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*This paper argues that cultural critic, Northrop Frye, shows mass culture to be the sort of analgesic modern capitalism designs to maintain contemporary individuals in their roles as what Martin Heidegger, calls "standing reserves." To this end, the paper will first describe Heidegger's view of modern technology and why its tendency to transform nature into a standing reserve must extend to human nature. Second, it will show how, for Frye, mass culture acts as a distraction for tired minds which has the ironic effect of diverting the attention of individuals from the fatiguing conditions under which they live. Third, the paper will conclude with a synthesis of the views of Frye and Heidegger designed to show how the most current developments in entertainment via the electronic media simply continue the tendency already identified by Frye in mass culture. That is, by creating the illusion of intimacy made easy, these developments serve to distract and therefore inure users of the new entertainment media to, what Heidegger characterizes as, their fatiguing condition as members of standing reserves. The paper will end with Frye's view on the university as a source of resistance to the effects of mass culture.*

**Northrop Frye's Mass Man is Martin Heidegger's Standing Reserve:  
Reflections on Mass Culture**

**By James Cunningham**

For many of his contemporaries, Northrop Frye was a twentieth century icon of Canadian letters. Educator, literary/cultural critic, and critical theorist, Frye argued that the primary requirement for free and informed citizenship is an educated imagination, and that a necessary condition of the educated imagination is "literary literacy." For Frye, literary literacy is the ability to read for literary value; and to refrain from judging literature by any values but its own. Without literary literacy, argued Frye, individuals lack the lasting imaginative standards by which to evaluate contemporary cultural practice. In effect, they are cultural illiterates, defenceless against any sharp commercial practice that finds them. Frye's case for viewing literary criticism as an autonomous study integral to human culture and freedom won him an international acclaim that still persists, though it has waned somewhat from its heyday in the 1960s. This waning of influence is due, in part, to Frye's rather gloomy assessment of the new electronic media of mass communication and their largely commercial co-opting by what has come to be known as mass or popular culture.

Frye's gloom about mass culture has put him at odds with a more current tendency by some "post-moderns" to embrace contemporary commercial uses of the electronic media as emancipatory.<sup>1</sup> Where Frye saw audiences bludgeoned into passivity by advertising and propaganda, there are post-moderns who see a new generation of self directed learners, "googling" their culture along their own chosen data path, "text messaging" their community in their own chosen language. Where Frye saw sub-literary standards, there are post-moderns who see the subversion of elitist hegemonies in an explosive and creative coming together of popular multiple wills. Indeed, there is a new generation of educators – one wedded to the pedagogical possibilities embodied by distance education and research via the internet – who would probably lump Frye in with "all the other dinosaurs." Are they right, or has Frye seen something to which their enthusiasm for technology may have blinded them?

It is tempting to dismiss Frye's media criticism, much of it written in what the computer literate would consider the antediluvian sixties, as hopelessly outdated – after all, what did Frye know about the internet? If Frye is not taken to be savvy about current media developments, however, it should still be granted that Frye could recognize continuity in historically disparate phenomena when he saw it – a literary education will do that for you. Frye's complaint about the electronic media and mass culture, even as it is today, would be that its commercial form embodies and completes a tendency inherent to modern technology as a whole. This tendency of modern technology was first identified by Martin Heidegger in his seminal essay, "The Question Concerning Technology", and can be described as that of reducing everything with which

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<sup>1</sup> The attitude of post-modernism is not one of uniform optimism about the new media. For instance, Baudrillard describes the contemporary media in very pessimistic terms as "induc[ing] 'a state of terror proper to the schizophrenic.'" However, there is also the attitude of "theorists of the information society such as [Daniel] Bell, [T.] Stonier, and [Yoneji] Masuda ... [who] see [in it] an extension of human capacity and power, a Promethean expansiveness on a global scale." Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), pp. 126-127.

humanity comes into contact to the status of a “standing reserve” – a source of stored energy to be tapped at will for any and all purposes. Modern technology’s tendency to reduce everything humanity encounters to the status of a standing reserve is a problem because it amounts to a degradation – perhaps a fatal one – of the very environment upon which humanity depends for survival. Worse, the tendency of modern technology is a problem because it does not spare individuals from the degradation it visits on their environment – modern technology makes inevitable an economy in which individuals are rendered into standing reserves: as such, their default condition will be that of unemployment, with all the attending stress, desperation and drudgery that such a condition must entail.

Such a condition as the one alluded to in Heidegger’s essay must be too unpleasant to be borne: one should expect the ensuing revolt of the masses as they smash the mechanisms of an economy that degrades them so. Against this eventuality, reasons Frye, mass culture is produced. Its goal is not the persuasion of its audience but their dependency on it; not to confound minds that are alert but to distract minds that are worried with fatigue. For Frye, then, mass culture is a final adjustment in Heidegger’s problem of modern technology. That is, mass culture ensures that individuals will remain standing reserves by distracting them from the reality of their condition. In distraction is the comforting illusion – an illusion so comforting that its dependents will cling to it in preference to and denial of their actual reality. In effect, for Frye, mass culture is the opiate of the post-modern condition.

The purpose of this paper will be, first, to describe briefly Heidegger’s view of modern technology, why its tendency to transform everything into a standing reserve must be inherent, and why the status of standing reserve must be one that is fatiguing for individuals. Second, it will be to show how, for Frye, mass culture acts as a distraction for tired minds which has the

ironic effect of diverting the attention of individuals from the fatiguing conditions under which they live. Third, the paper will conclude with a synthesis of the views of Frye and Heidegger designed to show how the most current developments in electronic media (on-line computer games, text messaging via cell phones, Youtube and Facebook via the internet, music on i-pods, for instance) are simply a continuation of a tendency already identified by Frye in mass culture. That is, by creating the illusion of intimacy made easy, these developments distract and therefore inure minds fatigued by what Heidegger calls their condition as standing reserves to the very condition that fatigued them in the first place. Heidegger might well say, then, that, as a distraction for fatigued minds, mass culture allows individuals to deny what they could not otherwise bear, and in denial, to bear it. The paper will end with Frye's view on the university as a source of resistance to the effects of mass culture.

### **Heidegger on Technology**

In his essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger differentiates technology from the machines and tools with which it is involved. Rather, for Heidegger, technology is more closely associated in its meaning with the Greek *techné* and its synonymy to craftsmanship and technique. As such, technology is both a way of responding to and of using the world – what Heidegger calls a revealing of the world and its resources for human creativity. The question is, though, in its revealing of the world, does technology use the world respectfully or violently?

Heidegger is clear that, if technology in general is a "revealing" of the world,<sup>2</sup> there are two types of technology – two radically different ways of revealing the world. The first of these is pre-modern technology. Pre-modern technology is almost universal among humans and reveals the world's creative resources through what Heidegger calls a "bringing forth" (11).

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Trans., William Lovitt (New York etc.: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), p. 12.

Heidegger characterizes this process of bringing forth in his famous example of the chalice (pp. 7-8). Says Heidegger, like all things fashioned (as *poiesis*) in pre-modern societies, the chalice is a product of the craftsman's bringing forth – his conjuring – of nature's causal forces (pp. 8 & 10). That is, through the craftsman, the four natural causes on which the chalice depends for its existence (its material, its form, its making, and its function) must all be brought into play and reconciled. The causal forces have to be reconciled because they all make demands that are quite independent of the craftsman. Thus the silver and metal out of which the chalice is made demand certain tools for their shaping, and the form conceived for the chalice determines how the tools must be used. Likewise, the ritual function or use of the chalice determines the nature of its form and the materials to be used.

What's note-worthy, here, is that, for Heidegger, pre-modern thought assumes that all of the above mentioned causalities, including the functional one, are products of nature, not man. The craftsman's skill (his *techné*) is in his imaginative reconciling of causal forces that do not originate with him, so that wielding nature's forces, the craftsman is both guided by and moved to complete nature's ways of providing for her human family. This means that the successful practice of pre-modern technology entails a respect for nature as intelligent provider: not only of the matter, form and means, but also the purposes, of human production. For Heidegger, then, pre-modern technology is akin to what moderns would call the "fine arts,"<sup>3</sup> where the artist is subsumed to the demands of his art. As Heidegger points out, however, pre-modern thought makes no distinction between artistic and non-artistic production: all pre-modern artisans are artists, there is no technological distinction to be made; the only distinction that might be made is that between the types of artefacts produced.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 35.

Having characterized pre-modern technology, Heidegger, then moves to show how modern technology is in direct contrast with it. That is, for Heidegger, if pre-modern technology amounts to the respectful use of nature, modern technology is nature's violent use. Heidegger sees modern technology as an anomaly of the last three centuries of human history, with beginnings specific to Western Europe (though, of course, the effects of modern technology are now felt world-wide).<sup>4</sup> As such, says Heidegger, modern technology is properly identified with a particularly modern "technical apparatus" or conceptual and methodological structure which determines how the world will be used (p. 14). At the heart of this apparatus is modern physics, operating as an exact science (p. 14), whose study of nature amounts to an intrusive practice – that is, the disassembling, observation and reorganization of matter. Scientific knowledge – the result of this intrusion – is the ability to predict how the manipulation of matter will preserve, release or transfer energy for any given purpose. The assumption implicit in this conceptual apparatus is that the world is dead and mute: like the corpse, its secrets lie buried so that learning is identified with exhuming and autopsy (science as profitable post-mortem). Thus, if pre-modern technology's revealing of the world amounts to a kind of artistic conjuring forth of nature's purposes for man, modern technology's revealing is a matter of "set[ting] upon" (or violating) the world: of mining its resources for purposes that are man's own (p. 15).

Also, if pre-modern technology is a conjuring, like all conjuring, it creates the pretence of ease where great skill is involved. Thus does pre-modern technology rest on the assumption that wonders of production entail the painstaking mastery of time honoured skills: the craftsman, then, aims at virtuosity, so that suffering is the prerequisite of pre-modern technology's proper employ. Not so with modern technology, the aim of which is to give man easy access to nature's energy: for modern technology, the aim is always easy use (to be user friendly). Ironically, it is

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 22.

ease of use that contributes most to modern technology's violent nature. For, if nature is subject to easy use, then the question becomes, what might we not use or, more ominously, what is to prevent us from the profitable mining even of human nature?

Heidegger has it that the essential tendency of modern technology is to turn nature into what he calls a standing reserve: essentially a large store of energy to be tapped for the multitude purposes of human use.<sup>5</sup> For Heidegger, then, the fate of all nature is to become like the Rhine (his paradigmatic example) (p. 16). The Rhine is straightened, deepened and lined with man-made materials rendering it into an easy source of low energy transportation and high yield electrical power. Roads and railways and aero ports open the Rhine to easy overland and air access for the purposes of tourism. Sewers and port facilities allow for riverside habitation where none was previously possible. In effect, there is no Rhine as it was: the Rhine is reduced to a resource for human use. How unlike the old pre-modern Rhine is this new Rhine, for the old Rhine was one to which man had to shape his endeavours, searching out those special spots, for instance, that would serve his water wheels. Under modern technology, however, it is the Rhine that is reshaped to give easy access to *man's* many demands for energy. Is there any place on earth that modern technology does not spare the Rhine's fate? Even the most remote reaches are designated wilderness "preserves" or "reserves": what modern societies can preserve or reserve for one purpose they can effectively store for others, as well.<sup>6</sup>

All of the above brings us to what Heidegger sees as the main problem with modern technology: mankind itself is a part of nature. In a society whose technology is modern,

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> In a vein similar to that indicated by the nature reserve, "uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, [as such, it becomes a reserve of power] which can be released either for destruction or for peaceful purposes." Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 15.

individuals can and must be reduced to the status of standing reserves.<sup>7</sup> The effect is for all individuals to function in an economy where the default condition is one of unemployment . After all, the goal of a modern economy is for all its parts to be user friendly: for ease of access, use and replacement. The key is for each part to be at the ready for use until needed and then, when the inevitable occurs and it is no longer needed, to be at the ready for use when needed again ... until the part is worn out and ready for disposal. As time-management theory since Taylor attests, the above describes the modern economy's goal for its workers as well. For employees in the modern economy, then, working life amounts to being at the ready for when one is wanted and then, when one actually is wanted, to looking forward to the time when one must be at the ready, again. That is, employees in a modern economy are always unemployed or waiting to become unemployed.

In line with Heidegger's reasoning, intelligent beings must find such an existence one of constant stress, anxiety and desperation. That is, my ability to be someone whose purposes, being served, are shown to be worth serving – to tap standing reserves in my own right – depends on my being employed. But because my status as employee under conditions of modern technology renders me into someone – something – who can be as easily declared redundant as s/he can be called or recalled, my existence as a being of worth is always tenuous – in question. Thus will I submit to whatever conditions ensure my continued employment: ironically, given the nature of modern economies, these will be the very conditions that make me increasingly replaceable. I will embrace, as user friendly, technologies which will render me increasingly deskilled and my employment one of increasing drudgery. I will embrace, as a career choice, conditions under which I must work longer, both through the day and through my lifetime. And,

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 27.

I will do all of this because I am engulfed by a desperation that I am too desperate to acknowledge.

Heidegger would probably allow that the condition of standing reserve is not sustainable for human beings. Ultimately, workers would be expected to use their off hours preparing for the day when they might smash the technological shackles that so effectively call their humanity into question. But ... we are still waiting. Why? Because, as critical theory has long attested, modern economies have moved to ensure that workers have no off hours; that their time away from work is transformed by distractions of that same economy's making into an extension of their work day, which allows workers to endure their conditions as standing reserves even as they deny that such a condition exists.<sup>8</sup> In his essay, *The Modern Century*, Frye provides two singularly effective analogies illustrative of how mass advertising and mass culture function as chief conveyors of this distraction by modern economies.

### **Northrop Frye and Mass Culture**

In *The Modern Century*, Frye describes the effect of mass culture by analogy to the experience of a train ride “so familiar to Canadians, at least of [his] generation.”

As one's eyes are passively pulled along a rapidly moving landscape, it turns darker and one begins to realize that many of the objects that appear to be outside are actually reflections of what is in the carriage. As it becomes entirely dark one enters a narcissistic world, where, except for a few lights here and there we can see only the reflection of where we are. A little study of the workings of advertising and propaganda in the modern world, with their magic-lantern techniques of projected images, will show us how successful they are in creating a world of pure illusion. The illusion of the world itself is reinforced by the more explicit illusions of movies and television, and the imitation world of sports. It is significant that a breakdown in illusion, as when a baseball game is “fixed”, is more emotionally disturbing than proof of crime or corruption in the actual world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, see “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 126-127.

<sup>9</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century: The Widdon Lectures, 1967* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 27-28.

What is noteworthy in the analogy is the implicit acknowledgement that, like passengers in a train, consumers of mass culture are, in a sense, aware that they are confronted by an illusion but still tend to respond to it with an emotional investment that would be more properly reserved for reality. Also, noteworthy is that the analogy hints at why individuals can be made to respond to illusion as reality, even when they know its not.

The beginning of the passage has the passenger's eyes "passively pulled along a rapidly moving landscape." The source of the passivity must be twofold. First, a train ride, especially a long one, has a soporific effect – something to do, no doubt with the regular noise and rocking motion of the train. And, the soporific state is a highly suggestible one. In any case, as Frye says elsewhere, resistance to suggestive stimuli is "a considerable strain to keep up,"<sup>10</sup> and that which is a strain to keep up can, over time, be broken down: such is the case in a train, where the train window has a captive audience, and where the "illusion" of a landscape in rapid motion is a natural draw on the eye. Thus does the passenger sit, a drowsy captive audience, receiving the scene as uncritically – as passively – as s/he would reality. But it is not reality s/he sees, for landscapes do not really move, certainly not at a rapid pace. They only appear to. Neither does s/he imagine it to be reality – s/he merely responds to it as reality. Once the tendency to receive illusion as reality has been established, the artificial nature of the illusion can be increased: the reflection of familiar surroundings in the passenger's car can be substituted for the outdoor scene with no change in response. In effect, the train window, like the mass advertising, propaganda and entertainment to which it is analogous, grabs the attention of its passenger audience with the promise of exciting new reality which inevitably transforms into a familiar and thus comfortable version of what they already know. And, because they are both fatigued and captive to what the

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<sup>10</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 136.

train window (or, for that matter, mass culture) shows them, the passengers respond to it as truth *because* it is comfortable.

Now the tendency to respond to familiar illusions as truth because they are comfortable has an alarming counter-tendency attached to it: a problem that is, again, attached to the fatigued condition of the audience. And that is the tendency to find truth – which is usually uncomfortable, and a lot of work to find at all – unintelligible and certainly unwelcome. As Frye says, the audiences of mass culture are more exercised by “fixed” games than they are when the political “fix” is in – in effect, audiences respond emotionally as though the sports event is more real than the political one.

So, why is it so important that mass advertising and entertainment should position audiences so that they respond to illusions as truth, even when they recognize them to be illusory. As Frye points out in his analogy to *Paradise Lost*, the purveyors of mass advertising and entertainment (which he identifies as being inextricably connected) do not seek to persuade, they seek dependence on the part of their audience. According to the *Paradise Lost* analogy:

... the forces of advertising ... move in [to the consumer’s mind] without any real opposition from the critical intelligence.

These agencies act in much the same way that, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton depicts Satan acting on Eve. All that poor Eve was consciously aware of was the fact that a hitherto silent snake was talking to her. Her consciousness being fascinated by something outrageous, everything that Satan had to suggest got through its guard and fell into what we should call her subconscious. Later, when faced with a necessity of making a free choice, she found nothing inside her to direct the choice except Satan’s arguments, which perforce, she had to take as her own, the more readily in that she did not realize how they had got there. Similarly, the technique of advertising and propaganda is to stun and demoralize the critical consciousness with statements too absurd or extreme to be dealt with seriously by it. In the mind that is too frightened or credulous or childish to want to deal with the world at all, they move in past the consciousness and set up their structures unopposed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century*, p. 26.

Frye might have added “a mind too tired” to his list of frightened, credulous or childish minds, for, it is just such a mind that presents itself to commercials and the entertainment that acts as their “warm-up act” when individuals flop down in front the internet or television after work. A mind that will accept comfortable illusions as reality (as described in the first analogy), is also a mind whose consciousness is easily demoralized by advertising and entertainment, whose subconscious is a ready receptacle for the clichés and bromides of mass culture.

Once again, the problem, here, is not that mass advertising and entertainment are convincing, it is that they are so easily absorbed that they broke no competition. As we saw Frye hint previously, the hard and time consuming work of consciously determining the facts about anything is strenuous and therefore, a job only for the mind that is well rested and refreshed. In the Heideggarean world of modern technology, where individuals are fatigued by the anxiety, desperation and the drudgery that come from being standing reserves, few if any of us will opt for the rigor of the reasoned pursuit of fact over the comfortable and infinitely suggestive repetitions of mass culture. When we decide what to do, then, we will find nothing to sustain our deliberations but what mass culture has put there. We will respond to its clichés and bromides as we would to wisdom, even though we know they are absurd, because we’ve been conditioned to respond to them as if they were true and because, in any case, they are all we have.<sup>12</sup> Exhausted, we choose the consumption of hokum over the pursuit of wisdom, and finding only hokum in our minds, we call it wisdom. That is why, as Frye has it, we all condemn the over commercialization of Christmas, but we all also binge shop at Christmas time (p. 26-27). In a similar vein, most men know that a girl in a bathing suit will not pop out of a paint can simply

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<sup>12</sup> Frye refers to the monopolistic nature of mass culture when characterizing it as propaganda. Writes Frye, “[w]hen propaganda cuts off all other sources of information, rejecting it, for a concerned and responsible citizen, would not only isolate him from his social world, but isolate him so completely as to destroy his self-respect. Hence even ... the big lie ... can establish itself and command assent if it makes more noise than the denial of the charge.” Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century*, p. 27.

because the can has got her picture on it. Still, the picture does seem to sell many cans of paint. According to Frye's description of mass advertising and entertainment, then, individuals can be seen to form a dependency on mass culture because:

- 1) they are its captive audience.
- 2) it presents their tired minds with comfortable illusions.
- 3) tired minds find its messages impossible to ignore at the sub-conscious level, while almost impossible to attend to critically.
- 4) it is easier for tired minds to assimilate the bromides of mass culture than it is to pursue reasoned research.

Frye's point is that individuals who have been conditioned to respond to the illusions of mass advertising and entertainment as they would to fact – on whose imaginations the bromides of mass advertising have a monopoly – are not going to want to change their existence: for them, anything but the consumption of mass culture will seem like a wearying burden. Frye might add that, as mass culture trains the mind to respond to comfortable illusions as truth, by default, it also trains the mind to respond to uncomfortable truths, or truths bought at the price of great labour, as “meaning nothing or infinitely less” ... certainly as irrelevant and unwelcome.<sup>13</sup>

What mass culture inculcates in individuals, then, says Frye, is a will to unite rhetoric and fact ... to say and act with conviction upon what, in their more lucid moments, they know is not true.<sup>14</sup> Even the false message that we are actually doing something meaningful when we deny in word what we copy in deed (that is, when we are being savvy consumers) is nothing more than a mantra of marketing. In effect, then, mass culture comforts and distracts individuals from the truth about their lives. Inundating them with comforting diversions, mass culture turns the

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<sup>13</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Northrop Frye, “Criticism, Visible and Invisible,” in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (London: Methuen, 1970), p.88.

attention of individuals away from the cause of the fatigue that made them susceptible to such diversions in the first place.<sup>15</sup> Instead of confronting that problem, individuals are seduced into buying phoney solutions to phoney problems: Need to be noticed? Noxima girls get noticed! Got only one chance to make a first impression? Chew the right gum!

**Recent Developments in the Mass Media: Synthesizing the views of Heidegger and Frye.**

It is on the topic of phoney problems for phoney solutions that a synthesis of Frye's and Heidegger's views concerning technology might be most helpful in understanding some very recent developments in mass media – all of which are supposed to render mass entertainment more interactive and/or to provide consumers with more choice (here I'm thinking of the obvious: for instance, on-line computer games, text messaging via the cell phone, Youtube and Facebook via the internet and music via i-pods). Just as Frye would see such developments as offering contemporary consumers a false promise of easy intimacy (really an ersatz intimacy which is indistinguishable from isolation), Heidegger would see this promise of ease as irresistible to contemporary employees fatigued by their status as standing reserves. Thus would Heidegger see their fatigue motivate them to buy into the very promise of ease that makes their status (their slavery) bearable.

To begin, Frye would probably note that the interactive devices listed above allow for conversation with real humans which is indistinguishable from interaction with a computer. Indeed, in most on-line computer games, players have the option of competing with other on-line players or simply playing with the computer, and the exchanges with human and computer opponents are so similar that the differences are trivial. Likewise, text messaging by way of cell

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<sup>15</sup> Frye describes our inundation by the products of mass culture in the following manner: "Everywhere we turn, there is the same implacable voice, unctuous caressing, inhumanly complacent, selling us food, cars, political leaders, ideologies, culture, contemporary issues, and remedies from the migraine we get from listening to it ... [it is] the voice that goes on echoing in our minds, forming our social attitudes, our habits of speech, our processes of thought." Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path*, p. 147.

phones extends a tendency of callers, already established in e-mail, to write in what Frye calls a manner which approximates the associative rhythms of ordinary speech: a manner which privileges self-expression over communication.<sup>16</sup> Such is the language of self absorbed gossip, which approaches even casual acquaintances with an assumption of an intimate familiarity that needs only the fragmented phrase, the knowing word, even the emoticon to make its meaning plain. The result is that the emotionally trivial is expressed in emotional superlatives. We seem to say much, and, perhaps we genuinely feel that we have, when, in fact, we have said very little, at all.<sup>17</sup> Intimacy by way of text messaging, then, tends to display the characteristics of advertising, which sells trivialities with dramatic slogans. It also displays the same characteristics as does the player's interface with the computer game: the terms of intimacy common to text messaging are identical to those that a computer could simulate. Of course, in an intellectual sense, users probably know that text messaging and related media tools, such as Youtube and Facebook, for that matter, blur the distinction between being alone and being with others in the way that playing computer games does. But they don't respond to these tools as if they know this, as is shown by the frequency with which users of Facebook and Youtube publish information about themselves which prudence would dictate should be kept private and with which individuals are encountered in public who engage in very loud private conversations on their cell phones.

In effect, Frye could say that text messaging *et alia* encourage in users the will to unite rhetoric and fact (this time around intimacy), just as he showed mass advertising and

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<sup>16</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Well Tempered Critic* (Markham ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1963), pp. 20-23.

<sup>17</sup> In my experience as a university instructor, students use emoticons in their messages to me when they are not discussing matters that are serious, or when they do not want me to treat serious matters – such as their failure to submit assignments – with the seriousness that they deserve. When students do want to discuss matters that they consider serious – marks with which they are disappointed, for instance – they never use emoticons. Gone also are the casual phrases and one word fragments. Instead, I am faced with attempts at earnest prose which tend to fail, probably because they are informed by habits of writing and assumptions about what is convincing suited to text messaging.

entertainment to encourage in viewers the will to unite rhetoric and fact about reality. For Frye, the reason for the success of these interactive technologies in encouraging this unity of rhetoric and fact would be simply that it is easier to engage in an intimacy with others that is akin to the experience of talking to oneself (that is, therefore, introverted), than it is to engage with people in an intimacy that is not.<sup>18</sup> By this, I do not mean simply that the media are user friendly. I mean that they give the appearance of easy intimacy: to that end they strip intimacy of its discomfort, something far harder to do when intimacy is conducted face to face.<sup>19</sup>

Still, questions arise. To the first question, why is face to face intimacy more difficult than intimacy by way of the new interactive media (text messaging, for example)? Face to face intimacy worthy of the name demands something close to the undivided attention and interest of those communicating in each other and in what they have to say.<sup>20</sup> It is the result of hard work – though that work can be very pleasant – and is encouraged by traditions with their social loci in family life and close social relationships (for instance, the after supper conversations at the family dinner table so common to the pre-television era, or the conversations at cafes during the extended lunch hours so common to work days in France). As I will show in the next section, Frye will say also that such intimacy is fostered in educational institutions worthy of the name, though, in the case of educational institutions, the intimacy is that of the scholar with their subject of study. By contrast, text messaging, e-mail, i-pods and the like are easy to use as distractions from activities in which the user feels isolated by a lack of interest in or connectedness with what is going on around them – when attending a lecture, or when working

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<sup>18</sup> As Frye notes, “the direction of most of the technological developments of our time has been towards greater introversion.” Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path*, p. 149.

<sup>19</sup> I acknowledge that face to face intimacy may be no less easy to achieve than the intimacy involved in the exchange of well crafted prosaic epistles (the letters between the Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett come to mind, as an example). But language of such epistles is hardly the stuff of text messaging; neither could it be, given that text messaging is designed for distracted users as described below.

<sup>20</sup> Hence the imprudence of giving that *hot date* with whom we want to form an intimate connection anything less than our undivided attention and interest.

in an office, for instance. In effect, they provide comforting feelings of intimacy when one is attending to something else and, therefore, guarantee that the people one is with will not have the user's full attention any more than will the people s/he is text messaging.<sup>21</sup>

To the second question, if face to face intimacy is harder and intimacy by way of text messaging *et alia* easier, why is face to face intimacy better? Here is where Heidegger makes a contribution. According to Heidegger, the status of a standing reserve is one of constant readiness for employment (a condition of unemployment). Readiness, however, is diminished if individuals engage in social activities which are incompatible with, and which they prefer to, employment. Such are the activities which foster the kind of undivided attention to others necessary for face to face intimacy. Such activities and the bonds of intimacy they foster will act as ties pulling against the demands by employers that individuals be on call at all times and be ready to go any place as required. As such, the bonds of intimacy so established must act to motivate in individuals a discontent with and resistance to the status of a standing reserve. On Heidegger's supposition that it is a bad thing for individuals to be reduced to the status of standing reserves, all such discontent and resistance is to the good.

By contrast, Heidegger might well see a danger inherent in the electronic devices which Frye would describe as making intimacy as effortless as talking to oneself – and as amounting to the same thing really. This danger would be in their capacity to be used as easy diversions from the anxiety and fatigue that goes with being a standing reserve without inhibiting our ability to act as standing reserves. As Frye would note, such devices are notable for their capacity to be

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<sup>21</sup> I acknowledge that certain traditional face to face forms of intimacy, sewing bees, for instance, involve multi-tasking on the part of participants and therefore seem, at a superficial level, to be like text messaging in class, say. Unlike instances such as text messaging in class, however, these traditional activities tend to engage the interest and connect the participants in a manner that allows them to give each other their undivided attention. This is indicated by the fact that silence of one of a bee's members, for instance, will almost inevitably occasion queries about what she is thinking.

used as diversions from isolating or alienating circumstances while at the same time allowing their users to function within those same circumstances. This explains why text messaging, the cell phone and the i-pod fit so seamlessly into the ever present light and noise show surrounding and permeating most modern retail, work and school environments. For Heidegger, the effortless fit of these diverting devices into the work place would in turn allow their users to fit in effortlessly, as well: like the rest of the sound and light show of which they are a part, these devices would serve to distract employees from the feelings actually engendered by their condition as standing reserves.

The other effect of the new electronic means of intimacy that Heidegger might well note is its tendency to displace activities encouraging face to face intimacy that might motivate resistance to the demand that we become standing reserves.<sup>22</sup> Really, there is nothing new in this. Note how, since its inception, mass culture has actively and successfully discouraged dinners at the family table as a mainstay of family intimacy (remember the TV dinner tray?).<sup>23</sup> These newest developments in mass culture are mere improvements in the means by which the same effect is delivered. Their ease of use, and the comforting nature of the intimacy they allow, makes them the favoured choice of populations that Heidegger argues are fatigued by the anxieties associated with being a standing reserve. At the same time, those same developments in mass culture inure populations to the losses they have incurred by becoming members of the standing reserve – the main loss being those hard won intimacies which might have provided them with the will and reason to resist a condition that oppresses them.

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, when we say that text messaging, e-mail, i-pods and the like are easy to use as distractions from activities in which the user feels isolated by a lack of interest in or connectedness with what is going on around them, we might add that, for most adolescents, life in the family home is now the main locus for such activities, especially around dinner time.

<sup>23</sup> For generations, fatigued parents have used mass culture – especially television – as a means of withdrawing from their children and each other. It is no surprise, then, that children should use the latest developments in the electronic media to withdraw from their parents.

Here, then, do we come to the point that derives from a synthesis of the views of Heidegger and Frye. For Frye, like all aspects of mass culture, the latest electronic developments in electronic intimacy would **seem to** offer an easy alternative to the kind of hard work entailed in the achievement of face to face intimacy. What they offer **actually** is self-comfort in isolation, a kind of opiate induced dream of intimacy and social activism made easy, in which we don't even have to acknowledge that we are dreaming (and here one thinks of the dream states that must accompany our shopping or driving with a cell phone wedged up against our ears). For Heidegger, it would not be surprising that a majority of the population rendered tired and anxious to the point of hysteria by their place in the current economy chooses to take advantage of the ubiquity and the readily accessible nature of contemporary mass culture to fill their both their working hours and off time with the same commercially ornate dreaming. Thus do contemporary individuals forget their misery even as they are living it. They become what Nixon said they always were, part of a silent majority, proclaiming, through their choice of mass culture, a preference for what Frye, in *Secular Scripture*, calls "a packaged commodity which an over productive economy ... distributes as it distributes food and medicines, in varying degrees of adulteration."<sup>24</sup> Fatigued minds will always take the easy road. And it is on just such minds that the survival of modern economies depends.

If, from Heidegger, we can conclude that modern economies deliver fatigued minds, from Frye, we can conclude that mass culture provides those minds with the distractions that will allow those same minds accept, even to prefer, their fatigued state. In Frye, then, we have a theorist who describes mass culture as having the analgesic qualities common to all narcotics.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 26

<sup>25</sup> Frye argues for the proposition that mass culture functions as a narcotic when he writes that "[w]e see the desire to identify social reality with appearance in the passive or negative concern of the person who automatically switches

Narcotics are addictive because they distract users from painful emotions, a painful environment, or both. Ironically the dependency usually ensures that the painful emotions will not be confronted, and the environment will never be escaped. Mass culture, in Frye's terms, amounts to a managing of the masses for the purpose of maintaining them as they are – what Heidegger would call standing reserves. In that sense, mass culture is modern technology as Heidegger would describe it. Of course, we might conceive of using the machines employed by mass culture differently, but, as Heidegger points out, machines are not technology. Technology is a use, and the different use of the mass media would entail a very different technology.

### **Hopeful Thoughts**

In the closing pages of his “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger sought solutions to the tendencies of modern technology in the arts, which, as we saw in the Heidegger section, act as a preserve of pre-modern technology, with their subsumption to and acceptance of the difficulties demanded by artistic traditions and materials. In the arts, reasons Heidegger, nature's materials and the practices which allow humans access to them as creative resources are revered as something more than standing reserves: in art, materials and practices have demands of their own to make and ends to which artists must bend. The question remains, though, what would it look like for a modern society to make a place of importance for pre-modern technology? Unfortunately, Heidegger's estimation about such things seems suspect: he is infamous for seeing, if only briefly, the development of such a society in the Germany of the mid 30s. Does Frye, who also sees in the arts a prevention of disaster, at the very least, fare any better?

I think he does, for Frye, unlike Heidegger, does not see the recovery of a place for pre-modern technology as being something at odds with a liberal-humanist vision. Rather, Frye has it

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over to situation comedies as soon as his television set begins to talk about public affairs or education. For such people, the fantasies of advertising are ... a form of drug culture.” Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path*, p. 160.

that such a place has never completely disappeared, that it is to be found in the university, especially in the university's emphasis on disinterested study, at least, in the humanities.<sup>26</sup>

Ideally, for Frye, the humanities share with the fine arts the tendency to embrace a subject on its own terms: to recognize in that subject values that have little or nothing to do with the extent to which the wider society finds it useful. In terms of literary education (Frye's field), what this means is that before we judge the value of literary works, our first job is to understand them on their own terms,<sup>27</sup> as products of the human imagination whose study provides us with irreplaceable imaginative resources.<sup>28</sup> Inevitably, such work is difficult and requires the development of mental habits capable of embracing such difficulties.

But it is this work, Frye argues, that places the university at the very centre of society (though its place is seldom recognized). For, it is scholarly work, says Frye, which allows individuals to develop the intellectual discipline to be critical of their society in any sense beyond griping about it, and to find values less fleeting than those which their society embraces. For this reason, Frye concludes that "literary education is not doing the whole of its proper work

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<sup>26</sup> Frye acknowledges that universities are not immune to the tendency of modern societies to render everything into a standing reserve. For instance, he notes the contemporary "gear[ing]" of universities to "political and economic expansion ... [which has] practically compelled universities to compete for students and to suggest that degrees were essential for a better job or social position." His fear is that such a tendency will "smother one of the real centres of university life [humanities education worthy of the name]." It is with the persistence of humanities education that Frye's hopes rest. Frye, N. "Rear-View Mirror: Notes Towards a Future," in *Northrop Frye: Divisions on a Ground, Essays in Canadian Culture*, Ed., James Polk (Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 1982). pp. 189-190.

<sup>27</sup> Says Frye, "The critic does not judge literature; he studies it and tries to understand it and thereby understand its social functions, but if he is up against something the size of Shakespeare, the critic is the one getting judged ... [t]he plays of Shakespeare are the standard: they illuminate the preoccupations and diseases of our [Frye's emphasis] time." Northrop Frye, "Freedom and Concern," in *Northrop Frye: The World in a Grain of Sand, Twenty-Two Interviews with Northrop Frye*, Ed., Robert D. Denham (New York, etc.: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1991). Pp. 290-291.

<sup>28</sup> Frye writes, "The culture of our past [and this includes our literary heritage] is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery ... of the total cultural form of our present life." Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957) p. 346. In the same vein, Frye says of the study of literature in a liberal arts college, "This was a community in which life could be experienced with a far greater intensity than anywhere else, because it was a life in which the intellect and the imagination had a functional role to play ... [t]he experience is its own value, and is a totally irreplaceable one." Northrop Frye, "Rear-View Mirror," p. 189.

unless it marshals the verbal imagination against the assaults of advertising and propaganda that try to bludgeon it into passivity.”<sup>29</sup> Only if it does this work of which it is capable will literary education and the scholarship that support it be a necessary part of modern democracy: “a mixture of majority rule and minority right, and the minority which most clearly has that right is the minority of those who try to resist a passive response, and thereby risk the resentment of those who regard them as undemocratically superior.”<sup>30</sup> But how are scholars to proceed?

Near the end of “Humanities in a New World” Frye writes, “The responsible citizen, of course, tries to get away from the mythical stereotypes [of mass advertising, propaganda, and entertainment], to read better papers and seek out friends who have some respect for facts and for rational discussion. But he will never succeed in raising his standards unless he educates his imagination too, for nothing can drive bad literature out of the mind except good literature.”<sup>31</sup> If there is a lesson here, for the university, it is that courses criticizing the strategies of mass culture – advertising literacy, and media literacy – are important but insufficient to an individual’s defence against the effects of mass culture. Their problem is that their value is predicated upon the continued consumption: I will be literate, thus immune. Therefore, I can consume mass culture with impunity. But, as Frye has argued, buttressing the conscious mind against advertising and entertainment is of little use once it is tired enough that their message can slip below it into the mind’s subconscious recesses. When students leave school and their busy analysis of all that is subversive in advertising, they will enter the work force and, exhausted by employment’s demands, will fall victim to the advertising and entertaining that they consume with such confidence. It is better, says Frye, to get students into the habits of reading appropriate

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<sup>29</sup> Northrop Frye, “Criticism, Visible and Invisible,” p.87.

<sup>30</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century*, p. 28-29.

<sup>31</sup> Frye, N. “Humanities in a New World,” in *Northrop Frye: Divisions on a Ground, Essays in Canadian Culture*, Ed., James Polk (Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 1982). pp. 113-114.

to something better than a “tin-pan alley jingle.”<sup>32</sup> Such habits are hard won, much like those of the professional athlete; but the pleasures they attain motivate, and the stamina they engender allow, individuals to continue to read and inquire critically even in the exhausting world of work. It can be something individuals do instead of consuming mass culture, which gives them a vision at odds with it<sup>33</sup>. For more than few of us, such a vision might make life as it is under conditions of mass culture and in the standing reserve intolerable. But that should be both the substance and goal for those individuals described by the newest educational buzz word: “self-directed learners.”

Since modernity’s inception, when Thomas Hobbes proposed that commodious living<sup>34</sup> is a universal goal for humanity, technology’s good has been equated with its ability to make endeavours easier on the assumption that ease and comfort are the same thing. In what many call the century of modernity’s demise, Heidegger demanded that we measure the veracity of the equation between ease and comfort: his warning is that the quest for ease promises comfort but at the cost of an ongoing fatigue that is structural to our living breathing environment and this includes human living and breathing, as well. With all ongoing structural fatigue, there comes a point of collapse. In the same vein, then, Frye warns that mass culture is the aspect of modern

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<sup>32</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Well Tempered Critic*, p. 153.

<sup>33</sup> For Frye, the habits necessary for reading difficult literature give us the capacity for “leisure” as opposed to “distraction,” which Frye characterizes as psychotic. “Leisure, [writes Frye], “begins in that moment of consciousness peculiar to a rational being, when we become aware of our own existence and can watch ourselves act, when we have time to think of the worth and purpose of what we are doing, to compare it with what we might or would rather be doing. It is the moment of the birth of human freedom, when we are able to subject what is actual to the standard of what is possible.” Frye continues, “our highways and television sets are crowded with people who are not seeking leisure but are running away from it. The same is true of the compulsive worker, the man who boasts of how little leisure he has, and who speeds himself up until he explodes in neuroses and stomach ulcers.” In such a man, Frye is describing Heidegger’s personification of the standing reserve. Frye, “Humanities in a New World,” p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> Hobbes makes this proposal when he argues that states must inevitably come into being as the only means by which “to secure [men] in such sort, as that by their owne (sic) industrie (sic), and by the fruites (sic) of the Earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly.” Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ed. C.B. Macpherson (London: Penguin Classics, 1988), p. 227.

technology which ensures that the very populations which modern technology fatigues will be complacent, even in denial, as their world collapses about them: how? by promising more ease.