

## STORAGE/RETRIEVAL

Mark Kingwell - Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecturer

*Mark Kingwell, author & professor from the University of Toronto presented the 1999 Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecture at the SLA/SLTA conference in Waskesiu.*

1. I thought it would be appropriate, at this cultural juncture, to talk about the logic of storage and retrieval.

My use of the phrase "this cultural juncture" might set off an alarm bell or two, but I promise I won't bore you tonight with talk of the millennium, lest somebody brandish in front of me this new book I keep seeing everywhere, called *Two Thousand Reasons to Hate the Millennium*. Mercifully my name is not included in that book, but in all fairness it could have been. The M-word is becoming boring, as I myself predicted it might when I published my book *Dreams of the M-Word* back in 1996.

Nevertheless, I do want to introduce one thought about that arbitrary cultural deadline, which is germane to the larger issue indicated by my title. It is the way the idea of the millennium serves, somehow, to heighten our awareness of the future as something that is happening to us. We observe an increase in life's velocity — which increase is, in part, a function of our own expectations about how we interact with a world increasingly dominated by technology.

This sense of anticipation, in other words, whatever the complex reasons for it, gives particular resonance to the problems of storage and retrieval — the problems, as I might put it, of information, technology, and information-technology. Storing and retrieving are basic human activities, but what I am going to suggest is that our apparently relentless desire to con-

sume information is something we need now to re-think. For such a desire can never be fully satisfied, it can only be fed; and that has negative effects on our sense of self.

The wisdom here, as so often, involves recognizing and acknowledging our limits. Like most philosophers, I will conclude not so much with a solution to the problem as with what is, I hope, a clearer sense of what the problem is. Then it's up to all of us.



*Mark Kingwell, the Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecturer, was also on hand to do a session on Storage & Retrieval.*

2. We have seen, in the past few years, a consensus building to the conclusion that there is now too much culture to consume, too many products to keep track of: a barrage of information and entertainment so large that mere mortals are powerless in the face of it. David Denby, the New Yorker film critic, recently compared the sensation of living in the 1990s North America to being "buried alive" in cultural sludge. As we approach the self-imposed calendrical deadline of

the millennium, there is more and more a sense that cultural production is being stepped up in both volume and velocity. Images and information proliferate at rates unimaginable only a decade or two ago, coming at a speed that threatens to render us insensible.

Indeed, we could say without exaggeration that the characteristic feature of living in the current culture is that of being bombarded with product: advertising campaigns and model descriptions, logos and trademarks, films and television shows, books and magazines, e-mail messages and phone calls, speeches and sound bites, websites and newsgroups, fashion trends and revivals, pop songs and rock operas, new generations of software and new models of telephone.

The sheer volume of this product is its most obvious feature. It makes the prospect of getting information or experiencing culture one filled with an unexpected element of risk. To live today is, as a friend of mine likes to say, like trying to get a drink of water from a firehose. Or as Neil Postman says, paraphrasing Coleridge, the "famous line about water everywhere without a drop to drink may serve as a metaphor of a decontextualized information environment." Postman, following the pioneering analysis of Marshall McLuhan, speaks here of the problem of the "information-action ratio" which is being altered by advances, or anyway changes, in the dominant form of communication. The concept works as follows.

It is easy to act on relatively small pieces of information, say when someone tells me that the building is on fire and it is clear to me that the appropriate action is to rise calmly from my desk and get the hell out of there. But the more information I must

process, the less likely it is that I will be able to act on any part of it. Hence the well known feeling of information overload. It is not so much that we cannot process the information, in the sense of simply ingesting it. Yet we cannot act on it in a meaningful way – cannot digest it – because we do not know where to begin.

This, surely, is the root of our enervation when sitting before the television newscast: all this human misery, all these warnings and threats, and yet no concrete suggestion of how to act in response to it. “The news elicits from you,” writes Postman, “a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.” Importantly, to adopt more efficient techniques of ingesting information, such as the instinctive “Multi-tasking” now common among younger people does not alter the fundamental problem. (A central etiquette issue has arisen here: the low-pitch sound of computer keyboards is picked up by phone microphones, meaning your conversation partner can hear if you are simultaneously checking e-mail or typing in a text revision. No doubt it is only a matter of time before someone invents the silent keyboard.) The main, and apparently unalterable, problem is that there is always more information out there, more than you can ever digest properly; increasing the rate of inward flow is nothing more than a self-defeating surrender to the overwhelming imperative to consume.

This volume of information and imagery produces, too, a sense of deep restlessness or anxiety. In what is perhaps our age’s version of the rapture described in the Book of Revelation, many people have a pervasive feeling of being left behind – either by the simple weight of the information and imagery that is out there, crying for attention; or by the carefully crafted

campaigns of planned obsolescence and continuous technological improvement that are the mainstays of any consumer-durables industry, from cars to computers.

These “advances, take on an air of inevitability closely associated with the more general fascism of speed that appears to afflict every aspect of our cultural experience, from the delivery of information to the aging of war and conducting of business. As the critic Paul Virilio pointed out two decades ago in *Speed and Politics*, the widespread rule of speed is far from neutral: it orders our lives, dominates our expectations, even alters our deep sense of ourselves. As a result I suspect that all of us feel, to a greater or lesser degree, the enervating, depressing anxiety that we might agree to call Upgrade Angst.

Its symptoms are common. Can I read all the articles that I want to, covering *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper’s Slate*, *Salon*, *GC* and *Esquire*; or will I have to “catch up” with them by ploughing through a stack of glossies one weekend? (I haven’t even mentioned the professional journals I

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should be reading.) Can I see all the latest movies before they are squeezed off the screens by newcomers; or will I have to “catch up” with them on video? Can I read all the bestsellers; or will I have to rely on just reading the reviews? Can I watch all the prime-time TV specials; or will I have to tape them for viewing later? When, later?

Can I eat in the new restaurant everyone is talking about? Or will it be passe by the time I get there? Can I get the new version of Netscape? Of Microsoft Word? Can I download it from the Web? How do I get on the Web? Have I been to the coolest website of the week, of the day, of the hour? Am I running System 10.1? Do I even have enough RAM to run System 10.1? What about System 10.2? When is system 10.3 being released?

This feeling is not something we should mistake as unique to our own time, nor should we accept without ado the conclusion that such saturation is necessarily bad. There is good historical evidence that every era has at some point produced a feeling of being overwhelmed in this fashion, sensing that the world in general is going to hell in a handbasket, and that the younger generation is exhibiting either lax morality or a shocking absence of idealism, or both. And it is possible that a culture suffused with content may, in its own way, create new opportunities for freedom; everything is available, so anything is possible.

Nevertheless, as people overwhelmed by cultural content, I think we feel a need for more context, for ways of making sense of the array. And yet that worthy project has an alarming tendency to decline immediately into mere trend-spotting. And it can lead, in another familiar reductio, to stories like the one published not long ago in *The New York Times*, which argued that the newest trend was spotting trends – an effort that later led to at least one newspaper column in which the writer noted that the latest trend was writing stories about how trend-spotting was the newest trend. Yikes.

Indeed, in the face of that kind of self-defeating modishness, we might

be inclined to try to extract ourselves from the culture in some way. It is enough to make you want to go, as they say, off the grid – to get a stone cottage somewhere, unplug everything, and live off homegrown beans in some Waldenesque fantasyland of simplicity and genuineness and purity. In fact, I think I saw that the Utne Reader had done a feature on off-grid living, but I haven't had time to read it yet. We might think to find, in this media-fasting state, that we do not miss our former flow of information. But this fantasy of chosen simplicity is stacked up against a large and very powerful array of social and cultural forces that make it seem unlikely. The problem is clear: there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

Certainly some kinds of ascent to the pinnacles of human thought and writing is one worthy antidote to the banality and superficiality of much that passes for culture production today. And the solitude of the garden or the plainly furnished room is one of the most indispensable elements in genuine happiness, especially at a time when most of the messages of the culture insist that being alone is somehow suspect or even Luddite in orientation.

Carl Malamud, founder and president of the Internet Mutlicasting Service, professor at MIT Media Lab and Keio University of Tokyo, recently made the following prediction about the wired future of what gurus call seamless ubiquity: the idea that message-carrying technology will soon be so extensive as to blanket our lives in connections, taking the logic of cell-phone, pager and voice-mail to its implied conclusion. "Communications technology will soon disappear," Malamud said, "that's because it will be everywhere, the way electricity is now." In this omnipresent medium of communication, no one will ever be entirely alone again.

3. If that is a prospect that strikes you, as it does me, as gruesome beyond description, let's pause and take a breath. We don't have to stop the world and step off. Let's just step back and think about what we are up to with out mad-seeming projects of storage and retrieval.

Consider for a moment the library, that ancient form of storage/retrieval device, which can be so good at allowing us to take a step back. Some of my happiest moments have been spent lost in libraries, oblivious to time's passage and out of life's reach. I always found the volume of the material around me comforting, not threatening. It is true that, as a very young boy, I believed it was possible to read all the books in the local library, every single one, which I naturally took to be all the books in the world. I imagined that this was what education consisted in: reading literally everything there was to read. When one had read everything, therefore – but not before – one was qualified to speak with authority on something. It's possible that this particular delusion was responsible for my decision to enter graduate school in philosophy. Of course I discovered, as Stephen Leacock once said, that they give you a Ph. D. not when you know everything, but when you are incapable of learning anything further.

It's a good thing I'm happy in libraries, in other words, because I've spent a disproportionate amount of my life in them. In my youth I used to hang out at the public library, in Winnipeg and in Summerside, and scope girls – which perhaps shows you something about the limits of my romantic technique. All during my twenties, meanwhile, when the sun was shining and the sap should have been rising, I took myself off to the dusty neo-gothic pile of Yale's Sterling Memorial Library, an edifice that might have been the inspiration for the laby-

rinth killer library of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*; or to the hushed Haldane Philosophy Library in Edinburgh University's David Hume Tower, the sort of place where despairing doctoral candidates were known to die of ennui and then lie undiscovered for weeks. And there I sat, away from any windows that might show happy undergraduates disporting themselves with Frisbees or picnics on the sun-kissed lawns, and gathered my pile of books next to me, a paper-and-ink bulwark against the temptations of the outside world.

In this self-imposed exile from life, I learned a good deal – and not only about the history of early-modern liberalism or the necessary and sufficient conditions of a valid hermeneutics. Much of graduate school is spent preparing The Bibliography, and that means acquiring the books and articles germane to the subject. This particular form of paper chase is challenging to anyone's sanity, because it involves a bizarre, and in my experience unique, combination of the usually antithetical qualities of narrow-mindedness and imagination.

You have to survey the whole of your subject – in itself a task to drive one mad. Then you must find a suitable sub-field, preferably one relatively untilled. Then you have to chew the hell out of the field by reading, and if possible hoarding, everything that's ever been written on the subject. Trawling day after day through index catalogues and computer systems, you live in constant fear that there is something you're missing, possibly something in press, that will either illuminate the topic in one brilliant stroke or else lay waste to every small insight you have laboriously gathered. Or, worst of all, both.

We all took short-cuts. Per convention, at Yale anyway, photocopying articles found in the stacks was con-

sidered tantamount to reading them. One could spend whole productive afternoons in the Sterling photocopy room, armed only with a plastic copy card and a stack of bound journal volumes, grinding out the hot pages with their distinctive smell of carbon-based fixer, flash by flash, under the cover. Imagine the sense of smug accomplishment, the feeling of well-deserved satisfaction, as one emerged, blinking, into the sunlight, a stack of stapled, double-sided copies under one arm! Twenty more entries for The Bibliography!

Reading books by the same token could be reduced to reading the first and last chapter, plus the first and last paragraph of very intervening chapter. You might then add an artfully chosen sample from page 317 or, better yet, page 568 that could be memorized, mentally labelled “seminal,” and recited upon some appropriate occasion, like an oral examination or departmental cocktail party.

Furthermore, by common consent, while in graduate school no book, no matter how obscure, is ever to be read for the first time. That is, if you are reading a book, you must always be sure to say that you are re-reading it, thus casually indicating long familiarity with its ridiculously esoteric yet seminal contents, a familiarity in need of the merest – heh, heh—superficial refreshment. “Don’t mind me! Just having a re-read of John Scotus Erugina’s Latin commentary on Anaximander’s Fragments! You go play Frisbee! No no no no! Go on! Be there soon!”

The professional equivalent of this, by the way, which must be mastered before one can attain tenure, is what the critic Gilbert Adair once called the future procrastinate, a language tense apparently reserved for the exclusive use of academics. A sentence is future procrastinate goes, “In this pa-

per I am going to address . . .” or “My main focus in the following will be the following . . .”, and so on; such that, eventually, one reaches the end of an article or address without once having heard a plain declarative sentence declaring anything. Instead, a series of promissory notes have been issued, none of them destined for redemption; a train of thought is repeatedly announced but never arrives. The oral version of future procrastinate, especially useful during conferences and question and answer periods, involves extensive use of the phrase “Well, there’s a whole body of literature on that.” A body of literature ever referred to, never delivered.

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On the other hand, when we grad students did read things – when we did retrieve knowledge from that most beautiful of storage devices, the book – most of us felt compelled to take detailed notes, ostensibly for use later in the often-postponed “writing up” phase of the dissertation. During the long days in the Sterling periodical reading room, I filled stacks of paper with summaries and quotations culled from the dozens of books I was responsible for. This led to a feeling that one was in the grip of some obsessive-compulsive disorder, like those mental patients who copy out whole books, sentence for sentence, as if assessing their merits. “Ah, yes, that’s a good thought, nicely phrased! Yes,

and that’s also good! Excellent, another one!” And so on, until a simulacrum of the original book rises in a pile from the mad scribbings.

4. These two extremes of storage and retrieval taught me, as probably nothing else could, the exquisite torture of the research project. It is in the nature of research that it can never be accomplished to the satisfaction of its own inner logic, because one never completes the task, only comes at best asymptotically closer to its beckoning edge. Every research project is, in this sense, a failure. But we keep on engaging in them because we cannot cease in our attempts, however limited, to make sense.

This likewise taught me that there is something beautiful and human about the project of setting things down, or aside, so that they might be picked up, or taken up, later. Like taxonomy itself—the act of classification whether it is Linnaean biological categories of baseball box scores—storing and retrieving things is basic to our engagements of meaning with an otherwise undifferentiated world. It makes us who we are.

We have of course evolved numerous techniques of pursuing this human task. Language itself is one, and arguably the most basic one. We use language, among other things, so we don’t have to do what those hapless foreigners in Gulliver’s Travels do, namely walk around all day with a packload of objects to flourish in efforts at communication. When I say “alarm clock,” I don’t need to have one in my hand to show you. The phonemes of the phrase are themselves meaningless, at least in isolation, but taken together give us the ability to refer to the world to powerful effect. I will leave aside for now the issues of how language in turn affects the world, even in a sense creates it, and simply notice the remarkable fact that

language allows us, in infinitely flexible ways, to represent—to make present again—the world we find before us.

Writing in turn, is a logical extension of the fact of language, for with writing we, in a sense, overcome the time-based limitations of the medium of language. Oral speech must float in the air. Like pre-notation music, it exists only in its action, suspended in the fourth dimension of duration. That is part of its appeal, even to those of us who love writing. (I am, after all, sending these words into time and the air as I speak them.) Indeed, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates praises orality for just these timely reasons, noting that it can respond and revise in the face of external influences, and moreover choose its proper interlocutors, those who are ready to understand, whereas written language can only say the same thing, over and over again—somewhat like my father, I have always thought, who has a weakness for telling the same stories, without noticeable variation, day after day.

Written words, says Socrates to the young discourse-lover, *Phaedrus*, “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place getting in the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it ill-treated and unfairly abused I always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.” Any writer knows that feeling only too well from reading reviews. Please don't hurt my baby! He's too young to fight!

Plato's in some ways rather elitist view of things is not widely shared, however, despite the good arguments Socrates makes for dialectical or conversational philosophy. And Plato's own succumbing to the temptation of writing seems to destabilize the position somewhat—if it also, at the same time, gives us the very means by which we know, today, what Plato's position was. Most people regarded, and continue to regard, writing as an advance on oral speech, or anyway a very good thing in its own right. Now we can master the limits of time by placing words in a kind of receptacle, drawing them out again at our leisure and going back to check them if we are in danger of forgetting what they said.

This very likely means we will allow our capacity for memory to wane a bit, of course, and it is true that we no longer have people around who can recite Homeric epics over the course of three days, or hold a crowd spellbound for a weekend as they spin out a yarn from the troubadour stocks. We have probably even seen the last people like my friend Matthew Parfitt, who once kept a group of us awake all night, crowded in a tent in a Muskoka rainstorm, reciting from memory highlights of English poetry, 1750-1945. Writing, says Socrates, “is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.”

Now, written language is not hostile to the rhymes and rhythms that were so necessary, and so helpful, to oral language. And it is true, as any experienced writer will tell you, that the best test of good writing is to read it aloud. But writing does not demand language's best gifts in the same way that speech does, and sometimes those gifts are lost, or rendered dispensable, mere window-dressing, in the relentless storage/retrieval imperatives of the written word. Writing seems forever to urge us onward,

sometimes to the detriment of the very language it uses. Writing's success is also, as Plato seems to suggest, a kind of failure.

We often forget that for centuries after the invention of writing, even written words were meant to be read aloud. This was rooted in the communal goals of the monastery, for example, where the rule of silence is broken only by the ritual of prayer and the equally important ritual of words read to accompany meals. But it was also rooted in an implied distrust of what reading might do to us. Reading silently was until very recently thought bizarre, even subversive, an unseemly retreat from the public realm of language into a strange, self-imposed solitude of the mind. Here one might think all manner of thoughts, without any outward evidence!

There remains in some quarters an odd distrust of silent reading, this withdrawal into the self. The protagonist of A.S. Byatt's novel *Babel Tower*, appearing in a child custody trial, is repeatedly criticized for reading while her child is young and her mother-in-law sits nearby—as if reading itself constituted neglect of the gurgling baby. My father, bless his heart, cannot bear the proximity of someone reading silently, so that conversational gambits continue to issue from him even as one raises a book protectively to ward them off. From the other side, he cannot himself read in silence. This has parallel drawbacks. I adore being read to, under the right circumstances—by my wife in bed, say—but snippets culled from the morning newspaper and lobbed over the breakfast table do not qualify.

So this dislike of the silent reader continues. At the same time, somewhat contradictorily, nowadays we tend to disdain people who can only read aloud, or by moving their lips. But how much more love of language

suppose we must still call it) read.

I am not about to surrender my right to read in silence, but every now and then an exercise in the roots of writing is worth taking on. Last summer I sat in my back garden and spent a couple of afternoons reading Shakespeare's Sonnets out loud. It was instructive. It probably goes without saying – to use that lovely, ever-mused phrase – that poetry needs orality to flourish. But we often forget it, sometimes especially those of us who studied poetry so assiduously in academia. Reading poetry aloud is hard, because we have lost the rhythms of poetic diction. Our eyes speed on ahead, eager for the next word stimulus. We stumble, we stagger. And if there is no loved one nearby to whom we are speaking, or even if there is, we tend to feel embarrassed.

Alas! Would that poetry had better servants in these fast, last days!

5. When it comes to writing, then, success breeds success, and that is an eventuality we should view with some trepidation. The more writing there was and is, the more there seems to be. This continues true, as any recent bureaucratic attempt to create a paperless office will confirm. In the flurry of memos and directives enjoining the paperless office, and the counter-flurry of responses and reactions and surveyed answers, not to mention maybe an outside report or two, plus the necessary third wave of

*pausing for a moment to cherish the technology of the book, especially in the face of the imminent challenges from other, allegedly superior forms of storage/retrieval devices.”*

That is not a good thing for the natural resources of the planet's forests, I know, but it is what writing demands. Responding to an oral argument or position costs nothing in the way of resources, unless we count fresh air—as we perhaps ought to do. But writing needs a material base, it needs some hardware on which to run the software of thought. We have tried various things, from the scraped and bleached skins of handy animals, to the mashed, pressed and dried leaves of various plants. Pulped softwood, itself bleached and pressed, mixed with some rag cotton or other softener, and then folded and sliced into useful sizes, is the best vehicle we have so far found for this peculiar undertaking of ours.

The important thing about the ve-

ing works because the setting down of ideas also means the taking up of them again later, at some future date as yet undetermined.

No material base, no writing hardware, is perfect, however. Ink fades, paper crumbles to dust, and every day thoughts are lost, never to be recovered. And books make unfortunately good kindling, as fascists and philistines alike know. How dislocating to realize that the apparent preponderance of names beginning with 'A' in the world of ancient letters—Aristotle, our friend Anaximander—might be an adventitious result of the disastrous fire in the library at Alexandria. What wonders may have been lost there? Still, books, or more specifically the codex, the bound volume of pages printed on both sides, is the best vehicle for writing we have so far created.

To talk of books as storage/retrieval devices, hardware for the software of thought, might seem to be a way of giving in to the dominating technological imperatives of the day. I hope very much I'm not going to be doing that. I am, rather, trying to see where the need for storage and retrieval comes from, and trying to expose, thereby, some of the limits of our current mania for more and more of it. That's why it is worth pausing for a moment to cherish the technology of the book, especially in the face of imminent challenges from other, allegedly superior forms of storage/retrieval devices.

## THEME: Post Conference

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I like to tell my techno-happy, book-is-dead students that the book's main superiority is its power sources. Once extant, all books are costlessly solar-powered. They are also compact and portable, easy to hold and use, and relatively durable. Unlike almost any other storage/retrieval system one can think of, they are incapable of crashing or becoming virus-infected (except perhaps by bugs and mould.) And unlike most of "dead media" archived by the science fiction writer Bruce Sterling, the retrieval techniques of the book are embedded in the device: we will always be able to run this software—always assuming, that is, we are still able to run the human-based operating system called literacy.

In fact, one can go on in this vein. Book City, the small chain of independent bookstores in Toronto, now gives out bookmarks with a little essay on what they call "the new Bio-Optic Organized Knowledge device-BOOK." In it, mocking the breathless language of computer manuals, they note Opaque Paper Technology (OPT), which "allows manufacturers to use both sides of the sheet, doubling the information density," and cite the "Browse" function," which "allows instant movement to any sheet, forward or backward" with the flick of a hand. "(T)housands of content creators have committed to the platform," they conclude, "and investors are reportedly flocking to the medium." They do acknowledge that, "like other display devices it can become unus-

ply do not, and cannot, know. I simply want to note the lovely durability of this particular storage/retrieval technology, with its many aesthetic dimensions—the design of the cover, the smell of ink on paper—and its many workaday virtues. As Anthony Powell once said, books do furnish a room. There is reason libraries are full of books: books work, they are good at what they do.

6. To be sure, a book is only any good to its reader if he or she can find it, and a good deal of the storing and retrieving we do is of information about where information and knowledge themselves are stored. When I was in graduate school I had a part-time job that ranks high on my list of futile and/or pathetically low-paying attempts to make ends meet. I used to file index cards in the Yale Library system for four dollars an hour. To do this I rose each morning at seven, walked to Sterling in the already humid heat, and then for eight hours sat on a kind of wheeled chair device—a go-cart going nowhere—sweating away in the nave of the library, which, like every other building at Yale, really wanted to be a church.

These cards arrived in packages from the Library of Congress and had to be interleaved with the existing catalogue. One took a drawer from the catalogue, which was a long row of cabinets, removed the screwed-in rod holding the cards in place, inserted the new one in the proper place, and then

My supervisor, a tiny hunch-over New Havenite called Miss Willoughby—in the manner of women of her generation, she had no first name—used to come by every few hours and tsk-tsk away as she looked over my work. "Mark," she told me one day when I was having a more than usually fierce desire to fling unrodded cards all over the stone floor, "you are very fast. But you are a little inaccurate." This made me sound, I thought, like a sort of rookie-league fireballer, the Nuke of Laloosh of Sterling Memorial.

The really twisted thing about this job, apart from its role in my own version of the future procrastinate, keeping me from writing my dissertation, was that it was entirely pointless. This was the summer of 1989 and the card index was not long for the world. Already computer terminals had annexed one side of the Sterling nave, and I used to look over there from my perch on the stationary vehicle and see other grad students clacking away in front of their screens. Clearly they knew something that I didn't. They were actually finishing their degrees, while I was working on something already finished.

The Sisyphean dimensions of the job eventually broke me. I quit before the end of the summer and went back to writing, by contrast a task full of glad confident mornings. And considering this was graduate school that is really saying something.

Indexing and classification systems are of course more important than ever, now that there is this huge volume of information to master. And there are many people out there who will tell you all about the virtues of different methods of classification. I am not one of them—even though I am clearly the beneficiary of numerous such systems, beginning with the alphabet and going through the Dewey Decimal System, which I used to know pretty much by heart, to the current Library of Congress system, with its alien spaceship designations. I like the fact that my books have these alternative identities, these call-signs from the universe: JC-578-K56; HM-101-K46; BJ-1481-K46. I also like the fact that, for those in the know, this peculiar combination expresses something about the range of my interests.

But classification systems are only as good as the people who use them, and none of them is perfect. There is a danger, I think, for us to try and meet the feelings of overload I mentioned earlier with the aspiration to create the perfect classification system. We feel that somehow, if only we possessed the right catalogue or search engine or index, we would be able to master the growing body of what is stored. Our retrieval missions would then be perfect, surgical strikes of the mind. But that is impossible, for information and knowledge, whether we think of the volume as good or bad, have a way of spilling

vourite of Michel Foucault and Umberto Eco, is allegedly from a Chinese Encyclopedia called *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Recognitions*. It goes this way: “[I]t is written that the animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.”

Try putting that in Dewey Decimal! We might also think here of another piece of Borgesian trickery. In one of his stories, a man finds a quotation to the effect that one is born either platonian or Aristotelian by nature: that is, either given to thinking we are supernatural essences, or given to taking the natural world on its own terms. The man checks the citation, and finds a reference to another book source of the quotation. This book in turn cites another book, to which he goes in turn. The third book cites a fourth book as the source. The fourth cites fifth. And so on, until the man finds, like some graduate student caught in library hell, that all the books using this quotation point to some other book, a self-referential circle or citation without an original. Whatever else it does, the story exposes the throb-

What is the ultimate wisdom of storage and retrieval? That, like a grad student in pursuit of a topic, there is always more to read, one more book or treatise—or, now, website or newsgroup—to explore before one may play Frisbee, go on that picnic. We have to remember that the logic of our tasks come from the ends we set ourselves, not from the insatiable inner logic of information itself. Only when we see that, only when we see that the proper sovereign relationship is ours over information, not the other way around, will the world resolve itself into something approaching sense.

This sense comes not because it reflects the nature of the universe, rather because it speaks to the needs that we, you and I, together determine as worthy of our attention. In this collective undertaking we are forever haunted by the distant, impossible prospect of final sense, of perfect retrieval. We are likewise haunted by the impermanence of our lives here. We wish that words might last longer than they do, that they might be stored and retrieved again after we are gone. And sometimes that is exactly what happens. But finally, no matter how efficient or durable the delivery system, not even words are proof against time. And wisdom, which is after all a different thing from both information and knowledge, lies in accepting that fact—even as we continue, ever hopeful, to make more words to store and retrieve.

## THEME: Post Conference

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I will leave the last word to someone who knew the value of words, and knew, too, the sad wonder of their combined power and limits when written down. As this poem (Sonnet 65) beautifully indicates:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth,  
nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality, o'ersways their  
power,  
How with this rage shall beauty  
hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than  
a flower?  
O, how shall summer's honey  
breath hold out  
Against the wrackful siege of  
batt'ring days,  
When rocks impregnable are not  
so stout,  
Nor gates of steel so strong but  
Time decays?  
O fearful meditation: where,  
alack,  
Shall Time's best jewel from  
Time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold  
swift foot back,  
Or who his spoil of beauty can  
forbid?  
O, none, unless this miracle have  
might,  
That in black ink my love may  
still shine bright.

It may, and sometimes—often enough—it does. For which we may thank the relative durability of the printed word. As I thank you for the durability of your attention.

lennium (Toronto: Viking, 1996), ch. 4, "The Virtual Future."

David Denby, "Buried Alive: Our Children and the Avalanche of Crud", *The New Yorker* (15 July 1996), pp. 49-59.

Neil Postman, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," p. 69. See also Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

B.W. Powe makes a similar argument for the political nullity of an overwhelming data-load in his book, "A Canada of Light" (Toronto: Somerville House, 1997) [orig. *A Tremendous Canada of Light* (Toronto: Coach House, 1993)], albeit in a more poetic and hopeful vein than Postman's grumpy critique. Powe thinks communications technology can foster "lightness", or the civil openness to the Other than he thinks characteristic of Canadian political culture. Pierre Bourdieu's essay, "Sur la television" (Paris: Liber, 1997) is an even more polemic condemnation of what Bourdieu calls *les fast-thinkers*: the sort of faux-intellectuals that talk television tends to create, the people who substitute opinion for discours; see also Emily Eakin, "Bourdieu Unplugged", *Lingua Franca* (August, 1997), pp. 22-23. While agreeing with much of the substance of these critiques, I have argued that it is possible to communicate deep ideas, and to engage in real public discourse, on television. See Kingwell, "The Intellectual Possibilities of Television" *The Chronicle of*

[www.cultureby.com](http://www.cultureby.com)). While I share McCracken's optimism about the possibilities for cultural critique and innovation in an age of invigorating variety, I find I cannot be as sanguine as he seems to be about the dangers saturation poses to individual projects of self-creation. Most people find the cultural volume that is so obvious today paralyzing, or simply enervating, not liberating. They are not prepared or (it seems) able to view the growing volume as the Platonic metaphysical plenitude, the full creation of everything that might be, that McCracken celebrates. (In fact the idea receives a fuller and more influential treatment in medieval and early modern philosophical theology, where the notion of God's bounty is seen to imply that all things that might be created have been created: God's will is *adeed*, and here possibility is actuality.)

Gilbert Adair, "Derrida Didn't Come", in *Myths and Memories* (London: Fontana, 1980).

Plato, "Phaedrus," 275 e. Translated by R. Hackforth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

Nicholson Baker's essay, "The Great Discard" is the best discussion I know on the implications of the change from card catalogues to online ones. On the whole, Baker is anxious about what is lost in the change: the curbed ability for true subject searches and the lowering of "futility points" in routine searches; that is,