Richard Kidder

«Fifty thousand years is not very long»:
The Tribal and the Information Age
in the Beat Movement

Because I have let it move in with me right inside the tent,
And it goes with me out every morning;
We fill up our baskets, get back home,
Feel rich, relax, I throw it a scrap and it hums[1].
(Gary Snyder, *Why I Take Good Care of My Macintosh*)

This paper has as its scope the analysis and the attendant shedding of light on the relationship between the Beat Movement, with its strong attachment to tribal and oral forms of discourse, and the Information Age, especially to a popular manifestation of it better known as the Internet. The Net is represented to contemporary society by, among other institutions, the Web, including social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. The development of the tools characteristic of the Information Age, and by extension, the Internet, has been lengthy and more often than not fraught with the involvement of nation-states and their militaries, with powerful economic interests and with what seem to all appearances like neutral research organizations, such as U.S. universities, like The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), The California Institute of Technology (CalTech), The University of California at Berkeley, and laboratories, such as Bell Telephone Laboratories in upstate New York and Xerox PARC, located in Palo Alto near San Francisco.

1. *The Beat Movement and the Military Industrial Complex*
The development and hey-day of these institutions and of the tools, innovations and inventions generally associated with them took place towards the end of the Second World War when the question was asked what to do with all the new-fangled instruments, with all the scientists who created them[2], and with all the technologies that they had developed for eliminating various peoples from the face of the earth.

The earth was further in turmoil not only because of the war but also because of the break-up of the colonial order and the contemporaneous re-ordering of the political blocs into East and West, North and South. Typically these winner-take-all realignments were attended by societal urges for the fruits of mechanization and for militarization. When and if such urges were countered and resisted, the instigations towards mechanization and militarization were characterized by opprobrium and resistance, never very organized, that had as one of its representatives a world-wide movement located at first in San Francisco in the U.S.A., the Beat Movement. The origins of the word and of the spirit repre-

[1] G. Snyder, *Why I Take Good Care of My Macintosh*, in Id., *This Present Moment: New Poems*, Berkeley (Ca.), Counterpoint, 2015, p. 9.
[2] V. Bush, *As We May Think*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», 176, July 1945, pp. 112-114, 116, 118, 121, 123-124 <www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881>.

sented by it are recounted by, among many others by two of its foremost representatives, Gary Snyder[3] and by Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), who in his foreword to *The Beat Book* edited by his good friend and fellow New Yorker, Anne Waldman, writes of the feeling of the times in relation to the Beat Movement:

The color of candor emerges with good humor and an inadvertent spontaneous frankness, unpremeditated directness in life and art, the end of secrecy and paranoia that runs beneath macho sexual politics and demagoguery all the way up through CIA-KGB and nuclear machinations. There's further realization we can destroy the human residence of the planet if we don't trust and exercise our better natures, thus an end to nineteenth-century Marxist-Capitalist myth of progress with expansionist imperial rivalry[4].

Obviously, when Ginsberg wrote this foreword in 2007 he not only had the advantage of temporal distance from the events he was describing with all of the concomitant historical certitudes, but he was able to relive the spirit of the times in a kind of non-threatened retrospective vision. In keeping with the 20th Century dream of oneness, Snyder and Ginsberg, along with Philip Whalen, Michael McClure and many others explored the path of Chinese and of Japanese poetry laid out by Ernest Fenellosa and then by Ezra Pound in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*[5].

It was in the spirit of those times that the poet Gary Snyder, somewhat audaciously, proposed in 1977 a reconfiguration of the study of the humanities based on his sense of the post-Darwinian, longer duration of events that mattered in an enhanced time-scape, an evolutionary time frame outside the ken of experience-based judgments and criteria:

Now I would like to think of the possibility of a new humanities. Humanities, remember, being a post-Renaissance way of looking at the question of how to shake man loose from the theological vision of the Middle Ages. But I can't think about our situation in anything less than a forty thousand year time scale. Fifty thousand years is not very long. If we wanted to talk about hominid evolution we'd have to work with something like four million years. Forty thousand years is a useful working time scale because we can be sure that through the whole of that period man has been in the same body and in the same mind that he is now. All the evidence we have indicates that imagination, intuition, intellect, wit, decision, speed, skill, was fully developed forty thousand years ago. In fact, it may be that we were a little smarter forty thousand years ago since brain size has somewhat declined on the average from that high point of Cro-magnon[6].

Snyder begins his argument rather conventionally, at least in terms of the humanist as well as the anthropological sciences: the freeing up of the European mind that began after the Middle Ages (which Snyder assumes to be universal)

[3] G. Snyder, *Notes on the Beat Generation and the New Wind*, in Id., *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds. New and Selected Prose*, Berkeley (Ca.), Counterpoint, 1995, pp. 7-18.

[4] A. Waldman (ed.), *The Beat Book: Writings from the Beat Generation*, Foreword by A. Ginsberg, Boston, Shambhala, 2007, p. xvi.

[5] E. Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (orig. pub. London, 1936), ed. by E. Pound, San Francisco, City Lights, n.d.

[6] G. Snyder, *The Old Ways: Six Essays*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1977, p. 16.

is the first step in moving toward a much longer time frame necessitated by the evolutionary sciences. And then he moves to the social role of culture in limiting the possibilities of human intelligence. And a little further on in his argument, Snyder claims that because «we are all the same people […] equally primitive», Homer is not the beginning of a period but rather like a linch-pin between past and future, between the oral and the written:

In the 40,000 year time scale we're all the same people. We're all equally primitive, give or take two or three thousand years here or a hundred years there. Homer then, from this standpoint, is not the beginning of a tradition but the end of a tradition. Homer incorporates and organizes the prior eight thousand years of oral material like the scribes who put the Japanese lore into writing finally. Homer launches those things again forward for another couple of thousand years so that we still have Ajax cleaning powder and Hercules blasting caps[7].

There are any number of points to notice in this quotation from Gary Snyder's short work, *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, included in his *The Old Ways: Six Essays*[8]: the first thing worthy of attention is the time scale of 40,000 years, give or take 10,000 years, the period in which the first anatomically modern humans (AMH) populated the Sahara and Kalahari regions and who later, among other destinations, migrated among other places into what is now Southern Europe, into the caves of the Iberian Peninsula. The discovery of the wall paintings in these caverns and in Altamura eventually led to the revolutions in modern art that we associate with Pablo Picasso's «Les Demoiselles d'Avignon» and with his «Guernica» and, of course with the movement in the arts of the 20th Century known as Primitivism, a subject treated in other parts of this brief essay. The focus on anthropological time places humanistic studies in an oral, pre-literate realm.

The second thing to notice is that Snyder uses a Darwinian time scale, an evolutionary frame of reference that belies not only his ideologic and scientific orientation, but his desire to reconfigure the study of the humanities in evolutionary terms: no longer the 17th Century European fight between Classicism and Romanticism, between Middle Ages and Renaissance, between Modern and Post-Modern, the distinction that will become increasingly clear exists between the oral and the written, between cultures that are organized around the written word and cultures that are not.

The third thing to notice in this passage is the Beat disdain and, at the same time, fascination with contemporary commercial forays into things cultural, represented here by «Ajax cleaning powder and Hercules blasting caps». This disparagement is echoed in other of the Beats, among them: Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane Di Prima, and William S. Burroughs. Although a contempt for the modern, commercial world shines through in writers such as T.S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings, Charles Baudelaire, and

---

[7] Ivi, p. 33.
[8] *Ibidem.*

the German Expressionists, among others, the animadversion is taken to new intensity in Beats such as William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, where the human and money-making world is a strange, threatening and insidious place, filled with dangers that come from societal misdeeds and crimes. In the second section of Ginsberg's *Howl*[9] present is the nightmare contemporary world, replete with «demonic industries», madhouses, and bombs:

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs!
skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries!
spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks!
monstrous bombs!

Ginsberg's *Howl* and the later *Kaddish* are filled with anger for the fates of his family and friends in the mawl of the contemporary world.

William S. Burroughs, because of his incessant foregrounding and his Swiftian concentration on the forms of language and communication, on the Word, with all of both its Biblical and evolutionary connotations, sets off to speaking of the lower-case word as an organism, as a virus:

From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus. The flu virus may once have been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the lungs. The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. […] In the beginning was the word. In the beginning of what exactly? The earliest artifacts date back about ten thousand years give a little take a little and "recorded" – (or prerecorded) history about seven thousand years. The human race is said to have been on set for 500,000 years. That leaves 490,000 years unaccounted for. Modern man has advanced from the stone ax to nuclear weapons in ten thousand years[10].

In fact shortly thereafter in the next pages Burroughs continues his story with a passage that is straight out of science fiction, a passage that recalls Ginsberg's bomb and madhouses as well as Swiftian satire:

Armed with nuclear weapons the 5th Colonists were determined to resist alterations. It had been necessary to issue weapons to his personnel. There were of course incidents […] casualties […]. A young clerk in the Cultural Department declared himself the Angel of Death and had to be removed to a rest home[11].

---

[9] A. Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*, Introd. by W.C. Williams, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1956.
[10] J. Grauerholz - I. Silverberg (eds.), *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader*, Introd. by A. Douglas, New York, Grove Press, 1998. E-book.
[11] Ivi.

This passage, from *The Ticket That Exploded*[12], a novel in the so-called Cut-Up Trilogy by Burroughs, derives its power from many sources. Among these surely is a pastiche of science fiction, and another is anthropology.

The novel was commented on by Gary Snyder in 1962. Snyder's remarks were published for the first time in *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* in 1995 as *A Virus Runs Through It*[13] obviously recalling Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It* that was first published in 1976. Snyder remarks that:

Contemporary society is witnessing (via electronic media) the proliferation of nervous-system extensions to such a degree that political struggles today are in essence campaigns to gain the "mind" of some other group. The mass media (for Burroughs the tape recorder is a key tool) are indeed an exteriorized nervous system: a planet-circling electric social consciousness where a delighted laugh or a wrenching groan can ripple across populations within minutes[14].

There are many things to notice throughout Snyder's commentary. Trained as an anthropologist and subsequently as a Sinologist, Snyder has an ear that is fine-tuned for changes in contemporary society. The relation of the electronic media to the realm of political struggle is «a planet-circling electric social consciousness» where an expression of ephemeral joy or of wrenching pain can be heard almost instantaneously throughout the world.

The analysis of the effects of electronic media was worthy of Marshall McLuhan who in the following passage enunciates his own idea of instantaneous transmission of information, in the global village of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* which is also from 1962:

But certainly the electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous "field" in all human affairs so that the human family now exists under conditions of a "global village". We live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums [...]. The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village[15].

The world, at the beginning of the war in Vietnam, during the Cold War, after the Korean War and World War II, among other wars, becomes a global village, as on the Iberian Peninsula, in contemporary Senegal, or in ageless Vietnam: for McLuhan, «We live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums»[16].

---

[12] W.S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), rev. ed., ed. and introd. by O. Harris, London & New York, Penguin, 2014.

[13] G. Snyder, *A Virus Runs Through It*, in Id., *A Place in Space*, cit., pp. 19-24.

[14] Ivi, p. 22.

[15] M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, The University of Toronto Press, 1962, p. 31.

[16] *Ibidem*.

2. *The Beats, Mass Media and the New Tribalism*

Among the many who weighed in for and against William S. Burroughs' novels was also Marshall McLuhan, whose prescient observations detail his very contemporary interest in the relationship of electronic media to tribal and pre-literate societies. He brings together the electronic media with science fiction, the nuclear bomb, ancient Egyptian culture and the tribal in his review of Burroughs. McLuhan echoes Burroughs claim that «My Purpose is to Write for the Space Age» as the title of one of his many essays asserts[17]. McLuhan claims that:

Like Burroughs, Joyce was sure he had worked out the formula for total cultural understanding and control. The idea of art as total programming for the environment is tribal, mental, Egyptian. It is, also, an idea of art to which electric technology leads quite strongly. We live science fiction. The bomb is our environment. The bomb is of higher learning all compact, the extension division of the university. The university has become a global environment. The university now contains the commercial world, as well as the military and government establishments. To reprogram the cultures of the globe becomes as natural an undertaking as curriculum revision in a university. Since new media are new environments that reprocess psyche and society in successive ways, why not bypass instruction in fragmented subjects meant for fragmented sections of the society and reprogram the environment itself? Such is Burroughs' vision[18].

A familiar configuration of terms emerges: tribal, oral, written, language, primitive[19]; on the part of the Beats, trying to make some sense of the terms offered by fields as different as archaeology, anthropology and the arts in order to offer some form of resistance to the mechanized and militarized world. On the part of Marshall McLuhan there is the bomb, an extension of the university amid fragmented parts of society. In addition, McLuhan repeats the concern, first voiced by Dwight D. Eisenhower on the eve of the swearing-in of John F.

---

[17] W.S. Burroughs, *My Purpose is to Write for the Space Age*, in J. Skerl - R. Lydenberg (eds.), *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959-1989*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, pp. 265-268.

[18] M. McLuhan, *Notes on Burroughs*, in J. Skerl - R. Lydenberg (eds.), *William S. Burroughs at the Front*, cit., p. 73.

[19] The meanings of "savage", "primitive", and "barbaric" have often been confused; Walter J. Ong in 1982 provides a very brief history of the words in an anthropological context: «"Civilized" peoples have long contrasted themselves with "primitive" or "savage" peoples, not only in drawing-room conversation or at cocktail parties but also in sophisticated historical works and anthropological studies. One of the pivotal anthropological works of recent decades, a work cited often in these pages, is Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1966; first French edition, *La pensée sauvage*, 1962). One thinks also of the earlier works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910) and *La mentalité primitive* (1923), and of Franz Boas's Lowell Lectures, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1922). The terms "primitive" and "savage", not to mention "inferior", are weighted terms. No one wants to be called primitive or savage, and it is comforting to apply these terms contrastively to other people to show what we are not. The terms are somewhat like the term "illiterate": they identify an earlier state of affairs negatively, by noting a lack or deficiency» (W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), 30th anniversary ed. with add. chapters by J. Hartley, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 171).

Kennedy as President of the U.S. in 1961, of the overwhelming presence of the military-industrial complex. McLuhan, however, extends this observation to include research institutions and the world of the university, insisting on their ties to the world of commerce.

Many were the scientists employed by their governments on all sides of the conflict in World War II. Before the end of the Second World War, the scientist and technocrat Vannevar Bush, the former director of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Office of Scientific Research and Development during the world conflict, published in July of 1945 in the «Atlantic», a popular magazine, his essay, *As We May Think*[20].

The problem of how to make available the vast stores of knowledge accumulated by scientists, in the past and in the future, the world over, was to be resolved by the computer. Bush foresaw developments such as Charles F. Goldfarb's SGML (Standard General Markup Language), a development within IBM of GML (General Markup Language) and of myriad other technologies for rendering textual knowledge instantaneously available. A subset of SGML, HTML, or Hypertext Markup Language, currently forms the basis, along with other technologies, of the World Wide Web, making it possible, as Snyder wrote in 1962: «The mass media […] are indeed an exteriorized nervous system: a planet-circling electric social consciousness where a delighted laugh or a wrenching groan can ripple across populations within minutes»[21].

Such were the very terms that were used by scientists in the nascent field of the information sciences to try to mimic human thought processes. The idea of mirroring human thought processes by imitating or duplicating the paths of associations in human consciousness, of making available the lessons of research and warfare, thus Vannevar Bush zeroed in on his targets:

There is a growing mountain of research. But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers – conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear. Yet specialization becomes increasingly necessary for progress, and the effort to bridge between disciplines is correspondingly superficial[22].

In part because «our methods of transmitting and reviewing the results of research are generations old and by now are totally inadequate for their purpose» and in part because of the growing demands made upon human memory by the various forms of specialization, it becomes necessary to find other means of reconstructing the maps of how to arrive at an understanding of the workings of the human mind.

This because, according to Bush, our languages are not adequate to the representation and communication of the various forms of knowledge necessary

---

[20] V. Bush, *As We May Think*, cit.
[21] G. Snyder, *A Virus Runs Through It*, cit., p. 22.
[22] V. Bush, *As We May Think*, cit., p. 112.

for being in the world and for, what else: for progress. The photograph, facsimile (fax), using various forms of compression could fill the memex; the Voder, and the Bell Labs Vocoder, together with the stenotype, although relying on a «girl» who «strokes its keys languidly and looks about the room and sometimes at the speaker with a disquieting gaze» may fill the void[23]:

One can now picture a future investigator in his laboratory. His hands are free, and he is not anchored. As he moves about and observes, he photographs and comments. Time is automatically recorded to tie the two records together. If he goes into the field, he may be connected by radio to his recorder. As he ponders over his notes in the evening, he again talks his comments into the record. His typed record, as well as his photographs, may both be in miniature, so that he projects them for examination[24].

The Web and related technologies of sound and of image are foreseen in this passage in which the researcher connects photograph to recorder to notes along the axis of time which, under the guise of associations, is used to link the numerous elements together:

The scientist, however, is not the only person who manipulates data and examines the world about him by the use of logical processes, although he sometimes preserves this appearance by adopting into the fold anyone who becomes logical, much in the manner in which a British labor leader is elevated to knighthood. Whenever logical processes of thought are employed – that is, whenever thought for a time runs along an accepted groove – there is an opportunity for the machine. Formal logic used to be a keen instrument in the hands of the teacher in his trying of students' souls. It is readily possible to construct a machine which will manipulate premises in accordance with formal logic, simply by the clever use of relay circuits. Put a set of premises into such a device and turn the crank, and it will readily pass out conclusion after conclusion, all in accordance with logical law, and with no more slips than would be expected of a keyboard adding machine[25].

In Bush's world, a person, like a «British labor leader», can become logical, prone to the manipulations of formal logic, «simply by the clever use of relay circuits», just by turning the crank, producing conclusion upon conclusion upon conclusion, like a Burroughs adding machine![26]

[23] Ivi, p. 114.
[24] Ivi, pp.114-115.
[25] Ivi, p. 116.
[26] Ann Douglas writes in *Punching a Hole in the Big Lie* (in J. Grauerholz - I. Silverberg, Eds., *Word Virus*, cit.): «Unlike Ginsberg and Kerouac, however, Burroughs, born in 1914 to a well-to-do Wasp family in St. Louis, was part of the American elite. Indeed, as he often noted, his personal history seemed inextricably intertwined with some of the most important and ominous events of the modern era. In the 1880s, his paternal grandfather had invented the adding machine, a harbinger of the alliance of technology and corporate wealth that made possible the monstrously beefed-up defense industry of the Cold War years. Burroughs' maternal uncle, Ivy Lee, a pioneer of public relations, had helped John D. Rockefeller Jr. improve his image after the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, in which Colorado state militia shot two women and eleven children in a dispute between miners and management. In the 1930s, Lee served as Hitler's

Finally, Bush develops the term «memex», at the time conceived as a device, presently considered an all-purpose computer with software for manipulating all of the things that can be included in SGML or one of its many subsets:

Consider a future device for individual use, which is a sort of mechanized private file and library. It needs a name, and to coin one at random, "memex" will do. A memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory[27].

Ted Nelson, founder of Project Xanadu, an extensive hypertext project[28], comments on Vannevar Bush, and introducing the term hypertext, Nelson hesitates to provide a definition, other than to claim it is «text structure that cannot be conveniently printed» because hypertext is capable of imitating the associative paths in human consciousness:

The best current definition of hypertext, over quite a broad range of types, is "text structure that cannot be conveniently printed". This is not very specific or profound, but it fits best[29].
As Bush pointed out in his own terms[30], we think in hypertext. We have been *speaking* hypertext all our lives and never known it. It is usually only in writing that we must pick thoughts up and irrelevantly put them down in the sequence demanded by the printed word. Writing is the process of making the tree of thought into a picket fence[31].

Nelson hits upon a distinction that will be covered in the following section, that is, the many differences between the oral and the written, of «making thought into a picket fence».

admiring publicist in the United States, an achievement that Congressman Robert LaFollette branded "a monument of shame"».

[27] V. Bush, *As We May Think*, cit.

[28] W. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, cit.

[29] T.H. Nelson, *As We Will Think* (orig. pub. in «Online 72», 1, 1972), in J.N. Nyce - P. Kahn (eds.), *From Memex to Hypertext: Vannevar Bush and the Mind's Machine*, Boston, Academic Press, 1991, p. 253.

[30] Bush refers in section 6 of his text to thought processes: «The human mind does not work that way. It operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain. It has other characteristics, of course; trails that are not frequently followed are prone to fade, items are not fully permanent, memory is transitory. Yet the speed of action, the intricacy of trails, the detail of mental pictures, is awe-inspiring beyond all else in nature» (V. Bush, *As We May Think*, cit., p. 121).

[31] T.H. Nelson, *As We Will Think,* cit., p. 254, my emphasis.

3. *Orality and the New Tribalism*

The historical underpinnings of this essay are to be found in the works of Albert Lord (1912-1991), Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) and Walter J. Ong (1912-2003). Marshall McLuhan was very successful and popular in the late 50s and throughout the 60s, becoming a kind of cult figure and founding the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. McLuhan's many works, which include *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*[32] from 1962 and his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*[33] from 1964, fundamental to these remarks, not only were based on the studies of Albert B. Lord on the orality and on the origins of written literature in a Slavic setting, *The Singer of Tales*[34] from 1960, but these works also drew on the studies of Harold Innis, like McLuhan a Canadian scholar, whose work, *Empire and Communications*, published in 1950, is based on oral and written communications and the degree to which these forms of communication influenced the rise and fall of empires.

These studies of the differences between oral and written societal communication styles typified the 20th Century's great interest and fixation with language and its relation to the many forms of the social orders. McLuhan, Innis, and Lord might form a prelude to the work of McLuhan's student, the Jesuit Walter J. Ong, his doctoral student at St. Louis University, whose far-ranging interests led eventually to *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* from 1982 and then, obviously, to the more recent edition with chapters by John Hartley from 2012[35].

At the heart of Ong's work, and especially pertinent to this discussion, is the distinction between primary orality and secondary orality[36] (at an earlier time in his studies he called them primarily oral culture and secondarily oral culture). Thus Ong distinguishes between pre-literate or oral cultures and those cultures in which written forms greatly influence and condition oral performance. In the Greek and Roman ages writing conditions the oral, just as, in the times after Gutenberg and after the development of print within the European context, oral forms were as heavily contaminated by the written. In the epoch of the Information Age and the Internet, this tendency toward a secondary orality is greatly accentuated:

---

[32] M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, cit.

[33] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), Introd. by L. Lapham, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, MIT Press, 1994.

[34] A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Pref. by H. Levin, New York, Atheneum, 1971.

[35] W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, cit.

[36] Ong writes in *Orality and Literacy*: «I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, "primary orality". It is "primary" by contrast with the "secondary orality" of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print. Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects. Still, to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality» (Ivi, pp. 10-11).

[W]ith telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of "secondary orality". This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas […]. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well[37].

Ong singles out four characteristics of what he calls the new orality. It has the charisma and the aura of partaking: it makes the audience believe they are really participating in something greater than the individual; it brings about and it encourages a shared and mutual feeling of belonging and meaning that surpasses the single user; it focuses on the here and now to the great detriment of the past and of the future; and finally, it is based on the identification and the employ of formulaic rituals.

More importantly than the preceding four characteristics, the notion of secondary orality takes for granted the printed and the written world, and this is especially the case with things technical. Ong argues that this is so because all of the technical and theoretical knowledge, from construction to operation – radios, televisions, telephones, computers, routers, antennas, the list could go on and on – is based on the written word. He then goes on to comment on the ways that secondary orality and primary orality are similar and paradoxically, dissimilar to one another:

Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality. Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture – McLuhan's "global village". Moreover, before writing, oral folk were group-minded because no feasible alternative had presented itself. In our age of secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically. The individual feels that he or she, as an individual, must be socially sensitive[38].

This passage reveals the degree to which Ong's observations about life before and after technology are telling, for he insists on the collective nature of the group, going so far as claiming, basing himself on the tradition and on his studies, that silent reading «turns individuals in on themselves». The age of the global village, as his teacher Marshall McLuhan characterized the modern and technological condition, is the age of programmatic and self-conscious group-mindedness. The radio and the Internet, the telephone and the Web, television and Twitter, the telegraph and Facebook, all share common characteristics both of immediateness and of collective assemblages of group-minded users.

[37] Ivi, p. 133.
[38] *Ibidem.*

Numerous points are made by Walter J. Ong that are very much in keeping with the discussion about points of convergence between the Beat movement and nascent technologies such as the Internet. As Benjamin R. Barber claims in his essay, *Which Technology and Which Democracy?*: «Let me start with what is perhaps the primary characteristic of digitalized media: speed. That is their greatest virtue and, for similar reasons, their greatest vice»[39]. Numerous commentators have remarked on the element of speed in communications, including Marshall McLuhan for whom the world was shrinking until it resembled nothing other than a global village. For McLuhan the entire human family lives «in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums». In McLuhan the space is constricted and tribal drums are overwhelming in their presence.

---

[39] B.R. Barber, *Which Technology and Which Democracy?*, in H. Jenkins - D. Thorburn - B. Seawell (eds.), *Democracy and New Media*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, MIT Press, 2003, p. 38.
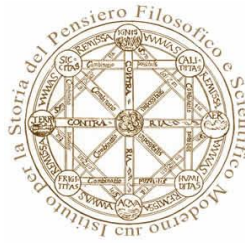
Richard Kidder
Università degli Studi della Calabria
richard.kidder@unical.it

– «Fifty thousand years is not very long»: The Tribal and the Information Age in the Beat Movement

ABSTRACT
This paper claims, in the first part, that the arguments put forth by the Beat Movement, personified by writers such as Gary Snyder, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, have much in common with the positions of Internet pioneers, such as Vannevar Bush, especially in the text of 1945, *As We May Think*, and with Ted Nelson, with his never quite completed project, "Xanadu". The second part of the paper explores oral and tribal experiences of contemporary critics such as Walter J. Ong and of Marshall McLuhan, whose claims for the existence of a global village in part has as its basis commonly shared with members of the Beat Movement ideas about orality. Finally, the center of gravity of the comments is explained as originating mainly in a twenty-five year period, from 1945 to 1970 but the discussion of these topics strays to the present.

KEYWORDS
Orality; Tribality; History of the Internet; Beat Movement

SOMMARIO
«Cinquant'anni non sono molto tempo»: elemento tribale e Information Age nel movimento Beat]. Il saggio argomenta, nella prima parte, che le tesi proposte dal movimento Beat, quale rappresentato da scrittori come Gary Snyder, William Burroughs e Allen Ginsberg, hanno molto in comune con le posizioni dei pionieri di Internet, come quelle di Vannevar Bush, specialmente nel testo del 1945, *As We May Think*, e di Ted Nelson, nel suo progetto mai del tutto completato, "Xanadu". La seconda parte del saggio esplora le esperienze orali e tribali di critici contemporanei come Walter J. Ong e di Marshall McLuhan, i cui argomenti per l'esistenza di un villaggio globale hanno una base comune con le idee sull'oralità dei membri del movimento Beat. Infine, si mostra come, sebbene il centro di gravità di queste posizioni origini nei 25 anni tra il 1945 e il 1970, il dibattito su questi temi sia ancora di estrema attualità.

PAROLE CHIAVE
Oralità: Tribalità; Storia di Internet; Beat Movement