

**Everyone's deep politics began to show.
Bursting the acoustic space of Herbert M. McLuhan.**

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1. Introduction

I wish to structure this paper around several penultimate, and critical, comments about the ideas and career of Marshall McLuhan. One sense in which these three points are penultimate is in terms of my own peripatetic familiarity, over many years, with his ideas of media “grammar”, and more recently his background in literary modernism and Catholic theology. Any current critical sense responds to a personal, if scholarly, sense of disappointment, that McLuhan has not sustained or satisfied the inquiry about language, media, identity and reality, that he seems to encourage. In terms of readings in post structural semiotics and communication theory, it becomes increasingly possible and necessary to mount a case against McLuhan, against his grammar, his theological and social conservatism, his reactionary politics, and finally his personal rhetorical style. Of course it is to be hoped that the following comments resonate with the experience and perceptions of others, regarding this ubiquitous figure: if not positively, then even as a means for useful contention, within general interdisciplinary directions that McLuhan can still represent in media studies.

2. “We cannot hope to achieve a contemporary awareness of the world in which we live without an understanding of media grammars.”

It has long been argued (commencing at least with Jonathan Miller), yet apparently needs to be said again and again, that McLuhan’s professed attempts to develop a grammar of media types and processes, especially around a dichotomy of speech/writing, can be seen as incomplete and quite misleading (Miller: 63-90). Such assessment is readily easy to make in comparison with semiotic, language and communication theories of this century, about the medium, or signifiers, or expression, of language and media generally.

One event in the long chequered, chronology of McLuhan’s career will help illustrate what is being considered. About 1954, McLuhan appropriated from Carl Williams, assisted by Ted Carpenter, the notion of “acoustic space” (Marchand: 123-124); (Molinaro et al.: 245, 278). He did this in order to extend a notion of sensibility and literacy, previously exemplified in literary and cultural values, to the domain of electronic media, in particular television, and to distinguish the latter from print media which had been the subject of his close critical scrutiny in *The Mechanical Bride*. This concept of an “acoustic space” was distinguished from “visual space”, and depicted as a “medium” in perceptual as well as artefactual terms. It remains true that one of the strongest features of McLuhan’s thought is its behavioural focus, that continually qualified any objectivism of media environments. It is one theme (and by no means, as we will discover, the only) that separates him from Harold Innis. McLuhan was not content to describe external or generalised processes: by 1960, he differentiated the “structural impact’ of artefacts, from their “subject completion” (Molinaro et al.: 262n, 286n.).

The notion of acoustic space proved central in his media typology: around it he developed various subcategories of media types, including sensorium, sensory spaces and biases, hot and cool, tribalisation, and in particular his historiographical classification. He developed an historicism based on acoustic spaces also around 1954, with the aid of Mumford Lewis and Wyndham Lewis, and in a different way Harold Innis, and if his epochful narrative seems highly generalised, this is because it is almost entirely

derivative in examples and theoretical in conclusions. This historical thesis is well known, its narrative being told repetitively by McLuhan, until it became his main thesis: that the printing press, along with the phonetic alphabet, produced a visual and technological age that disrupted holistic features of tribal societies that existed, albeit in traces, until the late middle ages. (Willmot: 111-112); (Miller: 92-133); (McLuhan, 1964: 8-84). The concept of an acoustic space helped him interpret anything he received from Mumford or Innis, and led to his major innovation, an argument for the possibility of the aporetic transformation of contemporary society, to a pre-literate, tribal state, due to the phenomena of electronic media. The acoustic/visual dichotomy allowed McLuhan to delineate print from television media, the latter leading to “total field of instant awareness’, to immediacy and “reality” of experience (Marchand: 131).

There is much of interest in the transformation of McLuhan’s own work in 1954: the positive appraisal of media and popular products, the stress on perceptual modalities, a speech/writing opposition, a theme of the end of the book. Such themes were current in French thought, before and especially after the war, commencing with Husserl. What was and remains peculiar and almost incommensurate in McLuhan is the privileged status he gave to an “audio tactile” modality, to sensory and holistic logic, and to the psychological wholeness it seemed to entail.

It was left to Jacques Derrida to make a succinct judgment, that expressed the difficulties the *Tel Quel* group had with McLuhan. His comments can be found in *Signature Event Context*, in the context of debate with the American communication thought of John Searle - nevertheless, I will later suggest, perhaps not the very best site Derrida might have found for arguing about McLuhan.

“We are not witnessing an end of writing which, to follow McLuhan’s’s ideological representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations ...” (Derrida 1988 :20). Derrida refers of course to his inquiry about a general understanding of writing and inscription, called grammatology, that followed on from critique of the oral basis of print culture. His own aporetic vision of society, ethics and politics, has

correspondences in work by Lyotard, Barthes, Kristeva, Deleuze, and Foucault, to name a few, and was built in terms of a post structural semiosis that presumed a grammatological turn. In American thought this turn was anticipated by Dewey's qualitative dimension of inquiry, and Peirce's diagrammatic reasoning in his sign category of Firstness (Innis 1994), long before McLuhan wrote. Both of these American authors provide explanations of verbal utterance and indicative behaviour, as well as cultural technology, that still seems to me to be more satisfying than McLuhan's account of acoustic and visual sensory spaces.

By comparison, McLuhan's acoustic space, purportedly positioned as the basis for a media grammar, seems deliberately non linguistic and unstructured. Jonathan Miller pointed out long ago how its explication, in terms of sensory space and perceptual intensities, was biological rather than hermeneutic, and also how imprecise were its biological features (Miller: 92-99); (Gordon: 327-328). Such a singular, naturalistic account of "medium", language or even bodily gesture, rubs against the main themes of twentieth century linguistics and semiotics, especially about the arbitrary, cultural and unmotivated status of language. Eco updates such concerns, criticising McLuhan's vague and naturalistic conception of speech (Eco 1998). One cannot think of any two writers more divergent: Eco's understanding of medium as cultural code, McLuhan's as sensory effects.

McLuhan's biologism also seems, to me at least, to contradict the very interesting work he did before 1954, and to a great extent, especially in his book production, throughout his life, in typographical experimentation. This followed on from his close study of modernist poets, especially Ezra Pound, and from the scholar Peter Ramus. McLuhan's prolonged correspondence with Pound is absorbing from this point of view (Molinaro et al. 1987). However, I cannot reconcile McLuhan's own inquiry into and production of text collages, for which he is famous, with his criticism of visual space as a constructed or artificial medium. Of course, some differentiation between print and experimental visual texts is implied by the typographical revolution of poetry and visual arts this century. McLuhan's practice seems to respond to a difference his ideas do not fully articulate. It

remains unclear how typographical space, which he refers to as “the world of structure and of configuration”, relates to “the actual process of thought” which is speech (McLuhan 1964: 16-23). Is a fragmented visual space a correlate to verbal utterance? If so, what is the nature of their relationship, in terms of McLuhan’s speech/writing opposition? Is it paradoxical, a disequilibrium, a co-determination? In *Understanding Media* the relationship is naively depicted in terms of brain/mind, unconscious/conscious, neurological/behavioural. McLuhan revises the behavioural notion of acoustic space to include the “central nervous system”, which corresponds to the “configuration” of cubist art. He solves a problem of experience and medium through a theme of cognition, which serves to create further problems for his work overall.

3. “One of the great prophets of our time.”

I might have thought Derrida’s elegant, short rejoinder to McLuhan, first written 28 years ago, would have been the last word on McLuhan’s attempts at a media grammar. If his classifications are so out of step and even incommensurate with main directions of contemporary text analysis, why do they continue to be countenanced? Why do authors like Levinson (1999) seek to celebrate a “Digital McLuhan” as “a guide to the information millennium?” Why does Landow so confidently and uncritically include McLuhan in his account of hypertext, citing the “‘simultaneous field’ of electronic information structures” (Landow: 179)? Altavista provides over 200 McLuhan web sites. Why do so many adopt the genre, that he encouraged, of sound bites and short quotes (Wallace 1999)?

Wired on line magazine has become a home for a latter day McLuhan revival, as has the writing of Stewart Brand (Brand 1988: 244,253). Camille Paglia, hailed as “Brash, Self-Promoting and Possibly the next Marshall McLuhan”, was interviewed by Brand, for *Wired*. Her vogueish references surprise. “‘This is one of the great prophets of our time.’ What’s happened to him? Why are these people reading Lacan or Foucault who have no awareness at all of mass media? Why would anyone go on about the school of Saussure? In none of that French crap is there any reference to media. Our culture is a pop culture.

Americans are the ones who have to be interpreting the pop culture reality.” (Brand 1993) It might be true, as Deleuze admits, that some semiotic or phenomenological approaches have been slow to approach mass media or film (Deleuze, 1986: 2). But “French crap”, “pop culture”! Does such hyperbole assume that McLuhan’s ideas are unique, unparalleled, and even authoritative, or merely convenient material for populist digital discourse, or what Gary Genoske calls “vectors for transmission often in distorted form” (Genoske :3)? Could professional adulation be at the core of such attention? Frankly, this seems one valid reason: why wouldn’t aspiring thinkers seek to learn or follow, as Paglia does, in the large footsteps of this public intellectual?

4. “The word medium ... refers to the gap.”

I suggest the answer to his contemporary vogue lies to a large extent in another dimension: that instead of a grammar, or a theory of language or even of technological artefacts, McLuhan’s should be seen as an erstwhile philosophy or metaphysics of presence, and the understanding of medium and language it entails, in terms of the classical trivium of which he was most fond, as a theory of rhetoric. McLuhan’s rhetorical theory of presence provides a convenient non hermeneutic account of digital media. Divested of symbolic significance, semantic difference and grammatological expression, acoustic space become an asemiotic membrane of unmediated infinitude and self presence, and a convenient and self validating source of contemporary hypotheses about virtuality, digital prothesis, communicative immediacy and even mystical incarnation.

This point can be explained by extending Derrida’s criticism further, by locating McLuhan alongside subjects such as Rousseau and Plato. Derrida is in fact part wrong to compare McLuhan, as he did, with the quasi linguistic pragmatics of American speech act theory, or to the implicit pared down analytic philosophy of John Austin that Searle used. McLuhan has much more in common with idealist and classical philosophies of presence that supported theories of rhetorical speech, and would be a ready target for Derrida’s

critique of logocentrism. This critique identified the philosophical grounding of ideas about grammar, language and reason. Deconstruction sought to sever the linkage of verbal language, writing and presence that Derrida saw implicit in so much Western philosophy, beginning with the Greeks and Plato.

The problem, previously mentioned, that the French had with McLuhan in the 1970's, was that his writing/speech dichotomy preserved rather than interrogated the classical bonding of presence and rhetoric (Genoske: 6-7). Despite his close reading of de Saussure (Gordon: 319), McLuhan deliberately seemed to ignore or entirely misconstrue major themes of twentieth century structural or linguistic analysis. Let us be very clear what his non structural account of medium, summarised as acoustic space, actually meant. As Eco and Miller have noted (Gordon : 326-328), many of McLuhan's ideas are surprisingly literal, and the sense in which a medium was an extension of the self was just so. "Cool" television was opposed to "hot" print because it was unobtrusive. The transparency of acoustic space (it could not be seen) allowed McLuhan to endlessly pun about identity and medium, for example about viewers being the television, and a stripper wearing the clothes of her spectators, or media being an "extension of the physical body" (McLuhan 1964:57). Such puns seem to be paradoxical, about double identity and human-machine relationship, and hence might be seen to anticipate discourse about virtuality. In fact, the literalism of these jokes closes rather than encourages such discursive explication. "The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implication of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time". The aesthetic use of a medium might also appeal, yet "the implications of ... actions" assumes control over visual space, not liberation through it. Actions are strong, not, as Peirce explained in his category of Seconds, fallible. Cool media, whether electricity or television, are valued for being intimate, rhetorical and transparent, that is, to the extent they were not a technological environment, but controlled by a rational, predicable natural self.

This understanding is clear in the following comment on Augustine.

"By the way, the word medium in Aquinas refers to the gap, or interval, the emptiness

between matter and form as such, i.e. the hidden ground of Being, and in every sense it is the message. ... total surround returns with the acoustic and simultaneous electric environment. We move into a pre-Socratic position once more.” (Gordon: 308) .

Anyone who has read behind the lines of McLuhan’s public saying will know his commitment to and training in classical sources. These focused on the work of Augustine and Aquinas (McDonald: 1999). Augustine fleshed out the rationalism of Greeks in terms of natural law and an holistic view of the senses. The pre-Socratic Greco/Christian synthesis provided a strong ideational base for all McLuhan’s work. The person of Christ became a typology for universal man, and his redeemed body a sensorium of human sense. In terms of the ground/figure terminology illustrated in the above passage, the hidden and universal ground, that comprises the “gap” in our known figure of being, provided the means of a return of our contemporary selves to tribal experience, and can be taken to imply Christian redemption as much as acoustic space. Connotations of church and sacrament, as embodiment and means of the salvation of common life, can also be traced readily throughout McLuhan’s quasi sociological utterances, for example about family, village, and tribes.

Following his undergraduate conversion to Catholicism (which amounted to a reconversion from his childhood Baptist faith), McLuhan’s devotion was extreme and lifelong, and included daily mass and bible readings. Religion seems often undetected in his informal, chatty discussion and correspondence, yet its traces are regular, consistent, and quite often marked. In one small example, in a letter to Wyndham Lewis (Molinari et al.: 242), he claims to have found a “religious basis for ... almost meaningless quarrels” he experienced at the 1953-1954 panel he chaired at the University of Toronto, as part of a Ford Grant that he obtained. Walter Ong was one of several colleagues with whom he shared reflections on Platonism, Catholicism and philosophy, and with whom he signed off, most sincerely, “As ever in Christ”(Molinari et al.: 244).

Religious belief and practice, it can be argued, provided a major source of assurance and optimism that pervaded his overall thought and presentation. His analysis and planned

reform of contemporary media was based on a choice, to “penetrate to the essential character of man and society and discover the outlines of a world order, or we continue as flotsam and jetsam on a flood of transient fads and ideas that will drown us”(Willmott :89). Such choice was based on a model of universal man, a presence by which the “total mosaic of ... contemporary world ...” would be organised, and the unity of art, business and intellect (Marchand :148, 151) achieved. While religion might have been backgrounded, even censored, for many reasons in his own work, that cannot be fully discussed here, “the sheer number and variety of” its occurrences (to paraphrase Genoske’s comments about political references in McLuhan) is as surprising as the “negligible effects the recognition of these have had on contemporary McLuhanites.”(Genoske: 28).

In his *Playboy* interview, McLuhan described the method of his throwaway thought, or “probe”, accordingly. “I don’t know what’s inside (the safe); maybe it’s nothing. I just sit down and start to work. I grope, I listen, I test, I accept and discard; I try out different sequences - until the tumblers fall and the door springs open” (McLuhan, 1969). One must dissent from such an unqualified account of the peripatetic creation and innovative content of his thoughts, however convenient such self probes might have been for his public reception, as creator, genius, or legend (Willmott: 183). Neil Postman remembered one night of shared, conference accommodation, in terms of “the tip of his cigar glowing”, when you “would hear him making these huge juxtapositions. Even his writing never captured the way McLuhan’s mind worked.” (Brand, 1993). This cognitive allusion at least encapsulates some image of acoustic space. Yet is this true? Logically, McLuhan’s “probes”, I would argue, should be regarded as deductions, rather than abductions. Their hypothetical nature should be understood as extensions of existing knowledge: the late night scramble that Postman observed is an attempt to synthesise, often in desperation, the present age in terms of the past. Probes had a clear ontological purpose, that existed before and after the occasion of their delivery, or creation. In short, many of them involved looking in the rear mirror, that McLuhan sometimes claimed he had covered up.

5. “The sheer number and variety of political gaffes.”

When it came to issues of his time, McLuhan’s classical theology resulted not only in social conservatism, but also reactionary politics. The historiography he developed with Mumford and Lewis based its generalisations on nostalgia for imagined values of past ages, and a catastrophic account of the modern industrial era, that commenced, for them, not in eighteenth century England, but with the invention of the printing press. Against the threat posed by the mechanical age (conceived conveniently by McLuhan in terms of the medium of visual space) was placed the values of personal sensibility, most clearly demonstrated in the literary values of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, whom McLuhan encountered during his doctoral studies at Cambridge. A critical sense and “awareness” became a primary measure of human values, that McLuhan transferred from appreciation of literature, via critique of print texts in *The Mechanical Bride*, into processes and products of the electronic age generally. In all cases values were conceived, almost negatively, as the exclusion of the inferior, mediocre, immoral and sinful, “the flotsam and jetsam ... of transient ideas and fads” (Willmott: 89). As it was for F.R. Leavis, the stakes of such awareness was high, nothing less than the discovery of “the outlines of a world order”, stakes which McLuhan raised in terms of religious redemption, and even worldly apocalypse. The moralism that informed Leavis’ re-appraisal of a literary canon, to include moderns such as D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot, was transferred by McLuhan into his approach to media generally. “I am not by temperament or conviction, a revolutionary. I would prefer a stable, changeless environment of modest services and human scale” (McLuhan, 1969). His whole historical enterprise, that he shared with Mumford, presumed static, normative values that transcended historical and social difference - a presumption that would appear not to be shared by Innis. McLuhan’s interpretation of Harold Innis thus should be regarded as highly controversial (Innis might have come to this same conclusion): its depiction of epochs according to medium modalities presumed, without any argument, the expression and conservation of essential cultural and human values. McLuhan’s historical project can be regarded along the lines of pseudo classical attempts at encyclopaedic knowledge, or Leavis’ attempt to

define or update a literary canon.

Such cultural conservatism extended into formal social and political allegiances, via the New Criticism of “anti progressive” scholars from the southern states, such as Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks, and in particular through several papers of McLuhan published in *Swanee Review* (Marchand: 67-68). His alliance with the Southern Agrarian movement provided a contemporary social model of conservative values, and a hint at the flavour of “deep” politics that accompanied and informed his thinking generally.

The story goes that McLuhan was part of a small coterie in New York, long before media contacts brought him celebrity status in that city (Marchand: 92). This group included Giovanelli and James Farrell, and was mainly literary and Catholic in composition, and seemed to act as an informal “counterpart” to the more organised and left wing *Partisan Review* clique, that included Paul Goodman. Goodman and McLuhan, when they did meet, seemed to have little to discuss about language, and even less about politics. These separate networks however really did fall out when, in 1949, Ezra Pound won the Bollinger Prize, when, as Leslie Feidler puts it, “everyone’s deep politics began to show”. McLuhan’s defence of Pound, along with his New York group and the New Criticism, “anti progressives”, was political in nature, with clear left/right delineation that ferociously opposed the theoretical, left wing polemics of the *Partisan Review*, and its opposition to Ezra Pound’s award. Giovanelli, McLuhan’s close friend, classed the *Review* “the most pestilential menace to autonomous art and free intelligence in this country”, showing a “contempt for literature”.

Of course such attitudes were shared by numerous post war, conservative art cliques in the West, especially at the time of the Cold War. Yet they point to an issue of McLuhan’s “deep politics” that goes quite beyond the criticisms frequently made of him by left wing critics, that he lacks a socio/economic analysis of media institutions and audiences, and generally ignored Harold Innis historical analysis of social power. Such criticism can be extended further, to include omission of significant cultural analysis, of the monopolies of knowledge by social elites. (Genoske: 27-28); (Willmott: 213); (Jones: 1-32). Such

criticisms have always seemed, to me, both valid, yet also rather unfair, and to ignore the relative strengths of the questions and conclusions that McLuhan chose to put.

What needs to be noted, however, about a political estimate of McLuhan, as illustrated by the *Partisan Review* episode and McLuhan's sustained opposition to Northrop Frye's structural approach to literature, is a pronounced, polemical opposition to "theoretical" cultural and sociological approaches to history, art, media and human "progress". Such opposition is unequivocally ideological and political, and avowedly against the left wing, both before and during the Cold War.

The reasons for this opposition might at first seem strange. *The Mechanical Bride* can be compared with Barthes' *Mythologies*. In it, McLuhan seems to acknowledge the symbolic representations of national, social and cultural division, that he calls "segmentation of human experience" and social patterns (Willmott: 89); (McLuhan, 1951). Barthes and McLuhan shared a common goal to analyse and expose the symbolic segmentation of experience by the media - but not much else. In Roland Barthes' early semiotic model, ideology and symbols were combined in one of three fundamental categories of signification. Yet for McLuhan the symbolic effects of print ads occurred as supplementary, artificial constructions of visual space, and not as foundational or necessary dimensions of experience. The prolific examples of print advertising analysed by McLuhan were a supplement ("a flood that has immersed us") of the essential and natural law of acoustic, interpersonal space (the "us" of the preceding quotation). The problematic nature of a flood advertisement could be mitigated through awareness based on a political and social perspective that existed prior to the symbolic and historical construction of visual space. What McLuhan would dispute that was not a method of analysis, that he shared with Barthes, but the social and political implications of using such methodology.

The issue, of politics and McLuhan, is thus "deep", because it is one of commission not omission. As his consistent support for Pound demonstrates, McLuhan's social

conservatism was often expressed in formal right wing politics and in fundamentalist social judgments. The biographical evidence for what Genoske calls innumerable “political gaffes” is clear and consistent (Miller: 38-62); (Marchand 1989); (Willmott: 82), and it is surprising although perhaps also commendable that Marchand did not write a more negative or interpretative account based on the evidence he alone presents. McLuhan’s allegiance to agrarianism, along with his fond use of tribal tropes, seems to ignore outstanding issues of race and social inequality, and dramatise nostalgia for and threats to family life and rural community. For McLuhan support for family values extended to patriarchy and apparent sexism: he saw, in a contemporary social crisis, a “flight from adulthood”, as well as “the obliteration of masculine and feminine”. He was constantly and quite seriously homophobic (Marchand: 66) - in one, not untypical incident, in a letter with Pound, about frustrations with Vanguard Press about publication of *The Mechanical Bride*, he exclaims how “publishing offices now are crammed with homosexuals who have a horror of any writing with balls to it” (Molinaro et al.: 217). He thought Cambridge was full of homosexuals and communists, and deliberately confused the two groups.

In an article as late as 1938, he approved of the return to traditional values in Nazi Germany and Franco’s Spain. His support for Franco seemed to endure for quite some time, and appalled the left wing Harold Innis (Marchand: 114). It explains the relative personal distance between these two supposed collaborators. McLuhan’s Catholicism was ultra orthodox, mixing daily mass and bible readings with opposition to liturgical reform and Vatican II. He maintained anti Mason hostilities and conspiracy theories all his life (Marchand: 103-105), and made quite overt sectarian preferences in literature and social contact, welcoming for example the religion of Joyce and students such as Walter Ong, and despairing in general of non Catholic authors.

“Joyce”, he argued, “refused to be distracted by the fashion conscious sirens of content and subject matter”, proceeding instead to the “universal forms of artistic process itself.” “The political analogue of that strategy,” he continues, “is to ignore ‘national and time trappings’ that is cultural identity”, and “seize upon the master forms of human

responsibility and community” (Willmott: 89). McLuhan saw his mission being to reform media values, according to those “master forms”, as being like an “intellectual thug who has been slowly accumulating a private arsenal with every intention of using it” He told Pound that “every insight taken on is a lethal weapon”. In defence of imaginary Southern values, McLuhan opposed “the dialectics and educational technology of John Dewey” and the Chicago school as a whole which he claimed had conquered the North.

So the list goes on, its cumulation providing significance that any one instance mightily assign only arbitrarily. While anything to do with physical guns are absent, a metaphoric penchant for intellectual combat is certainly not. Genoske (1999: 28) seems one of few to be “astonished” by “the sheer number and variety of political gaffes McLuhan made”, and then to enquire crucially about the apparently “negligible effects the recognition of these have had on contemporary McLuhanites”. The word “gaffes” still suggests mistakes, or unintended omissions, or a “general ignorance of social reality” (Miller: 76), which has seemed to comprise the main line of criticism about McLuhan’s politics. Yet my point is that McLuhan’s theory of medium as rhetoric is not only grounded in a theology of presence, but in a necessary ideology of a political and social fundamentalism, which has no end of enemies. Its “deep” political nature, which in many public instances “began to show”, was not the result of omission or innocence, but of an explicit and deliberate ideological polemic.

6. A Charge Against McLuhan

Heidegger is another thinker accused of “improper” right wing affiliation. McLuhan quoted Heidegger on technology - and it might be possible and of some interest to classify McLuhan as a phenomenologist (however peculiar his own version), even though he himself continued to confuse this French philosophical tradition with the structuralism that came to dominate post war studies. Despite different approaches to technology, it is true that both authors maintained a philosophy of being and presence that preceded

experience, and which qualifies, to a greater or lesser extent, the phenomenological status of their respective projects. Willmott, for instance, in an invaluable if brief discussion of these two figures, calls Heidegger a “minimal idealist”. Whether because of implicit idealism, or in Heidegger’s case a supplementary interpretation of his main ideas, both authors identified themselves with fascist and reactionary politics (Willmott: 173-189).

My case against McLuhan (which in political or theological terms is more a charge) becomes this: if Heidegger’s support for early Nazism has become a source of ongoing, unforgotten notoriety and difficulty for reception of his theories in general, then McLuhan’s reputation and work should be the subject of some reprimand because of the reactionary stances that informed and motivated his general theories, perhaps even more so than political conservatism did for Heidegger in his life as a whole. In view of his distance from the problematic times of Germany 1933, McLuhan’s dalliance with the international right, and vehement opposition to social democratic values, seems just as culpable as the more notorious positions of Heidegger and Ezra Pound.

Comparative study of McLuhan in contemporary thought (such as undertaken by Gary Genoske in his admirable and very recent work, *McLuhan and Baudrillard*) can proceed along political as well as hermeneutic and sociological lines. For example, Deleuze’s post analytic work includes themes of the ‘end of the book’, anti capitalism expressed as anti mechanisation, spatiality, a semiosis of behaviour, and in his most recent *Cinema* books, an analysis of imagery and the medium of film, that might seem to parallel the work of McLuhan. In fact, his classification of imagery, derived from Bergson and Peirce, I would argue, surpasses, and arguably should substitute for, anything attempted by McLuhan’s efforts at a media grammar. There is no room to elaborate that comparison here, except to say that it follows on from the criticism made of McLuhan’s media grammar in the first section of this paper, and from the true phenomenological and pragmatic perspectives that Deleuze brings to media studies. Deleuze does not disguise or presume a realist ontology of presence: his tome, *A Thousand Plateaus*, is structured on systemic parodic inquiry about the possibility of such ontology, and is premised on the tradition of American pragmatism, not Augustine rationalism. For Deleuze, criticism of capitalism,

and its cultural products, is relatively anarchic, grounded in 1968, not the twelfth century, and involves a revolutionary commitment to heterogeneity and change.

Two disclaimers, or hesitations, can immediately be made against the charge of political offense that has been brought against McLuhan. First, there is always the danger of reductionist interpretations, and unfair judgment, based on selective evidence: cultural studies sometimes seems overly frequent in bringing charges against established figures. One is most reluctant to regard McLuhan's work in anything but the hypothetical terms he, at times, claims for it.

Secondly, any case against McLuhan's reactionary position needs to be qualified, to accommodate the lessons of war and his own growth after it. Yet was this necessarily a growth? Willmott calls it more a "groping" towards liberal democracy (Willmott: 90). The phrasing of his utterances, from *Understanding Media* onwards, seems equivocal, expressed in a seemingly unresolved tension between a totalising, one world, tribal lexia (Molinaro et al.: 252);(Willmott :174), that contains a totalitarian scenario for a brave new world within a romantic, warm evocation of an old, that would absorb individual differences with a collective space of collective consciousness. On the other hand, there is much evidence of democratic, even anarchist, sympathies, about a decentred society that will follow the disruption of the mechanical age. For instance, with the medium of television, McLuhan assumed dialogic education would replace mass produced, fixed instruction predicated on printed book. The state (including even the United States) would dissolve, as national and international divisions were "retribalised" by "psychically integrating and socially decentralizing effects" (Willmott: 175). "Maximum disagreement and creative dialogue are inevitable". McLuhan uses biological, cellular metaphors, in the fashion of Mead or Peirce, to depict disorganised social networks. What are we to make of such progressive sentiments? Are they consistently anti government and isolationist in their leaning? Let us first consider one other apparent development in McLuhan, towards a progressive theology.

7. "McLuhanite Christianity"

"The computer ... promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favour of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. The condition of 'weightlessness', that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace". (McLuhan 1964: 90)

Very recently, a theological/media discourse has emerged that re-configures McLuhan's Catholicism in a progressive theorising of virtual spirituality, synchronicity, and anarchic, on line communities, to an extent that a liturgical revival has been anticipated, based on online sacraments. Various sources of McLuhan, like his famous Pentecostal quotation, have been gleaned to demonstrate the growth of a conservative Catholic transformed into the "Holy Fool" that Gary Wolf depicts in *Wired* magazine (Genoske: 13-14). The problem for consideration of McLuhan's theology has never been in terms of a taboo about its subject matter, although this might have been the case in his lifetime and remains so in some quarters of Humanities studies. Writers of early critical articles on McLuhan were quite unfair in thinking that any religious connotation would automatically discredit him. Hence titles like "Pilgrim of Audio-Tactile" and "The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan", in the early secondary collection, *McLuhan Pro and Co*. Gary Wolf would find such tags complimentary, in terms of a McLuhanised Christianity. The problem faced in McLuhan's theology, as addressed by this paper, has rather been with its inarticulated and conservative complexion, a complexion that accounts seem to have revised. But have they?

I must admit my own most recent interest, in McLuhan, has been in terms of a revisionist theology, at least, yet, as with other, earlier interests, I stand again disappointed. This disappointment can be succinctly explained by my very recent discovery, that the above famous Pentecostal quotation, that seems exemplary and crucial in any appraisal of his theology as progressive, should be regarded as tongue in cheek, that it should be read as “Menippean satire” (Willmott: 172). There is, we are assured, deliberate irony in the hyperboles of “speechlessness” and “weightlessness”, that subverts a theme of optimism into a catastrophic terror, a prayer of technological redemption into a dystopian nightmare.

There is no doubt the passage is either satiric, or a meaningless elaboration of acoustic space. In either case, two characteristic “McLuhanesque” rhetorical strategies are evidenced. First, is the briefly acknowledged appropriation of Bergson, and also indirectly, perhaps, Teilhard de Chardin. Such interdisciplinary snippets litter his work, and as with anything to do with French thought can be notoriously unreliable in their brevity, yet as “probes” they serve to express a drama and discovery of his own line of thought, apparently being able to encapsulate and represent, economically, within their form, any part of existing human knowledge. Second, there is an ironic, hyperbolic tone, characteristic of many of his jokes and sayings. Willmott calls this such exaggeration McLuhan’s “satirical expressionism”. McLuhan boasted about the satiric or playful intent of his probes, that prevented them being taken literally as “theories”. He loved “putting on” or exploiting the hopes and fears of an audience: in this way the public would be trained, and “awareness” created: in this way the public could be controlled, as a medium for his rhetoric. Is this what he meant by a probe, a probe not at meaning but at the expense of the audience? Can we ever know what he meant by a probe?

Accordingly, we need to be able to read most or all of utterances, especially progressives one, with caution, for their potential irony, as playing along to popular and varying audiences. Does this mean his content is incoherent and forever vaguely veiled from clear understanding? Unfortunately, the most reliable trace that can be evidenced, with parodic theory, remains fundamentalist and literal, and is arguably present in the Pentecostal passage. The vague, insincere promises of freedom and eschatological anarchy regress into a sense of impending catastrophe. The temporal dynamism of

progress is suddenly subverted and caught up in a irresistible “logical” movement to destruction, that by implication is opposed to static values of the past. Read conservatively (and I remain unsure how it was meant), a secret, apocalyptic vision of destruction or salvation remains ever present, and the joke is on us. This vision was clearly apparent in key chapters (Six and Seven) of *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964). Eight years later McLuhan told Allen Maruyama that to be unaware, to “resist learning” about electronic culture, is to live “in sin” (Gordon: frontispiece). Later still, that social violence cannot be explained in a “theory”, but in a “quest for identity” and “a psychic frontier” of individual, resentful teenagers (Benedetto: 75). The list, or sermon, goes on and on, all the way through his work.

8. “Never heard such a sermon.”

A longer version of this paper would refer to McLuhan’s upbringing, especially the crucial influences of his brilliant mother’s amateur theatrics and spirituality, and his father’s sales career and psychology, and, most crucially, the Baptist faith that underpinned the creative, low brow intellectualism of their Winnipeg household. One can fruitfully search here, as well as in models of author, priest and poet, from his tertiary training (that juxtaposed Chesterton and Eliot), for clues to the quite remarkable sense of confidence, argumentation, satire, mastery and mission that deeply motivated, regulated and legitimated his public success and persona, as much as any ideology or media theory. The “deep” political interpretation followed in this paper can cut even deeper: what are were the personal drives and needs behind McLuhan’s ideology and mission for “the master forms of human responsibility and community”, that saw him opposed to so much in its own time? In view of my inexpertise and distance regarding disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology, it is perhaps as well that pragmatic considerations of length of this paper, at least, cuts short this direction.

9. Conclusion

I remain somewhat reluctant to make criticism of the sort attempted in this paper. Yet in view of their relative plausibility, the lack of semiotic criticism his ideas still receive, and his own intellectual 'thuggishness' and insincerity towards all kinds of intellectual adversaries, I feel it is deserved.

The main and only value McLuhan has for contemporary studies (apart from his place in a history of pop culture) is to serve as a foil to directions of media and semiotic study that are in marked contrast to his own. Derrida's 1972 comments should have put paid to the credibility of McLuhan's media grammar. His Catholic and cultural conservatism might have some minor interest in a history of ideas, yet their political expression in his own time appears highly problematic and unresolved, as does their biographical shaping.

The unkindest thing I will say about "acoustic space" will be semiotic, and that is that there is no such thing, only acoustic acts and "multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities, lines of flight and intensities, mechanic assemblages and their various types, bodies without organs and their construction and selection, the plane of consistency, and ... a quantification of writing" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 4-5) that a revised sense of visual space, as rhizome or diagram, affords. Without all these things, acoustic space appears an increasingly psychoanalytic phenomenon, a self signing echo chamber, even when televised, of energy, assertion and illusion, signifying nothing. Its impossibly inflated membrane deserves to be burst.

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