

# Interview with Carl Mitcham

© Carl Mitcham and *Figure/Ground*

**Dr. Mitcham was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. December 29th, 2010**

Carl Mitcham is Hans Jonas Chair at the European Graduate School EGS and Professor of Liberal Arts and International Studies, Colorado School of Mines. Professor Mitcham is one of the leading American philosophers of technology with a focus on the ethics of science, technology and medicine. Mitcham received his Ph. D. in Philosophy at Fordham University in 1988. He has held academic positions at several institutions in the United States and internationally: from 1970-72 at Berea College, Kentucky as an Instructor in Philosophy; from 1972-82 at St. Catharine College, Kentucky as a Lecturer in Philosophy and Social Science; from 1982-90 at Brooklyn Polytechnic University as an Associate and then a Professor of Humanities. He was a Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Science-Technology-Society Program, Pennsylvania State University from 1989-99, and the founding Director of the Philosophy and Technology Studies Center, Polytechnic University, New York. Mitcham has also been a visiting professor at the Universidad de Pais Vasco, Spain (2003-4), the University of Tilburg and the University of Twente, Netherlands (1998), the Universidad de Oviedo (1993), and the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Mayagez (1988). Mitcham is currently the Director of the Hennebach Program for the Humanities at the Colorado School of Mines, a program which sponsors events with visiting professors in the humanities. Being a primarily engineering school, the Hennebach Program works to incorporate the importance of humanities into their highly regarded technical discipline. As head of the program, Mitcham heads this department that seeks to implement interdisciplinary studies with the assistance of an Advisory Committee. He is also the president of the Society for

Philosophy and Technology. Mitcham is the author of several books including: *Bibliography of the Philosophy of Technology, with Robert Mackey* (1973); *Thinking Through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy* (1994); *Research in Philosophy and Technology: Social and Philosophical Constructions of Technology* (1995); *Thinking Ethics in Technology: Hennebach Lectures and Papers, 1995-1996* (1997); *Engineer's Toolkit: Engineering Ethics, with R. Shannon Duval* (2000); *La ética en la profesin de ingeniero: Ingeniera y ciudadananía, with Marcos Garca de la Huerta* (2001); *Technology and Religion: Oppositions, Sympathies, Transformations* (2008); and *Science, Technology, and Ethics: An Introduction*.

**Where were you born, how did you decide to attend graduate school, and at what point did you realize that you wanted to become a university professor?**

In general, responses to these kinds of questions are difficult to construct. Life and thought are so complex and fluid. Reflecting on my life, sometimes I am not sure about whom I was or the continuity of myself. The theologian Stanley Hauerwas (with whom it would be possible to say I once shared a church) opens his autobiography with, "I did not intend to be 'Stanley Hauerwas.' I am aware, however, that there is someone out there who bears that name." The same might well be said with regard to "Carl Mitcham."

I was born in Dallas, Texas. I never "decided" to attend university any more than I decided to attend grade school or high school (or even to be born). Today, it seems required that we describe ourselves in terms of decisions. But my experience is that decisions are not nearly as significant as they are often made out to be. This is also in contradistinction to Carl Schmidt. With regard to being a professor, for instance, that is not something I ever directly wanted to be. I'm still surprised that I have apparently become one, and am not very comfortable in the role.

**You attended [Fordham University](#) as a doctoral student. Who were some of your mentors there and how was your overall graduate experience in N.Y.?**

I arrived at Fordham University in the 1980s. And as if to illustrate the point about decisions, it was more happenstance than decision. As a graduate student in the late 1960s, I was arrested for draft resistance and my graduate career was suspended at the ABD stage. That suspension led by a circuitous route to involvement with an experiment in family monastic community. When the community fell apart, another event took place to which I can only say I responded: The president of Brooklyn Polytechnic University (whom I just barely knew) offered me a job. I accepted it. Then he encouraged me to finish my PhD. After talking with people in philosophy departments at a number of universities in New York City, Dominic Balestra at Fordham opened the door and I walked through.

**Did you hear any stories about Marshall McLuhan during your time at Fordham?**

I only heard stories about him from Paul Levinson, a friend at the New School. But I don't remember the stories. What I remember is Levinson's enthusiasm in talking about McLuhan, who was clearly a charismatic figure.

**What do you make of McLuhan's work? Why do you think he isn't always acknowledged by philosophers of technology such as Andrew Feenberg, Don Ihde, or yourself?**

I've read a fair amount of McLuhan and would acknowledge him myself. But he is probably too oracular to be recognized as an influence by most philosophers.

**You are currently a professor at the European Graduate School. How long have you been teaching at EGS and how would you characterize your experience there?**

I've been teaching there off and on since very early, maybe the first or second year of EGS. I love the place and experience, not the least of all because of the inspired and insightful leadership of Wolfgang Schirmacher. He has created something unique, both in the faculty and the students. I am always energized and challenged by the seminars there.

**In the late 60s and early 70s, you were a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. How did your activism influence your research interests?**

I'd put it the other way around: it was my research interests – my efforts to think what it means to be human in an increasingly technologized world, a world as artefact – that influenced me to become a Vietnam War resister. That war was among the most unjust in United States history and it was waged with the most advanced technology America had produced to date. It also increasingly became a war mediated by television, the media of the time. Looking back now, I sometimes wish I had not refused induction but had gone and experienced the horror of the war up close instead at a mediated distance. In a funny way the media both gave and took away the war, made it present and absent at once, even as I opposed it. Miguel Hernandez, *Cancionero y Romancero de Ausencias*, is a favorite poets. More vivid in my memory are images of Walter Cronkite than of Thich Quang Duc, whose name I had to look up. I lack any real feel for the heat and horror of the war and the suffering of the Vietnamese people. My feel is of sitting in the living rooms of friends in Cambridge watching the evening news together. There is something wrong with that, something that was articulated by Gunther Anders in his little essay, "Commandments in the Atomic Age," when he described how our actions have escaped the capacities of our emotions.

**Wikipedia provides the following list of contemporary philosophers with an interest in technology: Jean Baudrillard, Albert Borgmann, Andrew Feenberg, Langdon**

Winner, Donna Haraway, Avital Ronell, Don Ihde, Bruno Latour, Paul Levinson, Carl Mitcham, Leo Marx, Gilbert Simondon, Jacques Ellul and Bernard Stiegler. Is this list arbitrary? Do you feel more closely associated with some of these names than others?

It appears a bit arbitrary or capricious. From this list, those who have most influenced me are Borgmann, Feenberg, Winner, Ihde, and Ellul. Among others not mentioned I would add Hans Jonas, Ivan Illich, Kristin Shrader-Frechette, and Rene Girard.

Moreover, this list ignores the most vibrant community of scholars currently pursuing philosophy of technology: the Dutch school that includes Hans Achterhuis, Peter Kroes, Pieter Vermaas, Tsjalling Swierstra, Peter-Paul Verbeek, Martijntje Smits, and Philip Brey, among others.

Actually, in a recent interview I asked [Albert Borgmann](#) the same question and he replied that he would exclude Beaudrillard, Haraway, Latour, and Marx from the list on the following grounds: *“Beaudrillard can be an astute and helpful observer of contemporary culture. But he throws out zingers that are either worthless or take a lot of work to develop. Haraway wrote a provocative essay, but she does not have a well-worked out philosophy of technology. I find Latour’s work mistaken or an unhelpful re-description of things that others have described already and better. Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* is a wonderful book, a classic no doubt. But it’s really history rather than philosophy.”* Do you agree with Borgmann’s appreciation of the field?

Yes. No one is more sound in such assessments than Borgmann.

I admire him greatly for his calm and well measured evaluations. Incidentally, although he did not say it, if we were to adopt his perspective on Carl Mitcham, it would probably be to characterize him as more historian of the philosophy of technology, or perhaps as an intellectual

journalist, than as a philosopher in the sense that Borgmann is.

**Your masterpiece is *Thinking Through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy* (1994). In a nutshell, what is the path that you allude to in the title?**

As you may not suspect, I'm uncomfortable with the word "masterpiece." But the path I tried to take is to begin with engineering or technology and from there seek philosophy, wisdom, not simply more power, efficiency, or artifice. This is an increasingly difficult /ambiguous/ambitious task in a world increasingly made artefact. The more common strategy is that enunciated by Haraway: to take "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries [between nature and technology] and for responsibility in their construction." But can an "ironic faith" have any purchase in a world of non-ironic faith in technology? The philosopher who has tried to think this path without irony more than any other is Leo Strauss. More recently I've also found Pierre Manent helpful.

**What are you currently working on?**

I'm working on too many things, too many of them no more than half finished. The year 2010 witnessed publication of the Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity (co-edited with Robert Frodeman and Julie Thompson Klein) and Humanitarian Engineering (co-authored with an engineering colleague, David Munoz). The former continues my more scholarly side and reflects an interest in thinking philosophy as interdisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity as philosophy. There is something the matter with disciplines that needs re-thought. The latter is just a small textbook effort to throw a bridge between human rights and engineering. With regard to engineering, and looping back to the "thinking through technology" question, is a book on philosophy of engineering that will appear in a Chinese version next year. One of these days I would like to finish a small book on religion and

technology. (But I'm not sure who the "I" that will be able to do it.)

Another concern not yet mentioned is science policy. Here my guide has been Daniel Sarewitz, a geologist with a philosophical soul. We need to better understand science policy, to promote a philosophy of science policy that could perhaps contribute small chiropractic adjustments to the billions of dollars the world currently invests in research and development in the belief that giving money to science is an unqualified good.

—

© Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Carl Mitcham and Figure/Ground with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.

Suggested citation:

Ralon, L. (2010). "Interview with Carl Mitcham," Figure/Ground. December, 29th.

< <http://figureground.org/interview-with-carl-mitcham/> >

Questions? Contact Laureano Ralón at [ralonlaureano@gmail.com](mailto:ralonlaureano@gmail.com)

---

## [Interview with W. Terrence Gordon](#)

© W. Terrence Gordon and *Figure/Ground*

Dr. Gordon was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. November 12th,

**2010.**

W. Terrence Gordon is Professor Emeritus at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada and Part-time lecturer in Linguistics at St. Mary's University, Halifax. He is the author of the three titles on McLuhan and the editor of the critical editions of his *Understanding Media* (2003), *McLuhan Unbound*(2005), and *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time* (2006). His *McLuhan for Beginners* brought him the invitation from the McLuhan family to write his biography: *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*, critically acclaimed in The New York Times and many other sources. Professor Gordon is also the librettist of a multimedia opera about McLuhan.

**How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?**

I was very fortunate to have excellent and inspiring teachers in high school for English, French, German, and Latin. I may have had more natural ability in language learning than in math and science, but I am inclined to give more credit to those teachers than to my genes as the earliest determining factor in moving me toward an undergrad degree in modern languages. Those language teachers seemed to have a more dynamic engagement with their subject matter than the math and science teachers, and so they became models for me, perhaps even before I knew for sure that I would enter the teaching profession. I also absorbed my maternal grandfather's enormous respect for learning at an early age. He was an immigrant who had no opportunity for formal education when he came to Canada as a very young man. He became very successful in running small businesses and worked long hours even late in life, but he also spent endless hours reading, a habit he passed on to my aunt (his younger daughter, who gave me early encouragement to think about becoming a writer) and to me. Every Sunday afternoon he would spend hours reading aloud to



my grandmother, who was illiterate, and the importance he attached to that sharing of his skill and learning also made its mark on me. When my mother remarried, I acquired a second inspiring grandfather with a huge library where I was free to read whatever, and that certainly drew me deeper into the world of books. Many of my undergrad professors were just as inspiring as my high school teachers, and I think I had pretty much decided even in first year that the teaching profession was for me. I did (very) briefly consider other careers, and my stepfather wanted me to become a dentist, so that I could take over his practice, but I knew I was neither interested enough nor strong enough in science to go down that path. So, strictly speaking, my career choice was a conscious one, but, above all, more or less inevitable.

**Joshua Meyrowitz' main thesis in *No Sense of Place* is that when media change, situations and roles change. In your experience, how did the role of university professor evolve since you were an undergraduate student?**

I am not familiar with JM's book, but being Marshall McLuhan's biographer, I can hardly disagree with its thesis! I think the role of the undergrad professor fifty years ago was primarily to provide guidance and authority. If s/he could also provide inspiration, that was a bonus that motivated students. My sense is that undergrads today are more overwhelmed by life and learning than we were in my generation, that they have less confidence in themselves to come to grips with the world (at large as well as the world of learning) and that consequently they attach less importance to the guidance and authority roles of their profs.

**What makes a good teacher today?**

I don't think that providing inspiration as a professor has changed or is threatened by technological changes, because the ultimate challenge to put to students remains fundamentally to foster critical thinking.

**How do you manage to command attention in the classroom in this age of interruption characterized by information overload?**

Attention deficit was a problem long before there was information overflow, stemming from a variety of sources that it is not germane to discuss here. If we identify information overflow in its extreme form (students engrossed in their laptops while the professor is trying to deliver a nineteenth-century style lecture), I am enough of an optimist to say that the problem can be its own solution. I say this because students in my classes often check out web sites dealing with questions we are discussing in class as soon as I raise the questions and volunteer the information they find. Their discoveries are germane most of the time and I am able to integrate the finds with what I am presenting. At a lower level, if it's web-surfing for its own sake that is going on, or e-mailing or whatever (I think of a circular I found on a desk in my classroom, distributed by the Student Union, saying "Bored in class? Vote on line") the challenge to the prof is even greater to make the class useful enough to be interesting. Of course, "useful" has to be negotiated.

**What advice would you give to young and aspiring university professors?**

That's easy: aspire to inspire.

**You mentioned your language teachers and your own family as primal sources of inspiration early in life. Who were some of your mentors in graduate school and what did you learn from them?**

I was fortunate to have a variety of teachers in graduate school whose strengths individually were very different from each other, so it seemed intuitively like a good idea to assimilate (or imitate) and integrate those strengths. Stephen Ullmann was an extraordinary blend of orator and

entertainer: elegant and eloquent above all, but never short of amusing anecdotes and illustrations. In a sense, his whimsical stories were a constant reminder of the old Russian proverb that there is nothing more serious than a joke. The same was true of Jean-Paul Vinay, though his humour tended to be a little more outrageous. In an interesting flip of that approach, he would make patently outrageous statements designed to make us stop and ask if he was joking, as when he suggested that he might revise his entire system for analyzing the comparative stylistics of French and English as a result of fresh "insight" into hamburger condiments. Edward Burstynsky was my model for encyclopaedic learning. As a doctoral student himself, he had taken more than three times the required number of graduate courses before doing his comprehensive exams and dissertation. My thesis supervisor was Henry Schogt, far and away the most important influence on me in terms of showing the way to the critical thinking that is indispensable to solid and balanced scholarship. The "ahas" that he gave me through constant feedback on my thesis chapters unquestionably laid the groundwork for all the writing that I would do throughout my own career. Some 25 years after I defended my thesis, Henry came to my university as an external examiner for another thesis, and we co-taught a session in my graduate seminar. It was a highlight not only of my career but of my intellectual life. To cap it off, we co-authored an article for a festschrift.

**You mention humour and entertainment as important personality traits that good teachers must possess in order to at least "aspire to inspire." This resonates with McLuhan's oft quoted remark that "those who make a distinction between education and entertainment don't know the first thing about either." I'm assuming you agree with the statement. What I really wonder though is how you would characterize McLuhan's sense of humor: What function do you think his humorous personality played within his system of thought, and to what extent do you think he was misunderstood because of his jokes, puns and**

## **aphorisms?**

Yes, I agree with the statement. To some extent, it was inspired by his mother, Elsie McLuhan, an extraordinary woman who travelled coast to coast as a monologist (at the height of the Great Depression), giving readings and recitations that definitely blurred the line between education and entertainment.

Some of his jokes were truly awful: Q: What happens to a duck when he flies upside down? A: He quacks up. Others were thought-provoking. And he analyzed the function of jokes: airing grievances, etc. Very useful. He was at his humorous best when he stuck to puns, and that is not surprising because the single biggest influence on McLuhan was that master of the pun: James Joyce. (There are more references to Joyce in *Understanding Media* and in *From Cliché to Archetype*, for example, than to any other author.) In his public lectures, McLuhan used jokes to warm the audience up, and that is pretty much a foolproof tactic. I don't think he was misunderstood because of his jokes, but his puns and aphorisms were challenges to follow him in his thinking. On the whole, I think they were less abrasive and off-putting than the tradition they stem from: stay-with-me-if-you-are-smart-enough.

**Did you ever meet McLuhan in person? I am curious as to the circumstances that led you to become his official biographer...**

When I was an undergrad, I heard him speak for the first time in a public lecture shortly after *Understanding Media* was published. Ten minutes into the lecture I realized that although I had come to university for the intellectual challenge, I was in my third year but had never heard anything so stimulating. Essentially, he was challenging you to think new thoughts AND to think them in new ways. I became a McLuhan groupie and took every opportunity to hear him speak.

Years later, after I had brought out *Saussure for Beginners*, my editor for the same series gave me *carte blanche* to do another, so I wrote *McLuhan for Beginners*. It was a short book but heavy on quotations, so I wrote to the agency handling McLuhan (he had already been dead for 15 years) to get official permission to use the quotations. A week or two later I had a call from his widow, Corinne McLuhan. She said "You understand my husband's work so well, I would like you to write his biography." I didn't feel I could say no! I have been on a "McLuhan detour" ever since, having produced four books about him and critical editions of four of his own books. I say "detour" because at that time I was already more than ten years into the research on a scholar who is, in his own way, every bit as amazing as McLuhan—the British polymath Charles Kay Ogden. Interestingly enough, McLuhan studied at Cambridge with Ogden's co-author of *The Meaning of Meaning* (I.A. Richards), and he explicitly acknowledged that his phrase "the medium is the message" was inspired by the title of the Ogden and Richards book.

**Philip Marchand also wrote a great McLuhan biography. I was wondering if you have a personal relationship with him, and if you read his work. How do you think the two biographies complement each other?**

I have never met Phil, but I respect his work. I don't think it would be appropriate to say anything more than that. Douglas Coupland called Phil's book "marvelous" and mine "equally marvelous" and that is good enough for me!

**What are you currently working on?**

I have an enormous number of irons in the fire, including a complete script for a multi-media piece about McLuhan's life and work that may or may not get produced during the centennial year.

I originally approached Mark Batty Publishers with a proposal

to serve as commissioning editor for a series on major intellectual figures of the twentieth century. So far, I have produced the only two books in the series myself (that was not my plan!): *Everyman's McLuhan*, *Everyman's Joyce*. If I am going to be a one-man band, I hope the next will be *Everyman's Gertrude Stein*, though the publisher himself seems to be leaning toward Susan Sontag at the moment.

And then there is the Ogden biography, though I am tempted to do it as a biographical fiction, because readers would inevitably think the real parts were pure fiction and the fiction biographical!

—

© Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to W. Terrence Gordon and Figure/Ground with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.

**Suggested citation:**

Ralón, L. (2010). "Interview with W. Terrence Gordon," *Figure/Ground*. November 12th.

< <http://figureground.org/interview-with-w-terrence-gordon/> >

Questions? Contact Laureano Ralón at [ralonlaureano@gmail.com](mailto:ralonlaureano@gmail.com)

---

## **Interview with Susan Barnes**

© Susan B. Barnes and *Figure/Ground*

Dr. Barnes was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. November 7th, 2010.

Dr. Susan B. Barnes is a full professor in the College of Liberal Arts and Associate Director of the Lab for Social Computing at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She has received numerous grants for both applied and theoretical research on the impact of computers in society. Her publications include *Online Connections: Internet Interpersonal Relationships* (2001, Hampton Press) and *Computer-Mediated Communication: Human-to-Human Communication Across the Internet* (2003, Allyn & Bacon), *Web Research: Selecting, Evaluating & Citing* with Marie Radford and Linda Barr (2002, Allyn & Bacon), *Mediated interpersonal communication* with E. A. Konijn, S. Utz, M. Tanis (2008, Routledge). Dr. Barnes has written articles and book chapters for *Real Law @ Virtual Space*, *Communication and Cyberspace*, *Emerging Issues in Cyberculture*, *Communication Education*, *Journal of Science, Technology & Society*, *The IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, *The New Jersey Journal of Communication*, *The Iowa Journal of Communication*, *New Media & Society*, and *Interpersonal Computing and Technology: An Electronic Journal for the 21st Century (IPCT-J)*, the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* and *First Monday*. Currently, she is the Visual Communication Series editor for Peter Lang Publishing. In addition to her academic work, Dr. Barnes was a new media consultant and multimedia designer in New York City. Professionally, she has been Co-Chair of the New York Macintosh User's Group Multimedia Special Interest Group (SIG) and Chair of the Computer Graphics SIG for the Graphic Artist's Guild. Her artwork has been exhibited internationally and her design clients included: AdWeek, Apple Computer, Commodore Computer, McCann Erickson, Seagrams, Xerox, WWOR-TV, and HOT '97, a New York radio station.

**How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?**

Actually, there is a story behind this. In the early 1980's I was a graphic designer with a promising business. It was part

print and part audio visual design. Then in 1985, the IBM computer with a program called PC-Paint came on the market and began to be used. Half my business dissolved when the machine became popular for making audio visual materials. To make-up for the income loss, I began teaching part-time. When I applied for better jobs, I was told that I needed a better degree. So, I had a choice: to get an MFA in graphic arts or a Ph.D. in communication. I knew that the Ph.D. would give me more flexibility. It was a marketing of myself decision.

When I started talking about my plans for further education, a friend named David Linton recommended the Media Ecology Program. It made sense because attending this program meant that I didn't have to move and I could continue with my adjunct teaching and freelance work, which then included advertising for computer companies. I was accepted to the program and the rest is history.

**In your experience, how did the role of university professor evolve since you were an undergraduate student?**

My undergraduate work was at an art school, which is very different training than an academic subject. My masters was in performing arts, which again did not focus on writing thesis or research papers. Our classes were much more activity focused, which is the direction that education is heading today. It wasn't until I entered the Ph.D. program that I started having research work to do. The style of teaching at NYU was more discussion oriented and Neil Postman was a very engaging Professor.

But, from my own teaching experiences I can trace the introduction of computers into education. My first academic teaching job was at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), where I computerized their advertising program. I designed courses in multimedia computing for advertising communication majors. From FIT, I went to Marymount Manhattan College to add desktop publishing and desktop video to their



communication department. Fordham University then offered me a position to create a digital media program. All of the courses developed were interactive classes with technology. After Sept. 11th, I applied for a job at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) to leave the NYC area. At RIT, my career took a new turn. We did a Lab for Social Computing start-up and I received a National Science Foundation Grant to study the role of social networking in the classroom.

The biggest change in the role of the University Professor is the fact that student no longer revere professors because of the books they have written. Instead, students want classes that are more interactive and fun.

**What makes a good teacher today? How do you manage to command attention in the classroom in this age of interruption characterized by attention deficit and information overflow?**

Commanding attention in the classroom can be difficult. My first suggestion is don't let students use laptop computers when lecturing. They will be looking at YouTube, IMing friends, and playing online games. My second suggestion is to try and develop constructivist learning methods that engage students with activities instead of passively sitting in a room. Blended learning can also help because students are engaged with the computer to discuss problems. I have also used blended learning to ask quiz questions that will engage the students with a textbook. My third suggestion is to make sure that the textbook is used in projects and assignments for the class. Otherwise, some students don't even buy the textbook. Finally, carefully examine the type of text that you use. Books from academic publishers are often less expensive than books from textbook companies. The price of the textbook should be considered.

**What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring university professors?**

Younger professors may have an advantage over older ones because they can be more in-tune with younger generations. But students are constantly changing. They have no longer been groomed in high school for college work. Decide what is the most important thing to learn about a subject and develop interactive learning exercises to teach it. You can get students to work hard, but you have to motivate them to do so. Find ways to motivate students, such as having them research a topic they are interested in.

**Who were some of your mentors as a graduate student at NYU and what did you learn from them?**

Neil Postman was a wonderful mentor. I remember several incidents where I tried to get his attention with clever ideas. For instance, the first thesis that I wanted to do had already been done, so I had to come up with a new idea. At the time I was doing some computer development and had four or five computers in a row in my loft. Looking at the machines, a Mac, Amiga, and mini-computer, I realized that computer screens were becoming graphical. I knew that if I told Neil that I wanted to research how computer screens were going from text (IBM-Dos) to graphical interfaces (Macintosh, Amiga, and Mosaic), it would capture his interest and it did.

Another time, the department was very anti computer and visual aids. So, in a teaching class that Neil used to sit in on, I used PowerPoint slides and started my presentation with very dry media ecology information. Then the question was asked: "Does the Mac make you stupid?" Neil immediately woke up and said, "I need that research." While the students in the class criticized me for the PowerPoints, the teacher wanted to know how to make the slides. What I learned from Neil is that you can market yourself as an academic if you ask and answer provocative questions.

The most useful tool I learned was from Chris Nystrom. She taught the seven sentences to organize a thesis idea. It was

going from the broad area of communication that the study was under to the specific idea you want to research. I still use the strategy with my grad students to help them organize their thinking and writing.

### **Did personal computers make us stupid?**

That is an interesting question. When I started my research on Graphical User Interfaces (GUI), I did not know that Neil was a friend of Alan Kay, the developer of the (GUI). Neil invited Alan to speak at one of our conferences and I really got some insight into how the GUI was supposed to work. The original concept was to make the computer, including the programming, easy enough for a child to use. Kay believed that if the computer was going to be a primary medium of communication, then people should be able to read and write (programming) with it. But, Steve Jobs only saw the visual potential and not the programming. As a result, the Macintosh was a visual, not a verbal machine. So in a way the computer does make us stupid because we cannot easily program it. The computer is a medium of communication that is beyond the understanding of most people. The argument for this is that most of us do not understand cars either. However, a car is a mode of transportation, not communication. Now we have the widespread use of a communication technology that most people don't know how to control or program. We depend upon the software written by companies. Therefore, embedded in computers is a commercial bias.

### **Is today's generation the "dumbest generation" in your view?**

Personally, I would not use the word "dumb." The current generation of kids have grown up with computers. But it is not just the computers that shape them. Today both mothers and fathers work and they program the kids time through play dates, sports and music lessons. Kids growing up today don't have enough time to imagine or play. Playing a video game is not the same as making up a game to play with the

neighbourhood kids. A certain amount of creativity is missing from today's students. They want to know exactly what to do and you can't give them room to be imaginative, unless it is structured into the assignment.

Also, I believe that computers have contributed to the lack of respect that kids have for adults. As a child of the 1960s, I was aware that there were problems with adult society. However, I also knew that I had to take responsibility for my actions. You cannot disrespect parents and then be irresponsible with your actions. An example of this is *cyberbullying*. There is a lot of misbehaviour on the Internet because people are not being responsible for their actions. At times many of these actions may appear dumb, but the kids don't know how they are supposed to act.

Additionally, because the computer is a new medium, adults did not know how to respond to it and help guide their kids in its use. Parents let the kids become the experts on the machine, which usurped parental controls. Today, people look to schools to solve all of these social problems, but it really all starts with the home and teaching appropriate and inappropriate social behaviour. It also doesn't help when parents don't believe their children could do anything wrong and don't support school's policies.

**Interesting remarks about respect and responsibility, or lack thereof. What is it about anonymity and distance that seems to bring the worst out of people?**

Anonymity is the one topic that I did not cover in the last question. A key media ecological concept for the Internet is the fact that computer-mediated communication separates people in the communication process. This relates to the concept of conditions of attendance. Face-to-face communication requires people to be co-present as a condition of attendance and the Internet does not. Because we don't see each other there is sometimes a feeling of anonymity, or the feeling that we don't

have to be responsible for what we say and do online. The separation of people from their words, enables individuals to misbehave online. A central issue for supportive Internet communication is people need to take responsibility for their words and actions.

**You mentioned off the record that you were interested in the concept of figure and ground, which is central to McLuhan's main thesis but is also present in the works of phenomenologists and gestalt psychologists. I am curious as to where your thinking is headed with regards to this notion...**

Figure ground is a concept in Gestalt theory that says you can't see the figure and the background at the same time. The idea relates to McLuhan and media ecology because you can not focus on the content of a medium and its structural form. People need to examine one or the other, for example, the idea of conditions of attendance. If researchers just examine the content (figure) of discussion lists, they will observe misbehaviour and not know why it occurs. But, if you examine the structure (ground) of the different communication media, you will observe that people are separated from their actions. This separation tends to make some people believe they are anonymous and as a result can do whatever they want without being responsible for their actions. Looking at the medium itself and not the content of the medium, will provide a greater understanding of the medium's impact on culture.

**What other projects are you currently working on, and when is your next book coming out?**

Currently, I am working on two book projects. One is a visual communication book called *Visual Communication: From Cave Art to Second Life*. The book provides a history of visual technologies and the theories of visual communication, information on how to become visually literate, and a description of how digital technologies have changed media—print, TV, photography, film, graphic design, and

advertising. Additionally, it has a chapter about new digital technologies, including virtual reality and Second Life (Peter Lang Publishing). This project should be published next Fall.

The other is called *Socializing the Classroom* and it is about using social media in classroom environments. It is based on grant research. A National Science Foundation grant to study the use of social networking tools in the classroom and a Provost's Teaching and Learning grant to incorporate Second Life into an advertising course. Using a media ecological approach, social networking is examined throughout the book (Lexington Press). I expect this to be out next Winter.

As soon as these books are completed, I hope to be working on a follow-up book to *Computer-Mediated Communication* that focuses more on social networking.

—

**© Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Susan Barnes and Figure/Ground with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.**

**Suggested citation:**

**Ralón, L. (2010). "Interview with Susan Barnes,"**

**Figure/Ground. November, 7th.**

**< <http://figureground.org/interview-with-susan-barnes/> >**

**Questions? Contact Laureano Ralón at [ralonlaureano@gmail.com](mailto:ralonlaureano@gmail.com)**