Stuart J. Murray — Perhaps I can start by asking you a general question about subjectivity as this pertains to electronic media. My ability to communicate more effectively over space and time — electronically — undoubtedly has an influence on where I am, and on what I am as a spatio-temporal referent. But how does my manipulation of space/time impact on my bodysubject, on who I am? How do we figure this ability in the mode of information? Although you have cautioned against the imposition of a liberalist metanarrative, if we theorize the subject's communicative abilities in the language of intentionality, should we consider the subject in the mode of information as an extended “I can,” to use Husserl's phrasing? How might we conceive of the human, if not by its abilities, its agency?

Mark Poster — You ask about who I am and my agency in cyberspace, about my manipulation of space/time. I don’t think it's my manipulation of space/time; that implies too much agency. Instead, we are a point in a circuit of a space/time configuration. And how does that affect who I am? Well, if you regard the subject as consciousness, then this question leads in a certain direction. But I
come to it from the linguistic turn, and look at the subject not from the point of view of its own consciousness, but the way in which it is figured as a cultural entity. This happens in part — not wholly, but in part — through media; through media, but also through face-to-face relations and through other practices. Your question returns to intentionality and seems to want to pull back to the position of the conscious subject; however, with Foucault and in my own work, I believe there is an attempt to understand how it is through culture that individuals are figured as conscious subjects or as agents, in other words, to understand what makes conscious subjectivity or agency possible in our culture, because not all cultures configure the individual in this way.

S.J.M. — In other words, going back and looking at the underlying or enabling conditions of subjectivity and consciousness, through a linguistic critique.

M.P. — Yes; certainly points of consciousness are always there, but they are configured in a certain way in modern culture as a kind of center, as a point of origin and as a privileged position. This is fine, but what I’m trying to do is to understand how media contribute to the construction of that kind of subject or to different kinds of subjects, different kinds of identities, different kinds of positionalities.

S.J.M. — You have made efforts to redefine human subjectivity in the current context by the somewhat awkward locution “network digital information humachines.”¹ You characterize such “humachines” in a threefold manner: (1) as evolving and unavoidable; (2) as dangerous to yet at the same time resources for power; and (3) as sites or nodes of resistance, specifically as they are presented in a decentralized, multicultural, and increasingly globalized world. This has to do with global subjects or, better, globally networked digital humachines, and so I wonder if we must or even if we can distinguish between a “good globalization” and a “bad globalization”?

M.P. — I think both “good” and “bad” forms of globalization are happening. Whenever there is a position put forth, there is always
a political relation or conflict, a political relation of power, as Nietzsche and Foucault would say. It can go in one direction or it can go in the other direction. It seems to me that the political situation is especially fluid at the transcultural, interactive, global level; the interaction between cultures is part of the problem or danger and yet also part of the opportunity of the situation. But networked computing is not the only element in the mix. We still have other media and other institutions and other practices. But even the other media like television and radio are available increasingly in a global way, such as the Al Jazeera network on the Internet or through satellite transmissions and so forth. Whereas the Internet is by definition already global, the other media are interfaced with it in ways that lead them more in the direction of planetary communications as well.

*S.J.M.* — I started by asking how we are to reconfigure human agency, and so as a follow-up question I’d like to ask about these network digital information “humachines” in light of a global media which forcibly reconceptualizes human agency. Do the global media, in part through brutal and close-up images of the current war in Iraq or of famine, and so forth, do these media images not interpellate me in a particular and unavoidable way? In brief, do the media not reinscribe me as a conscious subjectivity, as a responsible agent?

*M.P.* — I think they reinscribe you in a social space which now *includes* the war and the famine that you refer to, and to situations that are not only in your region, in your neighborhood, on your block, but that are global, planetary. Will that lead to a traditional resisting subject in the sense of the kind of agency that you refer to? I don’t know. What I do know is that the concept of agency was the model by which feudalisms were overthrown and modern societies were established. We don’t know what kind of subject it takes to build a planetary culture and society in a “postmodern” sense. What kind of agency does that require? What kind of subject-positions are most conducive to building a postmodern, global society?
I think we have to remember that the kind of agency that was typical of Jacobinism and Bolshevism was confronting a very different situation than we confront today. It makes sense to me that things would move in the direction of the conscious subjectivity and agency you speak of — for Jacobinism and Bolshevism, in the Enlightenment and so forth, but such subjectivity and agency depended on the context and the issues which they were confronting. We have a different context. And the figure of conscious agency is in fact part of the problem!

As for responsibility, there are different ways of being responsible. Al Qaeda is responsible by blowing themselves up along with a whole bunch of other, non-combatant people. That's the way they view responsibility. The responsibility of the autonomous agent is only one version of responsibility, only one version of ethical action.

My view is that it's not up to critical intellectuals to answer the question of right or wrong — this is just my preference, and here again I take my lead from Foucault. It seems to me that critical intellectuals need to define what the situation is and what the possibilities inherent in the situation are. And the more richly and complexly we can define the situation, the more availability there is for resistant folk to take up positions in relationship to it. What I think critical theory has been doing too often is to define the situation in terms of modern society. Critical Theory has not yet taken into account the significance of the failure of Marxism. Like the death of God in Nietzsche, we have yet to come to terms with this failure or defeat; it has yet to be integrated into our critical positions.

S.J.M. — We must also wonder if new technologies presume existing social and epistemological models — as if these were ever universal and stable, but that’s the myth. McLuhan has characterized new media as developing on the basis of older media, merely extending the given social and epistemological framework; this is liberalism's dream, that the future will be continuous with the past, only bigger, brighter, better, faster, and freer. Buying into this is dangerous politically; but it is also misleading from a technological perspective, ignoring the power of the medium to recast the modes
of human subjectivity. If we are to undergo a radical restructuring of space/time, of inter-corporeal relations, and of the interface between humans and machines, don't we have to abandon liberal humanism? How might we get out from under this weight?

M.P. — As for the subject conceived by humanism and the Enlightenment ideal, I would want to include the print medium as part of the constellation in which liberal humanism articulates its subject position. I particularly like Michael Warner's book *Letters of the Republic*, especially the opening section in which he looks at how American print practices in the eighteenth century began to open the subject-position of the citizen — not as someone who spoke from their personal interests, but as someone who, in the medium of print, could speak for the nation, for example, in letters to the editor, political tracts, essays, books, and so forth. The practice of writing for print helped to develop the grounds for the critical, autonomous subject of liberal humanism. While a lot of work remains to be done in the history of media, in a gross way we can say that print contributed to the enabling of the liberal humanist subject, and broadcast media contributed to the consumer subject, even as the Frankfurt School critiques it. Now, what will the new media contribute in terms of opening new subject positions?

In the new media, machines institute a different relation between the human and the media. They have a different position than the book or television or radio. Machines have an intelligent-like function that does not allow the individual to have the same sense of control over texts and other cultural objects. The individual becomes aware of participating in something greater than him/herself, in something where the individual does not have a fixed vantage point that is one of cognitive strength. I remember in an interview Baudrillard once said that he likes the typewriter and dislikes the computer. He says the computer scares him because he feels like he's inside it. The way I'd put it is that with the typewriter, you bang away with your fingers, you force print onto a page — you're controlling it, so that you as a subject still maintain a clear sense of separateness from what goes onto the page, whereas with
word processing programs or while being online on a network the
author has an entirely different position and relationship to the
machine. The interface is greater, and yet at the same time it dis-
appears; as Baudrillard says, it draws you into it, you’re already in
the space of the network and of the word processing program — in
so many ways, such as when the program corrects your spelling for
you as you type. Word processing entails a complex machinic net-
work: there’s the computer hardware itself, a program running in
RAM, the coding language of zeroes and ones, and so on.

S.J.M. — If we could talk about interface for a moment, may I ask
if you have an opinion on the increasing standardization of large
computer systems and database interfacing? One example would
be the proliferation of Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM) technol-
gy, heralded as the world’s most widely deployed backbone tech-
ology. The move here is toward standardization of the interface:
open source becomes open access, leading to greater opportunities
for automation and regularization, surveillance and control tech-
nologies. Included in ATM’s scope is Homeland Security and the
related technological infrastructure, possibilities for encryption,
and the like. Where do we go from here?!

M.P. — The deployment you speak about of surveillance and con-
trol technologies is a political move, an attempt to reconfigure
the protocols of the network in a certain direction and with certain
purposes in mind. I’ve argued that the Internet confronts us as an
underdetermined object, that its plasticity means that it can be
developed in a lot of different directions — far more so than most
objects. With a hammer, I can bang in a nail or crack somebody’s
head or throw it into the water to make it splash — I can do a lot
of things with it, but it’s nothing like the order of magnitude regard-
ing the range of possibilities that are made available through the
Internet. This is so especially in relation to its potential for concrete
and specific political developments. The attempt at standardization
of network protocols that you speak of is an effort by nation-states
to incorporate the network into patterns that conform to their own
interests of territorial control and governance. Whether this attempt succeeds or not remains an open question. We’re witnessing a proliferation of international laws and treaties in this regard. Since it is very easy to redirect your email through Tuvalu or through any place on the globe, any ISP, Tuvalu as well as Mongolia must be made to climb on board the bandwagon of new controls over protocols. I was recently speaking with some Internet security experts, and their consensus was that it is basically impossible to secure any point on the Internet; you can make it difficult to hack a given site, but the structure of the Net is such that it is impossible to completely avoid “break-ins.” This is so because the network is designed in relation to principles of cybernetic theory. It was engineered to transfer data as quickly as possible, and to reduce noise to a minimum. To accomplish these technical goals, the network is designed so that each node is completely open. One must add firewalls, password protection, encryption and the like to overcome this basic design feature. So, closing the Net down and restricting its use is an enterprise that can only be partially successful. And let us remember that such moves of enclosure are also a political choice. Part of my work has been to raise the level of consciousness about the importance of the question of openness or publicness as a step in making the Internet part of a political program.

S.J.M. — Yes, you have repeatedly argued that databases and computer networks, including the Internet, serve as a kind of “superpanopticon.” The reference draws on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, of course. In our post-9/11 world, what are your concerns about surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties, particularly the increasingly vague distinction between public and private? Has governmental biopower extended to the Internet? And secondly, in the spirit of Foucault, with greater powers of surveillance do you think there come greater possibilities for resistance and subversion? Was Heidegger right in citing Hölderlin, that there where the danger is greatest lies our saving power?

M.P. — Yes, Heidegger and you are both right. The question at issue
is one about the intelligibility of these terms "public" and "private." They just don't make much sense in many regions of and communication practices in Internet culture. There can be no privacy on the Net if by privacy we mean something that is secreted behind walls. By the same token on the Net there is no public properly speaking. If we mean by "public" face-to-face interaction — the ideal of the agora — where people get together to deal with collective issues, this is not possible on the Net even if two users in a conversation are deploying digital cameras on their machines. The mediation of networked computing undermines any assurance that one's interlocutor is in fact the person who appears on the screen. In this regard, there are myriad communicative situations, discussions on Usenet, for example, that are neither public nor private.

We hear "privacy" invoked as a defense against some of the phenomena that are happening on the Internet, such as the use of consumer information, the government's efforts to decode all our messages (the Clipper Chip proposal), and so forth. But I don't think "privacy" is a good defensive measure to protect us or to enhance our existence in this new context. Instead, what is needed are demands for validating activities that in the past were considered politically risky. It must become safe for people to be public about things that had previously been secluded to private arenas. One example concerns sexual orientation. In the history of the gay movement, until recently and perhaps to some extent still today, there were serious risks in making one's sexual orientation public when one's choice was same sex, in coming out of the closet. Such minority life choices and styles must become accepted politically. This is the only way to counter the efforts of the government and the corporations to place us firmly within their orbits of control. We have to push back the nation-state and the corporation so that what had been a threat to us if it became public would no longer be a threat to us. In this way the scope of possible resistance is greatly expanded, far beyond what it was and still is in the liberal period of our history. This expansion of publicity to include attitudes and behaviors that have been denigrated or considered abject in the past is the "greatest danger" you mention from Heidegger, who is,
one sees in reading his essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," quite surprised that the question of technology should prove to be such an important question. He is right to find technology a great danger, but I wouldn't restrict the issue only to one of danger; there are certain phenomena which older frameworks tend to marginalize, but which contain much greater possibilities for expanded forms of freedom than the older frameworks would allow. Danger is only one of these kinds of possibilities.

Each political order has many limitations on who may speak and who may have political power. It's clear that these limits are getting shuffled around in the context of the Internet. Students can now write emails to their professors, for instance. The Net enormously expands speech positions to groups that have previously had various kinds of constraint (one thinks of employees uploading to their web sites critiques of management and how outraged the managers are in response). Representative democracy, in its day, was feared as the tyranny of rule by all; there were things that remained to be worked out, such as what kind of force to give to minorities, for example. But the Internet promotes new spaces for democracy. All foot-fetishists in the world can join a Usenet group and have discussions that were impossible before. In Singapore, gays and lesbians can get together on the Internet, whereas they cannot in real life space/time. So the Internet is a way in which minorities are promoted to equal status as enunciators. It remains of course impossible to say how all of this will work out in the future. I think there needs to be a new and generalized politics of communications systems and especially of the new media as a major part of the program of any critical political group, a politics that seeks to expand positions of speech and upgrade actions to the status of the acceptable that previously required the protection of privacy because of their risk.

The structure of the network does not fold over neatly into the previously established forms of power. Hacking, for instance, is an ongoing practice, just as is peer-to-peer file-sharing, both of which are strongly at odds with established corporate and governmental rules. In this sense, hacking and file-sharing are transgressive. It is
really impossible to prevent people on the Internet from putting cultural objects into digital form, copying them, altering them, and distributing them — all of these features are built into the very structure of the Internet. I remember when the Internet first became a mass phenomenon, in 1993 with Mosaic and the World Wide Web. Soon thereafter, in 1994, the Bangerman white paper on intellectual property in the digital age was published. This paper was presented to the World Intellectual Property Organization as a policy statement for the institution of a global system of copyright control. It basically suggested that any time you copy anything, you're in violation of copyright. So, if you copy a file from floppy disk into RAM on your computer, that's a violation of copyright; if you copy the file from RAM to your hard disk, well, that's another copy and another infringement of the proposed law. Of course, the World Wide Web does nothing but copy: most of what happens when you visit a webpage is the copying of digital objects onto your hard disk, so that you can view them on your machine. The Bangerman report contained a basic misunderstanding of networked computing, based as it was on the previously existing political regime, but whose structure continues as hegemonic. Hacking and file-sharing do not constitute resistance in a liberal sense or in a Marxist sense, in that the intentional structures of these online users are not actually to defy copyright. They are simply "doing what comes naturally" with the media system of the network. And yet the MPAA's Jack Valenti and the RIAA's Hilary Rosen, representatives respectively of the film and music industries, become apoplectic on this issue of file-sharing because this use of the Net directly contravenes their control over culture.

S.J.M. — In early 2001, you wrote the following in your book The Information Subject: "In the case of encryption, the United States government seeks to secure its borders from 'terrorists' who might use the Internet and thereby threaten it. Yet the dangers to the population are and have always been far greater from this state apparatus itself than from so-called terrorists. More citizens have been abused, had their civil rights violated, or much worse by the gov-
ernment than by terrorists.⁵ I suppose this rings even more true post-9/11...

M.P. — Well, it seems to me that one of the political failings of the past years and of our political culture in general is the lack of a discussion of the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union. What impact would this have on the United States, a country that has been so deeply obsessed with communism for such a very long time? What's going to happen now that the enemy is no longer there? The situation after 1989 is that there is a single super-power, and so these kinds of questions are coming to roost in the war in Iraq where the United States defied the world community, like a school-yard bully, and invaded a Middle Eastern country on its own — with support from some arm-twisted allies. There should have been a public discourse and debate about a post-Soviet global political order. This never happened. As for the state apparatus, look at all the Americans in Iraq. Even at this early stage of the war, it appears that more people will die in the next few months than Al Qaeda was able to destroy on 9/11. While I deplore the acts of Al Qaeda and I have no sympathy for religious fundamentalists (of any stripe — isn't it time we put aside our need for the great patriarch in the sky, be he Yahweh, Christ or Mohammed?), the government of the United States, I am sorry to say, is by far the most dangerous political organization on Earth.

S.J.M. — In many ways, I could not help feeling an eerie déjá vu when reading your brief essay, “War in the Mode of Information,” written some ten years ago about the last war against Iraq. Cynics might say that history has repeated itself. In your opinion, has anything changed since your critique of this war in 1991? Certainly the technology at the disposal of the U.S. military has advanced, and media technology, too. But what about the media’s role? In your essay, you extolled the virtues of an instantaneous and near-ubiquitous media, suggesting that it effectively made the coalition forces more accountable for their actions. You write that “worldwide opinion has become a significant factor in warfare.”⁴ Is this still true in
2003, under the next-generation Bush Administration? And secondly, have we become less trusting of the media, aware of it as a propaganda machine, and thus less willing to say that “seeing is believing”? Is the Gulf War II just the most recent “reality TV” show?

M.P. — In the 1991 Iraq War, cameras were attached to the “smart bombs”; today in 2003 we are with the troops through cameras attached to the tanks. But there is a significant difference between ’91 and ’03 regarding the role of information machines in the war. Obviously, the military has surpassed the media situation of Vietnam where you’d see film footage, admittedly a week late, of dead Americans. Back in ’91, all you’d see is General Schwarzkopf and the bomb’s-eye view in the background. Now the military has instituted “in-bed-with” reporters, as well as the other media technologies such as placement of cameras on tanks, and so forth. There is a much better ability today to transmit information through satellites and telephone systems. As a result we are witnessing for the first time the sounds and images of war in real time. And according to what we have been told by CNN, the military is using information systems much more effectively. The military made the claim in ’91 that we have “smart bombs” and they assured Americans that they are only hitting military targets. It came out a couple of years later that this turned out to be wrong — American Patriot missiles were most often missing the incoming scud missiles and American “smart bombs” were hitting the wrong targets. But let’s just assume they have better systems now. Even if that is the case, the current war is not new in its reliance on information. War has always been to an important degree about information, about having knowledge about the enemy. The Iraq invasion of 2003 is about information machines as much as it’s about the mechanical destruction of objects with bombs and bullets. It is about soldiers in the field of combat with laptops and reporters with direct hook-ups to communication satellites.

One of the phenomena that is also part of this “new information mixture” is what Michael Hardt celebrated: the emergence of the multitude. Global dissemination of information about the war
elicited for the first time in history worldwide protests. The emergence of a popular, widespread opposition became a real political factor, and very dramatically so. In 1991, whatever opposition existed in the United States was very quickly quashed and, as I remember it, there was almost no public protest at all after the beginning of the war. In 2003, it's not so clear how successful or unsuccessful the protest movement will turn out to be. There has been a huge protest and there is still, as of our interview, a lot of criticism of the Bush Administration's war policy, although it remains unclear as we speak today what direction this will take. Clearly, the various global media information systems have been crucial in bringing to people an awareness of the political situation. It has contributed to creating a sense of urgency among millions of people, and helped to raise the number of those who participated in the marches and other actions. Today people feel that they have to say something or do something about the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Britain, and Australia. The role of the Internet in the current protests is an aspect of an evolving process that seems to be intensifying with each new military situation. In 2003 this has made a difference in at least two ways: first, some countries have refused to join the coalition, and second, these protests are now a political factor that the U.S. government has to consider — not that the government did what these protesters wanted them to, but the public resistance was there, despite the tendency in the corporate broadcast media to underestimate the reality that it brings to a political situation. I remember a long time ago, during the Vietnam War, protests in front of the White House; Nixon said that he thought a revolution was about to happen. He saw people demonstrating in the streets, and he thought this was the end! When you're in the position of power, you have a greater sense of fragility of the system than the person demonstrating in the street, who sees row after row of well-armed police. I think the protests are remarkable, and I agree with Hardt, he is right about it.

So to finally answer your question, quoting me from 1991, worldwide opinion and global media are much more significant today. Today, the U.S. government must worry about popular opin-
ion in America, in Europe, and in the Middle East. Similarly, the governments of Egypt and Jordan are extremely worried about the popular opinion of people in their respective countries. So, although it seems like Bush is simply ignoring any kind of opposition, I think he is putting on face and that the Administration is very much aware of and concerned about the protests.

S.J.M. — Maybe I can shift gears a little to ask you a more abstract question regarding life. Referring to the Internet, you have said: “I think that connected computers are much more than the sum of the individual computers.” How do we begin to theorize this “extra” or “excess”? I immediately think that this is a condition for life itself: the organism is alive because it is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. Related discourses on Artificial Life often rely on such characterizations of excess, called “emergence,” which means a moment of complexity, where a computer program or network generates something new by virtue of its organization or pattern, perhaps suggesting a self-reflexive component, or a type of consciousness. What for you is the ontological status of the pattern? Are you a proponent of Artificial Life? And how would you characterize this excess?

M.P. — On the one hand, there are examples of little programs being created and put into a networked computer environment in which they evolve and reproduce. This has been going on for several decades. Reproduction and evolution are the basic characteristics of life. On the other hand, more recently, there is the Human Genome Project, which tends to configure human beings as complex computer programs; this tends to represent human life the other way around, conceiving humans as “information machines.” So, there’s a kind of convergence here between the emergent quality of the Internet as a whole — specific examples of programs and viruses, moving in a direction where machines appear to be life-like — and, on the other hand, increasingly defining animal or biological life (bios) as forms of information machines. So maybe the question of life is better understood as a question that is now obso-
lete, from a time when there was a clearer distinction between life and non-life. Today we have forms of beings that are on the border and in between life and non-life. These beings blur and complicate the binary opposition.

I've been reading a little recently about bacterial life. In the past the dominant biological theory focused the ability of bacteria to reproduce, to become two where there was only one, in order to keep the species going. Now some scientists are discovering that bacteria operate as communities, that they communicate in some kind of way, that they respond to the environment, and that they change themselves, such as in reaction to antibiotics that threaten them. They behave like a super-organism. So, while previously scientists thought of life as discrete units, maybe life is really networks of phenomena — this might be the basis for a new paradigm.

*S.J.M.* — But there is always resistance to paradigm-shifts, and even the new terms never really break from the old. Like all this talk about the "*posthuman*": I can't help but think it's in the service of shoring up a humanism, because what's operating here, even if it's in a covert way, is a commitment to the "the human." We seem to lack terms for an authentic posthumanism.

*M.P.* — Yes, I agree. And it's the work of critical intellectuals to try to see what's going on here, not in the older terms, but by recognizing that there will be that kind of interplay between the old and the new, and not to deny the reality of this dialectic. I'm pessimistic, as anyone who has lived in the twentieth century must be pessimistic; but the critical intellectual focuses on the possibilities with the hope that this work will come to have the force of Locke in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the force of Marx in the nineteenth century. Our job is to try to discern what is emerging. I think that's what Marx did in his critique of industrial capitalism.

*S.J.M.* — And it's what Foucault does. What life lessons do you think we should draw from his later work, from the 1980s — namely, his "ethics," where the self's relation to itself is at issue, and
we're under a kind of injunction to “stylize” our lives anew? This is no longer an abstract question of life. Is this a new or emergent form of subjectivity, one that would be commensurate with the new technologies we've been discussing?

_M.P._ — Culturally-mandated subject positions have become more and more tenuous. I grew up in the '50s, and the film, _Far From Heaven_ recaptures the way in which a so-called “real culture” _[laughs]_ or a stable set of attitudes works such that people know exactly how they're supposed to behave and what their values are — all under the name of freedom, it must be added, it's “free agents” we're talking about here! I think that a lot of the solidity of the culture of the 1950s has disintegrated and fragmented in various ways. Groups have emerged into the public — the new social movements — insisting on their right to be citizens in their own terms. The types of practices that involve self-construction — of lives and of positions and so forth — have increased, and a part of this has to do with the Internet, even if just a small part. Yet the multiplicity of cultures in the new media is increasing in the sense that, for example, you're urged in online chat rooms to define for yourself who you are or who you want to present yourself as being. Here it is understood that such self-presentation and self-constitution is not simply an affirmation of who you are already, but that you're going to discover who you are in the process of defining who you are and through interacting with people on that basis. So I think that Foucault's late ethics, a kind of Nietzschean aesthetics of ethics, is, prophetically, increasingly built into the life circumstances and communication practices of people, and it's going to become more and more typical of how they behave. This is where I think we find the “posthuman,” because such a diversification of cultures of the self is not going to be closed off from animals and machines. The issue of where to draw the line between animals, machines, and humans is going to become increasingly important as part of an emerging posthuman culture, or postmodern culture, if you will. It's somewhat ironic that the stability of humanism was based upon rather fixed identities that you didn't have any control
over: you were a free agent and you couldn't change that, you were, to remember Rousseau, forced to be free.

S.J.M. — The freedom we're imposing on the people of Iraq...

M.P. — Exactly! We're bringing democracy to Iraq? Ha! [guffaws]

S.J.M. — Is posthumanism a constructivist position?

M.P. — Yeah! Maybe it's Hegel's absolute spirit coming to know itself and be itself and realize itself, but without the teleology of the philosopher, without knowing that this is the end or that it's even going to work, or that there won't be some new wave of monotheisms that would re-divide the world into Yahweh and Christ and Mohammed, or into something else.

S.J.M. — But are we forgetting history? For the posthuman, there is less permanence of the written word; the written word is evanescent — it fades, it can be erased, easily altered, hyperlinked; history can be rewritten, subtly emended, or altogether elided. I'll end by asking you if the written word is becoming like the spoken word, shading off into the instant? Are we returning to what theorists, such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, have called a kind of "second orality," a return to a sort of oral culture?

M.P. — There are definitely elements that hark back to pre-print cultures in some of the communicative structures that are emerging. But I am always suspicious of that kind of "return" — "return to Freud," "return to Luther," "return to the Roman Republic" (for the French revolutionaries of 1789). There may be elements of a return to oral culture, but they are also integrated with things that didn't exist in pre-print cultures, which makes orality different or new. There are mixtures and blends in the technoculture that are enormously interesting, in the kind of writing that goes on in email, for instance, or in text messaging on cell phones. These practices have elements of orality in their effects, in that they are more like speech than like writing. Yet they have elements that are significantly different from orality as well, so I wouldn't want to call it a "second orality."
Now as to your question about history, from the point of view of the modern period, if cultural objects are fluid, if history can be rewritten, for example, we are essentially in a Stalinist or an Orwellian mode. The alternative to established or modern forms of history can only be this tyrannical, politically suspect rewriting of history to suit different political interests. Of course, there has been the writing of history to suit political interests before the modern period. In early modern Europe, most historians worked for aristocrats and wrote their history, and this historiographic model is exemplified today in corporate histories.

Time and the memory of time, the configuration given to memorialized time, happens in different ways for different cultures; the modern way of recording time or writing history is simply one way of doing so, and Foucault tried to challenge this with his notion of the “history of the present.” We ought not to forget that there was a sense of the historical before there was writing and before there was print, and there’s no reason new forms of historical inscription cannot develop in the digital age of fluid and transformable cultural objects. This kind of historical representation may be different from modern forms of historiography, to be sure, but the older ways will also continue alongside the newer ones. Printed texts are not going to go away, and digital systems of storing are, in some ways, more permanent than print but in other ways, more fragile. Historians never had full control over cultural objects from the past, over archives. Administrations often kept their records to themselves, or they put them in places where historians never had complete access, such as with confidential materials. In this sense, cultural objects might be thought of as fluid or changing in the status of their availability, but in a different way than is normally meant by the term. One of the tasks for historians is to figure out how to do a history of the media, and secondly, how to do a history of the media from the point of view of a history of the present, from our time, when cultural objects are increasingly becoming fluid.

San Marcos, California
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1 Mark Poster, "Information Empire," keynote address, American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) Conference, California State University San Marcos, 4 April 2003.
6 Director Todd Haynes, Focus Features, 2002.