Foreword

If Hegel projected a historical pattern of *figures* minus an existential *ground*, Harold Innis, in the spirit of the new age of information, sought for patterns in the very ground of history and existence. He saw media, old and new, not as mere vertices at which to direct his point of view, but as living vortices of power creating hidden environments that act abrasively and destructively on older forms of culture. What Erwin Schrödinger tells us about the change of outlook from Newtonian to quantum physics concerns the student of Harold Innis:

> *This intrusion has, in a way, overthrown what had been built on the foundations laid in the seventeenth century, mainly by Galileo, Huygens and Newton. The very foundations were shaken. Not that we are not everywhere still under the spell of this great period. We are all the time using its basic conceptions, though in a form their authors would hardly recognize. And at the same time we are aware that we are at the end of our tether.*[1]

Innis recognized that the Newtonian hierarchy of natural events had crumbled. He was not under its spell in the least, because he saw what had to be done as a great leap forward in the understanding of organizing human affairs. Approaching the past dynamically as a dramatic action with a world cast, Innis naturally saw history as a mass of ruins and misconceived enterprises. In his power to reveal the patterns of massive imperial events, Innis is a kind of *deus ex machina*, unmasking the actors. This power to expose the hidden motivations of great corporate actors, such as the city-state or Roman or Babylonian bureaucracies, almost puts Innis in the role of a satirist. One no sooner uses the word than its appropriateness to Harold Innis becomes evident. If he is an artist in his manipulation of major historical actions, he is a satirist in his power to reveal the perversity and obtusity of the actors. He

1 *Nature and the Greeks* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 15.

would have endorsed Siegfried Giedion's remark that 'for the historian there are no banal things ... the decisive step must be taken by the reader':

> History is not a compilation of facts, but an insight into a moving process of life. *Moreover, such insight is obtained not by the exclusive use of the panoramic survey, the bird's-eye view, but by isolating and examining certain specific events intensively, penetrating them in the manner of the close-up. This procedure makes it possible to evaluate a culture from within as well as from without.*[2]

Not only does Innis put himself at the very heart of hidden historical actions, discerning cultures from within their processes instead of describing and narrating from outside, but he is always paradoxical because he provides more than one facet of a situation at a time. Rosalie Colie in her *Paradoxia Epidemica* explains that paradox, from ancient to modern times, has always been the form of presentation that requires the highest and most extensive erudition. Innis is a prime example of this kind of paradox. It was precisely the range of his erudition which compelled him to recognize simultaneous, complementary, and even contradictory aspects of the epoch and culture process. Thus, Innis points out that Greek oral tradition was destroyed from within by the stress on literacy and visuality which have always been regarded as the especial glory of Greece. He never ceases to point to the action of visual or literate culture in commanding space, while stressing the fact that command over territorial space usually goes with neglect of time, tradition, and stability.

The reason for the 'difficulties' which many people encounter in reading Innis arises from his participative concern with processes rather than a point of view. As he became better acquainted with the historical processes released by technical innovation, he was less and less inclined to moralize. He came to see historical Fate as the motivated refusal to recognize the patterns growing from patterns of culture already within the various cultures. He tackled these matters as practical problems to be solved by direct observation and analysis, developing his perceptual tools by means of historical comparison and contrast. The resulting awareness leaves as little room for moralizing as it does for a point of view. A point of view, as such, depends upon a fixed position, and Innis's interests involved him so much in the developmental processes that he could not afford the static position of a mere spectator contemplating the historical scene. He is, for the same reasons, not inclined to pass personal judgments on historical figures. Having become accustomed to contemplating the basic ignorance and misunderstanding of their own times by the greatest actors of world history, Innis felt excused from any personal evaluation of human character. Having studied the complacency with which culture after culture destroyed itself in sheer inadvertence and triviality, he was little inclined to make moral judgments about isolated individuals.

2 *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

The kind of understanding of social processes which Innis achieved is not shared by other historians. Innis is unique in having been the first to apply the possibilities of pattern recognition to a wired planet burdened by information overload. Instead of despairing over the proliferation of innumerable specialisms in twentieth-century studies, he simply encompassed them. Whether by reading or by dialogue with his colleagues, he mastered all the structural innovations of thought and action as well as the knowledge of his time. A historian like Innis was not inevitable in this age of electric information, but his insights became possible only in our electric time when it is the speed of access to retrieved knowledge itself that provides new possibilities of structural understanding in depth.

The kind of psychogenetic process that Innis describes as 'the bias of communication' is the principal theme of *And There Was Light* by Jacques Lusseyran. Physically blinded in youth, he describes his dismay upon encountering the uninvolved detachment of the merely visual kind of specialist:

> *When I came upon the myth of objectivity in certain modern thinkers, it made me angry. So there was only one world for these people, the same for everyone. And all the other worlds were to be counted as illusions left over from the past. Or why not call them by their name – hallucinations? I had learned to my cost how wrong they were.*
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> *From my own experience I knew very well that it was enough to take from a man a memory here, an association there, to deprive him of hearing or sight, for the world to undergo immediate transformation, and for another world, entirely different but entirely coherent, to be born. Another world? Not really. The same world rather, but seen from another angle, and counted in entirely new measures. When this happened, all the hierarchies they called objective were turned upside down, scattered to the four winds, not even theories but like whims.*[3]

Innis learned from historical analysis that what Lusseyran describes as the private re-ordering of all the components of experience, as a result of a single sensory shift, occurs on a massive social scale with the introduction of technological innovation and the resulting new service environments thus created. Though Innis hit upon this Lusseyran perception of perceptual metamorphosis quite early, he had as little success in communicating his insights as Lusseyran. What Innis indicates as a basis for social survival is nothing less than a reorganization of our perceptual lives and a recognition that the environments we witlessly or involuntarily create by our innovations are both services and disservices that make very heavy demands of our awareness and understanding.

Toward the end of *Empire and Communications* Innis speeds up his sequence of figure-ground flashes almost to that of a cinematic montage. This acceleration corresponds to the sense of urgency that he felt as one involved in under-

3 (Boston, 1963), p. 112.

standing the present. It is certainly crucial for the reader of Innis to recognize his method for presenting the historical process as inseparable from contemporary reality.

The entire volume relates to the ineluctable modalities of the audible and the visible, of time and of space. In the middle of the book he explains (pp. 80-81):

> *Writing was beginning to destroy the bond of Greek life. In 470 B.C. Athens had no reading public, but by 430 B.C. Herodotus found it convenient to turn his recitations into book form.*

On page 81 he continues:

> *The power of the oral tradition was reflected in political as in artistic developments ... The city-state and religion became a unity.*

Innis reiterates (p. 83):

> *The spread of writing contributed to the collapse of Greek civilization by widening the gap between the city-states. In Sparta the oral tradition and its emphasis on music persisted. Only a few laws had been solemnly introduced and fixed in writing and the legislation of Lycurgus persisted in the oral tradition.*

On page 84 he concludes:

> *Ancient empires had been absorbed in the problem of international affairs, Greece in individual development. Civilization was concerned with the absorption of two strands.*

Here Innis is displaying the processes by which empires rise and fall, pointing to their natural temptation to spread out in space by means of writing and paper and bureaucracy. The oral tradition, on the other hand, favours the stress on time and individuality, when it is 'fenced' by writing. Civilization is a precarious balance between written and oral structures of social organization (p. 84):

> *The powerful oral tradition of the Greeks and the flexibility of the alphabet enabled them to resist the tendencies of empire in the East towards absolute monarchism and theocracy. They drove a wedge between the political empire concept with its emphasis on space and the ecclesiastical empire concept with its emphasis on time and reduced them to the rational proportions of the city-state ... But the destruction of concepts of absolutism assumed a new approach of rationalism which was to change the concept of history in the West.*

It is important to recognize that Innis is not here presenting a perspective or a point of view but a diagnostic analysis of a complex process. He saw that

the figure-ground relation between written and oral is everywhere in a state of perpetual change. Material conditions can quickly reverse the relationships between written and oral so that, where literacy may be the ground of a culture in one phase, a sudden loss or access of written materials, for example, may cause the literate *ground* suddenly to dwindle to mere *figure*. That is why Innis carefully watches the changing material conditions of cultures since a reversal of figure-ground relations will put an individualist culture overnight into an extreme bureaucratic or hieratic posture. Innis demanded that governments might heed the dynamics of their world at least as closely as investors study the Dow-Jones index. Innis saw the Greeks as having finally pushed their written tradition into ascendency over the oral and changing their aristocracy into a sprawling Oriental bureaucracy.

It would be too much to say that Innis had anywhere fully explored the dramatic interplay of the written and the oral, the visual and the auditory forms of human organization. (His colleague, Eric Havelock, did much in *Preface to Plato*, Harvard University Press, 1963.) Innis felt that, by repeated and careful documentation of this existential drama in various periods of the past and the present, he had created the means of developing the awareness necessary for coping with the problems that originate in this unceasing interplay. Thus, when he says: 'The power of the written tradition made the Alexandrine age one of "erudition and criticism," of specialists rather than poets and scholars,' Innis felt that there was a timeless and structural truth revealed that was as relevant to understanding the present as much as the past. He looked at such discoveries as basic navigational aids for those engaged in practical affairs today. When history is crammed with evidence of the *effects* of such formal structures, Innis assumes that history as much as science provides the means of effectively directing our energies. When history, or the experience of others, is as eloquent and available as this, he would have concurred with Erasmus that merely private 'experience is the schoolmaster of fools.' When Innis says: 'The impact of printing was evident not only in the philosophy of the seventeenth century but also in the rise of parliament,' he is presenting the process of *figure-ground* interplay. He wants to stress the *effect* of printing as a form that resonates and imparts itself to seemingly unrelated fields. Innis, in fact, is himself presenting a total field-theory of 'cause' and effect. He insists that one and the same cause may have a wide diversity of predictable and characteristic effects.

Since the Renaissance, science has tended increasingly to quantify cause and effect and to assign as much as possible one effect to one cause. Innis naturally saw this as itself an example of the ascendancy of print and visuality over oral forms of awareness and communication. It would be easy to go much further than this and to say that Innis discovered a massive defect in Western culture since the Greeks. He found what many philosophers and cultural historians of our time have begun to observe, namely that Greek *physis* or

'nature' was more a system of classification than of the recognition of dynamic patterns in experience. Innis himself was striving to create a kind of *epistemology* of *experience.* He was looking for those 'entelechies' or patterns of intelligible energy and change which are manifested in the action of specific human artefacts and extensions of human faculties. The mere classification of the innumerable patterns of energy arising from specific human organizations such as speech and writing and weaponry, as well as all the means of accelerating work and travel, avoids the effort of understanding the actual *processes* involved. The conventional historian writing of 'the impact of printing' has merely told us the amount of printing and the numbers of new books and readers. Such merely quantitative reporting is matching rather than making, and simply ignores what really happened. Innis carefully avoids matching one cause against another effect and insists on *making sense* of the processes released by the new structures. In the same paragraph about the impact of printing, Innis observes (p. 152):

> *Law escaped the influence of the concept of nature which had been significant in the rise of science. There was 'nothing more repellant to Anglo-Saxon instinct than the corruption of law by political ideology.'*

If the reader has acquired the Innis perception of the written and the oral, he will share the Innis joy in discovering why the Anglo-Saxon would naturally despise Roman and written law. The Anglo-Saxon oral tradition of the common law put it perpetually at odds with the visual and written patterns of Roman legal procedure. When the oral tradition yields as ground to the merely written form, 'A theory of might was substituted for a theory of law.' Mere brute power, as opposed to aristocratic *tenue* of the spirit, is inherent in the Innis perception of the conflict of written and the oral (p. 152):

> *The supremacy of parliament was strengthened by the new financial devices which spread from Antwerp and Amsterdam to London and which accompanied improvements in communication incidental to the growth of newspapers.*

It may seem strange to some readers that Innis should consider 'improvements in communication' as a human disservice or even disaster. He was not inclined to regard quantitative change as simply classifiable as a 'good thing.' I am not sure that he anywhere discusses the widely held assumption that all innovative change is the result of some universal and benign Providence. It is a theme that would have brought out his wit and humour, and his entire writing stands as a testimony against this popular assumption.

Firm control of his structural perception of processes enables Innis to range freely across times and cultures (pp. 156-7):

Developments in Great Britain had profound implications for the colonies. Restriction of the press was paralleled, but the expansion of literary activity in Great Britain, which had served as an outlet to political repression, overwhelmed the colonies and compelled concentration on newspapers.

That is, a change that favoured the book in one area simultaneously favoured the newspaper in another. It is this kind of flexibility of perception that enables Innis to read the language of change and innovation with sure insight into the processes at work (p. 158):

Inability to adapt English institutions to new circumstances lost the colonies in the Western hemisphere and imperilled the empire in the East.

Understanding of the structural principles of human organization implied in this kind of insight has relevance to decision-making in every area of the establishment of any society. It enabled Innis to bridge across from the old mechanical technologies of the nineteenth century to the new electronic developments of the twentieth century (p. 161):

The demand for news to increase circulation hastened the development of the telegraph and the organization of news services ... The disturbances were reflected in political change.

With this kind of awareness Innis entered into the twentieth century with prophetic eyes; but he was surrounded by people for whom his trained perceptions and insights were merely opaque or transcendental. Few made the attempt to understand him on his own terms (p. 162):

The highly sensitive economy built up in relation to news-print and its monopoly position in relation to advertising hastened an emphasis on a new medium, notably the radio, which in turn contributed to a large-scale depression.

This remark illustrates another feature of the figure-ground or symbolist approach used by Innis in his later prose. I mean compression. Symbolism is the technique of concentrating on effects rather than 'causes.' With shading, and with many words, it is possible to provide a continuous perspective leading up to any effect whatever. To do so, however, is merely to put the effect into a perspective which readily becomes a classification. In this way, effects are reduced to something much less than the processes they actually illustrate. Radio, as an effect of an intensified world of advertising and abundance, can be seen as a medium contributing to the effect of speed-up of transactions in the entire industrial complex. Radio, as an enormous increase of information speed and volume, was thus a major feature of inflation and depression. The effect of information inflation on architecture and art and literature can then be seen as interfused with the same resonating and inclusive structure (p. 163):

Literature and other fields of scholarship have become feudalized in a modern manorial system.

The paradox by which depression comes from inflation and speed-up, and the paradox by which extreme monopolies of knowledge through specialism flip into old-fashioned feudalism in the organization of the community of learning – all these contradictions and conflicts are not only seen by Innis, but can also be deciphered by the reader if he troubles to acquire the multilingual grammar and syntax of the technologies that invest us. Innis is not talking a private or a specialist language but handing us the keys to understanding technologies in their psychic and social operation in any time or place (p. 165):

The loud speaker had decisive significance for the election of the Nazis. Regions dominated by the German language responded to the appeal of the spoken word inviting them to join a larger German Reich. The Second World War became to an important extent the result of a clash between the newspaper and the radio.

Innis is using the figure-ground of eye and ear, writing and oral here as everywhere. Either one of these forms, pushed to its limits, results in the opposite characteristics. Literacy pushed all the way becomes the agent of bureaucratic specialty, and the oral tradition pushed all the way by radio and electric media has just as destructive a result (p. 165):

The sudden extension of communication precipitated an outbreak of savagery paralleling that of printing and the religious wars of the seventeenth century and again devastating the regions of Germany.

Innis has provided his readers with the means of achieving political wisdom and prudence. He provides a new set of perceptions for anticipating effects with causes in the almost magical way envisaged in *Troilus and Cressida* (III, 3) by Shakespeare.

The providence that's in a watchful state
Knows almost every grain of Plutus' gold,
Finds bottom in the uncomprehensive depth,
Keeps place with thought, and almost, like the gods,
Does thoughts unveil in their dumb cradles.

Marshall McLuhan
May 14, 1971