



B R I A N L E N N O N

Misunderstanding Media: The Bomb and Bad Translation

“GADGET,” WE ARE REMINDED BY Nicolas Freeling’s 1977 novel of that name, was in Manhattan Project jargon “a playful and harmless word for what we would call an atomic bomb.” The pathos of the death drive is radiant in this infantilizing slang, a register that is not at all remote from genital euphemism: the pathos, as well, of novelty, of the crudity of first-generation machines, spearing you with startled nostalgia in the understanding that time passes quickly, too quickly, and that miniaturization, in its alteration of the scale of human environments, works in a blind spot in that understanding. Freeling’s novel turns the word over and over, linking the primitive device produced by America’s best minds in the heat of a just war to the hacked-out contraption that is always already acquired by its most bitter enemies, and reflecting on the inversions of the age of insanity opened there: above all, on what can only be called the Bomb’s satanic cuteness. In what follows, I mean to examine the work of the gadget in an age of miniaturization: the molecular age of packs, bands, cells, all the social miniatures in the panorama of stateless (and indeed, headless) terror. My argument will be, first, that as a sign for inhuman efficiency, a form of the machine evolving by becoming more radically present-to-hand, the gadget is simultaneously a sign for the human value of inefficiency, of waste and expenditure. Second, I will argue that in the form of the portable translator, the gadget can tell us something about the human and the inhuman in language, that most artificial rose: about bad translation, or translation applied in spontaneous or calculated bad taste, and about the *waste* of translation.

I

“Gadget” can be found in print as early as the late nineteenth century, as a phatic placeholder for maritime technical jargon.¹ Today it seems to have retreated into innocuous synonymy with “gizmo” and other diminutives suggesting, at worst, opaque eccentricity. It is in its euphemistic violence, however, that Marshall

McLuhan invoked the word in “The Gadget Lover,” one of the passages in *Understanding Media*, still his most frequently cited work, where an argument crossing the grain of McLuhan’s popular image is clearly visible. As I argue here, we might say that McLuhan produced a strong analysis of that *mediated narcissism* from which his critical disavowals, deployed as rear-guard actions and from the source of his literary training, were later powerless to rescue him.

In an atomic age led by a muscular new American consumer society, McLuhan abandoned the futurist conservatism of *The Mechanical Bride*, his first publication, in which he had abandoned the traditional conservatism of his British New Critical training. Embracing Menippean satire as the mode of the age, McLuhan kept in play a constant flicker or oscillation between these two antecedents; that is, the insincere or gimmicky play of personae in the work that would make him famous. However, despite his later claim (very much in the satiric mode) never to have “expressed any preferences or values since *The Mechanical Bride*,” McLuhan does enter quite openly into judgment on the gadget lover—who stands not for excessive affection, but rather for a kind of damaging reserve. This later, satirical (and familiar) McLuhan, valorizing human sensory extension through media as a with-it embrace of the consumer society and its universe of fetishized commodities, offers a critique of the gadget in its emblematic usefulness, in the superficiality of its extension. Through the image of the gadget lover, McLuhan linked the technophilic and autotelic hyper-consumption of postindustrial America to its most destructive product, the weapon that totalized and destroyed war’s temporality.

The “deterrent” arms race, from which Jean Baudrillard fashioned analogies for the collapse of representation, makes planet Earth a totality of power relationships, a weapon that could go off at any time. The narcissism of the consumption cycle thus anchors at one end—that of the gadget as a commodity whose exchange value is its *simulated* use value—a spectrum at the other end of which we find that apocalyptic excess of destructive utility, the Bomb. “The youth Narcissus,” McLuhan wrote, “mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and become a closed system.”²

The “gadget lover” mistakes his extension for someone else, in an insufficiently deindividuated understanding of his deindividuation. In the schema presented in McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, technological extension is a two-step process: (1) initially, the expansion of human sensory capacities within the intensifying channel proffered by a new technology; and (2) subsequently, a reconfiguration of sense ratio producing numbness or narcosis, as other senses diminish under the hypertrophy of the sense intensified. For McLuhan, this is the operation of closed systems, which define through exclusion and are incapable of

expanding the field of experience without imposing new limits on it. The visual biases introduced by the Roman alphabet and the printing press, for example, destroyed the causality linking outward behavior to interior psychic life, making possible modern secular law. Where the phonetic alphabet establishes arbitrary visual representations of sound, secular law provides arbitrary legal definitions of outward behavior. Such “detrribalization,” expanding the field of interior psychic life, “frees the individual for inner deviation”³: one may now think sinful thoughts without immediate consequences. Yet as the operation of closed systems (= alphabet, printing press), detrribalization also imposes new limits as knowledge is condensed or reduced in it.

It is an argument not dissimilar to that made by Martin Heidegger in a relatively early essay, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes” (“Age of the World Picture,” 1938).⁴ For McLuhan, electricity is the historical *occlusion* that will retrribalize Western societies, enabling a return (which is of course not a return) of the balanced sense-ratio, the pre-Socratic holism of Heidegger’s lost, uncorrupted “Greek thinking.” Indeed, McLuhan went out of his way to pay Heidegger backhanded and comic tribute, imagining him as a “surfer” on an “electronic wave”—gliding along, he wrote, “as triumphantly as Descartes rode the mechanical wave.”⁵ Heidegger’s image of research (*Forschung*) as exploration within limits that are defined and projected in advance—a self-deception that is instrumental to the science fiction of “discovery”—corresponds to the present-to-hand object utility of the tool (as analyzed in *Being and Time*) and to McLuhan’s narcissistic or narcotic extension. Meanwhile, the world of things *zuhanden*, or “ready-to-hand”—what Heidegger also calls *Zeug*, or “equipment”—stands for relational continuity between human being and *techné*, that which overcomes techno-extensional narcissism and the bulge it creates in an imploding world. “Hypertrophy,” McLuhan wrote, “is the mark of obsolescence.”⁶ To be overdeveloped, here, is to be noncontemporary.

Baudrillard has of course done much to elaborate—some might say hypertrophy—McLuhan’s image of the West imploding, or contracting within the caul of socialized electricity. In the works for which Baudrillard is best known in the United States, the Cold War condition of maxed-out representation (everything either Capitalism or Communism) can only rearrange and recombine elements of itself in deterrence.⁷ The timeliness of this view (or of McLuhan’s own general framework) is not in itself my concern here; I merely want to notice how the combination of figures for extension and limit enable McLuhan, justly the most influential technological determinist of our time, to critique the narcissism of a gadget lover and to offer it as an example of *bad translation*.

In *From Cliché to Archetype* McLuhan defines *cliché* as the narcotic state of extension, in which form and content, subject and object, nature and culture, medium and message remain suspended: separate, yet interdependent, in unresolved antithetical formations. The paradigm *cliché* is the weapon: in particular, the rifle, which

McLuhan cheerfully argues is a by-product of visual culture. “Long before guns,” he wrote in *Understanding Media*, “gunpowder had been used explosively, dynamite style. The use of gunpowder for the propelling of missiles in trajectories waited for the coming of perspective in the arts. . . . Not for the nonliterate is our easy selection of a separate, isolated target in space, with the rifle as an extension of the eye.”⁸ In the Great War, the machine gun that is fired blindly into a kill zone, as effective at night as during the day, marks the implosion of the visuality of the sighted rifle; in World War II the aerial bomb jumps to the scale of planetary holocaust, eroding the specificity of any “target.” The atomic bomb, McLuhan suggests, is the ultimate cliché, concealing under the mask of “winnable war” the MAD (mutual assured destruction) scenario requiring the annihilation of *both* adversaries. “The mechanical techniques, with their limited powers, we have long used as weapons. The electric techniques cannot be used aggressively except to end all life at once, like the turning off of a light. To live with both of these technologies at the same time is the peculiar drama of the twentieth century.”⁹

Art, for McLuhan, absorbs the death drive of the cliché/weapon, containing the violence of the individuated ego within symbolic or archetypal activity. In other words, art’s symbolic activity is initiated and sustained by cliché—yet its redaction of cliché into archetype demands disarmament, de-weaponization. To “disarm” art in this way is to forbid it any political contest, while banishing it from the theater of war. This is the source of McLuhan’s assertion that the political “point of view” is obsolete, and of his alignment, at best, with a bohemian or existentialist Sixties counterculture.¹⁰ De-weaponized art as the ego’s absorption requires a notion of art as “anti-environment,” as a reversal of the world of assertion through practices of assemblage. In *Understanding Media* this produces the image of media *as* (continuous) translation.

By 1974, when the fame garnered by *Understanding Media* had begun to wane, McLuhan was defending himself against academic contempt for his work by reminding critics that *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and its successor had been translated into more than twenty-two languages.¹¹ McLuhan’s pride in thus penetrating so much national-linguistic sovereignty through *manual* translation stands in instructive contrast with the vision of “electric” or continuous translation in his writings. In the précis introducing *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan proclaims that the nation-state has risen with the printing press and will not “survive the advent of electric circuitry with its power of totally involving all people in all other people.”¹² And in *Understanding Media* McLuhan wrote of computers as “the means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language” and of “the next logical step” as “not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness.”¹³

McLuhan consistently refers to new technologies’ interventions into history as “translations.” In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, detribalization

and retribalization are modes of incommensurability and fundamental restructurations of consciousness and possible knowledge. For McLuhan, Western societies have twice been translated, from one historically antecedent enstructuration into another organized by a new technology. In the first instance, the invention of the phonetic alphabet, arbitrarily encoding sound and extending the visual sense over the aural, translates consciousness from that aural world into a new, visual universe. One mode of translation—a theodoxic “possessive world of total interdependence and interrelation”¹⁴—is displaced by another, in the general equivalence of meaningless signs linked to meaningless sounds. In the second instance, translation names that process by which, in the contraction of electronics, a hypertrophied individual visual sense is reintegrated into the field of collective experience. In the first instance, the phonetic alphabet carves a field of experience, that of the private psyche, out of the collective life of “tribal” religious societies; in the second, that private psyche is electrified, becoming a collective field again. In electronic media the West “wears its brain outside its skull.”¹⁵ Media—or technologies, in their confusing interchangeability in McLuhan’s writings—are translators, and electricity *translates* human sense experience into post-psyche information.

This anthropological schema attempts to cover the long view. As prophet or advertiser, McLuhan adds a popularized model of psychic repression to the image of a technological bulge in history, and this is how he finds in Narcissus the “gadget lover.” Two senses of an already generalized translation are now brought to bear: once, as a name for the historical intervention of new technologies, experienced passively; again, as an active response to the intervention. Translation is once what *happens* (to one) in a technological culture, and again what one *does* to adapt to thus being translated. Repression, accordingly, takes the form of narcissis, a failure to *actively* translate into psychic reality the historical (passive) experience of being translated. “It is this mechanism,” McLuhan wrote in “Media as Translators,” “that also serves to numb us in the presence of those extensions of ourselves that are the media studied in this book.”¹⁶

Writing in the era of Beat identification with a white Negro, McLuhan recast narcissism as the West’s failure to recognize (as he put it) “the Africa within”¹⁷: translation in the individuated *active* sense involves recognizing that the Other is always already there. It is for this reason, perhaps, that McLuhan’s references to machine translation are remarkably unanxious about the inhuman’s intrusion into his beloved humanist canon:

Today Mark II stands by to render the masterpieces of literature from any language into any other language, giving as follows, the words of a Russian critic of Tolstoy about “War and World (peace . . . But nonetheless culture not stands) costs on place. Something translate. Something print.”¹⁸

Electric technology does not need words any more than the digital computer needs numbers. Electricity points the way to an extension of

the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of men. Language as the technology of human extension, whose powers of division and separation we know so well, may have been the “Tower of Babel” by which men sought to scale the highest heavens. Today computers hold out the promise of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity.¹⁹

Offered with playful irony, these observations stand in marked contrast with the Heidegger of *Der Satz vom Grund*, who wrote, in the mode of the guardian of culture, “Übersetzen und Übersetzen ist nicht das Gleiche, wenn es sich hier um einen Geschäftsbrief handelt und dort um ein Gedicht. Jener ist übersetzbar, dieses nicht.”²⁰ [“Translating and translating are not the same if it concerns a business letter on the one hand and a poem on the other. The former is translatable, the latter not.”] Heidegger’s protective emphasis on the unity of “Greek thinking”—howsoever it be achieved by going forward through *techné* and not back behind it—is antithetical to McLuhan’s vision of media as *continuous* translation.

At the boundaries of McLuhan’s often haphazardly planted field of metaphors, we are to understand media as translators and language itself as extension’s (final) frontier. The denunciation of nonsense, then, in the chronic humanist’s encounter with machine language, is a form of narcosis, a failure to translate the historical fact of machine language into psychic reality. One image of mistranslation—the comic garbling of human language by an algorithm—is superimposed here on another: the tragic refusal of *sense* to the historical transformation that garbling, in its very “inadequacy,” now demands. As a psychic embodiment of print culture, Narcissus “loves” his extension in the mirror—his extension in *human* language—in defense against dissolution in the technological simulation of consciousness.

Far from embracing it, then, McLuhan retains and indeed deepens the pejorative of the “gadget,” locating in gadgetry not the superfluity of excess but rather the inadequacy of reserve. And McLuhan relays this pejorative to human language, to a human-all-too-human love of language: it is merely “gimmicky,” in this view, to cling to the humanist mode of the untranslatable. The humanist and the atomic scientist, each beholding himself lovingly in narcotic extension, have this in common: the Bomb needs a euphemism diminishing it to the status of an extensible tool, because it reintroduces a totality of cause and effect in mutually assured destruction. From this point onward, as McLuhan says from the outset, the world can only implode. “Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well. Then, at least, we shall be able to

program consciousness in such wise that it cannot be numbed nor distracted by the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world that beset mankind when he encounters himself extended in his own gimmickry.”²¹ Technonarcissism is a *distantiated relation to extension*, an act of repression of the very impossibility of distance, of being disinterested. This, we might say, is the naïve political content of McLuhan’s critique of the “political point of view”; as Glenn Willmott notes, “[McLuhan] assumes (and herein is his real optimism) that if we really knew the self-destructive structure and force of our total extensions in media; if we knew that everyone was at all times at the mercy of everyone else; then some kind of charitable interplay would arise merely as a new strategy of survival.”²²

II

Within two days of each other in 2003, two stories on new translation gadgets led the personal technology sections of major U.S. media outlets. The first, which *Wired News* ran under the headline “Device: Arabic In, English Out,” announced that the U.S. Office of Naval Research and Navy Central Command in Bahrain were testing a device called Interact, a tablet PC–based simultaneous audio translator, for use on the battlefield. While noting that idiom, slang, and environmental noise were glitches yet to be worked out, Erik Baard’s story noted with excitement the consumer applications of Interact, including mobile phone integration for conference calling and on-call interpretation at “say, a local market in Peru.”²³ The second story, appearing at CNN.com on March 24, 2003, announced that Takara Co. Ltd.’s Bowlingual, a device for translating the barks of a pet dog into phrases such as “I’m hungry” or “Let’s go for a walk,” would be marketed in the United States, having sold more than three hundred thousand units in Japan in the previous six months.²⁴ Consisting of a wireless microphone worn by the dog and a receiver unit carried by the dog lover, Bowlingual incorporates software that assigns each bark, whine, yip, or yelp to one of six emotional categories, displaying the text of a corresponding phrase (including such Americanisms as “Get out of my face” and “You’re ticking me off”) on the receiver.

Lest one doubt the complex entwinement of U.S. military and consumer entertainment affairs, CNN Technology added helpfully, under the heading “Helped by 9/11 Impact,” that “the increasing importance” of the U.S. pet products industry “was highlighted by the nation’s reaction to the September 11, 2001, attacks”:

Many Americans found consolation in the familiar routines of their pets and were willing to pay to pamper their furry friends.

That trend continued in the months afterward as U.S. authorities tightened security across the nation and moved closer to a military attack on Iraq, industry insiders say.

“As fear, tension and insecurity continue to rise in the nation, people are turning to their pets for comfort,” says Robert Vetere, executive vice president of the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, an industry trade group. “They don’t mind spending more on them.”²⁵

I offer this quotation not in assault on the straw men of journalistic naïveté and hype, but merely as an illustration of the banality of the link between terror and leisure in a culture industry backed by gigantic military expenditure. Bowlingual, in its role as toy—or, by analogy with the rustic or junk food we consume for its simplicity or familiarity, as “comfort technology”—is enlisted in a kind of civil defense, drawing man’s best friend into the project of keeping morale up. Meanwhile, Interact, its counterpart implementation, assumes the offensive role, helping the American soldier to interrogate or dictate orders to Arabic speakers and to decipher their bellicose threats. What is odd here—or perhaps not odd at all?—is that enabling one’s dog to speak English through a box strapped to its neck is proffered as somehow more natural, homier and more comforting, than anything the dog might normally do to express companionship—and on the other hand, that learning Arabic, another human language (if admittedly a difficult one for native speakers of English), is implicitly dismissed as impossible. A dog’s barks are no longer intimate enough on their own, and require translation, in a reevaluation of the relationship that requires not less but *more* technological intervention in the domestic sphere; the language of Arabs, meanwhile, part of the same constellation inaugurated by 9/11, is a code coming from Out There, without even a lost or alienated social character. Thus the minds of “many Americans” chatter on: *I never realized what my dog was saying before; and What are these Arabs saying?*

But when order has been returned to the world, we are to understand, and Interact is declassified, its implementation in an ordinary mobile phone will help the discerning American tourist to penetrate the authentically tradition-bound realms of real people engaged in quaint forms of exchange with other real people in Peru—or wherever. It astonishes no one that the U.S. Department of Defense would rather invest millions in automated translation devices, which insert yet another layer of technology between invader and invaded, than to generalize foreign language training, which might at least offer the start of a human way out of the ethical impasse into which his country thrusts him (her). It’s astonishing as well that in the meantime consumers in the world’s rich countries are so desperate for deeper communication with their pet dogs, or whatever the dogs stand in for, that they will spend one hundred dollars on what most of them surely know quite well is quackery. The translation gadget miniaturizes and prosthetizes the labor of learning another language, just as the Bomb was represented by Truman as the condensation onto a single, efficient, nonhuman object of the labor of invading the Japanese islands, and as the Gadget is represented by Freeling’s ter-

rorists (as we shall see) as the only way of making a statement that is not incorporable and neutralizable by the world media.

III

For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the gadget anchors the small end of a spectrum counterweighted with heavy machinery: each being a version of the *tool*, which like McLuhan, they take to be fundamentally projective and contactive, remaining a prosthesis of the body, a culture to the body's nature, howsoever affirmed or incorporated. Anti-Oedipal "machines désirantes," by contrast, suggest a human-machine ensemble or "assemblage," in the most capacious sense of the ergonomic: not merely the adjustment of the machine to its human user (or vice versa), but a simultaneously constitutive and fluctuating link between the two terms. "Machines désirantes" are not machines in any usual sense; their tropic function is, in fact, precisely to confuse the division of nature from culture that "machine" requires. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that in transition from an economic order based on fixed manufacturing to one that privileges control through portable electronics, machines become less like machines—the tool, such as a hammer, extending one's arm into space or augmenting its applied energy. The gadget is an Oedipal projection in the sense that it maintains and stabilizes the distinction between human and machine against schizophrenic forms of communication that threaten it. Desire names the affirmative life force opposing the Oedipal death drive:

Tel nous semble le sens des analyses de Mac Luhan [sic]: avoir montré ce qu'était un langage des flux décodés, par opposition à un signifiant qui garrotte et surcode les flux. D'abord tout est bon pour le langage non signifiant: aucun flux phonique, graphique, gestuel, etc., n'est privilégié dans de langage qui reste indifférent à sa substance ou à son support comme continuum amorphe; le flux électrique peut être considéré comme la réalisation d'un tel flux quelconque en tant que tel. Mais une substance est dite formée lorsqu'un flux entre en rapport avec un autre flux, le premier définissant alors un contenu, et le second, une expression. Les flux déterritorialisés de contenu et d'expression sont dans un état de conjonction ou de présupposition réciproque, qui constitue des figures comme unités ultimes de l'un et de l'autre. Ces figures ne sont nullement du signifiant, ni même des signes comme éléments minimaux du signifiant; ce sont des non-signes, ou plutôt des signes non signifiants, des points-signes à plusieurs dimensions, des coupures de flux, des schizes qui forment des images par leur réunion dans un ensemble, mais qui ne gardent aucune identité d'un ensemble à un autre.²⁶

[“This seems to us to be the meaning of McLuhan’s analyses: to have shown what a language of decoded flows is, as opposed to a signifier that garrottes and overcodes flows. First, anything will serve for non-signifying language: no phonic, graphic, gestural flow is privileged in language that remains indifferent to its substance or its support as an amorphous continuum; electric flow can be considered the realization of an ordinary flow as such. But a substance is said to be formed when a flow enters into relationship with another flow, the first defining a content and the second an expression. Deterritorialized flows of content and of expression are in a state of conjunction or of reciprocal presupposition that constitutes figures as ultimate units/unities of one and the other. These figures are not at all of the signifier, neither of signs as minimal elements of the signifier; they are non-signs, or rather non-signifying signs, points-signs with multiple dimensions, breaks of flow, schizes that form images in their assembly in a collection, but which do not retain any identity from one collection to another.”]

To forego rigid distinction between content and form, message and medium, is to forego structures of knowledge requiring that distinction: lines drawn between human and machine, what is useless, or *using* (in relation to a tool) and what is useful or *being used*. Because they depict radically inefficient or eccentric machines, Rube Goldberg’s drawings, for Deleuze and Guattari, break down that division; because it maintains a strict separation between human pathos and machinic affectlessness, Charlie Chaplin’s tramp character reinforces the division. Use and possibility, in the nature of machines, is part of the discourse of projection, invention, extension, which function through the Oedipus complex to repress desire.

To the extent that electronics permits the miniaturization of weapons as well as their remote control, it represents a concentration of the power to inflict death that moves toward a vanishing point. Weaponry drives technological innovation more generally, as McLuhan argued, because with the advent of air warfare, advantage shifted decisively to he who obtained the highest offensive performance with the smallest means. This is how McLuhan could link the gadget, produced from a euphemism invoking tinkering, eccentricity, and portable inconsequentiality, to extensional narcissism as a threat to the world. Miniaturization does for the machine what neoprimitivism does for the State, the United States, the United Nations, and so on: because they scale down to and past the human body, small, mobile devices denaturalize the distinction between body and machine, just as Deleuze and Guattari’s roving “bands,” as units of contingent autonomy within civil society, denaturalize the distinction between anarchic and bureaucratic social patterns.

For Deleuze and Guattari, translation is accordingly not the representation or recoding (in Jakobson’s sense) of the content of one form in another; rather, because

of “overcoding” as the special character of language, and in accordance with the principle that “the medium is the message,” translation is the simultaneous decoding and overcoding (deterritorialization and reterritorialization)—but *never* just “coding” or “recoding”—that operates in all social uses of language. Both Interact and Bowlingual *repress* translation in this expanded sense: both are designed merely to provide “recoding,” in one direction only. These two notions of translation—one hermeneutic and supplemental, the other pragmatic or utilitarian—are roughly analogous to the two senses McLuhan gives as *implosion* and *extension*. The translation gadget permits the extension of one’s language (English) into the space of the foreign language (Arabic), or of the transposition of the foreign language (dog barks) into one’s own (human sounds). In whichever direction translation proceeds (and this would apply to simultaneous or duplex translation as well), it is designed to preserve the integrity of monolingual spaces: extension pushes one into a space that was previously inaccessible, while disallowing reciprocal variation or fluctuation in the space of origin. The translation gadget is what McLuhan calls a “partial and fragmentary,” “previous” technology;²⁷ that is to say, a device of extension, not the linkage of all devices in “total and inclusive” extension—“implosion.” The gadget is a device in one’s hand, grasped by an extremity, extending its reach in the space of language, yet remaining just that—grasped, an object, constituted as such by the visual thinking *requiring* objects. There is no *contact* there, since the device’s purpose is to penetrate barriers without changing them. It is not truly electromagnetic. Linguistic difference is the shock or “irritating pressure” producing “self-amputation” in the form of the gadget.

IV

What Freeling’s *Gadget* stages is the advent of the possibility of nuclear terrorism: a symbolic “battle” pitting the universe of tactical and long-range strategic warheads against that of the improvised nuclear device. “Gadget,” here, is at once an affectionate term for the primitive device produced by the Manhattan Project and a marker for the home-brew experimentation of rogue elements. It signifies the vast distance of technological progress separating the nuclear-armed nation from its pre-nuclear past, as well as from the clumsy fumbings of those playing catch-up. The Palestinian terrorists who have kidnapped Jim, an English physicist and the novel’s hero, are straightforward about it: “He struck a match, lit the cigarette. ‘What I want, Jim, is that you build me a bomb.’”²⁸ *This* bomb, it must be said, is not the inevitable product of total war, of a deadlock between armies that are equally or nearly equally matched (the official justification for Hiroshima and Nagasaki); nor is it a deterrent in either the doctrinal or the didactic sense. For the terrorists, the bomb declares a definite and actionable interest, beyond all abstractions of balance. It is *useful*: “[E]xplosions, even large ones, produce no result. They have a half-life, to use jargon, of a day in the world’s Press. An atomic device will arrest.”²⁹

In the end, *Gadget* is a novel of intrigue, built on the intoxicating mirage of evil genius and of intercourse in all directions; despite its searching the question of violence and symbolic communication, unproblematic translation is everywhere presumed. Each terrorist has a master spy's perfect cosmopolitanism, speaking fluent idiomatic English and German with unplaceable accents, if with any accent at all. Their physiognomy, manners, and dress suggest one national culture one day, another the next. In a series of drugged lucid dreams, Jim struggles to determine the identity of Marika, the terrorist who wears wraparound sunglasses day and night:

"What are you? Navajo? Zuni? Cheyenne?"

"It does not matter. All over the world there are others like us. . . . We forgot our customs, our religion, our language."

"I have heard you talk that language. What is it?"

"It does not matter."

"Mexican? Peruvian?"

"All those peoples."

"Paraguay."

"I tell you for the last time, it does not matter."

Palestinian, thought Jim. It must be. Argentine Indian perhaps. Intermingled with Spanish blood and Basque. That language, unlike anything I have ever heard, could perhaps be Basque. Remnant perhaps of the Spanish Civil War? Emigrated to Argentina?³⁰

Jim and his wife and fellow captive, Leora, are in the end more fascinated by this unknown language, and by the essentialist riddle of the terrorists' group identification, than they are by their reasoning, which is everywhere pitched as intelligent madness. The indecipherable, almost otherworldly language renders Marika exotic, where her ideology, her wraparound sunglasses, and her Oriental costumes make her merely inscrutable. It is just barely a coincidence that this dialogue is exchanged after sex: Jim, waking surprised to find not his wife, Leora, but Marika, the object of fascination, in his bed naked, having "took her, as far as he was able to judge, competently."³¹ The female terrorist is vulnerable to him, he sees—or it is a compensation formation—in a way that the male (the Doctor) is not. And he probes at her ethnic and national identifications as a connoisseur of the world, one on top of the global news, of the struggle here and the struggle there, as managers might speak of workers' demands and generals of "pockets of resistance"—isolated, external fields of difficulty, which can, with sufficient effort, be named, known, and dealt with.

But Marika refuses to match known categories. She rebuts Jim's sleuthing with demi-platitudes, mimicking both the science fiction of close encounters with the alien kind, and the rhetoric of popular revolutionary movements:

“Marika is not a person. It is a people.”

“What is this people?”

“You wish to know? Perhaps you should know. She will tell you. A people invaded and conquered over and over again. But never subdued, never reconciled, never accepting bondage. Slowly changed by the bondage. Brutalized by the brutality. It suffered very much, very long, very slowly.”³²

“Marika” is not the name of a person, but is a euphemism for history from below, the lending of a name to the nameless. It brings the nameless into view, condensed onto a representative, just as the mushroom cloud over Geneva, in the final scene of the novel, purports to make visible a hidden “elementary justice.”³³ But, bored of being thus lectured, and refused the quantification he desires, Jim falls asleep again. Or so he thinks. “Was it all a dream induced by heavy dosage of hypnotic and soporific drugs? Some of those things had weird side effects.”³⁴

Though he is horrified by their intentions, Jim is gratified to have been selected for the job of building a Bomb, because it confirms his expert opinion that “home-made,” easily concealed atomic weapons are hardly inconceivable. Jim identifies not with the terrorists’ political aims, but with the technical challenge they attach to it, and the political and ethical consequences of his acquiescence are held at bay by his fascination. He permits himself to be threatened into compliance, because in a way he *wants* to comply; a tradition of scientific neutrality provides the alibi he needs to fuel not only his own curiosity, but his narcissism as well. As Leora reflects: “Physicists were kindly, civilized people, who loved Bach, and admired his mathematical genius. Jim had been isolated, brought to his knees by the threat of torture. His wife and children were held hostage. What had he left but his work, his skill? It was the one thing left of his maleness, his pride, his self-respect. My poor Jim, caught in the terrible dilemma of the physicists’ ‘I want to know.’ To know whether it would work. To construct a home-made gadget.”³⁵

Jim *wants* to build the bomb, in a way, because to succeed in doing so would confirm his position (revealed in a series of flashbacks) that such a thing is possible even in the absence of direct, internal and legal (i.e., state) sponsorship. In one of *Gadget’s* many strands of conspiracy this is, in fact, precisely what the terrorists have counted on: Jim is driven to assist the means, despite professed abhorrence of the ends, because it wins him a victory in an otherwise abstract argument transmitted by academic politics. The justification he offers to Leora is a political argument about restraining proliferation, by which he attempts to distance himself from the terrorists’ claim on justice; his wife, however, finds the two viewpoints congruent:

“One or a thousand—I don’t even know what his target is. It’s the World Trade Center in Manhattan or it’s the local synagogue, what odds? We’ve all got to die some time.”

“So you’re a terrorist?” she flung at him. “Willing to die and you don’t even know what for.”

“No,” said Jim flatly. “For the good of the people some place. If for nothing else—maybe an atomic device used on a civilian target would wake the hypocrites up at last to the crude fact that they don’t want to face—that the irresponsible proliferation of plutonium had better be stopped.”³⁶

When at the novel’s climax Jim enters warp mode, assembling a remote detonator with sadistic pedantry, it is a cathexis without parallel in his personal life, analogized to both seduction and reproduction: “Naturally, we add a final-output amplifier to the transmitters—write it, ’finger stabbing. Humbly, the Doctor wrote his shopping-list. ‘And let’s have some more champagne up here. And if you go out shopping, get lots more. And some oysters if there are any. I’m like a pregnant woman, I fancy an oyster.’”³⁷ Jim is intoxicated by the potency of his own extension, by that technicity for which the terrorists need him and through which he now resolves the professional controversy of his career.

The paranoia of Freeling’s novel lies not in its scenario: it could happen. It rests in the attribution of perfect cosmopolitanism to the villains. There are no translation problems, in the literal sense, in *Gadget*. Marika and the Doctor are fantasy subalterns, having mastered the art of disguise, including linguistic disguise, without giving up their hidden nativity. If, for McLuhan, building the Bomb is “bad translation” in translation’s secondary sense (as adaptation)—that is, an image that runs against the euphoric grain of popular McLuhanism—*Gadget* enters that euphoria in full, desperate to find in the gadget, and in its successful deployment at the novel’s end, the hand of an apocalyptic universal justice in the name of which science (and by extension, “the West”), awakened from its amorality, revenges itself on itself.

V

What can the gadget tell us about literature, about “literarity,” about the technicism of literary studies? In his critique of Thorstein Veblen, Theodor Adorno wrote that in the production and consumption of luxury goods, “Die Wendung der Kultur gegen die Utilität geschieht um der *mittelbaren* Utilität willen.”³⁸ [“The turn of culture against utility takes place for the sake of a *mediated* utility” (emphasis mine).] Mass-produced luxury goods, that is to say, suggest that utility was never the goal of production in the first place. Veblen, Adorno suggests, tried to produce a critique of the tyranny of kitsch in American consumer society, of the barbarically performative expenditure of “conspicuous consumption”—but remained bound to an ascetic utility aligned with the very logic he wanted to reject. Veblen’s analysis, for Adorno, conceals a puritanical ideal of

nonconsumption, of living in harmony with minimal needs, and a “splendid misanthropy” whose sole affirmation is the rational reserve of optimization.

Bowlingual is not “high tech” in the same sense as the rovers that NASA has landed on Mars. It lives in that stratum of high-priced, leisure-oriented “life enhancement” or luxury gift devices whose high-tech allure is marketed to upmarket consumers in rich countries. Nothing in the catalogs of The Sharper Image or Hammacher Schlemmer is in danger of ever becoming a *common* household appliance. Such products bring the mystique of the artisan-genius (in the image of the eccentric inventor) to mass production in limited quantities, like the first edition of a book or a numbered series of prints. They are marketed by means of appeals to efficiency, much as are more ordinary household labor-saving devices: yet they combine that appeal to efficiency with the exceptionalism of an unusual, and in most cases unapologetically false, labor dilemma: how can I tell what temperature my bathwater is, while I’m drawing it, without getting up from my desk in the next room?

The proximity of such implementation to the “cutting edge” is not illusory, however, as the simultaneous appearance of Interact and Bowlingual on the military prisoner and household pet interrogation markets demonstrates. The gadget radicalizes and utopianizes a labor task in a *parody* of high-tech efficiency. (Thus even a device retaining its basic usefulness, such as a wine opener, will be made of a pointlessly exceptional material, such as titanium, and styled to invoke an automobile or an airplane, so that an ordinary real bottle of wine looks almost absurd, suffering under it.) The very functional and instrumental logic of mass production gathers art and utility objects alike into equivalence, throwing off “images out of control” of productive regulation.³⁹ *Faux frais*, or superfluous expenses, are immanent in the production of commodities, and represent not the opposite of utility but, as Adorno argues, utility’s mediation.

“High tech” perishes in this transformation of the intricate and powerfully efficient device into a useless commodity. The commodity aesthetic, meanwhile, returns to haunt those precincts supposedly immune from it, in war’s radical efficiency. Paul N. Edwards termed this the “closed world” of cold war systems for strategic early warning and automated response.⁴⁰ Every one of the casualized wars of the last fifty years has been haunted by gimmicky war technologies and the simultaneous discourses of gee-whizzery privileging the technical (Laser-guided bombs reduce civilian casualties) and damage control subordinating it to the human (Our targeting is only as good as our human intelligence).

McLuhan’s naive politics made him a kind of sacrifice, as Willmott expresses it, to the problem of critical discourse, or the intellectual’s ambition to intervene in, rather than merely mirror, the state of the world. The media celebrity that grew from and fed his gimmicky self-presentation was one case of a symptom producing its own analysis. His “revival” notwithstanding, it is still tempting to discount McLuhan as a kind of Bowlingual, a luxury good thrown off by the military-

entertainment complex whose value, if any, consists in its passive registrations of social change in the rich countries. I want to suggest that if McLuhan's writings are prominent examples of a kind of intellectual or high-cultural kitsch, they are not, for that reason, permanently separable from either their counterparts in a progressive political avant-garde, or those on the cutting edge of military and corporate entertainment culture. "Critical tradition," as Willmott concludes in his book, "has its own unconscious of texts, critics, and situations which have been junked in the process, as innovative techniques and ideologies have pushed critical theory forward . . . McLuhan is one of those clichés from the junk pile of critical history . . . McLuhan is not an idiosyncratic critic; he must neither be forgotten, nor, worse, rediscovered as a practical critical ideology."⁴¹

Kitsch mimics the avant-garde and engulfs it. Gadget kitsch rejects efficiency, not art. Its throwaway quality—the unlikelihood that anyone will use Bowlingal for more than a few weeks—is at the same time a kind of stasis, because it stands so far outside the life cycle of a usable tool. It combines the disposability of products in a consumer society of linear, schematic, measurable, and unrepeatable—"modern"—time with the timelessness of the craft object. The narcissism of technological extension is this constant insertion between persons and between persons and animals of devices, devices whose mirroring capabilities provide an alibi for further retreat from *machines désirantes*. A work of literature, insofar as it must circulate in the form of the commodity object "book" (that is, in a market for books), is a form of kitsch in this sense. Plainly useless, yet at the same time holding out the promise of intensified access to a plane of experience in which life is lived off the clock—"useful" as a heuristic for anti-utility—books of literature comprise a class of gorgeous luxury object consumed in a parody of catharsis. It is literature itself, through bad translation, that speaks to the agon of the avant-garde, that vanishing point at which the satanic mediocrity of bourgeois culture yields to "an irrepressible negative that the dialectic cannot entirely confine: something that criticism can only catch out of the corner of its eye, for when it turns to face it[,] it is no longer there; something that cannot be represented within the white economy of discourse because as soon as it is represented it ceases to exist."⁴² It is a paradigm of Literature as the untranslatable, resisting its entry into equivalence in translationese, resisting its very destiny in a global market.

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Notes

My gratitude to two anonymous readers of an earlier draft of this essay, whose advice helped me reshape it.

1. According to the OED, the word "gadget" entered the English vocabulary when Robert Brown wrote in his *Spunyarn and Spindrifft: A sailor boy's log of a voyage out and*

home in a China tea-clipper (London: Houlston, 1866): "Then the names of all the other things on board a ship! I don't know half of them yet; even the sailors forget at times, and if the exact name of anything they want happens to slip from their memory, they call it a chicken-fixing, or a gadget, or a gill-guy, or a timmey-noggy, or a wim-wom—just *pro tem.*, you know."

2. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 41.
3. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 20.
4. See Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1957): 69–104, and "Age of the World Picture," trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, in *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 57–85.
5. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 248.
6. *Ibid.*, 44.
7. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations (Simulacres et simulations)*, 1981; New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
8. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 341.
9. *Ibid.*, 342.
10. Here, as elsewhere, I follow Glenn Willmott in his sober and elegant *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
11. Willmott, *McLuhan*, 136.
12. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, unnumbered page preceding page 1.
13. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 80.
14. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 22.
15. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 57.
16. *Ibid.*, 59.
17. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 45.
18. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 60. Mark II was a computer built at Harvard University in 1945. John Hutchins cites a Mark II translation made in 1960 of a Russian newspaper article about the Mark II itself, a variation of which McLuhan appears to be quoting or modifying here. See W. J. Hutchins, *Machine Translation: Past, Present, Future* (Chichester, UK: Ellis Horwood Limited, 1986), 67ff.
19. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 80.
20. Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske Verlag, 1957), 163.
21. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 60–61.
22. Willmott, *McLuhan*, 178.
23. See Erik Baard, "Device: Arabic In, English Out," *Wired News*, March 22, 2003. Available at <http://www.wired.com/news/gizmos/0,1452,58150,00.html>.
24. In November 2004 Bowlingual was offered by Neiman Marcus for \$119.00; by November 2005 it was on sale for \$9.99 from Amazon.com. At the time of this writing (February 2006) the product appears to have vanished from the U.S. market.
25. See "Dog Translation Device Coming to U.S.," CNN.com, Technology, March 24, 2003.
26. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Bilan-programme pour machines désirantes," *Minuit 2* (1973): 286.

27. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 57.
28. Nicolas Freeling, *Gadget* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1977), 9.
29. *Ibid.*, 71.
30. *Ibid.*, 199 (quoted with omissions).
31. *Ibid.*, 196.
32. *Ibid.*, 197.
33. *Ibid.*, 71.
34. *Ibid.*, 200.
35. *Ibid.*, 65–66.
36. *Ibid.*, 63–64.
37. *Ibid.*, 223.
38. Theodor W. Adorno, “Veblens Angriff auf die Kultur” (“Veblen’s Attack on Culture”), in *Prismen* (1941; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), 83.
39. See R. L. Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
40. See Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
41. Willmott, *McLuhan*, 207.
42. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 90.