

## Avatar Emergency

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### Abstract

The original usage of *avatar* referred to the incarnation or human appearance of a deity, particularly Vishnu, in Hindu mythology. The term was adapted to cyberspace to name one's online persona. This usage has come to include every aspect of one's online representation, from the icon on a blog, or an email signature to the figure one plays in Second Life. *Avatar*, then, is a practical point of entry for theorizing the emergence of the new identity experience of electracy, that is supplementing and displacing *selfhood*, the identity formation of literacy. Playing one's avatar is to electracy what writing an essay is to literacy. The point addressed in this essay is that an avatar is not merely the appearance of one's representation, since through interactivity and even telepresence, I am t/here with my image. What is it to be/have an image? The answer begins with noting the literal meaning of the *avatar* in Sanskrit: "Descent." Vishnu has descended (taken on embodiment) nine times, to correct a disordered world condition. This essay initiates a review of the cultural archive to see what is known already about our question (representations of "descent"). It is perhaps obvious, considering the prominence of Christianity in our heritage, that the West accumulated a huge amount of information about becoming body. Two examples are referenced in this introductory piece: Krishna and Orpheus.

This essay considers *avatar* from the point of view of the apparatus of electracy (the digital equivalent of *literacy*). The concept, tradition, and practice of *avatar* are relevant to the invention of flash reason, a rhetorical practice for deliberative reason, for public policy formation, making democratically informed decisions in a moment, at light speed, against the threat of a General Accident that happens everywhere simultaneously. Any theorizing of *avatar* must at least acknowledge James Cameron's dramatization in the blockbuster film. It is fortunate for my account (given the influence this film will have in shaping the discussion) that there is an important aspect of electrate *avatar* captured by Cameron's treatment. *Avatar* as an experience is an event of counsel. It is an uncanny encounter with one's own possibility (potential), as undergone in various wisdom traditions noted here as analogies for the flash reason made possible through avatar practice. Through avatar, players come to understand the General Economy of the universe, so to speak, represented as *nature* or the Gaia spirit of Pandora in Cameron's film. The "jar-head" Sully, incarnated in his Na'vi simulation, transcends his Marine training as well as his limitations both physical and mental, to oppose the actions of the military-industrial complex corporation that are threatening the natural order. It is perhaps understandable, if not inevitable, that the screenplay uses the shorthand of the Frontier myth, in high-concept reconfiguration (genre hybrid), to express its values. Cameron's *Avatar* is a Western.

Something is happening to us and through us that goes by the name *avatar* these days. Some of us are present in Second Life through an *avatar*, or have had our identities stolen digitally, for example, added a photograph to our Facebook account or branded our blog with an icon of some sort, even designed and sold T-Shirts, skateboards, coffee mugs and the like with our personal logos emblazoned. All of that is just learning the *alphabet* of avatar. We have not yet begun to avatar, although there are futuristic scenarios and scholarly histories, looking forward and back in time, to consider the possibilities. You need to meet avatar, that part of you inhabiting cyberspace (for lack of a better term). You and I need to meet the avatar that we already have, that we already are, now that it may be augmented within the digital apparatus (electracy) as a prosthesis of decision. *Avatar* knows more than you or I do, or rather, it knows better than you or I do about what to do now, or what you or I truly know and understand and value and wish in our various respective situations. This claim must be not only understood, but undergone. It is not only an idea, a theory, but an

experience.

## Internet Accident

### Avatar Descends (the phrase is redundant) in Times of Crisis.

The present crisis is represented by an exhibit, curated for the Museum of Accidents proposed by Paul Virilio. The Museum is an idea that hardly needs a space, since it is available “without walls” 24/7 on television. Nonetheless, it began its existence as an exhibition and catalogue, both entitled “Unknown Quantity,” presented at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris, from November 29, 2002, to March 30, 2003 ([http://www.onoci.net/virilio/pages\\_uk/accidents/liste.php](http://www.onoci.net/virilio/pages_uk/accidents/liste.php)) [Virilio 1999, 45]. Having directed a television program on this project in Japan, Virilio collaborated with the Japanese on creating an actual museum [Virilio 1999, 76]. This Museum constitutes a paradigm, or exemplary problematic, which has the potential to gather all specialized academic disciplines around a single project, in order (despite Virilio's warning against this effect) to synchronize contemporary knowledge. 3

The catalogue of the exhibit included Virilio's text, summarizing and expanding upon the thesis argued in a number of his published works, such as *The Politics of the Very Worst*, *Open Sky*, and *The Original Accident*; an excerpt from the Chernobyl diary of Svetlana Aleksievich (Chernobyl is foregrounded as the emblem of the modern accident with global consequences); extensive illustrations — photographs representing a gallery of modern disasters both natural and man-made; reproductions of art works belonging to an eschatological genre, classical and contemporary, such as Jan Van Scorel, “The Universal Deluge,” and Walter de Maria, “Lightning Field.” 4

Virilio's argument looks at the epoch of electracy from the perspective of the rise and fall of the ideology of progress. The extraordinary technological innovations of the industrial and post-industrial eras, including the invention of the recording technologies of the electracy apparatus, occurred within a shifting horizon of negative expectations. The eighteenth century introduced revolution; the nineteenth century added the expectation of war; the twentieth century culminated in the expectation of an integral accident, referring to an accident of knowledge itself. The basic insight derives from a glance at the history of progress — that every invention brought with it its own disaster: with the ship, train, car, plane, came their respective wrecks. There are no exceptions to this rule, hence, as we contemplate the possibilities of inventing life itself now (cloning, genetic engineering) we may anticipate corresponding disasters (the knowledge accident). 5

The claim most directly relevant to electracy concerns the Internet accident, with the “Internet” serving as a metonym for the digital technologies of new media rapidly replacing the literate apparatus as the support for the language function in society. The Internet accident is a General Accident that occurs everywhere simultaneously, an event made possible by the light-speed connectivity and global reach of digital media, especially as these capacities are extended into such features as telepresence. Virilio posed the question: what is the integral accident that may be expected to follow upon the invention and general adoption of the Internet? In our context, he is asking: what are the consequences of electracy? 6

Virilio introduces the neologism *dromosphere* (from *dromos*, race) to name the conditions likely to produce the General Accident. The dromosphere refers to the pollution of dimensions that follows from electronic augmentation of human thought and language. Instant communication is constricting time, eliminating the past and the future, reducing human temporality to Now-time. If the oral apparatus ran on cyclical time, and literacy on linear time, electracy operates within the moment of Now. All trajectory disappears, eliminating the journey with its departure and passages, leaving us only with pure arrival. The mood of this condition is claustrophobic, a sense of being trapped. The human condition in the dromosphere is that of being caught and held within Now-time. The paradox of this confinement is that, augmented by the technologies of telepresence, the experience of Now is separated from place, even from being-there (*Dasein*). 7

It is now the immobility of all possible journeys or paths. The time-light barrier then blocks off — along with the horizon of appearances — the horizon of action, the very reality of a space where all succession dissolves, where it is as though hours and days had ceased to flow; surfaces ceased to extend; what cropped up yesterday, here or there, now happens everywhere at once. The accident

to end all accidents spreads in a flash and the center of time — the endless present — leaves behind the center of fixed space for good. There is no longer any *here*, everything is *now*. [Virilio 1999, 85]

Virilio's argument is that teletechnologies through their instantaneous interactivity have produced a “single time” — Real Time — whose milieu is speed. This unprecedented immediacy and ubiquity makes democracy impossible, he argues. Public space in Real Time becomes an image in some medium — photography, cinema, television. These images replace the “trajectories” of the city, the face-to-face interaction of the public sphere and the encounter of subject with object in the agora, the forum. The question he raises is whether a virtual city is possible — whether it is possible to urbanize real time. “If the answer is no, then a general accident is inevitable, the accident of history, the accident of accidents that Epicurus spoke of regarding history. If we are not capable of urbanizing the real time of exchange, in other words the live city-world, the city-world in real time, through the globalization of telecommunications, then both history and politics will be called into question. This is an extraordinary drama” [Virilio 1997, 40].

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The conditions described by Virilio pose a challenge, calling for the invention of a new apparatus (social machine), that does for digital media what the invention of literacy in Classical Greece did for alphabetic writing. The creators of philosophy in the Academy and Lyceum invented the very institution of school, and within it the practices of logic, rhetoric, poetics to support ultimately scientific and democratic civilization. Plato warned in the first discourse on method in the Western tradition, *Phaedrus*, that writing separated the speaker's voice from embodied presence, allowing it to wander abroad without protection. The experience of one's own voice returning in writing contributed to the formation of a new identity formation known as selfhood, as Eric Havelock demonstrated in several books. In electracy (the digital apparatus) the evolution of identity continues, this time through the phenomenon of avatar, of one's image and reputation circulating through the Internet, subject to sampling and mixing, to return in the form of scandal, libel, fame, fortune. The invention of a logic adequate to the dromosphere (flash reason, a practice of epiphany for authoring on the fly in database environments functioning at light speed) begins with an investigation of the opportunity for further invention opened by the acceptance of *avatar* to name one's representative in cyberspace. The implication is that avatar opens connectivity between you and techgnosis.

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## Dromosphere

The guiding scene and proposed attunement for thought and action in electracy is *player with avatar*. “Play” is justified in this context not only because of the game analogy, but more properly in the ludic terms developed by Johan Huizinga, who argues that culture and even civilization emerges out of play [Huizinga 1950]. The historical or cultural source of this scene is the Sanskrit poem *Bhagavadgita* (“Song of God,” Book VI of the *Mahabharata*), a major work of the Hindu religion. The setting is the battlefield of Kuruksetra (a place of religious pilgrimage), with two armies in conditions of civil war in position to engage. Prince Arjuna is assisted in his battle chariot by Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Arjuna, seeing many friends and family among both armies, expresses to his friend Krishna his ambivalence about the situation, and the decision he has to make. The poem records the subsequent conversation between the friends about dharma (duty, virtue), and the meaning of life in general, the metaphysics of the Hindu worldview. Krishna is one of nine avatars of Vishnu that have incarnated, appearing at times of crisis, whenever dharma is in decline. Vishnu's avatars include fish, tortoise, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rama the ax-wielder, Rama, Krishna, Buddha. A tenth avatar, Kalki, will appear in human form, riding a white horse, at the time of the crisis of our present age. The term *avatar* in Sanskrit literally means *descent*.

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The secular meaning of avatar refers to the personification in human form of abstract principles or intangible qualities. Aaron Britt surveyed the usage.

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The proliferation of avatar's second meaning can be traced to Second Life, a multiplayer online virtual world, where players fashion their own online personae called avatars. The popularity of the game has shot the term into the mainstream. Philip Rosedale, the creator of Second Life, defines avatar in the gaming sense as “the representation of your chosen embodied appearance to other people in a virtual world.” Considering that Second Life avatars may assume literally any guise —

wings, a dragon's head, gills and flippers — the key to avatarness, in Rosedale's view, is user control. And insofar as a Second Life avatar does and is precisely what the player wants, not just a little Mario who can be made to run and jump or a shapely diva gyrating of her own programmed will, it comes far closer to being a full-fledged virtual persona. [Britt 2008]

The value of *avatar* for us is that the name tags the site of electrate identity formation, and in its religious, secular, and literal senses indexes cultural resources that have yet to be explored for the insight they may offer into our question of deliberation in the dromosphere. Rosedale misunderstands avatar. It is indeed a relationship with self, but the power flows in exactly the reverse direction: the player is and does what avatar wants, to the extent that the player is prudent. Our point of entry into electracy is just this question of avatar: what it is, what it is for, how to do it (how to avatar, *avatar as verb*). A first lesson of our guiding scene for contemporary conduct – Arjuna with Krishna on the verge of battle – signals a shift in our approach to this usage, extending it to identify the site of subject formation itself in electracy. The scene shows us a relationship between self (player) and avatar. Self is Arjuna; avatar is Krishna. Here is a relay for understanding the status of one's image (reputation, status, brand) in cyberspace. An online incarnation is not "self" or ego, but a dimension of identity emerging in the new apparatus that is unfamiliar to modern people, and for which the analogy, helping us to imagine what is happening and to guide the invention of this new formation, is *avatar*. The function of avatar is counsel in a situation of decision. Through avatar you go beyond the limits of "self" to understand action from the position of communal well-being.

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## Descent

There is also a tradition of avatar in the West, whose terms help to locate a set-up for an invention. The tradition supplies the slots for a poetics of avatar. What are the elements, for which we will develop an upgrade path?

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1. Theory: Neoplatonism describes human being as a fall (a breaking off) from pure spirit into matter. The original descent is "natural" (birth). Embodied, one chooses between a vicious or virtuous descent (to embrace or reject sensory pleasure). Wisdom prescribes a practice of "attention," devoting one's life to a "return" to pure spirit.
2. Allegory: Plotinus treated Homer's *Odyssey* as an allegory, to dramatize the circular journey of descent and return. Ulysses demonstrates the middle stage of striving, between Procession (the going down) and Epistrophe (return) (M. H. Abrams). The fourth mode of descent is "artificial," undertaken for purposes of wisdom, experiment, education. Ulysses leaves Circe, and follows her instructions to enter Hades (via ritual sacrifice), to learn from the shade (manes) of Tiresias how to return home.
3. Trajectory (movement, path, *Weg*): The shape shared by the theory and the allegory, extracted as measure.

A lesson of this vocabulary is that *descent* entails three other stages of *avatar*. Up to modernity Western culture was devoted almost entirely to *return* or *ascent*, to escape the "prison of embodiment." Such is the chief lesson of the Passion of the Christ. The stage that survives into modernity, however, with its commitment to immanence against all transcendence, is that of striving or dwelling. There are Sanskrit words for these other stages as well, although not applied to this context. Usage dictates that we retain *avatar* as metonym for the whole cycle.

Ezra Pound begins his *Cantos* with a version of Ulysses's descent into Hades to consult Tiresias (one of the classic accounts of avatar). His method of access involved much sacrifice.

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Dark blood flowed in the fosse,/ Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides/ Of youths and of the old who had borne much;/ Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,/ Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads,/ Battle spoil, bearing yet dreary arms, / These many crowded about me; with shouting,/ Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;/ Slaughtered the herds, sheep slain of bronze;/ Poured ointment, cried to the gods,/ To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine;/ Unsheathed the narrow sword,/ I sat to keep off the impetuous impotent dead,/ Till I should hear Tiresias. [Pound 1996]

The heuritic analogies continue: avatar descends into media spectacle as Ulysses into Hades, a fourth mode of

descent, to question and to learn. The structural pattern repeats across civilizations and media. In Plato's version, the Real is a realm of Ideas (Christianity placed Plato's Ideas in the mind of God). Spirit enters a body when it is born, and this material kosmos is an image of the Real. Journeys to Hades are examples of the fourth descent, the probe (Dante's tour of Inferno). Science Fiction has run ahead to predict the coming relationship of user and avatar, but the point of view is reactionary (witness *The Matrix*).

## Synderesis

Giorgio Agamben suggests a point of departure guiding our analogies.

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*Synderesis* is a technical term used in the Neoplatonic mysticism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to designate the highest and most delicate area of the soul; it is in direct communication with the supersensory, and has never been corrupted by original sin. Perhaps these pages give us a glimpse of the future experience of the *ego cogito*, and furnish one more proof of the close proximity between two poles of our culture. We see that the *cogito*, like mystical synderesis, is what remains of the soul when, at the end of a "dark night," it is stripped of all its attributes and content. The heart of this transcendental experience of the I has been signally described by an Arab mystic, Al-Hallaj: "I am I and the attributes are no more; I am I and the qualifications are no more... I am the pure subject of the verb." [Agamben 2007, 34]

This "obsolete" notion of synderesis may be retrieved for thinking about the connection of telepresence between player and avatar. The new attitude introduced within electracy (beginning with aesthetics) is the embracing of "pleasure," characterized in the tradition as the "vicious" descent. In apparatus theory, dreams (visions, fantasies) motivate invention as much as does practical necessity.

We may elaborate our allegory of prudence (good judgment based on wise counsel) following Agamben: to articulate a new experience of time, in order to invent a thought adequate to image spectacle. Even as our idea of history has changed, our model of time has remained within literate metaphysics. Time in this metaphysics has been thought through two shapes (two ideas, *eidos* = shape). The Greek shape is a circle. The Christian shape is a line: circularity and linearity. Modern time is a secularized line. We no longer have time for round trips or progress, when before and after, here and there, have collapsed into now. But what is this now? Agamben has one answer, alluding to Walter Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* (now-time). The shape of this moment derives from a tradition of emergency (as Benjamin put it): an experience of the normal condition as a state of emergency. Agamben locates his third model in the Gnostic time of interruption, figured as a broken line. In this experience everything has already happened (the worst, the best, revolution, the resurrection). Time stands still, and nothing may be expected from the future. All that history has deprecated must be revisited.

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Agamben recommends retrieval as the method for expressing the new experience of time (a grammatology of the archive). He proposes two topics for further inquiry. First is the tradition of *Kairos* (even a *kairology*), with its roots in *metis*. In practice *metic* time breaks with the vulgar time of streaming instants, to recognize a moment of opportunity (an opening in time). The conventional emblem of a weaver throwing the shuttle does disservice to *kairos*, since the moment may not be awaited with such certainty or rhythm. The other topic Agamben proposes as the basis for a new time shape is pleasure. "Yet for everyone there is an immediate and available experience on which a new concept of time could be founded. This is an experience so essential to human beings that an ancient Western myth makes it humankind's original home: it is pleasure" [Agamben 2007, 114]. The time of pleasure is neither that of precise continuous time nor of eternity. It is rather the time of history, Agamben, says, but a *kairological* history. Here is the primary issue for electracy experience: avatar as prosthesis of a time of "pleasure" (the nature of which remains to be defined).

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The invention of flash reason may approach a new operation of time through shape. There is no shape given in the intuition of time as inner experience (Kant). Since no shape is given (thus opening a history of time), we resort to a graphic analogy (the *gramme*). Here is the problematic of trace, according to Derrida. It is not a question of any one shape, a fourth graphic, for example, but the *differance* of time space. Thus we become aware of this other dimension,

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the undecidable trace working within any particular configuration of time space (chronotope). This is the trace in the term *electracy*. Once this problematic is thematized, the practices associated with a new temporality become accessible to invention. The preliminary problem addressed in our practice, however, is how or in what way this temporality may be experienced. How may we undergo differential prudence (decision, judgment)? Most of the disappointments reported regarding social networking experience are made from the position of selfhood (of ego, of literate identity), concerned about attracting and holding attention upon a fixed identity. But *self* is not one in cyberspace. Avatar is no more ego than Krishna is Arjuna. The instructions are analogies. What is avatar, as practice and experience? *It is like consulting with incarnate Vishnu in a moment of emergency.*

## Metis

Avatar uses flash reason in order to deliberate on public policy issues in the dromosphere. Paul Virilio's choice of the Greek term for race (dromos) to name the condition of dimension collapse in electracy is a clue guiding the heuristics of flash reason. The method poses a question: what is the reasoning that wins races; specifically (continuing with the tactic of retrieval), what was the logic of the *race course* in Classical Greece (grammatology, inventing electracy by analogy). The oral Greeks called this reason *metis*, (after Zeus's first wife) and it survived in literacy as prudence, *phronesis*, practical reason. Plato configured it as his contrast while inventing the pure or contemplative reason and its logic of identity organizing the philosophy of Being. Metis, rather, is the logic of Becoming, useful in conditions of contingency such as those concerning ethics and politics, when the outcome depends on human judgment. A phronimos or prudent person is one capable of immediately assessing the givens of a particular situation, and drawing upon maxims formulated from past experience, making a decision to act in a way that foresees the best outcome in the future. In short, prudence is time-logic.

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The details of prudence (*metis*) in their oral version are exemplified by Odysseus, who relies on cunning and deceit to overcome more powerful adversaries and forces. The same vocabulary was used in early literacy in manuals teaching hunting and fishing. The emblematic figure of *metis*, in fact, is the fishing net, especially the cast net with its encircling meshes. The *net of network* in electracy resonates with this skill of creating or escaping snares, traps, lures, or any sort of *aporia* — mastery of circles and binds. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant use the race course (dromos) to map the operating features of *metis* that may be projected onto any situation (Arjuna and Krishna in the battle chariot). Prudence means not caution but *foresight* that prepares one for success in open circumstances requiring improvisation and instant thought. The race course holds three sites and moments of danger and opportunity: the starting line, the turn (bend), and the finish line. The charioteer stands in for any pilot (Arjuna in his chariot with Krishna), with the vocabulary of navigation, cybernauts, cybernetics, helping translate practical reason into flash reason. The ultimate test of wayfinding is that of a stormy sea at night, when all guidemarks disappear (the scene of *aporia*), whether this night sea is literal or figurative (projected into the arts of medicine, politics, rhetoric). Avatar as guide through Tartarus (the trackless realm beneath the underworld).

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Virilio's general emergency is a call for invention, not a prophecy of doom. The danger that he sketches begins with the formation of the "mental map" that each person develops. This map is what must be augmented in the new apparatus. What is the mental map of cyberspace? The threat to freedom, he says, begins with the reduction and impoverishment of this mental picture. As an urbanist he locates the source of the crisis as the displacement of the real city by the tele-city, the loss of a lived public space in favor of a virtual gathering on the internet [Virilio 1999, 45]. The challenge is that the lived city as a space and place is no longer visible, its borders or shape lost to perception, a loss that affects border itself and hence identity as such. Intelligibility depends on borders, edges, limits: "the city is the law, and the law is the border" [Virilio 1999, 76]. The new technologies of electromagnetism and the video screen no longer concern sun rays, light, and geometric perspective, but wave optics. "Geometrical optics made the city centers and the suburbs. Centralized cities such as Palmanova are the result of perspective vision. The ideal city of Piero della Francesca is the vision of a city that implements perspective vision. Now, the invention of a perspective of real time and electromagnetic wave optics demands an understanding of what the city of that vision of the world will be — virtual city" [Virilio 1999, 85].

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Alongside air pollution, water pollution and the like, there exists an unnoticed phenomenon of a

pollution of the world's dimensions that I propose to call *dromospheric* — from *dromos* : a race, running. Contamination has in fact spread further than the elements, natural substances, air, water, fauna and flora it attacks — as far as the space-time of our planet. Gradually reduced to nothing by the various tools of transport and instantaneous communication, the geophysical environment is undergoing an alarming diminishing of its “depth of field” and this is degrading man's relationship with his environment. The optical density of the landscape is rapidly evaporating, producing confusion between the apparent horizon, which is the backdrop of all action, and the deep horizon of our collective imagination; and so one last horizon of visibility comes into view, the transparent horizon, a product of the optical (optoelectronic and acoustic) magnification of man's natural domain. [Virilio 1997, 22]

What makes the dromosphere so troubling is that it requires the invention of a new mode of governance. The rhetorical skills of deliberative reason within a public sphere that made democracy possible were inventions of literacy, and are not sustainable within electracy. The time of decision, the civic process of critical analysis and persuasion through argumentation, is a luxury we do not have in the conditions of Right Now. We need a rhetoric that is forensic, epideictic, and deliberative at once. What happened, who is responsible, what do we do now? Here is the point of departure for flash reason, the image logic of avatar. Avatar reason is as compressed as the compression ratios of the equipment supporting it. An apparatus is not only equipment, but also practices of thinking developed within emerging institutions, and behaviors of identity (individual and collective).

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Flash reason must do for the image prosthesis what argumentation did for the word in literacy. The resources needed for designing a logic of an Internet civic sphere are already available in the same cultural history that produced the technology. Marshal McLuhan's laws of media indicate that apparatus invention proceeds by the “obsoleting” of some current practice, and the “retrieval” of some obsolete practice, newly recognized as relevant to a contemporary context. The larger purpose of Avatar Emergency is to establish a collection of cultural inventions associated historically with fast or sudden thinking, and compose from them an experimental procedure for collective and individual decision-making Now. Flash reason, adopted as a practice of general electracy, is a civic basis for democracy in the circumstances of the dromosphere.

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## Orpheus

Our reconfiguration of avatar as a practice of electracy takes McLuhan's advice about the laws of media: that with any artifact one must ask, what does it render obsolete, and what does it retrieve from the past? [McLuhan & McLuhan 1992]. As our guiding scene suggests, avatar's history includes various incarnations and theorizations, as god, soul, self. It is not that literate selfhood is rendered obsolete in our context, seeking a practice of flash reason adequate to the demands of the dromosphere, but that this experience of being an autonomous individual is brought into relationship with a new dimension of reality produced within the epoch of electracy. Avatar is the name of this relationship, and it may be figured in an emblem.

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Avatar in our Internet public sphere is a relationship, and depends upon a certain kind of experience. Another relay (rather than model) for this approach to avatar is provided by Maurice Blanchot's appropriation of the Orpheus myth as an emblem of his theory of writing [Blanchot 1981, 171]. The Greek myth recounts the life and death of Orpheus, credited as the inventor of writing. Blanchot focuses on Orpheus's descent (avatar) into Hades, which he was able to enter through the power of his art. His purpose was to retrieve his beloved Eurydice, who died in an accident. Blanchot focused his retelling, more or less faithful to the original, on the moment when Orpheus broke the agreement with the demi-gods and turned to look at Eurydice before they exited Hades. “Thracian Orpheus took her and with her the command that he not turn back his gaze until he had left the groves of Avernus, or the gift would be revoked,” as Ovid wrote. “Through the mute silence, they wrest their steep way, arduous, dark, and thick with black vapors. They were not far from the border of the world above; here frightened that she might not be well and yearning to see her with his own eyes, through love he turned and looked, and with his gaze she slipped away and down” [Ovid 1999, 274].

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The Greek terms for descent ( *catabasis* ) and ascent ( *anabasis* ) remind us that the West has its own tradition of

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avatar and *aarohat* (Sanskrit *ascent*). *Catabasis* (Greek *kata* , *down*, and *base* or *foot*) is the essential epic convention of the hero's trip into the underworld. A hero necessarily braves a catabasis, such as the descent of Orpheus into the lower world in order to charm Hades and Persephone to bring his wife, Eurydice back to the living world. Most catabases take place in the Underworld, such as the descent of Heraklês, or in Hell, such as that of Dante. However a catabasis can also be other dystopic areas such as what Odysseus encounters on his twenty year journey from Troy to Ithaca. Christ's Harrowing of Hell appropriates this pagan narrative. Catabasis connects avatar with the very structure of narrative, codified in the templates of screenplay authoring: the protagonist becomes hero by leaving home, entering the special world of the narrative (that is, descends into the realm of death). This model is only the point of departure for our project (becoming image), since brand as the identity experience of electracy no longer possesses the coherence of narrative form.

Blanchot's appropriation of the myth typifies a device of existentialist authors of his period (Camus and Sisyphus, for example), of updating legends, fables, myths, as allegories for contemporary experience. The lesson passed along for us is the analogy between the writer's relation with the work and the relation of self with avatar. Blanchot developed his poetics in explicit opposition to Sartre's endorsement of prose and an activist engagement with political polemics. Blanchot takes "the other slope of language," that of poetry, with important implications for EmerAgency consulting. Poetry is "useless" in instrumental terms. Our purpose, rather, is to bring into ontology the disposition, attitude, virtue (desire) of the subject, in order to open a new front in the struggle for survival. Blanchot's lesson is that the "entry into language" by a speaking being is a kind of avatar descent.

Blanchot was one of the first, and remains one of the most perceptive, French readers of Heidegger. He took up Heidegger's project to introduce a new ontology, doing for the poetic slope of language what the Classical Greeks did for the propositional slope. Heidegger's etymological reading of the Greek word for truth ( *aletheia* ), made explicit the limits of the Greek achievement. *Truth* is an uncovering, in a figure-ground relationship. The Greeks focused on the figure, which they ontologized, and forgot about the ground, the act of disclosure itself. A related point, important for distinguishing this ontology from the direction taken by modern science, is that the Greeks were concerned with what showed itself of its own accord, what attracted attention through the beauty of its form. Heidegger shifted attention to the ground that withdraws in order to disclose, and demonstrated that art with its circumspective devices of indirect intimation offered the means for ontologizing this more reticent dimension of Real.

Blanchot takes up this angle, which was continued by Derrida. The moral that Blanchot extracts from the story of Orpheus concerns the author's experience of writing this withdrawal. The writer is descending into the void that language opens in Real, the site of potential that Aristotle called *dunamis* and Deleuze the virtual. Eurydice is the object of desire, indicating that Eros and Thanatos are involved, life, human sexuality, the unconscious. Foucault's reading of what Blanchot attempted has become definitive, when he named this void the "outside." Many other modern writers explored the Orpheus theme, in order to evoke the experience of creativity in which one's personal identity is subordinated or extinguished, replaced by what is more than and beyond the limits of conscious thought, identity, understanding. Blanchot referred to this stance in language as "the neutral," beyond individual identity, in which the subject receives from world, from the outside (such is the experience of avatar). Roland Barthes was teaching a seminar on the Neutral at the time of the accident that killed him, the notes from which are now published. These "accidents" index the General Accident against which flash reason operates. It is worth noting in the context that Kafka (one of Blanchot's favorite exemplars of writing) was a lawyer for the Worker's Accident Insurance Company.

An instruction of this analogy is that avatar as the enunciation of flash reason performs an entry into image, and must be designed according to this conative or receptive stance. Avatar is not mimetic of one's ego, but a probe beyond one's ownness, as a relationship with community. Deleuze and Guattari's *rhizome* is much invoked in association with the Internet. Our use of the figure follows their example of rhizome as a symbiotic relationship between two separate domains brought into mutually beneficial alliance. It is significant that one of their primary examples of rhizome (the wasp and orchid, or bee and flower) was also the chief guiding image for students in manuscript culture, who were advised to compose texts the way bees made honey: by frequenting the best flowers of rhetoric, to retrieve and store their essence, with which to create honey in the hive. Here is another analogy for the avatar relationship: player to avatar is as artist to work. Analogy depends upon the familiarity of its ratio. To understand your relationship with avatar,

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you are offered a comparison with authoring, or with art making in general. Blanchot's allegory specifies the relevant part of the analogy: player with avatar in an Internet dromosphere is like Orpheus with Eurydice in Hades. Such is the counsel provided by our traditions and our artists, said to be *the antennae of the race*.

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