THE EROSION OF ATTENTION
AND THE COMING DARK AGE

DISTRACTED

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Foreword by BILL McKIBBEN

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For Emma and Anna

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FOREWORD

As I settled down at my desk to write this brief foreword, a light on the computer blinked to indicate that a new e-mail had arrived. This left me with a quandary that by now must afflict most Americans most days of their lives: continue with the train of thought that I'd begun to follow or see who was hailing me and for what purpose. The quandary was easily resolved—I of course clicked on my inbox, finding a message from someone asking if she could call me right now to discuss a piece of climate change legislation making its way through the Senate. I said yes, the phone rang, a half hour disappeared, and now I am back.

I can't add up with any precision the costs and benefits of that small exchange, repeated constantly. On the one hand, I was able to link up with someone far more easily than I would have even a few years ago. On the other hand, I was unable to keep thinking a thought—any thought—straight through.

Distraction has always been a human condition. Sages have always been quick to point out how even a few minutes of meditation prove the jumpy nature of our consciousness—our monkey minds. But now every force conspires to magnify that inattentiveness: technology

Chapter One

WIRED LOVE CA. 1880

Tracing the Roots of an Attention-Deficient Culture

> "I hope sometime we may clasp hands bodily as we do now spiritually, on the wire—for we do, don't we," said C.
>
> "Certainly, here is mine spiritually!" responded Nattie without the least hesitation, as she thought of the miles of safe distance between.
>
> —*Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes*[1]

The quaint words, like tinges of a foreign accent, date this prose. This fictional scene is set in an era of horse-drawn carriages, hoop skirts, and chaperoned outings. Two young telegraph operators begin quarreling, then chatting, over the wire and eventually fall in love after a long flirtatious exchange of messages and innuendo, all heard by other operators up and down the same telegraph line. When they finally meet, they are so tongue-tied and distracted by jealousies and other real-world complications that they only get engaged after setting up a private telegraph line between rooms in a boardinghouse so they can tap out their amorous feelings. Their story unfolds in *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes*, an 1880 novel that ends with a Morse code proposal from "C" to "N."

Wired Love is a long-forgotten literary footnote, a peek into a time far removed from the whirling, speeding Technology Plays, when dusty rail journeys and "stereopticon" slide-viewers were considered state of the art. But this minor portrait is worth resurrecting if we are to understand how we arrived at an age of splintered attention, on the cusp of a dark time. For although we breezily assume that cell phones, e-mail, and instant messages inspired our split-screen, split-second life, we must remember that virtual love didn't start with the Internet, and jets and cars didn't entirely make us the nomads we are today. Dizzying film and video montages trace their ancestry to wisps of Victorian prose and poetry detailing lives that now strike us as gritty and plodding. The era captured in *Wired Love* signaled a panoply of heady, new powers for humankind that seemed to break our earthly fetters, shift our world—and set off changes that ushered us toward a land of distraction. Simultaneity, or the seeming ability to exist in two places at once, rewrote the nature of human communication and set the stage for our fevered attempts to juggle multiple, mediated domains. Spiritualism, with its earnest efforts to tap into new frontiers of communication, foreshadowed our notions of cyberspace as a realm of scientific, spiritual, and social exploration. Last, the era's earnest experimentation with mediated experience and the control of perception has helped inure us to a world of fragmented, diffused, and manipulated attention. To understand our age, we must first look back. "The world is stretched & folds out & squeezes shut like an accordion tortured by some sadistic hand," wrote Blaise Cendrars, an early twentieth-century French poet who tried to capture the revolutionary changes of his day. "Through the rents in the sky the locomotives hurl themselves in fury. . . . I'm afraid I've no idea how to see it through to the end."[2]

To appreciate the emotional impact of the telegraph and then the telephone, remember that for at least one thousand years before such devices were invented, a message could be transmitted at most just one hundred miles by horseman in a day, notes Tom Standage.[3] Simultaneous communication over a distance could not be imagined.

Nothing in the natural world anticipated such communications, note James Katz and Mark Aakhus in *Perpetual Contact*, an exploration of the impact of the cell phone. Even the all-powerful mythic Greek gods had to rely on messengers, they write.[4] News of George Washington's death in Virginia took a week to reach New York, while nearly 70 percent of the country knew that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated within a half hour of the Dallas shooting.[5] More than two thousand people died in 1815 at the Battle of Orleans—*two weeks after* a peace treaty had been signed in London between the combatants.[6] In 1825, Samuel Morse missed the funeral of his wife, Lucretia, in New Haven because at the time he was in Washington, DC—a four-day journey from Connecticut. But by the 1870s, about twenty years after Morse had created the first public telegraph, six hundred and fifty thousand miles of wire and thirty thousand miles of submarine cable had been laid, and a message could be sent from London to Bombay and back in as little as four minutes, notes Standage in his history of the telegraph, *The Victorian Internet*.[7]

The effect of such innovations on people's sense of time and space was electrifying, as evidenced by the fin de siècle and early twentieth-century love affair with "simultaneity" of all kinds. This was a time of stunning, discomfiting advances not just in communications but in travel and entertainment. The railroad, steamship, telephone, and other "homeless technologies" made it seem possible to be everywhere at once, noted German cultural historian Karl Lamprecht in 1912.[8] Speed became an often lamented norm. Electricity lit up the night. And the phonograph and cinema played still more havoc with sensory experience, seemingly stretching, bending, and freezing once-stable conceptions of time and space. "Present-day life, more fragmented and faster-moving than preceding periods, was bound to accept as its means of expression, an art of dynamic 'divisionism,'" wrote cubist painter Fernand Léger in a 1913 essay exploring the roots of the brief, influential art movement that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque founded.[9] Just as the cubists tossed away established conventions of beauty and perspective to paint fractured abstract collages inspired by the mind's

eye, so Virginia Woolf and other writers shelved conventional rules of narrative to try to capture the rapid-transit simultaneity of both the material and psychological worlds. Simultaneity's literary masterwork, of course, was James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a cinematic pastiche of moments in a multitude of lives touched by one man's brief journey through Dublin. In the book, a mid-June day becomes "a vast expanded present," observes historian Stephen Kern.[10]

Little more than a decade before the publication of *Ulysses*, Cendrars published an intriguing and prescient little work that plays with a marriage of simultaneity in both idea and form. Claimed by the poet to be the first "simultaneous book," the 1913 *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* depicts his 1904 journey from Moscow to Harbin, spiced with musings of his mistress. Illustrated with geometric splashes of color down one side and with a map of the journey across the top, the poem was printed on a six-foot-long sheet of paper that was intended to be unfolded and seen all at once. Although thoroughly low-tech by our standards, the piece nevertheless still gives readers a real sense of speed, movement, and the collapse of distance. At that time, most books rarely experimented with chronology and invariably were illustrated with stodgy picture plates distinct from the text. But Sonia Delaunay's illustrations swirl alongside the poem, with swatches of rose, mint, midnight blue, and tangerine blending into one another, seemingly impossible to confine. The poem is sparsely punctuated, and nearly every word sports a different hue or font size. A reader is pushed and pulled from ancient to modern times and places, and back again.

Que mon couer
tour à tour, brûlait comme le temple d'ephèse
ou comme la Place Rouge de Moscou quand le soleil se couche.

(That my heart
one moment was aflame like the temple at Ephesus, & the next
was like the sun in its sinking on Moscow's Red Square.)

While Cendrars revels in the dizzying changes of the day, *Wired Love*'s author Ella Cheever Thayer depicts the awkwardness and uncertainties that complicated the seductive new relations of this age. Thayer, a hotel telegraph operator in Boston, points out at the novel's outset that her protagonist, nineteen-year-old Nattie Rogers, lives in two worlds: her drab rented room in a stuffy dowager's apartment and the telegraph office where she could escape "on a sort of electric wings, to distant cities and towns," and where "although alone all day, she did not lack social intercourse."[11] In the novel's opening scene, Nattie multitasks between these worlds furiously, juggling the barrage of code thrown at her by "C" with the ignorant questions of a curious spectator and the demands of a pushy, would-be customer. Throughout the book, Nattie tends to scowl at customers standing in her office, preferring the allure of the wire and especially her witty invisible friend to the demands of the physical world in front of her. Yet, like the cyber-lovers in the Technology Play, Nattie wrestles constantly with the question of whether wired love is real. She wants to believe it is, but can't quite get over her doubts. Flirting with Clem ("C"), she hopes uneasily that the physical distance between them excuses their improper familiarities. Even after they get to know each other by telegraph, they distrust the reality of their relationship so completely that when they meet, they are essentially strangers and must go back to square one in the courtship game. They seek refuge in a private telegraph wire, but wind up promising to end their wired romance in favor of "real" love, "more potent than electricity."

Virtual love affairs were often played out in actual telegraph offices, where women, agile at both machine and code, made up a good portion of the clubby corps of operators of the day. By the 1870s, women comprised a third of the staff at Western Union's main office in New York.[12] Telegraph companies tried to break up wired romances and friendships by "snatching," or transferring operators from station to station. But between telegrams, the operators in different stations found ways to keep playing virtual checkers, telling stories, and flirting. "Romances of the Telegraph," an 1891 article in the weekly

Western Electrician told the story of a male operator who struck up a virtual friendship with an operator whom he assumed to be a man. After the "fellow" backed out of a planned vacation together, the two nevertheless arranged a meeting that ultimately led to courtship and marriage. In another instance, a remote operator was refused leave to travel for his marriage, so he arranged to hold the ceremony over the wire. A minister in California officiated to the operator and his bride in Arizona. "At the proper moment, the solemn 'I do' came back over the wires," the weekly reported. "Congratulatory messages were sent the bride and groom from all stations."[13]

Virtual love affairs and online games? Simultaneous books and instantaneous travel? Cubist painters, simultaneous poets, and telegraph operators were undoubtedly the front line of industrialized society's plunge into a culture of simultaneity and split-screen attention. They were the first to confront questions that we now wrestle with daily. How do we navigate seen and unseen worlds at once and handle relationships that unfold via new codes of disembodiment and mystery? How is humanity changed when, as Kern notes, distance collapses and the present becomes "an extended interval of time that could, indeed must, include events around the world"?[14] We still wrestle with the protocols and parameters of the virtual, while increasingly embracing it as a *real* new space for human creation and connection. At the same time, simultaneity is morphing into something richer and more layered. Just as the shocking glimpse of a Victorian ankle has melted into today's blasé public exhibitions of thigh, belly, and décolletage, we've moved from the once novel experience of hopscotching distance to share a moment, to the jaded expectation of juggling multiple temporal and spatial dimensions. Teens describe instant messaging their peers as less enjoyable than face-to-face visits or phone calls, yet they say that they prefer IM because it allows them to multitask each other. "Personally, I like talking to a lot of people at a time," a Pittsburgh-area teen told researchers. "It kind of keeps you busy. It's kind of boring just talking to one person cause then like . . . you can't talk to anyone else."[15] Now we weave in and out of a vast

array of relationships, dancing across multiple spaces of connection, seemingly freed from the limits of body and earth. Attention becomes ethereal in a world of multiplicity. No longer do boundaries matter.

Along with simultaneity, cyberspace's precursor was the realm of spiritualism, the nineteenth-century movement to communicate with the dead. Flourishing just a few years after the invention of the telegraph, spiritualism's practices ranged from fraudulent circus-like séances to earnest experiments and writings on the subject by great thinkers and scientists of the day, including Thomas Edison, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Thomas Edison devoted an entire chapter in his memoir to communicating with the dead.[16] Twain was a member of Britain's Society for Psychical Research and in an 1884 article on "thought transference" in the society's journal, he applauded telepathy as the next step in human communications. "Telephone, telegraphs and words are too slow for this age; we must get something that is faster," he urged.[17] It may seem bizarre to compare our exploding, limitless experiences of cyberspace with past efforts to telegraph the dead or find proof of telepathy, a word coined in 1882 by its proponent F. W. H. Myers. But in both eras, inventions of science and technology tore down the constraints of time and space, firing the public imagination. Suddenly, spiritual and cerebral worlds, once considered the sole realms of religion and imagination, became cutting-edge scientific frontiers—and arenas for new forms of intimacy and communication. "Talking to the dead and talking on the phone both hold out the promise of previously unimaginable contact between people," notes historian Pamela Thurschwell.[18] Even the electric light, another invention that seemed to symbolize man's unlimited potential, was compared to a supernatural phenomenon.

Now exploratory forays into unseen worlds are burgeoning into a determined desire to increasingly *inhabit* new dimensions. In the past, mediums depended on spirit "guides" to describe the cricket pitches and "spirit universities" of the rather suburban-sounding Summerland, the area of afterlife most popularly described in spiritualist accounts.[19] Today, we don't need spirit guides to offer secondhand reports of other

worlds. Rather, we spend increasing proportions of our lives in alluring netherworlds that we have constructed ourselves. "Unlike television, in which the audience is confined to the role of passive viewer, the game puts you into the action in the role of a god," a critic writes of the online alternative-world fantasy game Sims 2, "and not a distant, magnanimous god but one of those petty Roman gods who amuse themselves by toying with people."[20] Nearly eight million have joined Second Life, a kind of fantastical cloning of the world where politicians get interviewed, entrepreneurs make up to $200,000 annually in real dollars, and support groups bond, just as they would in "real life." Second life, second chance. Now "what once might have been called reverie," writes art historian Jonathan Crary, mostly takes place in mediated worlds of "preset rhythms, images, speeds, and circuits."[21] Are we perfecting "wired love," upgrading ourselves, grasping transcendence on earth through our screens?

Whether via mediums or cyber-games, past and current technologists share a stubborn certainty that utopian ideals of connection are within reach of explorers of these other realms. In its day, the telegraph was celebrated, even beyond its ability to shatter distance, as a device that, according to nineteenth-century British prime minister Lord Salisbury, "combined together almost at one moment . . . the opinions of the whole world."[22] Although leaders of the telephone industry at first erroneously assumed that, like the telegraph, the telephone was solely a business tool, industry literature by the 1920s promised that the invention would turn the country into a "nation of neighbors."[23] But perhaps few would have believed as passionately in the power of today's online social networks to connect humanity as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit and paleontologist (1881–1955). Teilhard, who experienced in his lifetime a dizzying parade of technological changes, fell afoul of the Catholic Church in his attempts to reconcile evolution with science and theology. His idea that the universe evolves seriously challenged the Church's view of a static planet with eternally fixed forms. As a result, the Church sent him into exile in China in 1926, forbade him from teaching theology

or philosophy, and kept his greatest work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, from being published during his lifetime. Nevertheless, he made important contributions to paleontology and continued to write, developing in exile his concept of the "noosphere"—the idea that all human thought persists beyond its recorded forms and envelops the earth like another atmosphere. "As an effect of co-reflection, the human mind is continually rising up collectively because of the links forged by technology," wrote Teilhard, whose idea of the "thinking membrane" increasingly is being revived and cited.[24] A *New York Times* editorial lauded the "blogosphere" that is doubling every five months as the "global thought bubble of a single voluble species."[25] Network theorists, meanwhile, are exploring the idea that vastly different systems, such as the Web and the North American power grid, have a common dynamic and governing architecture, in other words, everything is ultimately connected.[26] Whether the noosphere strikes you as eccentric or brilliant, certainly Teilhard's vision presciently captures our mushrooming Web-based quilt of knowledge and relationships. If as nothing more than an analogy, the noosphere describes the expectation and, increasingly, the reality of our times.

Yet what ultimately happens when the simultaneity of yesterday becomes a quest for multiplicity, and pioneering explorations of unseen worlds become *inhabitations* of limitless new dimensions? There's a fine line, after all, between rich relations and meaningless hyperconnectedness, between abundance and chaos. How do we keep from getting lost in these mercurial and diffuse realms, where time for reflection and focus is increasingly lost as a valued part of life? To set the stage for a deeper appreciation of our own landscape, consider how our cultural views on attention have shifted in the past century. For when we try to shatter the earthly and *stretch toward* for the stars, we perceive the world differently. We shape our attention through our yearnings, choices, values, and blind spots, now and in the distant past.

"For what is even the greatest distance to modern man?" asked August Fuhrmann in 1905. "Nowadays it is easily bridged by railroads, air and

steam ships, post and telegraph, so that it has almost ceased to be a factor in cultural life."[27]

Bringing faraway worlds to Europe's doorstep was, you could say, Fuhrmann's bread and butter. He was a German physicist and entrepreneur who invented a precursor of cinema and television that enthralled spectators from its launch in 1880 right up until the eve of World War II. The Kaiserpanorama, renamed the Weltpanorama after World War I, consisted of a large wooden cylinder with twenty-five individual binocularlike lenses. Peering in, spectators saw a show of rotating and seemingly three-dimensional slides of news events and exotic places, such as a Turkish harem or the pope's private apartments. For the average European of the day, the "stereopticon" show briefly captured slices of a world changing almost beyond belief. The invention proved so popular that the Kaiserpanorama was franchised across Europe, with two hundred and fifty machines in operation at one point. Since shows changed twice weekly, Fuhrmann sent his own troupe of photojournalists around the world to shoot news-making events and far-off places.

The Kaiserpanorama did more than bring a glimpse of distant lands to entranced spectators in the early days of photography. Fuhrmann's invention helped change how Victorians perceived the world, and from the seeds of this change have grown our own collagelike and mediated existence. "One great charm of the shows at the Kaiser Panorama was that it made no difference where in the series you started," recalls critic Walter Benjamin in a memoir of his childhood in Berlin. "Because the display went around in a circle, every picture would come around past the stop where you sat and peered through two little windows into its pale, tinted vistas."[28] The Kaiserpanorama offered a creaky, mechanized nineteenth-century virtual reality show, "a steady, constant flow of images whose narrative content was secondary to its promise of a vicarious visual experience of the real," observes art historian Angela Miller.[29] It was the era's *Sex and the City* and CNN crawl wrapped in one. This automated panorama became one of the first modern inventions to mediate and mechanically direct human attention.

It's no coincidence that the Kaiserpanorama proved spectacularly successful in an era that was fascinated by attention yet discomfited by the growing discovery that it could not always be controlled, understood, or protected. "Whatever its nature, [attention] is plainly the essential condition of the formation and development of mind," wrote Henry Maudsley in the early 1880s.[30] This intangible aspect of humanity inspired endless public debate and research by scientists, writers, and philosophers of the day. Scientists studied people's responses to electric stimuli or their own ability to concentrate their mind or vision. Psychophysicist Gustav Theodor Fechner noticed that when he held two different-colored objects in front of his eyes, only one color or the other could be seen after a time and that no matter how much he concentrated, he could not keep both in view.[31] Suddenly, attention was not the obedient phenomenon that he and his colleagues had once assumed, notes science historian Michael Hagner.

Remember that this was an era of rapid mobility, newly instantaneous communications, mystical, magical technologies—and broken norms. The world seemed at once flattened and fractured, shrunken yet imploded, mutable and subjective. In realms from art to science to politics, the comforting notion of a shared reality became passé. "With the tremendous acceleration of life, mind and eye have become accustomed to seeing and judging partially or inaccurately, and everyone is like the travelers who get to know a land and its people from a railway carriage," wrote Nietzsche, a leading proponent of a new philosophy called "perspectivism," which held that reality was a matter of interpretation.[32] In 1905, an obscure patent clerk named Albert Einstein published five papers that radically remapped conceptions of space and time. Most famously, his theory of relativity postulated that what we observe depends upon how we move through space. In parallel, artists and filmmakers were inspired by Paul Cezanne's pioneering depictions of subjects—such as his beloved Mont Sainte-Victoire—from multiple perspectives on a single canvas. Joyce portrayed a cacophonous world of clashing, blurring, overlapping realities. In *Ulysses*, "the real action takes place in a plurality of spaces, in a con-

sciousness that leaps about the universe and mixes here and there in defiance of the ordered diagramming of cartographers," writes Stephen Kern in *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918*.[33]

Perhaps inevitably, attention began to be seen as subjective and malleable, rather than the stable, controlled, and highly valued mental ability admired greatly during the ever-reasonable Enlightenment. Attention in Benjamin Franklin's day was the thinking man's obedient dog, the faithful servant of civilized man's efforts to overcome primitive superstitions and scientifically understand his world. (Physiologically, attention was thought to derive from a pooling of "nervous fluid" in a part of the brain.) To study insects or plants, eighteenth-century naturalists such as the Swiss entomologist Charles Bonnet undertook feats of observation so rigorous that they were ridiculed by satirists of the day. Bonnet once studied a single aphid from 5:30 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. for twenty-one days straight in order to learn about its reproductive cycle. And he took such detailed notes of his experiments that modern scientists often find it hard to determine which type of insect he was studying. "The part overwhelms the whole" in Bonnet's notebooks, writes historian Lorraine Daston.[34] Yet while Bonnet and his colleagues were undoubtedly extreme in their devotions, their views of attention as a sort of intellectual firepower, rigidly controlled by will and tenacity, reflected those of their era. "Around 1800, attention made us the masters of exploring ourselves and the world that surrounds us," observes Hagner. "Around 1900, the spaces between ourselves and the world was filled by apparatuses, instruments, technologies and all sorts of entertainment."[35]

By the nineteenth century, attention was no longer seen as a docile, willing companion, but a cerebral Hound of the Baskervilles—difficult to leash, frighteningly powerful, and vulnerable to control by external forces, both human and mechanical. "Now the risks, gaps and instabilities of attention were set upon stage," observes Hagner.[36] In particular, an outpouring of research into hypnotism explored the fine line between enrapt attention, sleep, and hypnotic trances, as well as the expansion of learning and memory that accompanies the intense focus of the hypnotized. The technique, although little understood, at first was lauded as a significant medical advance. Yet the idea that one's attention could be controlled by others, sometimes malevolently, proved deeply disturbing to the public and experts alike. George du Maurier's 1894 novel *Trilby*, one of the most popular novels of the decade in Britain and America, tells the story of a musician who hypnotizes and enslaves a young Bohemian girl, turning her into an opera star. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the vampire not only sucks his victims' blood, he controls their minds through telepathy and hypnotism. "When my brain says 'Come!' to you, you shall cross land or sea to do my bidding," threatens the vampire before forcing the book's heroine, Mina, to drink his blood.[37] Ultimately, hypnosis became too closely associated with docility and a loss of control to be accepted by a public and scientific establishment struggling with the mutability of modern life. By the turn of the century, hypnotism increasingly was shunned by influential advocates such as Freud, writes Crary in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*. "There was an astonishing cultural reversal from the great heyday of hypnosis in the late 1880s," he writes, "when across Europe and North America it seemed a therapy that promised unlimited benefits, to the turn of the century, when it had become an embarrassment to its former advocates."[38]

Generations ago, people took their first forays into dreamy new worlds: from collagelike visions offered by the Kaiserpanorama and new spiritual playgrounds, to the unsettling embrace of hypnosis. The experiences were heady, even as the risks were real. In a world of shattering boundaries and assumptions, losing control was a peril ever-crouched on the other side of the front door. But now we splinter our focus and plunge into alternative realities so often that perhaps we are losing the ability and will to question the consequences. We begin to take for granted that attention is a kind of noisy, manipulated, and splintered battleground. As recently as the 1920s, silence was "the context of thought, conversation, and general existence," notes Joseph Urgo, author of *In the Age of Distraction*.[39] Now this space is "colonized," he writes. A realm of silence is as rare as a virgin forest and,

to many of us, as eerie. "Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture," asserts literary critic Sven Birkerts. "We are experiencing in our time a loss of depth—a loss, that is, of the very paradigm of depth."[40]

Crary ends his book with a letter, dated September 22, 1907, that Freud sent to his family from Rome. Describing his evening, Freud tells how he stood in a crowd to watch a "lantern slide" show projected on the roof of a house in the Piazza Colonna. Freud doesn't describe the content of the slides but rather their effect. Every time he tries to pull away during an ad, "a certain tension in the attentive crowd" forces him to look back at the short films and still slides. "Until 9 p.m., I remain spellbound, then I begin to feel too lonely in the crowd, so I return to my room to write to you all," wrote Freud.[41] This vignette of the great thinker, far from home and entranced by a primitive precursor of the media that envelop us today, is somehow poignant. Freud is captivated, until he wakes from his automated reverie, feeling homesick and empty. Written more than a century ago, this brief sketch of one evening in Rome whispers to us of the skimming, fleeting, alluring world we now inhabit.

How did we come to the cusp of a new dark age? The seeds of our world can be traced to the first high-tech revolutions, when now quaint technologies shattered the confines of the local and the tedium of ancient routines. In the nineteenth century, people became untethered and empowered in striking new ways, and they began to experience the delights, quandaries, and questions that now confront us urgently and inescapably each day. As economist Jeremy Rifkin reminds us, "the great turning points in human history are often triggered by changing conceptions of space and time."[42] The telegraph introduced people to the thrill of simultaneity. Now we slip easily in and out of virtual worlds and multitask each other, wondering if our seemingly miraculous power to be in many places at once brings us closer or keeps us apart. At the same time, the fleeting glimmers of life at the other end of the telegraph

wire or Ouija board have evolved into galaxies of otherness, real and imagined. Finally, the "pale vistas" of the Kaiserpanorama offered an enthralled public a first taste of a virtual, mechanized entertainment in an era captivated by the dark mysteries of attention. Increasingly, we sense that crucial aspects of our humanity—our ability to focus, be aware, and reason well—may be eroding, even as we surrender to the dreamlike joyride that this way of life offers. Now it's time to confront the challenges of our day. Does intimacy survive a seemingly limitless realm of infinite prospects? Can we bolster the quality of our life by split-screen living? How do lives of perpetual movement shape our attachments to each other and change our experience of place? Facing these challenges leads us first into the "new room" in the house, the virtual space where the lights are always on. But before we enter, let's give a last word to a largely forgotten nineteenth-century thinker who piercingly understood our times.

Albert Robida was a French cartoonist, illustrator, and novelist who surpassed even Jules Verne and H. G. Wells in describing with astonishing accuracy the day-to-day impact of technology on society. In his novels such as *The Twentieth Century* and *The Electric Life*, Robida predicted helicopters, giant-screen television, twenty-four-hour worldwide real-time news, video telephones, and test tube babies, along with biological warfare, environmental destruction, the domination of imagery over reality, and the speeding up of life. Equal parts utopianism, witty satire, and science fiction, Robida's works—unlike Verne's—explored the social impact of coming technologies, not simply the wonders of the hardware. At one point in *The Twentieth Century*, a hyper-busy father attends his daughter's wedding by telephone. In other scenes, two unsuspecting people are watched in their bedrooms by remote users of a Webcam-like "telephonoscope."[43]

His drawings and prose humorously eased people's anxieties about the era's rapid technological advances, according to Philippe Willems.[44] Yet Robida's message was clear: be warned about the consequences of unrestrained technological living. Born in 1848, the shy

and myopic Robida rode a bicycle only once, detested automobiles, and refused to use the most wondrous technology of his day—the telephone. We could dismiss him as a curmudgeonly Luddite, but that would be missing the sparkling clarity of his vision. After writing a lighthearted short story titled "In 1965," he admitted in an interview that he didn't envy those who would live in our time. "Their every day will be caught in the wheels of a mechanized society," he said, "to the point where I wonder how they will find the time to enjoy the most simple pleasures we had at our disposal: silence, calm, solitude. Having never known them, they shall not be able to miss them. As for me, I do—and I pity them."[45] With trepidation, Albert Robida foresaw an age of distraction, and he depicted it well to an era that did not heed his warnings.

Chapter Two

FOCUS

E-mailing the Dead and Other Forays into Virtual Living

Alan Edelson stood on the shore of the Michigan lake where his fourteen-year-old son, Zachary, had drowned. He flipped open his cell phone. Four years after the accident, Zach's name was still at the top of Edelson's phone list, just as his instant-messaging screen name "Snoopy1372" pops up when Edelson logs onto his home computer. "How do you push the delete button?" asked Edelson, a furniture store owner in suburban Detroit. "You don't."[1] He hung back from the water's edge, facing a sky darkened by storm clouds. An old man toting a fishing pole ambled off the beach, followed by a puppy. In the distance, a teenager reeled in his line and cast again. This was the first time that Edelson had been back to Walnut Lake since Zach died. It was a Fourth of July weekend, and Zach had just finished tubing with friends and had taken off his life jacket. A gust of wind sucked an inner tube out of the boat. A rope wrapped around his leg, dragging him overboard. He banged his head and sank.

It took three days to find his body in the lake's 80-foot, 45-degree waters. For three days and nights, Edelson stood on this spot, interrupting his vigil only to shower and sleep for a few hours. Hundreds of onlookers—mostly friends and family but a few gawkers—

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