Discarnate Śivas: Marshall McLuhan, Pratyabhijñā Philosophy and the Evolution of Religion
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“All forms of mystic meditation have become very popular in our television age. We have gone very far to the east since television.”

Marshall McLuhan

“Their vision, their perception, heretofore limited becomes unlimited. The mode of their actions becomes absolutely unique.”

Lakshmanjee

“When the wonders of radio burst on an astounded world, age old concepts of time and space were annihilated… (even) the dullest intelligence enlarged before indisputable proof of one aspect of man’s omnipresence.”

Yogananda

With the proliferation of digital networked media technology as a pervasive aspect of daily life in the 21st century, our perceptions of the world and ourselves are altered, both in ordinary, everyday ways, and in the most extreme states of experience- the religious, mystical or paranormal. The character of the information environment renders the human a nonlocal being, with a (tele) presence of consciousness that stretches around the planet, connecting it to a potential plurality of others, as well as to an accumulated human history aggregated via technology. This experience transforms the nature of the self. A religious revelation, it represents an evolution of the cultural understanding of the self into a fundamental religious concern. In this environment the individual person comes to an awareness that it possesses its own personalistic semiotic sign

regime and system of correlative interrelations which connect it experientially to (an image of) the whole. In Marshall McLuhan’s idea of the “discarnate man,” whose “organs without bodies”4 are extended across the global digital nervous system in dialogic interaction, such a new disposition is evident. More recent thinkers like Bruce Powe, William Irwin Thompson, and Andrew Chrystall have written on the significance of new media to the evolution of religious experience, using McLuhan’s work as a prophetic lens, heralding, in Thompson’s words, a movement toward “the beginning of a unique/universal self-similar architecture of consciousness that is based upon individual experience and not upon priestcraft, rigid dogma and collective forceful indoctrination.”5 As we struggle to adapt to our extended nervous systems and the discarnate, nonlocal interactions produced by this arrangement, the nature of self-awareness is transformed from that of a private individual enclosed in a three-dimensional physical body to that of distributed lattices of consciousness, and yet the obsolescence of a particular notion of private individuality does not necessarily equate to the doing away with all notions of individual selfhood. As the digital architecture comes to mirror the consciousness of which it is an extension, and personality takes form in the relationships cultivated and reflected upon, both within and alongside the digital surround, an expanded notion of selfhood comes into focus, one not separate from the world and technology but constantly in relationship with the whole as well as with what is beyond it. In the 10th century Indian philosophical school known as Pratyabhijñā (self-recognition) we may find an analogous description of such an awareness, now retrieved in digital technology.

Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) rose to prominence in the 1960’s, at the time when television and mass media broadcasting were reshaping the human community, continuing the process of electrification begun with Marconi’s wireless telegraphy in 1894. McLuhan’s work focused on the way human culture and society had been profoundly structured by the dominant media forms it had employed throughout its history — progressing from the earliest and longest lasting stage of oral culture (a world of acoustic resonance and close knit tribal groups where information was preserved through elaborate recitation and memorization) to the literate culture forms fostered by writing, and in particular the phonetic alphabet, characterized by visual bias, private detachment and identity, and abstract uniform conceptions of time and space. For McLuhan, all media or technologies are extensions of some human sense or faculty, and have as a consequence of this amplification, the numbing and isolation of the enhanced sense from the other sensory modalities.6 This exaggeration or enhancement of certain senses at the expense of others has

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5 William Irwin Thompson, Beyond Religion: The Cultural Evolution of the Sense of the Sacred from Shamanism to Religion to Postreligious Spirituality (Lindisfarne, 2013), 85.
particularly destabilizing effects on the “sensus communis” – a concept with Aristotelian origins (*De Anima* III.2) which comes to McLuhan through Aquinas, and refers for him primarily to the properly harmonized human sensorium in which the soul is able to most accurately perceive and understand reality. The sensus communis acts to interrelate sensory-perceptual data into coherence, affording the soul an internally unified vision. At times McLuhan identifies the sensus communis with synesthesia, with Aristotle’s nous poetikos or active intellect, and with consciousness itself. Senses are extensions or powers of the soul, and media in McLuhan’s formulation, are extensions of the senses. When externalized in media, these senses become isolated from their natural interplay in the psyche and destabilize the harmony of perception. Thus, this interplay of media becomes for McLuhan a spiritual concern. The effects of electricity on global human culture are even more drastic than the rise of literacy, playing out at a much faster rate, and involving not only specialists but the whole population. The characteristics of electricity are global involvement, instant interconnection, and universal aggregative retrieval of previous and disparate culture forms and media technologies, all of which serve to create an environment of profound involvement amongst a dizzying plethora of data. “In the electric age, history no longer presents itself as a perspective of continuous visual space, but as an all-at-once and simultaneous presence of all facets of the past.” “Electronic man,” McLuhan writes, “has to train his perceptions in relation to a total environment that includes all previous cultures.” The extensivity of digital technology not only collapses history in this way, but also space – rendering all users simultaneously present to one another, a state McLuhan referred to as the “discarnate condition.”

The effect of this shift in the nature of the human encounter with its environment is to facilitate a personalization of experience, with the terms and concepts that orient one in the world being those they are subjectively invested in rather than being the product of external authorities. This is especially true in the sphere of religion, in which the semiotic and symbolic terms of self-orientation to the existential become largely a private concern. The primary effect of the new media environment according to McLuhan, “was to usher in a great new religious age and new chapter in Church history,” one “as trackless and opaque as in the “wild west” of 1870.” In addition to Thompson, religion scholar

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13 Chrystall, “The later-McLuhan’s dialogue with the church,” in *Explorations in Media Ecology,*
Christopher Partridge has also put forth a view of the evolution of religion which stresses the individual religious experience unmediated by formal institutions, authorities, or dogma, and focuses on synthesizing the views and symbols that have been excluded or marginalized by the dominant religious currents of the modern west, what Partridge calls “occulture”- “those often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices.”

This is not limited to ostensibly religious content, but extends into the realms of popular culture as well, within which “popular cultural forms including literature, film, and music are becoming increasingly more visible vehicles of religious images, symbols and categories.”

Further, this dialectical process of the “re-enchantment of the secular and the secularization of the sacred” is indicative of a subjective turn at the general cultural level. Partridge writes, “the acceleration of the democratization of subjectivization since the 1960s has meant a shift away from (a religious/spiritual) life lived in terms of external or objective roles, duties and obligations and towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences. There has been a sacralization of subjectivities, an increasing focus on states of consciousness, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, visions, and feelings- a turn within.”

Thus, the “everyday, within certain contexts, is transfigured... the commonplace becomes impregnated with the sublime, and the sacred.” This “turn within” is not simple narcissism but a kind of revelation, as individual consciousness itself acquires a kind of universal extension similar to that facilitated by digital media, as Eric McLuhan notes, “The exciting discovery is that we are immensely larger on the inside than we are on the outside. The inner space of fantasy is a mythic world of simultaneous relations & magical transformations. It embraces all times & experiences, not private single consciousness.”

These shifts in religious sensibilities parallel the perceptual shift effected by digital networked media as a pervasive human environment. We are not simply detached observers of the digital surround, as was more or less the case with print, but rather emphatic participants, discerning the patterns and shaping the space with our unique movements of perception. “Truth is not matching,” McLuhan wrote, “it is something we make in the encounter with the world that is making us.”

The information environment is a kind of totally filled plenum and shifting

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16 Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 44.
nexus of forms, with content turning over rapidly, a situation in which pattern recognition replaces logical rational connectedness. Users are thus enabled “to see archetypal patterns more readily.” 21 Such patterns are those engrained in human memory and culture through repetition, a cyclical process of constant interchange with new circumstances which he describes in his work From Cliché to Archetype. Indeed, McLuhan’s ‘discarnate condition’ could itself be viewed as a kind of archetypal retrieval of a state of awareness described by mystics, poets, and philosophers. The discarnate individual experiences a form of ESP or telepathy simply by virtue of being in the electronic environment, which serves as a space of simultaneous presence and interpersonal resonance. McLuhan explicitly compares this ethereal world created by the “invisible and total environment of information” to the Catholic idea of the Mystical Body, 22 and to Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of the noosphere, an invisible collective realm of psychically interconnected minds. 23 These concepts “become technologically a fact under electronic conditions.” 24 In this electronic space, we are translated into information and image, in effect disembodied in a way similar to the angles of Christian theology, but also stretched out over history and space in a kind of omnipresence usually reserved not for angels but divinity itself. This prompts McLuhan to call the discarnate state “super-angelic.” 25 In this state, “sight and mind quantum jumps to a global superposition, via the singularity of internet hubs.” 26

The key to understanding the mode of perception in the discarnate state is the sensus communis, both personal and collective, but especially the former. The personal sensus communis is a kind of configuration of the soul which it uses to perceive and interact with reality. It is not a sense in itself but an interplay of senses. As McLuhan writes, “In ordinary perception men perform the miracle of recreating within themselves – in their interior faculties – the exterior world. This miracle is the work of the nous poietikos or the agent of the intellect. The exterior world in every instant of perception is interiorized and recreated in a new matter. Ourselves. And in this… we experience immediately that dance of Being within our faculties which provides the incessant intuition of Being.” 27 The nous poietikos or sensus communis has the ability to bridge the distance between itself and its objects in a unifying apprehension that is closer to touch than sight. With digital media the visual sense acquires something of this tactile

23 McLuhan, Gutenberg Galaxy, 32.
character, “becoming haptic by reducing distance & ‘touching’ the perceived object.” Touch then is reimagined to be an internal sense, or rather the internal interrelating together of senses, “not just skin contact with things, but the very life of things in the mind.” The visual sense thus acts as a kind of vehicle for the soul to project itself outward and interact in the world in a disembodied fashion, now technologically enhanced by the internet. Merleau-Ponty writes, “We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely that through it we touch the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere at once.”

The discarnate state is in a sense both individual and collective – individual because one’s identity determines the parameters of contact and collective because it exists as a communal environment. Each individual is a center of the collective discarnate condition, what B.W. Powe, a former student of McLuhan’s, calls the “Magnetic City.” “The Magnetic City is a reality,” Powe writes, “not just a slogan. The noosphere is not a theoretical, ideological construct: it is what the world has become.” McLuhan predicted such a “circuited city of the future,” one which would “not be the huge chunk of concentrated real estate created by the railway” but “an information megalopolis.” The condition of the individuals populating this city, as ubiquitous omnipresent centers, approximates Nicolas of Cusa’s similar formulation regarding the nature of God as a circle “whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” Thus, according to Eric McLuhan, with electric media it is the sender who is sent, not the information, enabling one to be present anywhere the media extend, “both actually and potentially,” and relegating these media “to the domain of metaphysics, not that of physics,” a “world of simultaneity” where “the emphasis shifts automatically from becoming to sheer being.” The physical body then no longer constitutes a limitation to this kind of universal interpenetrating environment of forms, and consciousness finds an extended realm of disembodied real estate to act within, a public or “external sensus

29 McLuhan, in Rosen, “Digital Skin,” 600.
31 Sostituisci con B.W. Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy: Marshall McLuhan and Northrup Frye (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 266.
32 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Massage (Berkeley: Ginko 2001), 72.
33 This idea, which McLuhan also equates to his notion of ‘acoustic space,’ is said to be traced back to the 12th century text, The Book of the 24 Philosophers (in Latin Liber XXIV philosophorum), see Emma Findlay-White and Robert K. Logan, “Acoustic Space, Marshall McLuhan and Links to Medieval Philosophers and Beyond: Center Everywhere and Margin Nowhere” Philosophes 2016, 1: 163.
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which in turn produces changes in the identity of the individual and its sensus communis. “With each of our senses becoming externalized electronically, we encounter the sensus communis in a collective form for the first time.” The discarnate population forms bonds and electronic crowds or “noetic polities” based on their media experiences, interpenetrating with one another in the electronic ether – “those who participate in the same thing at the same time participate in each other.”

Eric McLuhan expresses fears over the place and importance of the body in the new media environment, as its “organs” are etherealized and set loose in the digital noosphere, however the actual bodies from which such organs are extended still act to anchor consciousness in physicality– the transhumanists have yet to upload consciousness to the cloud. But the freedom of movement and interaction allowed by its translation into electronic form – its etherealization – speaks to the similar processes at work with other areas of human experience. Not only discarnate individuals populate the online realm, but also previous media environments and technologies which have been similarly etherealized; from books and print media to telephones, photography, movies, television, banking, typewriters/word processing, and all manners of content in all varieties of human endeavor; arts, sciences, literature, etc. “Cyberspace formation resembles that of black holes into whose singularities all information is hurled to the event horizon, in this case, various gadgets such as computers, cell phones, TV sets and web cams that convert the real world into digital information.” This situation in which the world itself begins to acquire the character of disembodied etherealization and electronic universal interpenetration begins to approximate a kind of idealist metaphysics, in which the world is the projection of a self-luminous consciousness inhabiting and generating the whole show of forms.

In the metaphysics of the Pratyabhijñā philosophical school of Hinduism, we find a similar conception of the relationship between the world and such a divine self-luminous consciousness. This school of thought came into being in India in the 9th and 10th centuries and was centered on the work of a handful of thinkers; Somananda, the founder of the school, his pupil Utpaladeva, and

40 McLuhan, *The Sensus Communis*, L76.
Abhinavagupta, a student of another disciple of Utpaladeva, Laksmanagupta. The system developed by these thinkers is essentially panentheistic and trinitarian, isomorphically equivalent to the Christian trinity though with its own history and context. The transcendent divine outside of time, Śiva, is complemented by a universal phenomenal form of itself, pictured as the goddess consort, Śakti, and finally by the individual human being (nara), who is essentially identical to Śiva, though acting through its own personal consciousness as a reflection (and reflecting power) of the more universal transcendent divinity. The Śaiva philosophers built upon earlier Hindu religious philosophy, such as the revelation of the self as Ātman, identical to the divine absolute principle, Brahman, first elaborated in the Upaniṣads in the 5th century BCE. Biernacki relates this to the pratyabhijñā system, writing that, “the ‘I’ is the self, the Ātman, as such, it has a unique capacity to move back and forth between the first grammatical person as subject (Śiva) and the third grammatical person as object (world/body). As the self, the ‘I’ can shift back and forth between the mode of object, and the mode of doer. Our own consciousness, which is none other than God’s consciousness at base, can be both immanent in the world as object and the real subject, the transcendent I.” This condition is the given state of each person individually, whether they realize it or not. As Abhinavagupta writes in the Iśvarapratyabhijñavivrtivimarsini, “even the essence that is the limited subject, an ordinary person, also is at base just the very essence of Śiva. By analogy and by being co-essential, ultimately the ordinary subject and the highest Lord rest in one essence.”

As our contemporary world continues to become digitally etherealized, it reflects the same qualities of interpenetration and disembodied formlessness characteristic of the Śaiva idealist metaphysics. For instance, in his Śivadrṣṭi, Somananda writes, “Absolutely everything is possessed of will and pervades everything else. And everything is thus devoid of material form (amūrta) everything consists of cognition and action.” Nemec comments that “for Somananda, consciousness is amūrta, disembodied. Śiva, and with him the universe to which he is identical, functions in a disembodied fashion, like a yogin in concentration, he knows what he wishes to know intuitively and immediately.” The individual,

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43 Though John Nemec (Ubiquitous Śiva: Somananda’s Śivadrṣṭi and His Tantric Interlocutors. New York: Oxford University Press, (2011), 9) has argued for Somananda’s pantheism, emphasizing the absolute identity of Siva and Sakti, whether and how this could be reconciled with Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta’s more panentheistic conceptions would require further elaboration.


46 Abhinavagupta, IPVV verse 258, in Biernacki, “Panentheism,” 172.

47 Somananda, Śivadrṣṭi 5.4cd-5ab in Nemec, Ubiquitous, 43.

Similar to Śiva, has immediate access to the desired knowledge through the storehouse of instantly accessible information aggregated on the internet, even if their intuition and navigational acumen are at times lacking. Additionally, the relationship of Śiva to the phenomenal world is paralleled in that of the wired individual, who co-creatively produces the world encountered in objective form through the power of subjective consciousness. For the Śaiva philosophers, “the universe only exists within Śiva, understood as a single, all-encompassing, and all-powerful consciousness manifesting itself in an infinite variety of forms; and they express this absolute idealism by saying that the perceived universe is nothing but reflections (pratibimba) on the mirror of consciousness.”

The reflections – the phenomenal forms of the world – are real “inasmuch as they belong to the mirror from which they seem to be distinct (that is, Śiva); they can be “manifest only because they are fundamentally one with the mirror” just as “perceived objects only exist insofar as consciousness takes on their form.” In the same way Śiva is the ultimate mirror par excellence, of which we are all reflections, we are also identical to Śiva and have his power of reflection in relation to the content encountered and experienced in the course of our own individual life. “This infinite plasticity of consciousness, or this capacity to manifest itself in innumerable forms while remaining itself (even though it shows itself in the form of objects, i.e., as what it is not) is what the Śaivas call “freedom”…consciousness is capable of changing without perishing.”

McLuhan cites an analogous passage from Aristotle’s On the Soul in From Cliché to Archetype: “The soul is analogous to the hand; for as the hand is the tool of tools, so the mind is the form of forms and sense, the form of sensible things. (By way of resonance and repetition) The soul is in a way all existing things.” The soul, as the locus of the personal sensus communis and of the technologically externalized senses – the forms of media – has the power to touch at a distance, to see haptically, as it were and even (in yogic systems) to identify with its object of perception.

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53 McLuhan, From Cliché to Archetype (New York: The Viking Press. 1970), 150, parenthesis McLuhan’s.

human society act as “a mirror or speculum of the Logos,” in the same manner that “the mind of man” does so internally, and the two achieve a paradoxical sort of union in the discarnate condition. Where McLuhan, following Aristotle and Heraclitus, uses the language of soul and Logos, the Pratyabhijñā frames the relationship in terms of the absolute identity of the divine self (Śiva) and the self of the individual, however both systems specify a unity of the soul or personal consciousness and the world, and these with the divine: for the Pratyabhijñā, “the universe is essentially identical with consciousness just like reflections are identical with a mirror,” while for McLuhan, “The Logos is at once the life and order which are in all things, and in the mind of man.”

Thus the reflective plasticity of individual identity includes an extrapersonal component as the invisible mirror behind and reflecting all forms, and doing so through the free agency of the individual self, which also functions as a kind of substratum integrating and preserving in memory the history and trajectory of this reflective process. Torella cites Utpaladeva’s notion of prasiddhi as representing such an extra-personal dimension of individuality: “Prasiddhi is the paradox of something both coming from outside and abiding in the depths of men’s interiority. It is a content of our individuality for which we are not responsible, since it is already present in the new-born creature. It is not a fixed content, but a varying one, due to its interaction with the other factors of individuality. In a sense, then, prasiddhi is not even a content, being instead more akin in its essence to a “container” (which) enacts specific practical behaviors, (and expressing a) spontaneity ultimately rooted in universal consciousness, Śiva.” Prasiddhi exists alongside and within an individual’s life, the course of which is internalized and preserved in memory, which acts as an interface with the universal and transcendent dimensions of one’s nature. Prasiddhi might also be said to reflect what, in another highly influential Indian philosophical darsana- Samkhya – is called the ‘puruṣārthic principle’ – that the world (in this case the Sakti or universal poise of Siva, prakṛti in Samkhya) itself acts “for the sake of” purusha, or individual (transcendent) consciousness, and specifically for the purposes of its self-recognition (Pratyabhijñā, or kaivalya in Samkhya). In either case, there is an extra-personal macrocosmic orientational pattern laid out by the environment, orchestrated “for the purpose of perception” and moving individual consciousness toward the enlightening realization. This is precisely

56 Lawrence, “Remarks on Abhinavagupta’s Use of the Analogy of Reflection,” 586.
the kind of pattern-recognition McLuhan has in mind as characteristic of electric media, a turn inward that reverses into union with the outward. “The Self is both the source and the locus of reflections. All reflections are of the Self in the Self. What makes the Self/Śiva different from other reflecting media is its recognition apprehension of itself,” which “is the cause of the externalization of what is internal.”

This externalization of the internal is the key to the significance of digital media and networks of screens (proxies for the mirror of consciousness), for it reveals the pattern uniting internal and external dimensions of perceptual reality, a universally pervasive code that becomes indistinguishable from first person experience, collapsing the external world into interior code and vice versa. Powe offers an account of such a code’s presence in the contemporary media environment.

Powe, who studied with McLuhan at the university of Toronto, was in the same period a student of another famous professor at the university, the United Church minister and literary critic Northrop Frye. Powe’s study of McLuhan and Frye as members of a Canadian tradition of visionary humanism emphasizes the way each thinker’s work illuminated that of the other. For instance, McLuhan’s sounding the alarm about the effects of electronic and popular culture in drastically reshaping the immediate environment and sensus communis of the global population calls forth Frye’s insight into what he called “the Great Code” – the identity quest at the heart of all literature. “(The Great Code) becomes essential,” writes Powe, “when we find ourselves in the Magnetic City being shell-shocked or shellacked by the deluge of raw images and the glosses of text messaging.” In Frye’s view, all books form a single book, into which a fundamental pattern is inscribed which is unique to the individual and which connects their story with the story of the cosmos in toto. This is a retrieval of the medieval idea of the Book of Nature, made into a literary metaphor, but originally referring to the study of the world as a means of divine revelation. Powe extends the metaphor to include the electronic technologies now populating our environment, which he calls “super-Nature.” Rather than being an esoteric, minority experience, this condition is shared by a major segment of the population: “What was once the province of students of spirituality, of visionaries and seers, of prophets and mystics, of poets and mythmakers, is now in the reach of everyone with access to electric super-Nature, so McLuhan insisted.” Likewise, in the Śaiva system, “this blissful “recognition” (Pratyabhijñā) of oneself as “the Lord” (īśvara), that is, Śiva can be achieved by simply drawing attention to our various cognitive events.”

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60 Lawrence, “Remarks on Abhinavagupta’s Use of the Analogy of Reflection,” 592.
61 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 246.
62 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 33.
events reveal the unitary nature of consciousness and its creative microcosmic reflectivity, which “although usually we do not pay attention to it, we are always somehow experiencing.” Rather than being dependent on particular doctrines or scriptural sources, it is a fundamental feature of conscious reality available for discovery by anyone regardless of their circumstances: “We are endowed with this extraordinary power and actually exert it in the most ordinary situations: (even) if we do not fully comprehend it (as long as we are not liberated), it belongs to us and we keep experiencing it in our most trivial activities.” According to McLuhan, “we live in the first age when change occurs sufficiently rapidly to make such pattern recognition possible for society at large… (the seer’s ability) to read the language of the outer world & relate it to the inner.”

Although this powerful pattern is universal, the personalistic filter through which that universal is accessed remains relevant, for in this process, the objective manifestation of religious states, experiences, and phenomena, is oriented by the terms encountered in subjective experience (microcosm), while also essentially involving correlative relationships to the circumstances of the external or social worlds (mesocosm, macrocosm). These relationships form webs of interconnectivity which act to integrate into coherence one’s cumulative experience. Such integration is conveyed by Saivism’s Pratyabhijñā or ‘recognition,’ a realization which, Abhinavagupta writes, “has the nature of synthesis, with what was known or cognized before becoming present again, in terms of general or particular character (someone, something, some quality/ies)… Recognition is attained through the study of the underlying establishment of all the features of internal and external experience… it is the examination of ordinary experience as a means for achieving realization.” In this process, “memory is the origin and synthesizer of all experienced diversity, and effects the apprehension of the essential nature of all things… (thus) the agent’s role as substratum of the overall process is interpreted in terms of the synthetic function of recognition.” In the same vein, Powe speaks of the Code “spanning an individual’s lifetime,” as “a linked visionary cosmos revealed through interconnections that flow through identity” which blends personal biography with cosmic proportionality and infinite possibility.

With electric and now digital media, the opportunity for recognition via the means of digital repetition (‘replay’) of experience is enhanced to the extreme:

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68 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 70.
“all the events are not only being recorded but replayed... the replay offers the means of recognition, which is a deeper awareness of the pattern and the events that have taken place, the process.”

In replay the Great Code can be revealed through triggering an awareness of personal memory- the synthetic substratum and the identity contained therein. “The Great Code is the personal legend. What is the theme of the code? You, always you. This does not mean narcissistic self-obsession but that through you the cosmos flows. Each person is a medium.” For the Śaivas, personal identity is itself reflective of Śiva’s freedom (svatantrya), that is, subjectivity embodies the consciousness for whom the world is organized, it is the “formal cause (nimittakārana)... what He (Śiva/Self) wills appears in the mirror of His consciousness.” What appears is recognized as oneself, for oneself, as medium and message. McLuhan referred to Christ as “the greatest medium” because “in Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: (they) are fully one and the same,” and this can be generalized to apply to the ordinary individual. In the pratyabhijñā view, each person is a medium as well as constituting the message because Śiva is not only shining forth through individuals as the cosmos but also as individuals themselves: “mystical realization is itself a creative, cognitive act, one in which divinity itself recognizes its own presence in and as the embodied cosmos, on both cosmic and personal levels.” From the perspective of the individual, “just as the whole universe is the Sakti-body of the Self as Śiva, it is also one’s own reflection.” And Lakshmanjee writes, “There are not two elements, such as the mirror and the object which is reflected in the mirror. The reflected and the reflection are one.” Similarly for Frye, “the recovery of identity is not the feeling that I am myself and not another, but the realization that there is only one man, one mind, and one world, and that all walls of partition have been broken down forever.” The recognitive awareness of individual memory and identity as a total structure or filter is the microcosmic corollary to the universalization of consciousness in the temporal dimension, while the omnipresence of the noosphere represents its universal extension in the spatial dimension.

71 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 283.
72 Raina, Kashmir Shaivism, 31.
76 Raina, Kashmir Shaivism, 30.
77 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 107.
Such a universalizing vision seems to be one called forth by our global circumstances, in which the individual finds themselves always in the presence of everyone else in the world through the use of digital media. We seem to have two paths open to us; a pluralistic monism (or monistic pluralism) in which subjectivities are recognized as co-creative mediums for an essentially communal, inclusivistic, sacred (as in some variation of the “filter thesis” in which such a sacral consciousness “exists independently of the brain, into and by which it is filtered and translated”\(^{78}\)), or we regress into tribalism, fundamentalism, and retreat behind impenetrable cultural-ideological fortresses. In Thompson’s view of cultural evolution, “those who do not take the next quantum leap upward can slip down into an evil caricature of the old culture”\(^{79}\) and so in our present circumstances we must identify the disservices caused by the media as well as its utopian potentials. Immense threats lurk in future visions of an inhospitable Earth, increasing inequality, and all manner of evolutionary missteps. Although the vision put forth by McLuhan, Frye, and the Pratyabhijñā system are fundamentally positive and world-affirming, there was also a recognition by McLuhan and Frye of immense dangers lurking if their prophetic utterances went unheeded. Contra to his utopian pronouncements, McLuhan writes, “this could be the time of the Antichrist. When electricity allows for the simultaneity of all information for every human being, it is Lucifer’s moment. He is the greatest electrical engineer.”\(^{80}\) He further remarks that “some glorious heresies’ will emerge from the age of discarnate man” hinting at the potential for misinterpretations following the revelatory deluge.\(^{81}\) Without the means to navigate the maelstrom of electronic information, we risk being manipulated, losing our identities, and drowning in data overload: “A fool does not see the same PC that a wise soul may see.”\(^{82}\) Although the digital database makes available a plethora of information to the user, they may lack discernment and insight into the meaning of this information, leaving them open to deception. This deceptive potential of media was recognized most acutely by Jean Baudrillard,\(^{83}\) who called attention to the media’s quality of being a simulacrum, offering nothing but the illusion of represented realities with no authentic substance or connection possible. “Baudrillard is the truest successor to McLuhan,” writes Powe, “but only if we take the global theatre to be an excremental heap. All media ecstasies for Baudrillard are intoxicating addictions. The pleroma of the sacred has been stripped away in his uneasy

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79 Thompson, *Beyond Religion*, 45.
vision by the overstimulations of mass media.” 84 Baudrillard expresses the shadow side of McLuhan’s utopianism, lamenting the failure of a media revolution that went quite sour: “We dreamt of a transgressive, excessive mutation of values. What is coming about is a regressive, recessive, involutive mutation … The true cancels itself in the truer-than-true, the too-true-to-be-true, the reign of simulation.” 85

There is also the aspect of the media’s bringing everyone together in ways that prompt sudden and extensive involvement in hypersonal levels of awareness, as a kind of mass performance, which McLuhan, after he felt his term “Global village” had become obsolete, dubbed the “Global theatre” (marked by the proscenium arch of the satellite around the planet, turning it into a stage). 86 In The Global Village he remarks on the way this hyper-involvement will result in some “arduous interfaces and abrasive situations,” 87 observing, “Earth in the next century will have its collective consciousness lifted off the planet’s surface into a dense electronic symphony where all nations may live in a clutch of spontaneous synesthesia, painfully aware of the triumphs and wounds of one another. After such knowledge, what forgiveness.” 88 The violent explosive reactions that occur in the process of mediated global interinvolvement pertain for McLuhan to the issue of identity. Violence is for him a form of the quest for the retrieval of identity in situations where this awareness has been lost due to a rapidly shifting media-cultural environment: “A sudden change of environment through major technological innovations blurs the identity image of generations old and new. They then begin a tragic agon of redefinition of their image of identity.” 89

If a loss of identity is the cause of such violence, a recovery or novel awareness of identity is the remedy. Even when the familiar semiotic systems and sign regimes we have used to define ourselves collapse in the whirlwind of multisensory digital signifiers, the code persists, running ahead of us and leading us onward to the extent we are able to discern its self-recognitive signals hidden somewhere in our perception and memory. Thus, Powe writes that, “in the form of our personal myth, each of us carries the seed of the code. Our obsession with recording ourselves, with documenting our experiences, flowers from this seed.” 90 He invokes McLuhan’s aphorism, “the user is the content” – the corollary to his much more well-known quip, “the medium is the message” – to describe the way the patterns and content encountered in the mediated and nonmediated world

84 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 257.
87 Interview, TV Ontario 1977, The Mike McManus Show.
89 McLuhan, From Cliché to Archetype, 114.
90 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 242.
ultimately find meaning in individual experience – “through the mental exercise of the user.”91 In reiterating the religious implications of such a cultural shift in sensibilities, the combining of McLuhan’s insights into the nature of media with the Pratyabhijñā philosophy of recognition yields a pluralistic vision of the evolution of the sacred toward a proliferation of new forms oriented by the terms of individual subjectivity, and yet global in both its potential range of synthesis and in its daily discarnate interactions. The necessity of such a recognition may in fact be called forth by our present media circumstances, as Thompson observes: “What McLuhan recognized was that…these new media require a new spiritual consciousness… We either shift upward to a new culture of a higher spirituality to turn our electronic technologies into cathedrals of light, or we slide downward to darkness and entropy in a war of each against all.”92

Nor is this recognition necessarily limited to the Pratyabhijñā system, as we might point to “homeomorphic (functional) equivalents”93 in Hermetic, gnostic, and western esoteric systems, and in iterations of Christian trinitarian spirituality, such as that of Raimon Panikkar. The existence of such equivalents points us toward a novel kind of pluralism, of the kind Panikkar has spent much of his life articulating. He correlates the indic term advaita (a-dualism) with (the homeomorphic western equivalent) pluralism to stress that “reality is neither (solely) a unity nor a plurality… (and) what is ultimate is again subject to pluralistic discussion.”94 Panikkar’s advaita can be viewed both as “qualified monism” and as “qualified dualism,” while pluralism is equally “qualified plurality” and “qualified unity.”95 There is an essential personalist aspect to this pluralism, which “simply implies the awareness that knowledge is always the knowledge of a subject. All knowledge is personal knowledge, and this is not an imperfection but a ‘vital component’ of knowledge itself.”96 Our media situation makes this pluralism a fact on both cultural and individual levels. Technology’s having “brought people and peoples together” means that “today isolation is no longer possible, and the problem of pluralism has become the first order of business.”97 In confronting the problem of pluralism, the sensus communis, the discarnate condition, the great code, and the philosophy of recognition offer ways of understanding our novel situation and a potential path toward a more harmonious religious coexistence.

91 Powe, Apocalypse and Alchemy, 218.
93 Raimon Panikkar, Spirituality: The Way of Life (Orbis Books 2014), L7832.
94 Panikkar, Pluralism and Interculturality (Orbis Books 2018), L1268.
95 Panikkar, Pluralism, L1268.
96 Panikkar, Pluralism, L1292.
97 Panikkar, Pluralism, L569.
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