

Tetrads for History and Alternate History

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Tetrads for History and Alternate History

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Marshall McLuhan's tetrad is a useful tool for discovering and understanding how human activities, especially media, are connected to one another. It maps a four-part relationship that happens in any human endeavor. That activity

AMPLIFIES or **ENHANCES** an aspect or certain aspects of human life; as it does this, it

OBSOLESCEs an activity that had previously been amplified; and the human endeavor also

RETRIEVES an activity that had previously been obsolesced or pushed off center stage; and the amplified activity

REVERSES or **FLIPS INTO** a new activity, at once very different from but closely related to what was amplified.

So, for example:

RADIO AMPLIFIES sound and speech heard instantly across great distances, for the purposes of news, entertainment, etc;

OBSOLESCEs slower visual media such as newspapers and books;

RETRIEVES word of mouth, in-person singing, oral history; and

REVERSES into TELEVISION.

And TELEVISION, in turn, **AMPLIFIES** audio-visual sent instantly across great distances;

OBSOLESCEs radio (as a source of drama and comedy);

RETRIEVES cave painting and all painting, motion pictures, and all forms of writing; and

REVERSES into the Internet, smartphones, holography.

In other words, tetrads move through history in cycles -- or, as I have put it, in [Wheels or Spirals](https://www.academia.edu/28945044/Tetrad_Wheels_of_Cultural_Evolution) (https://www.academia.edu/28945044/Tetrad_Wheels_of_Cultural_Evolution).

Now, I've been thinking a lot about alternate history these days -- writing, reading, watching narratives in which some crucial element in the past has been changed. Last week, I had a great conversation with Chuck Todd (<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/alternative-history-beatles-putin-and-supreme-court/id1156592336?i=1000639727924>) on his podcast, in which I said in order for an alternate history scenario to be plausible, its elements must be as close to real history as possible -- that is, everything other than the element of history that you're changing in your scenario.

And I realized last night that history and alternate history reside in a tetradic relationship. Here's how I see that:

Tetrad for HISTORY

AMPLIFIES: the past, as accurately as we can know it

OBSOLESCE: the daily news, focus on the here and now

RETRIEVES: myth, legend, religion, non-scholarly accounts of the past

REVERSES INTO: alternate history -- changing a key element of the past; for both entertainment (fiction) and a better understanding of "real" history (in quotes, because even real history is not the entire story)

Tetrad for ALTERNATE HISTORY

AMPLIFIES: a fictitious better or worse world, obtained by changing a crucial element of history (for example [The Man in the High Castle](#) imagines a world in which Germany and Japan won the Second World War).

OBSOLESCE: our immersion in the present, and our view that it was inevitable

RETRIEVES: the notion most of us had when we were children that we could change something just by wanting it

REVERSES INTO: real alternate realities, which recent data from the Webb Telescope suggests could be possible (see this article in the [New York Times](#) which says our universe may be just one universe is a "multiverse").

Further reading on Tetrads: [Laws of the Media](#) (by Marshall McLuhan, with Preface by Paul Levinson);

[Tetrad Wheels of Cultural Evolution](#) (Paul Levinson);

[Tetrad on the Selfie](#) (Paul Levinson);

[Tetrads and Chiasmus: A Reclamation of the Tetrad Wheel](#) (Matthew S. Lindia & Paul Levinson),

Further reading, listening to, viewing Alternate History:

[A Fiction Writer's Guide to Alternate History](#) by Jack Dann;

[Paul Levinson's review](#) of *A Fiction Writer's Guide to the Alternate History*;

[Paul Levinson's interview with Jack Dann](#);

[Paul Levinson's interview with Rufus Sewell](#), who starred in *The Man in the High Castle* series on Amazon Prime Video;

[Chuck Todd's interview with Paul Levinson](#) about alternate histories;

[It's Real Life](#) (alternate history about The Beatles by Paul Levinson, made into a radio play)