THE LOGIC OF (TECHNOLOGICAL) PROGRESS

Linear histories of digital media, such as those of Howard Rheingold and Peter Weibel (Lister 2003:47) broadly fall into the category of historical accounts that create a narrative of (technological) progress. In such histories, progress is driven either, by some grand design of history itself, or in a subset of the same argument, by human genius and invention. An account of digital media in these terms would, therefore argue that our current media technologies and practices are the culmination of the historical progress, sometimes involving false starts and dead-ends, of all previous media, which contained the 'seeds' of, or prefigured, the present. In this way of seeing history the past is a preparation for the present and, by implication, the further unfolding of events into the future and towards some final goal. Such historical constructs are labelled by Lister as teleological. Teleology is a theoretical term in philosophy, which attempts to explain a series of events in terms of ends, goals, or purposes. Aristotle argued that all nature reflects the purposes of an immanent final cause.

An example of a teleological history of media would be one in which each historically ascending medium, television following radio for instance, emerged deliberately and inevitably in a process of continuous discovery and progress. A wider version of the same argument is one in which history is highly telescoped to suggest that the development of implements for hunting and cultivation contained the drive for space travel because tools, whether a stone axe or a rocket, are extensions of the human body in time and space. Such arguments are powerful and a persuasive view of human progress in which we come to see all of the subsequent historical refinements in tool-making as a preparation for our current ability to traverse outer space (this was alluded to in the opening sequence of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001*). Another example of the same argument applied retrospectively from the vantage point of digital media would be one which argued that the 35,000-year-old cave paintings of flora and fauna in Southern Europe and Australia, were made as immersive and virtual environments. In this example the enclosure of the cave and the light from the fire illuminating the painted representations on the walls, create a simulation of the external world. Our ancestors, looking at the flickering images of hunter and hunted could be likened to the contemporary game player in front of the computer screen. In this way of thinking the painted image on the cave wall and the computer screen are assumed by us to be connected by the continuous human drive to augment reality. At a larger level the same argument can be advanced to say that the European history of art and representation, which links fresco painting, oil painting, lithography, engraving, photography, telegraphy, film and television are the inevitable intermediate steps between the cave and the immanent next step towards a totally immersive virtual reality.

Such grand historical narratives are, as Lister points out again, arguments rather than necessary or absolute histories. As such, they are of interest and attention precisely because of their selective view (what they leave out of the account) and for their narrative content (the story they tell). In the case of digital technology it is the larger drives towards convergence, miniaturisation and automation of information that linear progressive histories have pointed up. These tendencies of technological development are, in the thinking of Baudrillard (1988), for instance, stages towards the visibility and at the same time the dematerialisation of everything, in his terms, the 'satellitisation of the real'.