

The Renaissance Around Us

By Eric McLuhan

We are presently in the grip of the largest and grandest renaissance that the world has ever seen. This should come as no surprise.

When we use the phrase, "the Renaissance," we generally mean the renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Actually The Renaissance was invented in the nineteenth century. Until then, people didn't think in those terms: we had no word for it. Apparently, it took two and a half centuries for people to recover from that cultural convulsion sufficiently to discover a need for the word. "Renaissance" debuts in English in 1845, coinciding with the invention of the telegraph, the technology which precipitated the first stage of the renaissance which now envelops us. Coincidentally, the same date saw the invention—a kind of renaissance—of dinosaurs. The word "dinosaur" too enters the language (1841) at the time of the telegraph. Everyone knew about those piles of old bones that littered the US landscape. In the nineteenth century, Americans even shipped railway cars full of them to Europe; Americans themselves, by and large, ignored them.

So why should it take over two centuries to notice the 16th-century tidal wave of rebirth and renewal?

Any environmental action automatically overwhelms and paralyzes the sensibilities: its cataclysmic size and power and sheer obviousness—these form a cloak of invisibility. That it took two or more centuries to recover from The Renaissance enough to notice it testifies to its scope and power. And the renaissance gathering momentum during the 20th century is so much more grand and potent as to make that last renaissance seem puny by comparison. The present one is still, at the turn of this century, very much an environment of actions rather than a convulsion of any one field; it surrounds us and affects every feature of life; and it is invisible.

Look around: every imaginable corner of our culture and arts and sciences is embroiled in a kaleidoscopic welter of discovery and rediscovery.

- We have recently seen the rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, as providing a way of life and of craftsmanship in trades; as the setting for plays, documentaries, and novels; and as an absorbing study in cultural history and historical experience.
- Medieval art is back as never before, beginning with the pre-Raphaelite movement. It has resurfaced unexpectedly in such ordinary forms as the organization of the newspaper page.

- In religion, it is the established forms, the institutional bureaucracies, that are suffering decline: the older, more intuitive forms, embodied in the evangelical and charismatic movements, are booming. Paganism is on the upswing, and all the age-old mystery religions and tribal gods are slowly recovering their followings, as is goddess-worship and witchcraft, superstition and occultism of every stripe.
- At the turn of this century, African modes of sculpture and iconography began to be widely retrieved and reinterpreted for use in Western art. Primitivism provided a venue for all of the pictorial and plastic arts at the same time that film was retrieving bare motion and gesture as objects of aesthetic attention.
- In the last few decades, we have witnessed a particular interest in adopting and investigating Oriental mythology and forms of knowing, of meditation, of martial art, and of philosophy.
- Group identity, instead of private individual identity, is now found everywhere, from youth culture to the business world (where it is called corporate culture), to advertising, to feminism and other -isms. Increasingly, mere private identity is seen as a liability, as too confining. Ancient tribal identity and antipathies have surged up in cultures in recent years, in the form of separatist movements everywhere, including in Canada, and most recently in Italy. We also have the tribe of Michael Jackson. The tribe of rastafarian music followers. The tribe of the Beatles. The tribe of Bruce Springsteen. The tribe of neo-Nazis. The hip-hop tribe ... The jeans tribe ...
- Nazism itself, and fascism, were at their beginning revivals of ancient forms.
- In fashion and design, all modes and periods and styles are in vogue.
- Most important in the transformation of Western culture in our time has been the revival of group experience in the form of the mass audience. The reading public was a side-effect of the printing press, but the mass audience results from electric simultaneity and participation.
- The pre-pictorial arts have revolutionized design and painting and sculpture since Matisse and Gauguin. African music and sculpture and imagery are suddenly very post-modern and up-to-date. "Postmodern" itself means post-chronological, post-historical, post-industrial; that is, shaped by electric media, where all times and spaces are simultaneously valid and accessible. The latest topic in the academy now is the "post-intellectual" age and its affinity with more ancient forms.
- We are presently on a binge of retrieving old television shows and old comic book characters as new movies-most recently, for example, another in the *Batman* series, and the film based on the series *Lost in Space* .

To live at the speed of light is to live mythically-in all times and spaces and cultures at once. Living mythically means far more than simply being more interconnected or being

able to send messages to each other more quickly and easily than we could last year. It means living in a form of consciousness in which knowledge does not exist outside the knower, in a written or printed or recorded text, but instead has to be lived and dramatized, communally performed in much the same manner as the myths of our oral, tribal ancestors were performed. The massive movement of retrieval going on around us had its beginning a century ago at the time of the telegraph. But our present cultural flourish isn't the end of the story; it is just the most recent chapter in a tale that is already some thousands of years in the making.

Call to mind **the Grand Renaissance of the 15 th and 16 th centuries** , the last renaissance universally acclaimed as such: a flowering and retrieval such as still holds the world in thrall. Technology: print; revival of learning, of ancient Rhetoric, and the of entire manuscript culture of the ancient world and the middle ages. Explosion of culture into new territory around the world: empire-building by Spain, Portugal, England. Technology of ocean-going ships, sail. Rabelais, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Cervantes ... Like the present one, this renaissance straddles two centuries: it began in the fifteenth and continued in the sixteenth century.

The same universal recognition holds true for **the "medieval renaissance," the renaissance of the 12th century** . The fact that this renaissance is widely deemed to be of lesser significance is a matter of comparison only, so much is it overshadowed by the Grand Renaissance of the 16 th century. Yet this period enjoyed a pronounced revival of learning due to the reappearance of paper supplies.

The renaissance of the twelfth century might conceivably be taken so broadly as to cover all the changes through which Europe passed in the hundred years or more from the late eleventh century to the taking of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204 and the contemporary events which usher in the thirteenth century, just as we speak of the Age of the Renaissance in later Italy ... More profitably we may limit the phrase to the history of culture in this age-the complete development of Romanesque art and the rise of Gothic; the full bloom of vernacular poetry, both lyric and epic; and the new learning and new literature in Latin. The century begins with the flourishing age of the cathedral schools and closes with the earliest universities already well established at Salerno, Bologna, Paris, Montpellier, and Oxford. It starts with only the bare outlines of the seven liberal arts and ends in possession of the Roman and canon law, the new Aristotle, the new Euclid and Ptolemy, and the Greek and Arabic physicians, thus making possible a new philosophy and a new science. It sees a revival of the Latin classics, of Latin prose, and of Latin verse, both in the ancient style of Hildebert and the new rhymes of the Goliardi, and the formation of the liturgical drama...

-Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* , pages 6-8.

Where the renaissance of the 15 th and 16 th centuries was a renaissance of rhetoric and audience-making, that of the 12 th century was a renaissance of manuscript culture and the ancient tradition of literary studies, the *translatio studii* .

But look: *in each case there is a four-century gap between one renaissance and the next* : 12 th , 16 th , 20 th . THAT is the cycle or pattern that I have found. For thousands of years, the West has undergone a renaissance at regular intervals. It is as if, every four centuries, a window opens and a new kind of light streams into and through our culture. We have seen three renaissances that show a pattern. Are there others?

In the eighth century AD : Charlemagne and the **Carolingian renaissance and the Carolingian empire** . The stirrup: mounted shock combat invented by the Franks of the eighth century. (Cf. Lynn Whyte Jr.'s *Medieval Technology and Social Change*) "Antiquity imagined the centaur; the Middle Ages made him the master of Europe." Bede . . . Alcuin . . . St. Boniface . . . In the eighth century, England held the intellectual leadership of Europe, and it owed this leadership to the Church. From this time date the earliest written records of Old English. In the 8 th C., English vernacular literature and the arts received new impetus. Workers in stone and glass were brought from the continent for the improvement of church-building. Islam was on the rise.

Charles the Great-he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in Rome in A. D . 800-believed that his own preoccupation with the arts and sciences was the very duty of a ruler.

It has sometimes been alleged that idealism prompted the artists and scholars of Europe to gather at the court of Charlemagne in order to unite their efforts for the cultivation of classical beauty and wisdom. They were, after all, so the argument runs, true humanists who endeavoured to re-kindle the fire of culture and to keep it alive for coming generations. They had no interest in material gain. Alcuin, the model of this kind of humanism, repeatedly praised poverty and impressed his idealistic motives upon his readers. Notker, also, explained that the first of the "humanists" had not been prompted by desire for material gain when they had first approached the royal court.

The fallout of this renaissance included the partition of Europe and the decline of the tribal structure of that continent, the rise of the royal houses, and the schism between the Eastern and Western churches.

In the fourth century AD : St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Martianus Capella... Constantine 288-337 or so, establishes Christianity as the religious foundation of Western civilization. The West repels assaults by Persia and Eastern empires.

The Edict of Milan, 313, gave for the first time full legal recognition to the Christian community. The Council of Nicea, 325, was the world's first Ecumenical Council. At this time, too, the first example of Caesaropapism: the emperor's becoming head of the Christian commonwealth precipitated a massive retrieval and refurbishing and renewal. May 11, 330, saw the foundation of Constantinople. This city was intended from the outset to be *the* centre of art and learning. Charlemagne built its libraries and stocked them with Greek manuscripts from an antiquity that included the great products of classical Greece. He filled the streets and squares and museums with art treasures drawn from all over the Greek orient.

So far, the "window" has opened with a subtle but persistent rhythm, and we have a pattern of renaissances and intervals that occur in a four-century cycle. Where did the cycle originate? Does it extend further; does it make the jump from Christian Europe back-to Roman or, even further, back into Greek culture?

In the zero century : The emperor Caesar Augustus undertook a massive program of cultural reform. It undertook a careful retrieval of ancient Roman values and culture. Augustus revived and reestablished the office of *vates* , the poet/priest of the temple of Palatine Apollo, devoted to the spiritual side of Roman culture. It had a cultural priesthood devoted to the "sacred" responsibilities of poetry and the arts, and gave high salience to the work of Horace, Varro and Vergil. This time was a period also of moral and social reform.

Christianity.
Horace.
Cicero.
Quintilian.
Juvenal.
Persius ...

Fourth and fifth centuries, BC : The bare litany of names brings to mind that convulsion of Greek society and culture that represents the sudden flowering; Alexander; Classical Athens; the mature Aristophanes; the transition from Old Comedy to New Comedy; Plato and his war on the poetic establishment; Aristotle and the revolution called logic; Diogenes; Euclid and the revolution called geometry; Isocrates and the revolution in rhetoric; Xenophon...

In the eighth and ninth centuries, BC : Homer's period, and Hesiod's, and so this was the age in which the first major retrievals due to alphabetic writing are experienced. The *Theogony* was used as a pattern for retrieving and systematizing the Greek religion and to regularize their ideas of the gods and goddesses. This was also the time of the Hoplite revolution, occasioned by bronze armour and by the innovation of cavalry. Hoplites (meaning phalanx) were heavily armed infantry: helmet with nose- and cheek-guards (first seen at Corinth), a breastplate or cuirass (Chalcis) and greaves-all made of bronze. Add to this a heavy elliptical or round bronze shield (Argos) secured to the left arm; and, as weapons, a short, straight iron sword (Chalcis) and a nine-foot-long thrusting spear. The phalanx: a tight mass of soldiers eight lines deep featuring corporate, cohesive, disciplined action rather than the older individual heroic action (- Michael Grant, p. 13).

This eighth-century revolution affected not just the arts but every walk of life. It accompanied the maturity of the Greek Iron Age . . . Iron had been in use from before the turn of the millennium (the 'early Iron Age') but an enormous development of Iron metallurgy between c. 750 and c. 650 improved and accelerated the speed and efficiency of life in many fields, and under this more stable mode of existence the population of Greece multiplied to a remarkable extent.

This increased number of inhabitants encouraged a wholesale switch from pasturage to arable farming, and food-production notably intensified. (page 7).

See also R. Higg, ed., *The Greek Renaissance of the Eighth Century B. C.-Tradition and Innovation* (Stockholm, 1983).

The twelfth century, BC : This was called the Golden Age; it was the age of the Trojan war. It marked the beginning of the great Classical Period in Greece-yet another revival and flowering. You can fill in the details . . . [According to Michael Grant, Iron-working begins at this time. Such a technology would have been quite enough by itself to give rise to a renaissance. And to sustain a war.)

The sixteenth century, BC -but here we are so far back in pre-history that events are difficult to date with any certainty, or even to assign to a particular century. We do know that this is the time of Linear A and Linear B, each a syllabary for writing Greek before the alphabet), and also the time of Mycenae and a sudden flowering of their arts.

Writing systems of any kind are enormously powerful and have tremendous effects on virgin cultures. While tablets of stone or clay make moving information slow and awkward, their durability supports time-binding. The society that uses them re-forms around the new knowledge monopoly: a temple bureaucracy. By contrast, writing on paper or papyrus or some other lightweight, portable (and less durable) medium shifts the emphasis from time-binding to control of space. Enhanced portability meant that written information could be moved more swiftly, enabling a centralized bureaucracy to administer vast far-flung territories. Consequently, cultural and political control also shifts with these new media away from temple control and into military bureaucracy.

Piecing together events in the **20 th and 21 st centuries, BC** involves a great deal of guesswork and groping: the historical data is particularly cloudy and ill-defined. It is hard to tell whether the cycle is intact at this remove, or whether it has begun to dissolve or smear.

In any case, **the curious thing** that emerges from seeing this four-century cycle is the realization that

We in the West have NO other renaissances.

That isn't to say that nothing else goes on in the intervening centuries, that nothing of consequence happens elsewhere in the cycles: it does, beyond question. But whatever does go on at those times does not qualify as a full-scale renaissance of the sort we've been watching.

Now, I realize that the cycles are clearly not at all exact. As Haskins pointed out, when one is dealing with effusions such as renaissances,

Chronological limits are not easy to set. Centuries are at best but arbitrary conveniences which must not be permitted to clog or distort our historical thinking: history cannot remain history if sawed off into even lengths of hundreds of years.

-C. H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* , pp. 8-9

Renaissances have this one common characteristic : each one results from a earlier action. Some spasm or cultural convulsion pulled the awareness of the culture into a new shape. In other words, what we normally notice about a renaissance, the intensifying of artistic action and innovation, is actually a side-effect of a deeper action.

Every renaissance is the closure action of a culture in absorbing and adjusting to the shock of a new technology. Then a renaissance is the shock-wave produced as that technology penetrates the whole culture and works its particular influence . So the pattern we've found in our renaissances shows us the effects, not the causes. The questions in each case then arise,

- What caused such a massive drift in perception as to reinvigorate these old things? And to do so in this or that particular manner?
- What prodded perception into that manner of noticing?
- Where was the stress applied?

In each case, the precipitating or deciding factor was a new technology.

Then, if there is in fact a cycle or rhythm of renaissances in Western culture, does this mean that there is in our culture a definite rhythm to our technologies? We already know that, with the first tools, human evolution shifted from biology to technology. In all of creation, we are the only species that has thus taken charge of the course of our own evolution. That is, inasmuch as the technologies are actual extensions of a biological organism (us), may not that rhythm be a biological one?

Now, what of the renaissance around us? Its underpinnings include the cascade of electric technologies overt the last century and a half: radio, telegraph, film, television, videotape, computer... The pace is accelerating, with personal computers, cellular telephones, global positioning satellites, space exploration and space telescopes, virtual reality, interactive multimedia, the Internet and World-Wide Web all appearing in a couple of decades. We have undergone an explosion of interest in outer space and other planets, voyages to the moon, probes sent to Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, etc. One immediate result of satellites was our discovery (rebirth) of Earth as a polluted planet that needed cleaning up and up-dating. Nature ended, the planet became an art form inside a manned capsule, and life will never be the same. Nature ended and art took over. Ecology is art.

The renaissance that will usher us into the twenty-first century, the new millennium, is the greatest of all because it includes all prior times and all forms of awareness. And in the West we are recycling and revisiting not only our own culture but also exploring all the others-every form of experience that humans have ever created or indulged. The content, then, of the renaissance about us is the entire Neolithic era. The Neolithic age, which is now over, used the pastoral hunter as its content and in recent times used pastoralism as its esthetic. The environment now is not one of specialized tools but rather of information and software.

The Orient is undergoing the same retrievals, of Western culture as well as their own, in the same measure and degree that we are rediscovering the East. Similarly, this is the new rise of Islam. And we are just launching another phase of this rolling renaissance on the Internet and the World-Wide Web. These new forms demand participation and are by their very nature inclusive and encyclopedic.

The Grand Renaissance of the 16 th century is aptly named not only because it was the grandest and most comprehensive renaissance in human experience, but also because it involved the entire cultural matrix of the Western world. Certainly, the renaissance of the 12 th century seemed to the participants no less grand and less extensive, yet to us it still pales somewhat by comparison with the events of the 16 th century. But we should notice that both of these cultural explosions were just that, outward movements, expansions; our present renaissance, powered by electricity and vastly more extensive and eclectic than any of the others, is implosive because it involves the entire globe at once. Once the entire globe is involved, no further expansion-or expansionism-is possible. This condition raises the prospect that, unlike any previous time, this 20 th - century renaissance will simply continue without surcease, that renaissance will become our permanent address.

All oral and tribal peoples regard present and past and future as a single multidimensional cycle or set of cycles or gyres, a vortex of cultural energies that charges them with being and cosmic significance and destiny. We have echoes of this sense of things today in the reappearance, for example, of the suspicion of reincarnation, and even in the saying, "what goes around comes around." In the electric age, all times are simultaneously present and accessible, not hypothetically but as real, available experience. Cyclicity implies dynamism and compactness, a means to charge and *re*-charge the cultural batteries. The alternative, the familiar rational line of history, presents instead a single prolonged *dis* charge or endless effusion. Today we live in post-history in the sense that all pasts that ever were are now present to our consciousness and that all the futures that will be are here now. To live today is to live mythically in all cultures and times at once: the narrative of history now concludes, as does the history of narrative. If there is a future to history, it resides, as the Italian rhetorician Giambattista Vico tried to indicate, in the hands of poets and artists.

I leave you with the mystery of the renaissance cycles and with four questions.

- Are there in fact other iterations of the cycle? In the 16 th century BC, for example? Or the 20 th , or 24 th centuries BC?
- What precipitating technologies are responsible for each renaissance? Can we now use the cycle to date other major technological revolutions as accurately as carbon-dating allows us to do, for example? Might it be possible to use this cycle as a guide to events in prehistory?
- What is the significance, meaning of events in the intervening centuries? Is there a rhythm to them too?

Do other, non-Western, cultures march to a different rhythm or observe a different pattern of renaissance? Or do they have no rhythm at all? That is, is the four-century cycle to our innovations-and-retrievals-and-renaissances peculiar to the West alone? Or does it actually extend to other cultures such as those in the Orient or in Central or South America or in Africa or in primitive Europe? Perhaps other cultures do have different rhythms. China, for example, and Egypt have followed the lines of force of the dynasty, rather than that of the democracy, and their social rhythms clearly differ from ours. Their language-patterns and -rhythms clearly differ from ours, and I would maintain that innovation and utterance are linked absolutely.