

MESSAGE IN THE MASS AGE: REMEMBERING THE McLuhan MATRIX*

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In the 1920s, I.A. Richards' experiments with the practical criticism of poetry ended in the cul-de-sac of his students' stock responses to the texts. Marshall McLuhan relates the story of Richards' subsequent visit to the University of Wisconsin. While canoeing, Richards fell into the icy waters of Lake Mendota and, when rescued, was unconscious but nonetheless clinging to the thwart of the canoe. *The Cardinal*, the student paper at Wisconsin, ran a feature cartoon on the incident with the caption: "Saved by a stock response" (34, pp.19-20).

In his later work, McLuhan himself became increasingly interested in the stock responses that assist people to negotiate various demanding situations in everyday life. He developed, correspondingly, a conservative amnesia about the reifications of daily existence that distorted his focus on the liberating or humanistic features of the cultural environment. I have been sharply critical of this amnesia (see 10), and find no reason now to retract the basic criticisms. At the same time, in order to appropriate and appraise McLuhan's contribution, it does not seem enough to rehearse those criticisms, unless we can simultaneously account, in a complementary vein, for the fact that McLuhan's writings continue to intrigue. How is it that his work may still serve us well as an alibi for discussing a configuration of matters deeply important for us? To what extent can it be regarded as a new model for a strategically-oriented humanist scholarship, characterized by a concern with paradigm shifts, civilization-level reflection, a futuristic edge and experimental pedagogy? The observations below are designed to sketch such a complementary framework for a continuing discussion.

Many modern accounts have converged to suggest that a momentous human revolution is under way, with a significance that may parallel or exceed that of the industrial and political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The extent to which this revolution may pivot on new modalities of information, knowledge, and intelligence, the extent to which it implies overt rearrangements of our social, economic, political and cultural institutions, and the extent to which it entails subliminal alterations in our cognitive, emotive, and esthetic responses have become large, open and pressing questions of our times, not least because of the immense conflicts that may be implicated in any of these changes. In the immediate, the nature and impact of our newly-emerging electric or electronic technologies and the way in which their social incorporation may proceed point to possible consequences for the structure and quality of human interactions at least as profound as the consequences attached to the invention of writing or print.

Marshall McLuhan tried to absorb and respond to this prospect of the human life-world on the point of evolution, and to articulate an orientation to the pressures that this imposing complex of problems and opportunities exercises

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on the enduring concerns in the purview of the humanities. As an explorer of new landscapes, he has left behind a challenging intellectual and institutional legacy. He can be described as a maverick humanist; his institutional fate is particularly interesting and instructive for framing his intellectual project.

It appears paradoxical that McLuhan should have become the world's most widely known and acclaimed literary scholar while remaining relatively uncherished or resisted in the academic milieu where he spent most of his working life. A year after his death, his Centre for Culture and Technology is being dismantled at the University of Toronto, and his work has attracted relatively little active interest in recent years in the academic humanities. By contrast, it is worth recalling how very popular McLuhan became during the 1960s in important non-university sectors including teaching, the arts, engineering, architecture, business, and media-related fields. In the French language, *le mcluhanisme* became a common noun, signifying mixed-media cultural forms. In Canada, McLuhan advised the federal government; in the U.S., he collected substantial fees for talking to executives of Bell Telephone, IBM, Container Corporation of America, and General Motors. It has been observed that McLuhan's sense of the corporate "may even have made the executive suite as attractive a base of operations for him as the throne room had been for the early humanists" (38,p.93).

Newspapers routinely referred to him as "communications prophet" or "media guru," and Toronto newspaper coverage alone of McLuhan was 1223 column inches in 1964 (36,pp.31-33). His face appeared on the covers of *Newsweek*, and *Saturday Review*, and material by and about him reached vast and varied audiences through new mass circulation organs like *Look*, *Vogue*, *Family Circle*, *Fortune*, *Life*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *National Review*, *New Yorker*, *New York Times Magazine*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Popular Photography*, as well as radio, television, a record, and films. McLuhan also took advantage of the rise of the mass paperback, and published over a dozen books, of which *Understanding Media* sold well over 100,000 copies. It is fair to suppose that in capturing and articulating the structure of feeling of the 1960s, McLuhan touched a contemporary nerve.

McLuhan's reception in university circles during this period and since has been much less enthusiastic, and it is possible to identify at least four major clusters of difficulties in the way of a favourable and enduring incorporation of his concerns, polarized around his deviations from the specialist academy from high culture, from the spirit of critical values and from the realm of the privileged, isolated text.

1. An information environment of electronic data-processing through the mass media and with the aid of computers suggests a major shift in the place and function of formal education. It favours the recognition and formulation of patterns that will make stored information available to research and make sense of the proliferation of signs at large, and it requires the strategic skills of coordinating and interrelating data to complement specialised knowledge and memory. A premium is placed on comprehensive understanding of the processes

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of learning and knowledge formation. To an extent, the humanist advocacy of interdisciplinary liberal education is confirmed on these grounds but it is not hard to see how such an emphasis runs counter to the institutional and professional attachment to specialized scholarship.

In the nearly feudal division of functions and disciplines in the conservative university structure of the 1950s, McLuhan offended the dominant norms with his vigorous pursuit of an interdisciplinary investigation cutting across the humanities and social sciences, beginning in 1953 with the journal *Explorations*, founded on a Ford Foundation grant. These norms, of course, have since loosened, partly through McLuhan's own efforts, in the context of a general attack on the feudal forms of education pressed by such agencies as Ivan Illich and advocates of deschooling as well as by a broadly militant student movement. Interdisciplinary formations today are stronger, somewhat more capable of looking after their needs, and correspondingly somewhat less strident, if even more strategically important.

Within the classification, definition, and co-ordination of data, the electronic techniques pose a further great challenge for all scholars, but especially for the special concerns of the humanities: the challenge to know the limits of what are and are not technical problems and to support the valorization of those human functions — from the phatic to the valuative and consensually cognitive — for which technology cannot substitute because these human functions are essential to the interpretive and communicative dimensions in the formation of human community and in the intersubjective legitimation of social and cultural goals (39, pp.5-7). The information revolution, thus, with all its perceivable pressures and unforeseen fallout, places the humanities with the full force of all their traditional concerns in a strategic position.

McLuhan's recognition of the educational function of the new media, however, ran into the resistance of scholars to the primitive contents of the available mass media. His polemical attacks on the monopoly of the book as teaching-aid (28, p.1), and on the extent to which traditional education coerces students to be passive consumers of uniformly-packaged learning (26, p.144), were polemically rejected by academics in a defensive posture. As McLuhan moved further from the institutional norms for the production and distribution of information by playing to a mass audience in new pedagogical forms, his serious underestimation of universities, and of the critical exploration of cultural and intellectual values which is the mandated function of the universities, simply further strained his relations with the structure of institutional norms. In the end, the academic humanities have yet to engage with his provocative formulation of a "classroom without walls" and its central recognition that, in the electronic information milieu, most learning occurs outside the classroom.

2. As proportion and propriety are closely linked, so a reflection on the volume of information outside the classroom and the formal arts led McLuhan, through the *Explorations* period and thereafter, to reject the high-culture provincialism that "everything connected with industry, commerce, sport, and popular entertainment is merely vulgar" (18, p.96). He came to define culture as a communication

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network with which all objects and activities have some kind of relation so that "there are no non-cultural areas" in society (19,p.191). By shifting attention to form, he attended to the formal continuity of cultural articulation in a multiplicity of fields. When McLuhan linked profane culture to canonical culture, and proposed that the new media were "serious culture" (21,p.7) or that advertising used symbolist techniques to create communal participation in the totemistic institutions of national brand commodities such as Coca Cola (20,p.555), he was taken to be heretical with respect to the canonical humanities professions.

Now we can recognize such arguments as belonging to a large culturalist complex concerned with reducing the distance between the arts and the other forms of life. Northrop Frye's argument for the formal continuity of narrative across different discourses, the universalism implicit in the attention to the rhetorical stances and conventions that both organize discipline-specific writing and cut across disciplines, the structural or semiotic generalization of signs throughout the social domain in networks of conventional formations, and the post-structuralist development of the productive notions of trace and genealogy all parallel or confirm McLuhan's approach and create around it a politically democratic intellectual and institutional cluster which was unavailable in the 1950s and 1960s, which is more or less realistically synchronized with the widely variable retrieval and reception conditions in the contemporary information environment, and into which McLuhan can be fruitfully resituated. What the traditional humanities and the humanist social sciences still need to introduce into such a pan-semiological configuration in order to assist the active appropriation of practical powers of decision and agency is: (a) a revalorization of the value definitions and symbolic exploration that the open forms of the arts serve to provide; (b) a thematization of the ways in which the closed forms of mythologies (in Barthes's sense) of mass culture may be opened in individual reception; (c) a reconnection of the semiological field with the body politic in the fullness of the world; and (d) an emancipatory anatomy of the forms of domination at play in the semiotized social universe.

3. In contrast to the deeply rooted defensive posture of the traditional humanities with their received critical stance or wasteland mentality with respect to the social order or disorder of the times, McLuhan, as early as 1948 in his "Introduction" to Hugh Kenner's *Paradox in Chesterton*, announced programmatically the need to face "the problem of creating a practical moral and social order...and this necessarily means an action which co-operates in multiple ways with the numerous hopeful features of the contemporary world" (17,p.xvii). Whereas the early McLuhan had attacked "the technological bias of the age" (16, p.171), later he came to describe the electric media as hopeful features that we should maximize (33, p. 133), and to claim that they resolved the traditional humanist problems — for example, healed "the print-made split between head and heart" (26, p.170).

Such a technologically-effected resolution of problems like the dissociation of sensibility that preoccupied T.S. Eliot is a paradoxical reversal of the customary

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superordination of the world of humane values to the world of the machine and it was bound to evoke nervous reservations from the academic humanities, with justice in so far as any distinction in McLuhan's writing between technical potentials and the contexts of human response is elusive. But it is noteworthy that elements of all of McLuhan's humanist traditions collaborated in this reversal. The search for order among his Catholic influences such as G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and Wyndham Lewis took an openly technical turn in Teilhard de Chardin. In the sociological tradition of Lewis Mumford, until the late retractions, electric technology served as the motive force of the renewal of civilization. In the visual arts, from Futurism and Dadaism to Cubism and Constructivism, as in Mallarmé's description of the newspaper as a new form of communal landscape (32, pp.5-21), McLuhan found, to adapt a phrase of art historian Siegfried Giedion, that mechanization took command of the imagination. The English traditions of praise for the miracles of the machine go back to Tennyson's "Locksley Hall," Carlyle's description of locomotives as "our poems", and Shelley's description of the scope of technical power in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Perhaps most importantly, the Anglo-American tradition of critical theory, of which McLuhan could be described as a culminating figure (10, p.135), in its strivings for totality and order, from I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot through the New Critics and Northrop Frye, developed an increasingly technical orientation. There is a plausible leap from a technical art form to other technical communicative forms, in this case, electric media, to serve as the agencies of a salvation that the secularized eschatology in this tradition has since Matthew Arnold customarily anticipated from art within its unresolved art-religion interface (10, p.11).

McLuhan's strongly urged confidence in the option presented by an incipient electric culture tended, in the utopian mood of public reception of the 1960s, to make less visible or compelling in their own terms his critiques of centuries of mechanization, which link him with a variety of European traditions of alienation critique, and also tended to overshadow the countervailing humanist scruples in his methodological assertion that culture need not be accepted as a fate (26, p.76), his warning that "we must now work very hard to retain" the achieved values of the Gutenberg mechanical culture (26, p.135), or his repeated comments on the status of his own work as consisting of probes, not fixed formulas. The field of attention acquired from both a humanities and a social science tradition as well as the visual arts, the set of problems and resources received from a literary tradition, and the moral orientation supported by a Catholic religious tradition combine in McLuhan with an anthropology of man as "the tool-making animal, whether in speech or in writing or in radio" (26, p.4), to create an original synthesis which, taken as a whole, but read through the emphases of the moment, was bound to be almost impossible for literary humanists to accept.

4. McLuhan's "worldly turn," as it might be called, reversed the systematic isolation of the literary humanities from social currents. He thus confronted a

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two-centuries-old critical strategy adopted under the hostile pressures of industrial, commercial, and political development. McLuhan argued relentlessly that the age of electro-magnetic information processing was tendentially capable of satisfying without exception all of the concerns that humanists had demarcated for two centuries as their basic demands more or less in critical opposition to the system of the world. In effect McLuhan declared that the culture-society, or cultivation-calculation, antagonism of Romantic origin was terminated (10, p.8), and he used an apparatus developed in literature and critical theory for the analysis of communicative and social relations.

In as much as his arguments about a comprehensive information environment left no place for privileged isolation of the humanities and their objects of study, McLuhan was simply taking note of professional and cultural realities that the humanist were unready to accept as were, in their turn, the political economists. The general principle here is the ending of privileged, self-determined, stable spheres of separated human activity. Nevertheless, the skeptical response from the humanities involved a proper concern that McLuhan's impatience with mediations may erode the ever more necessary humanistic opposition to the imperialism of instrumental reason. In the event, it passed unnoticed that McLuhan was, among other things, offering to recapture for humane reflection some territory in the realm of scientific processes and social relations which had been abandoned and which was being rapidly claimed by the positivist social sciences that were vigorously on the rise after the 1939-1945 war. Evidently the humanities did not need to feel disarmed; they could consider that they were being placed, as McLuhan hoped, in the control tower of society to navigate its course, having thus acquired greater responsibility, i.e. greater capacity to respond to a greater range of questions.

McLuhan's interdisciplinary worldliness was, in fact, except for his few academic and many public supporters, unwelcomed in all quarters. If his excursions into the social sciences were predictably considered from given social scientific disciplinary standpoints to lack density, it was equally predictable that his turn to the consideration of historical, technological, and other environmental elements would cause alarm in the circles of the literary institution, especially as it seemed to threaten the hermetic closure of the textual object around which the strategic moves of the literary humanities had only in the preceding decade or two developed a professional institutional base (see 10,11).

Today, at a different strategic stage of institutional development, texts are routinely opened to intertextual configurations within the expanded formalization that results from the structuralist and post-structuralist consolidation of the language paradigm (see 11). New attention to the contexts (social practices, collective interpretive norms and assumptions, or conditions of production and reproduction) that impinge intrinsically on texts is being given persuasive direction and support, moreover, from such divergent critical quarters as Michel Foucault, Stanley Fish, and Raymond Williams (see 13,12,41). It seems much more likely that McLuhan may be able to appear less eccentric or deviant in such a configuration and find the proper hearing that can earn for his concerns a place

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of importance in a broadly ecumenical paradigm.

In fact, McLuhan's work remains one of the best alibis in the humanities for exploring the nexus that bears his mark: interpretation-communication-community. It links him to pragmatist traditions as much as to hermeneutic traditions. The context of reception belongs to both, and McLuhan's enduring sense of a mass audience that he believed was too numbed by the habitual patterns of the cultural environment to be aware of the changes occurring around it gave him the broad theme of manipulation in order to take account of it. From the Richards-Eliot tradition McLuhan had inherited, in any case, an interest in the manipulation of impulses to serve in the formation of a wider equilibrium. Manipulation and massage, then, are pivots from which some of the stimulating elements in McLuhan's work may be reviewed—elements that may still be usefully touched on in contemporary discussions.

The major opening image of McLuhan's 1967 text, *The Medium is the Massage* (29, pp.4-5), highlights a life-sized hand cupping an ear attached to the barely visible side of a head. A lock of hair, a patch of forehead, and a dim suggestion of a cavity to house the eye add fragments to the picture. The sole caption inquires: "...the massage?" The most partial semiology will display here the central problematic of McLuhan's interrogations: an acoustic tactile field dominated by the hand, i.e. the universe of manipulation.

The controlling focus of the image is a receptive gesture of amplified attention. In mapping the field of attention, more broadly than Harold Innis's inquiry into why we attend to the things to which we attend (15, p.xvii), McLuhan expands a problem in the psychology and sociology of perception toward the articulation of an ecology of sense, taking from the organic and social sensorium such aspects of sense as sensation, sensuality, sensuousness, sensibility, apprehension, affect, percept, concept, rationality. As their ratios change, McLuhan says, people change (29, p.41).

The gesture of amplified auditory attention, especially as the ear is said to favour no particular point of view, rests on a posture of total sensory receptivity adjusted to the anticipation of an acoustic or oral message—which means, for McLuhan, not only spoken or verbal but total (22, item 1; 26, p.3). In fact, the verbal caption, "... the massage?", even as it echoes the earlier cybernetic formula—the medium is the message—that McLuhan introduced in 1959 (23; see also 24,25), exceeds that formula. Its *double entendre* provides a dual hermeneutic specification of message within the communicative paradigm, historically drawing attention to the mass age with its mass culture, and behaviorally, to the sensory massage. The pun, and the echo, in their verbal synergies, of course further exceed these propositions.

The punch that comes from the media environment then makes good on the anticipations; its gift saturates the receptive horizons of expectation. According to McLuhan:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological,

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moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments (29, p.26).

In message, everything and everyone is completely worked over, altered, manipulated. We are here in a world of mass mediatization, forced socialization, universal imposition of models. We are past a world where contents are significant, or even where forms dispose of relative self-determination. It is noteworthy that we seem to have here a regulative paradigm, not a productive paradigm. The media are the processes that effect changes "of scale or pace or pattern" in human affairs (27, pp.23-24).

What appears here as a general theory of objectivation has at its centre a theory of communication. In this sense, media are not vehicles or means of distribution of formed contents, or co-efficients of ideology; in their very operations they are *ipso facto* effectors of ideology and social relations (3, p.169). It follows that they compel involvement and participation—the terms through which McLuhan characterizes the electric age (in contrast to the specialist detachment of the earlier print-dominated period). In as much as the human image is that of a receiver, this is evidently the world of universal consumption, consumption of signs, consumption of media. Correspondingly, the media themselves take on, in their very operations, the form of domination, the form of the unilateral gift, the message.

On Jean Baudrillard's account, if one agrees to understand communication, not as simple transmission-reception of a message, but as the reciprocal space of a *responsibility* (not psychological or moral, but personal, mutual correlation in exchange), then media, as McLuhan accurately presents them, "fabricate non-communication," preventing response, and "making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response *simulation*, themselves interpreted in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact)." A system of social control and power is thus coded in the abstract social relations so established (3, pp.169-170). In the light of his tribal optimism, McLuhan's proposition of media message is clearly not a critical proposition, but it is equally clearly endowed with considerable analytic value.

If, on McLuhan's reading, media processes do not serve primarily to convey information but to reprocess and transform the factors of communication, then we are taken past the theatre of representation and the contentions and abstentions of signs. Signs are separated from transcendental signifieds, as Jacques Derrida would prefer, de-auratized, as Walter Benjamin would say, that is, stripped of intrinsic finality and implicated in a general manipulation, a political epistemology, a tactical disposition, a coded program. It is at this point that McLuhan finds a provisional terminus of sorts, to replace the transcendental ends that are lost to the media message, by way of recourse to nature, especially

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the sensorium: "All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical" (29, P.26), and extensions alter our ratios of sense perceptions and thus the way we think and act (29, p.41)

It would be important to study the extent to which this phantasm of nature, which draws body, technology, and social form into a simulation model of the penetration of the nervous system by cultural process, can bear fruit under investigation into the connections between organism and social organisation. It is possible to criticise (10, pp.168-170) the ideological character of the subject-object identity which is postulated here by McLuhan and which, from genetics to socio-biology, philosophy, literary theory, or physics is part of a complex contemporary strategic configuration. What is worth noting here is that the sensorium serves, on McLuhan's account, to provide the variables of the code carried and imposed by the media. It is then the sensory bias of the method of information processing favoured by a particular medium that regulates the process of signification and exchange. In consequence, the socio-cultural system has no further foundational or teleological myths or referential values and McLuhan, accordingly, places at the peak of his value hierarchy an interplay of senses as opposed to any exaggeration of one over the other. Indeed, he defines "touch," the sense of manipulation, as the general interplay of senses rather than a separate sense (26, p.65).

McLuhan's prophetic stance is accordingly assumed, just like Teilhard de Chardin's cosmic optimism (26, p.32), to the extent that he finds in the era of electro-magnetic technology an era of tactile communication. If McLuhan is right that a period of fragmentation, distance, and detached sequential reflection, what he calls a visual period, is receding, then it is intriguing to consider that just at the point where touch is being denied its separate sensory value as a factor in physical manipulation, and, correspondingly, its value in classical political-economic terms, it should be recategorized as a general sensory interplay characteristic of generalized manipulation and plasticity (2, p. 100). McLuhan's argument merits serious attention within a constellation of similar arguments to the effect that the movement of information increasingly exceeds in significance the movement of physical materials. In his description, the result is that the communicative universe becomes a field of interface, of being in touch, of tactile and, one would have to say, tactical simulation, one might even hope tactful simulation, in a mosaic arrangement where message turns into massage.

McLuhan thus brings organic and organizational elements into active relationship in a way that leaves neither term stable or, rather, institutes both through the structure of their relationships. It is of particular interest that, as a result, he moves to reinstitute as the key to his ecology of sense, with a new historical edge, the category of *sensus communis* (26, p.106). In his discussion of the sensorium, McLuhan combines a medieval usage of this category, as a faculty of the individual mind that serves as the common root or the processor of the information of the outer senses, with the category of common sense as the sense that founds community. This latter usage refers to the common world, predisposition, most general frame of reference or way of seeing of an epoch or a

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culture, which has served through the centuries of the commercial-industrial period, in Vico, Shaftesbury, the Scottish moralists, or the German pietists (see 14, pp. 19-29), as a defense against privation, usually as an ideal norm to the extent that a broad public sphere, or *a fortiori*, a substantial community, were not given in empirical reality. Kant had demarcated a space for this problem in his discussion of aesthetic judgement, and any attempt to maintain the subjectivity of taste while avoiding the traps of ideosyncratic subjectivism must come to terms somehow with an effectively shared dimension. In our own information environment, as even higher cognitive functions come under questioning as to their ineluctable subjectivity, a historical concretization of the given *sensus communis* seems indispensable for any hermeneutic theory that raises the question of reception.

It is in this connection that Marshall McLuhan, like Walter Benjamin (see 4,35), calls attention to the conditions of reception in mass culture through his interpretation of forms and media and their functions. McLuhan's historical specification is to find in electro-magnetic processes the shapes of a new electronic community, made interdependent by the instantaneous and thus simultaneous processing of information in a global network, and correspondingly reshaped at the level of the individual psyche with a discontinuous and inclusive mode of awareness as opposed to the sequential and segmented modes of consciousness in earlier cultures dominated by fragmenting technologies. Like Freud or Marcuse, McLuhan reads history with pointed reference to psychic organization.

It may be of interest in other contexts that sometimes McLuhan describes this global electronic village community in the terms of an ultra-conservative ritualized ethos (31, p.70), sometimes, more rarely, in the terms of an ultra-libertarian pluralistic eros (26, p.31), and sometimes in the terms of a millennial religious apocalypse (31, p.72). Partly, there are ideological variants at play here, partly a strategy of ambivalence that builds into the text enough contradictions to reduce the vulnerability to refutation or irony that attend a single point of view. What matters more for the moment is McLuhan's central insistence on the question of a new rationality, both public and private, a *sensus communis* at play at the levels of both sensory organism and technical organisation:

Our extended senses, tools, technologies, through the ages, have been closed systems incapable of interplay or collective awareness. Now, in the electric age, the very instantaneous nature of co-existence among our technological instruments has created a crisis quite new in human history. Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious. Our technologies, like our private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes rational co-existence possible (26, p.5)

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McLuhan's central contribution then is to contemporary rationality debates or, more precisely, to the discussions over what ratios might regulate the tactics of social organization in a tactile communicative ecology. His target is a conscious rationality, co-ordinating individual culture and liberty with collective culture and mythology in the light of day (26, p.269). The issue here is one of proportions, or rather, of disproportioning and reportioning, in as much as he rejects, as he claims electronic culture rejects, the proportions of the closure effected by visual rationality.

For techniques of insight into the forces shaping human perception, McLuhan turns, like Walter Benjamin (see 4, pp.157-202), to the patterns and methods of awareness of symbolist and modern art and poetry, to the contours of the process itself in distinction from the products. In the esthetic developed from Ruskin and the French symbolists, he finds clues to a procedure of multi-leveled insights. It is characteristic of McLuhan's convictions and habits that he seeks to find in popular culture the basic components of a hieratic intelligence and is prepared to withstand the almost inevitable scorn of "serious people". In a discussion of the Gothic grotesque, he notes that the vogue of the Gothic romance was considered trite and ridiculous by "serious people" (26, p.266) in Blake's time, yet could later and now be seen as the quest for a unified mode of perception which held the key to the way out of the "single vision and Newton's sleep" that Blake fought all his life.

Ruskin's description, which won Rimbaud's and Proust's attention, presents the grotesque as a way of breaking open the closed system of perception embedded in the "regime of Renaissance perspective and single vision or realism" (26, p.266):

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character (37, p.91).

McLuhan finds here a source of Rimbaud's technique of vision in his *Illuminations*, and draws a line to Joyce as well, in as much as Joyce accepted the grotesque "as a mode of broken or syncopated manipulation to permit *inclusive* or simultaneous perception of a diversified field" (26, p.267). The world of manipulation again closes on itself but this time as a resource of artistic articulation. Simultaneity here may be read as analogical ratios rather than as the coordination of absolute presence (see 30, p.240; 8, p.85).

We might draw further lines between Rimbaud's "painted slides" and Benjamin's dialectical images, linking a French poet and a German cultural

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theorist, or among Keats's, Benjamin's and the Frankfurt School's commitment to fragments as anchors of a sublime defence against the pressures of single vision and homogenised rationality. The point is that McLuhan is here working deeply within a cultural configuration that also includes the structuralist attention to gaps and fissures in texts and the Brechtian theatre of multiple-vised estrangement. His effort, not unique in history but significant in our time, is to retrieve discontinuity from the multi-cultural archives as a viable resource of illumination, as a technique of "collocation, a parataxis of components representing insight by carefully established ratios, but without a point of view or lineal connection or sequential order" (26, p.267). McLuhan's own pedagogic art employs such juxtapositions in a mythic configuration, in both Barthes' sense of myth as having no "regular ratio between the volume of the signified and that of the signifier" (1, p.120) and McLuhan's own sense of myth as a "mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects" (29, p.114).

In the same vein, McLuhan insists that under the conditions of simultaneous information movement and human interdependence, neither truth nor practicality are well served by the fixed or specialist point of view, closure, or perspective, but require, as the only viable method, the method of the open "field" and the suspended judgement, the discovery of the 20th century in art and physics alike (26, p.278). On McLuhan's account, the suspended judgement deconstructs the visual distance or detachment implicit in the narcissism of the point of view and therefore re-involves one in the process through the open "field" method, having surpassed the limitations of one's assumptions by criticizing them. We must remember here that the category of participation, for McLuhan, is modelled on Keats's "negative capability", and therefore signifies an active processing of uncertainty without closure. As Raymond Williams recently noted in a different context (40, pp.334-338), a suspended judgement may be a necessary prelude to the eventual exercise of an authentic judgement restored to its circumstances and thus deprived of a privileged standpoint of superiority. In other words, McLuhan's argument may properly open the doors to a full range of normative considerations, in the sense of orientations for an open-ended, pluridimensional life-style, and thus to a most urgent problem of how to redeem value discussion from the grip of a Philistine moralism.

In Joycean stream of consciousness, or in other contemporary techniques, McLuhan sees a transformation of an impersonal process to one that centrally involves active reception as Joyce expressed it in *Finnegan's Wake*: "My consumers are they not my producers?" And through these new realms of indeterminacy or undecidability, McLuhan calls for an expansion of our norms of rationality, so that visual sequence may no longer monopolize the rational norm and that much of what modern discussion regards as irrational or non-logical may be seen as features of "the ordinary transactions between the self and the world, or between subject and object" (26, p.278). Tactile rationality would thus be a larger rationality in which visual closure, among others, would be suspended. When Derrida writes of deferring linguistic closure as long as possible, it is clear

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that the poststructuralist investigation of the trace structure of language and McLuhan's study of the strategic methods of inclusive awareness have important points of contact within the single web of the modern information environment. It is all the more important for us to read them together in that one stresses the digital and the other the analog.

If McLuhan's turn to implicating the domain of aesthetics in a worldly complex of actual material processes was directed against the hermetic closure of texts as autonomous determinate entities in a way that incurred the automatic resistance of the New Critical institution, it differs as well from the Derridean construction, not only to the extent that this latter represents a textual closure within the language paradigm, as Foucault argued (13, p.602), but also to the extent that it proposes a limitless play of grammatological traces. The McLuhan emphasis in cognitive practice on a moment of analogical fusion of discontinuous fragments following the moment of analytic fission (32, pp.164-166) runs counter to the Derridean emphasis on fission, on the unrestricted digital play of abstract functions whose concrete, transcendental closure or fusion, it is said, should be deferred as long as possible (6, p.46). The New Critical, the symbolist, and the Catholic traditions converge in McLuhan's orientation toward a quality of intelligibility in things, by analogy, in the exterior as in the interior landscape. But the methodological action in both McLuhan and Derrida is to dereify closed, fixed forms, in effect by way of fresh relations.

Still, in a theoretical climate stamped by the Derridean argument, there are likely to be new barriers to a reception of McLuhan, where more properly there might be interchange and mutual revision. Emphases on disperson and inclusion pull in different directions, although the common deep interest in the interval, the gap, the space of discontinuity and difference draws together. Perhaps if we concede that the world is still given to us in the form of actual pluri-dimensionally circumscribed conflicts and options, neither as ultimately harmonious *présance*, nor as ultimately indifferent *différance*, we may agree that the appropriative interest in the bias of communication, in an opening to the material rationalities inscribed in operative processes, is complementary to and as deserving of attention as the critical interest in deconstruction, in an opening to "the play of the world and the innocence of becoming" (6, p.427).

There is another fundamental connection between McLuhan and Derrida. The binary opposition between two technical forms, speech and writing, is equally the structural underpinning of both grand cultural theories. In the *Grammatology* (8), published in 1967, Derrida takes up again and again, without reference to McLuhan, the same themes that McLuhan develops throughout the 1960s: logocentrism, phonocentrism, the eye, the ear, technics, the impact of the phonetic alphabet, abstraction, writing, linearity as "the repression of pluri-dimensional symbolic thought" (8, p.86), simultaneity, synaesthesia, etc. In Derrida, as in McLuhan, a discussion of writing, speech, and other basic communicative technologies that initially draws on or parallels Hegel's reflections expands beyond the received categories to the point where the divergent natures of written and oral forms of thought and social organisation

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are elucidated, and then to the point where *writing*, for Derrida, and *oral form* for McLuhan, come to articulate not only primary categories, compared to which all others represent an ontological impoverishment, but also a historical finality, the shape of things to come, the coming to prominence and dominance of the primary category.

McLuhan's anticipation of the historical expansion of oral form in an electric age is now familiar. By contrast, in 1972, in the passage in *Marges de la philosophie* where Derrida finally acknowledges the existence of his theoretical alter-ego and comments on him directly, he affirms his own anticipation of the historical expansion of a general writing:

As writing, communication, if we retain that word, is not the means of transference of meaning, the exchange of intentions and meanings [*vouloir dire*], discourse and the "communication of consciousness." We are witnessing not an end of writing that would restore, in accord with McLuhan's ideological representation, a transparency or an immediacy to social relations: but rather the increasingly powerful historical expansion of a general writing, of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would be only an effect, and should be analysed as such. It is the exposure [*mise en cause*] of this effect that I have called elsewhere logocentrism (9, pp. 194-195; 7, p. 392).

How close together or far apart a general oral form and a general writing may be as announcements of a new information environment remains to be seen. It is not necessary here to adjudicate between McLuhan's and Derrida's terminologies analyses and conclusions in order to anticipate that new illuminations may ensue from the scholarly effort that awaits us of bringing their texts into dialogue. They move evidently on congenial grounds of inquiry, and in an ecumenical spirit one may accept that the questions that are asked bind as much as the fragments of answers may separate. It may be possible to join in the hope that ours may be a time when such basic matters as speech, writing, reading, seeing, listening and touching are brought to much deeper understanding.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that the technique of the "etc." in Derrida's list of the effects of a general writing is similar to the technique inscribed in the lengthy lists of parallelisms that carry the burden of signification attached to McLuhan's basic media signifiers (e.g. 31, p. 60). There is the suggestion here of a place for exaggeration, hyperbole, in the rhetorical apparatus of modern scholarship. The function of such hyperbole would be to attract attention and to draw it forcefully to the *pattern*, that is, the ensemble of relations among the details enumerated. With respect to McLuhan's usage, especially with regard to

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statements expressing what has become known as a technological determinism—for example, in the statement about media massage that I connected with the text under examination—it is possible to differ from those who compare McLuhan's formulations unfavourably with the cautious qualifications of academic convention. The effect or function of such exaggeration can be regarded as paralogical and meant to take account of the communication situation. It is addressed to an audience presumed to be asleep or hypnotized by cultural imprinting and hence in need of excessive address to loosen the imprinting. It is also enunciated from an epistemological position that is prepared to subvert its own status, call attention to its hypothetical character and propose itself as a probe rather than a theorem. Finally, like McLuhan's juxtapositions generally, it invites engagement with its rationality, simultaneously reportioning its proportions and the proportions of the world, more than it invites outright acceptance or the outright rejection which has frequently been its destiny of academic reception.

McLuhan, in fact, seems to use a complex rhetorical arsenal to resist the reduction of his text to a single point of view, including the indeterminate energy of Nietzschean aphoristic fragments; analogy, humour, and other semioclastic techniques (see 34); and undecidable probes developed in contradictory directions—even on matters as basic as whether in the electric age we are likely to “live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums” or “live pluralistically in many worlds and cultures simultaneously” (26, p. 31). One might say, ultimately, on the Barthesian or Derridean argument that every model is its own norm, and in recognition of the variability of reception, that McLuhan's model, relying on communicative and social organisation as its referent or alibi, is full of informative surprises for those who are capable of receiving it that way. For others, it may take a more predictable shape. On this account, McLuhan's inconsistencies, evasions, undecidabilities work *for* him as much as against him, and one might see him, in basic respects, as finally a tactile theorist, that is a textural rather than a structural analyst, with cultural texture as his object, and, by way of a kind of pedagogic art, texture also as his product.

This is, to be sure, a generally friendly humanist reading of McLuhan, but close to the agnositic spirit of the Russian harlequin in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* who holds that Kurtz, for all his shortcomings, enlarges the mind. The culture-technology nexus, the rationality problem, and the structure-form-content matrix remain open and strategically urgent questions to whose elucidation McLuhan has made memorable contributions. There is a broad constellation of cultural inquiry into which McLuhan can be profitably and honourably welcomed if we are less dazzled by his points of excess and more open to his points of access. McLuhan, like Marlow, was an untypical narrator of the crisis situation of his culture, a culture embarked on a great adventure and poised for great changes through an expansion of intelligence automation, and major rearrangements of life. As was said of Marlow, so too the meaning of McLuhan's writing can be said to lie, ultimately, “not inside, like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze . . .”

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