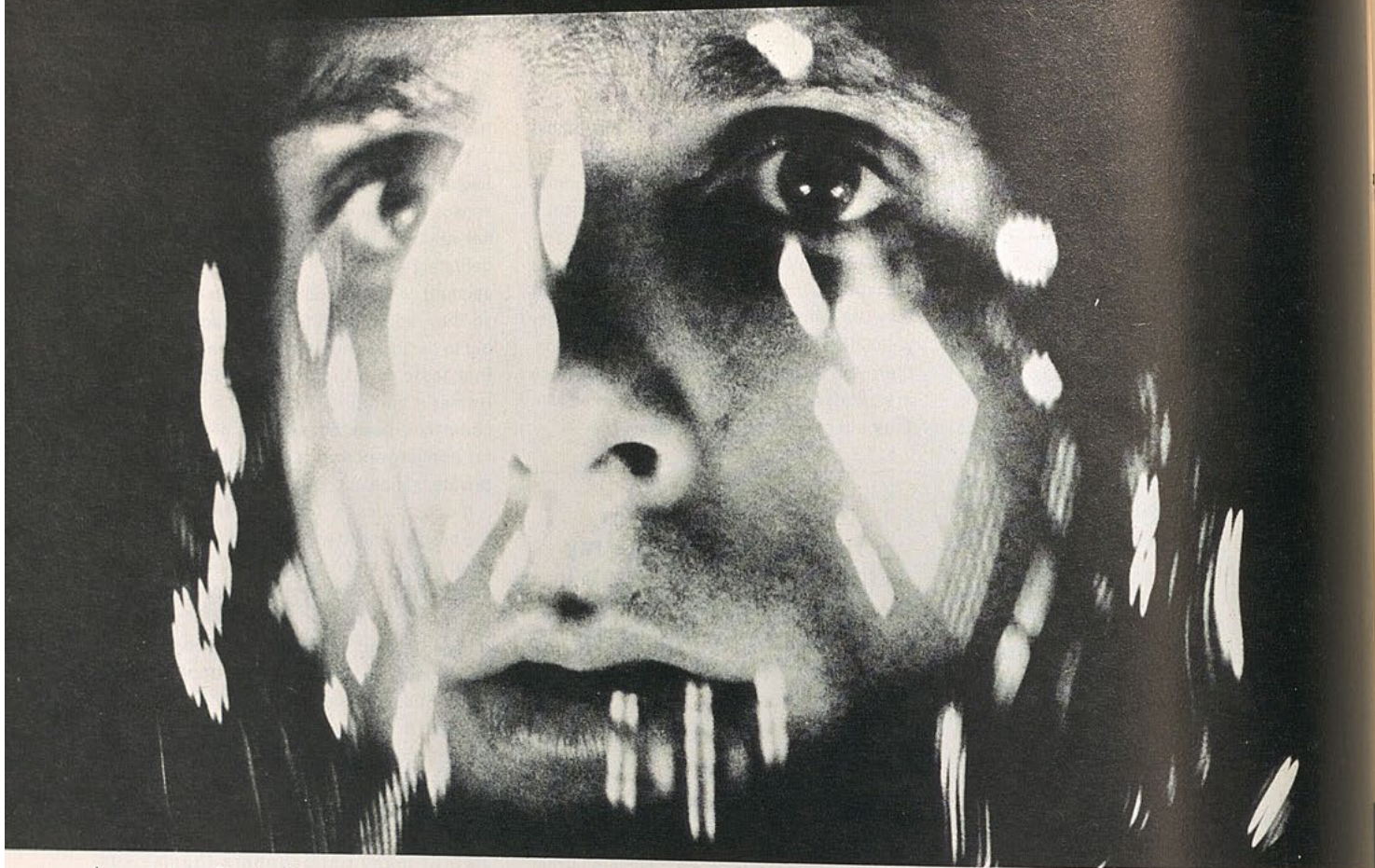


The future and the functions of art

A conversation between Alvin Toffler and John McHale



A scene from Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (MGM).

Futurism, in the early decades of the century, was the name given to a school of artists and poets led by Filippo Marinetti. Not to be confused with that historical movement, an important new tendency, also called futurism, is attracting support among writers, designers, architects, artists, sociologists, philosophers and others who see in the accelerated change of the present the breakdown of an old civilization and the birth pangs of a new one. Arguing that we must develop "future consciousness"—that we must anticipate change rather than chase the last crisis—the new futurists turn the mirror of tomorrow on today in an effort to see the present in a fresh way.

What about the effects of high-speed

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change on art in the years just ahead? ARTnews asked Alvin Toffler and John McHale to speculate on that question and to record their conversation. Toffler is, of course, the author of the recent best-seller, Future Shock, and of the earlier The Culture Consumers, a study of art and affluence in America. He is a contributing editor of ARTnews. McHale is the author of The Future of the Future and The Ecological Context. An artist himself and a founder-member in the early 1950s of the Independent Group, which, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, was one of the factors which triggered the very early British interest in Pop Art, McHale is now director of the Center for Integrative Studies at the State University,

Binghamton, N.Y.

The following is an edited account of the Toffler-McHale conversation:

TOFFLER: The key to understanding art today does not lie in what artists think or do. It has to do with the new environment in which they find themselves. They, like all of us, are caught up in a wave of revolutionary change. The world is simply not going to move on the tracks that were laid for it in the Industrial Revolution.

I see the emergence of a radically new techno-economic system with new, post-bureaucratic forms of organization, with new forms of interpersonal relationships, with new family structures, with new values; but

also, obviously, with a new symbolic superstructure—a new artistic environment. Many of us are going to find the transition from industrialism to the new civilization very difficult, and artists, by doing their work well, can, I believe, soften the impact of the future. But artists themselves are going to find the period ahead deeply upsetting. This global revolution is the larger reality of which art is only a small part.

Exactly what the nature of this new art environment is likely to be is, of course, a very difficult question. We can, however, at least say a few things about the next 20 or 30 years. I would argue, for example, that no school or style will dominate the galleries, the museums, the classrooms or the pages of ARTnews for long. While there may be momentary dominances—like, for example, Abstract-Expressionism from the early to the late '50s—the over-all push is toward differentiation, diversity, heterogeneity.

The other trend is the one you wrote about in your essay, "The Plastic Parthenon," and that is the transience of artistic imagery, the continual nondurability of our artistic imagery.

McHALE: Yes, but an additional direction of change is the shift of focus from the art work to the life style of the artist. One significant example is Warhol. It is not only his discrete works which are interesting and important, it's the cycle of works he produces, one after the other, it's the whole Warhol output for a particular point in time. Add to that yet another important dimension: He lives the work. It's his whole life-style which becomes the art work. That's true also of the Beatles and other figures. It's not only the record that is picked up and listened to; what is presented is their entire person, the total personality and life-style. What they're wearing at a particular time, how they express themselves, how they relate to authority.

However, it's worth noting that the idea of the life-style as art work is not terribly new. This was also very much the case for the Renaissance prince, whose entire life-style, in a sense, became art. The possibility of designing a life-style artistically was available only to a very few people in the past, however—only a very tiny elite could afford to live out its lives as works of art—good, bad or indifferent.

Today this capacity is open to many more people. Some, in their teens or early 20s, actually live within a series of established metaphors drawn from the icons they prefer: Janis Joplin, the Beatles, the Stones—along with the gear, the language, the way of behaving, and so forth.

The art work dissolves, the boundaries between the art work and life become permeable. The painting on the wall is not the

important thing, it's the total environment, the range of experiences. The city itself, for example, can be experienced as a total kind of art work—though not designed as such.

One might assume the future of art possibly lies in these directions, then. Diversity. Turnover. And a further breakdown of the boundaries between art and life.

TOFFLER: I've suggested elsewhere that we are also witnessing a shift from the collection of "things" to the collection of "experiences." We are moving toward what I call "experiential" art. If that is correct, it implies other big changes. If we are going to buy experiences, we can use technology to do it. Holography, for example, or interactive video. **McHALE:** Holography's only one means, and I think it is still "mechanical," in a sense. What about the tapping in more directly through...

TOFFLER: Electronic brain stimulation?

McHALE: Yes. Combined with many other kinds. We investigated the pathology of sensory deprivation before we got to the physiology of it. Imagine an artistic movement that grows out of the development of the psychology of sensory deprivation, and which then begins to work on enriching sensory stimulation in "experiential" packages—what you call "chunks" of information—and does that in terms of traditional means—print, noise, pictures, that sort of thing. We don't talk about it in terms of smell very much as yet, or in terms of tactile experiences—we're just beginning to get into that range.

So you have the possibility then of personalized kits of experience extending quite a long way, apart from the capacity to stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain. One could take an interior such as the room we're in, and with various kinds of projection, with a certain amount of collapsibility—being able to collapse things down; say, plastics with memory—you could transform this rather contemporary setting very quickly into a Louis XIV interior with the feel of authenticity. And you could have the appropriate music, and whatever.

TOFFLER: You've just described one of the final scenes in Kubrick's *2001*.

McHALE: Right. But one would go beyond that. Recreation and reuse of the past would be only one factor. There are whole other ranges of experience which we haven't begun to explore yet.

TOFFLER: I think that in fact we are already moving toward this in rapid and multiple ways. If it is possible, in effect, to create a kind of music of the spheres—this time I mean the spheres of the brain—by inputting electronic impulses, those impulses could indeed be structured and designed as a work of art.

Conceivably the same process might be carried out through drugs or chemistry. If part of what we are saying is that art implies a certain patterning of experience, then what you've alluded to here is a multiplication of the vehicles—the delivery systems. The delivery systems can be multiplied manifold.

One could, for example, think not only of sending electronic impulses to the brain, but also of creating experiences through drugs in which the pattern of the experience is in fact predetermined by the "chem artist" who put the capsule together.

McHALE: A French meal, an Italian meal, or a Japanese meal.

TOFFLER: Right. But much more than that! A meal, colors, lights, sounds, sex—all precisely combined according to a pre-fixed chemical program. Or one can think, for example, of patterned tactile stimulation. That's called a massage parlor, I suppose.

McHALE: The "fluid theater" in London is very close into this. But also, you see, nothing holds still. So we might go toward these with great interest and drive, and then suddenly

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swing around to a situation in which artists abandon all that, strip everything away, want nothing to do with sophisticated technology or drugs and decide that the thing to do is to take sheets of paper, brushes and black ink, and do nothing else but inscribe images, signs and symbols with them.

TOFFLER: At which point we put frames around them. Radical idea!

McHALE: Right. Because the interesting thing about the future of art—possibly for the very first time in human history, and here's where we agree—is that it's not a question of *either-or* but of *both-and*. A vastly enlarged range of experiences becomes available to individual choice. You're not locked in.

TOFFLER: No work, whether it's a Michelangelo or an African mask, can be interpreted out of its context. Any work forms for us only part of an enormous visual and tactile flux. And for us this "surround" is transient, irregular, increasingly hard to understand. It's harder even to detect the large patterns in it, the useful metaphors.

McHALE: Right. The fine arts are now just one

of many channels of communication within which images and metaphors of the society flow. The fine arts, at one point, used to be one of the major sources of the images and metaphors with which the society guided its conduct. The arts in the Renaissance were used in the service of the church to communicate certain common ideas, common symbols, in a way which was popularly understandable.

TOFFLER: What is more, these same ideas and symbols were used again and again, with variations. The larger patterns held still through time.

McHALE: That was what I call an "iconic" function. Artists produced some of the key icons of experience, they provided the important metaphors by which men lived. In that sense they were part of the "guidance system" of the society. Today they are still hard at work, but there are many sources of metaphor and many more metaphors. Some of the most powerful ones don't originate in art.

TOFFLER: But if today we are multiplying the channels through which images flow to the ordinary individual, isn't it possible that we are pumping ideas, symbols, images into people's lives to the point of numbing saturation? At some stage we're bombarded by so much imagery coming through so many channels that we can no longer catalogue it, classify it, use it. And we turn off.

McHALE: Yes, but. . . For those of us who start off from the other end, as artists, the aim is quite the opposite. The artist tries to carry the viewer or participant to the point at which receptivity is not numbed, but maximized—the point at which you become extraordinarily alert to changes in your environment. As an artist you constantly go about the business of overstimulating yourself and the viewer. When you get an apparent overload of discrete visual stimuli, this begins to form new patterns or Gestalts.

TOFFLER: Well, you *hope* that's what happens. If you're bombarded by a lot of discrete stimuli your only way to deal with them is to block them out after a while, or to look for an over-all pattern. A key protection against numbness—apart from simply closing your sensorium down—is to look for these

larger patterns. So that maybe the work of art is no longer a painting but the larger Gestalt of which the painting is only a part. Maybe it's the whole exhibition.

Or perhaps the painting is actually a component of an even larger pattern, which consists of the exhibition, the street the gallery is on, the noise of a bus rumbling by, a few stray odors, the latest headline, plus a page from the calendar and other elements from left field. Perhaps all those put together form, or could conceivably form, an esthetically pleasing or effective over-all pattern. At which point we may conceive of that larger configuration, not the individual painting or sculpture, as the art work. The painting itself then becomes only a grain or daub in that larger picture.

If that's the case, the question is: Do artists help us to see those larger patterns? In general, yes. But not in the way most critics believe.

One of the things works of art do, whether we're talking about visual art—painting, drawing—or any other form of art, is to present novel juxtapositions of form, color, shape and so on, that are outside the range of the viewer's ordinary experience, so that he or she suddenly begins to see that there are more possibilities than previously considered.

Art widens the viewer's conception of the possibilities. (I use the word "viewer" as shorthand for viewer-participant-consumer-image modifier.) And I think that a comparable function is also performed by literature and by the other arts.

In this sense, it might be argued that the arts serve to broaden the behavioral repertoire of the human race. They make possible more alternative forms of future action. This is, perhaps, why the arts serve so useful an adaptive function in periods of high-speed change.

If you're locked into a set of conceptions, if you have a limited view of the number or range of alternative futures, you evidence less flexibility in your response to change. If the arts *do* suggest novel juxtapositions, not merely of form and color but also of experience, in some way, then it seems to me that they widen one's range of behavioral response. They make possible new ways of acting. And that might very well help explain why there is an enormous surge of interest in the arts today, even though sometimes this interest isn't labeled as such.

McHALE: That was one of the functions of Pop Art particularly, as it made people more alert to their everyday environment and accorded meaning and significance to objects and processes in their daily lives. Indeed, up to a point, this has always been one of art's functions. But generating awareness of new possibilities is only part of it. The artist, to put what we have been saying another way, also assembles or "frames" experience. Take van

Gogh's landscapes of Provence. Now, after knowing those paintings, it's very difficult to see the Provençal landscape "as it is." You always see it in terms of that series of paintings. The artist is able to put his or her thumbprint on a whole range of human experience.

TOFFLER: That's part of what I mean by organizing experience. It is a process of data-reduction. What's happening is that the artist is abstracting out some personal view of what he has seen, and saying, "Look, this is the way it is." That is very useful because now when I go to Provence I don't have to look in detail at each of the elements of that environment. The paintings provide symbolic representations—abstract representations—which save me a lot of information processing.

Now it is true that the artist sees Provence in a highly personal way and that his representation of it may have no bearing on "objective reality." The brush, like the eye itself, can lie. But he is engaged, it seems to me, in a form of information-shunting, of classifying or organizing information, and this is so powerful, so useful, that it takes an act of will to forget van Gogh's Provence and see the "real" one.

McHALE: Yes, but at the same time we mustn't get hung up on the notion of information and communications. There are many different kinds of art, many different kinds of audience, and each type or each group has a slightly specialized function. We are, after all, still trying to fight our way past the Victorian notion that art had a certain kind of unity, that all art could be talked about as Art. We've fought our way out of that bag and assume that art is as diverse as any of the other areas and ranges of human activity.

TOFFLER: Absolutely. But even with that necessary caution, it seems to me that what we are saying here about "chunking" or "organizing" experience is directly related to the idea of metaphor. If, as stated earlier, the most powerful metaphors are no longer coming out of the arts, where are they coming from? Which collections of symbols and ideas reach and influence the largest numbers of people? This is, of course, not simply saying that an art work or metaphor is better because it reaches more people. But good or bad, it's important to know. Where does our contemporary symbolism come from? Who, to use your terminology, are the "icon-shapers?"

McHALE: Let's take something very close to our own interest—the future. One of the strongest recent sets of metaphors is found in the so-called Club of Rome report. This report, *The Limits to Growth*, which contends that industrial societies are racing to disaster, has taken a powerful hold on the imagination. Dennis Meadows and his team presented their studies in the form of a book filled with what appeared to be highly analytical and

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mathematical studies of the various curves and trends in the human environment—the growth of population, the growth of the use of resources, the growth of pollution, the growth of technologies.

It's a small work, and about one-third of it is conveyed in graphic terms. (That by itself is rather interesting.) Now it has some hard data within it, but most of all it's a set of hypotheses. It really is a set of poetic metaphors. And that, too, is very interesting, because that set of metaphors, expressed in a very small and rather slim work, becomes instantly available on a world scale.

Indeed, it has had a sharp impact on a whole series of sectors in society, from governments down to the man in the street, within a very short time. It was published in the United States in March, 1972, and within a six-month period you got governments, the press and educated people in countries around the world talking about it.

What they did is striking. They set out to do a serious study of technology. But really what they wound up with was a set of extraordinarily adept poetic metaphors, like those that have moved men to action in the past decade—Adlai Stevenson's "spaceship earth," for example, which is another powerful, poetic metaphor.

And your own metaphor, "future shock." Once you've expressed that, it encapsulates and orders a wide range of human experience. Once you've got the metaphor, the whole thing is there in a kind of bag. *Future Shock* put into a very tightly organized metaphorical set those series of images which conformed to people's experience around the world. Hence the interest in it.

It told them something about their attitudes, gave them some clues as to how to order those elements which were disordered in their own personal environment, put them into a larger Gestalt. So in that sense it is not really about the future, it is about the present. It is about one's expectations, attitudes and strategies for orienting oneself today in a changed environment.

What you did, and what the Club of Rome, Dennis Meadows, Bucky Fuller and others have done, was to create metaphors. *The Limits to Growth* is a poem. *Future Shock*—which you considered, I think, in your own terms to be a very hard piece of documentary work with an imaginative leap into the future—tried to help people understand the wave of shocks—shocks plural—running through the society. But, again, what you did was to produce a kind of very large prose poem. It doesn't degrade your function to say you produced a very large prose poem.

TOFFLER: Not at all.

McHALE: This tells us something new about the nature of art and society. It illustrates how art has moved out of the traditional frames, how the metaphor-making function is no longer performed exclusively or even primar-

ily by artists as classically defined.

TOFFLER: I'm not at all taken aback by the argument that my own book, which appears in the form of a documented study, shares in fact some of the characteristics of a poem, a work of art. I confess to having started out as a poet rather than as a social analyst.

McHALE: As for the power of poetry or art, this lies in its iconic character.

TOFFLER: When you say "iconic," how are you using that?

McHALE: I'm using it in the same way in which you used the term "compressed," with reference to chunks of information. An icon, in a sense, is a chunk of experiential information—highly dense, highly compressed. The images of the Mother and Child, Madonnas, etc., are typical—icons of experience that compress a tremendous amount of human variability around a central concept. That's what I mean by an icon.

An icon, then, can either help you stabilize your own personal course of development and growth within the society, as an individual, or it can mobilize collective growth around particular ideas. Perhaps because of our mutual interest in what's happening to human society on the world scale, your emphasis has to be, at the moment, on those collective symbols which are affecting the society.

TOFFLER: Since these big, powerful organizing metaphors don't occur so often now in the fine arts, we must look for them elsewhere, and...

McHALE: Yes. What is one of the most commonly shared visual experiences for a great number of people in the world? Not a work of museum art, but the moon landings. Possibly a billion people might have become aware of the event and shared it in some way or another. That was an image with enormous impact.

TOFFLER: Right. And such images, once created, are picked up and amplified by artists and poets. I recently went to see Arrabal's play, *And They Put Handcuffs on the Flowers*. In that play he uses the space shot as a powerful symbol of freedom. The characters are all prisoners of Franco; they are caged, angry, bitter. And one says to another, "Is it possible that man has landed on the moon and we are still here?" Arrabal uses this imagery—phrases like "the eagle has landed" and ideas like the escape from the "prison" of earth's gravity—as dramatic counterpoint. A novel juxtaposition. In this way, he amplified the imagery and built a fresh metaphor. The moon shot imagery is used in myriad ways.

In fact, NASA knew that it was really producing an artistic extravaganza. Its public information officers were keenly aware of the symbolism of the event.

McHALE: Who knows, they might have been given an even bigger appropriation if they'd said that what they're really doing is a massive

John McHale



Alvin Toffler

"earthwork," and re-doing Greek mythology—Gemini, Mercury, Saturn and Apollo!

But humor aside, they're very powerfully attached, in many senses, to the myth structure.

Another key aspect of the space program is the way in which you had people in Texas and elsewhere on the earth's surface in communication with other individuals orbiting around the earth or the moon. The viewer is not shown the process continuously in its real sequence but at different points both in time and reality. Many dimensions of time are compressed. We view one "clip" that was happening half an hour ago, in juxtaposition with something that's happening now, along with a mock-up of what might happen in an hour's time. You have a collapse or interpenetration of space and time that seems curiously characteristic of many 20th-century art works.

TOFFLER: That suggests another source of artistic imagery in the sense we're talking about: advertising. I'm struck by the enormous impact that television advertising has—not in the directions intended by its producers and sponsors—but the impact on our psyches produced by the presentation of images in 10-second or 30-second slices. The cutting—the telling of a whole highly compressed story in very small slices of time—alters our temporal reality.

Not only is a lot of information jammed into

a flick of time but the convention grows up in television that a one-hour "special" is really 51.45 minutes because you have to allow time for commercials. When the special is written, whether it's a drama or a documentary, it has to have sub-climaxes at the appropriate moments to allow for the insertion of the appropriate commercial. The pressures of advertising thus modify the artistic form of the work involved.

I'm not simply echoing the usual complaints about advertising—that it forces us to buy goods we don't want, or that it's mercenary, as indeed much of it is. What I'm saying is different and deeper. Advertising picks up styles and artistic forms and incorporates them. And artists work the other way as well, of course, making it two-way traffic. But the high compression of advertising packed into disconnected, very brief intervals of time does something else. It alters our tempo, our expectations, our attitudes toward time. Partly because of this, but also because of accelerating change in general, speeded-up time is part of the new environment we were talking about. It accounts for the way artists struggle to achieve immediacy.

It reminds me of a comment that Thomas Messer made once at the Guggenheim Museum: that so much work is displayed today that a gallery-goer doesn't react to the individual painting as he once did, but to the whole show. And the whole show then becomes a unified piece.

It was his theory that artists compensated for this—or fought it—by making their paintings bigger and bigger in an effort to achieve immediate and individual impact. I don't know if scale is related to time in this way, but once again, at the risk of laboring the point, I think it underlines the way that context alters the function of the individual work of art.

Furthermore, this is true, I think, not just of paintings and art galleries. I find myself, for example, as a cinema addict, increasingly focusing on a given stream of cinema, so to speak, rather than the individual movie. What concerns me, more and more, is the larger pattern being formed by the last 50 movies I've seen, rather than the immediate pattern formed by the movie I'm seeing right now. It's a different form of appreciation.

McHALE: Yes, this becomes extremely interesting when you consider sets of movies. At the time of the Korean War, one interesting cycle of films was preoccupied with what I call the weapons theme—*Winchester 73*, *Bowie Knife*, *Broken Lance* and a whole series of others.

The titles themselves are extremely important themes, growing out of the fact that the title usually represents the greatest compression of the image or the metaphor. Those weapons movies were concerned with the use of certain kinds of weapons. What was the dialogue in the society at about that time?

The Korean War. It was about the use of certain kinds of weapons—atomic weapons.

In many senses, that whole subject of nuclear war was elaborated through that particular series of Westerns. You would get Jack Palance or somebody else sitting around a campfire and saying, "The problem nowadays is that nothing is really very black and white, everything is gray. We can't really distinguish the bad guys from the good guys any longer."

You might say, now, this is a coincidence—but it's not, because *somebody* has to make those movies. The script writers are a pretty hip collection of characters. Although they're writing so-called popular entertainment, many are "marginal men" and much of what they feel about the stresses and abrasions of the world situation slips in. They are, in many ways, alert to the kind of myth structure which they import into the work.

Your reaction here is an insightful one, of viewing this kind of communication in sets or cycles.

TOFFLER: I'd like to take this idea of looking at the set, at the "filmstream" rather than the film or at the whole gallery rather than the individual work of art, and relate that to systems theory and to the systems conception of the world around us.

The development of systems theory is an attempt somehow to get our hands around the complexities of experience in a holistic fashion. So we move to higher and higher levels of abstraction, and look for more and more inter-connections in reality.

But if the *viewer* doesn't look at the individual painting the way he once did, then doesn't this suggest that the *artist* needs to see himself, in effect, as part of a collectivity of artists producing a stream of work rather than as an individual producing an entirely independent work? If he is producing, so to speak, a tile rather than a mosaic, shouldn't he concern himself with the whole? And if that's true, maybe the artist needs to see himself in relationship not just to other painters, but also to musicians, to industrial designers, to politicians, to nonfiction writers, and so on. So that the pieces fall into some semblance of order for maximum impact. Do artists think of themselves this way? Or do they not?

As a writer, I confess, I find it difficult to think of myself as part of a movement. In fact, I take pride in being different.

McHALE: The answer, I think you would agree, is that they don't. They would take much more your attitude, as individuals. But their role has been defined for them historically, don't forget. The notion of the individual artist working entirely on his own, producing art, is of quite recent origin—but we're stuck with it, for the moment, as our "image of the artist." Actually, artists are part of a collectivity by virtue of the fact that they are working in one tradition or another. Even if they think it their function to try constantly to destroy

that tradition, this in itself has become part of the "artistic tradition." The strongest movements toward the destruction of tradition—Dada, for example—usually produce an art which, in many senses, becomes a new tradition.

TOFFLER: What you're really saying is that the artist can never escape his context, no matter how much he tries.

McHALE: But it's incumbent on him, constantly, to try to transcend it.

TOFFLER: Yes, but not through ignorance. Whether he regards himself as highly individual or not, it seems to me that he or she needs to be exquisitely aware of all the other images, symbols, movements floating around, so that they can be taken into account—so that the artist can anticipate the response of the viewer, reader, audience or participant to his work.

McHALE: Yes, which helps him make effective use of the shared codes and symbols. But I would include not only those around right now, but also some of those from the past—which leads us to another curious and interesting function of the artist, who not only must interpret the present, but also powerfully reinterpret the past.

The past provides us with a set of laboratory experiences. We can go back and look at what man did in this or that situation—not necessarily as a guide to the future, but simply saying, "Well, here are a lot of field tests."

TOFFLER: That seems to me exactly parallel to what I was saying about the function of art as an adaptive tool. I'm not suggesting that this is its only function, but it is one of the functions of the artist to say, "Look, there are other ways of dealing with a situation!" That's what the artist's "novel juxtapositions" do. And history is another pool of information, as you call it—previous field tests, laboratory experiments. In that sense, history and literature are closer than the historians and the writers frequently allow themselves to imagine.

If you regard history in this sense, and I think this is a useful way to regard it, then the historian and the artist and the science-fiction imaginer and the popular interpreter—at least many of them—are working at the same business of defining alternative pathways into the future, alternative ways of coping with the immediate pressures on the civilization or the individual. In effect, they are saying to the decision-maker, in business, in politics, or in private life, "You don't need to be what you are. You *can* act or live differently. Your range of potential responses to change is broader than you think."

By raising the consciousness of the viewer (and the society) that *other* ways of doing things are possible, by using and legitimizing imagination, artists, whether intentionally or not, often help us survive the trauma of change. That, in a revolutionary moment of history like ours, is a crucial contribution. ■