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# The Disintegration of Modern Culture. Nietzsche and the Information Age

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## **The Disintegration of Modern Culture. Nietzsche and the Information Age**

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The widespread use and abuse of the term “culture” both in current academic and popular discourse have come to shape the contemporary understanding of ourselves and the world around us like few other concepts. Nietzsche’s philosophy contributed significantly to the modern popularity of this concept. His critique of modernity for its apparent lack of culture received great attention in the twentieth century. His writings had a big part in ringing in the “golden twenties” of cultural philosophy<sup>1</sup> and the not-so-golden thirties and forties of mono-cultural politics and propaganda. Despite the abuses of Nietzsche’s philosophy by the Nazi propaganda machine, Nietzsche’s critique of modernity was quickly rediscovered in the subsequent decades when it was reassessed against the background of the Nazi era. Two positions emerged, one arguing that Nietzsche’s critique of Enlightenment values undermined these values and thus had played into the hands of totalitarian ideology and its desire to create its own “culture;” the other camp saw in Nietzsche a prophet of sorts whose philosophy had predicted the failure of the Enlightenment ideology to provide the West with a sustainable, unified and unifying culture.<sup>2</sup> Although this particular debate is still played out today as part of the modernity / post-modernity discussion, the concept of culture took a seemingly different turn in the eighties and nineties. Increased interest in multiculturalism initially shifted the attention away from a critical examination of Western culture and led to a focus on foreign, “primitive,” suppressed, or otherwise marginalized cultures. Subsequently, the critique of Western culture was somewhat restricted to the political and moral realm. Proponents of multiculturalism turned to Western culture primarily to investigate its colonialist tendencies, the political and cultural mechanisms that allow it to suppress different cultures and cultural differences. Despite its focus on different cultures and colonialism, cultural studies eventually provoked a return to a more comprehensive interrogation of Western culture when its interest in culture itself began to be viewed as a cultural phenomenon. As multiculturalism came to be considered a cultural phenomenon of the

West,<sup>3</sup> so too did the question of what Western culture might be lacking since it tends to observe and propagate other cultures within and outside of itself. After all, few other societies show much interest in the study and defense of different cultures or of cultural differences. Indeed, thinkers as diverse as Richard Rorty and Terry Eagleton -- who rarely see eye to eye -- seem to agree that our Western society's interest in different cultures is a unique feature of this society, a mark of difference, of an "otherness," and of self-alienation which signals at the very least a "loss of innocence" when it comes to Western society's own cultural identity.<sup>4</sup>

My rather general overview of an undoubtedly more complex and multifaceted history of "culture" in the twentieth century is meant to suggest a return to the question of the cultural identity of the West -- the question central to Nietzsche's critique of modernity. Before relating Nietzsche's critique of modern culture to our contemporary, multi-media culture and its declared interest in multiculturalism it must be noted, however, that such an endeavor is not without complications: it runs the risk of ignoring the multiplicity of conflicting meanings that today are encompassed by the single term "culture" as well as the historical distance and national distinctiveness which separate the Anglo-American concept of culture from the German meaning of *Kultur*, a concept that, unlike its English counterpart, for centuries supported the German quest for a national identity.<sup>5</sup> The problem is compounded by the fact that today, the pan-national use of the Anglo-American concept also informs the German debates on *Multikulturalität*.<sup>6</sup> Without denying the distinctiveness of the debates on culture then and now, Nietzsche's critique of modern culture can, nevertheless, be related to our contemporary concerns. For that purpose, however, we need to follow Rorty's and Eagleton's lead and understand the modern interest in culture -- and subsequently the multiplicity of congruent and incongruent meanings of culture -- as a cultural phenomenon, as a defining aspect of modernity's own culture.<sup>7</sup> As indicated, this is in tune with Nietzsche who understood his time's interest in (historical) culture(s) itself as a cultural phenomenon. This approach assumes a particular definition of culture, a definition of culture that is no longer restricted to what Nietzsche called "decorative" aspects of culture, particular customs, habits, or styles. Nietzsche understood culture more comprehensively. He

interpreted customs, habits, and styles, but also concepts, signs, symbols, images, metaphors, and narratives as fashioning the beliefs, values, hierarchies, perceptions, and self-perceptions of a social unit. Accordingly, the modern concept of “culture” designates an observational *mode*, a perspective rather than particular physical differences.<sup>8</sup> Defined as an observational mode, modern culture is able to describe any event, artifact, or concept -- including the concept of culture -- as a cultural phenomenon.

## I

Nietzsche’s critique of modernity can be summarized in precisely in the following terms: Culture has become a matter of perspective, a way of knowing rather than a way of practicing culture, and thus has lost its force. Subsequently, he interprets the modern interest in culture not as indicative of a new cultural paradigm, but rather as a sign of the *absence of culture* in modern society. Nietzsche unfolds his critique of Western society for its lack of culture most forcefully in the second *Untimely Meditation*, “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life.” The treatise was written in 1873, less than two years after Germany became a modern unified nation-state and at a time when the Western imperial powers were subjecting the rest of the world to their political will (with Germany soon asking for its “Platz an der Sonne”). In this time of national pride and expansionist ambition, when history was used, to speak in Nietzsche’s terms, “monumentally” to inspire hopes of new grandeur, in an “antiquarian” fashion, to instill a sense of identity and belonging, and “critically” to reject old paradigms and make room for the new, Nietzsche takes a deliberately untimely stance. He sets out to understand “as a defect, infirmity and shortcoming of the age something of which our age is justifiably proud, its historical education” (*History* 8).<sup>9</sup> Historical education (“historische Bildung”), he argues, prevents rather than accomplishes *Bildung*. In the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt, *Bildung* strives for education to exceed the mere accumulation of knowledge or the mediation of particular skills. *Bildung* endeavors to fashion (literarily, to form after an image) a cultured (*kultiviert*), that is a mature, autonomous, responsible, civilized, and “whole” human being.

Nietzsche argues that not only does historical education fail to achieve *Bildung* in this comprehensive sense, but singles it out as the primary reason why modern society lacks culture altogether.

Nineteenth-century historical education included, of course, the study of ancient and foreign cultures. History is the (fateful) discipline that educates young men about culture in general:

[...] der junge Mensch hat mit einem Wissen um die Bildung selbst zu beginnen. Und zwar wird dieses Wissen um die Bildung als historisches Wissen dem Jüngling eingeflösst oder eingerührt; das heisst, sein Kopf wird mit einer ungeheuren Anzahl von Begriffen angefüllt, die aus der höchst mittelbaren Kenntniss vergangener Zeiten und Völker, nicht aus der unmittelbaren Anschauung des Lebens abgezogen sind. (KSA I:327).

[...] the young man has to begin with the knowledge of culture. And this knowledge of culture is instilled or stirred into the young man as historical knowledge; that is, his head is filled with an enormous number of concepts which are drawn from the highly mediated knowledge of past ages and peoples, not from the immediate perception of life. (*History* 60)

The mediation of historical and cultural knowledge prevents *Bildung* in the sense of “culturation” and character formation. Nietzsche blames both *what* is taught and *how* history is taught -- what later in the treatise he will call the modern *educational procedure* (“Erziehungs-Operation” [KSA I:326]) -- for leaving modern man without the benefits of culture.

Before addressing the problems Nietzsche sees with regard to the content and the modality of historical education, let me briefly distinguish his use of the term “culture” -- which, as Robert McGinn has shown, is itself by no means consistent -- from some of the common uses

of the term today. I take Nietzsche's famous definition of culture from the first *Untimely Meditation* (which reappears in the second) as my starting point. Following Jakob Burckhardt's understanding of culture as an "organic, collective work of art,"<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche defines culture as the unified artistic style in all of the life expressions of a people: "Kultur ist vor allem Einheit des künstlerischen Stiles in allen Lebensäusserungen eines Volkes" (KSA I:163). This definition differs from three notions of culture that are commonly held today.<sup>11</sup> Firstly, culture according to Nietzsche's definition, is not restricted to a set of shared habits and customs which today allows us, for example, to speak of the corporate culture of McDonald's or of a Japanese Tea Ceremony as an expression of a particular culture. Nietzsche defines culture more comprehensively, as unifying *all* of the life expressions of a people. Secondly, Nietzsche does not restrict his concept of culture to the idea of "high culture," that is to the valuation of existing artistic achievements. Nietzsche, who is known for his disdain of the *Bildungsphilister*, demands that *all* of the vital expressions of a people be *artistic*. Artistic, to Nietzsche means creative and self-motivating, as well as fulfilling art's primary function as it is defined in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Artistic expressions must transfigure the *horror vacui* that life is without art: "for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*" (*Basic Writings* 52).<sup>12</sup> And thirdly, his concept of culture is more narrowly defined than the eighteenth-century idea of culture as a universal human trait that separates man from nature. By restricting culture to the expression of "a people," Nietzsche defines culture as pluralistic and historical, that is as a collection of traits that allows a comparison between cultures both in time and space.

If in the following I quote Nietzsche as saying that modern society lacks "culture," it does not mean that it lacks particular customs and practices, artworks of value, or even a degree of civility; what is missing, however, is a "unified artistic culture." What does this mean? Nietzsche specifies the concept at the end of the second *Untimely Meditation* in analogy to the Greek concept of culture. We must "rebel against secondhand thought, secondhand learning and imitation," he explains, for then we can begin to comprehend,

dass Cultur noch etwas Andres sein kann, als Dekoration des Lebens, das heisst im Grunde doch immer nur Verstellung und Verhüllung; denn aller Schmuck versteckt das Geschmückte. So entschleiert sich ihm der griechische Begriff der Cultur -- im Gegensatze zu dem romantischen -- der Begriff der Cultur als einer neuen und verbesserten Physis, ohne Innen und Aussen, ohne Verstellung und Convention, der Cultur als einer Einhelligkeit zwischen Leben, Denken, Scheinen und Wollen. (KSA I:334-5)

that culture can be something other still than decoration of life, that is, fundamentally always only dissimulation and disguise; for all adornment hides what it adorns. Thus the Greek concept of culture -- in contrast to the Romance concept -- will be unveiled to him, the concept of culture as a new and improved nature, without inside and outside, without dissimulation and convention, of culture as the accord of life, thought, appearing and willing. (*History* 64)

These concluding lines of the essay go beyond the function attributed to culture in the *Birth of Tragedy*, where the focus is on culture's ability to justify existence, an ability threatened by the modern emphasis on truth. Culture is no longer merely needed to overcome what then was called the "tragic insight" of the ancient Greeks, their insight into the contingency of all existence, that there is no inherent reason to value life over death.<sup>13</sup> The second *Untimely Meditation* attributes a second, vital function to culture. Although never clearly spelled out, this second function can be inferred from the failures of modern culture that Nietzsche details. Throughout the treatise, he identifies dissimulation, convention and what he calls somewhat cryptically the alienation of the modern individual's inside from his outside as the clearest signs for the modern lack of culture. Overcoming dissimulation and the incongruence of inside and outside can neither imply a return to nature nor a return to a more "truthful" way of life in the ontological sense; that would contradict the transfigurations of art necessary to sustain life. Rather, pointing to dissimulation

and convention as culprits, Nietzsche suggests that culture lost its ability to integrate the individual within the social sphere.<sup>14</sup> Culture, to put it bluntly, ought to enable the individual to be privately what he or she is considered to be socially. Modernity lacks culture by failing to integrate the individual socially and, thus, forcing the individual to mask himself:

Sieht man einmal auf's Aeusserliche, so bemerkt man, wie die Austreibung der Instincte durch Historie die Menschen fast zu lauter abstractis und Schatten umgeschaffen hat: keiner wagt mehr seine Person daran, sondern maskirt sich als gebildeter Mann, als Gelehrter, als Dichter, als Politiker. (KSA I:280)

If we regard their outside we notice how the expulsion of the instincts by history has almost transformed men into downright *abstractis* and shadows: no one dares to show his person, but masks himself as an educated man, as a scholar, a poet, a politician." (*History 29*).

Nietzsche interprets this social masquerade as the central symptom of a society that lacks culture. In subsequent passages it is evident that Nietzsche is not targeting the dissimulation practices that evolved at the centralized European courts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather, his argument against conventions and masquerades is directed at the German Enlightenment period. It was the fear of "conventions" that led the Germans to leave the school of the French for "he wanted to become more natural and thereby more German" (*History 25*). Nietzsche mocks the German attempt to cast in nationalistic and cultural terms the propagation of bourgeois values such as rationality, sensibility, and inwardness in contrast to aristocratic French culture, which Germans were typecasting as shallow and fundamentally corrupt. The result of this endeavor, according to Nietzsche, was not the creation of a German cultural identity, but rather the disintegration of their cultural identity through the separation of "inside" and "outside" – through the separation of their private from their social identity.



The disintegration of modern culture as it affects the individual can today be explained in terms of larger, socio-historical developments that shaped modern Western societies. For that purpose, I would like to adopt the sociological point of view provided by contemporary systems theory and relate what Nietzsche considers role-play and disguise to comprehensive social changes that took place in the eighteenth century. Systems theory understands the transition from pre-modern to modern society in terms of a fundamental change in social structure, the change from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society.<sup>15</sup> In a nutshell, pre-modern societies consist of hierarchically organized strata with the top strata defining (again hierarchically) all relevant social domains. In our modern and functionally differentiated society, there is no overarching social strata that would define and govern all relevant social domains. Instead, social subsystems have ascertained autonomy. Social subsystems such as the legal system, the economic system, the political system, science, art, and, of course, the education system have gained the right and ability to define their own function, their procedures, their goals, their membership. Even a sub-subsystem such as the academic discipline of history, for example, now insists on selecting its members and defining its standards according to its understanding of what is historically and scientifically relevant or not.

With the help of this (admittedly) rather general socio-historical model, we can, I contend, come to a better understanding of Nietzsche's cultural critique, as well as approach some of its inherent limitations. The structural change from stratification to functional differentiation is relevant in at least two regards, namely as it promotes social reflexivity and as it affects changes in the semantics of individuality. Functional differentiation leads modern society to develop a high degree of reflexivity within all of its subsystems.<sup>16</sup> Reflexivity is, of course, an important mark of Nietzsche's writing, but also the target of much of his criticism. Nietzsche's critique of the modern educational system and of our knowledge-based-society in general rests on the conviction that science (*Wissenschaft*) should not serve the interests of science (a mark of functional differentiation, I would argue) but rather the interests of what Nietzsche somewhat cryptically calls "life." Below I will return to Nietzsche's stance on

reflexivity, which leads him to assume the absence of culture in modern society in the first place. Allow me to first address the second, and more immediate concern Nietzsche expresses, namely the disintegration of modern culture as it affects the individual. From the socio-historical point of view that I want to adopt here, the perceived disintegration can be understood in terms of the changes in the semantics of individuality that accompany the transition from pre-modern to modern society. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann argues, pre-modern (stratified) societies defined the individual through social inclusion (through rank, blood, or profession) while modern, functionally differentiated societies define the individual through exclusion. In modern societies, the individual can no longer identify him- or herself with any single social subsystem.<sup>17</sup> Each person is identified and identifies him- or herself differently according to the social domains within which s/he is situated at the moment. Thus, s/he is seen and experiences him- or herself differently economically, legally, politically, when with family, watching TV, or when reading a systems theoretical interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy. This lack of any coherent social recognition leads the individual to perceive him- or herself as being "complete" and "authentic" only in areas which are perceived to be outside of the social sphere (for example, when alone, as artist, when reading literature, traveling, or maybe even through one's romantic involvement).<sup>18</sup> Lamenting the lack of culture in modern society in terms of modern man having created an interior without an exterior equivalent, and of modern man constantly hiding behind masks, Nietzsche appears to register the societal changes that resulted from the functional differentiation of society and the subsequent exclusion of the "whole" individual from the social sphere.

## II

Before returning to the socio-historical contextualization of Nietzsche's critique of modern culture and exploring its limits (section IV), I want to address the medial dimension of his critique, the question *how* education (II) and why in particular historical education (III) should lead to the social disintegration of the modern individual. Nietzsche's argument is

stunningly modern and relevant for contemporary concerns for he might well be the first thinker who understands modern times as an information age. Nietzsche relates the proclaimed loss of culture to modern society's information processing media, which include the education system and the mass media of his time, the printing press. Both participate in what Nietzsche calls the educational procedure, *how* history is taught that it produces "not at all the liberally educated man but the scholar [...], the precocious newly wise chatter box" (*History* 59). As I indicated earlier, historical studies *per se* are not regarded as necessarily problematic. Nietzsche's own philosophy, of course, would be unthinkable without its historical component. After all, it is based on historical considerations that the philologist, historiographer, and soon to be genealogist Nietzsche can expose the contingency of philosophical "truths" and Judeo-Christian values and promote what Foucault called the "affirmation of knowledge as perspective."<sup>19</sup> What is detrimental to modern society is primarily the dis-unified, inartistic "style" of historical education. History, according to Nietzsche, is no longer taught to enhance the present and further life, but rather merely for the sake of history. Nietzsche identifies science as the "star" that changed for the worse the constellation of life and history:

*durch die Wissenschaft, durch die Forderung, dass die Historie Wissenschaft sein soll [...] regiert nicht mehr allein das Leben und bändigt das Wissen um die Vergangenheit: sondern alle Grenzpfähle sind umgerissen und alles was einmal war, stürzt auf den Menschen zu. (KSA I:271-2)*

through science, through the demand that history be a science [...] life is no longer the sole ruler and master of knowledge of the past: rather all boundary markers are overthrown and everything which once was rushes in upon man. (*History* 23)

Science removes all selection and criteria of discrimination from the knowledge acquisition process, overwhelming the "soul of modern man" (ibid.) with ever new and discrete items of

information. Nietzsche describes the effects of this information overload with reference to Little Red Riding Hood's wolf:

Der moderne Mensch schleppt zuletzt eine ungeheure Menge von unverdaulichen Wissenssteinen mit sich herum, die dann bei Gelegenheit auch ordentlich im Leibe rumpeln, wie es im Märchen heisst. Durch dieses Rumpeln verräth sich die eigenste Eigenschaft dieses modernen Menschen: der merkwürdige Gegensatz eines Inneren, dem kein Aeusseres, eines Aeusseren, dem kein Inneres entspricht, ein Gegensatz, den die alten Völker nicht kennen. (KSA I:272)

In the end, modern man drags an immense amount of indigestible knowledge stones around with him which on occasion rattle around in his belly as the fairy tale has it. This rattling betrays the most distinctive property of this modern man: the remarkable opposition of an inside to which no outside and an outside to which no inside corresponds, an opposition unknown to ancient peoples. (*History* 24)

The quantity of unchecked information and the fact that it finds no immediate application has a twofold effect on modern man (and especially on the German): it creates a disjunction between inside and outside, between content and form, whereby form is rejected as convention, disguise, and dissimulation;<sup>20</sup> and it creates “Innerlichkeit,” *inwardness*. When Nietzsche subsequently mocks the Germans as “the people famed for inwardness” (“das berühmte Volk der Innerlichkeit”), he, in fact, mocks leading codes of Enlightenment ideology, its valuation of inwardness over the social exterior and the body, of content over form, and of rationality and sensibility over rhetoric and conversational aptitude.

Nietzsche specifies the problem causing and caused by inwardness in sections four and five of the treatise. Focusing on modern modes of knowledge acquisition and distribution, he

argues that modernity did not create a culture, but only a kind of knowledge of culture.<sup>21</sup> The unchecked and scientifically intensified acquisition of knowledge has led men to fill and overfill themselves with “alien ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions and knowledge” that turned them into “walking encyclopedias.” Such education, according to Nietzsche, does not lead to cultivation. In other words, the acquisition of knowledge does not necessarily result in an increased degree of civility, as Enlightenment ideology proclaims. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case: rationality and sensibility do not prevent barbarism. On the contrary, the disjunction between inside and outside that rationality and sensibility create threaten to make modern man more barbaric:

und so ist die ganze moderne Bildung wesentlich innerlich: auswendig hat der Buchbinder so etwas darauf gedruckt wie: Handbuch innerlicher Bildung für äusserliche Barbaren. Ja dieser Gegensatz von innen und aussen macht das Aeusserliche noch barbarischer als es sein müsste, wenn ein rohes Volk nur aus sich heraus noch seinen derben Bedürfnissen wüchse. Denn welches Mittel bleibt noch der Natur übrig, um das überreichlich sich Aufdrängende zu bewältigen? Nur das eine Mittel, es so leicht wie möglich anzunehmen, um es schnell wieder zu beseitigen und auszustossen. Daraus entsteht eine Gewöhnung, die wirklichen Dinge nicht mehr ernst zu nehmen, daraus entsteht die “schwache Persönlichkeit,” zufolge deren das Wirkliche, das Bestehende nur einen geringen Eindruck macht; man wird im Aeusserlichen zuletzt immer lässlicher und bequemer und erweitert die bedenkliche Kluft zwischen Inhalt und Form bis zur Gefühllosigkeit für die Barbarei, wenn nur das Gedächtniss immer von Neuem gereizt wird, wenn nur immer neue wissenschaftliche Dinge hinstürzen, die sauberlich in den Kästen jenes Gedächtnisses aufgestellt werden können. (KSA I:274)

the whole of modern culture is essentially internal: on the outside the bookbinder has printed something like “Handbook for Inner Culture for External Barbarians.” This opposition between inside and outside makes the outside still more barbaric than it would need to be were a rude people to grow out of itself alone according to its rough requirements. For what means is left to nature to take in what imposes itself so excessively? Only the one means, to accept it as easily as possible in order quickly to lay it aside again and expel it. This gives rise to a habit of not taking actual things too seriously anymore, this gives rise to the “weak personality” as a result of which the actual and enduring make only a minimal impression; in externals one finally becomes ever more casual and indolent and widens the critical gulf between content and form to the point of insensitivity to barbarism, if only the memory is stimulated ever anew, if only ever new things to be known keep streaming in to be neatly put on display in the cases of that memory. (*History* 24-25)

The mind-numbing effects of overabundant information threaten, according to Nietzsche, the very civility of a society that prides itself on the study of civilization. In a stunningly modern analysis, Nietzsche focuses on the “medium” as responsible for the absence of culture. The overabundance of information leads modern man to categorize and cast away knowledge rather than actualize it and relate it to “life.” In section four of the second *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche identifies the educational system as the primary culprit; he later adds the mass media of his day, the press, as the second, defining medium of modern knowledge distribution and information processing that is responsible for society’s cultural disintegration. In a nutshell, Nietzsche argues that the moment culture becomes “interesting” (i.e., the moment culture becomes an object of historical study),<sup>22</sup> it loses its social function, its ability to provide a form of expression that would give modern man a sense of purpose, meaning, and an empowering

will. The media's instant representations of current events, turn modern man into a spectator, an abstraction, and a shadow:

[der moderne Mensch] der sich fortwährend das Fest der Weltausstellung durch seine historischen Künstler bereiten lässt; er ist zum geniessenden und herumwandelnden Zuschauer geworden und in einen Zustand versetzt, an dem selbst grosse Kriege, grosse Revolutionen kaum einen Augenblick lang etwas zu ändern vermögen. Noch ist der Krieg nicht beendet, und schon ist er in bedrucktes Papier hunderttausendfach umgesetzt, schon wird er als neues Reizmittel dem ermüdeten Gaumen der nach Historie Gierigen vorgesetzt. Es scheint fast unmöglich, dass ein starker und voller Ton selbst durch das mächtigste Hineingreifen in die Saiten erzeugt werde: sofort verhallt er wieder, im nächsten Augenblick bereits klingt er historisch zart verflüchtigt und kraftlos ab. (KSA I:279-80)

[Modern man] who continuously has the feast of a world exhibition prepared for him by his historical artists; he has become a spectator merely enjoying himself and strolling around and brought to a condition which can hardly be altered for a moment even by great wars and great revolutions. The war is not yet over and already it has been transformed a hundred thousandfold into printed paper, already it is being served up as a new stimulant for the wary palates of those greedy for history. It appears almost impossible to elicit a strong full sound even with the mightiest sweep of the strings: it fades away immediately, and in the next moment it already echoes away strengthless in historically subdued vapors. (*History* 28-9)

Nietzsche draws on the neurological discourse of his time, describing the deadening effects of overstimulation.<sup>23</sup> As a cultural phenomenon, however, the neurological system under investigation is the modern system of mass communication itself (seen as an extension of our individual nerve system, if we were to follow McLuhan). Nietzsche lays out how modern media culture with its emphasis on news and information -- science, too, wants “news”-- temporalizes meaning in a way that robs it of its ability to function culturally, that is, to provide purpose, meaning and a will to an integrated society. In more contemporary terms we can say that Nietzsche recognizes science and the mass media as information processing systems. For such systems, information -- which I want to define here, following Gregory Bateson, as a “*difference which makes a difference*”<sup>24</sup> -- is merely of singular and temporary significance. As soon as it is used, it loses its informational value. The differences created by the processing of information are momentary and cannot be repeated. Subsequently, they do not achieve the kind of permanence needed for them to acquire cultural significance. Modern information processing systems compensate for the chronic loss of information by sustaining a constant flow of information, creating and replacing information with ever new differences that again will leave behind little more than another momentary difference within the system of communication.

Today, we are all too familiar with this mode of information processing and with what, I argue, Nietzsche identifies correctly as its devaluating effects. It can hardly be said, for example, that the CNN coverage of recent (and current) wars had any significant political, let alone cultural or social effects other than creating an information flow that managed to transform almost all of us into what Nietzsche called spectators, abstractions and shadows. Nietzsche thus recognizes how our modern information processing systems lead to social disintegration: precisely because we are saturated with information, our society seems no longer affected by any particular event in a significant way. One wonders if such information processing is not a kind of immune system in Western society, keeping almost any catastrophic event from having a measurable impact on anyone other than those who are immediately affected.



Let me return to one of my initial questions. How does Nietzsche's analysis reflect our current interest in cultural (and multicultural) studies? I argued above that Nietzsche remains interesting for us today because he understands the interest in culture as particular to modern Western society. His critique of modern modes of information processing remains equally relevant. From the media perspective suggested by Nietzsche, our society's interest in culture -- its own or others' -- is part of a particular cultural practice that threatens to destroy the very object of its interest. This is not to say that the contemporary interest in cultural diversity does not have a political justification, or is not able to cherish and, with regards to customs, habits, and styles, preserve cultural variance. However, if we follow Nietzsche's argument, we must infer that through cultural education and the medial promotion of cultural diversity, cultural differences are assimilated on a much more profound level. By becoming part of what Nietzsche identified as the modern educational procedure, cultural difference and diversity are integrated medially. In the process, cultural customs, habits, styles, even beliefs will be treated as "news," i.e. will be temporalized and thus lose the ability to have a lasting and unifying effect. In this sense, cultural studies, despite its often contrary political intentions, always runs the risk of furthering rather than opposing the globalizing tendencies of the West and its non-culture.<sup>25</sup>

### III

The loss of meaning described by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century has, I believe, only multiplied in today's much more incessant media culture with its ever faster paced and multi-faceted electronic media. Nietzsche's point, however, is not only that the modern modes of information processing by the media make current events lose their cultural significance, but that the teaching of history in itself has a similar effect: it replaces cultural practice with the knowledge of culture(s) and thus reveals cultural practices as contingent. Nietzsche's claim is, of course, highly provocative. It contradicts the Enlightenment belief in liberal education as the means to provide humankind with meaning, values, and the ability to make mature judgments (*Mündigkeit*). Nietzsche's controversial claim that education may

promote rather than prevent loss of meaning, might become more palpable if we distinguish education from socialization along the lines that Niklas Luhmann suggests in his posthumously published book *Das Erziehungssystem der Gesellschaft* (Society's Education System). Luhmann argues that in pre-modern societies socialization outweighs education. Socialization works through imitation and thus is able to communicate natural and conventional behavior as a matter of course. In this regard, it is easy to understand how socialization does not create the rift between inside and outside that, according to Nietzsche, defines modern man. Education, on the other hand, does not work through imitation but must denote what it wants to achieve. It first teaches students what they do not know and then provides the means to fill that void. By marking what is to be learned as something that needs to be learned, students are led to reflect on what they learn. This educational procedure creates a sense for the contingency of its selections: if it has to be learned it cannot be a given.<sup>26</sup> In other words, teaching meaning, values, responsibilities or other cultural particularities fosters a sense of contingency for such cultural artifacts. Put more pointedly, the modern emphasis on education is caught in a peculiar double bind: By *teaching* meaning and values it promotes the sense of contingency it hopes to overcome. If the modern educational system continues to promote the teaching of values (see almost any mission statement of colleges of arts and sciences throughout the US), it is responding to, and thereby enhancing a problem it itself creates.

Contemporary systems theory has a keen eye for the sense of contingency modern societies create. Dirk Baecker in his recent book *Wozu Kultur?* (Why Culture?) points at the concept of culture itself as it emerged at the end of the eighteenth century as a primary catalyst for the perception of cultural contingency. Baecker understands loss of meaning as a modern (not post-modern) problem. He recognizes the societal function of the concept of culture as creating identity only by offering the possibility for geographical or historical comparison with other cultures and cultural traits. The effects of cultural comparison, however, are viewed as daunting. While comparison arguably creates awareness of one's own cultural identity in the first place, it also offers a possible alternative to the cultural choices of any particular group. Once one sees

other cultures acting (valuing, perceiving) differently, the necessity of acting in one way rather than another loses its immediacy. In other words, exposing cultural differences introduces the knowledge of the contingency of cultural habits. Baecker argues that the concept of culture was more successful than any other in positing the contingency of all formerly unquestioned pursuits of society while at the same time offering values intended to hide this achievement.<sup>27</sup>

I contend (with and beyond Baecker) that the concept of culture does not only hide the sense of contingency it creates by attaching value to cultural characteristics (for example, by calling them “achievements”), but that it also functions as an ordering device in a globalizing and increasingly complex world. Since the eighteenth century, the term culture has allowed Western society to categorize and process the plethora of different beliefs, values, and perceptions that it has encountered through political expansion, migration patterns, historical and anthropological studies, ethnographic writing, news reporting, and that are sustained by the incessant information flow of the mass-media. In other words, marking and marketing cultural differences and different cultures allows Western society to accept conflicting outlooks and practices where dogmatic assertions of what is right or wrong, good or bad, natural or unnatural are no longer presupposed or can no longer be enforced. In this regard, the concept culture can be said to be a *pharmakon*<sup>28</sup> of sorts. It is both, poison and medication for a society that sees itself at odds with its own cultural identity. It is poisonous because it enhances the perception of cultural differences that appear to threaten cultural coherence. At the same time it provides a form of medication for the very problem it creates by offering a common frame of reference which allows Western society to put into perspective the excess of cultural differences it confronts.

#### IV

Let me return to Nietzsche and take a second, more critical look at his conception of culture. Nietzsche sees, of course, no redeeming function in the modern concept of culture for modern culture. His claim that modernity lacks culture altogether is coupled with the hope for the advent of a new culture that presumably would be able to integrate the individual again. This

hope for a new culture emerging, however, raises the question how a highly developed society could get rid of its (however deficient) culture and acquire a new one in the first place. We find the answer to this question in a historical model that motivates and structures much of Nietzsche's philosophy. This historical model is by no means linear, teleological, or even progressive. Rather, it reflects one of the most striking features of Nietzsche's thought, the idea that the application of a concept to itself will be detrimental to this concept. In his recent essay on Nietzsche's relationship to the Enlightenment, David Wellbery identifies the paradox of iterative self-application or recursion as a governing principle of Nietzsche's thought.<sup>29</sup>

Paradoxes of self-application can be found on different levels of Nietzsche's writing. The second *Untimely Meditation*, for example, is caught on the macro level in such a paradox: Nietzsche has to educate his reader historically to dismiss historical education. Nietzsche is well aware of the paradoxical thrust of his philosophical endeavor.<sup>30</sup> The apparent paradox of pursuing history to demolish history should not be misunderstood as an incoherence of Nietzsche's philosophy but rather as a deliberate strategy. This strategy allows Nietzsche to develop a historical model that drives his thought from the *Birth of Tragedy* and its dramatization of the "present," to Zarathustra's conception of the overman, to the *Genealogy's* reflection on overcoming nihilism, to the late project of a reevaluation of all values. Nietzsche uses the paradox of self-application to project a historical model that is no longer progressive in the teleological sense, but rather revolutionary, set up for historical "catastrophes," for a sudden and potentially violent turnover from one cultural state to another. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche uses the verb "umschlagen" (which means 'to turn into its opposite' and 'to turn over a page' but also retains a sense of 'knocking over') twice to describe the historical effects of recursion. At the end of section fifteen of the *Birth of Tragedy* (where the original version had ended), this thought figure marks two moments of historical "catastrophe." The first reference is to the effects of Socrates on Greek society where the desire for insatiable and optimistic knowledge "turned" into tragic resignation and destitute need for art. The second reference is to the present. Following the prediction of the famous snake metaphor ("When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries

and finally bites its own tail -- suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, tragic insight which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy" [*Basic Writings* 98]), Nietzsche interprets the turning of knowledge against itself as a historical moment that will either lead to new cultural heights or to a "restless, barbarous, chaotic whirl":

Hier nun klopfen wir, bewegten Gemüthes, an die Pforte der Gegenwart und Zukunft: wird jenes 'Umschlagen' zu immer neuen Configurationen des Genius und gerade des *musiktreibenden Socrates* führen? Wird das über das Dasein gebreitere Netz der Kunst, sei es auch unter dem Namen der Religion oder der Wissenschaft, immer fester und zarter geflochten werden oder ist ihm bestimmt, unter dem ruhelos barbarischen Treiben und Wirbeln, das sich jetzt 'die Gegenwart' nennt, in Fetzen zu reissen? (KSA I:102).

Here we knock, deeply moved, at the gates of present and future: will this "turning" lead to ever-new configurations of genius and especially of the *Socrates who practices music*? Will the net of art, even if it is called religion or science, that is spread over existence be woven even more tightly and delicately, or is it destined to be torn to shreds in the restless, barbarous, chaotic whirl that now calls itself "the present"? (*Basic Writings* 98).

Nietzsche offers another glance at this alternative historiography in section eight of the treatise on history:

denn der Ursprung der historischen Bildung -- und ihres innerlich ganz und gar radicalen Widerspruches gegen den Geist einer "neuen Zeit", eines "modernen Bewusstseins" -- dieser Ursprung *muss* selbst wieder historisch erkannt werden, die Historie *muss* das Problem der Historie selbst auflösen, das Wissen *muss*

seinen Stachel gegen sich selbst kehren – dieses dreifach *Muss* ist der Imperativ des Geistes der “neuen Zeit” falls in ihr wirklich etwas Neues, Mächtiges, Lebenverheissendes und Ursprüngliches ist. (KSA I:306).

the origin of historical education -- and its inner quite radical contradiction with the spirit of a “new age”, a “modern consciousness”-- this origin *must* itself in turn be historically understood, history *must* itself dissolve the problem of history, knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself -- this threefold must is the imperative of the spirit of the “new age” if it really does contain something new, mighty, original and a promise of life. (*History* 45)

The idea that by turning the modern, scientific paradigm against itself, this paradigm will self-destruct and something new, different, and more authentic will be created in its place, allows Nietzsche to direct his philosophy toward the future, anticipating the possible collapse of the current social order in the hope for the creation of a newly unified and unifying culture.

Nietzsche’s belief in a historical turnaround (*Umschlag*) is based on the assumption that a degree of transparency achieved through self-reflexivity must be detrimental for any particular cultural practice. In this regard, Nietzsche’s famous dictum from the second *Untimely Meditation* that “knowledge kills action” should perhaps be read as specifying: “reflexive knowledge kills cultural action.” From today’s perspective, or at least from the socio-historical perspective that I sketched above, however, Nietzsche’s hope for an act of historical self-effacement appears to underestimate modern society’s ability to accommodate (without disintegrating) a high degree of self-reflexivity, including the reflexivity of Nietzsche’s own thought. While Nietzsche constantly reflects on the position and impact of his thought on the conceptual history he analyzes, he fails to understand the very reflexivity that he performs as an integral part, not as the demise of, modern society. As I indicated above, high reflexivity is the mark of a functionally differentiated society where each social subsystem defines and negotiates its function reflexively and where

subsequently no single social subsystem can speak for or unify all social domains. We have seen that for Nietzsche such institutional autonomy is seen as threatening, as a cause for social disintegration for example, when he understands history being taught or researched merely for the sake of history as detrimental for life. Instead of recognizing the reflexivity of our modern society as an integral part of this society, Nietzsche envisions the return of a “unifying” culture that would subject all social subsystems once again to the hierarchies of an overarching, and presumably mono-contextual worldview.

Nietzsche’s failure to understand recursive reflexivity as an integral part of modern culture (rather than as a sign of its immanent end), I believe, is due to the lack of an appropriate social model that would allow him to distinguish modern from pre-modern societies. This lack affects his assessment of the late nineteenth-century cultural state. Instead of searching for a modern definition of culture, Nietzsche transposes an archaic ideal of culture (modeled after the stratified society of ancient Greece) onto modern society. Consequently, he must conclude that modernity lacks culture -- rather than that it redefines culture as *perspective*. The archaic notion of culture employed by Nietzsche can be seen, I believe, as a constitutive blind-spot of his philosophy: constitutive, because on the one hand it provides him with the outside perspective necessary to be the astute observer of modernity that we witnessed above; on the other hand, it leads him to demand the return to a more “authentic” culture which cannot be harmonized with the complexity and reflexivity of modern society, a circumstance that Nietzsche indirectly acknowledges when he hopes for the self-effacement of reflexivity through reflexivity. In his later writings, Nietzsche increasingly draws on biological and evolutionary discourses to motivate his hope for a future return of a unified culture. That is, he develops a kind of cultural idealism that is open to the political and social abuse it encountered in the first half of the twentieth century.

The advantages and disadvantages of Nietzsche’s archaic concept of culture are most apparent in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Especially the first essay, “‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad’” provides an excellent example of the dynamic that motivates stratified social models

where social change is affected from top down and from the bottom up. Values, morals, and truths are linked to social struggles that build and rebuild hierarchical structures. Within such societies, domination and subjection imply and invert each other in a seemingly eternal interpretive struggle that is defined by and defines the powerful and the powerless. As appealing and powerful as Nietzsche's description of a chain of incessant re-interpretations might be for assessing the dynamics of pre-modern societies, the argument gets more complicated and, I contend, falters when it comes to explaining the transition from pre-modern to modern society. This transition is marked by the emergence of the "sovereign individual" who enters the stage in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* on "'Guilt', 'Bad Conscience' and the Like." With the "sovereign individual," Nietzsche continues the discussion of modern man from the second *Untimely Meditation*, even recalling the metaphor of modern man being the "ripest fruit on the tree of knowledge" (*History 50*) used there. Drawing heavily on the biological, racial, and pseudo-Darwinian discourses of his day, Nietzsche sees sovereign man at the end of a long, tortuous, and difficult process of self-cultivation -- "the labor performed by man upon himself during the greater part of the existence of the human race" (*Basic Writings* 495). The sovereign individual emerges from this labor as the individual liberated from what Nietzsche calls "morality of mores" (*ibid.*) as the human being of his own independent, protracted will who has the right to make promises. Nietzsche connects this newly-found freedom to the creation of "conscience":

Das stolze Wissen um das ausserordentliche Privilegium der *Verantwortlichkeit*, das Bewusstsein dieser seltenen Freiheit, dieser Macht über sich und das Geschick hat sich bei ihm bis in seine unterste Tiefe hinabgesenkt und ist zum Instinkt geworden, zum dominirenden Instinkt, gesetzt, dass er ein Wort dafür bei sich nöthig hat? Aber es ist kein Zweifel: dieser souveraine Mensch heisst ihn sein *Gewissen*.... (KSA V:294)



The proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, the power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct. What will he call his dominating instinct? The answer is beyond doubt: this sovereign man calls it his *conscience*. (*Basic Writings* 496)

The creation of conscience is, in turn, linked to the creation of a cultural memory. At this point in the argument, Nietzsche returns once again to the German feature of “inwardness.” Linking the creation of memory and modern man’s “inwardness” to the extended infliction of physical pain on the human body, Nietzsche suggests a dazzling theory of modern cultivation:

Wir Deutschen betrachten uns gewiss nicht als ein besonders grausames und hartherziges Volk, noch weniger als besonders leichtfertig und in-den-Tag-hineinleberisch; aber man sehe nur unsre alten Strafordnungen an, um dahinter zu kommen, was es auf Erden für Mühe hat, ein “Volk von Denkern” heranzuzüchten (will sagen: das Volk Europa’s, unter dem auch heute noch das Maximum von Zutrauen, Ernst, Geschmacklosigkeit und Sachlichkeit zu finden ist [...]). Diese Deutschen haben sich mit furchtbaren Mitteln ein Gedächtniss gemacht, um über ihre pöbelhaften Grund-Instinkte und deren brutale Plumpheit Herr zu werden: man denke an die alten deutschen Strafen, zum Beispiel an das Steinigen [...], das Rädern [...], das Werfen mit dem Pfahle, das Zerreißen- oder Zertretenlassen durch Pferde (das “Vietheilen”), das Sieden des Verbrechers in Öl oder Wein [...]. Ah, die Vernunft, der Ernst, die Herrschaft über die Affekte, diese ganze düstere Sache, welche Nachdenken heisst, alle diese Vorrechte und Prunkstücke des Menschen: wie theuer haben sie sich bezahlt gemacht! wie viel Blut und Grausen ist auf dem Grund aller “guten Dinge”! ... (KSA V:296-7)

We Germans certainly do not regard ourselves as a particularly cruel and hardhearted people, still less as a particularly frivolous one, living only for the day; but one has only to look at our former codes of punishments to understand what effort it costs on this earth to breed a “nation of thinkers” (which is to say, the nation in Europe in which one still finds today the maximum of trust, seriousness, lack of taste, and matter-of-factness [...]). These Germans have employed fearful means to acquire a memory, so as to master their basic mob-instinct and its brutal coarseness. Consider the old German punishments; for example, stoning [...], breaking on the wheel [...] piercing with stakes, tearing apart or trampling by horses (“quartering”), boiling of the criminal in oil or wine [...]. Ah, reason, seriousness, all these prerogatives and showpieces of man: how dearly they have been bought! how much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all “good things”! (*Basic Writings* 497-8).

Nietzsche dubs this process, “[...] the ever-increasing spiritualization and ‘deification’ of cruelty which permeates the entire history of higher culture (and in a significant sense actually constitutes it)” (*Basic Writings* 502), the internalization of man. He concludes famously: “All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward* -- this is what I call the *internalization* [*Verinnerlichung*] of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his “soul” (*Basic Writings* 520).

The cultural theory Nietzsche proposes anticipates Freud’s theory of internalization from *Civilization and its Discontents* as much as it inspires Michel Foucault’s 1975 study *Discipline and Punish*. The latter provides the historical data that appears to support Nietzsche’s claim, investigating the sweeping changes in the Western penal codes during the eighteenth century (when within a few decades the body as the target of public and torturous punishment disappears and is replaced by what Foucault calls the “modern soul”). Foucault, of course, does not resort to a causal model that posits the creation of the modern soul as resulting from the cruel

mnemotechniques described by Nietzsche. Foucault speaks of a redistribution and refinement of power through disciplinary regulations that would soon permeate many areas of modern society (such as the law, the health system, and also education).

Although it can still be found in certain psychoanalytically oriented readings,<sup>31</sup> the link between physical pain and cultivation must seem suspect to the modern observer. It is, in fact, reminiscent of outdated pedagogical dogmas that rely on corporal punishment to force students, or worse, children to memorize. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's link between the creation of the modern soul and the creation of "memory" anticipates more contemporary, sociological accounts of the creation of modern man's "inwardness." The creation of memory, however, is no longer seen as having resulted from the public infliction of physical pain. As recent studies in mediology and systems theory have argued, modern "inwardness" as it evolves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be explained in terms of the invention of the printing press, the increased alphabetization of Europe, and the increased availability of books. It is through the popularization of reading and writing that Europe ascertained its newly defined mnemonic capacities, the basis for the development of its modern sensitivities.<sup>32</sup>

In questioning Nietzsche's account of the emergence of modern man, I do not mean to dispute his more general claim that locates coerciveness and violence at the base of a society that insists on being built on principles of reason, openness, sensibility and justice. Nor do I dispute the devaluating effects Nietzsche observes with regard to our information based society. What should be rejected, however, is Nietzsche's precarious dream of a return to a newly unified and unifying culture that would remedy this situation. Such a return is indeed only possible through a violent upheaval of the structure of modern society. The totalitarian attempts of the twentieth century to reintroduce social stratification have, fortunately, failed. Today one might be tempted to view religious fundamentalism as a desperate attempt to escape the disintegrating effects of an information processing world society. Instead of defending a fundamentalist (or socialist) opposition to this society, I suggest we modify Nietzsche's proclaimed desire for a "*unified* artistic style in *all* of the life expressions of *a people*" to fit our modern day reality and call for

“multiple artistic styles in *some* of the vital expressions of *groups of people*.” In large part, such limited and multi-faceted cultures, which provide social integration for *groups* of people, have become a reality for many over the last few decades. In some cases more openly than in others, they have been created “artistically” (not with a capital “a”), that is, by the media (by literature, movies, TV) as much as by cultural studies which continues to give contour and voice to multiple styles of personal expression.<sup>33</sup> In this limited sense, modern society, one might argue, not only created the need for cultural integration but also its means. Through the media, old and new cultural identities are constantly created, reflected on, rejected, or uncritically accepted and celebrated. The current popularity of minority literatures, women and gender studies, queer studies, etc. is a testament to how such articulations can have integrative effects, redefining the social realities of particular groups in society at large. This might put many modern observers in the “ironic”<sup>34</sup> yet not impossible position of understanding the contingency of a cultural practice or identity and yet living it. Compared to the fundamentalist or totalitarian alternatives, such irony seems a small price to pay for finding a (however limited) sense of social integration within modern society.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The German Historical Dictionary of Philosophy writes that “as the en-vogue philosophy of the golden twenties, cultural philosophy understood itself as universal philosophy, and not merely as a philosophical discipline” (“Als ‘Mode’-philosophie der ‘goldenen zwanziger Jahre’ verstand sie [die Kulturphilosophie] sich als “Philosophie im Ganzen” und nicht nur als eine philosophische Disziplin” [*Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, 1310; translation mine]). More generally, Nietzsche’s critique of modernity was an important point of reference for much of the *Kulturpessimismus*, which marked the intellectual debate on this topic in the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup>For the first position, see esp. Jürgen Habermas who understands Nietzsche’s philosophy as a “turn table” (“Drehscheibe”) that supposedly derailed the Enlightenment train’s progress (see the German title of the fourth lecture of Habermas’ book *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* [“The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity”] entitled “Eintritt in die Postmoderne: Nietzsche als Drehscheibe” [“Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as Turn Table;” translation mine]). The second position is found most notably in Foucault’s writing, but discussed earlier already, for example, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>3</sup>Resulting, of course, not only from historical studies, but also from our own mobility, modern immigration patterns, and the world wide media coverage which make us confront multiple cultures and cultural differences on a daily basis (see, for example, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Heimat Babylon*).

<sup>4</sup>Although Eagleton in *The Idea of Culture* argues from a leftist political position and Rorty (in “Rationality and Cultural Difference”) takes the pragmatism of Dewey as his starting point, both speak against the ‘romanticizing’ of popular and more primitive cultures which characterizes our modern, multi-cultural society.

<sup>5</sup>See Norbert Elias’ *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen I*. Elias shows that the German use of “Kultur” entails many aspects that in French and English are carried by the word “civilization.”

<sup>6</sup>In Germany, the debates on “Multikulturalität” have much more staying power than, for example, the recent controversy over “Leitkultur” has had (seemingly an attempt to return to the nineteenth-century idea of *Kultur*) which disappeared as soon as it had spent its political capital.

<sup>7</sup>The historical debates on what it means to be modern are first instances of cultural self-reflection. The first two explicit reflections on modernity date back to 1688, when Charles Perrault published the “Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui regarde les Arts et les Sciences” (Paris 1688-1697), and to 1795 when Friedrich Schlegel’s “Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie” with its extensive reflections on modernity were published (see Carsten Zelle, “‘Nous, qui sommes si modernes, serons anciens dans quelques siècles’. Zu den Zeitkonzeptionen in den Epochenwenden der Moderne”).

<sup>8</sup>I will return to the social implications of this definition of culture below, with regard to Dirk Baecker’s argument. Baecker traces the modern concept of culture back to the eighteenth century and interprets it as a pan-national, “Western” phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup>History 8. (English quotes from the essay “On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life“ follow Peter Preuss’s translation. Future references to this translation will be given in parentheses in the text indicating title of the essay and page number. English quotes from all other Nietzsche texts follow Walter Kaufmann’s translation in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Future references to this translation will be given in parentheses in the text indicating *Basic Writings* and page number. All German quotes are taken from the *Kritische Studienausgabe* and will be quote in the text indicating *KSA* and page number.).

<sup>10</sup>Duncan Large, “Nietzsche, Burkhardt, and the Concept of Culture,” 13. Duncan Large’s very subtle essay establishes Nietzsche’s indebtedness to Burckhardt’s concept of culture.

<sup>11</sup>I am following the three senses of culture which Richard Rorty takes as the starting point of his critique of culture in the 1998 essay “Rationality and Cultural Difference.”

<sup>12</sup>“[D]enn nur als ästhetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig *gerechtfertigt*” (KSA I:47). The argument is made most forcefully in the *Birth of Tragedy*. The question remains, of course, what art has to do with culture as a whole once culture is defined as affecting “all the vital expressions of a people.” Christoph Menke answers this question in his essay *On the Relationship between Art and Culture in Nietzsche* with regard to the *Birth of Tragedy*, arguing that artistic styles in Nietzsche (such as the Dionysian or the Apollinian) represent “different ways of relating aesthetic representation to the world” (“unterschiedliche Weltbezüge ästhetischer Darstellung” [Christoph Menke, “Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und Kultur bei Nietzsche,” 241; translation mine]) which change “the image of the world, which appears in the mirror of art” (“das Bild der Welt, das im Spiegel der Kunst erscheint” [Menke 246; translation mine]). The unity of a culture, according to Menke, is formed through the “economy of art and life” (“‘Ökonomie’ von Kunst und Leben” [Menke 263; translation mine]). The unified artistic style, i.e. “culture” that Nietzsche desires would replace a world-view which is imprisoned by “truth” and negates life with aesthetic freedom and life affirmation.

<sup>13</sup>David Wellbery, in his essay on the Strategy of Paradox: Nietzsche’s Relation to the Enlightenment, defines culture accordingly as the “avoidance of the kind of desperation that would lead to suicide, desperation that originates from the contingency of existence -- from the fact that there is no inherent reason why one should be rather than not be” (“die Vermeidung der bis zum Selbstmord treibenden Verzweiflung, welche der Kontingenz des Daseins -- der Tatsache, daß es keinen inhärenten Grund gibt, warum man sein und nicht vielmehr nicht sein soll -- entspringt” [David Wellbery, “Die Strategie des Paradoxons,” 161; translation mine]). Wellbery concludes that the “modernity that Nietzsche attempts to cope with through writing is the crisis of the legitimization of knowledge as a cultural form of living” (“Die Moderne, die Nietzsche schreibend zu bewältigend sucht, ist die Legitimationskrise der Erkenntnis als kultureller Lebensform [Wellbery 163; my translation]). Eric Blondel’s study of the concept of culture in Nietzsche never gets beyond this prophylactic aspect: “Culture, for Nietzsche, is the more or less unified totality of values that a society, age or civilization -- as vital typological totalities -- offers itself in response to the question: why do we live?” (Eric Blondel, *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture*, 54).

<sup>14</sup>Robert McGinn shows that Nietzsche develops the second function of culture -- social integration of the individual -- already in the later parts of the *Birth of Tragedy* (following section 15): “Greek tragedy was both a prophylactic against the debilitating effects of unmediated encounter with the horror and terror of human existence, as well as a vehicle of transcendence vis-à-vis the alienating effects of complete socialization into the secular life- and thought-forms of the phenomenal world” (Robert McGinn, “Culture as Prophylactic,” 101). The *Untimely Meditations* hardly mention the *horror vacui* (horror of nothingness) problem anymore, but rather focus on the social disintegration of the modern individual.

<sup>15</sup>The following considerations rely primarily on the works of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. The idea of functional differentiation, however, dates back to the works of Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. These social changes are also addressed, albeit in less structural terms, by the works of Norbert Elias. In his seminal work *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, (*The Civilization Process. The History of Manners*), Elias, who on numerous occasion credits Nietzsche for his insights on the social circumstances which helped define our modern psychological sensibilities, links the process of Western civilization to the increased control of affects forced upon the individual through the ever increasing differentiation of social functions: “From the earliest times of Occidental history to our present, societal functions have differentiated themselves more and more under the pressure of competition. The more they are differentiated, the greater becomes the number of functions and thus of people on whom the individual depends, in all of his activities, from the most simple and everyday activities to the most complicated and rare, [...] The individual is forced to regulate his behavior in an ever more differentiated, uniform and stable manner” (“Von den frühesten Zeiten der abendländischen Geschichte bis zur Gegenwart differenzieren sich die gesellschaftlichen Funktionen unter einem starken Konkurrenzdruck mehr und mehr. Je mehr sie sich differenzieren, desto größer wird die Zahl der Funktionen und damit der Menschen, von denen der Einzelne bei allen seinen Verrichtungen, bei den simpelsten und alltäglichen ebenso, wie bei den komplizierten und selteneren, beständig abhängt. [...] Der Einzelne wird gezwungen, sein Verhalten immer differenzierter, immer gleichmäßiger und stabiler zu regulieren. [Elias II:316-7; translation mine]).

<sup>16</sup>To understand “reflexivity” as the mark of modernity is neither new nor does it need the conceptual framework of systems theory to defend this view. Christoph Menke, for example, looking at romantic irony, argues in his essay on Aesthetic Subjectivity that “the central destination of modernity should be considered to be not subjectivity, but reflexivity. The type of reflection that is designated here looks behind the world of forms at the means of their formation and creation” (“Die zentrale Bestimmung der Moderne sollte nicht in Subjektivität, sondern in Reflexivität gesehen werden. Der damit bezeichnete Typ der Reflexion geht hinter die Welt der Formen zurück zu dem, wodurch sie geformt oder hervorgebracht werden” [Christoph Menke, “Ästhetische Subjektivität,” 609; translation mine]).

<sup>17</sup>According to Luhmann’s essay *Individual, Individuality, Individualism*, this led society “to think, treat, and institutionalize individuals more individually, while in reality it was about shifting individuality from [social] inclusion to exclusion” (“Individuen individueller zu denken, zu behandeln, zu institutionalisieren, während es in Wirklichkeit darum ging, Individualität von Inklusion auf Exklusion umzustellen” [Niklas Luhmann, “Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus,” 165; translation mine]). Art and literature soon become the repositories for the eccentric individual to include its eccentricity socially. A new emphasis on authenticity and immediacy characterize this attempt to think individuality more individually and to integrate socially social *eccentricity*. The Enlightenment emphasis on rationality and sensibility did not only increase the interior space of the individual -- create what Foucault calls the modern “soul” -- it also increased the sensibility for dissimulation and convention, for the separation of inside and outside, and for the incongruities between intentions and communications (see also Albrecht Koschorke’s book *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr: Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts* [the title of this book translates: Bodily Fluids and Literary Intercourse: Mediology in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century], which links the increased sensibility and the individualization of modern man to the change from oral to literal communications). Paradoxically then, if Nietzsche propagates a culture which overcomes the social disintegration of the individual, he acts to overcome social effects which made this individual possible in the first place.

<sup>18</sup>Once we define society comprehensively, as the system of communication, that is as the sum total of possible communications, defining oneself outside of, or, in opposition to society becomes a paradoxical endeavor: the moment it is communicated (even through one’s silence on the matter), it will be part of society (society defined as the sum total of its communications) again and hence unable to escape social definition. Nevertheless, the creation and explorations of such “outsides” particularly in and through literature has been central to modern society. They are based on the eighteenth century tradition which defines society either in opposition to the natural and individual world or as the sum total of its institutions.

<sup>19</sup>Michel Foucault “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 156.

<sup>20</sup>“Die Form gilt uns Deutschen gemeinhin als eine Convention, als Verkleidung und Verstellung und wird deshalb wenn nicht gehasst, so doch jedenfalls nicht geliebt” (KSA I:275). -- “Form is for us Germans generally a convention, a costume and disguise, and for that reason it is, if not hated, at least not loved” (*History* 25).

<sup>21</sup>Heide Schlüpmann understands Nietzsche as distinguishing between cultures and “Kulte des Erkennens” (Heide Schlüpmann *Friedrich Nietzsches ästhetische Opposition*, 43) whereby the word “cult” is read as entailing the appropriation of past cultures.

<sup>22</sup>Dirk Baecker argues that the concept of culture has precisely this effect: it doubles all meaning, makes all meaning interesting, and invites comparison thus exposing the contingency of all meaning (see Dirk Baecker, “The Meaning of Culture,” esp. 45ff).

<sup>23</sup>Friedrich Kittler points out that “at the same time that physiologists (Helmholtz, Fechner) calculate thresholds of sense reception, Nietzsche describes a sense production of differences and intensities” (“Zur selben Epoche, da die Physiologen (Helmholtz, Fechner) Schwellwerte der Sinnesrezeption ermitteln, beschreibt Nietzsche eine Sinnesproduktion von Differenzen und Intensitäten” [Friedrich Kittler, “Nietzsche [1844-1900],” 203; translation mine]). In his *A Cultural History of Cultural Studies*, Kittler points toward Nietzsche’s general interest in the natural sciences (see Friedrich Kittler, *Eine Kulturgeschichte der Kulturwissenschaft*, 157-159) and reads his philosophy as reflective of the technological advances that mark the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kittler argues that the change toward technical

media (from “spirit” to “machine” as it is reflected by the fact that Nietzsche was maybe the first philosopher who used a typewriter) was essential for Nietzsche’s rejection of the humanistic tradition (see esp. Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800 - 1900*). Tarmo Kunnas summarizes Nietzsche’s general stance on technology. Kunnas indicates that Nietzsche had a split view on technology. He saw the machine as revealing “in a very concrete way the alienation of modern European culture” (“in einer ganz konkreten Form die Entfremdung der modernen europäischen Zivilisation” [Tarmo Kunnas, “Nietzsche und die Technologie,” 317; translation mine) and yet put great hope into technology for its promise of a new culture: “But technology can also lead to a complete change of the whole of culture and civilization. It even might lead to a new cultural heyday in the spirit of Nietzsche’s overman” (“Aber die Technologie kann auch eine durchgehende Veränderung der ganzen Kultur und Zivilisation herbeiführen. Ja, sie kann sogar im Geist des Nietzsche’schen Übermenschen zu einer neuen Kulturblüte beitragen” [Kunnas, 319; translation mine]).

<sup>24</sup>Gregory Bateson, “Form, Substance, and Difference,” 453.

<sup>25</sup>Terry Eagleton, arguing from the perspective of the political left, comes to a similar conclusion, blaming cultural studies for its tacit allegiance with the conservative, globalizing culture it criticizes. “Cultural studies today [...], fails to see not only that not all political issues are cultural, but that not all cultural differences are political. And in thus subordinating issues of state, class, political organization and the rest to cultural questions, it ends up rehearsing the prejudices of the very traditional *Kulturkritik* it rejects, which had little enough time itself for such mundane political matters. A distinctively American political agenda is universalized by a movement for which universalism is anathema” (Terry Eagleton, “The Idea of Culture,” 43).

<sup>26</sup>“Erziehung hebt etwas hervor, was sich nicht von selbst versteht [und schafft so] eine Sinn für die Kontingenz der Festlegung” (Niklas Luhmann, *Das Erziehungssystem der Gesellschaft*, 53).

<sup>27</sup>“The concept culture functions like a bait that modern society casts in order to win over most and foremost its critics. No concept was more successful in positing all social practices that were self-understood before as contingent while at the same time covering up this achievement by offering values that compensated for contingency. Through this process, society got caught up in the ‘catastrophe’ of second order observation without having a chance to realize what was happening to it.” (“Der Kulturbegriff funktioniert wie ein Köder, den die moderne Gesellschaft auslegt, um auch und gerade ihre Kritiker für sie einzunehmen. Keinem Begriff gelang es erfolgreicher, alle selbstverständlichen Praktiken der Gesellschaft kontingent zu setzen und im gleichen Zuge diese Leistung durch das Angebot kontingenzkompensierender Werte zu verwischen. Das hat die Gesellschaft in die ‘Katastrophe’ der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung verwickelt, ohne daß sie eine Chance hatte, zu merken, wie ihr mitgespielt wurde” [Dirk Baecker, *Wozu Kultur?* 9-10; translation mine]).

<sup>28</sup>See Jacques Derrida’s elaborations on the intricate nature of the pharmakon in *On Dissemination*.

<sup>29</sup>Wellbery focuses on the snake metaphor in Nietzsche: “Bei den drei skizzierten Lesarten der Schlangenfigur handelt es sich ersichtlich um für Nietzsche’s Denken entscheidende Zusammenhänge: die Ontologie des Werdens, die ewige Wiederkehr, das Konzept des Tragischen, die Stellung zum Sokratismus. Gelingen es also, diese drei Lesarten in ihrer Einheit zu erfassen, dann wäre eine fundamentale Gesetzmäßigkeit dieses Denkens erschlossen. Die These, die ich hier zur Diskussion stellen möchte, behauptet, daß diese Gesetzmäßigkeit zu begreifen ist als *iterative Selbstapplikation* oder schlicht als *Rekursion*” (David Wellbery, “Die Strategie des Paradoxons,” 159). Wellbery interprets the strategic use of paradoxes as Nietzsche’s attempt to transgress the limits set by Enlightenment rationality. More specifically, I would argue that Nietzsche’s use of paradox defies the constraints of a bivalent logic and thus defies what in *Beyond Good and Evil* he identifies as a foundational prejudice of metaphysics, the belief in opposite values (see: “Der Grundglaube der Metaphysiker ist der *Glaube an die Gegensätze der Werthe*” [KSA V:16]). My following argument hopes to elaborate how Nietzsche’s paradoxical writing strategy fashions his historical model and subsequently motivates his hope for the re-emergence of culture in the unified and unifying sense.

<sup>30</sup> At the end of the first section of the treatise, for example, he openly rejects the wiser, “superhistorical perspective” that knows too well that the modern belief in historical causality, progress, or the existence of a self-conscious



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“Weltgeist” are modern day myths, and proclaims: “heute wollen wir vielmehr einmal unserer Unweisheit von Herzen froh werden und uns als den Thätigen und Fortschreitenden, als den Verehrer des Prozesses, einen guten Tag machen. Mag unsere Schätzung des Historischen nur ein occidentalisches Vorurtheil sein; wenn wir nur wenigstens innerhalb dieser Vorurtheile fortschreiten und nicht stillstehen!” (KSA I:256) [today we want rather to rejoice in our unwisdom from the bottom of our hearts and as active and progressive men, as admirers of the process, enjoying ourselves. May our estimation of the historical be but an occidental prejudice; as long as, within these prejudices, we make progress and do not stand still. (*History* 13-14)].

<sup>31</sup>See, for example, Judith Butler’s work, including her recent contribution to the debate on the contemporary relevance of Nietzsche, the article “Dramatic Personae,”.

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, Niklas Luhmann who understands the change in historical semantics that marks modernity as resulting from increased literacy rates. The subsequent change from conversation to writing as primary medium of communication accompanied the transition from a predominantly aristocratic (stratified) to an increasingly functionally differentiated society. Building on this argument, see again Koschorke who (also drawing on the works of Norbert Elias) elaborates the historical changes that define the modern soul along the lines of a restructuring of the semiotics of the body, changes in personal hygiene and definitions of interpersonal space, and the increase in communicative distance, etc. as signal traits of a society whose primary communicational medium is writing rather than conversation.

<sup>33</sup>I propose a constructivistic point of view on understanding minority and majority cultures, as inventing and creating themselves rather than (following eighteenth-century literary ideas) as merely “expressing” preexisting cultural realities. In this respect, I follow the pragmatist stance of Richard Rorty: “To be a pragmatist rather than a realist in one’s description of the acquisition of full personhood requires thinking of its acquisition by blacks, gays, and women in the same terms as we think of its acquisition by Galilean scientists and Romantic poets. We say that the latter groups invented new moral identities for themselves by getting semantic authority over themselves. As time went by, they succeeded in having the language they had developed become part of the language everybody spoke. Similarly, we have to think of gays, blacks, and women inventing themselves rather than discovering themselves, and thus of the larger society as coming to terms with something new” (Richard Rorty, “Rationality and Cultural Difference,” 225).

<sup>34</sup>Ironic according to Richard Rorty’s definition (see esp. Richard Rorty, *Irony, Contingency, Solidarity*, 73-95).

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