in acknowledging that different discursive modes 'overlie'<sup>6</sup> rather than succeed one another. His perception of the present as being a complex ensemble of discursive modes, each exploiting a particular sense and relying on the synthesis of more than one, provides a useful guide to our own present:

What we are faced with today is a sensorium . . . so reflected and refracted inside and outside itself in so many directions as to be thus far utterly bewildering. Our situation is one of more and more complicated interactions. The radio telescope is an example. It has largely supplanted the earlier more direct-sight instruments. Yet it does not exactly return us to a world of sound. Rather, it provides data for a basically visual field of awareness, but does so by elaborate indirection. One looks at charts instead of at a galaxy. . . . Vision here is more and more disqualified as providing direct access to information. (89)

This brings to mind what we have come to refer to as hyperreality: telecommunicative access to a world that is apparently always there, simultaneous to the viewer's existential present, apprehensible through vision, but always a simulated vision of the infravisible.

Gregory Ulmer is one of the more astute theorists of discursive change. In the tradition established by Ong, Ulmer emphasizes the interdiscursive nature of communications culture. Ulmer's concept of 'teletheory' interprets Derrida's *grammatological* typology of writing in terms of the transition from print to video culture, and this concept stipulates the interrelatedness of oral, literate and video cultures. Ulmer recognizes that the communications revolution presents an opportunity to cross ideological boundaries of specialization and privilege; he presents teletheory as a 'translation (or transduction) process researching the equivalencies among the discourses of science, popular culture, everyday life, and private experience'.<sup>7</sup> Ulmer puts his theory into practice in his experimental genre of writing, 'mystory', a mode of inscription that involves activating one's engagement with the world in terms of all the discursive modes and registers through which one assembles knowledge. Ulmer focuses on the ways in which the cognitive processes demanded by new technologies, such as video, are unavoidably caught up with residual and/or dominant cognitive habits. As long as there is a communicative mode centred on the word, it is impossible to engage with video without drawing on the procedures of orality and literacy. One of the projects of teletheory, then, is to enable students to think electronically, which is regarded as being supplementary to oral and literate epistemology.

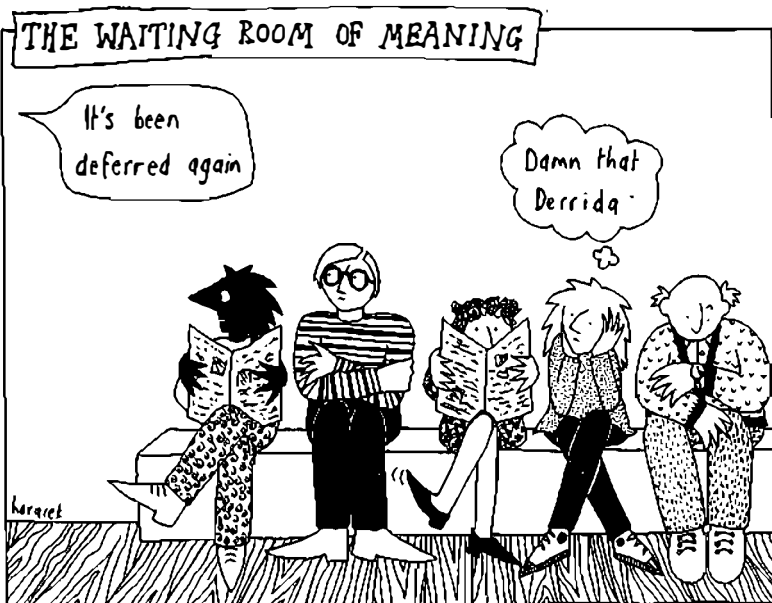
Mystory offers at once a way of relating the apparatus of literacy to videocy, as well as a mode of invention that is capable of transcending the linearity imposed by the book. Linearity has become the whipping boy of post-literate technocrats in recent years, and apologists for new writing technologies such as interactive multimedia have argued that their wares simulate the encyclopaedic, multi-levelled density of human thought, and thus can liberate creativity from the confines of the book.

There is nothing new in this critical attention to the book. The history of literature this century is pockmarked with the traces of rupture, with moments of disenchantment with the limitations imposed on writing by the technology of print. Indeed, much of Gregory Ulmer's work draws on the practices and assumptions of avant-garde anti-representationalism. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the most enduring experiment in the deconstruction of the book written this century. In the 1960s Joyce's writing (principally *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) was central to the formation and consolidation of the textualist and deconstructionist principles of the *nouvelle critique*. One of the features of Joyce's writing that appeared so amenable to the concept of *différance*, for example, was its ceaseless discontinuity, its 'hesitation of meaning into the perpetual "later"'.<sup>8</sup> Hugh Kenner referred to this suspension of the linear development of meaning as an 'aesthetic of delay', and identified it as the principal motivation of Joyce's narrative in *Ulysses*:

Joyce's strange book has no stranger aspect than this, that no one comprehensive reading is thinkable. A book – certainly a novel – normally presupposes that ideal attention will reap it at one traverse. . . . But *Ulysses* is so designed that new readers . . . cannot possibly grasp certain elements because of a warp in the order of presentation, and veteran readers will perceive after twenty years new lights going on as a consequence of a question they have only just thought to ask.<sup>9</sup>

The aesthetic of delay demands that any given piece of information be understood in its immediate context, but also requires that it be held in abeyance for a multiplicity of cross-references elsewhere, at a later date. This differential, paratactical play of textual meaning in *Ulysses* returns to literature some of the temporal dynamism that the word lost with the advent of print, investing writing with a lateral multidimensionality that transcends the flatness of contiguity. (Joyce is not the first writer to prompt this kind of radical renegotiation of the temporal and spatial relation between printed words. Mallarmé and Shakespeare are notable predecessors.)

The kind of reading required of *Ulysses* involves the associative and cross-referential processes exploited by hypertext networks. In an exemplary reading of the myriad of references made to the potato that Bloom carries around in his pocket, Kenner has shown how a motif is constructed by the reader's associative collation of details scattered throughout the book, in very different contexts.<sup>10</sup> The terms and principles of his textual analysis are echoed in the procedures of hypertext, which simulate mnemonic structures of association common to human cognition by constructing a 'directed graph' through an interactive ensemble of nodes, links and anchors.<sup>11</sup>



*Ulysses* may well be regarded as a kind of paradigm of hypertext, which is often described in introductory literature as 'non-sequential writing'.

*Ulysses* is one of the most impressive reinforcements we have of the theory that linearity is only a condition of the technological object of the book, not the act of reading it. It is the reader's active memory, in collaboration with the durable physicality of print, that constitutes the phenomenological space of reading. Hypertext environments, as they are currently being developed, simulate cognitive processes that are well traversed within contemporary literary practice, and this perception of radical writing as the forerunner of a subsequent discursive model supports the contention that the future of cultural studies remains necessarily tied to critical analysis of how we read texts of any kind.<sup>12</sup> Their difference (apart from context and the nature of their use) lies in the remarkable compression and speed with which hypertext renders associative links, and enables the synthesis of complex and divergent networks of information. Such efficiency would seem contrary to the kind of reading warranted and yet celebrated by texts such as *Ulysses*, in which themes and motifs are built up gradually, lovingly, by accretion, over many years of commitment – a more intensive version of the traditional devotion to literature that is now in decline. It is easy to imagine a

CD-ROM exegetical guide to *Ulysses* that would enable us to homogenize the *Don Giovanni* motif in the blink of an eye. But this, too, has already been anticipated within literary culture. The critic Harry Blamires, in *The Bloomsday Book: A Guide Through Joyce's Ulysses* (1966) offers a simulation of many readings of the text crammed into one dense and sophisticated commentary, or, in the parlance of the day, navigational facility. In *The Bloomsday Book* all the hard work has been done; it is a heightened example of the simple fact that criticism, particularly of difficult and long works, has always provided something like the services of hypertext.

Similarly we have hypertext technology to thank for giving us the 'corrected' *Ulysses*, the *Critical and Synoptic Edition*, published in 1982. There was no complete holograph of *Ulysses* when it went to the printers. Always correcting from memory, without consulting previous drafts, Joyce scattered variants across a diverse textual field during the seven years it took to write the book. The editor of the variorum edition, Hans Walter Gabler, treated every inscription within this heterogeneous field as 'a continuous manuscript text',<sup>13</sup> and submitted it to an elaborate computer program to scan for overlaps, identify variants, and finally authenticate an ideal authorial version. The new *Ulysses*, then, is a text that Joyce never actually wrote: it is a product of a series of technological editorial processes, and not an integrated act of composition (the computerized *Ulysses*, however, took as long to construct as Joyce took to write the 1922 edition). Now, while we can congratulate the technology for giving us a text that would have taken much longer to produce without the aid of a computer, we must also attend to the hermeneutic problems raised by producing such a text in the first place.

Reading literature, like doing academic research, is intellectual labour, but hypertextual commentaries, such as *The Bloomsday Book* and its inevitable electronic equivalent, have wide hermeneutic implications. It is easy to see how the database can be useful and valuable in academic research, but when hypertext is applied to the reading of literary texts it opens up some problems for institutions such as universities, where *individual* interpretation and research still have currency (despite the impact of postmodern revisions of intellectual ownership, intertextuality and logokleptism). As Paul Fisher has noted, CD-ROM packages such as Chadwyck Healey's *English Poetry Full-Text Database* will enable students to 'filler poets in ways it would be easy to mistake for erudition'.<sup>14</sup> As the uses of new technologies shift from their original applications, they engender potential conflict with the habits and values of pre-electronic cultural assumptions and forms. Advances in communications and

information technologies impinge upon all facets of social and cultural life, on the way we think, the way we relate to others and the world we live in, the conditions of labour and leisure, and the nature of the things we do every day. Indeed, the shift from print to electronic culture re-enacts the contours of the shift from oral to literate culture, both in the utilitarian benefits it promises and in the anxieties it engenders.

The American composer John Zorn has described the rapid changes of style and pace in his music as being 'ideal for people who are impatient, because it is jam-packed with information that is changing very fast'.<sup>15</sup> Zorn recognizes that video and computer technology has influenced the way we receive and process information, prompting a new demand for speed. Yet it would be careless to assume on the basis of the pace of contemporary consciousness that we have gone beyond the processes of literacy. According to the model of literacy outlined by educator and theorist Paulo Freire, literacy is the fundamental epistemological model that underlies and motivates our entire involvement with the world. For Freire, literacy is the principle that enables individuals to negotiate any order of sign (verbal, pictographic), and activates the procedures by which they become part of a culture, and are able to understand and accord value to practices within that culture, from social habits to video. As one commentator has noted, literacy is the political project that enables individuals to 'constitute and reconstitute their relationship with wider society'.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the advances of technological society, print seems to be more prevalent, indeed more conspicuous than ever before. Nowhere is this better illustrated than within the scholarly industry of cultural studies itself. The most cursory glance at the catalogue of any publisher of cultural studies such as Routledge testifies to the conspicuous proliferation of academic *books* about the effects of change within communications technologies that are increasingly moving beyond book culture. Despite his invocation of a post-literate culture, I encountered Wark's article as a printed document, not through E-Mail, CD-ROM or floppy disk. There may well come a time when scholarly articles will be purchased like the latest Sega game at Tandy, or accessed on the home PC. For the moment scholarship, enlivened debate and inquiry into the changing world we live in are inconceivable without literate culture (which much of it presumes to be outside and beyond), and its most enduring technology, print. For many people currently interested in cultural studies and the like, print media provide the only viable access to criticism and ideas.<sup>17</sup> In many instances this access is only available



through libraries, one of the arboreal archives marked by Wark as an antiquarian curiosity.

If within the current transformation of cultural technologies the role of the humanities intellectual (a product of literate culture) is a diminished one, then a further question arises: why write? Surely silence or exclusive computer networking are the only ideological options for the intellectual who comes to the realization that it is futile to continue writing critiques of a culture that is moving further away from the forms and structures of literacy. Just one more preposterous book on the death of the book. Wark seems to have forgotten this point. For whom, exactly, is he writing, and as whom? The referential appeal of Wark's article is testimony to the overlap of emergent and residual cultural assumptions. The 'wired society' he invokes is happening, but his critical commentary on it is made available for consideration by the exercise of a certain kind of writing, within a particular sphere of the print media, which can isolate, formulate and communicate knowledge about the state of play within information society. The dominant discourse of analytical-referentiality produced and was produced by the literate mind, and Wark perpetuates it, first, by addressing himself to an unseen but implied audience of cultural-studies colleagues, and secondly, in his description of what he thinks criticism can achieve:

The problem with the 'big picture stories' is not that they ought to be thrown out, but that their correct application has to be learnt and their use restricted to that. Their correct application, I would contend, is as a communicative mode in which intellectual practice at diverse sites can be speculatively organized, related and compared. The grand narrative is an imaginary *translation* device – no more and no less. (689)

'Organization', 'relation', 'comparison' – these are the defining metaphors of analysis and reference. But as metaphors they suggest the degree to which literacy still informs and guides the intellectual practices and nomenclature of current research into what we are becoming and where we are going as social beings. The organization and comparison of material within a coherent framework are cognitive structures that are very hard to unlearn, and determine the way we orient ourselves towards avant-garde video, the weather or grand narratives. Criticism, for the moment anyway, had better get used to that.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'After Literature: Culture, policy, theory and beyond', *Meanjin*, 4/1992, p. 683.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Ulmer, *Teletheory. Grammatology in the Age of Video* (Routledge, London, 1989), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Fisher, 'Look, no pages: CD-ROM books arrive', *Age Green Guide*, 10 December 1992, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *The Presence of the Word. Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Teletheory*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Ambiviolences: Notes for Reading Joyce', in D. Attridge and D. Ferrer (eds), *Post-Structuralist Joyce* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ulysses* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1982), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Nielson, 'The Art of Navigating Through Hypertext', *Communications of the ACM*, 33, 3, 1990, p. 298.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Con Davis, 'Freud, Lacan and the Subject of Cultural Studies', *College Literature*, 18, 2, 1991, p. 23; see also Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (eds), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (Open University Press, Buckingham, 1992), pp. 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (eds), *Ulysses: A Critical and Synoptic Edition* (Garland, New York, 1982), vol. 3, p. 1895.

<sup>14</sup> 'Look, no pages', op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Sleeve notes for *Spillane* (Elektra, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Henry Giroux, Introduction to P. Freire and D. Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew Allen, 'Border Crossing', *New Researcher*, 1-2, 1992, p. 122.