

# Media, Technology and the Imagination



# Media, Technology and the Imagination

Edited by

Marie Hendry and Jennifer Page

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Marie Hendry and Jennifer Page

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This collection is dedicated in loving memory to Dr. Barbara J. Cicardo for her continued support as a mentor and to the conference on Literature, Language and Culture. “Bobbie C.” will be sorely missed.



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## INTRODUCTION

### MARIE HENDRY AND JENNIFER PAGE

The essays collected in this volume reflect the scholarly conversation started at the eleventh annual Louisiana Conference on Literature, Language and Culture, held at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in March 2012. Because this conference continually welcomes inquiry from academics at all stages of development and from a multiplicity of disciplines, the theme of media, technology and the imagination was especially enticing and provocative. Scholarly advancement now hinges upon technology in ways that were previously unimagined. Contemporary analysts might take for granted that technologies like word processing software, online research databases, discussion boards, and listservs, as quotidian as they now are, have irreversibly changed the standard method of performing literary and cultural analysis. As a symbol of literary innovation and query, the quill seems to have been replaced by the blinking cursor. Certainly, the intersection of imaginative thought and technology is beneficial for scholars, especially as it allows us to share discoveries and new ways of thinking; media and technology, for the modern thinker, foster the development of the imagination.

Beyond the typical fodder of literary analysis—which itself must acknowledge that technological innovation is commonplace in contemporary literature, no longer an element of only speculative or science fiction—a discussion of media, technology and the imagination invited speculation on generic performance, narrative film, and documentaries as well. Because of Louisiana's rich performance history, as the birthplace of jazz and the home to the zydeco musical genre, and as an attractive setting for Hollywood productions, from the well-lauded *Beasts of the Southern Wild* to the wildly popular *Twilight Saga* franchise, an investigation of the crux of media and the imagination was surprisingly well-suited for French Acadiana. Moreover, the newly-established Moving Image Arts program at UL Lafayette, orchestrated by the documentarian and humanitarian Charles E. Richard, generated further interest in this mutli-genre, multi-cultural conversation. With the support of local filmmakers and producers, the Louisiana Conference welcomed the opportunity to screen documentaries

and host intimate discussions about using film to convey individual imagination.

As deeply as media and technology influence research and writing habits, they also play an important role in our professional development and pedagogical strategies, and several contributors to the Louisiana Conference questioned how technology can be used to enrich students' learning experiences in the traditional and online classroom. One might think of online discussion boards or database research as some of the main methods of urging student familiarity with technology; however, instructors in the humanities are incorporating digital tools to demonstrate that artistic and cultural inquisition can be methodical as well as intuitive. Through the use of blogs, collaborative wikis, as well as software developed for visual analysis, desktop publishing, and film editing, instructors are introducing students to technologies that allow them to develop their imagination and present themselves as impressively tech-savvy. Because several presenters shared their knowledge and experiences with introducing students to new technology, other researchers at the conferences will be able to integrate methods and technologies into their own courses.

It is fitting that a conference so invested in interdisciplinary exchange and growth included the unique perspective of a scholar whose corpus embodies the paradoxical, inspiring marriage of technology and the literary imagination. As a geneticist, administrator, playwright, and poet, John Doucet's essay—located at the beginning of this volume—celebrates the symbiotic relationship of technological and imaginative innovation. Part autobiography, part ode to comic book art, and part exploration and condemnation of the arbitrary delineation of educational pursuits, Doucet's essay affirms that technology and artistry are not mutually exclusive; rather, they augment one another, leaving researchers, students, and artists with a nearly limitless potential of invention and investigation.

The essays in this collection likewise investigate more specific ways in which media, technology and the imagination inspire dynamic intellectual pursuits. Some of the essays take classical literary texts and writers, such as Milton, and discuss how technology has given these works a new birth. Others deal with modern texts and television, such as Laura Holder's ending essay on the television show *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* and traditional monster motifs.

It is our hope that this collection will inspire readers to reflect on the role(s) of pop-culture in academia and the multi-facetedness of how neo-studies produce a unique interpretation of media and technology. Most importantly, it is the imaginative nature of this volume that stands as a

testament for the importance of this theme in today's emerging dialogue on pop-culture.



**PART I:**  
**PERSONAL ESSAYS ON SPECTATING**  
**AND BECOMING**





# CHAPTER ONE

## ON THE DESIGN OF MENTAL ORGANISMS

### JOHN P. DOUCET<sup>1</sup>

It is the nature of mental organisms to resolve thoughts, concepts, and ideas to conclusion. A conclusion can be logical, based on structures observed from the sensuous world and chemically remanufactured as a series of neurotransmissions across synapses of neurons that may be recalled time and time again in the process of memory and then used as rationale to explain other, unknown thoughts, concepts, and ideas theretofore unconcluded. Alternatively, a conclusion can be illogical, which would be nonetheless a similar chemically remanufactured observation that can be recalled and then used by casual and intentional observers alike as rationale for dirty looks, snide remarks, lack of career promotion, and expensive prescriptions with unwelcomed side effects.

A cat, for example, is certainly a mental organism, as it remanufactures the location of its supper bowl and time of filling on multiple occasions per day. Its conclusion is that this location is where sustenance will be provided by larger mental organisms who routinely fail to realize that it can provide sustenance for itself by hunting for juicier kibbles, like mice. The cat at its location, however, will not make the conclusion that its supper bowl will be filled by a mouse slowly and involuntarily crawling across the surface of its supper bowl feigning its traditional role as prey. That would be an illogical conclusion, and cats do not make these.<sup>2</sup>

Lions are another example. Despite also being considered a “cat,” lions have clear differences in their acumen for making conclusions about the

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a mild-mannered scientist rendered superhero by mutation—presumably not mutation induced by cosmic rays, gamma rays, or the bite of a radioactive spider but rather by the natural, spontaneous mutations that occur in the stem cells of parental germlines. At least that’s what his meager superpowers suggest. For more on germlines mutations, see note 46.

<sup>2</sup> Evidence for this is, of course, anecdotal, and is sometimes challenged by other evidence provided by YouTube and *America’s Funniest Videos*.

natural world. For one thing, they would not even conjure the thought of a mouse as food, preferring the more slender and tender dark meat of the wildebeest or gazelle.<sup>3</sup> They would also not depend on larger mental organisms to provide sustenance, for, oppositely, larger mental organisms sometimes actually serve as sustenance for the lion itself. Most importantly, and unlike the domesticated cat, a much smaller mental organism, lions do make the occasional slight of logic—like trying to paw down two rhinos at once or trying to swallow that first bite of alligator without first removing the skin. Lions never remanufacture the series of neurotransmissions necessary to correct this illogic because no other mental organism—not humans, not mice—will exert the requisite fortitude to alert the larger, carnivorous mental organisms to their failures. Fortitude, it seems, is a prelude to face-to-face criticism, and in its conclusion-making the lion has no immediate need to recognize that behavior in other mental organisms.<sup>4</sup>

Humans, on the other hand<sup>5</sup>, are mental organisms distinct from cats large and small in that in humans it is insufficient simply to resolve to conclusion. Other, confounding synapses manufacture the *desire* to come to conclusion, to covet *meaning*, and to use meaning to generate more complex thoughts and concepts and ideas.

One manifestation of this uniquely human desire for conclusion is the academic conference. Attended mostly by humans with the occasional post-conference gathering of smaller cats around garbage cans where the leftover refreshments not otherwise absconded by graduate students are left for refuse, such conferences invite an array of specialized thoughts, concepts, and ideas with an inherent understanding among participants that a conclusion will be resolved. This resolution usually manifests in the spectacular ideas of one invited human with handsome gifts of both complexity of thought and eloquence of word.

And so, I begin.

Of all the scholastic, convivial and collegial motivations to undertake this conference, perhaps none has provided the requisite “ire” in our *desire* as mental organisms to come to conclusion as one motivation in particular. Our contemporary, literary theorist, and critic Terry Eagleton, has provided many intellectual challenges to address at many academic conferences.

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<sup>3</sup> That’s “legs and thighs” for you eaters of potted beef tripe and mechanically-separated chicken, even if it’s canned as “America’s Favorite.”

<sup>4</sup> With the exceptions, of course, of moments under contractual obligations to circuses, zoos, and most Siegfried and Roy performances. At one point or another, all mental organisms work for meat and money.

<sup>5</sup> Paw?

This conference, on media, technology, and the imagination, has chosen its own challenge from his book, *Literary Theory*: “Superman comic and Mills and Boon novels are ... not generally regarded as literature, and certainly not Literature.”<sup>6</sup>

And so, at the end of this conference, I am left with a multitude of ends to tie, a plethora of parallel ports if you technologically will, including lyrics by both Iggy Pop and Terry Eagleton, none of which can be sung by the human voice and maybe not even that of the cat.<sup>7</sup> By way of resolving “media, technology and the imagination” to conclusion, I here offer a graphic, novel, largely autobiographical apology in defense of our collective ideas.

## Megacephalization

Evolutionary biologists explain that cephalization was the consequence of natural selection in the prehistoric struggle to find food. First, there was some sort of cell or body structure in an ancestral organism containing a concentration of pigment molecules that could receive and respond to light photons and thereby distinguish dark—like distinguishing the silhouette of something tasty swimming across a light source. It was beneficial to organisms to have these pigmentary sensors developed near the organismal mouth where the tasties would be captured. Those with more pigment molecules experienced better acuity and were fitter to eat, survive, mate, and distribute their genes to a next generation. More pigment molecules meant more and bigger cells, bigger tissues, and then bigger heads.

This is how evolutionary biologists explain cephalization. There are some things, however, that even the most brazen of such scientists fear to explain.

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<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. Print. P. 2. (Hereafter, *Literary Theory*.) Readers of *Literary Theory* may recognize that our never illogical “cat” is also the favorite, furry signified referent of Ferdinand de Saussure and semiotics (pp. 96-7).

<sup>7</sup> This is only a supposition. During some seasonal cat fights, I have heard harmonic approximations of Iggy Pop melodies. Although I have heard none of Eagleton’s during these episodes, I suspect this is because those longer-winded cats are routinely eliminated in the natural selection inherent to the fight.

It was a harrowing diagnosis, one that a doctor should never reveal to a mother.<sup>8</sup> But this was the 1960s, a time when lawyers were busy solving the Kennedy assassination and not concerned about emotional traumas induced by careless or insensitive physicians.

*Megacephaly*. A large head. Of all things to be large. A father inevitably would be prouder if the diagnosis applied to something other than the cranium. But I speak in generalities. My father was proud, but perhaps this was because he couldn't see *past* the cranium.

My mother has always been proud. Or maybe she was proud just to have survived the natural birth of a megalot.<sup>9</sup> That earned her membership in an exclusive club in the world of women, and maybe she went home with special gifts, like not one but two boxes of those new-fangled disposable diapers and not one but two cases of that experimental milk formula. I believe that there were not one but two sheets of S&H Green Stamps thrown in as a consolation prize, but I could be mistaken. After all, I was young.

A few years after birth, and after missing a few developmental landmarks, I had come to realize that I was not clinically megacephalic.<sup>10</sup> But I still had a big head.<sup>11</sup> And that would prove a big fricative problem.

It's hard to be a big kid. It's worse to be a big-headed kid.

For one thing, big-headed kids have big head colds in winter because there's so much surface area to catch a chill.<sup>12</sup> And, on windy days, forget finding a cap or a hat that fits. My mother once tried to buy a cap for me, and the lady at the register called the produce section for a price check. Another lady asked if I came seedless.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Of course, since she had already birthed the subject, perhaps there was suspicion among the doctors that she was already desensitized to the situation.

<sup>9</sup> I sorta helped out—at least initially. I was breech.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, I learned to walk later than the accepted pediatric standard age because I was perfectly adept at getting from one place to another by rolling on my head.

<sup>11</sup> So, that would make me *macrocephalic*, not *megacephalic* or worse—*megalencephalic*. But, a curse is a curse by any other name. I think Shakespeare said that, maybe in *Macbeth*.

<sup>12</sup> Now, doctors will tell you that colds are caused by viruses and not by frigid, ambient temperature. Others will tell you that frigid, ambient temperatures lower your immune response, making you more susceptible to viruses. Either way, I still had a big head and big head colds.

<sup>13</sup> That lady may have had an ulterior motive, as cougars, by definition, often do. Pardon the cat analogy: "Thrice [now] the brindled cat hath mewed" (Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt.

Sports were a disaster. I made the local Biddy Basketball team not as a player but as equipment. For football, I couldn't fit any helmets, so I was converted to place kicker.<sup>14</sup> When daddies would take their sons to see a baseball doubleheader, they'd end up at my house to sit and watch me.

Elementary school itself was not much more fun. I wouldn't play hide-and-seek because my head or its large shadow would inevitably give me away. I wouldn't play with hula-hoops because they'd painfully pull my hair when I'd try to put them on. And the only reason I was ever invited to swimming parties is because parents viewed me as a safe flotation device.

I remember going to the cinema as a kid. People complained even though I sat in the back row. If you ever wonder who invented stadium seating, it's the guy who was sitting behind me during *Star Wars*.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking of outer space: Once, after a lunar eclipse over my hometown, people would call my parents and ask me to go out and do it again. One day in second grade, we got to act out the solar system. All the kids said I should be Jupiter. "No," Mrs. Sensitivity said, "He has to play the sun because his head is so [whatever]." At least I was the center of planetary attention. And, though I secretly wanted to be a "star" pupil, this was not what I had envisioned.<sup>16</sup>

Some autumn mornings as a kid, I'd wake up to a bed full of acorns. My three elder sisters would tell me that the backyard squirrels needed help transporting large volumes of these oak nuts for winter. And so, they explained, during the night the furry animals would silently bring me a large stash to carry in my cheeks to the burial grounds. How my sisters knew details of this innate squirrel behavior was a mystery.

The emotional trauma for a kid with a big head has long-lasting effects. For years I had this recurring dream that I was at a birthday party in Mexico surrounded by children carrying sticks who were crying

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2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008. 2579-2632. IV.i.1. Hereafter, *Macbeth*.

<sup>14</sup> I am being polite. This was really a demotion. Kickers practiced separately, used separate showers, rode separate buses for away games, and enjoyed only the glory of being the default scorer when the much preferred touchdown could not be achieved by the more lauded players of the offense who have below normal-to-normal cranial diameters.

<sup>15</sup> Apparently, and unbeknownst to me except for the slight scalp burn I suffered at the back of my head, I had eclipsed close-up scenes of the Death Star several times.

<sup>16</sup> In addition, as the sun and not as Jupiter, I got to stand much closer to the precocious blonde girl who played Venus, a consolation I didn't fully appreciate until several years later when I approached high school years. (See note 26.)

inconsolably because they couldn't beat candy out of my head. Another time I dreamed I was swimming somewhere off the Gulf Coast and Gregory Peck tried to harpoon me.<sup>17</sup> But the worst dream I ever had was when I imagined my head was infested with lice sailing in tiny wooden sailing boats. I heard one louse exclaim in Spanish, "It's flat, Christopher! For God's sake, man! Turn back!"<sup>18</sup>

## Orwellian Proportions<sup>19</sup>

It is a great day in high school when a student earns reprise from his teacher's classroom rantings and instead gets to watch a movie. That is, such is a great day in high school if you have a normal sized head. By those days, however, the non-cranial aspects of my body had normalized, at least somewhat so, and thus the cranium itself was less conspicuous given that growth phenomenon, together with emerging expression of unexpected personal charm previously concealed in those of my more disproportionate elementary school days.

Beyond the typical directions of my teachers to make sure that I sit in the back of the class, which became so commonplace as to be no longer embarrassing or discouraging, it's always a risk for a big-headed kid because particular items in films—like the Death Star of *Star Wars*—that can alert detractors to the shape and unappreciated grandeur of his cranial disposition.

But there is no day **less** such a great day than that unforgotten day when my English teacher wheeled in a vacuum-tube television monitor, which sat atop a three-fourths-inch video tape player on a four-foot tall

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<sup>17</sup> This Technicolor dream was a leftover memory of watching the 1956 Warner Brothers film *Moby Dick*, which starred Peck. I survived that dream by blasting Peck and his feeble harpoon apparatus with a great snort from my dorsal blowhole, no doubt a Freudian concoction deriving from many years as a tuba player in various school bands.

<sup>18</sup> Maybe it was Portuguese. It's hard to tell when you're sleeping.

<sup>19</sup> "Orwellian" in this usage is an original contraction of "Orson" and "Welles," after the macrocephalic director, play-adaptor, and titular star of the film *Macbeth*, which is the subject of ensuing paragraphs. The term at this point, much like Eagleton's *Literary Theory*, has little to do with George Orwell himself, despite that author's importance to all of literature in, among other things, illustrating the idea and consequence of a dystopian world, a place where, it is abundantly apparent from his writings, the critic Eagleton lives.

cart<sup>20</sup> and told us that we were about to watch *Macbeth*.<sup>21</sup> This was not just some friendly caught-live-on-film play between actors mouthing obscure, overwritten lines with funny accents. This was the famous<sup>22</sup>, stark, spare, 1948 Republic Pictures version for which Orson Welles was awarded only \$700,000 to headline and produce and which he completed in only twenty-three days.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, the script was Shakespeare's, and so there could be no criticism of or detraction from that exalted regard in the world of public school English class.<sup>24</sup> And, as prelude, the class was warned of the "curse of Macbeth"—the injuries, riots, and deaths that had occurred through history at theaters where Macbeth was performed. This frightened us deeply. As if we were in imminent danger, we were uncharacteristically hushed.<sup>25</sup>

As the film began and the stark, black-and-white images cemented all our fears, it became clear that the imminent danger was all and only mine. In the first two minutes of the film, two realizations ignited inside that great vault where my self-consciousness paced ceaselessly and sent fire down my spine and into my skin to flush with embarrassment. These two anxieties put me once again at risk of ridicule by classmates and the

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<sup>20</sup> Okay, this was the seventies—the *late* seventies to be exact. Nothing digital, nothing streaming, nothing in current usage, all obsolete. But, to paraphrase Iggy Pop in the roughly contemporaneous proto-punk anthem "Search and Destroy," "Ain't got time to make no apology! Look out, honey, we're using technology—along with media and imagination!" (Iggy and the Stooges. "Search and Destroy." *Raw Power*. Record album. CBS. 1973.) Hereafter, "Search and Destroy." In the first line of this song, among a litany of self-descriptions, Iggy describes himself as a "street-walking cheetah"—yet another brindled mew. It's a connecting principle. It's synchronicity, man. Somebody call Carl Jung (Jung, Carl. *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1972.). Or call The Police (The Police. "Synchronicity I" and "Synchronicity II." *Synchronicity*. Record album. A & M. 1990.).

<sup>21</sup> When we first heard our teacher say "Macbeth" and "Macduff," the class thought we were going to be taken on a field trip to MacDonald's.

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps that should be "infamous," but we had not yet learned the difference between the two words until subsequently watching the Orion Pictures feature film, *The Three Amigos* (1986), in which Martin Short (as Ned Nederlander) explains that "infamous" means "*more* than famous."

<sup>23</sup> Produced largely on stage and using props leftover from previously filmed studio Westerns, some purportedly made of painted cardboard—a true challenge for media, technology, and imagination.

<sup>24</sup> I suspect that was Eagleton's point in commanding our undivided attention.

<sup>25</sup> I suspect that was the teacher's point in commanding our undivided attention.

questionable intention of my teacher who sat me in the rear of the room. From that bloodfire grew the threat that would tear open all the still-scarred wounds that my new teenage conformation and charm had marginally concealed.

First, Orson Welles had a big head, and so did I. Second, Macbeth had three doom-forecasting witches called *evil sisters*, and so did I.

It was clear to me that the three shadowed and cloaked figures standing atop a granite (cardboard) ledge with bifurcate twigs high above their heads had molded from the Scottish peat of a Hollywood set a heavy-headed voodoo model of me, and that that clay construction would collapse—no, be decapitated—in defeat by the end of the film. This was my life, played before all to see—not just my classmates but also people worldwide who spoke the twenty-three languages into which the film had been translated up to that time.<sup>26</sup> This was the impersonal manifestation of my own three elder and female siblings and their constant reminders of my Orwellian head and consequent impending doom. My fate was not just toil and trouble, but double-double so<sup>27</sup>—boiled and baked in a cauldron of unfailing anguish, a boiling hell-broth of

Fillet of a fenny snake,...  
 Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
 Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
 Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,  
 Lizard's leg and owlet's wing...<sup>28</sup>

And lest we forget (and I never can) that *Macbeth* is all about *heads*—heads of kingdoms, heads of armies, even the head of Macbeth himself at the play's end, severed from its disproportionate (in Welles' case as in my

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<sup>26</sup> This includes the one-time precocious blonde girl who played Venus, who I am certain spoke, kissed, and tickled in one of those languages which I had hoped would be French.

<sup>27</sup> Which, being inclined to math and sciences at that time, I inferred as a simple mathematical progression as  $\text{Fate} = 2 \times 2 \times (\text{Toil} + \text{Trouble})$ , as opposed to the much more serious exponential progression,  $\text{Fate} = ([\text{Toil} + \text{Trouble}]^2)^2$ . Judging from ensuing events, however, I may have been wrong.

<sup>28</sup> IV.i.12-17. Little did Shakespeare, or the witches, whichever was real, realize that this is my great-grandmother's gumbo recipe. For those of you who intend to make some of your own, you can substitute a whole lizard for the two ingredients "lizard leg" and "blind-worm sting" because blindworms have no legs. To emulate the "sting" of the blindworm, a little Tabasco sauce will do. However, under all circumstances do not suffer the omission that Shakespeare has made in the *Macbeth* manuscript: First, you make the roux.



own) body and displayed for all conquering soldiers to gawk upon. But even more harrowing for the head-conscious student is the Armed (Armored) Head of Act IV, a bodiless apparition conjured by the sisters that speaks a mortal warning with a prophetic couplet<sup>29</sup> of lines: “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff; / Beware the thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.”<sup>30</sup>

And so, after suffering the corporal pyre of watching that film, will all my classmates mocking me through the backs of their heads, I came to an understanding—a *capitulation*, to use a big word with the same Latin etymology as “head.” Just as Macduff revolts for Macbeth’s head, so the world is revolted by mine; revolt in both cases illustrated by three evil sisters. It would be thus throughout my life if not for the rise of a being that would finally come to justify my forceps-bending birth.

### Sophisticate Titles<sup>31</sup>

Thick, heavy, oil-based paint slathered over huge engines and machinery held down by humongous nuts and bolts. The deafening hum and heavy vibration of hot machinery in constant motion. Smudges of oil and mud at every corner, on every tally book, at every control panel, in every steel-toed shoe print. And everywhere the sweet odor of rust and diesel.

When I was in second grade, I got to visit my dad’s rig. Dad was the tool pusher, and the “rig” was a drilling barge, with three floors of heavy machinery rising from the barge floor.<sup>32</sup> Atop (and through) the floors on one end of the barge was the drilling platform with a huge, steel drilling

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<sup>29</sup> And that’s all the head gets to say. So typical of theater and life that the more corpus-centered actors get the most lines.

<sup>30</sup> A subsequent apparition—a human child—tells Macbeth to “be lion-mettled, proud” for, as explained previously in this essay, humans lack the fortitude to point out illogical conclusions to lions (IV.i.87-8, 106). (Alas, another mew.)

<sup>31</sup> “Sophisticate Titles” was the polite, unrevealing phrase of the sign on the temporary wall beyond the comic book displays at my hometown drugstore. Beyond that wall were shelves of magazines that only adults were allowed to view and to purchase. On one Saturday visit, and with one peek while no one was looking, the phrase was no longer unrevealing to this mind. Behind such a wall is where Terry Eagleton might have conducted research on Mills and Boon novels (particularly the Blaze, Desire, and Spice imprints) for *Literary Theory*.

<sup>32</sup> The guy or gal in charge on site of a drilling operation.

derrick that in height was probably twice the length of the barge.<sup>33</sup> Aside the derrick on the other half of the barge and on the top floor were the bunkhouses, kitchen, and tool pusher's office where I hung out.

This was the early 1970s, when drilling and exploration off and around the Gulf Coast was at its peak. And just starting a well, or during down time between wells, there was little risk for bringing a kid aboard, I suppose. In any event, and although only under supervision did I visit the drilling deck and rooms of heavily painted machinery, I was generally relegated to the office, where I played with things like exotic drilling supplies, manual adding machines, slide rulers, circular graph paper, and unsmudged tally books. I learned sharp-edged, polysyllabic terms from pictures and drawings in catalogs and technical reports produced by companies like Hughes, Reed, names made by acronyms and portmanteaux ending in "CO," and the macho-sounding Baroid and Dresser Magcobar. The office was nearby the kitchen, where I discovered breakfast sausage, T-bone steaks, and other manly and meaty staples of the roustabout's and roughneck's diet that I had never tasted before either at home or at the elementary school cafeteria. This was a world away from the other—an advanced (although filthy and smelly) technological (and well-fed) playhouse of a world.

Soon, I had played with and tasted (from the office and kitchen, respectively) everything in that water-locked microcosm and got bored. In response, my dad called an incoming crewman to stop at his local supermarket to pick up some magazines and comic books. After several days of anticipation, the crewman eventually reached the office with a large bag of magazines, mostly sports and sophisticate titles, together with random comic books. Although I was permitted to view the sports magazines, of course I was not allowed to see the more sophisticate titles. However, I remember glimpsing the cover of a *Sports Illustrated* magazine with Joe Namath sporting a greasy-looking Fu Manchu-style mustache<sup>34</sup> and a *Playboy* issue not with a photograph of a woman on the cover but rather with a bunny-bustiere-bowtie cartoon.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> My parents have told me that "Derrick" was their first idea for my given name. I suspect that, because the sight of my newborn form reminded them less of a derrick and more of a salt dome into which a derrick would drill, they abandoned the idea.

<sup>34</sup> This was a time when Joe only played a few games per year due to injuries. He was probably on the cover of this issue because around that time he had opened a series of bachelor bars in several major cities that hosted NFL teams, much to the dismay of Commissioner Pete Rozelle. When Rozelle demanded Namath's divestiture from the New York City operation, Namath, with a tearful television

The anticipation of getting new coming books outside of my control was a significant source of anxiety for me because the crewman knew nothing of my exclusive taste in comics. I was strictly a Marvel Comics boy, and I tended to shy away from the mainliners, like Spiderman and the Fantastic Four because those storylines were just too long for me and my meticulous attention span. I was attracted to the rarer headliners—hero and villain alike—characters like the gangly mythological dragon Fin Fang Foom,<sup>36</sup> the technologically advanced Titanium Man and Cobalt Man,<sup>37</sup> and the one-off, single-issue stories from *Tales of Suspense*, *Tales to Astonish*, and other variety series.

The bag of comics I was given was ultimately a mixed one, which was better than I predicted. Among this impromptu stash collected onshore without my input but for which I was obliged to show appreciation to a

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broadcast, announced his premature retirement. Unfortunately for Rozelle, Namath was professional football's most popular and marketable player. A few months later, Namath returned to training camp and continued his injury-prone career in football, a game Terry Eagleton apparently does not watch and believes should be abolished (Eagleton, Terry. "Football: A Dear Friend to Capitalism." *The Guardian*. 15 June 2010. Web. 15 November 2012.) Of course, he was talking about *association* football (that's *soccer* for you Brits), but his sentiment, I'm certain, would be the same. Perhaps he, too, was named to school sports teams as equipment. Or perhaps he was relegated to kicker. But wait: Aren't they all kickers in soccer? Well, that explains that.

<sup>35</sup> This was a time when there was absolutely no reason to have a bunny-bustiere-bowtie cartoon on the cover rather than the anticipated alternative.

<sup>36</sup> Foom emigrated from a peaceful planet (Don't all dragons?) that suddenly set about to conquer other civilizations. Of course, he ended up trying to conquer ours because which other planet would pay 12 cents to read about their own invasion by a comic book character? Foom looks like a traditional Chinese dragon, and his base of operations is in fact in China. Seems to me the slow, economic conquering of civilization in the twenty-first century is much less messy than Foom's fiery, tail-swinging exploits of the twentieth, but I guess that would be hard to illustrate.

<sup>37</sup> These two characters (together with a group of superheroes from DC Comics called the Metal Men, which I soon stopped collecting because of the silly illustrations and storylines, like, for instance, the red, thermometer-colored Mercury Man dripping down the side of a laboratory where evil scientists [a concept that offends me professionally] were creating super magnets to destroy the obviously magnetic superheroes) led to my interest in the periodic table of the elements, the 100-plus names and symbols of which I could recite from memory in elementary school. Of course, and much to my dismay, no one at home or school was impressed because they expected that kind of spectacular feat from a child with such apparent cranial volume.

grown man with no taste in comics was a couple of *Archie Comics*<sup>38</sup>, an *Iron Man*<sup>39</sup>, and a *Sub-Mariner*. It was *Sub Mariner* #49,<sup>40</sup> and, much to my surprise, it immediately became my favorite mag.

I was attracted to that issue for then inexplicable reasons. Was it because I was offshore and the superhero represented a similar lifestyle surrounded by water? Was it Sub-Mariner's little ankle wings which reminded me so much of Greek mythology? Was it his hatred of humankind for polluting oceans (in some issues by drilling for oil) and destroying his home, Atlantis?<sup>41</sup> Or had I become over-sensitized by the multitude of calendars and other pinups taped and tacked to the filthy paneled walls of the men's bunkhouses depicting nude women feigning modesty while posing behind large, strategically placed wrenches and drilling bits, causing me to coincidentally become sensitized to his green, scaly, proto-Speedo bikini bottom?

Then it hit me like the subterranean screech of a diamond bit hitting a plate of iron ferrite.<sup>42</sup> I wasn't attracted to the Sub-Mariner at all. What kind of defeatist attraction would a young boy have toward a superhero who lay prostrate and incapacitated in the cover art, being dragged unconsciously—not even putting up a fight—by robotic minions under direct orders of the issue's primary supervillain? No, it wasn't poor ol'

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<sup>38</sup> Which was way below my reading and interest level, although, because it was meat and I was on such a meat-eating drilling rig, the thought of Jughead's limburger cheeseburgers was a hungering interest to me, as was Veronica, who I thought was really hot (nearly a sophisticate title herself), even though that wasn't really a catch phrase for second-graders in those days.

<sup>39</sup> This one irritated me more than the *Archie* comic books because the pages were skewed when it was cut at the printer, and I needed perfect symmetry in both my comics and my life.

<sup>40</sup> *Sub-Mariner* #49 appeared in May 1972, which means that by the time I received this issue summer vacation had started and I was not a truant after all (Lee, Stan., Ed. "The Dream Stone." *Sub-Mariner*, 1.49 (1972): 1-21. Print.). Coincidentally, at the end of this issue, Subby ends up on the foggy, moonlit streets of the French Quarter of New Orleans embracing a brunette woman who looks remarkably like Veronica of *Archie* comics.

<sup>41</sup> Although Sub-Mariner no longer has his own comic book title and therefore reports of his antagonism of humankind are few, far between, and relegated to backstories of other superheroes who actually have their own titles, I wonder how he would feel today about British Petroleum. Somebody call the Marvel editors.

<sup>42</sup> A scenario borrowed from the asteroid drilling episode in the Touchtone Pictures feature film *Armageddon* (1998).

Subby at all. Rather, it was Subby's macrocephalic captor—the menace of Modok!<sup>43</sup>

### If This be Modok<sup>44</sup>

Now, Modok wasn't born a macro.<sup>45</sup> Like many superheroes and supervillains,<sup>46</sup> his powers were induced. But he wasn't bombarded with gamma rays (like the Fantastic Four), exposed to a nuclear blast (like the Hulk), or bitten by a radioactive spider (like Spiderman). Instead, Modok was originally George Tarleton, a mild-mannered scientist<sup>47</sup> working for Advanced Idea Mechanics, better known as AIM. AIM had recently created the Cosmic Cube, a device designed to further their ultimate goal of world conquest, but, due to its reality-reshaping, trans-dimensional, portal-opening powers, a device that they couldn't quite understand; they

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<sup>43</sup> Modok, which has been called “one of the greatest visuals ever” by then Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics Joe Quesada (Tarleton, George. “Here's Why Joe Quesada Should Just Go Ahead and Sell Me Rights to Modok.” *Journal of Modok Studies* 1.2 (2004). Print.), was created in 1967 by Marvel editor Stan Lee, illustrator Jack Kirby, and embellisher Joe Sinnott. “Modok” is an acronym for “Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing,” although he was originally intended to be “Modoc” (Designed Only for Computing).

<sup>44</sup> This subtitle, in the stark, present subjunctive case common to the Silver Age of Marvel comics, is also the title of *Tales of Suspense* #94, the comic book debut of Modok. (Lee, Stan and Jack Kirby. “If This Be Modok!” *Tales of Suspense* 1.94 (1967): 1-10. Print.)

<sup>45</sup> Although Modok gloriously appears first in *Tales of Suspense* #94 (from 1967), the story of his origin is first told three years later in *Captain America* #133 (Lee, Stan and Gene Colan. “Madness in the Slums.” *Captain America* 1.133 (1970): 1-18. Print.), most elegantly told in the non-graphic novel *And Call My Killer Modok*, by William Rotsler (New York: Pocket Books, 1973. Print.), and somewhat less elegantly revisited in “The History of Modok, Part One” (*Journal of Modok Studies* 1.1 (2003): 2-5. Print.)

<sup>46</sup> All except the X-Men, who are declared mutants with special gifts conferred at birth. Genetically, their gifts (or, better, mutant phenotypes) are congenital. They are mutants like all of us. Current genetic understanding suggests that we are all born with about 60 mutations different than our parents, products of spontaneous changes in their germlines (Conrad, Donald. “Variation in genome-wide mutation rates within and between human families.” *Nature Genetics* 43 (2011): 712-714.). Of course, if a germline was exposed to radiation like many Marvel superheroes have been, then maybe it would be something like 6000 times 60 mutations. But, realistically speaking, those exposed wouldn't likely have a functioning germline at that point (Somebody call Sue Richards.). So who's counting?

<sup>47</sup> There are so very few of us.

needed an advanced mind—a controllable mind and one capable of human communication—to understand and wield the Cube according to their world-dominating wishes. And George Tarleton was the path of least resistance—the scapegoat, the guinea pig, the *Drosophila*<sup>48</sup> for their next creation.

Tarleton, placed into the “alteration chamber,” was within seconds transformed<sup>49</sup> into “...Modoc...the most powerful brain alive!” as one of his AIM captors explained.<sup>50</sup> Having the most powerful brain alive is a cool thing, Tarleton’s ego must have felt,<sup>51</sup> but that brain was contained in a cranium of circumference that rivaled a small moon of Jupiter. He had become a hideous being with an enormous head and a disproportionately flailing body that was no longer the focus of either his motor skills or his being. Fortunately, AIM had invented a really cool hover chair<sup>52</sup> for the flailing Tarleton that just happened to be the perfect size and shape to support the massive and pudgy head of the victim of a process they obviously didn’t know how to control. The originally shiny silver chair (later a school-bus yellow) held the gargantuan head in place while the rest of the body fit into the base of the chair. Across Modoc’s forehead was a headband<sup>53</sup> that, fitting perfectly around his long-banged, bowl-cut coiffure, focused his concentration into powerful psionic waves<sup>54</sup> with

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<sup>48</sup> *Drosophila melanogaster* is the scientific name of the common fruit fly, which since the 1910s has been a routine model organism for studying the effects and transmission of mutations in laboratories and teaching classrooms.

<sup>49</sup> Though a process that has been called “advanced mutagenics” and not explained further. However, forty years later, we are clued. In *Marvel Adventures: The Avengers* #9 (2007), Modok and AIM have redesigned the alteration chamber into a “cellular restructurer” which operates, according to the commentary of the AIM operator, as follows: “Initiate reformation sequence...DNA chains unlocking,...commence cerebral expansion,...” and *voila!* (Pannicia, Mark, Ed. “A Not-So-Beautiful Mind.” *Marvel Adventures: The Avengers* 1.9 (2007): 6. Print.).

<sup>50</sup> *Captain America* 1.133 (1970): 4.

<sup>51</sup> And it was now a very large ego. Even his superego was supersized.

<sup>52</sup> Actually, from Page 4 (*Tales of Suspense* #94), it is a “magnetic-powered mobile chair,” far more agile than the naturally occurring legs of the infinitely more athletic Captain America. But it also hovers.

<sup>53</sup> After a whole decade, Modok’s fashion statement became vogue in popular culture, as evidenced by musical acts of the late 70s and early 80s, such as Loverboy and later Olivia Newton-John—although neither generated much psionic influence.

<sup>54</sup> Actually, on Page 5 (*Tales of Suspense* #94) Modok describes it as his “invincible mind beam... the greatest single weapon ever unleashed!!!” But he also has a stun-shock beam and a heat beam.