

On Renaissances

When technology extends *one* of our senses, a new translation of culture occurs as swiftly as the new technology is interiorized.
– Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

Why are there no studies of re-naissance as a phenomenon? We in the West have now endured a sufficient number of them that we ought, in hindsight, to be able to enunciate at least a few general principles. Such at least will be one aim of these remarks. I do not know that any study has ever been made of renaissances in general. Every study that I have seen concerns this renaissance or that renaissance in particular; occasionally, two renaissances are looked at simultaneously for contrast or comparison. But there are no book-length studies, nor is there even a single article, concerning renaissances as a phenomenon.

I

Characteristics of Renaissances

Renaissances have a number of characteristics in common. Let us examine four of them. One of the most remarkable, perhaps, is the numbing effect of the spectacular event. Consequently, there is never, at the time, any realization or acknowledgement that a renaissance is underway. This paradox is the first characteristic of renaissances, and it applies also to our own time:¹ A renaissance is always invisible to those who live through it. To them, the action of renewal and revivification is so habitual that they accept it as the norm: the convulsion was too completely environmental to be noticeable *as such*. At such times, one notices only that matters are in an advanced state of chaos. Change follows upon change and there does not appear to be a direction or pattern to it all. The feeble-minded chant “Change is Good!” and burble slogans about “progress” to allay their fears and uncertainties. Change is generally catastrophe in slow motion.

In “The Problems of Our Time and Confucian Theory of Justice,”² Yu-shun Huang pointed out,

¹ So I am the first person ever to point out a renaissance *while it is underway*.

² Paper distributed at the conference.

The problems that our present society is facing are various and difficult to be covered in a few words. I'd like to put them in a Chinese idiom: **The Rites Collapsed and the Music Ruined**. This means the existing system of social norms is collapsing: moral norms, ethical norms, political norms, economic norms, family norms, industry norms, etc. – all these are being deconstructed, and the whole society is getting caught in the chaos of anomie day by day....

How should we perceive this situation? This is an age of transformation of society. Transformation of society unavoidably brings about radical change of values and disintegration of old norms and institutions, as well as all the abovementioned problems and disorder. However, harmonious existence of humankind needs order, social norms, and institutions.

The first paragraph describes the West forty years ago: things have not changed much here since that time.

Renaissances are times of accelerated change, of intensified discord and disharmony.

Another characteristic is this: a renaissance is not an isolated phenomenon. A renaissance is a side-effect of a precipitating action or event occurring elsewhere. Some new technology arrives on the scene and radically reshapes perception; similarly, an undersea earthquake can spin off a tsunami wave. In the case of the renaissance presently underway, we have been treated to a protracted cascade of electric technologies from the A.C. motor to the MP3, from the telegraph to the satellite, the radio to the Internet or GPS or Cloud computing. A renaissance always accompanies an earthquake in sensibility: it is the outer manifestation of interiorizing a technology. Or, to put it another way, every major technology brings with it a new and different culture.

The first area of the culture to respond to the onset of a renaissance is the arts: as the poet observed, artists function as “the antennae of the race.” One after another, all of the arts burst into renewed life and sometimes into furies of innovation. The spectacular flowering in the arts diverts attention from the comparatively ponderous reorganization of culture and society. Many of the sciences will also be affected and will make major discoveries, will revise or replace long-held theories.

A third characteristic: each renaissance is the leading edge of a new mode of culture and society; it brings with it a new-fashioned identity. That is, while the renaissance is evident almost immediately because of the ferment in the arts, the accompanying new culture will be discovered some time *after* it has established itself, perhaps two or three generations later. The arts are the culture’s Distant Early Warning System.

A fourth remarkable feature of renaissances is this: each is accompanied by a major war.

In our present case, we have had World Wars One and Two and the Cold War, to mention a few, and now we are embroiled in the first round of the Terrorist Wars. At the speed of light, the front is gone, the battleground is the entire globe at once. In *War and Peace in the Global Village*, we showed that violence is always a response to a sudden change in patterns of identity, or to a challenge to cultural identity. (Events in the Middle East in recent days and weeks bear

sufficient testimony to these dynamics.) Half of that study examined the reciprocity between war and education: war is a form of accelerated education; conversely, education is a form of warfare. In our time, we all inhabit the same global information environments: to live in an environment of information, of incessant updating and gossip, is to live in a constant state of education, but accelerated to the speed of light. And education becomes an assault, a mode of warfare. Here is the root meaning of “The Global Village”: the disharmony of civilizations, cultures.

We habitually refer to the magnificent renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries as The Grand Renaissance because it so far outshone the glories of all previous renaissances; but the renaissance that ushers us into the twenty-first century is grander by far because it subsumes all prior times and all prior forms of awareness. To live in multiple times and multiple spaces simultaneously is to live mythically. A myth always consists of two or more levels, parallels: two or more spaces, two or more times. In the West we are recycling and revisiting not only our own cultural past but we are also exploring all the other cultural pasts—every form of experience that humans have ever created or indulged.

The content, then, of the renaissance surging about us is the entire Neolithic era. The Neolithic age, which is now over, used the pastoral hunter as its content and has for over a century used pastoralism as its esthetic. Our present

environment is made up not of specialism and hardware, but of information and software.

The Orient is undergoing the same pattern of retrievals, rediscovering Western culture as well as its own, in the same measure and degree that we are rediscovering the East. Similarly, this is the new rise (re-naissance) of Islam. And we have just launched another phase of this roiling renaissance on the Internet and the World-Wide Web. These new forms demand participation and are by their very nature inclusive and encyclopedic. Our new media environments are now global, no longer confined to a single culture or society. They bring every culture on earth into abrasive interface with every other—an experience which fuels terrorist fury and gives rise to the concerns discussed here yesterday and today.

All oral and tribal peoples regard present and past and future as a single multidimensional cycle or set of cycles, a vortex of cultural energies that charges them with being and cosmic significance and destiny: they live mythically. In the electric age, all times are simultaneously present and accessible as real, available experience. Cyclicity brings with it dynamism and compactness, to charge and *re-charge* the cultural batteries. The alternative to cycles, the familiar rational *line* of history, brings a single prolonged *discharge* or endless effusion. Today we live in post-history in the sense that all pasts that ever were are now present to our consciousness and that all the futures that will be are here

now at least in embryo. To live today is to live mythically in all cultures and times at once.

A brief review of our acknowledged renaissances may suggest some further observations.

II

For the Grand Renaissance of recent memory, the driving technology was clearly the printing press. It ushered in a flowering and retrieval such as still holds the world in thrall; it included a revival of learning, of ancient Rhetoric, and of the entire manuscript culture of the ancient world and the middle ages. The explosion of culture extended to newfound territories around the world and ushered in a spate of empire-building by Spain, Portugal, England and others, made possible by the new technology of ocean-going ships. Rabelais, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Cervantes ... Like the present one, which got underway in the nineteenth century, this renaissance straddles two centuries: it began in the fifteenth and continued in the sixteenth century.

The same universal recognition holds true for the “Medieval Renaissance,” the renaissance of the 12th century. This period too enjoyed a pronounced revival of learning due to the reappearance of paper supplies.

The renaissance of the twelfth century might conceivably be taken so broadly as to cover all the changes through which Europe passed in the hundred years or more from the late eleventh century to the taking of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204 and the contemporary events which usher in the thirteenth century, just as we speak of the Age of the Renaissance in later Italy ... More profitably we may limit the phrase to the history of culture in this age—the complete development of Romanesque art and the rise of Gothic; the full bloom of vernacular poetry, both lyric and

epic; and the new learning and new literature in Latin. The century begins with the flourishing age of the cathedral schools and closes with the earliest universities already well established at Salerno, Bologna, Paris, Montpellier, and Oxford. It starts with only the bare outlines of the seven liberal arts and ends in possession of the Roman and canon law, the new Aristotle, the new Euclid and Ptolemy, and the Greek and Arabic physicians, thus making possible a new philosophy and a new science. It sees a revival of the Latin classics, of Latin prose, and of Latin verse, both in the ancient style of Hildebert and the new rhymes of the Goliardi, and the formation of the liturgical drama...³

Where the renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries was a renaissance of rhetoric and audience-making, that of the 12th century was a renaissance of manuscript culture and the ancient tradition of literary studies, the *translatio studii*. Prior to these events there was another period also sometimes called a “medieval renaissance”: I refer to Charlemagne and the Carolingian renaissance and the Carolingian empire.

Charles the Great, crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in Rome in A. D. 800, believed that his own preoccupation with the arts and sciences was the very duty of a ruler.

It has sometimes been alleged that idealism prompted the artists and scholars of Europe to gather at the court of Charlemagne in order to unite their efforts for the cultivation of classical beauty and wisdom. They were, after all, so the argument runs, true humanists who endeavoured to re-kindle the fire of culture and to keep it alive for coming generations. They had no interest in material gain. Alcuin, the model of this kind of humanism, repeatedly praised poverty and impressed his idealistic motives upon his readers. Notker, also, explained that the first of the “humanists” had not been prompted by desire for material gain when they had first approached the royal court.

³ Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, pp. 6-8.

One driving technology was the stirrup: the Franks of the eighth century invented mounted shock combat.⁴ Antiquity imagined the centaur; the Middle Ages made him the master of Europe. The times bring to mind to mind such personages as Bede, Alcuin, St. Boniface: in the eighth century, England held the intellectual leadership of Europe, and it owed this leadership to the Church. From this time date the earliest written records of Old English. In the 8th century, English vernacular literature and the arts received new impetus.

As regards military conflict at this time, the fallout of this renaissance included the partition of Europe and the erasure of the tribal structure of that continent, the rise of the royal houses, and the schism between the Eastern and Western churches.

Two earlier renaissances loom as part of this survey. The first of these occurred in the fourth century AD; the other, at the turn of the millennium, about the year zero.

Constantine, 288-337 or so, established Christianity as the religious foundation of Western civilization. A few familiar names will give some points of orientation: St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Martianus Capella.

At this time, too, the West repels assaults by Persia and Eastern empires.

⁴ *Vide* Lynn Whyte, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change*.

The Edict of Milan, 313, gave for the first time full legal recognition to the Christian community. The Council of Nicea, in 325, was the world's first Ecumenical Council. This time also saw the emperor's becoming head of the Christian commonwealth. That act precipitated a massive spate of retrieval and refurbishing and renewal. May 11, 330, saw the foundation of Constantinople. This city was intended from the outset to be *the* centre of art and learning. Charlemagne built its libraries and stocked them with Greek manuscripts from an antiquity that included the great products of classical Greece. He filled the streets and squares and museums with art treasures drawn from all over the Greek orient.

Four centuries before these events, the emperor Caesar Augustus mounted an elaborate program of cultural reform. It included a careful retrieval of ancient Roman values and culture. Augustus revived and reestablished the office of *vates*, the poet/priest of the temple of Palatine Apollo, devoted to the spiritual side of Roman culture. It had a cultural priesthood that oversaw the "sacred" responsibilities of poetry and the arts, and it gave high salience to the work of Horace, Varro and Virgil. This time was a period also of moral and social reform.

Christianity made its appearance...

Nor is this the end of the matter.

Since we are surveying Western renaissances, and since the West was defined by the phonetic alphabet, if we look beyond the zero date we will discover that the pattern operative in the Christian Era had its genesis in earlier events though the date of the first renaissance is in doubt. Certainly the fifth-to-fourth-century glory of Athens would qualify as a renaissance: all of the characteristics are in place. The eighth century BC presents us with Homer and Hesiod and the early onset of phonetic literacy, which instilled a dramatically new bias of sensibility and occasioned the first major retrievals due to alphabetic writing. The *Theogony* was used as a pattern for retrieving and systematizing the Greek religion and to regularize ideas of the gods and goddesses. This was also the time of the Hoplite revolution, occasioned by bronze armor and by the innovation of cavalry.

This eighth-century revolution affected not just the arts but every walk of life. It accompanied the maturity of the Greek Iron Age . . . Iron had been in use from before the turn of the millennium (the 'early Iron Age') but an enormous development of Iron metallurgy between c. 750 and c. 650 improved and accelerated the speed and efficiency of life in many fields, and under this more stable mode of existence the population of Greece multiplied to a remarkable extent.

This increased number of inhabitants encouraged a wholesale switch from pasturage to arable farming, and food-production notably intensified.⁵

⁵ Michael Grant, Op. Cit., page 7. See also R. Higg, ed., *The Greek Renaissance of the Eighth Century B.C.—Tradition and Innovation* (Stockholm, 1983).

The events Homer recorded in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* occurred four centuries earlier still, in about the twelfth century BC, which was also a time of renaissance. It was called the Golden Age, the beginning of the great Classical Period in Greece.

The curious thing that emerges from our survey of Western renaissances is the realization that they occur in a four-century rhythm: every fourth century, more or less, we have a renaissance. That isn't to say that nothing goes on in the intervals between renaissances: a great deal does, beyond question. But whatever does occupy those times does not qualify as a full-scale renaissance of the sort we've been discussing. It is the aftermath of a renaissance, a period when the culture can settle down and establish some normalcy.

Now, I realize that the four-century cycles are clearly not at all exact. Haskins pointed out that, when one is dealing with effusions such as renaissances,

Chronological limits are not easy to set. Centuries are at best but arbitrary conveniences which must not be permitted to clog or distort our historical thinking: history cannot remain history if sawed off into even lengths of hundreds of years.⁶

⁶ C. H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, pp. 8-9.

III

As noted earlier, what we normally notice about a renaissance, the intensifying of artistic action and innovation, is actually a side-effect of a deeper action. Then, a renaissance is the shock-wave produced as that technology penetrates the whole culture and works its particular influence. So the pattern we've found in our renaissances shows us the *effects*, not the causes. A number of questions then arise, such as:

* What caused such a massive drift in perception as to reinvigorate these old things? And to do so in this or that particular manner?

* Where was the stress applied?

In each case, the precipitating or deciding factor was a new technology.

Then, if there is in fact a cycle or rhythm of renaissances in Western culture, does this mean that there is in our culture a definite rhythm to our technologies? We already know that, with the first tools, human evolution shifted from biology to technology. In all of creation, we are the only species that has thus taken charge of the course of its own evolution.

Inasmuch as our technologies are extensions of a biological organism (us), that technological rhythm has its roots in a biological one.

Now, what of the renaissance around us? Its underpinnings include the cascade of electric technologies overt the last century and a half: radio, telegraph, film, television, videotape, computer... The pace is accelerating, with personal computers, cellular telephones, global positioning satellites, space exploration and space telescopes, virtual reality, interactive multimedia, the Internet and World-Wide Web all appearing in a couple of decades. We have undergone an explosion of interest in outer space and other planets, voyages to the moon, probes sent to Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, etc. One immediate result of satellites was our discovery (rebirth) of Earth as a polluted planet that needed cleaning up and up-dating. Nature ended, the planet became an art form inside a manned capsule. Nature ended and art took over. Ecology is art.

Media are not additive: one cannot simply add a new medium to a culture without causing profound disturbance, yet the West persists in the illusion that media are neutral and passive. Media are transformative; therefore, each imposes a new culture as a side-effect of its presence in your midst.

In a period of rapid change you have no time to adapt to or get to know a new medium, and disharmony and confusion multiply. At such times the need to predict effects of new media can become a matter of survival. Because they are environmental, new media coerce the user into changing, accommodating to the new form. Always be mindful that some new media can be toxic to this or that culture: what if the

“new culture,” the new posture of the imagination that the new media bestow on you, is alien to your traditions and your mores? The alphabet is a perfect case in point, as is print, and as is the computer. All have devastated cultures.

A few blocks from here, at Lincoln Center, lies a campus of Fordham University. Fordham is world headquarters for a new field, called Media Ecology. Media Ecology began as a response to the current situation. The aim of this kind of ecology is to learn about the effects of mixing various technologies in different cultures. But the ecologists have not yet approached the problem of prediction in the case of new technologies. Or the question of toxicity of media new or old. The West is well aware of toxicity and chooses to ignore it. They also occasionally refer to⁷ the case of medieval China, which, having discovered gunpowder (some centuries before the West did), banned it on the grounds that extensive use of gunpowder would destroy Chinese culture. The idea that media ecology means cultural ecology is rather daunting and challenges the academic imagination: academics hate it when they can't keep their fields “clear and distinct” from each other. Clearly, however, media ecology will be a major tool in ensuring cultural survival. Furthermore, it means that culture can be shaped, orchestrated, by careful balancing of the environment and working with its energies.

⁷ E.g., Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, “Technology and its Consequences.” In *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall, 1992, pages 31-38.

Since the present renaissance got underway, in the 19th century, we have been treated to quite a number of new technologies, any one of which would have been enough to launch a distinctly new form of sensibility, as events have proven: the telegraph, the photograph, movies, television, satellites, computers, and so on. Any of these would, under ordinary circumstances (that is, had it appeared on the scene alone, with no other technologies for a generation or two before or after), have set a renaissance in motion. But we have had a constant parade of one after another without, it seems, a break, and the renaissance that began in the 19th century seems in response to continue unabated instead of waxing and waning. Possibly, then, our present renaissance is not one but actually a series of overlapping renaissances, each feeding on the energy of the last. Let me suggest that, as the unity of the modern world becomes increasingly a technological rather than a social affair, the techniques of the arts provide the most valuable means of insight into the real direction of our own collective purposes.

IV

I leave you with the mystery of the renaissance cycles and with more questions than answers. These concern rhythm and harmony –

1. Are there in fact other iterations of the four-century cycle? In the 12th or the 16th century BC, for example? Or the 20th, or 24th centuries BC?
2. What precipitating technologies are responsible for each renaissance? Can we now use the cycle to date other major technological revolutions as accurately as carbon dating allows us to do, for example? In *Laws of Media: The New Science*, we showed that all human innovation is a form of speech, that the things we make have exactly the same verbal structure as do our words. Technology is language without syntax. This suggests that the rhythm of renaissances in our culture reflects some fundamental rhythm of a verbal and uniquely human nature—an area for further investigation.
3. Do other, non-Western, cultures march to a different rhythm or observe a different pattern of renaissance? Or do they have no rhythm at all? That is, is the four-century cycle to *our* innovations-and-retrievals-and-renaissances peculiar to the West alone? Or does it actually extend to other cultures such as those in the Orient or in Central or South America

or in Africa or in primitive Europe? Perhaps other cultures do have different rhythms. China, for example, and Egypt have followed the lines of force of the dynasty, rather than those of the democracy. Their social rhythms clearly differ from ours in the West. Their language-patterns and -rhythms differ from ours, and I would maintain that innovation and utterance are linked absolutely.

I have tried in the foregoing to sketch a complex mystery. The entire matter of our renaissances and their relation to cultural, technological and perceptual change deserves prolonged study. More pressing, however, is the mystery of the renaissance underway at the present: the first Global Renaissance. The invisible renaissance. The present is not too soon to mount studies of the present situation, if only for purposes of orientation and survival. With some awareness of the environmental pressures now acting on psyche and society alike, we might discover means to channel or control some of those energies, to reduce human misery, to preserve cultures, and to allay international uncertainties.

Thank you.