The Uselessness of Monoculture

by Alan Sondheim

I will call 'monoculture' anything before the advent of the Internet -- in particular artworks, literature, theater, dance, etc. etc. This culture is characterized by the singular; even when dispersive anatomies are present, they are always in opposition or subtext to traditional thought. The monolith is always present and accounted-for. The monolith is either stationary or process- movement- oriented, always static or dynamic; its elements cohere, separate, are born to die, to be reborn again. This is the culture of the traditional university but it is also urban culture, street-corner culture; it is the culture of history and historiography, of the encyclopedia and the expert and think-tank. Monoculture resolves, whether towards resolution or irresolution; it is possessed by narratological impulse, by development and the compass. Monoculture is not necessarily unary; there is multiplicity and the nomadic, beneath the stars, within it. Monoculture blinds us to the world; it is the World that is all the case. It is the culture of gas, liquid, solid, electrostatics, electrodynamics, special and general relativity; it is the substance of quantum mechanics insofar as action may be defined as action or verification at a distance. In sum, it is our sum, our summation, our accountancy of the world and of ourselves, and it is useless, as the result of an Internet that is neither singular nor plural, neither present nor absent, neither coherent nor dispersed; I will call 'Internet' what has corrupted monoculture, tended towards its demise. I am not implying that 'Internet' in fact or fiction signifies anything, that the name means; it may, in fact or fiction, be characterized imprecisely by insignification, spews, abjections, blurs, avatars, nothing at all.

For the change that has come about within and without the tangled skein, holarchy of networkings, is of the plasma or swarm; it is Wolfram's science, not Hertz's. Thinking through social sites, collaborative facting and fictioning, wikipediatry, avatars of avatars, bots and phishing, what comes clear is lack of clarity, lack of clarity's epistemology. This is a fundamental transform to the extent that anything is fundamental at this point; it sweeps away, for example, plots and allegories, bureaucracies and governments, minds and bodies. Think of pre-Internet novels -- novels of modernism or post-modernism, of constructed and conceptual weavings, of characters or lack of them. And television, theater, cinema, follow suit; one is locked into farther time, father time, to diegesis, to an unraveling that characterizes experimental film as well. Neither film nor painting is linear, but both participate in a locking-down of perspective, no matter what openings, contusions, are on the horizon.

Lacan, Gardner, even Bateson presaged multiplicities; in Wolfram the swarm is simultaneously organized and disorganized. Lacan never went far enough; there was that reliance on language, no matter how shifted. It comes down to this: When I read a novel, I don't recognize myself, the 'times,' anything. When I watch a show on television, there are actors, people, or animated actors. They're moving through familiar antiquated monolithic space, proscenium or deep space -- it makes no difference; there's always a perspective. Perspective invades novels, stories, and the world of monolithic writing -- on the other hand, try assigning a vanishing-point to MySpace or even Facebook. Even Second Life, which tends towards classical perspective, falls apart on the edges where the simulacrum of physics is turned, churned upside-down. One doesn't recognize (oneself or others) in Second Life because recognition is already a problem; everything moves within the aegis of Bell's theorem.

Consider photographic apparatus: begin with camera obscura, that one-to-one allegory of the real -- through Daguerre, view cameras, stationary then moving then Edgerton. Cameras dissolve into swarming components; now components themselves disappear as cameras transform into light-sensitive holarchies, networked or independent, under whose or what control? The image ends up everywhere and nowhere at all; no longer is it allegory -- which has long since disappeared -- but the stuttering of the fragment which no longer is in need of suture or extension. You can watch family trauma, physical and mental abuse, on the morning talk shows, but whose families? whose abuse? whose perspective? It doesn't need to end up on YouTube; YouTube provides its own violence, its own parameters of literally unfathomable streams. Videos are removed if found, if from copyrighted material; everything gets through, leaks. But leaks from nothing -- the culture, non-monolithic, Internetted, leaks without transmitters, receivers, leaks without channels, or leaks from traditional channels, only to be churned back, lost in brackish protocol.

Code, programs, codes, protocols, reference one another, are increasingly open-sourceless; scratch the surface and no one's there, nor beneath the surface -- all those dead-ending projects on SourceForge ending up maybe somewhere else, maybe vaporware, the languor of the name. Languages embed languages; soon they'll be without physical foundation for all intents and purposes, perfectly floating signifiers shattering against subroutines and useful or useless misuses. (The world doesn't end either with a bang or with a whimper; there is no world to end.)

This confusion is on the ground as well -- in some places, Harry Potter really is a witch; children suffer as a result. It doesn't take electronics; it takes nothing more than extinctions, overpopulation, global climate change, weapon distribution, religious fanaticisms, starvation, desertification -- the unsupportive world. Radiations swirl around the farthest villages; there are unheard broadcasts, music, news, exhortations to the perfect religious life, promises of vacated paradises. These places or spaces are the future of the novel; language dissolves without signifiers, without that place where the sememe holds, however tenuously. It's here that home is found, in the bombing of the home, categorization of flora and fauna, ethnic cleansing. Online real explosions transform into hacking, thousands, millions, of MySpace friends, hundreds of millions of blogs, billions of Wikipedia pages hardly ever under contestation. Yes, it's all true. Yes, none of it is.

Monolithic culture prepared the battlefield inhabited only by the wounded. Monolithic culture developed the technology of multiplicity and the plasma -- a multiplicity of multiplicities, never stationary enough for analysis, never moving enough for a coherent dynamics to emerge. It's a memory to an extent, to the extent that memory is encapsulated in fast-forward media already forgetting what was loosened in the habitus.

This is all electronic, all colonial, all nanobot, this isn't your father's monoculture, your mother's multiplicity, your father's multiplicity, your mother's monoculture. Capital seeps everywhere as do heat and water; island nations are disappearing in the Pacific, Atlantic not far behind. Think of this as the anxiety of diminishing power; surely, not only is the world out of control, but control is as well. What happens to feedback in chaotic domains? One likes to think fecundity, fractal, but in the real this holds only so long before 'things' bottom out in rust and tumors. Monoculture is always waiting in the wings; as networks decay and databases turn useless, big iron will descend upon the world. But this is far in the future, a future so defined that no one will see it, no one will inhabit it. Instead of now, we are pre-sent, always in a state of arrival; there are endless tracks, monorails, they go nowhere, sink in dust, desiccation.

This is all electronic, and as technology miniaturizes, improves, perhaps these skeins will continue, sheathed, to exist, transmit, transform, no matter what. Then the scenario simply holds longer. Consider: There are no species. There is no real life, no organic life, no artificial life, no patented life, no constructed life. There is network life and one hopes that the remnants of wilderness (which are not to be deconstructed) remain that way, that enclaves succeed where management hasn't. Consider: There are no persons; there are couplings, situations which grow increasingly small and temporary, imminent decisions. Consider: Immanence has disappeared, if it were every anything more than mythos; it's replaced by the Facebook contact, as enunciations are replaced and replicated by 'What I am doing now.' Consider the usual: We are all audience; none of us are watching; we are all watching; there is no 'we.' It's the latter Lacan has missed; there is nothing to talk about. These essays themselves are thin sheaves, interspersions; they carry the dim light of the dusk into the dusk. 'Beyond' means absolutely nothing; time is indicated only by the stoppage of death. What is a store if not a mouse-click or twitch? What is a body if not blown to pieces by a car-bomb? On a certain undefined level, these are identical. Perhaps an economic level. Perhaps in the poetics of disappearance.

To be in pain, slaughtered, wounded, is two-fold, interior, exterior. The former stops everything; it is unthinkable, unbearable. It is always other even when ourselves. The color of time disappears without witness. But exterior -- this requires transmission, a receiver, political economy, some means of noise control. The receiver must be receptive, must orient itself towards the message; otherwise the message remains noise, death. The receiver must have space place for reception, a moment off the network which in the very real, idiotic inert real, may be what has brought her to this moment. But the receiver is already dissolving and a hundred-thousand new novels are being born, and they are not novels, nor histories, but software biographies perhaps. Rather than monoculture, monolith, let us say multilathe, uncontrolled or multiply-controlled lathes refashioning, refiguring, configuring, what we are reading that was once literature. There is great exhilaration, great promise; multilathing, in its bypassing any and all absolutes, is always in process of permanent deconstruction. Think of the school essay, modified, bought, sold, dated, outdated, online and offline, assembled, reassembled, spell-checked, recreated, plagiarized, written on demand, printed on demand, behind wikipediatry, related to class, gender, sex, race, nation, religion, handedness, all or none. Think of the essay reader, the recipient, following through with programs designed to weed out the copy which is always already a copy, hacking his way through the sememe looking for miscreants, passing results to and from university and institutional databases, listening softly to the YouTube song, exchange of draft letter on Gmail, or just listening to Ipod Itunes with her Ii. The whole world is steganographic, embedded, uninterpretable, piecemeal, exchanged.

So for better or worse monoculture is dead; it grew on foreign soil, is in the process of recession. To what? To the corners of vulnerable data-bases and technologies, conservationists, those disappearing from the present. The future were there, present, and it's why novels and paintings and just about anything before 1985, say -- *not* 1968 -- is inconceivably quaint, something for school credit, nothing more. We need an ethnography of our own pasts presented as disappearing cultures or archaeologies written in the unreadable, spoken in the unspeakable; it is here that our bodies once reproduced and never reproduced in the continuing acceleration of images -- of someone or other or no one at all.

(I'm not good enough; I'm not smart enough: You may think this is temporary or not-me, not-I, that this is elsewhere, of an other, an other generation, place space, time, time before death. This is not the bicylist who was injured on the corner of Fifth and Bergen three days ago, but this is her/our interior, her/our political economy, what comes about in the midst of architecture and physics. I want to talk about the pleasure of novel- reading, Harry Potter and other accelerants, and their fan- and enclave- existence. I want to talk about

radiations and dusts and their dispersions and what they carry from prions to nanogarbage to pollutions to sex to early deaths from bullets and asthma. I want to talk about mash, I want to perform djay vjay Vday vdday. I want to be you or someone. Rimbaud knew he was splitting up. The last of the obscene has passed, the obscene is always passing: the ob-hack fractured and visible. The last of the discourse too.)