McLUHAN, TELEMATICS AND THE TORONTO SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION

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In order to understand Marshall McLuhan and the force behind the Toronto school of communication, culture and technology, it is only necessary to reflect on the book which McLuhan always said he wanted to write and never did — *The Road to Finnegans Wake*— for more of his vision of an electronic Utopia emanated from the esthetics of post-symbolism, Dadaism and Surrealism and from a pansemiological hermeneutics of post-Viconian hermeticism than from a preoccupation with popular culture and the products of the media.

Therefore, I would like to begin by reflecting on the work of the art historian, Siegfried Giedion, on some modern artists and poets and on the writer most quoted by McLuhan, James Joyce. To commence, *Mechanization Takes Command*, the title of Siegfried Giedion's anonymous history of cultural objects, provided one of those descriptive tags of the early part of our century, which in itself is a key insight. In the Twentieth Century the "machine" became universal in its domination of the world's everyday activities. Naturally, it also became a major preoccupation of artists and poets. Whether adulatory, like Futurist paeans of praise, or satiric like Dadaism, or reflective like Cubism and Constructivism, mechanization invaded drama, the visual arts and poetry. It also invaded the arts of literature and music, architecture and the dance, leading ultimately to our uneasy contemporary alliances between art and technology.

It is in this context that during the composition of *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce described himself to Harriet Shaw Weaver as one of the world's greatest engineers, if not the greatest, in addition, (of course, in his mind) to being a great musician, a great philosopher and a host of other things. While the remark may have a ring of Celtic bravado, its announcement was

accompanied by a stricture concerning Joyce's seriousness about what he was doing and by a description of how he was in the process of "designing a wheel and squaring the circle."

Comparing the artist and the engineer was a familiar theme for Joyce and his contemporaries. Growing up during a thirty year period which Péguy described as having seen more change than the previous 3000 years, their sensibilities were acutely tuned to tools, instruments, mechanisms and human invention. Paul Valéry, participating in the resurrection and revaluation of Leonardo's image, argued that the method of the engineer and that of the poet were the same, thus reasserting a Renaissance theme where the poet was frequently compared with *captains strategematique* and cunning artificers and engineers, since they all shared the property of being illuminated with the brightest irradiations of knowledge and of the *veritie* and due proportion of things.

Consider for a moment the particular historical context in which McLuhan was born. Like Joyce, he was born into a marginal culture — the Dominion of Canada; marginal to the United States as well as to Canada's colonial roots in Great Britain and France. Within the thirty years or so before McLuhan's birth, most of the major inventions which would affect so profoundly the transformation of the first half of the century were coming to maturity — Edison's and Tesla's discoveries of electricity for power and lighting; Lumiere's cinema; Curie's discoveries of radium; Bell's telephone; Marconi's wireless; and the Wright brothers' airplane. Einstein had articulated his theory of relativity and Ford had completed the process of mechanization taking command with the mass production of automobiles.

It is not surprising, therefore, that McLuhan's sensibility was dominated by a sense of mechanics which reflected the sense of mechanics in the intellectual world stretching from Freud's dream world to Mallarmé's sense of the book as a literary machine, which Joyce developed both in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. McLuhan shared the sensibility of his fellow Canadian Malcolm Lowry, who provided a remarkable explanation of the newly emerging work of art. Lowry says of the modern work of art:

> It can be regarded as a kind of symphony, or in another way a kind of opera — or even a horse opera. It is hot music, a poem, a song, a tragedy, a comedy, a farce and so forth. It is superficial, profound, entertaining and boring, according to taste. It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall. It can even be regarded as a sort of machine: it works too, believe me, as I have found out.

Marshall McLuhan initially began his university studies as an engineering

student and never lost afterwards a fascination and a fear for the mechanical when he turned to the world of literature. Together with the critical writings of Paul Valéry, James Joyce's work confirmed for McLuhan the validity of the interest he had developed in the artist as a super-engineer and in the cultural critic as the quality control analyst. Through McLuhan's writings, the insight of avant-garde artists into the modalities of mechanization and electric power taking command of man's culture were turned directly toward the problem of the effect of the cultural artifact on the human sensorium. Media as the visible post-mechanical, electric mode for achieving esthetic effects, while simultaneously being manipulated by man and being a manipulator of men, early attracted McLuhan's attention. What he later called media massage in one of his more complex puns — "the Medium is the Massage" — had the overall effect of elevating man's sensory involvement, hence creating a kind of synesthetic tactility. The force behind the massage, though, flowed from mechanics metamorphosed into electricity, which itself was about to be further transformed by the silicon-chip.

Engineering implies technique, just as massage implies technique and just as the art of rhetoric or the art of poetic implies technique in persuading and making sense. McLuhan, seeing "know-how" as the shared wisdom of artist and engineer, viewed technique as a creative force which had made man's culture rather than one side of that schism between creation and know-how, which was a key presumption and presupposition of the romantic spirit.

The basic thrust of the so-called Toronto school of communication rises from McLuhan's inter-relation of his classical knowledge of the history of poetics, grammar and rhetoric with its emphasis on technique as the basis of artistic creation and of his contemporary knowledge of avant-garde art and literature and its sense of the poetic work as the product of engineering, a literary machine, joining this sense of the classic and the avant-garde with his interpretations of popular culture and rapid changes of the world of communication media, reflecting the dominance of mechanical and electronic power and by implication, their social and economic concomitants in the shaping of the contemporary sensibility. This led to a major reassessment of the relocation of the value of education in an emerging telematic society and a concomitant reassessment of a need for a new role for the humanities. It involved the total rejection of the primacy of high culture; a new sense of the interpretation of the cultural artifact and object within an integrated sensory-intellectual language and a new interdisciplinarity turning towards worldliness away from the specialized disciplines of academia.

A particular type of cultural study arose in the Toronto group which had roots in the arts, in classical thought, in the social sciences and in poetics. One early precursor of the Toronto school was the classicist, Eric Havelock,

who shared with McLuhan an interest in the continuity of techniques. In *The Crucifixion of Intellectual Man* Havelock explored the relation of the myth of the Promethean discovery of fire to the emergence of arts and science as a revolution of intellectual man. In *The Preface to Plato* he discussed the effect of writing as a technique on the oral culture of Plato. The real complement and goad to McLuhan, however, was the historian of political economy, Harold Adams Innis, who turned his attention from the transportation routes by which the fur trade and the railroad were developed in Canada and transformed Canada into an empire to the trade routes of the mind by which knowledge and information were transmitted, preserved and controlled. Innis provided a socio-cultural and material basis for McLuhan's conviction that technique had important ramifications for transforming man's sensibility.

The fact that Harold Innis, even though he died before living long enough to genuinely comprehend the nature of the cybernetic revolution, anticipated the major redistribution of power and control implicit in the ever-accelerating revolutions of transmission and processing of knowledge is in itself remarkable. He extrapolated from the experience of earlier communication revolutions to the ongoing effects on cultural, political, social and economic life which would be achieved by still further changes in these relationships. Without developing in detail Innis' many contributions to McLuhan's thought, including his particular type of writing history, Innis' insight about media transformations alone provided McLuhan with the reassurance necessary to perpetrate the academic heresies of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* in which he married Giedion's "anonymous history" of cultural objects by which "mechanization takes command" to various of the esthetic visions of modernism. Thus, the basis was laid in the Toronto school for developing a concept of an ecology of sense which could provide the only means of comprehending fully the potential humanizing dimension of the marriage of cybernetics and telecommunications that is shaping our new telematic age.

One of McLuhan's last published articles, in the *Journal of Communications*, explored the theme of the shifting awareness by "Ma Bell" (the International Telephone and Telegraph conglomerate) that their business was to create a total environment, not merely to deliver oral messages. According to McLuhan the ever-accelerating information technology transformed the sense of the telephone as a simple instrument into a conception of the telephone as provider of a new space. McLuhan even goes on to argue that the major social effect of the telephone is to remove the identity of the caller. The caller, therefore, becomes truly disincarnate and, in a psychic sense, uncontrollable. Losing touch with geographic location and social function, he is according to McLuhan, a potential "phone polter-

geist," which in its worst manifestations produces the obscene phone call. It is natural, then, in such a world where the phone transforms our relation to our world, to adapt ourselves to the still greater abstractions of the information revolution and to incorporate its drive towards hybridization of media, interaction with equipment and decentralization of activity. But McLuhan's reasons for believing this to be true, as he does, are quite different from those technologists who speak of computer networks and resulting decentralization. McLuhan's interest is in the transformed sensibility which will permit — in fact, accept — the new modes of implied social relation. For him the corporate battle between IBM and the phone company is not an Innisian conflict of power and control (though he assumes that as a background to his analysis), it is a race to see who first makes the imaginative leap to realize the full extent of the potential transformation of the human sensibility and hence the willingness of human's cultivated by the phone network and a new sense of acoustic space to accept, in fact, need such changes.

In *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror*, I described McLuhan as a poet-manqué, as a creator of a new form — the *essais concrète* — marked by such productions as *The Medium is the Massage* and *Counterblast*, works evolved in the tradition of Mallarmé, of Dadaist collage and of Wyndham Lewis' experimentation with headline and display print forms. Both of these factors suggest that McLuhan himself is a mixed medium poet and essayist (and perhaps, occasionally, even a mixed-up medium). He uses esthetic form as a mode of critique and interpretation in order to focus attention on the intellectual-sensorial qualities of the network of cultural artifacts. Let's remember McLuhan's fascination with Eliot's description of the effect of the typewriter on the writings of poets. From quill pen to word processor represents a route of change — man's sensibility is changing through such changes, just as surely as Siegfried Giedion pointed out in a more serious and deep way that it was being changed by the mechanized abbatoir or slaughterhouse, which as the early McLuhan himself pointed out in *The Mechanical Bride*, led directly to the horrors of concentration camps concealed in the insensitivity of a 1930's advertisement for coffins:

> There's deep consolation, serene through shower or heavy rain for
> those who know that the casket of a dear one is protected against
> water in the ground by a metal grave vault.

Of this ad, McLuhan himself says, "I cried until they told me it was watertight." But behind the wit is the critique of a newly emerging kind of sensibility.

McLuhan who became an uncritical, positivist-oriented optimist when he

became a theorist, never rejected his early fear of the new technologies. He merely developed an expanded vision where the total impact of the whole change through mechanical and electric to electronic ultimately could provide the possibility of social redemption, although as he explained in a *Playboy* interview, he personally disliked and feared the intervening stages of change. To return to Eliot and the typewriter, for McLuhan, the image of the word processor and the techniques it makes readily available to the individual as a maker of texts, would represent a realization of the tactile and the acoustic world in the process of what heretofore was the mechanical side of composition. Texts could become simultaneously available to the writer. Whether McLuhan, if he had done the analysis, would bother to have thought about the greater modes of precision and exactitude which could be achieved by composing on a word processor, one does not know. (That is, for example, the possible effects of greater condensation and greater precision in printed messages.) But that he would have noted and responded to the immediacy of production and particularly to production that could be realized on a screen alone without the interaction of print, or in the not too distant future by a voice synthesizer, would have confirmed his vision of the "reamalgamerging" (as Joyce would have said) of the senses in a new individualized, decentralized world of production and in a new sense of the surround of acoustic space.

Such vision, is a poetic mode. It is allusive, image-ridden, ambivalent, invites interminable interpretation and presents a kaleidoscopic perpetual refocusing of the object each time it is reconsidered. Nevertheless, it draws direct attention to the neural effects of social change and it simultaneously implies and sometimes achieves a realization that accompanying changes in individuals are creating a greater need and hence acceptance of such a world. As many of those who came to him from the perspective of the left have felt, McLuhan appears to be indifferent to sociology and to politics. While this may be true, it may also be that the saving grace of his allusive method is precisely to include the socio-political in spite of himself. In a more positive vein than I argued in my book *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror*, McLuhan could well have turned from *The Mechanical Bride*, because he did not know how to encompass at that early stage the complexities of the social, esthetic and neurocultural components of the texts which he felt had to be simultaneously held in perspective to meet the demands of his multidisciplinary program for a new humanism.

For McLuhan at that time the only way to realize this goal was through the practice of the artist. Interpreting the essay tradition inherited from Montaigne, Bacon and Pascal as essentially an artistic way of rendering "*la peinture de la pensée*," McLuhan conceived of a post-surrealistic essay technique à la Joyce as a way of developing a poetic critique of culture and technology. His foci became culture and technology in spite of his early

interest in communications, because like some semiologists he saw communications as the bridge between culture and technology. In a strange way, communications represented both the main problem and the immediate technological involvement of the present moment. At one end of the spectrum from Dewey and pragmatism, with its incipient semiological interpretive interests, the study of communications represented the route to community and social communion; while at the other end, with the emergence of cybernetics and Bateson's early realizations of the neurocultural and sociopsychiatric significance of cybernetics and the principles of information science, it represented the link of the sociocultural to the techno-economic realities of the newly emerging society. The two polarities encompass an essential ambivalence which ultimately makes McLuhan's themes important to critical scholars of the left, such as some of the *Telos* group or Murray Bookchin, while simultaneously his work can conceal an esthetics of fascism which is retrograde and dangerous — the thrust that developed his recommendations, even if meant poetically, as to how to dampen the heated up quality of the Vietnamese war by controlling the media mix through which it was delivered. Nevertheless, his basic thrust provided a deeper way of relating the problems of community, communion, and sensibility with the exploration of the possible development of the potentialities implicit in the forms of modern communication and technology. They produced the dilemma that we still confront the way that the simplistic dystopianism of George Orwell's 1984 confronts the seemingly naive tribalism of McLuhan's electronic Utopia which is apparently focussed on the growth of the new economic empires of Bell and IBM.

In the after-image of 1984, the world is neither the nightmare of Orwell nor McLuhan's dream of plenty, yet if Orwell's vision appears to be an extrapolation from the past, McLuhan's appears to be an attempt to use the Thomistic described art of natural prophecy (now honoured with the title of futurism) as a way of using the signs of history to construct a hypothetical (fictional) future. Our dilemma is that while both analyses may provide us with a moment of insight, neither set of perceptions provides an understanding of the actual historical reality which we face on the other side of this mythical past of 1984. What the perspective of the Toronto school does provide, however is the means by which we can begin to develop a new humanities combining the arts, social knowledge and the sciences necessary for understanding the current technological scene — the threshold of the telematic society with its concomitant challenges to equalization of social goals and to the realization of a knowledge base so infinitely powerful as to be beyond the reasonable control of any small, limited group — providing we can re-educate society's understanding of the new significance of common sense.

In an interview with *Playboy* magazine McLuhan described his stance,

like that of the artist or the sleuth, as antisocial. He always viewed himself as satirist, or wit. In fact, he even attributed the quality of wit to the historical writing of his Toronto colleague, Harold Innis (a feat which took some imagination). Wit is certainly a quality for demystifying the unconscious. Joyce's literary engineering produced a dream language out of the techniques of wit and metaphor. This strategy, however, links up with one of McLuhan's central conceptions, which he would attribute as a concept of key importance in our telematic society and its future manifestations — the concept of the *sensus communis* extracted from Aristotelean and scholastic philosophy and refined from the perspective of Shafesbury, Vico and others. The theme of the *sensus communis*, or common sense, underlies the way McLuhan joins his view of tactility, his conception of the interplay of the senses, his awareness of a new holism based on the bonding of sense and intellect with the themes of communication, social communism and community. This Aristotelean-scholastic concept of the *sensus communis* stresses the process of the mind which integrates the information provided by the various senses. Joined to the more recent conception of common sense as the basis for human communication and community, McLuhan imaginatively integrates the psychological with the social through the probing and exploratory revelations of wit and metaphor. In the 60's he could easily be linked by young enthusiasts with Marcuse and Marcuse's Schiller-derived emphasis on the play of the senses.

The doctrine of the commonsense is McLuhan's basis for a poetics and a hermeneutics. Paralleling the *sensus communis* in McLuhan's account of mental faculties was a conception of the *nous poetikos*, a faculty borrowed from neo-Platonism and scholasticism, which he mischievously conceived of as remaking the sense through a poetic activity from the presentations of common sense. It provided the basis for his matching and making of sense that he explained in *From Cliché to Archetype*. "One of the etymologies of "matching" is "making"", McLuhan tells us. "This polarity is inherent in consciousness as such. Certainly in the cliché-to-archetype process, if cognition is matching our sensory experience to the outer world, re-cognition is a repeat of that process." Wit and metaphor along with poetic interpretation is a special way of making sense out of a rapidly changing environment and of permitting it to continue to be a public world shared with a community. Its ambivalence provides its own self-criticism — a fact which makes all McLuhan's weaknesses so visible in his own work. Yet it is the only way for our instantaneous electric age, in which our human coexistence with our technological instruments creates a crisis, to realize McLuhan's visionary program:

> Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious.

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> Our technologies like our private senses, now demand an interplay
> and ratio that makes co-existence possible.

In *From Cliché to Archetype*, McLuhan restates this theme redeemed
through the poetic making of sense:

> By way of resonance and repetition, "The soul is in a way all existing
> things." As the hand, with its extensions, probes and shapes the
> physical environment, so the soul or mind with its extensions of
> speech, probes, and orders and retrieves the man-made environ-
> ment of artifacts and archetypes.
>
> A cliché is an act of consciousness: total consciousness is the sum of
> all the cliche̒s of all the media or technologies we probe with.

As Roland Barthes, whose works so often paralleled interests similar to
McLuhan's realized, the cliché (or the myth), decontextualized and poeti-
cally interpreted, brought the context of everyday life to consciousness. This
perception was shared by McLuhan's vision of a future marrying eros, ethos
and apocalypse as a result of the evolution of electronic tribalism. McLuhan
too easily can become a target for the conservative academy with its
continuing emphases on specialization, positivism and empiricism, just as
he also can too easily be a target for the left with his lack of consistent,
reflective, critical analysis of society. Yet to perform such analyses without
balancing them against his actual poetic method, is to miss the point that
McLuhan followed Joyce in trying to evolve a new intellectual-emotional
language of discourse to bring to consciousness the hidden depths of the
social change wrought by the new society. Such a project involves implicit
critique (often only partly conscious to the writer himself) and the very
ambivalence of the poetic method makes it possible to see the contradictions
of the world which McLuhan reflects. Therefore near misses in metaphoric
insight, such as his potentially misleading concept of the "global village,"
can be as valuable as his many perceptive hits, such as his transformation
of his own slogan the medium is the message into "the medium is the
massage."

The telematic society has set humanity adrift in a world of intense
abstraction. The potency of data banks and information processing at first
shock is overpowering to the human sensibility, and potentially intensifies
the dissociation of sensibility which Eliot perceived in the post-Cartesian
world. Yet it is simultaneously a world of wonder, of intellectual richness,
capable of intensifying sensuous and erotic experience. McLuhan sets forth
the paths to be explored in understanding that world as it evolves. It will
only be when the technological is encompassed in its poetry and drama that
it will be humanized; from the Dadaists and the Surrealists through histori-

ans like Giedion and poetic visionaries like Joyce to the themes McLuhan introduced there is a beginning of understanding of the relations of culture, communication and technology.

There are similar questions being raised in different intellectual traditions: Barthes' concept of mythologies or of semiology; Deleuze's anti-oepidal schizoanalysis and conceptions of transverse communication to suggest only two. But none of these raise the same problems in the same form or with the same basic poetic stance as the unanswered questions of McLuhan. What he provides, with all his weaknesses and all our exasperation, is an opening up of discourse — a prosaic realization of the poetry of Joyce's last book — a book of coming forth by light, a strategy for consciousness which we must return to and put in dialogue with other major works. The insights of the Toronto school, if they are the insights of McLuhan's poetic vision, are yet to be deeply explored, because the richness of McLuhan's legacy may have been obscured by the faddist debates about his immense popularity in the 1960's.

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