Marshall McLuhan's Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man @ 50
Edited by Raitford Guins

With contributions by:
Charles R. Acland
John Armitage
Ryan Bishop
Jay David Bolter
Antonia A. Casilli
Suzanne de Castell
Richard Cevell
Wendy Hui Kyong Chun
Edward Conner
Wolfgang Ernst
Gary Genosko
W. Terrence Gordon
Paolo Granata
Richard Grusin
Erkki Huhtamo
Derrick de Kerckhove
Peter Krapp
Elena Lamberti
Paul Levinson
Henry Lowood
Peter Lunenfeld
Lev Manovich
Janine Marcheault
Shannon Mattern
W.J.T. Mitchell
Jussi Parikka
Jeffrey Schnapp
Marc Steinberg
Jonathan Sterne
William Uricchio

Book reviews by:
Brent Strang
Brooke Belisle

ISSN: 1470-4129
http://vcu.sagepub.com
journal of visual culture

Volume 13  Number 1  April 2014

contents

Themed Issue: Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man @ 50
Edited by: Raiford Guins

Raiford Guins
The Present Went This-A-Way:
Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man @ 50  3

Charles R Acland
Never Too Cool for School  13

John Armitage
Terrophone  17

Ryan Bishop
I Sing the Senses Electric  20

Jay David Bolter
McLuhan and the Legacy of Popular Modernism  23

Antonio A Casilli
How to Talk about Media You Haven’t Understood  26

Suzanne de Castell
Being T/here  29

Richard Cavell
On the 50th Anniversary of Understanding Media  33

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun
Marshall McLuhan: The First Cyberpunk Author?  36

Edward Comor
McLuhan and World Affairs  39

Wolfgang Ernst
Understanding Media Tempor(e)ality  42

Gary Genosko
Electric Light  45

W Terrence Gordon
By a Commodius Vicus: From Cliché to Archetype to Cliché  48
 Paolo Granata  
Meta-Understanding Media: Marshalling Forms  52

 Richard Grusin  
Mediation is the Message  55

 Erkki Huhtamo  
A Menippean Satirist in the Rear View Mirror  58

 Derrick de Kerckhove  
McLuhan’s Decalogue  61

 Peter Krapp  
Reading for the Noise  64

 Elena Lamberti  
Betrayals and Smells: On the Italian (Mis)Interpretation of Understanding Media  67

 Paul Levinson  
The Kindle Arrives in Time and Makes Everyone a Publisher  70

 Henry Lowood  
How I Ever Got to Teach a Course on McLuhan is Totally Amazing  73

 Peter Lunenfeld  
Fanfare for the Antifan  76

 Lev Manovich  
Software is the Message  79

 Janine Marchesault  
Media Studies as Interdisciplinary Exploration  82

 Shannon Mattern  
Embracing the Formalist Mantle  85

 WJT Mitchell  
Marshall McLuhan Then and Now  88

 Jussi Parikka  
McLuhan at Taksim Square  91

 Jeffrey T Schnapp  
McLuhaest  94

 Marc Steinberg  
McLuhan’s World, Or, Understanding Media in Japan  97

 Jonathan Sterne  
Media Analysis Beyond Content  100

 William Uricchio  
The Greatest Art Form of the Twentieth Century  104

 Books

 Caetlin Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing  Reviewed by Brent Strang  107

 Erkki Huhtamo, Illusions in Motion: Media Archeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles  Reviewed by Brooke Belisle  111

Cover: Reinterpretation of original design by Marget Larsen and Howard Gossage for the 1964 jacket of the 3rd printing of Understanding Media: The Extension of Man used with the support of the Estates of Marshall and Corinne McLuhan.
The Present Went This-A-Way: Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man @ 50

Such is the faith in which this book has been written. It explores the contours of our own extended beings in our technologies, seeking the principle of intelligibility in each of them. (Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, 1994[1964]: 21)

Why mark the semicentennial of Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man here? Within the pages of a journal whose very name privileges the sensory bias of the visual: the radical re-ordering of the ‘ear mode of awareness’ by the ‘eye mode of awareness’; the tribal human de-tribalized, civilized; non-literate culture made literate; the ‘all-at-onceness’ of ‘acoustic space’ stymied by the ‘one-thing-at-a-time’ awareness of ‘visual space’s’ perpetration of the phonetic alphabet and Gutenberg Western visual culture.1 If visual space privileges the eye, then acoustic space’s ‘audile–tactile’ interplay and intersection of the senses (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 60, 314) exchange the ideal of a fixed perspective for ‘simultaneous relations’ (McLuhan, 2005[1960]: 6), a ‘non-lineal mosaic’ compared to visual space’s centuries of ‘linear and sequential training of perception’ (p. 8). McLuhan’s ear mode is a ‘total field’ of awareness – ‘we hear from all directions at the same instant’ – whereas the journal of visual culture, still steeped in the continuity, sequentiality, rationality and linearity of visual space, severely lacks awareness … or, so he may have joked.

McLuhan was interested in the structural patterns and effects produced by media as environments that shape, extend, involve, if not completely ‘work over’ the ‘human sensorium’ and he explored how the visual bias of Western culture ill prepared ‘literate man’ to understand the audile–tactility of new electronic media. The ‘discovery’ that excited McLuhan the most, Philip Marchand (1998[1989]: 133) notes in his biography, was precisely: ‘that Western culture had returned to this resonating world of acoustic space three thousand years after the phonetic alphabet had detoured it into a long spell of literacy and emphasis on the visual’. It comes as no surprise that the adroit elocutionist was partial to the oral culture of speech and
its acoustic space, yet he never eschewed the visual in his work. He did the complete opposite; he troubled its 3000-year reign in order to develop an awareness of and address to the technological effects transforming his present environment. This is very much ‘the business’ of both this journal and its disciplinary namesake: a willingness to contemplate what is happening.

Why commit a themed issue to Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man? Seeds began to germinate in earnest during 2011 when learning about the exciting events marking the centenary of the birth of Herbert Marshall McLuhan (21 July 1911), who, like a Brazilian footballer, achieves the global status of a single name designation, ‘McLuhan’. Such events include: Enculturation published its themed issue, McLuhan @ 100: Picking Through the Rag and Bone Shop of a Career; Paolo Granata and Elena Lamberti (both contributors to this issue) curated the photo-documentary exhibition, Message or Massage? Playing with Images from Marshall McLuhan’s Books, Bologna, 20 to 23 April 2011; Gingko Press produced a hardback Centennial Facsimile Edition of The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects; University of Toronto Press released a new edition of The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man serving as both a centennial edition for its author as well as a semicentennial edition of the book; the McLuhan Centenary Conference, McLuhan 100 – Then | Now | Next: International Conference + DEW Line Festival was held at the University of Toronto, 7 to 10 November 2011; the Estate of Corinne and Marshall McLuhan (marshallmcluhan.com) launched its Marshall McLuhan Speaks Centennial 2011 collection of rare interviews, lectures, and television appearances; Traffic Records reissued the 1968 audio collage, The Medium is the Massage LP, on CD, MP3, and limited edition vinyl; and NPR New York ran a week-long tribute, Marshall McLuhan at 100. These are just a few events that I can recall (hopefully a greedy Hollywood executive isn’t planning a sequel to Cronenberg’s Videodrome. If so, I’d remind the executive of Max Renn’s day job). In hindsight, these seeds of thought were possibly sown even earlier when thumbing through Douglas Coupland’s 2010 biography of McLuhan, Marshall McLuhan: You Know Nothing of My Work (published in Canada as Marshall McLuhan, part of Penguin’s Extraordinary Canadians book series) and continues with the recent book by Elena Lamberti, Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic: Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies (2012).

The centennial bug proved infectious. But it’s certainly not the first time. Many will recall Wired Magazine ushering in a ‘McLuhan Renaissance’ by declaring him its ‘patron saint’ in the early 1990s, perhaps spurring MIT Press to republish Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man in 1994 (a period in time when the word ‘media’ would seldom be seen again without its permanent prefix, ‘new’). The year 2011 followed suit: another ‘McLuhan Renaissance’ was afoot, or, in less ostentatious terms – ones not so heavily draped in an appellative synonymous with perspective – we could just say that many never stopped being fascinated, or feeling exasperated in the first place rather than seeking to reawaken our ‘tribal memories’. Either way, taking in a person’s full life and
legacy is far more than a triannual academic journal can do. Besides Philip Marchand (1998[1989]) and W Terrence Gordon (1997), also a contributor to this issue, have already gifted their rich biographies on McLuhan. With the journal of visual culture planning to publish a themed issue dedicated to the 40th anniversary of Ways of Seeing (1972) it made perfect sense, a no-brainer, actually, to extend this commemorative archetype to one of McLuhan's most – fill in your own adjectives here – books, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man published by McGraw-Hill in 1964 (with an eBook edition by Gingko Press, 2013).

Should the reader wish to read a breakdown of Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, I would point the reader in the direction of Gordon's thorough dissection found in Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding: A Biography (1997) as well as his expansive Critical Edition of Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (2003). It also seems pointless (i.e. dull) to attempt a summary of a book while 30 essays wait patiently on the horizon. Plus I think Gordon (1997: 200) is quite correct in claiming that ‘the book defies summary’ and conceivably to McLuhan's favor, ‘that was the whole idea’. I will instead simply say: Understanding Media is supraordinary. It's much more (deceptively) conventional in its appearance and form than his first book, The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951) and The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962). Compared to the latter, his lucid mosaic style is dropped out of Understanding Media (a constraint imposed by McGraw-Hill who clipped his penchant for quotations). McLuhan's barrage of serpentine probes certainly persists though more intertwined throughout the text than the interspersed call outs that chopped up The Gutenberg Galaxy's content into 107 chapters between pages 11 to 263. Designwise, and in rear-view retrospect, it is a far cry from the McLuhan–Fiore–Agel (1967) triptych of hip in The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects and War and Peace in the Global Village (McLuhan with Fiore and Agel, 1968); the typographic explosion of Counterblast (McLuhan, 1969) designed by Harley Parker; as well as McLuhan's collaboration with Wilfred Watson resulting in From Cliché to Archetype (McLuhan, 1970). To drive home this stark difference, Understanding Media remains in the clear domain of ‘typographic man’ when one scans bookshelves to observe a few of McLuhan's infrequently examined titles: Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting (McLuhan, 1968), also with Harley Parker, Culture is Our Business (McLuhan, 1970), his return to the subject of advertising studied in The Mechanical Bride 20 years earlier, and Take Today: The Executive as Drop Out (McLuhan, 1972) with Barrington Nevitt.

Understanding Media plays with the activity of reading a book if not the very convention of an academic author's responsibility of writing a book. Given McLuhan’s professed reading habit should we be that bewildered? ‘I read only the right hand page of serious books. If it’s a frivolous relaxing book I read every word.’ The reason? McLuhan claims to have discovered ‘an enormous redundancy in any well-written book’ (from My Reading Habits, McLuhan, 1967). This method keeps him wide-awake, he informs
his viewers, while lounging on a sofa during an interview. When not in
the immediate vicinity of a probe the reader must stay very alert when
reading both the right and left hand pages in Understanding Media – far
from either frivolity, or relaxation. We are neither switched on by Fiore’s
electric, televisual design, nor coddled by an author filled to the brim with
the standard niceties of the ‘I will argue that …’ garden variety approach.
Vertiginous best describes Understanding Media’s four-page rapid fire
channel-switching ‘Introduction’. No such ‘introductory’ mechanism is really
on offer apart from his assertion that the book will ‘explore the contours of
our own extended beings …’ The ‘Introduction’ is a mere formality at best,
an anachronistic leftover from the ‘narrative plane of the printed word’.2
His ‘Introduction’ thrusts you into the book: pushed from behind landing
face down on the hard enamel of words.3 The opening New York Times
snippet is only cover fire for his humdinger of an opening line: ‘After three
thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical
technologies, the Western world is imploding’ (p. 3). What’s worse, you
cannot even take cover from an implosion. It swallows you, sucks you in.
You are under standing.4 No exclamation mark could really convey the
urgency being expressed here. We read on. Actually, we must read through,
involving ourselves to ‘get in touch’5 with the book McLuhan attempts to
cool-down should we actually seek to know its theme, as proclaimed by its
author, and his particular meaning of ‘mass media’. We grasp or reach the
book’s theme on page 329 (on the right hand page):

It is the theme of this book that not even the most lucid understanding
of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary ‘closure’
of the sense that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience
presented.

Reaching even further (to another right hand page) we discover that ‘mass
media’ are not necessarily merely electronic media, or a ‘mechanized
mode of a previous communication channel’ (McLuhan, 2005[1954]: 5), as
commonly perceived but ‘an indication, not of the size of their audiences,
but of the fact that everybody becomes involved in them at the same time’
(McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 349). Having become involved, we cannot go much
further: for the book offers no conclusion. It simply ends with ‘Automation:
Learning a Living’, the final chapter of 26 from Part II (one for each letter
of the phonetic alphabet, Marchand, 1998[1989]: 177) each devoted to a
specific medium. A chapter on ‘the book’ is noticeably absent but, then
again, why would a reader require such a chapter when he or she is already
inside and involved in its environment?

Throughout the years of slowly and repeatedly grasping at McLuhan’s
writing I’ve satisfied myself with regarding Understanding Media as
his biggest probe: an entire book of explorations not explanations. The
ersatz introduction and stop-reading-or-fall-off-the-cliff lack of conclusion
conforms well with the flat pronouncement of the probe: no finality, only a
book of percepts pushed out to get a response, a print-bound instrument of
observation; the dictation of McLuhan’s spoken word translated into print. One elongated aphorism … a paradox of form. Of course, *The Medium is the Massage* would package only a small collection of probes punctuated by Fiore’s graphic style. *Understanding Media* didn’t require such apparent treatment as it used the conventions of the book as its camouflage: is one even aware that they are being probed in the comfort and by the great stalwart of literate culture … the printed page? Not surprising considering that, ‘visual man … cannot see much difference between the motion picture and TV, or between a Corvair and a Volkswagen’ (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 125).

*Understanding Media*, as many note in this collection, did not begin its life in book form. It was granted the closing statement in his 1962, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, a book also gestating long before its configuring, to indicate the need for a second volume, one explicitly devoted to the ‘special study’ of the transformations wrought by new media. If Gutenberg was afforded a *Galaxy*, *Understanding Media* became its universe, the observable universe of McLuhan’s long interest in the effects of media. Its mental matter stems directly from the National Association of Educational Broadcaster’s (NAEB) *Report on the Project in Understanding New Media* (1960) that McLuhan revised and modified into *Understanding Media*. The NAEB Report was also meant to have direct application in the classroom: McLuhan designed a companion syllabus for a high school course that was never implemented. In addition, many of *Understanding Media*’s main ideas – ‘Or, if you don’t like those ideas. I got others’ – already fluttered in the somber life of academic journals. ‘Notes on the Media as Art Forms’ was published in 1954, in the second issue of his *Explorations*, and has been described as an ‘embryonic version’ of the book.5 ‘The Medium is the Message’, no doubt his most famous probe, already circulated in McLuhan’s talks by the mid-1950s and appeared as the title of an article published in 1960 (see McLuhan, 2005[1960]). Even at the time of *Understanding Media*’s publication McLuhan would turn to the journal *Arts and Society* to, in a rare move, clarify and even offer a ‘better’ explanation for ‘the medium is the message’ probe than that found in his recently published book (inchng towards sales in the hundred thousands). In ’New Media and the Arts’ (1964) McLuhan takes to saying that ‘a new medium is environmental’ (p. 239) understood as ‘psychic and social’ and that ‘new technologies create new environments for old technologies’ (p. 242) to assist in our understanding of his assertion that a consequence (or effect) of any medium is its transformation of experience (this is media as ‘make happen agents’, McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 48) in opposition to an understanding of media as transportation of communication or ‘transmission of information, message, or idea’ (McLuhan, 2005[1954]: 6).

*Understanding Media*’s universe was not monotheistic. An industry of critique, commentary, and annotation sprang up in the wake of *Understanding Media*’s publication. Dennis Duffy’s *Marshall McLuhan* (1969), Sidney Finkelstein’s *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan* (1968), Jonathan Miller’s *McLuhan* (1971), and Donald F Theall’s *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding
McLuhan (1971) took up this task. Monographs were not alone. Gerald Emanuel Stearn edited a star-studded cast of mid-century intelligentsia in the form of a ‘critical symposium’ published as *McLuhan: Hot & Cool* (1967) with proportionate responses by McLuhan. Raymond Rosenthal republished over 20 essays and reviews of McLuhan’s work (some of which already appeared in Stearn’s symposium) in his edited collection, *McLuhan: Pro & Con* (1968), a bizarre little book whose Pelican Books paperback cover is a distorted photograph of McLuhan transposed over a light switch flipped ‘on’ where his nose is and I say it’s bizarre because McLuhan is granted no voice in the form of rebuttal anywhere in the 308-page book. Without the warm words from McLuhan’s warm body, *Pro & Con* pendulums between a eulogy and a roast. Lastly, despite the NAEB Report failing to have its course syllabus adopted in high schools, Harry H Crosby and George R Bond packaged the Introduction and first three chapters of *Understanding Media*, over 30 articles and reviews spanning from 1963 to 1967, a glossary of McLuhanisms plus a ‘Do-It-Yourself Kit’ from which to teach McLuhan’s ideas in their book designed for first-year college students, *The McLuhan Explosion: A Casebook on Marshall McLuhan and Understanding Media* (Crosby and Bond, 1968). So that’s one ‘march backwards’ but what of going ‘into the future’, this temporal marker inscribed in this publication’s month and date of April 2014 when numerous writers graciously agree to further massage pages well traversed since their original printing in 1964?

This mosaic of contributors possesses its own ‘all-at-onceness’ sensation as the reader flips across the short essays at their fingertips (or, the more likely scenario, mouse clicking and tablet swiping as academic journal reading increasingly loses its once proud paper-cuts). Similar to the journal’s ‘The Obama Issue’ – 8(2), August 2009 – and aforementioned ‘The Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue’ – 11(2), August 2012 – this issue placed a restraint on each essay, the restraint of 1,000 words maximum (only minor deviations occur). This seems fitting for the subject, compendious essays akin in size to Part II of *Understanding Media*. It also keeps pace with academic conferences that favor the ‘lightning round’ of presentations – where one travels to speak for 7 minutes among 20 other speakers all begging for additional minutes, those precious fragments of time academics covet (the trick, of course, is to write a 7-minute paper and NOT attempt to cram a 20-minute standard paper into a smaller pair of intellectual skinny jeans). Like the blurb being the future of the book, the academic article is whittling itself down a size to reach that crucial nugget of insight – this is already common in online academic publishing so why not electrify print with brilliant little 1000-word flashes? This was the affect/effect of McLuhan’s probes designed to explore an idea or environment, sometimes functioning as provocative summations, if not punctuation (e.g. ‘The Gadget Lover’ chapter closes with this line: ‘In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin’, p. 47). In further hindsight I guess that I should have required only 150 words rather than 1000 words. Have the abstract become the new article; a summary for no text but itself, like a fake trailer for a film that doesn’t exist. Pity that I didn’t have that idea sooner …
All I, in my role as editor, required from each contributor was an interest in McLuhan. Either found in one’s teaching, research, influences, or even annoyance and irritation with his work. The content of a contributor’s essay had no restraints, only its form of communication (sounds familiar, eh?). As with *Ways of Seeing*, I invited personal reflection, the opportunity to write candidly about a book no doubt dog-eared and scribbled upon by many, or one rarely cracked open, possibly even disliked, or never even read in its entirety – though I doubt seriously that any of the contributors had to actually acquire a copy. Although a personal account was suggested such a tone was by no means required. How one decided to approach the invitation was left to one’s own scholarly vices. This is evidenced clearly in the diverse writing actions performed here that do not necessary coalesce into a single cohesive entity, but, even better, veer off in all directions. Wonderful directions of elaboration, extensions, spring-boarding, relocations, close inspections and investigations, retrieval of esoteric or overlooked details, further probing … I wanted the ears of readers to ring from all directions by all of these ‘simultaneous relations’ resonating across the pages of the journal of visual culture.

Should the reader access this issue’s content not in its entirety, but via some institutional portal for snatching ‘electronic products’ in a piecemeal manner, I want to use this editorial’s remaining space to provide a full list of this issue’s contributors. And to express my sincere gratitude – as a journal editor and fellow explorer – to each and every one of them for their willingness to reflect (not to mention meet the deadline) on Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* @ 50.

Charles R Acland  Gary Genosko  Peter Lunenfeld
John Armitage  W Terrence Gordon  Lev Manovich
Ryan Bishop  Paolo Granata  Janine Marchessault
Jay David Bolter  Richard Grusin  Shannon Mattern
Antonio A Casilli  Erkki Huhtamo  WJT Mitchell
Suzanne de Castell  Derrick de Kerckhove  Jussi Parikka
Richard Cavell  Peter Krapp  Jeffrey Schnapp
Wendy Hui Kyong Chun  Elena Lamberti  Marc Steinberg
Edward Comor  Paul Levinson  Jonathan Sterne
Wolfgang Ernst  Henry Lowood  William Uricchio

Mark Poster, a contributor who sadly passed away on 21 October 2012, present in spirit.

So if McLuhan is correct when writing, ‘having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a
further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well’, then I expect to hound all of you to contribute to the *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* bicentennial issue I’m planning for 2164.

### Notes

1. ‘Visual culture’, ‘visual space’, ‘visual bias’ teem, if not team, throughout McLuhan’s writing. Rarely acknowledged in genealogies of the term ‘visual culture’ is the fact that McLuhan exercised this phrase sporadically throughout both *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1994[1964]).

   In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* the term often appears as ‘new visual culture’ to account for the historical transformations to oral culture due to print culture’s break-up of the ‘balanced interplay among the senses’ (p. 28). The term ‘visual culture’ serves as a broad descriptor used to help bridge while tidily distinguishing media of a visual orientation (e.g. movies claimed as a visual medium, the advertising and comic strips of the 1930s and 1940s that McLuhan swam through when compiling his first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, 1951) due to a heightened intensity, exclusive emphasis on the eye, from those media orienting the world from and through other sensorial biases, or, and most notably, via multi-sensorial interactions (e.g. television claimed not as a visual medium, but as an acoustic, audile–tactile medium). Here’s where and how the term ‘visual culture’ appears in *Understanding Media*. In Part I, Chapter 4, The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcois, McLuhan contrasts the TV image in ‘audile–tactile Europe’ with that of America:

   In audile–tactile Europe, TV has intensified the visual sense spurring them toward American styles of packaging and dressing. In America, the intensely visual culture, TV has opened the doors of audile–tactile perception to the non-visual world of spoken languages and food and the plastic arts. (p. 45, emphasis added)

In Chapter 11, Number: Profile of the Crowd, we read that:

   ... the phonetic alphabet had, centuries before, invaded the discontinuous cultures of the barbarians, and translated their sinuosities and obtusities into the uniformities of the visual culture of the Western world. (pp. 117–118, emphasis added)

Chapter 12, Clothing: Our Extended Skin declares:

   ... nudity could be naughty excitement only for a visual culture that had divorced itself from the audile–tactile values of less abstract societies. (p. 121, emphasis added).

And, to cite a final instance, from the same chapter:

   ... the media analyst can help the anthropologist in this matter, although the explanation will not be obvious to people of visual culture. (p. 125, emphasis added)
1. Underlining this encircling, delineating sense of ‘visual culture’ is a much deeper chasm between the two sensory biases that McLuhan distinguishes as ‘visual space’ from that of ‘acoustic space’ to characterize media that extend one sensory bias over others. ‘Visual’ and ‘acoustic’ space are associated with other names in *Understanding Media*: ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ media. A ‘hot medium’ like radio, movies, print, photographs, lectures and the phonetic alphabet, extend a single sense, are high in definition, ‘well filled with data’ (p. 22) while demanding little participation. A ‘cool medium’ like the telephone, television, cartoons, seminars and speech are low definition and require high participation by their users.

2. ‘Teeth are emphatically visual in their lineal order’ (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 83).

3. I wish that I could take credit for this wonderful pun on McLuhan’s book title. However the credit must go to Stony Brook University graduate student, Dylan Godwin.

4. McLuhan informs his readers in Chapter 6, Media as Translators, of *Understanding Media* 1994[1964]: 60), that:

‘touch’ is not skin but the interplay of the senses, and ‘keeping in touch’ or ‘getting in touch’ is a matter of a fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell.


References


**Raiford Guins**

Department of Cultural Analysis and Theory
Stony Brook University, NY, USA
[email: rgun81@gmail.com]
'War as education'. 'Education as war'. One might think that propaganda is surely the first point of application for these McLuhanisms. But McLuhan (see McLuhan and Fiore, 1968) directed us elsewhere, to the inevitable deployment of technological advancements for military purposes, to the certainty that military purposes drive technological advancement, and to the assaultive reorientation demanded by technological innovation. The unsettling implications of this circuitry appear to open up a critical assessment of the technological pursuits of both the military and educational institutions. In actuality, McLuhan's impact upon education largely involved smoothing the way for an intensification of technologized instruction.

Peeking through so much of McLuhan's writings is a deep concern about the role of education in light of the new media world he documented. For him, efforts to reorient human society to the conditions of the electronic age prompted engagement with, and radical reconceptualization of, the methods and priorities of schools and teachers. *Understanding Media* (1964) is a splendid illustration of this feature of his writings. Before the book begins, right on the copyright page, McLuhan acknowledges the 'liberal aid' provided by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) and the US Office of Education. This notice is a reference to the funding he secured under Title VII of the Sputnik-catalyzed 1958 National Defense Act to write *Report on Project in Understanding New Media* (1960), effectively for the NAEB. And the final chapter of *Understanding Media*, 'Automation', opens with anecdotal evidence that modernization effectively 'dissolves' one-room schoolhouses (McLuhan, 1964: 346), and ends with an incautious celebratory declaration that 'the social and educational patterns latent in automation are those of self-employment and artistic autonomy' (p. 359). He closes the book with what is effectively an accusation that believing automation portends uniformity is in fact an archaic product of a fading era of 'mechanical standardization and specialism' (p. 359).

As McLuhan learned from Harold Innis, changes in media produced spatial and temporal upheaval, meaning that previously bounded and delineated
institutional spheres begin to crumble. Expanding André Maleux’s concept of ‘museums without walls’, McLuhan (1964: 283) proclaimed:

The telephone: speech without walls.
The phonograph: music hall without walls.
The photograph: museum without walls.
The electric light: space without walls.
The movies, radio, and TV: classroom without walls.

McLuhan drew the final line from the 1957 essay–poem Classroom without walls, which proposed that the overwhelming quotidian presence of media busted any final monopoly claimed by schools upon education. In that essay, he wrote:

Today in our cities, most learning occurs outside the classroom. The sheer quantity of information conveyed by press-mags-film-TV-radio far exceeds the quantity of information conveyed by school instruction and texts. This challenge has destroyed the monopoly of the book as a teaching aid and cracked the very walls of the classroom, so suddenly, we’re confused, baffled. (McLuhan, 1960[1957]).

A late addition to his educational commitments was The City as Classroom (McLuhan, 1977), in which the city is effectively a teaching machine. This line of argument had been pursued by McLuhan for the two decades prior to this book’s appearance, and he used the ‘teaching machine’ analogy frequently, for instance, describing television as a teaching machine in Understanding Media (McLuhan, 1964: 292). ‘Teaching machine’, of course, had a specific resonance in the 1960s. It referred to a then popular set of individualized devices that had swept into audio-visual instruction, most of which found their way to obsolescence in dusty closets by the end of the decade. While the point of McLuhan’s reference may be lost on many readers today, it should inspire our scepticism toward the longevity of technological ‘sure things’ and toward the staying power of pedagogical fads.

In our record of McLuhan’s influence, we have tended to underappreciate how quickly he was taken up by pedagogical theorists and activists. American educationalists were especially early adopters of McLuhan and his ideas about the new literacies supposedly needed for the contemporary media environment. The NAEB invited him to deliver a keynote at their 1958 convention in Omaha (McLuhan, 1987: 288). In 1957, McLuhan offered a course to 30 high-school teachers on the grammar of the media (p. 251). He addressed the National Education Association’s Division of Audio-Visual Instruction in 1960 (p. 265). And John Culkin’s ‘A schoolman’s guide to Marshall McLuhan’ was said to be the Saturday Review’s most republished essay (Culkin, 1967; McLuhan, 1987: 300).
One choice document of McLuhan’s integration with the currents of educational exploration is the film *The Communication Revolution*, recorded during the Conference on Humanities, October 1960, at one of the most influential sites for audio-visual educational experiments, Ohio State University. The film is a 22-minute conversation with McLuhan, leading educational theorist Edgar Dale, prominent radio educationalist Keith Tyler, and celebrated cultural critic Gilbert Seldes, who was easily the most famous man on stage at that particular moment. It is clear that the charismatic McLuhan and his claims command the agenda. The conversation is polite, but the participants express challenges, especially in response to McLuhan’s reluctance to speculate about what might be lost in a shift to a post-literate society. Yet, the discussion, and the fact of it having been recorded, demonstrates the intense curiosity and concern held by educationalists about the implications of the changing media environment. And indeed, while McLuhan’s wilder generalities about media effects may have baffled his esteemed discussants, the underlying premise about the expansion of the school grounds to the entire contemporary world, and about the necessity of designing new media for classroom contexts, had already been a priority item among educationalists for over a decade and was taken for granted by all on that stage in Columbus, Ohio.

McLuhan’s celebrity status is still a wonder today, especially for humanities scholars for whom anxiety of relevance is a morning stretching ritual. Among educationalists, though, McLuhan’s celebrity made complete sense. His work confirmed, and did not unsettle, the massive wave of audio-visual instruction programmes, and his writings helped smooth the way for the full acceptance of technologized pedagogy, ‘informal learning’, and open-concept classrooms in the 1960s. As early as 1946, with the publication of Edgar Dale’s important *Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching*, a new generation of audio-visual educational theorists vigorously advocated for the modernization of the classroom, and the obsolescence of ‘the little red schoolhouse’, via a broad acceptance of new media literacy and of the educational prospects beyond the school yard. And by the mid-1960s, educational theorists and activists frequently and casually referenced McLuhan to give authority to these ideas. He fit with, and ultimately served to articulate in a credible and flashy, if bewildering, manner, approaches to instructional technology that were already well accepted by a major faction of techno-educationalists. He did not initiate these concepts, but his work and celebrity contributed to the legitimation of the audio-visual future for education at all levels. Essential media attributes did not produce this legitimation; dominant understanding about those features, the modern world, and educational policy did. The result was that classrooms became, and still are – as was so perfectly observed in Claude Jutra’s documentary on educational technology *Comment savoir* (1966) – automobile showrooms for new technology.
Note


References


Charles R Acland
Department of Communication Studies
Concordia University, Montréal
[Email: c.acland@concordia.ca]
The telephone is a theme of deep interest in Marshall McLuhan’s (1994[1964]: 265–274) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. This is for numerous reasons: its place on his varying program concerning the form and character of the telephone; a theoretical concern with the telephone as a form of shared participation; and an historical interest in teletechnologies and the question of human lives led inside an implosion.

According to McLuhan, the form and nature of the telephone are marked by its abolition of place, which activates unforeseen socio-cultural consequences, such as the creation of new subjectivities like the ‘call girl’, and, as with all ‘electric technology’, appears fully formed as a singular, stunning, event (p. 266). Yet the force of the telephone for McLuhan derives from its ability to decentralize each and every operation, which has been sensed but not altogether comprehended by everyone even today. McLuhan’s additional move, associated with the Bell Telephone research department especially, seeks to rewrite ‘book-oriented’ definitions of the telephone (p. 267). He does so by turning to the form of the telephone as inspiration for a counter-discourse to the study of media content and as an alternative telephonic imaginary (or the function of the form of the telephone as form) to contest the arid deserts of Information and Game Theory. For McLuhan, Information and Game Theory are problematic because they disregard the mental and socio-cultural transformations ensuing from the form of the telephone, which have altered the totality of our existence.

A further claim of McLuhan’s concerns the telephone as a form of shared participation within the small town, specifically in the first phase of the commercial telephone in the early 20th century. He signals the small town as a key issue as the ‘back fence’ is substituted for the ‘heated participation of the party line’, which reminds us that, once upon a time, the telephone was a new machine used more for amusement than for the state or for commerce (p. 268). These and McLuhan’s subsequent claims about the telephone rendering speech visible and electric technology uniting with the domain of speech and language from the dawn of electricity reveal deep connections between the mass media of the spoken word and electric...
technology, the first and second great extensions of our central nervous system, and other, perhaps more threatening, telephonic alignments in the contemporary form and character of the telephone such as wire-tapping.

Edward Snowden, previously an American contractor for the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, recently left the United States after disclosing to the media details of widespread telephone surveillance by American intelligence as a covert form of shared participation in the big city’s contemporary, commercial, and overheated digital party line (BBC News US & Canada, 2013: 1–2). Rendering speech visible to the US state and to big business thus presently entails the invention of another new machine, the US’s National Security Agency’s (NSA) machine that clandestinely gathers the telephone records of tens of millions of Americans through electric technology. The technological convergence of the realm of speech and language today therefore exposes profound electronic links between telecommunications companies such as Verizon and the electric technology of the US state, given that Verizon was directed by secret court order to relinquish all its telephone data on a continuing daily basis to the NSA. Perhaps in the late 21st century, then, this third great extension of our central nervous system will menace even non-telephonic arrangements in its future form and character as the telephonic imaginary shifts beyond wiretapping and internet server tapping to wi-fi tracking small town non-commercial offline everyday communications in a surveillance program known as ‘Back Fence’.

Meanwhile, certain media theorists opposed to McLuhan’s media theory, such as Paul Virilio, who live beyond the overheated participants of the digital party line, are intensifying their contemporary opposition to the telephone not as a new-fangled machine but as an ‘electronic straitjacket’ and distancing themselves from its ‘universal remote control’ directed by the state and telecommunications corporations (Armitage, 2012: 82–83). While accusing the NSA and the telecommunications industry of inducing a conformity to the remote-controlled time and space of the terrorphone, for instance, we might claim a right to rendering speech invisible or electric technology breaking with the field of speech and language or the associations between the mass media and the dictatorship of individualized relentless telephone interaction. A more spatiotemporally, rather materially positioned viewpoint, developing but not entirely renouncing McLuhan’s interpretations of the spoken word and electric technology, might acknowledge how the telephone – far from being a great extension of our central nervous system – is in fact a danger to it. No longer left with any free time for extended contemplation, we increasingly and publicly subcontract our bodily sense impressions and the most banal of personal emotions (‘I’m on the train’). In other words, the contemporary teletechnological form and socio-cultural character of the telephone is imploding into a new kind of plague of electronic eavesdropping; the virus of an information gathering once controlled, now overwhelmed with the ecstasy of infinite surveillance programs, illegal communications, and (de)classified intelligence that the whistleblowers of American intelligence of the 21st century have exposed.
References


John Armitage
Winchester School of Art
University of Southampton
[email: j.armitage@soton.ac.uk]
I Sing the Senses Electric

*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* appeared in the heady days of the post-Macy conference era, with information theory, cybernetics, game theory and simulation informing the ‘Wizards of Armageddon’ out in Malibu at the RAND Corporation. It is a Cold War tract in its blurring of technology and culture, its end of the individual found in a mass target (of weapons as well as TV and radio), its potentialities for revolutionary change and its likely sedimentation into rote patterns of thought and Skinner-ish behavioralism, as well as the triumph of teletechnologies in overcoming time–space constraints. It emerges at the moment of exhaustion for the post-WWII futural cheerleading and whistling past the graveyard. This complex context works its way into the text at every step.

In a book roiling with ideas, insights and collage-like (or indeed montage-like, in the Eisensteinian sense of the term) juxtapositions and connections, the intellectual and rhetorical moves that most startle me, and which continue to resonate in the present, reside in those areas related to the subtitle and not so much those of the generic main title *Understanding Media*. Or rather it might be those aspects of this eclectic electric book that exemplify and explore the relationship between its title and subtitle as inextricable elements of the constitution of the species as a sentient entity at any moment in history. Whenever McLuhan invokes that seminal set of links between the senses, the sensorium, technologies of communicating, moving and dwelling as all being physical and noetic extensions of humans as well as the means through which we understand the human as human marks the moments when this sizzler of a read, for me, really crackles.

McLuhan (1994[1964]: 55) quotes William Blake, claiming hyperbolically these lines to be the theme of *Jerusalem* (Book II, Chapter 34):

> If Perceptive Organs vary, Objects of Perception seem to vary:

> If Perceptive Organs close, their Objects close also.
Not only do the lines offer content essential to McLuhan’s thesis, but the intertextual reference also provides clues to the kind of ecstatic visions that his own text will conjure while working through the relativity of perception, the power of empiricism and its inherently flawed base, as well as the ineluctably technological construction of the sensorium and our knowledge of the world. Through media as processual verb more than stative noun, he invokes how the technology of writing allows us the synesthetic trade of an ear for an eye (which sounds like a conceit from his protégé Walter Ong) or how Mumford likens the walls of a Medieval city to the skin: the body and mind extended infinitely and feedback cybernetically. A Whitmanesque celebration of corporeal and sensorial connectivity ensues, but with a decided twist.

Prosthetic extensions of the body and the senses through teletechnologies lead us to Derrida’s positing of prostheses at the origin and that is origin. No originary body exists for us to have recourse to; we are always already prosthetically outfitted. The implication is that the subject becomes extractable from its empirical apparatus and operates as a prosthetic extension, landing us at Kittler – whose Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (1999) offers an extended allusion to the object-centred structural organization of McLuhan’s (1994[1964]) text. The McLuhan bot that channelled the theorist in a most unheimlich manner in 1996 placed McLuhan’s thought and persona beautifully within the 19th and early 20th century of media as mediums to the afterlife. More importantly the bot exemplified and extended the notion of the conscious self as subject rendered obsolete by the media that are the conditions of its possibility.

It is not just the extensions of the senses, of the somatic being, that make these formulations kinetically inspiring but the extensions of these extensions – what is implied by them. These further implications are fleshed out in the rest of the book. For example Mumford’s city walls as skin (p. 56) becomes the city as weapon and as skin (p. 298) and the militaristic art of ballistics can emerge only after Renaissance perspectival theories take hold, bridging technological and artistic divides. Nor is he content to stop here; the ever-expanding context and interconnectedness of the object or phenomenon under discussion makes limits largely arbitrary. He asserts that there ‘is no ceteris paribus in the world of media and technology. Every extension or acceleration effects new configurations in the overall situation at once’ (p. 167). The different media engage in dialogue with each other and shape the environment in which they operate as well as the senses through which they operate. ‘Since all media are fragments of ourselves extended into the public domain’, he writes, ‘the action upon us of any one medium tends to bring the other senses into play in a new relation’ (p. 234). In other words, he offers us Crary stripped of Foucault.

McLuhan, through my own fault, possesses a belatedness. I have been always out of time with McLuhan as the context of Understanding Media delineated briefly in the first paragraph coincides with my own earliest years. His work was part of the media-glutted world of televirtual immersion that
constituted my extreme youth, as would be the case for many writing in this issue. He was always a part of this mediascape and a part from it. Reading him as a high school student, and later re-encountering him through those he influenced, I backed into McLuhan. The overall genealogical debt is to Saussure, of course, but the extensions generated by McLuhan taken up or challenged by other thinkers took my reading and thinking on a recursive path to this book time and again: through orality–literacy studies by Ong, through acceleration and city and weapons by Virilio, by materialist readings of technology in Kittler, through provisional visionary proclamations about mediation with Baudrillard, and on and on, allowing me to waft through his battlements like Hamlet’s ghost. And like Hamlet’s ghost, to borrow a conceit from Derrida, McLuhan begins by returning.

References


Ryan Bishop
Winchester School of Art
University of Southampton
[email: r.bishop@soton.ac.uk]
McLuhan and the Legacy of Popular Modernism

The academic world of the 1960s reacted to Marshall McLuhan’s ideas with disdain. By declaring that the era of the printed book was over and that television was changing human nature and the social fabric, he was seen as a scholar who had ‘gone over to the other side’. McLuhan himself often claimed that he was misunderstood in this respect: he was not proselytizing for television, but simply insisting that we look honestly at the current media culture. While McLuhan may indeed have been more at home in the world of books, the impact of his writings as well as his persona reinforced a major trend of the 1960s: the rising status of popular culture and the breakdown of hierarchy in the arts. At the same time, McLuhan’s theory of media clearly marked him as a modernist and put him in implicit dialogue with the modernist art theory of the period.

The authoritative spokesperson for high modernism was Clement Greenberg, who championed in particular the American Abstract Expressionist painters. In essays such as ‘Modernist painting’, Greenberg argued that the task of the artist working in a particular medium such as painting was to develop the ‘area of competence’ of that medium. For each art, the goal should be to develop the appropriate medium by exploring and extending its key quality or qualities. For painting, that quality was flatness, ‘for flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art’ (Greenberg, 1960). The Abstract Expressionists were therefore doing just what Modernist artists should do in rejecting the illusion of three dimensions and focusing the viewer’s attention on the canvas itself. Greenberg seemed to be suggesting a historical trajectory for painting: since the Impressionists, painters had been striving to free themselves of the representational techniques perfected in the Renaissance. Finally, since his 1939 essay ‘The avant-garde and kitsch’, Greenberg was understood as insisting on the division between high or serious art and the world of banal entertainment. Kitsch for Greenberg included most forms of popular entertainment: ‘popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.’ (Greenberg, 1939). Greenberg’s apparently blanket rejection of popular
culture became harder to sustain as the 1960s brought a reconfiguration of cultural attitudes to the arts.

There is no evidence that McLuhan and Greenberg ever met or even that McLuhan had read Greenberg’s essays, yet McLuhan was in important ways a counterpart to Greenberg (Van der Meulen, 2010). Greenberg was working in the established world of elite art; McLuhan was rebelling against the world of traditional humanistic disciplines and seeking to define a new interdisciplinary media studies. McLuhan’s technique was inherently comparative and expansive: he examined media in relation to each other both in historical and contemporary terms. Greenberg insisted that each artistic medium should be considered in isolation from the others. Above all, while Greenberg had no interest in popular culture, McLuhan considered popular forms such as film and television to be just as important as elite art for the study of our media culture.

Despite these differences, both Greenberg and McLuhan were modernists in their foundational thinking. Both were looking for essences. Greenberg was seeking to locate the essence of each art. McLuhan sought to identify the essence of each medium and describe its human and cultural impact. For McLuhan, each medium had a set of characteristics that determine how it ‘extends’ the sensorium. The linearity and exact reproducibility of the printing press defined typographic man with his sense of individualism and autonomy. The synaesthesia induced by the televisual image now gave us electronic man, who had more in common with the inhabitant of a village in a preliterate oral culture than with the urbane inhabitant of London or New York in the age of print. However, McLuhan’s instinct to be inclusive – to include almost all technology as media and to regard popular culture as well as high culture as his field of inquiry – did not comport with the purity of Greenberg’s high modernism. In this sense McLuhan had affinities with the earlier 20th-century avant-gardes such as dada or to the nascent postmodernism of the 1960s, which rejected Greenberg and his notion of purity in art.

With his appreciation of popular culture, McLuhan in fact reached far beyond art and the art community, just as he reached beyond the community of literary academics in the 1960s. He was a formative figure in the cultural shift I would call ‘popular modernism’. As the hierarchies of art and high culture were breaking down, as film and popular music (first jazz and then rock) were rising in their cultural status to rival their elite counterparts (literature and classic music), new cultural figures such as rock stars, film directors, and performative celebrities were in fact (and often without realizing it) adopting and adapting the aesthetic assumptions of high modernism. McLuhan was part of this trend, arguing that the medium of television or film could play the same cultural role as the medium of print had done in the past. For McLuhan, the same inexorable mechanism is at work in the way all media remake us.
As Greenberg lost influence in the art community in the second half of the 20th century, McLuhan has gained influence with today’s much larger digital community. Digital practitioners and theorists have largely accepted McLuhan’s essentialism and identify procedurality and interactivity as the essential qualities that make the digital medium uniquely expressive in today’s media culture. Popular modernism has outlived modernism itself.

References


**Jay David Bolter**

Literature, Communication, and Culture
Georgia Institute of Technology
[Email: jdbolter@gatech.edu]
In his essay *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read* (2007), French literary critic Pierre Bayard insists that the act of reading is not essential to the appreciation of the essence of a book – as long as we know how to position it in the broader ecosystem of a literary genre or of a field of knowledge. Following Oscar Wilde’s tongue-in-cheek advice never to read a text one must review (‘it prejudices you so …’), Bayard advocates the *right to non-reading*, in order to stimulate our creative imagination.

I, for one, have been sticking to this principle for most of my adult life. I’ve put off reading certain books as much as possible, while in the meantime avidly studying germane texts, secondary sources, and critical appraisals, so as to have a comprehensive panorama of the literary environment of their authors. Moreover, this procrastination allows me to fantasize about their opinions, their style, their concealed intentions. I call this ‘beating around the book’.

McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* is no exception. For years I’ve been leafing through excerpts and commentaries – never the real thing. And to this day I wouldn’t even have opened it, were it not for my students. When I started teaching classes on (new) media studies, the 1964 classic was on every list of compulsory reading. Reluctantly, I had to put my hands on a copy, too. It was the mid-noughties and the emphasis was on ‘social’ and participatory media. That largely shaped my expectations as to the content of the book.

That also determined my initial disappointment as to what I deemed was missing in McLuhan’s work. There I had an author who clearly drew inspiration from Harold Innis, who considered technologies as tools mediating processes of diffusion of cultural forms across spatial and time biases, and yet showed little awareness of the part played by human intermediaries in the transmission of messages across geographic, social and demographic boundaries. While his contemporaries Elihu Katz and Paul F Lazarsfeld were already reflecting on how media contents moved across social networks via opinion leaders, brokers, and mediators, McLuhan didn’t seem to take into account that part of the equation. His manifold influences...
included Edward T Hall, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, none of whom (except maybe the last one) qualifies as an early pioneer of ‘social’ and ‘new’ media studies.

In a way it was like McLuhan’s work left the role of social ties as structuring forces of diffusion untackled. From this point of view, situating Understanding Media in the larger field of communication and social sciences proved more arduous than I thought. Yet, this realization coincided with the moment when my initial disappointment turned into genuine interest. I was intrigued by the fact this work exposed a schism between a holistic stance, descriptive and focusing on the content of mediatic communication, and a more empirically-driven one, micro- and meso-sociologically-oriented, sensitive to the context of the mediated communication. For the former, McLuhan’s catchphrase ‘The medium is the message’ was valid. For the latter, it was also valid but – in an admittedly less incisive phrasing – it read: The medium is the structure of the social network describing the ties between the social agents uttering the message.

No incident summarizes the tension between these two approaches better than the 1955 Columbia University Teacher’s College seminar clash that opposed the then-budding Canadian information theorist and the dean of US sociology, Robert K Merton. The anecdote is related in Paul Levinson’s Digital McLuhan, one of the germane books I engaged with while postponing reading Understanding Media:

[Merton stood up] purpled with outrage and proceeded to say: ‘Just about everything in your paper requires cross-examination!’ He started with the first paragraph, sonorously ticking off all the points in want of further explanation, a William Jennings Bryan making a closing argument to the jury about why the accused should be found guilty of murdering the scholarly procedure. (Levinson, 1999: 24)

Retrospectively, I cannot help thinking that Merton was somehow set against McLuhan by Lazarsfeld with whom, one year before, he had co-written ‘Friendship as a social process’ (1954), the text establishing the notion of homophily as the individual propensity to communicate and create preferential ties with persons displaying shared characteristics. For decades, their seminal contribution would remain relatively unknown outside a restricted circle of English-speaking academics, while McLuhan would go on to meet international success with Understanding Media.

Here another type of schism comes to light, this time in terms of timing and public reception. If up to the 1990s McLuhan’s analysis was considered indispensable to figure out how ‘mass’ media worked, in the 2000s Merton and Lazarsfeld’s approach got the upper hand, as far as their approach turned out to be crucial to our grasp of how ‘social’ media function. Today’s interminable debates about online ‘echo chambers’, or the emphasis on the nature and effects of computer-mediated ‘friendships’, seem to respond to the theoretical framework established by the context-aware stance embodied...
by the two sociologists. Homophily in internet social networks stands as a prominent theoretical concern for scholars researching web-based political phenomena, cultural consumption, or relationship building.

Yet this relative cyclicity betrays the fact that the two approaches are complementary, rather than opposed. The focus on content and the one on context go together – they alternate, interchange, the one lives in the negative space left by the decline of the other. Which is why today McLuhan's voice still has something to say to our understanding of contemporary media. Even if, in fact, he did not understand them.

References

Antonio A Casilli
Economics and Social Sciences Department, Telecom ParisTech
École Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications
[email: casilli@telecom-paristech.fr]
Being T/here

Canadians of a certain age cut our teeth on McLuhan’s form-breaking texts that embodied and enacted theory in and of themselves, modeling for us a reflexive appreciation of and responsible engagement with studies of media forms and functions, that might wake us up from what McLuhan (2005[1955]: np) described as ‘the habits of rigid perspective induced by three centuries of print hypnosis’. Understanding Media, though entirely conventionally print-based and not the hybrid multi-modal forms other key works assumed, was even so a book that greatly extended beyond its covers.

My own dog-eared copy was purchased, second hand, for 75 cents in 1970. Second only to Eric Havelock’s Preface to Plato, it has probably had the greatest influence on my work, despite a parting for the couple of decades it took me to get over its ‘extensions of man’ aspects. To be generous here – it was a bit of a challenge for a young would-be feminist to own an allegiance to McLuhan, and this had to do not only with the literal language of the times, in which man stood, purportedly but rarely in actuality, for (but mostly on) all those ‘subordinates’ that McLuhan blithely invokes: ‘the negro’, ‘women’, ‘children’, ‘the Indians’, ‘primitive tribes’. Indeed the medium was its message for us, the subordinated ones. And although the joy of the work was its fearless interweaving of literary classics with contemporary conditions ranging from neuroscience to pop art, its unashamed embrace of every possible topic that helped us to tear off the straitjackets of disciplinarity, the medium, recall, was a tall, white, heterosexual, Christian academic, tenured at Canada’s top university, in suit, white shirt and tie who spoke in that distinctively ‘educated Canadian’ accent that sounds almost British to contemporary ears, a man whose self-representation was so staunchly conservative as to repel self-styled student radicals of the underclass. In one short ‘art’ film, we see McLuhan lying in the grass as young females dressed as airline stewardesses pranced around him presumably to attend to His every need as the Great Man reflects, pontificates, reflects again. So, yes, that was more than a little contradictory, and Marshall and I had a lengthy separation during which time things germinated, got remixed and admixed and resurfaced in ways that only in hindsight can I acknowledge came from the patriarchal wellspring that was the long-repudiated McLuhan.
A further object-lesson in the inseparability of medium from message, while
the task of recollecting Understanding Media did in the end catalyze all kinds
of ways that the book was a conceptual, pedagogical and methodological
‘backbone’ to my own work, the (often handwritten) texts, course syllabi,
research papers and such, in which those connections were made evident
are no longer retrievable, simply because they are not in digital form. And
none of those old papers, to the extent I have kept them anywhere at all,
are any longer in the same physical space from which I am writing, so it is
as if they have never been at all.

Still, since all reading is interpretive, and all writing, authorial, probably it
doesn’t matter that much of that paper-based ‘historical record’ has now to
be imagined and made up.

Time is short, cut to the chase: this one fragment has been my bedrock for
understanding how epistemology and ethics converge – former German
Armaments minister Albert Speer, in a speech at the Nuremberg trials, made
some bitter remarks about the effects of electric media on German life:

The telephone, the teleprinter and the wireless made it possible for
orders from the highest levels to be given direct to the lowest levels,
where, on account of the absolute authority behind them, they were
carried out uncritically … (McLuhan, 1964: 277)

I work in educational media studies, focusing now on digital games and
learning. The question driving my work is properly McLuhan’s: what
are the epistemological impacts of media on what counts as knowledge
– specifically on what counts as ‘educational’ knowledge? What differences
are made to knowledge – how we think about and act in relation to its
pursuit – by changes in the media of its representation and reception? How
is ‘school knowledge’, in its insistently textual preferences, formulated,
communicated, evaluated, and ‘accredited’. Necessarily, such a trajectory
of inquiry soon becomes a critique of educational systems and institutional
definitions of ‘curriculum’, ‘pedagogy’, ‘development’, and ‘achievement’,
because in so little of what is done now, just as when McLuhan was writing,
is attention seriously given to the media in and through which we teach
and learn. David Olson, himself a past director of the McLuhan Center at
the University of Toronto, remarking on the ease with which we mistake
linguistic fluency for cognitive competence, remarked that we often see as
intellectual accomplishment what is in fact merely mastery of a particular
form of language (Olson, 1977).

We continue to rely even today on textual affordances to conduct and to assess
education’s work, and so the public school remains largely unaware of the ways
the literate and linguistic forms it privileges for knowledge transmission and
knowledge display are partial, experientially incomplete and only differentially
accessible, nor does public education often acknowledge or appreciate what
these forms make impossible and invisible. This is a failure to realize that
educational communication is always both an epistemological and an ethical
engagement. When we ignore the school’s privileging of very particular, very limited forms of legitimate communication, and fail to pay attention to the ways these forms work against inclusion and equity, we ourselves continue through our studied ignorance and inactivity, actively to effect a continuance of traditional educational inequalities. That being so, there is a responsibility, one both epistemological and ethical, to make oneself rhetorically accountable. As educators, as scholars and researchers we are responsible for knowing that – even if we do not always know how – each medium imposes its own grammatical constraints, its own ethical inclinations, its own ideological tendencies. The communicative forms we use and require in education all come with a price tag in terms of what can be said, how and by whom.

Conclusion? Woodbugs!

And so it happened that, circa 1990, I had my class of graduate students searching the web for images of woodbugs to insert into the webpages they were assigned to create for their ‘doctoral seminar in contemporary curriculum theory’. In a kind of Nietzschean transvaluation of values, all their well-honed skills of sophisticated verbal artistry were sidelined in favor of images of woodbugs in the form of lines of code. By the next decade, we were creating paper prototypes of digital games about pond life, and home-made.GIF animations of aliens and flying cows. Presentations using multiple overhead projectors, and recorded sound punctuated by words to which those images bore no obvious relation routinely confused and annoyed audiences accustomed to the soporific drone of literal and linear texts paradigmatic for scholarly talks. Then came multi-modal research tool-development to enable the analysis of video clips of children at the zoo from which language was prohibited in order to concentrate on children’s experience in multi-sensorial terms, and building videogames about mad scientists and dogs navigating the world through smell.

Thus for me has theory, pedagogy and research d/evolved from scholarly literate finessing into playing with pictures and gestures, technologies, games and gizmos, remixing pirated sounds and animations, studying children as if they were animals, listening attentively to their grunts and laughter and watching the ways their bodies move and touch one another and their world. New technologies like digital games have been invaluable for seeing how the school’s fidelity to traditional ways and means of educating, its traditional ‘textual preferences’, once advanced, but now limit its educational work. And as for ‘Understanding Media’, we are very far away from that even now. Education has indeed taken up new media and new technologies, but in all seriousness and, indeed ‘with a vengeance’ as programmed learning and ‘expert systems’ drive students senseless with boredom cultivating the most literal and superficial kinds of ‘knowledge’ all neatly expressible in words and numbers. Truth is, we are just beginning to understand media in education, and our best hope for progress to that end is not to fetishize and sanctify Man’s [sic] extensions, but with irreligious gay abandon, to play, play, play, because, as someone once said, anyone who thinks games aren’t educational doesn’t know a thing about either.
References


**Suzanne de Castell**

Faculty of Education

University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa

[email: Suzanne.deCastell@uoit.ca]
On the 50th Anniversary of *Understanding Media*

The 26 chapters that comprise the second half of *Understanding Media* proclaim for media a cultural impact equal to that of the alphabet; the seven opening chapters of the book propose media as the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of a post-humanist epistemology. Behind these quotients hovers the digital as a universal mode of translation. And the subtitle places mediation in complex relationship to the *bios*.

McLuhan announced *Understanding Media* at the end of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962) as that book’s companion piece:

> The new electric galaxy of events has already moved deeply into the Gutenberg galaxy. Even without collision, such co-existence of technologies and awareness brings trauma and tension to every living person. (pp. 278–279)

Alluding to the famous scene in *Notre-Dame de Paris* where we are told that ‘ceci tuera cela’ – the book will displace the cathedral – McLuhan continues:

> Our most ordinary and conventional attitudes seem suddenly twisted into gargoyles and grotesques … These multiple transformations, which are the normal consequence of introducing new media into any society whatever, need special study and will be the subject of another volume on *Understanding Media* in the world of our time. (p. 279)

It is well known that *Understanding Media* grew out of McLuhan’s *Report on Project in Understanding New Media*. In the transition from the *Report* to the book, however, media took on a breadth not evident earlier. As McLuhan wrote to his former student Walter Ong in February of 1962:

> I expect to add to the present form [i.e. the *Report*] of *Understanding Media* several media like money, railways ships and planes and cars – in fact, all of those externalizations of our bodily functions and perceptions
which cause all human technology to exist in the ablative case. (Molinaro et al., 1987: 283)

McLuhan was also concerned with the transition from visual to acoustic space, and thus the two books form a chiasmus, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* focusing on the transition from orality to literacy and *Understanding Media* from print culture to the acoustic. Chiasmus is a rhetorical trope; chiasm is an anatomical term for the crossing over of two physiological structures, and thus McLuhan unites the *techne* of mediation with the *bios* He would return definitively to this structure in the tetrads of *Laws of Media*, a book conceived as a sequel to *Understanding Media*.

Reviews ran the gamut. Kenneth E Boulding (1967: 60) noted that the structure of *Understanding Media* was far more conservative than that of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and that while the terms ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ were unfortunate, they addressed a very significant fact about the way media work. George P Elliott (1967: 67) made the point that McLuhan’s ‘writing is deliberately anti-logical: circular, repetitious, unqualified, gnomic, outrageous’. Dwight Macdonald (1967: 204–205) wrote that: ‘compared to Mr. McLuhan, Spengler is cautious and Toynbee positively pedantic’, but lest this be construed as a compliment, Macdonald added that the book is ‘impure nonsense, nonsense adulterated by sense’. Christopher Ricks (1967: 217) commented that McLuhan’s ‘style is a viscous fog, through which loom stumbling metaphors’. McLuhan’s comments about the ‘oral’ caused more than one critic to ask how he could write about the oral in a book. Other critics were disturbed by the lack of attention to content. Still others wondered why so much attention was given to popular culture, and where McLuhan stood morally when he referred to humans as the sex organs of technology. The most intelligent of these contemporary reviews was made by Harold Rosenberg (1967: 194–202) for *The New Yorker*: ‘We all know’, he wrote, ‘that radio, the movies, the press do things to us. For McLuhan they also *are* us; ‘technologies have been a component of human living for three thousand years, and our loftiest feelings have derived from that segment of us that is least ourselves.’ Rosenberg called McLuhan a ‘crisis philosopher’, though ‘by far the coolest’, a ‘belated Whitman singing the body electric with Thomas Edison as accompanist’.

McLuhan begins the book with one of his most insightful and far-reaching comments: that the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium (1964: 8). This provides his study with an historical and critical foundation, and one that is meant to challenge Enlightenment values, because ‘we have confused reason with literacy, and rationalism with a single technology’ (p. 15). *Understanding Media* embraces the ‘ear-rational’ and the disconnected as necessary concomitants of the electronic era and its newfound tribalism. But this is not to universalize the effects of media; the local inflects the global: ‘the effect of … the TV image will vary from culture to culture’ (p. 45).

The most important point made in *Understanding Media* is the relationship between the *bios* and technology, the notion that we have become ‘the sex organs of the machine world’ (p. 46), a concept first broached in *The
Mechanical Bride (1951). This interfusion of sex and technology is only one aspect of the 'hybrid energy' (McLuhan, 1964: 49) that will be released by the conjunction of literate and electronic modalities, a conjunction that highlights the translational aspect of media, especially in their digital configuration: ‘Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language’ (p. 80); this translation is configured through number, which has ‘both auditory and repetitive resonance, and a tactile dimension as well’ (p. 108). Electronic media, in this regard, can be understood as producing an acoustic (non-visual) space that is characterized by sensory involvement. This is the space of ‘the skew, the curved, and the bumpy’ (p. 117), as opposed to the ‘straight and uniform’ domain of print culture. This new acoustic space will require ‘nonverbal ways’ (p. 140) of understanding. It will be a sculptural world, characterized by contours rather than by straight lines, just as film rolls up the linear frames of a movie to produce the sense of an organic process (p. 182).

Understanding Media retains its currency largely because it rejected the critical commonplaces of its day, and because it is inconclusive. Fuelled by ‘percepts’, it seeks not to create a system but to produce a pedagogy. The book teaches how to understand media not as a continuous phenomenon but as a discontinuous set of effects. It thus seeks to reproduce the experience of electronic media themselves, which require that we engage with them in ‘a convulsive sensuous participation’ (p. 314) in their ‘discontinuous, skew, and nonlineal’ (p. 334) configurations. Not a messenger but a medium, McLuhan created an effect.

References

Richard Cavell
Department of English
University of British Columbia, Vancouver
[email: r.cavell@ubc.ca]
Marshall McLuhan: The First Cyberpunk Author?

Whenever I re-read *Understanding Media*, I am amazed by its brilliance and by its darkness – and by the fact that so little of the book, that many assume they already know because they have heard the aphorisms ‘the medium is the message’ and ‘the global village’, is actually known or understood (to use McLuhan’s phrase). To many, McLuhan is a prophet of the electronic age who predicted the importance of personal computers and the internet; to others, he is a doomed and dangerous apologist who, like his fictional counterpart in *Videodrome*, Dr O’Blivion, should have died from a TV induced tumor. Neither position catches the deep ambiguity – the hope and the fear – expressed in *Understanding Media*.

The ambiguity even extends to the form of McLuhan’s writing. What does it mean for a man who declares the medium is the message to write? This question was taken up recently in a remarkable exhibit curated by Ellef Prestsæter called *GG*, which draws from Guttorm Guttormsgaard’s remarkable archive of books to interrogate *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962). Framing the table dedicated to McLuhan’s work is a quotation by Nam June Paik: ‘The only problem with McLuhan is that he still writes books.’ Showing how McLuhan’s books – especially the more experimental ones such as *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan with Fiore and Agel, 1967) – played with form, this exhibit reveals that our reading is enabled by what it elides, such as the spacers used by print setters.

Given McLuhan’s emphasis on medium as mess/age, it is perhaps not surprising that *Understanding Media* is cited so widely, but read so little. What can content – words – mean when the medium is the mass/age? In a strange way then, the content has become what is elided as the book lives on. It now perhaps serves the same purpose as those spacers: gaps that make books books.

Perhaps. But let me be perverse and read *Understanding Media*, that is, read McLuhan’s reading of understanding in order to understand his understanding of it. The message is, of course, the new scale, the new
ratio of sense perceptions that every new medium initiates. The Electric Age is the externalization of our Central Nervous System – the whole world becomes one great consciousness.

But this is not necessarily a happy state: it is a mess/age. McLuhan is arguably the first cyberpunk author: offering us dark (in more sense then one) futures that are also enticing in their possibilities for control. ‘The global village’ is not some happy construct, especially for the ‘civilized’ mechanical man. The problem facing the world, McLuhan (1994[1964]: 25) argues, is not population growth, but rather proximity. The Electric Age is the Age of Anxiety in which ‘we wear all mankind as our skin’ (p. 47) for ‘the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups … can no longer be contained, in the political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our lives’ (p. 5). This promises a time in which we can live mythically and wholly, but also threatens mental breakdown in which mechanical man painfully implodes and amputates himself, victim of the Narcissus / narcosis syndrome.

One of McLuhan’s most evocative yet under discussed ideas is the Narcissus/narcosis syndrome. Because extension also irritates our bodies, we self-amputate that organ in order to produce a ‘generalized numbness or shock that declines self-recognition’ (hence Narcissus’s image as self-amputation and his attendant misrecognition). Each extension, that is, causes a radical shift in the ratio of our sense perceptions, which our whole body reacts to violently. The stakes, though, with the Electric Age are especially high since man

set aside himself … a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation; as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism. (p. 43)

Further, this self-amputation takes place with ‘complete disregard for antiseptics’, spreading infection in a desperate attempt to produce pleasure, a powerful counter-irritant.

This, however, is where the saving power of ‘understanding’ comes in – a subliminal understanding of human conscious and unconsciousness that actually stems from the extension of the central nervous system. Understanding provides ‘comfort’ and thus the removal of the irritant, rather than the removal of our organs. This ‘understanding’, though, is further bifurcated into the rational / computational and the artistic. Rather than being percussed victims, enslaved to technology, McLuhan argues we can do two things: use computers to ‘control these shifts in sense-ratios of the psychic and social outlook’, or avoid them altogether by becoming immune, that is, having the disease without its symptoms (p. 64). The artist can ‘correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures’ because the ‘artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of
new knowledge in his own time’ (p. 65). The artist promises a way toward human autonomy.

Is it any wonder then that the Narcissus / narcosis syndrome and the artist have been forgotten under the mantra of ‘the medium is the message’ and ‘the global village’? Aphorisms that have become ways of numbing ourselves to the impact of McLuhan?

Perhaps. But the reading of vaguely dystopian texts as cyber-celebrations is not limited to fans of McLuhan, nor is McLuhan’s celebration of human autonomy (p. 51), computer control and integral understanding, his representation of difference as both promise and threat of the future limited to McLuhan. Again: Marshall McLuhan, the first cyberpunk author?

Let me just end, then, with an observation. McLuhan links literate, mechanical, specialized man to slaves. Drawing from Arnold Toynbee’s work, he argues that Greek society, the ‘society of active warriors’, was destroyed by its reliance on slave labor, which increased production, but also introduced specialization (the tactic of ‘the lame and the crippled’) (p. 69). Mechanical technology enslaves because it follows the logic of slaves, ‘the armies of technologically specialized slaves working the land [which] blighted the social existence of the independent yeomen and small farms, and led to the strange world of the Roman towns and the cities crowded with rootless parasites’ (pp. 72–73). To what extent is this vilification of slaves, at the heart (and indeed at the end) of Understanding Media reveal what Understanding Media cannot understand? As Orlando Patterson (1985[1982]) has so forcefully argued, the notion and value of freedom is inextricably linked to the history of slavery.

References


Videodrome (1983) Dir. David Cronenberg. CFDC, Film.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun
Modern Culture and Media
Brown University
[email: whkchun@brown.edu]
McLuhan and World Affairs

When I first read *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964) 30 years ago I was baffled. As an undergraduate seeking truth rather than how to seek truth, McLuhan was fun to peruse but most of what I recall reading left a mixed impression. Over the past decade, however, while trying to comprehend globalization as a neoliberal, neo-imperialist foreign policy project (I am a political economist, after all), I’ve been drawn back to McLuhan, re-reading his work as a means of elaborating Harold Innis’s (1973: vii) guiding question: ‘Why do we attend to the things to which we attend?’

Most foreign policy analysts and practitioners apply variations of what is known as neorealism – an approach to international relations that (essentially) conceptualizes the world as a competition among states using various coercive and economic capabilities. US policy, from this perspective, thus is the outcome of the ‘rational’ Machiavellian calculations made by its officials. For many foreign policy analysts and practitioners, McLuhan’s probes concerning extensions, the global village, and his aphorism that the medium is the message have been (especially after 9/11 and with the advent of digital technologies) simplified and adapted to fit this positivist approach.

When, in 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton introduced a policy initiative called Internet Freedom – asserting that ‘the spread of information networks is forming a new nervous system for our planet’ (Clinton, 2010) – I was reminded of McLuhan’s (1964: 110) position that electricity constitutes an ‘extension of our central nervous system’. But then when she associated Internet Freedom to ideals such as freedom of expression, freedom to worship, and even the freedom to pursue ‘modernity’(!), as well as global peace and security, I was also compelled to recall McLuhan’s more dystopian concerns.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Obama administration has embraced almost everything digital. In fact its policies concerning digital technologies feel as if they’ve emerged from discussions among State Department, Google, Facebook, and NSA officials, over coffeehouse get-togethers with the editors of *Wired Magazine*. When these policy perspectives, however, are assessed directly in light of the text that appears to have inspired them
(Understanding Media, of course), one also gets the impression that McLuhan would have associated these with 'the zombie stance of the technological idiot' (McLuhan, 1969).

Again, the philosophical question addressed by Innis has become paramount as, according to McLuhan, the global village clearly is not an ideal place to live. For one thing, it is a world of accelerating discontinuities inducing the Age of Anxiety. Electronic environments, McLuhan argued, reassert aspects of pre-modern acoustic culture in that the interdependencies of humanity are sensually apparent. However, the removed, individualistic, cause-and-effect thinking that characterized the industrial age has been marginalized. This, for McLuhan, has undermined the visual–aural balance (or tension) that he idealized in, for example, medieval monastic culture.

In my own work, admittedly influenced much more by Innis than McLuhan, the writings of the latter constitute complex elaborations of the annihilation of time (or, more specifically for Innis, the spatial biases related to modern political economic relations and thought). Through McLuhan, what is striking, particularly in the context of US foreign policy, is the general inability (rather than an unwillingness) to recognize the many contradictions now being authored by American officials as they push to universalize digital mediations. For one thing, amidst an ever-increasing volume of information and the speed-up of human interactions, a declining ability to perceive and communicate with care is becoming both apparent and trivialized as 'just the way it is'. In the electric age McLuhan opined that we must make sense of the world by reacting rather than analyzing as action and reaction are occurring virtually at the same time. When media are understood as the message rather than just conveyors of messages, the ideals and benefits that official Washington has discerned from its secondhand or simplified reading of McLuhan are rendered infeasible. If, in our global village, people relate and act more through emotion, intuition, and a reactionary mindset rather than discussion, deliberation, and reflection, we can better appreciate why our emerging world (dis)order is becoming a more alienating and, ultimately, violent place (Comor, 2008, 2013).

In returning to McLuhan and approaching his writings in the context of my current research, I think I have a better sense of the Promethean tragedy now unfolding. Although a computer-enabled ‘process of consciousness’ without ‘verbalization’ constitutes, for him, the dawning of a prospective cosmic consciousness (McLuhan, 1964: 80), this is not a world in which truths are formulated in thoughtful ways. In fact, the unreflexive nature of neorealist positivism and, with it, its practitioners' misapplications of McLuhan, demonstrate this very condition. Instead of the ascent of some sort of liberal democratic global civil society – one that is engaged and cooperative (at least in accordance with status quo political economic relations) – what we can foresee instead, thanks to McLuhan, is a world more accurately characterized by deepening anxieties and various forms of disengagement.
Surely it is this kind of dystopian insight that compelled McLuhan to develop an approach that requires reflexive (as opposed to just critical) thought – an ability I lacked 30 years ago. As he put it:

The extensions of man’s consciousness ... hold the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ ... Cataclysmic environmental changes ... are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences. If we refuse to see them at all, we will become their servants. (McLuhan, 1969, emphasis added)

McLuhan’s writings help me make sense of contemporary policies that are, from a macro-historical perspective at least, worse than senseless. More than this, they help me to understand the dynamics shaping both reflexive and unreflexive thought and to appreciate the importance of promoting the former in world affairs going forward.

References


Edward Comor
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
[email: ecomor@uwo.ca]
I remember reading McLuhan in my student times for theory of history at Cologne University. At that time I could not know yet that a new discipline was soon to emerge at German universities called Medienwissenschaft, triggered by scholars like Friedrich Kittler, which retroactively made McLuhan's Understanding Media the foundation of a discourse. By naming media in its title in a sense not restricted to the term medium in physics (air, liquids, gases), McLuhan made clear that cultural engineering had escalated into electronic agencies whose impact on society and economy had become so strong that it deserved an academic analysis of its own. Having been trained as a historian myself, I grew into that new discipline, re-reading Understanding Media rather more than less frequently. By transforming what had initially been commissioned as a report on the educational impact of mass media, McLuhan has created a non-contentist understanding of media. Focusing not on the content of mass media (which is the realm of communication studies) but on their subliminal messages, he opened a non-hermeneutic definition of media-in-operation which resonates with what we today term the media–archaeological approach (see Huhtamo and Parikka, 2011). The title Understanding Media was untranslatable in its first German edition, it sounded too hermeneutic to German ears, but McLuhan's message has been unmistakingly non-hermeneutic. Mistaking understanding for sense-making itself would be a misunderstanding of media. Maybe that is why the publisher Econ (Düsseldorf) did not dare to translate Understanding Media directly, but re-phrased it rather cloudily as Die magischen Kanäle – 'the magic channels' – in 1968. Has McLuhan been a true media archaeologist avant la lettre? At one point, he compared his method with that of archaeologists, but he never really took care to undertake a close reading of the precise technological artefacts and their circuit diagrams. Media archaeology is 'cold' in its apassionate gaze ('pathos of distance', according to Nietzsche), but 'hot' (focusing perception on details) in the literal sense defined by McLuhan in chapter 2 of Understanding Media.

Let me return to my dialectic experience with Understanding Media. Following on from studies in history I did not, in the course of my academic
curriculum, turn directly into a media historian, but having been trained by McLuhan's initial remark that the real impact of any technology is the change of scale or pace of pattern that it introduces into human affairs, I was led to focus on tempor(е)alities that differ from the well-known 'historical' ones. At that point, my reference to McLuhan's classic transcends it at the same time, across the historograpical border which still limits Understanding Media. McLuhan himself devoted chapter 15 to the impact of the mechanical, escapement-driven clock, linking it to typography and cinematographic movement as opposed to the ephemeral fluidity of electricity. The 'semicentennial' (itself a chronological calendar term) of its publication thus gives rise to a different interpretation of its place in the genealogy of media knowledge. Essentially still being a book which McLuhan made the subject of his 1962 *Gutenberg Galaxy*, it refers to the regime of the symbolic (alphabetical) order which tends to be time-invariant (its temporal bias in terms of McLuhan's academic teacher Harold Innis), while the electronic media which are the core of McLuhan's analysis are signal-based and incorporate a completely different chrono-poetics. The infinitesimal calculus which according to McLuhan is itself a product of the typographic age offers a tool for a non-historiographical approach to such temporalities; in fact, there is much more media-mathematics in McLuhan's *Understanding* than philological humanities tend to acknowledge. Thus even the somewhat unhappy term ‘digital humanities’ gains new energy from McLuhan.

One essential message of McLuhan's diagnosis of the shift from the Gutenberg era to the current age of electronic media is changing tempor(е)alities. All of a sudden, McLuhan turns into a critique of the visualisation of knowledge that started with the use of the phonetic alphabet which, according to chapter 9 gramophonically took ‘an eye for an ear’. Beyond *Understanding Media*, McLuhan discovered what he coined ‘acoustic space’ (see McLuhan and Carpenter, 1960). As a counterblast to the so-called ‘visual turn’ or ‘pictorial turn’ as declared by WJT Mitchell long ago, recent years proclaim another rebellion against the Gutenberg galaxy which is the ‘sonic turn’, accompanied by new methods of making information and even knowledge accessible in the so long neglected acoustic channel of perception. Audio interfaces and methods of sonification of data are addressed to the time-sensitive ear. It has been McLuhan who anticipated this turn already, a theorem bound to his analysis of the electronic age which he sharply discontinues from the machinic age. As expressed in a letter by McLuhan to Barbara Ward, 9 February 1973, the speed of electricity constitutes an information environment that has basically an ‘acoustic’ structure. This insight into synchronicity instead of linear-historiographical linearity, nowadays analogous to networked electronic data transfer in the world wide web, remains valid in McLuhan’s somewhat bizarre diagnosis of the media situation. All of a sudden, *Understanding* gets a different meaning; in German, ‘Verstehen’ has a resonating connotation with listening, closer to the famous introduction of Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone – Film – Typewriter* (1986): media determine (German: ‘bestimmen’) the situation.
Stimmung means ‘tuning’ as well; one still has to be tuned in the right way to understand medium McLuhan.

References


Wolfgang Ernst
Institute of Musicology and Media Studies
Humboldt University, Berlin
[email: wolfgang.ernst@hu-berlin.de]
Electric Light

Marshall McLuhan built his study of media around a singular, contentless, pure, informational, medium of electric light. Electric light was exceptional in his view because it had no other medium as its content and delivered a message of fundamental change in human affairs. Moreover, electric light did not entail specific tasks or operations but was, rather, non-specialist. The more McLuhan speculated about electrification as the externalization of the human central nervous system, which is to say for him, consciousness itself moving towards an organic, interdependent cybernation (his synonym for interplay assisted by automation), the less attention he paid to the electrical grid. His focus was electric form and not electrical system(s). This distinguishes his approach from historians of electrification, whatever their stripe. The thinking of electrical generation, distribution and consumption as a public utility – the power grid – is supplanted by the instantaneity of electricity. Electricity is process removed in space from the power to undertake it; this separation between plant and process was based on principles of indirectness and post-mechanical flexibility, what might be called illumination without determination. It was never a question for McLuhan who supplied the power and who paid for it, and how it moved from here to there, and who controlled it, although he was certainly aware of General Electric Company’s profitable trade in light bulbs; instead, the wonderful visions of independence, artistic autonomy and self-employment that would result from global illumination blinded him to the political economy of the grid, dumb and monopolistic as he found it, or quilt-like, fragile and smart as we live it. Between these two conditions, then, there remains a constant: big black outs. McLuhan experienced the big northeast black out of 1965 that darkened many provinces and states in Canada and the US not as scarcity of light, but as a paradoxical fullness that suspended the laws of supply and demand. If he had lived to witness the bigger black out of 2003, he might have rejoiced at the new socialities that spontaneously appeared in the darkness.

In his own terms, McLuhan’s claim that electric light was pairless, that is, without the content of another medium seems historically naive. When we
read in *Understanding Media* that all media come in pairs except electric light, this well-known argument to the effect that the content of writing is speech, thought is the content of speech, etc., one is being asked to forget the close developmental links between utilities. It may be the case that supplies of water, gas and then electricity were developed in that order, though they were delivered to the populace quite unevenly, sometimes long after their availability, there is no mistaking the debt that electrification owed to the gas supply. Historians of industrialization point out that the idea of a central supply, its distribution network with primary, secondary and tertiary branches, and switch technologies, entail that in the late 19th century the content of light was gas as a key force of social change. At the same time electrification was an innovation that rapidly outstripped the utility it had originally mimicked.

Thus, McLuhan's insights are still selectively valuable in as much as they alert us to how certain qualities, namely, degree of purity, taken in the late 19th century conceptualization of electricity as a ‘vitamin’, can lean forward toward that kind of fusional, interdependent and implosive vision he had of electric form in modernity, even if he neglected to develop the relevant historical connections across utilities and analyze the role of electrical generation in the transition of the structure of capitalism from the invisible to the heavy hand (autonomous, entrepreneurial competition to corporate monopoly). Indeed, the electrical character of finance capital and socialism constitute in themselves rich terrains of investigation of electricity’s fraught ideological field. At all costs McLuhan wanted to keep his thinking of the electric age apart from what he considered to be ideology, that is, social programs. Borrowing a page from Barthes, it is fair to claim that McLuhan like a good mythologist ex-nominated the politics that underwrote the electric implosion of an age defined by speed, interplay, synchronicity, and the metaphysics of illumination.

McLuhan never mentioned Lenin in this regard. It should be noted that the project of electrifying Russia in the 1920s was a massive technical and economic undertaking and that for Lenin ‘the age of steam is the age of the bourgeoisie, the age of electricity is the age of socialism’; indeed, electricity would bring about the erasure of lingering distinctions between industry and agriculture and town and country, which would revitalize industry, and create a new high-tech economy, and transform workplaces and homes. Instead, eschewing ideology, McLuhan underlined social change through the erasure of the difference between night and day by electric light, with recourse to apple pie values of night baseball, network television, advertising, infowar, and business – into which, during a period of overstaffing, university students are supposed to go during summer break. Whether or not they will find a berth after graduation is another matter altogether. For McLuhan, the electric age is capitalistic.

What McLuhan accomplished was a deepening and extension of electricity’s mystery that had been in circulation before the arrival of the 20th century, whereas Lenin saw that all such bourgeois myth-making would be switched
off with the advent of a socialist electrification of humankind. McLuhan persisted in his belief that electricity fostered independence from place rather than metabolising collectivity, the latter being a phenomenon of firelight and physical proximity. Electricity fed automation, which fostered nomadism and generalism. McLuhan’s nomads were in principle deeply engaged in the dialogical interplay of the global electric network of communications, even if they, too, might suffer from the apathy of the numbness they experienced of having their central nervous systems overstimulated.

What, then, as a professor of communication, did I learn from McLuhan? This piece of advice still rings loudly: reflecting deeply on the transformative powers of electric light is the key to understanding the effects of all media on our lives.

Gary Genosko
Faculty of Social Science and Humanities
University of Ontario Institute of Technology
[email: Gary.Genosko@uoit.ca]
By a Commodius Vicus: From Cliché to Archetype to Cliché

Midway among Marshall McLuhan's book publications stands *From Cliché to Archetype* (2011[1970]), a collaborative work with Wilfred Watson. It owes its origins to McLuhan's notice that the word archetype had degenerated into a cliché. When he set about regenerating it, he showed that archetype and cliché are inseparable. This discovery is illustrated fully in *From Cliché to Archetype* in relation to language, literature, and beyond, thus simultaneously underscoring the unity and coherence of *Understanding Media* and adding a new dimension of insight to it.

An archetype is an expandable category; a cliché is neither a category nor expandable. But it can be modified, and McLuhan has much to say about how this is done in the hands of artists. Just as McLuhan stretched the sense of ‘medium’, he stretches the sense of ‘cliché’, defining it at different times as an extension, a probe, and a means of retrieving the past. The resonance among these notions demonstrates how fundamental the study of cliché is for McLuhan.

He calls perceptions clichés, since the physical senses form a closed system. In this sense, all communications media are clichés, insofar as they extend our physical senses. And even art is cliché, because it retrieves older clichés.

The simplest definition of cliché for McLuhan is that of a probe. Here is an apparent paradox, as the authors freely acknowledge. But art is the sharpening of clichés into probes, into new forms that stimulate new awareness. What is familiar, even worn out, becomes new. McLuhan’s favorite example to illustrate this process comes from James Joyce, whose writing wakes up language (creates new clichés) by putting it to sleep (destroying old clichés). Or, as McLuhan (1974) put it in commenting on the treatment of this theme: ‘All cliché is always being put back on the compost heap, as it were, whence it emerges as a shining new form.’

Between archetypes and clichés there are both contrast and interaction. A cliché is incompatible with another, even when they are of similar meaning. One may choose between the expressions ‘getting down to the nitty-gritty’
and ‘getting down to brass tacks’ but not combine them into ‘getting down to brass nitty-gritty’ or ‘getting down to nitty-gritty tacks’. But an archetype is an open set or group to which members (clichés) can be added.

McLuhan defines the archetype as a retrieved awareness or new consciousness. Such awareness is created when the artist probes an archetype with an old cliché. Eventually, the probe itself turns into a cliché. From Cliché to Archetype views all form – whether in language, visual arts, music, or other domains – as reversal of archetype into cliché. But cliché also reverses into archetype. Beyond language, cliché occurs in past times, fixed and unalterable, because they are irretrievable.

McLuhan emphasizes that clichés are not confined to the verbal, noting parallels between the verbal and the nonverbal type. They find strong similarity between phrases like ‘green as grass’ or ‘white as snow’ and the internal combustion engine. These similarities relate to both the form of the clichés involved and the key McLuhan teaching on new environments created by technology from Understanding Media.

The banal phrases in question and the engine operate without any control over their form by the user. This is ultimately less important than their environmental impact. Both the clichés and the engine create new environments in three distinct ways: (1) meaningless communication and endless commuting, respectively; (2) invisible/visible junkyards of speech/writing – the vehicles of thought and visible junkyards of the road vehicles of yesterday, respectively; (3) disfigured mindscape and landscape, respectively.

McLuhan probes the connection between verbal and nonverbal clichés and archetypes. They observe that language provides extensions of all the physical senses at once, reminding us that these are integrated when language is spoken, whereas the visual sense becomes highly specialized with written language. Because McLuhan takes clichés as extensions or technologies, he can discover not only similarities but direct links between the effect of past technologies and the accumulation of clichés in language. So, hunting with dogs gave English the phrases to turn tail, top dog, underdog, bone of contention, to give the slip to, to run to earth, to throw off the scent, to be on the track of, etc.

Inspired by WB Yeats’s poem ‘The Circus Animals' Desertion’, McLuhan develops the idea that the interaction of clichés and archetypes in language has counterparts beyond language. Examples include that of a flagpole flying a flag. The flag by itself is a cliché – a fixed and unalterable symbol of the country it represents. Citizens don’t have the option to modify it at will. But a flag on a flagpole is an archetype, since any flag can be hoisted in place of another.

The interplay of cliché and archetype, and the close connection of both to McLuhan’s most fundamental preoccupations in Understanding Media, are perhaps best seen in the following passage:
The archetype is a retrieved awareness or consciousness. It is consequently a retrieved cliché – an old cliché retrieved by a new cliché. Since a cliché is a unit extension of man, an archetype is a quoted extension, medium, technology, or environment. (McLuhan with Watson, 2011[1970]: 21)

The discovery of the interplay of cliché and archetype led to the further discovery of the interplay of figure and ground. The concept of archetypes also gave McLuhan a take on structuralism, in which he identified the paradigms of European structuralists as a set of archetypes. His decision to develop a complete book around the term archetype might have been motivated in the first place by a desire to appropriate it from Northrop Frye. There are five references to Frye in the book, including a Frigean Anatomy of a Metamorphosis for Eugene Ionesco’s The Bald Soprano and an extensive quotation from a commentary by William Wimsatt criticizing Frye for failing to maintain his own distinction between value and criticism in Anatomy of Criticism. McLuhan (1977) wrote to Cleanth Brooks with some satisfaction of his discovery in Jean Piaget's writings that archetypes, as defined in Frye's approach, were unnecessary.

McLuhan's preference for percepts over concepts was a strategy for avoiding clichés by recourse to pure process. He linked this process to his original probe, pointing out that any medium surrounds both its users and earlier media. The result is resonance and metamorphosis between media and their users. This nonstop process was the subject of From Cliché to Archetype.

Within the body of McLuhan's work, From Cliché to Archetype marks the emergence of the notion of retrieval – the fourth of the media laws he would integrate with those of extension, obsolescence, and reversal. 'Retrieval' is the only entry in the book under 'R'. McLuhan's correspondence following the appearance of the book indicates the central place retrieval occupied there and in his evolving thought:

I had asked the publisher to put on the flap of the jacket this formulation of the process that is cliché to archetype: Print scrapped scribe and Schoolmen and retrieved pagan antiquity. Revival of the ancient world created the modern world. Electricity scrapped hardware and industrialism and retrieved the occult. (McLuhan, 1971: np)

When the reviews of From Cliché to Archetype appeared, Hugh Kenner (1970), then teaching at Harvard University, wrote: 'No art can step up the voltage of boiled spinach.' This was a phantom blow for McLuhan, an echo from one of his own favorite sayings, attributed to the Balinese: 'We have no art; we do everything as well as possible' (1964: 66). Now his former student and friend was telling him that he had neither done everything as well as possible nor been artful enough to cover it up. Other reviewers also spoke of a rehash and raised the usual charge of obscurity, reactions prompting
a *Toronto Daily Star* editorial by Peter Newman (1970) entitled ‘McLuhan, hurrah!’ calling him ‘the most influential prophet of our age’.

**References**


**W Terrence Gordon**

Dalhousie University and St. Mary’s University, Nova Scotia
[Email: globalgordon@yahoo.com]
Meta-Understanding Media: Marshalling Forms

The nature of contemporary media forms has become so wide that the transformational processes they trigger in human experience cannot be distinguished from one another any more. Who can say what a medium is, who can describe the ontological nature of an individual medium without referencing the other media? Today, we discuss the new media in the plural, while their impact actually seems to have taken the shape of one macro entity that, complex, dynamic and manifold, affects the modes of sensorial perception and the forms of knowledge at the same time and on many levels. In other words, it is not so easy to tell the effects of a particular media apart from those of another, as it was still possible until a few decades ago.

Therefore, would it be possible to conceive a book today the way McLuhan conceived Understanding Media? What would be the use of defining the effects of one medium, when that same medium would be pointless without the presence of the other media? The relations, and reactions, connecting the expressive forms have overridden the individual forms, their reciprocal connections have become so tight they have started to crossbreed, in other words they have established, or revealed, a new kind of entity, to define which new terms and paradigms of thought are required. Rather than the existence of one form, it is necessary to recognize that this systemic configuration of the contemporary media environment implies the existence of a new kind of forming function that transcends the individual forms all while embracing them. Such transcendent forming function of the media is not just literally trans-forming, or capable of inducing a change in the forms of human experience. The process through which the contemporary media environment exerts its shaping power should be defined as a wider ranging, more complex process, that it is therefore only apt to literally define as a meta-process.

That said, what meaning should be attributed to the meta-understanding evoked in the title of this short essay, and what benefit would derive from considering the media as a ‘metaform’?

To address the first question, it is well known that the suffix meta is connected to the concept of crossing, transcendence, or going beyond one’s
discourse while still referring to the self. Metaform is what transcends, what goes beyond an individual form; it is the form taken by the combined forms, the form of the ratio between forms. It is very similar to the procedural modes that guide complex dynamic systems; it is an operating principle that belongs to any individual form within an aggregate of forms and at the same time regulates their structural relations. In brief – but this issue would deserve an exploration in itself – the expressive forms of human culture work as complex systems, and for this reason it is necessary to adopt a meta-understanding, one that would reach the transcendent, invisible, and in many ways homotethic – in geometrical terms – or homological – according to a terminology also adopted in the humanistic realm – or environmental aspects, as implied by the approach typical of media ecology.

With regard to the second question – what benefit would derive from considering the media as a ‘metaform’? – we could add that all this is beneficial in many ways. First of all, because the meta approach can bring the individual dimension of human experience back to the collective, social and cultural dimension. Today the social media are all the rage. Still, in spite of the wide range of meanings this phrase acquires at present, one cannot ignore that, in many ways, the media have always been social. No medium could possibly be conceived outside its social dimension. Secondly, the meta approach allows us to conceive the aesthetic experience in its plurality; the effect of a medium never acts on one sense alone, the perceptive components are never stimulated separately when they interact with the media. A sensorial plurality is always triggered as an effect of the media. Media aesthetics is always synaesthetic, or even meta-aesthetic, where what counts is precisely the connection, relation, the dynamics – the ‘translation’, as McLuhan would say – between the senses, as a process that surpasses the individual perceptive components. Thirdly, as implied by the semantic–linguistic use of the word ‘metaform’, the contemporary media are the factual expression of human culture as increasingly dependent on its material nature. This fact is there for all to see. In other words, the contemporary media let us touch, substantiate dynamics and evolutions that would basically remain abstract or hidden; they make us experience the relevance of cultural processes with more awareness than in the past, by transferring them from their invisible dimension to daily life, if anything because we are more aware of the media’s relevance for us.

According to McLuhan, a higher aesthetic awareness emerges from a plural approach to the media, an approach to the media as a metaform. Indeed, far from just shaping and transforming the human experience, the very function of the media is their meta function – their crossing, overcoming, activating a process whereby the human experience is led beyond, across. What are the media if not a way to cross, surpass, stretch the boundaries of human cognitive perceptive functions? The contemporary media environment has revealed a revolution of the forms that has constantly and silently been part of human culture. Meta-understanding media, thus exploring the media as a metaform will help us capture the very essence of their causal nature,
going beyond while carrying something else with us that is nothing but an expression of the nomadic nature of existence; perhaps it will show us how we can try to grasp something more about the contemporary man, shaped and moulded by the always new forms of human ecology.

Paolo Granata
Department of Arts
University of Bologna
[email: paolo.granata@unibo.it]
Mediation is the Message

At first glance, nothing could be more obvious than for the *journal of visual culture* to devote an entire issue to ‘Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* @ 50’. The interdisciplinary study of visual culture that the journal has fostered for more than a decade owes much to the study of media inaugurated by McLuhan’s slogan, made famous in *Understanding Media* (1994[1964]), that ‘the medium is the message’. Yet in the second decade of the 21st century there might be something anachronistic about commemorating *Understanding Media* in a journal devoted to ‘visual culture studies’, insofar as visual culture studies seems less a question of our present moment than of an earlier moment: the emergence of cyberculture and new digital media from the early 1980s through the end of the 20th century. I do not mean to argue that visual studies was a direct consequence of the ‘digital turn’ of the late 20th century, or that the project of the *journal of visual culture* is no longer relevant. Rather I want to highlight some of the divergences between a McLuhan-inspired new media studies and visual cultural studies, in part by emphasizing how visual culture studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field from the widespread focus of Anglo-American cultural studies on all forms of material culture and popular media, motivated by the Marxian belief that visual culture mediated the political ideology of capitalism.

This focus on the visual was intensified in the 80s and 90s by the explosion of visual images made possible by the proliferation of increasingly easy and affordable technical means of producing and remediating digital images. As Jay Bolter and I defined it (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), remediation operated at the end of the 20th century within a visual opposition between reality and mediation, following two predominant logics of visual mediation: transparent immediacy, in which signs of visual remediation were erased in favor of the presentation of ‘the real’; and hypermediacy, in which digital remediation served to multiply and make visible the processes of visual mediation. Like visual culture and visual studies, remediation and new media studies emerged at the end of the 20th century and have now become institutionally established at the beginning of the 21st. We gave *Remediation* the subtitle ‘Understanding New Media’ to acknowledge our debt to McLuhan’s transformative text, *Understanding Media*.
In the first decades of the 21st century, we find ourselves in the midst of a shift in our dominant cultural logic of mediation away from a predominantly visual, late 20th-century focus on remediation toward a more embodied affectivity of premediation generated by the mobile, socially networked media everyday of the 21st century. Where remediation spoke to the visually oriented model of mediation that prevailed in the 80s and 90s, premediation speaks to the embodied anticipatory mediation of the early 21st century. In developing the concept of premediation, I have not moved away from McLuhan, but pursued his influence on new media theory more fully than in *Remediation*, particularly his insistence that media operate affectively. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan claimed that new media were ‘extensions of man’, which simultaneously extended and amputated our body’s senses. New electronic media like television, McLuhan argued, reconfigured the ratio of our senses, de-privileging vision and reemphasizing our haptic and auditory senses. What we have come to see in the half century since McLuhan wrote *Understanding Media* is that new forms and practices of media also change the ratios of power and knowledge. For premediation the political operates less through visual representation than through the surveillance and mobilization of people and things through social media networks that have been and continue to be premediated into the future.

More recently I have developed this understanding of mediation as massage in terms of the concept of mediashock, which comes directly from McLuhan. After 9/11, I argue, premediation has operated both to create and maintain low levels of mediashock among the public in order to keep them online in a state of medial anticipation, which keeps them engaged with their mobile, social media networks. In his 1967 experiment in typography, photomontage, and design, produced in collaboration with Quentin Fiore, McLuhan underscores the physicality of media and mediashock in the instigation of ‘social and cultural change’. ‘All media work us over completely’, McLuhan (2001[1967]: 26) writes:

They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.

To make sense of the broader anticipatory media formation of the 21st century requires more than visual studies, and McLuhan points the way. Following the precepts set forth in *Understanding Media*, McLuhan famously asserts in *The Medium is the Massage* that ‘Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.’ Visual culture studies must shift its focus to what media do rather than what they mean if it is to honor McLuhan’s insights:
The medium, or process, of our time – electric technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. (p. 8)

In thinking about *Understanding Media* 50 years after its publication, we can see that its greatest impact on visual culture studies is to turn our attention away from a primarily visual analysis of media and toward an understanding of how media operate as objects within the world, impacting both the human sensorium and the nonhuman environment alike.

References


**Richard Grusin**

Center for 21st Century Studies
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

[email: grusin@uwm.edu]
A Menippean Satirist in the Rear View Mirror

... he told me that the whole point of his work was that it was cryptic and to explain his work destroyed it. (Donald F Theall, 2001: 230, on Marshall McLuhan)

My canvasses are surrealist, and to call them theories is to miss my satirical intent altogether. (Marshall McLuhan to William Kuhns, 1971 [Molinaro et al., 1987: 448])

I just noticed that I have dated my copy of Understanding Media ‘1980’ – 33 years ago. Since then I have returned to it countless times, perused it, underlined it, quoted it, and copied (brief) sections for my graduate students. Yet, I must confess that I have never managed to read it from cover to cover. Indeed, I have come to consider it an unreadable book, at least in the traditional linear sense. After digesting a few pages, jumping back and forth, and trying to absorb some stimulating but cryptic rapid fire insights, I always start feeling exasperated and push the thing aside.

McLuhan might not have found anything wrong with my situation. His approach ran against academic logocentrism – in fact, his critical practice had features that anticipated Derrida. He was exploring, probing, testing, and challenging culture from all angles, and undermining his own reasoning in the process. He stated in a letter: ‘Certainly I have no system or theory that I would not scrap instantly in favor of better means of discovery’ (McLuhan, 2001[1970]: 219). Instead of forming and defending closed chains of argument, he was in the ‘business’ of doing something else: stimulating discourse.

McLuhan's profuse and seemingly spontaneous utterances (both in print and in speech) were meant to challenge and stir the recipient's mind. By a stream of shifting perspectives, puns, contradictions and paradoxes, he forced his audiences to question and refocus their stances, turning them, often unawares, into human discourse engines. McLuhan was a magister ludi, engaged in complex but open-ended games with everybody, including himself. It makes perfect sense that Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens is one of the metatexts behind Understanding Media (McLuhan, 2003[1964]).
There was another – exhilarating and exasperating – book that McLuhan admired: James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce was a self-declared Menippean satirist, and so was McLuhan, who stated: ‘Most of my writing is Menippean satire, presenting the actual surface of the world we live in as a ludicrous image’ (McLuhan, 1987: 517). Theory – if there is any, in the proper sense of the word – was an element of an essentially poetic and artistic approach, as Donald F Theall, McLuhan’s first doctoral student, early collaborator, and perhaps his most perceptive critic, suggested.

For years, I have been using Theall as my Virgil on my peregrinations in the curious realms of McLuhania. His book *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror* (1971) was not welcomed with open arms by his former master. McLuhan’s legal advisers tried to block it, and his hagiographers have accused Theall of demonizing him. What Theall tried to do was to use his unique double perspective – inside knowledge and theoretical distance – to provide a rational analysis of *Understanding Media* and McLuhan’s other works.

Having read the manuscript, McLuhan wrote Theall a long letter, which he did not send. Perceptive as ever, he delineated the divide between their perspectives:

> I think you take me too ‘seriously’. It is really more fun to join the quest for discoveries than to try to classify and evaluate the processes in which I am involved. You are, in a sense, trying to translate me into an academic fixture.

McLuhan added that ‘my books are intended as fun books.’ Theall’s he found ‘dull and confused’ (McLuhan, 2001[1970]: 218).

This debate highlights the problems scholars like myself (educated as a cultural historian) face with McLuhan. Being no McLuhanite, I agree with many aspects of Theall’s clear-headed analyses. For example, there are logical problems in the ways McLuhan applies Edward T Hall’s idea of the extensions of man, making it a cornerstone of his own book.1 As a cautious academic scholar, Hall used this notion about ‘man-made material things’ only, whereas McLuhan, who had no such inhibitions, took a wild leap into psychology and extended it to things immaterial, such as the ‘outering’ of language.

As the lengthy Table of Contents for Part II of *Understanding Media* demonstrates, McLuhan sees ‘extensions’ in almost anything; these are the ‘media’ he explores. His list overlaps with ‘media culture’ as we now understand it only partly. How everything is supposed to fit logically together I have never understood (neither did Theall). McLuhan’s visions are slippery; they escape analysis, and so he wanted them to do. Perhaps that is why they live on.

For me the seminal McLuhan book is *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). Although it is far from conventional, with its lengthy glosses, schematic juxtapositions and non-linear structuring, it presents an historically grounded argument – one
that McLuhan’s serious students like Walter Ong elaborated further. In spite of his great erudition, McLuhan had no patience to do all the homework himself, but he inspired others who did it in a more down-to-earth manner, which is not a poor achievement.

*Understanding Media* remains a curious, uneven, and – as I said earlier – largely unreadable application of *Galaxy*’s key ideas to contemporary culture. How a rejected educational curriculum was turned into a best-seller with the help of collaborators like McLuhan’s close friend, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter (who claimed to have partly written it as a collaborative endeavor), and how its author was deliberately fashioned into a media superstar by the advertising agency Freeman, Mander and Gossage, is a fascinating story, but has been told elsewhere.2

When it comes to media archaeology (the field my work is associated with), McLuhan has left a lasting legacy. I am less impressed with the ways Friedrich Kittler and his followers have used his work as a stepping-stone to bolster a techno-centric, deterministic and anti-humanistic agenda, but I appreciate McLuhan’s intellectual appetite, mental mobility, and readiness for breaking boundaries. These are essential qualities for a media archaeologist, and so is his sense of humor, the irreverent touch of the Menippean satirist.

**Notes**

1. According to Theall (1971: 82–83), McLuhan appropriated it from Hall’s *Silent Language*. Hall did not mind, saying he took it from Buckminster Fuller; W Terrence Gordon attributes the idea to Emerson’s *Works and Days* (see McLuhan, 2003[1964]: 539).


**References**


**Erkki Huhtamo**

Department of Design | Media Arts
University of California Los Angeles
[Email: erhuhta@ucla.edu]
McLuhan’s Decalogue

I

With two short sentences, page 158 of the 1962 edition of the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan had already set the stage for the next 50 years, that is, today:

The next medium, whatever it is – it may be the extension of consciousness (1) – will include television as its content, not as its environment (2), and will transform television into an art form (3). A computer as a research and communication instrument (4) could enhance retrieval (5), obsolesce mass library organization (6), retrieve the individual's encyclopedic function (7) and flip it into a private line (8) to speedily tailored data (9) of a saleable kind (10).

I call this quote that is presently repeated and commented on over 15,000 times on Google. 'McLuhan's Decalogue'. I use it to try to set the stage for the next 50 years with my students.

D

Beside the fact that the above is stunningly predictive of what is actually going on today with YouTube (TV as artform), Wikipedia (our encyclopedic function) or tags (the new global library organization), the surprise is that the structure of the reasoning could be McLuhan's earliest and most successful 'tetrad'. The four stages of the tetrad are clearly evident: *Extension* of consciousness, *Obsolescence* of television, *Retrieval* of encyclopedic function and *Reversal* or flip into an economy. McLuhan would present the stages as a succession of effects of the medium, but he also affirmed that they were simultaneous. The tetrad is not logical, it is perceptual. McLuhan is introducing here a method for 3D thinking, a kind of Rubik's cube of media effects. It is a matter of sensing – rather than seeing – all the effects rising from the ground up so to speak, electricity being that ground. That is quite difficult for a literate mind, which is why I always have difficulties
with tetrads. I was never very good at it, but, to be honest, in view of the above I have to recognize that it deserves the name of ‘method’.

The method I prefer, one that McLuhan taught me in his classes, I am using right here. IDEMP stands for the five parts of rhetoric proposed by Cicero about how to make a point. First *Inventio*, what are you talking about, then *Dispositio*, or how you plan to talk about it, followed by *Elocutio*, now you are talking about it, *Memoria*, the most important, why you are talking about it, and finally *Pronunciatio*, you make your point.

So, we’re talking 50 years. What is going on today that could qualify as a strong signal heralding the next 50 years? Let me risk a tetrad, taking electricity as the medium: electricity extends the central nervous system, obsolesces privacy, retrieves aristocracy, and flips into global responsibility.

I had two short but unforgettable discussions with McLuhan about private identity. The first one was pivotal. I was about to drop out of university altogether, frustrated by six years of vain attempts to get past the 15th page of my doctoral dissertation about the decadence of French tragedy. In a five-minute conversation McLuhan turned the whole situation around. ‘I see your problem’, he said, ‘you think that tragedy is an artform.’ So what is it then? ‘Tragedy is a strategy invented by the Greeks to overcome a profound social crisis provoked by the Greek alphabet. I call it QUID i.e., “quest for identity”.’ Four months later, my thesis was done. In my Cartesian-trained way, I would go on to study the structural relationships between the alphabet and the brain. And I would eventually establish that only a fully alphabetical writing system could allow the user complete control over language and thus forge private opinions and points of view, as well as a strong sense of one’s individuality. Text wrests control from context.

The second discussion was an argument about the impact of computers on private identity and selfhood. I maintained that they would reverse what McLuhan saw as television’s tendency to wipe them out. I suggested that using computers would allow us to recover power over the screen. McLuhan objected that electricity was no friend of private anything and that it would eventually engulf our little selves like a tidal wave. Until recently, I thought that we had pulled a draw on the issue. But the news about PRISM and other military or police initiatives globally tracing and reaping our digital unconscious, that is, all the data collected about each one of our moves, reminds me of Marshall’s prophetic quip: ‘The more they know about you, the less you exist.’ Add to this that our kids are pouring their profiles into social media and you have the conditions for a kind of transparency that could indeed wipe out private identity.

Considering that private identity has probably been a product of one technology, we can reasonably assume that over the next 50 years, total
transparency could arise from the progress of digital and other children of electricity. Transparency would bring up the moral and social value of everyone and generate a new form of aristocracy based on reputation and social responsibility. That would spell the return of a shame culture globally. Furthermore a transparent society would have to evolve political checks and balances to avoid tyranny. The system could only work if everyone was mutually accountable.

P

Two relevant quotes from *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964) seem to point in that direction. One is from the Introduction: ‘Electric speed, in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion, has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree' (p. 5). And the other is the last sentence of chapter 4, and perhaps the most profound of McLuhan’s insights: ‘In the electric age, we wear all mankind as our skin' (p. 47). There is no question in my mind that that is indeed where, eventually, albeit with a fair bit of global suffering in between, we are going to end up in 50 years.

References


Derrick de Kerckhove
Sociology
Università Federico II, Naples
[Email: d.dekerckhove@utoronto.ca]
Reading for the Noise

My first encounter with Marshall McLuhan's work was through an aunt studying design who told me about Jerome Agel; leafing through *Herman Kabnsciousness* (Agel, 1973), *The Making of Stanley Kubrick's 2001* (Agel, 1970), and of course *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan with Fiore and Agel, 1967), I wondered how these noisy collages could be read? Gradually it became apparent how much information theory and continental cultural theory influence media studies, although neither debt is widely acknowledged. As Poster (2010) admonishes, it is odd how many cultural theorists of the 1970s and 80s – whether one looks at Habermas or Foucault, Lyotard or Deleuze – paid little attention to McLuhan's work on media, often rendering them unable to productively theorize media technology: instead, one tends to point to Benjamin or Baudrillard (Grosswiler, 1998). But I disagree with Poster about Derrida, whom I always read as a media theorist – though it is true that Derrida rejected what he saw as hype in McLuhan:

I think that there is an ideology in McLuhan's discourse that I don't agree with, because he's an optimist as to the possibility of restoring an oral community which would get rid of the writing machines and so on. I think that's a very traditional myth which goes back to ... let's say Plato, Rousseau ... And instead of thinking that we are living at the end of writing, I think that in another sense we are living in the extension – the overwhelming extension-of writing. At least in the new sense ... I don't mean the alphabetic writing down, but in the new sense of those writing machines that we're using now (e.g. the tape recorder). And this is writing too. (Brennan, 1983: 42)

The supposition of progress from chirographic handling via formalizing typesetting to the polymorphous implications of processing gives rise to the assumption that a recurrence of orality means returning to ancient techniques of story and myth. While Derrida objects to McLuhan's vaunted return to orality (with Havelock and Ong), elsewhere he also associates McLuhan with privileging touch as ‘the sense of the electronic age’ (Derrida, 2005: 354). As new media play back and to an extent reverse the history
of mechanical development as ‘extensions of man’, they seem to invert the
development of literacy and social organization in the cool metamedium of
the connected computer. McLuhan hoped this would engender that shock of
unfamiliarity in the familiar that is necessary for the understanding of media
culture. But this also invests technology with a disenfranchising agency,
opposing the analytic mind-set of logic and literacy with the formulaic state
of mind of oral culture, as Havelock and Ong did: in non-literate cultures
the task of education could be described as putting the whole community
into a formulaic state of mind, and thus lengthy verbal performances in oral
cultures are never analytic but formulaic. Along with Flusser and others
of their generation, both Derrida and McLuhan juxtapose sequential and
discontinuous modes of communication, but Derrida (1982: 329) does not
go along with the troubling equation of a ‘primitive past’ with the electronic
present:

… communication, if one insists upon maintaining the word, is not the
means of transport of sense, the exchange of intentions and meanings,
the discourse and ‘communication of consciousnesses.’ We are not
witnessing an end of writing which, to follow McLuhan’s ideological
representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social
relations; but indeed a more and more powerful historical unfolding
of a general writing of which the system of speech, consciousness,
meaning, presence, truth, etc., would only be an effect, to be analyzed
as such. It is this questioned effect that I have elsewhere called
logocentrism.

Yet McLuhan’s observations on media transpositions render traditional
distinctions between logic and aesthetics invalid: we are enveloped, he
asserts, in environments that would not exist without media technology.
As McLuhan knows, game studies and information theory ‘have dealt with
the information content of systems, and have observed the “noise” and
“deception” factors that divert data’ (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 242). With
reference to Shannon and Weaver, McLuhan asserted that ‘what they call
noise I call the medium – that is, all the side-effects, all the unintended
patterns and changes’. And even earlier, in an essay on ‘Culture without
literacy’ (1953), he writes

of seeing that modern physics and painting and poetry speak a
common language and of acquiring that language at once in order that
our world may possess consciously the coherence that it really has in
latency, and which for lack of our recognition has created not new
orchestral harmonies but mere noise.

This does not mean, as Cavell (2003: 5, 153) erroneously alleges, that the
Shannon–Weaver model excludes noise – moreover, despite McLuhan
relegating it to ‘merely a transportation model which has no place for
the side-effects of the service environments’, he explicitly cites Peirce’s
information theory in *Understanding Media*. The task of media studies is to interpret how programs rely on an analytic frame of mind, yet so often tend to succeed by putting users or audiences into a formulaic state of mind – and much the same applies, to be sure, to today’s Derridean disciples and McLuhanite messengers.

References


**Peter Krapp**

Film and Media /Visual Studies
University of California, Irvine

[email: krapp@uci.edu]
Betrayals and Smells: On the Italian (Mis)Interpretation of Understanding Media

Critics seem to agree that betrayal is an inextricable component of all acts of translation: when we translate from one language into another, we shift both words and content, adapting ideas or even creating new possibilities which were not explicit in the original or that were unknown to those in the other language. Translation is therefore a creative act which also mirrors conscious and unconscious cultural intentions. The case of the Italian translation of Marshall McLuhan’s classic, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), is a case in point: that volume was released as early as 1967 but with a title that betrayed the original one (and much more). The promptness of that editorial enterprise (only three years after its first edition) was undone by a lexical ‘creation’ which, inevitably, affected the reception of the Canadian thinker’s ideas: *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, literally ‘The tools of communication’, entirely missed (betrayed) the original title and opened up (I’d rather say: ‘it narrowed’) the interpretation of McLuhan as a ‘technological determinist’ and a ‘sociologist’ tout court. A new edition of that book published in 2008 tried to redeem the error but did not fully succeed: the phrase ‘Capire i media’ (finally: *Understanding Media*) was added to the cover, but the *original* Italian title had to remain because the book was by now a *classic in Italian* and ….who dares to touch that?

There is a reason if, today, Wikipedia English and Italian pages have different ‘labels’ for Marshall McLuhan: the English version introduces him as ‘a Canadian philosopher of communication theory’; the Italian simply states that he ‘was a Canadian sociologist’. Two different entries that contradict William Shakespeare’s query, ‘What’s in a name?’ As a matter of fact: a lot. Certainly, ‘That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet’, but that which we encapsulate through a (made-up) cliché would have to fight hard to break free and gain the right to (so to speak) smell its own smell.

Beginning with the title, the Italian translation of *Understanding Media* affected the reception of McLuhan’s ideas which soon became the land
claimed by our sociologists; those ideas, therefore, became a minefield for all other scholars. At the same time, communication studies became the battlefield of our own Italian school of semiotics who, from the late 1960s, joined forces with other European schools of thought (especially those being developed in France), often looking suspiciously at North American approaches to mass culture and new media. In addition, in the Europe of the ‘iron curtain’, intellectuals were doomed to take sides and combine their approaches to mass culture, technology and new media with a clearcut ideology: something that – alas! – one cannot find in McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*. Therefore, *The Tools of Communication* was the perfect title for a ‘neutral’ volume introducing ideas on old and new communication processes which were then investigated through a sociological perspective. As a result, we missed the dynamics of a title which, instead, was conceived to challenge readers across disciplinary boundaries (understanding, not ‘being taught’, and certainly not ‘here-is-a-list-of-tools-related-to-communication-and-nothing-else’); also, we missed the vibrant association between that dynamic approach and the idea of media as *extensions of man*. That part of the title was in fact retrieved through a deterministic reading (and translation) which imposed a lasting bias on the reception of McLuhan’s ideas: technology is the factor determining *all the rest*. Take it or leave it. A bias, which – surprise! – was there even before that very translation was done and which, inevitably, underpinned it (betrayal is often a conscious act). As stated, *Understanding Media* was translated three years after it first appeared in English, and three years after another important ‘Italian classic’ on communication and mass culture was also released; a classic which in fact *determined* the reception of McLuhan’s thought … and much more. For one of those interesting coincidences, in 1964 Umberto Eco (the master figure of our school of semiotics) published his *Apocalittici e Integrati: Comunicazione di massa e teorie della cultura di massa* (literally ‘Apocalyptic and Integrated Thinkers: Mass Communication and Theories of Mass Culture’). Three years before the (misleading) translation of McLuhan’s 1964 volume was available – and, for that matter, 12 years and 20 years before *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962) and *The Mechanical Bride* (McLuhan, 1951) were respectively translated into Italian – the Italian scholarly community was given an influential interpretation of McLuhan’s ideas. Eco introduced him as a thinker fully integrated in the new mass media world and an overt enthusiast of the potentialities embedded by the then evolving new media. Not the best introduction for the Italian (as well as the European) ‘market’ as, at that time, the European intelligentsia remained rather sceptical about the North American technocapitalism. Those who tried to resist that oversimplified interpretation were in turn labelled as ‘mclunatici’, mcluhnatics, also *chez nous*. What’s in a name? You decide.

As a PhD student in Bologna, I found myself at the University which was home to the two major figures in the debate for and against McLuhan following the reception of *Gli strumenti del comunicare*. Umberto Eco (who reconsidered – in part – his take on the Canadian ‘sociologist’ only after the
Italian translation of *The Mechanical Bride* was released) and Renato Barilli (the art critic who became the champion of the Italian *mclunatici*). It was not easy to escape their presence while *determining* my own understanding of McLuhan’s work; but I managed. I owe this to another Italian major intellectual, Alfredo Rizzardi, a Professor of English and American Literature, as was McLuhan. He, too, had met Ezra Pound at the St Elisabeth Hospital, just like McLuhan before. Being a conscious translator, Alfredo suggested I should start by smelling the rose before naming it or, worse, blindly accepting the name imposed by others. It worked. Shifting from cliché to archetype was (and still is) a fascinating cross-cultural journey. In truth, I fear the moment I might find the right name for that smell as I am afraid it would be a way to betray it: understanding McLuhan should remain a work in progress, forever extending ourselves across cultural fields and scholarly boundaries.

**References**

Eco U (1964) *Apocalittici e integrati: Comunicazione di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*. Milano: Bompiani.


**Elena Lamberti**

LILEC – Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne

University of Bologna

[email: elena.lamberti@unibo.it]
The Kindle Arrives in Time and Makes Everyone a Publisher

Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (1994[1964]: 184) instructively quotes the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine’s circa 1830 observation that ‘the book arrives too late.’ McLuhan cites this as part of his contrast between slow-moving books and fast-arriving newspapers. By 1977, he was also aware that ‘the Xerox makes everyone a publisher.’ Although both observations were essentially true, they in retrospect can be seen as forecasts of the revolution that the Kindle and digital publishing have engendered in the past few years. The newspaper indeed arrived faster than the book, but not instantaneously; the photocopied manuscript was indeed technically published, but looked nothing like a book; the Kindle edition arrives instantly and looks exactly like a book on the screen. This essay will sketch the impact of this new kind of book on the author.

I suppose there are writers like Emily Dickinson who submitted just a sliver of her great output of poetry for publication, but I’ve never met any, and the prospect of writing for my file cabinet or private computer screen is antithetical to every authorial impulse of my being. The act of writing, I would therefore contend, is intrinsically an act of publishing.

But submitting for publication is not easy, and the talent of getting published, aside from the quality of the writing, has little in common with the talent of writing. The result is as Thomas Gray put it in his Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard in 1751:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

The problem for an unpublished author resides in the logic of the acquisition editor. If your work is accepted for publication and it doesn’t do well, the editor looks bad. If your work is accepted by no one for publication, no
one even knows it exists and no one looks bad. Indeed, even if someone else publishes a book rejected by an acquisitions editor, and that book does well, few will know about the earlier editor’s poor judgment.

Robert A Heinlein’s advice to authors to keep sending out a work until someone publishes it is the best that an author can do under the traditional gatekeeping regime, but it provides no assurance that a great work – yours – will not be left to blush unseen. This is why the Kindle revolution is such a profound game-changer for the author. At any point in the dance of sending out your work for publication to the next publisher, you can stop the dance and publish the work yourself. Or, you don’t have to dance in the first place. You can publish your book on Amazon – and on Nook, Kobo, iTunes, and other digital sites – the moment you finish writing it. Digital publication works not only for self-publication, but publication by small presses, and, for that matter, by traditional publishers as well. This invites a comparison of each kind of publication for authors in today’s world.

The rewards of traditional publication to an author are common knowledge: advances (which can be huge if you’re a best-selling author, but are usually four or five figures, especially for scholarly texts), copy editing and proofreading, arranging for a book cover, getting your books into bookstores as well as on Amazon, and (sometimes) some small bit of advertising and promotion.

The drawbacks of traditional publishing are perhaps not as well known: minuscule royalties (usually 10% of net sales or less), delay in receiving said royalties (usually at least 6 months to a year or longer), complex royalty statements which would give even your accountant a headache, needing to plead for promotion, and capped off by a steep decline in your publisher’s interest in your book within a month after publication unless it’s a best seller.

A small or independent press publication removes those disadvantages. You can negotiate a much better royalty, receive your payments on a monthly basis, and expect continuing promotion and interest in your book as long as the small press endures. True, you won’t get much if any advance, you might have to find or arrange for your own cover, and you may need to call upon family and friends for help with copyediting. But not having to beg for promotion is a big plus, and if we’re talking about digital publication, physical bookstores are irrelevant. And my wife and kids have helped with crucial copyediting and proofreading of all of my books, including the many that have been traditionally published.

What about sales?

I’ve sold far more copies of my novels *The Silk Code* and *The Plot to Save Socrates* in the past five months in their digital editions brought out by small-press JoSara Media than in the previous five years of all editions brought out by traditional-publisher Tor, after the books’ initial sales bumps in the first months of publication in 1999 and 2006, respectively.
What about digital self-publishing in comparison to small, independent publication? It has the advantage keeping all control, including immediate publication, and all income from sale of the book, in the author’s hands. I chose JoSara MeDia rather than self-publication to share my workload, but otherwise I would self-publish in a heartbeat.

The one exception – the one kind of publishing in which traditional publishing still has a significant edge – is in textbooks, where traditional publishers have sales forces who can get books to the attention of professors who order textbooks for their classes. Pearson, the publisher of my New New Media (2013[2009]), now in its second edition, has done a good job with this. But the drawbacks in terms of pleading for promotion and so forth remain, and make even textbook publishers vulnerable to the Kindle revolution.

The upshot is that the fulfillment of McLuhan’s vision in our digital age has set the world of writing and publishing on a course as revolutionary as the printing press and the alphabet were in their originating times.

References

Paul Levinson
Department of Communication and Media Studies
Fordham University, New York
[mailto: levinson.paul@gmail.com]
How I Ever Got to Teach a Course on McLuhan is Totally Amazing

‘You know nothing of my work ... how you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing.’ I was a young graduate student when I first watched Marshall McLuhan deliver his verbal sucker-punch to an unwitting NYU professor in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977). I got the joke, but considering the depth of my own knowledge of McLuhan back then, any rock-star intellectual could have delivered it as far as I was concerned. (Indeed, as we know now, McLuhan was not Allen’s first choice for the scene.) That movie scene was about the sum of my engagement with his work for quite some time.

I finally circled back to McLuhan more than a decade ago and have faced the challenge of featuring his work in perhaps a half dozen university courses since then. I know a lot more about McLuhan than I did in graduate school, yet when I view a clip of the famous *Annie Hall* scene today, I find myself sympathizing with the professor. How did I ever get to teach a course on McLuhan?

The first obstacle was the man’s descent from relevance. His biographer, Philip Marchand, wrote a short piece about McLuhan’s ‘fall and rise’ a couple of years ago. Marchand (2011) noted that McLuhan’s reputation had begun to decline by 1970. If we combine that observation with Nicholas Negroponte’s reference to McLuhan as ‘Wired’s patron saint’ in the November 1993 issue of *Wired*, we have a tidy chronology from fall to rise. Unfortunately, my graduate education in history of science and technology took place around the mid-point of that chronology, beginning just before I saw *Annie Hall* in the movie theater and ending long before the year of *DOOM* and the Mosaic web browser and McLuhan’s elevation in *Wired*. I was a child (academically speaking) of the McLuhan Dark Ages stretching from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

McLuhan was not entirely absent during these years. For one thing, he made a great whipping boy. My recollection is that his name came up a few times
in seminar as the incarnation of technological determinism. I think this memory must be true. (Earlier this year I was charmed by an image with the caption ‘Marshall McLuhan, Technological Determinism Theorist’ that I found on the web while preparing PowerPoint slides for a lecture. I used it.) The communications historian Susan Douglas called *Understanding Media* ‘an exercise in hard-core determinism’ in her Da Vinci Medal speech before the Society for the History of Technology in 2009. Of course, this view of McLuhan persists today – and rightly so. Douglas is roughly my contemporary, and in this speech she described her education in history of technology as conditioned by Marxism, externalism, and SCOT (social construction of technology), not McLuhan.

The interesting thing about McLuhan’s absence from my graduate education is that as a ‘technological determinism theorist’, he should have been right in the middle of things. As Douglas points out, science and technology studies opened up during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, during my years in Berkeley there was a seminar on social science methods in history of science and another on quantification, as well as a big international conference on quantitative methods. This may not seem particularly earth-shattering today. However, the point I want to make is that history of science and technology was a frothy field during those times, with many new ideas that challenged the kinds of stories that had previously been told about invention and discovery. It seems a little strange in retrospect that McLuhan was left out, considering that *Understanding Media* was a huge can-opener for radical notions about the impact of media technologies.

If McLuhan was not part of the discussion during his Dark Age, the elephant in every seminar room was surely Thomas Kuhn. Published only two years before *Understanding Media*, Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) was the Copernican Revolution of the history of science. Google’s Ngram viewer lends support to the idea that Kuhn’s presence mirrored McLuhan’s absence during the period from the early 1970s to the early 1990s. Consider the terms ‘paradigm shift’ (Kuhn) and ‘global village’ (McLuhan). In 1970, usage of McLuhan’s term beats Kuhn’s by a ratio of 6:1, and it peaks in 1971. By 1978 the terms are running even. In 1986, the Kuhn/McLuhan ratio is well over 3:1, 6:1 in 1992, 10:1 in 1998; ‘paradigm shift’ does not peak until 2004, when the ratio is about 13:1. ‘Global village’ appears in the book corpus about as frequently in 2008 as it had in 1978, and the ratio remains steady at about 13:1.

The point of this little exercise is to contrast the impact of two super-novae in the intellectual world of the early 1960s. McLuhan fizzled while Kuhn exploded, right? Yet, something is not quite right here. Why did Negroponte choose McLuhan when he could have designated *Wired* as the reader’s guide to the paradigm shifts of digital media, an especially valid question considering McLuhan’s ideas about electronic media were formed by television rather than computing. Perhaps we should look at Negroponte’s exact words:
Wired’s patron saint, Marshall McLuhan, was right about the medium being the message in the 1960s and 1970s. But that is not the case today. In a digital world the message is the message, and the message, in fact, may be the medium.

I just completed teaching a McLuhan-inspired course (with my friend and colleague Scott Bukatman) called ‘Media and Message’. We have taught McLuhan to Stanford freshmen four or five times now, and every time we help our students through their struggle with McLuhan’s wonky ideas about television, trying to break down ‘hot and cool’ media, explaining how a light bulb can be a medium, and so on. And yet it works. It’s maddening really. How is it that somebody whose intellectual influence seemed to have begun stagnating 40 years ago is again fresh and alive in the classroom? I’ll be darned if I can explain it.

References


Henry Lowood
History of Science and Technology Collections and Film and Media Collections Stanford University Libraries [email: lowood@stanford.edu]
Fanfare for the Antifan

I'm a media theorist, and I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't be without the redoubtable Marshall McLuhan, whose most important book is a half-century old. Not only wouldn't I be, but perhaps no else would be either. That's not to say that people wouldn't be thinking about radio dramas and television sitcoms, classic books and pulp magazine, the postal service and the internet, movies in theaters and movies on video and movies on YouTube, just that they might not think of them in that peculiarly synthetic, dare we say Catholic (in the comprehensive rather than doctrinal) sense that McLuhan bequeathed to us with his epochal work of the 1960s. Trained as a Medievalist at Cambridge, this son of the Canadian West forever after looked the part of the tweedy don, which paradoxically lent his pronouncements on the newest communications technologies a gravitas that his black clad, architect-glasses sporting descendants (myself included) may lack.

It was in the 1950s that McLuhan started to change his focus from literary criticism to the idea of 'media', publishing his thoughts on advertising in a quirky little book called *The Mechanical Bride*. This was followed in 1962 by *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which examined the impact of print on the entirety of culture, and then, in 1964, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. With pithy insights like 'we change our tools and then our tools change us', invertible probes like 'the medium is the message', and frankly gnomic statements like 'the electric light is pure information', *Understanding Media* was a watershed book that ignited a firestorm of support, derision, controversy and publicity the likes of which we really haven't seen since.

I like to tell myself that in 1968, at six years old, I saw a very young Goldie Hawn in a bikini on the TV show Laugh-In gyrating and giggling ‘Marshall McLuhan, what are you doin’?’ but I'm probably projecting backwards. McLuhan's fortunes rose and fell with the 1960s and by the time I started grad school in the 1980s, he was out of favor with all but a tiny coterie that looked past his outrageousness to unearth the truly radical thoughts he had about the intersections of communications, technologies and cultures. By
the 1990s, and the digitization of everything, the world wide web seemed more a ‘global village’ than television ever did, *Wired* proclaimed him the magazine’s patron saint, and *Understanding Media* was more relevant than ever.

As we move ever further into the 21st century, though, his very ubiquity itself becomes an issue. Our web-driven McLuhan renaissance affords us access to new and ever more multi-mediated ways of accessing his thought, with everything from the audio of *The Medium is the Massage* album to the famous television interview with Dick Cavett streaming on YouTube. But somehow lost in all of this is McLuhan’s intense criticality about the media he was studying, especially when its content was pop culture and entertainment. He has been invoked as one of the prototypes for the figure of the new academic fan (or ‘acafan’ in their parlance): public intellectuals who talk at fan conventions as often as at academic conferences, blog on their own sites and guest blog elsewhere, upload videos to YouTube and Vimeo, tweet on Twitter, and post (and post, and post, and post) everywhere from FaceBook to Tumblr to Pinterest. The acafans’ messages tend to be that the media are not just intriguing, but instead and at all times to be celebrated because, after all, they are justified by the population that makes them popular media.

In acafandom, there are no ‘guilty’ pleasures, only the pleasure principle itself, entertainment’s popularity both the driver and the driven of the mass id. The acafan recognizes no hierarchy outside of the personal, and abandons criticality as unseemly elitism. For the acafan, critical evaluation of the content of a message is secondary, or even tertiary, to the effects that content has via its mediated reach over audiences and their embrace of the content via consumption and discursive reappropriation. In their classrooms, Chekov the Russian *Star Trek* character trumps Chekhov the Russian playwright. For acafans, ‘the medium is the message’ evolves into ‘the content is the critique’, and they point to McLuhan’s work and his promotion of it everywhere from a *Playboy* interview to his famed cameo in *Annie Hall* as the work of a proto-acafan working the levers of his particular media ecology. But to paraphrase the scene in *Annie Hall* where Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) brings McLuhan in from offstage to dress down a professor’s pomposity: They know nothing of his work!

McLuhan was not an acafan, he was an antifan. He used the media of his time to get out the message of *Understanding Media*, but the content of that message was not as celebratory as a multitude of misreaders took it to be. *Understanding Media* is no fan’s celebration of a new era, it’s a deep drill into what was then the author’s present, probing words of warning. One of McLuhan’s least quoted utterances is particularly revealing of his methods and ends: ‘I find most pop culture monstrous and sickening. I study it for my own survival’ (Marchand, 1989: 49). Fifty years after the publication of his seminal book, we should remember and celebrate his resistance to the behemoth that is popular entertainment.
References


Peter Lunenfeld
Design Media Arts
University of California, Los Angeles
[Email: lunenfeld@ucla.edu; http://peterlunenfeld.com]
Did McLuhan ‘miss’ computers? In his major work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) the word ‘computer’ appears 21 times in the book, and a few of those references are to ‘computer age’. However, despite these references, his awareness of computers did not have a significant effect on his thinking. The book contains two dozens chapters each devoted to a particular medium – which for McLuhan range from writing and roads to cars and television. (The last chapter ‘Automation’ addresses the role of computers for industrial control, but not its other roles.)

The reasons for this omission are not hard to understand. McLuhan’s theories were focused on the media that were widely employed by regular people in human history. In 1964, the popular media for representation and communication did not yet include computers. Although, by the end of the 1960s, computer systems for design, drawing, animation, and word processing were also developed (along with the first computer network that eventually became the internet), these systems were only used by small communities of scientists and professionals. Only after the introduction of a PC in 1981, did these inventions start to be disseminated to the masses.

As a result, *software* has emerged as the main new media form of our time. (I say ‘software’ rather than ‘digital computers’ because the latter are used to do everything in our society, and often their use does not involve software visible to ordinary users – like the systems inside a car.) Outside of certain cultural areas such as crafts and fine art, software has replaced a diverse array of physical, mechanical, and electronic technologies used before the 21st century to create, store, distribute, and access cultural artifacts, and communicate with other people. When you write an article in Word, you are using software. When you are composing a blog post in Blogger or WordPress, you are using software. When you tweet, post messages on Facebook, search through billions of videos on YouTube, or read texts on Scribd, you are using software (specifically, its category referred to as ‘web applications’ or ‘webware’ – software which is accessed via web browsers and which resides on the servers).
McLuhan’s theories covered the key ‘new media’ of his time – television, newspapers and magazines with color photos, advertising, and cinema. Just like these mediums, the software medium took decades to develop and mature to the point where it dominates our cultural landscape. How does the use of professional media authoring applications influence contemporary visual imagination? How does the software offered by social media services such as Instagram shape the images people capture and share? How do particular algorithms used by Facebook to decide what updates from our friends to show in our News Feed shape how we understand the world? More generally, what does it mean to live in ‘software society’?

In 2002, I was in Cologne, Germany, and I went into the best bookstore in the city devoted to humanities and arts titles. Its new media section contained hundreds of titles. However, not a single book was devoted to the key driver of the ‘computer age’: software. I started going through indexes of book after book: none of them had the word ‘software’ either. How was that possible? Today, thanks to efforts of my colleagues in the new academic field of software studies, the situation is gradually improving. However, when I looked at indexes of works of key media theorists of our time published in the last year, I still did not find an entry for ‘software’. Software as a theoretical category is still invisible to most academics, artists, and cultural professionals interested in IT and its cultural and social effects.

Software is the interface to our imagination and the world – a universal language through which the world speaks, and a universal engine on which the world runs. Another term that we can use in thinking about software is that of a dimension (think of three dimensions that we use to define space). We can say that at the end of the 20th century humans have added a fundamentally new dimension to everything that counts as culture – that of software.

Why is this conceptualization useful? ‘Cultural software’ is not simply a new object – no matter how large and important – which has been dropped into the space that we call ‘culture’. And while we can certainly study ‘the culture of software’ – programming practices, values and ideologies of programmers and software companies, the cultures of Silicon Valley and Bangalore, etc. – if we only do this, we will miss the real importance of software. Like the alphabet, mathematics, the printing press, combustion engine, electricity, and integrated circuits, software re-adjusts and re-shapes everything it is applied to – or at least, it has a potential to do this. Just as adding a new dimension adds a new coordinate to every point in space, ‘adding’ software to culture changes the identity of everything that a culture is made from. In this respect, software is a perfect example of what McLuhan (1964: 24) meant when he wrote that the ‘message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs’.

However, the development and current hegemony of software does not simply perfectly illustrate the points McLuhan made 50 years ago. It also challenges these ideas. Here is how.
In the first few decades, writing new software was the domain of professionals. However, already in the 1960s, Ted Nelson and Alan Kay proposed that computers could become a new kind of cultural medium. In their paradigm, the designers would create programming tools, and the users would invent new media using these tools. Accordingly, Alan Kay called computers the first metamedium whose content is ‘a wide range of already-existing and not-yet-invented media’ (Kay and Goldberg, 2003: 403).

This paradigm had far-reaching consequences for how the software medium functions today. Once computers and programming were democratized enough, some of the most creative people of our time started to focus on creating these new structures and techniques rather than using the existing ones to make ‘content’. Since the end of 2000, extending the computer metamedium by writing new software, plugins, programming libraries and other tools became the new cutting-edge type of cultural activity.

For example, GitHub, a popular platform for sharing and developing open source tools, houses hundreds of thousands of software projects. Making new software tools is central for the fields of digital humanities and software art. And certainly, the key ‘media companies’ of our time such as Google, Facebook, or Instagram do not create content. Instead they constantly refine and expand their software tools used by hundreds of millions of people to make content and to communicate.

Thus, it is time to update Understanding Media. It is no longer the medium that is the message today. Instead, ‘the software is the message’. Continuously expanding what humans can express and how they can communicate is our ‘content’.

References


Lev Manovich
The Graduate Center, City University of New York
[email: manovich.lev@gmail.com]
Media Studies as Interdisciplinary Exploration

In an unpublished letter dated June 6th, written to his long-time friend and collaborator the anthropologist Edmund Snow Carpenter1 in 1964, Marshall McLuhan expressed his excitement over the fact that Understanding Media (1994[1964]) sold out in Toronto in two days – 300 copies at $8.75. While this might not seem like much to a 21st generation used to things going viral, it was hugely significant in 1964 that a book on media (a term that was little used) by an unknown English Professor was completely sold out in a city that as McLuhan would regularly point out, was conservative, ugly and dull. It was a sign that the book was on the cusp of a massive wave that would bring McLuhan tremendous fame and inaugurate a new field of study.

In the letter to Carpenter, McLuhan is also excited by the possibility that the book could be transformed into a different kind of school text where students could create their own curriculum, devising questions, bibliographies and projects. McLuhan saw Understanding Media as providing the basis for a new ‘teaching machine’ and he was searching for a new pedagogical format, which he describes as a series of gestalts. He wrote optimistically that if a format could be found, the schools, he believed, were prepared for the challenge. McLuhan’s letter to Carpenter concludes by referencing a new project on a sensor typology test. While the combination of student-driven curriculum and sensor typology – reference no doubt to Carl Jung’s typology test – may seem incongruous (i.e. outputs versus inputs), it represents the phenomenological, pedagogical and creative mission at the heart of McLuhan’s inauguration of media studies with this landmark book.

Understanding Media reached millions of readers in the 1960s. While the order of the book is not linear (indeed McLuhan was questioning the book’s order right up until publication), the book’s ‘Introduction’ was a crucial component and certainly an audacious statement that would anchor its many and diverse insights. Famously, its opening lines brazenly proclaim: ‘After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding’ (p. 1). Many critics took issue and still take issue with this opening paragraph which went on to assert that
‘we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society’ (pp. 3–4). McLuhan was a utopian thinker along the lines of Teillard de Chardin and while he refused to comment on whether this total connectivity is a ‘good thing’, the book is infused with a ‘deep faith’ that ‘concerns the ultimate harmony of all being’. This harmony is all part and parcel of the zeitgeist of the electronic age.

This ‘dramatic reversal’ has created a deep involvement and participation in each other’s lives and thus, ‘the globe is no more than a village’. This intimacy while reflecting ‘the ultimate harmony’ also defines the ‘Age of Anxiety’. Things can no longer be contained by one viewpoint and the ‘inclusive image’ rather than the specialized viewpoint, produces conditions where ‘the psychiatrist’s couch’ is the new extension (p. 5). Indeed, McLuhan’s description of the electronic age certainly invokes the characteristics of social media (Facebook / tumblr/twitter etc.) that many have come to know as precisely new forms of ‘outerings’: ‘We are suddenly eager to have things and people declare their beings totally’ (p. 5).

McLuhan was influenced by research into human perception as part of his approach to media studies since he believed that these media were altering our senses, our forms of attention and knowledge production. This is why pedagogy is absolutely central to his book, and all of his books. In the acknowledgements page of Understanding Media, McLuhan credits the National Association of Educational Broadcasters and U.S. Office of Education who in 1959–1960 provided him with funding to produce his Report on a Project in Understanding New Media. This was a proposal for a radical high school curriculum centered around media. Many passages and ideas from this book are developed in Understanding Media. As such, McLuhan is quite specific about the material assemblages of the media technologies under discussion both in terms of their impact on the human sensorium and the environments they are creating. This serves as the basis for a program of comparative media studies.

While the simulation of consciousness and the imploded world may sound like McLuhan is writing us into an abstract virtual world, the book proposes just the opposite: a new pedagogy for studying the media that is grounded in medium specificity and materiality. With this in mind, it is chock full of examples taken from newspaper articles, TV shows, comics, popular films, photographs, novels, etc. It is also highly interdisciplinary, drawing on writings from anthropology, urban planning, psychology, art history, physics, literature and history. It is also geographically diverse, running the gamut from India, Africa and China to Russia, Europe, Canada, and the US. This gives the book its particular processual character in Gilles Deleuze’s sense of things in process and spatial relation (and he was equally influenced by Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead). Understanding Media is a workbook with pedagogical tools; oppositional characteristics like hot and cool, center and margin are intended to help us probe our
experiences of the media rather than provide definitive once and for all answers. These are designed to raise questions for further study rather than provide an overarching theory of the media.

The roots of McLuhan’s media studies go back even further than 1959 to the early 1950s at the University of Toronto with the creation of a think tank called the Explorations Group (1953–1959) – an interdisciplinary group of researchers from psychology, urban planning, and political economy led by McLuhan (English) and Carpenter (Anthropology) who laid out a series of research questions to analyze the New Landscape being created by media (film, television, radio, computers). The group was deeply influenced by the interdisciplinary methodologies of political economist Harold Innis and the architectural critic Siegfried Giedion, and they published their writings in the interdisciplinary journal Explorations – which thankfully is being reissued. McLuhan’s interdisciplinary and experimental approach to media studies sought to challenge the strictures and specialisms of the University, which he knew needed to adapt to and understand the new world created by media (or become completely irrelevant).

Note

1. Edmund Snow Carpenter Papers Series 3.2, 3.3 Box 7, temporarily housed by the Rock Foundation and the Association for Cultural Equity at Hunter College, CUNY Hunter College, New York.

Reference


Janine Marchessault
Sensorium: Centre for Digital Arts Research
York University
[Email: janine.marchessault@gmail.com]
Embracing the Formalist Mantle

Horrors! Maybe I’m a formalist!? Such was my worry upon completing *Understanding Media*, after spending three years as a Chemistry and English major focused on the *content* of my Erlenmeyer flasks and Norton readers. Despite the fact that my undergraduate brain was aching from the effort of following McLuhan through 300+ pages of rhetorical and logical acrobatics, I still sensed a resonance with his way of thinking about media – as forms, objects, networks; and not just substrates or windows we look *through* to get at the words and pictures.

This was, however, a disheartening self-realization, since I knew the term *formalism* primarily as a pejorative. Calling someone a formalist seemed akin to calling him a technodeterminist, which Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (2011: 121), in *Kittler and the Media*, says is ‘a bit like saying that he enjoys strangling cute puppies’. I should’ve seen the warning signs. In my English seminars, I’d always been just as interested in the heft of our anthologies, their typeface and layout, and the smell and texture and translucency of their onion-skin pages, as I was in the actual *text* of ‘Beowulf’. In the lab, too, I spent nearly as much time pondering how the design of beakers and pipets shaped the way we interacted with chemicals and the kinds of results we could derive.

I had encountered McLuhan while writing a senior thesis exploring representations of human–computer interaction in the early years of *Wired* magazine, well known for its formal experimentation. Through my immersion in the magazine and exposure to its patron saint, I came to recognize that I, too, had long cared about forms of communication, and about mediation as a multisensory process and experience. But what did these interests say about me? Did being a formalist mean that I pay too little attention to content and social and historical context; that I ‘desocialize’ media and fail to see mediation as a ‘practice’, as Raymond Williams claimed of McLuhan?

Not necessarily. There *are* some formalist puppy-killers out there, but McLuhan needn’t be counted among them. His interests include the ‘psychic and social consequences’ of media technologies, and the ‘change of scale or
pace or pattern’ they introduce ‘into human affairs’ (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 8). His media are socialized (even if the social is often generalized in his work). And he recognizes that technological change incites the recalibration of myriad social and psychological patterns; ‘each new impact shifts the ratios among all the senses.’ When we add a new medium into a culture, he says, ‘it is the entire system that is changed’ (p. 64). This ‘entire system’ can expand to allow for a highly multifaceted approach to studying media.

Over the years, in my research on media-architectures, I’ve found that thinking formally helps in modeling the systemic interactions among technologies, people, institutions, places, and various cultural and political–economic factors. Understanding Media provided early inspiration for the development of my own method. McLuhan (taking cues from his mentor, economist Harold Innis) recognizes media as ‘staples or natural resources’ that have a profound impact not only on a society’s political economy, but also on its social configurations, its ‘entire psychic life’, and its ‘unique cultural flavor’ (p. 21). Just as cotton helped to define the 19th-century American South, and oil the contemporary Middle East, papyrus played a key role in shaping the ‘entire system’ of ancient Egypt. And when ‘paper from China …[made] its way through the New East to Europe’, it ‘accelerated education and commerce … and provided the basis for “the Renaissance of the twelfth century”’ (p. 101). The movement of this space-biased medium eventually exploited, and in some cases even incited, developments in transportation infrastructure (consider the creation of postal routes).

Through McLuhan, Innis, and Lewis Mumford, to whom McLuhan is likewise indebted, I came to realize that media don’t merely exploit infrastructures for their production and distribution; they themselves are infrastructures. They’re the systems, often invisible, that undergird and structure our daily existence. McLuhan acknowledges the etymological connection between communication and transportation (e.g. the Greek metaphor means to carry across or transport), and ‘the term ‘communication’ has had an extensive use in connection with roads and bridges, sea routes, rivers, and canals, even before it became transformed into ‘information movement’ in the electric age’ (p. 89). Each of these forms of transport ‘not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver, and the message’; thus trucks and boats are media, too (p. 90).

Media systems are also like transit in the ways they change how we organize and inhabit space. The steam railway created a ‘new political centralism and a new kind of urban shape and size’ – an ‘abstract grid’ with separate zones for production, consumption, and residence (p. 104). Electric power reversed the trend toward decentralization; electric light transformed the way people moved, worked within, and experienced space; and the car and the plane further ‘scrambled’ spatiality and amplified mobility. The telephone, the radio, and now mobile and sensing technologies have played similar roles in reorganizing physical and psychic space. McLuhan even acknowledges the politics of these transformations in media-geography: ‘any new means of moving information will alter any power structure’, and
that uneven distribution of resources and ‘lack of homogeneity in speed of information movement’ can create a ‘diversity of patterns in organization’ and incite ‘serious conflicts’ (pp. 91, 104).

It’s hard to see how an individual might have any power to influence the design of these media-infrastructures, to manage their psychic effects or their recalibration of our sense-ratios, to monitor how they alter our ‘habits of life’ and our ‘patterns of thought and valuation’ (p. 63). One place where this can happen is in the classroom. Understanding Media encourages us to acknowledge and evaluate multiple forms of learning, and to appreciate the multisensory nature of knowledge-production. We adhere to educational standards rooted in print-based values and ocularcentrism; ‘our testers assume that uniform and continuous habits are a sign of intelligence, thus eliminating the ear man and the tactile man’ (p. 17). ‘The American stake in literacy as a technology or uniformity applied to every level of education, government, industry, and social life’, McLuhan observed 50 years ago, ‘is totally threatened by the electric technology.’ Those stakes are further challenged today by video games and mobile technologies. McLuhan advocates that we prepare our students to develop ‘literacies’ in myriad media forms. ‘Would it not seem natural and necessary that the young be provided with at least as much training of perception in [the] graphic and photographic world’ – and, I would add, the sonic and interactive and mobile worlds – ‘as they get in the typographic?’ (p. 230).

McLuhan’s appreciation for multiple literacies and forms of knowing – and for pedagogical strategies tuned to those various formal sensibilities – inspired me to commit, early in my teaching career, to what are known today as the digital humanities. Furthermore, his acknowledgment that artists, keenly tuned in to ‘changes in sense perception’, are ‘indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures created by’ different media technologies, has led me to insert artists’ works among the theoretical texts on my syllabi, and to engage my students in critical-creative practice (pp. 18, 65). I want them to think about the material properties, affordances and limitations, sensory dimensions, epistemologies and ideologies of the media-forms they’re learning, and making, with. I want them to proudly embrace the formalist mantle. It’s come to fit me quite well.

References


Shannon Mattern
The New School, New York
[email: matterns@newschool.edu]
Marshall McLuhan Then and Now

I met Marshall McLuhan when he came to speak at Johns Hopkins in the 1960s where I was a grad student in English. The reception was held before the lecture, and McLuhan drank a good deal of whiskey, which only had the effect of making him more eloquent. He titillated us with aperçus about the difference between fishnet stockings and nylons with the seam down the back, and their linkage to hot and cold media. He quoted Shakespeare and Blake and Henry Ford in the same breath. He annoyed the hell out of our professors (with the possible exception of J Hillis Miller, who seemed delighted). And he presented a wonderful image of scholarship liberated from the study into the world, of a humanities for which nothing human—or inhuman—would be alien. As an apprentice Blakean, I felt that I had heard from the master, and wished I had had the good sense to go to University of Toronto for my PhD, where I could have studied with him and Northrop Frye.

Within a year of this meeting, the Structuralist Symposium was held at Johns Hopkins and the foundations of criticism and theory seemed to shift under our feet. McLuhan's highly accessible and aphoristic writing gave way to a sublime abyss of theory that seemed to lie beneath the dazzling surfaces of *Understanding Media*. Was not Derridean writing the noumenal substrate beneath all the phenomenal interfaces of television, cinema, radio, printing, and the rumored invention known as the computer? And within a few years, the posthumous figure of Walter Benjamin arrived to displace McLuhan as the magus of media theory. As McLuhan’s star rose on television, his standing in academia began to sink, and some of his pronouncements (the end of work, the new tribal/global consciousness) began to seem naive. University of Toronto graduate David Cronenberg pronounced McLuhan’s epitaph in his 1983 horror classic, *Videodrome*, which portrayed him as ‘Dr Brian O’Blivion’, the media theorist who is the ‘first victim’ of the new media. The era of the media theorist as himself a ‘medium’, a kind of prophet, shaman, or guru, seemed definitively over.

But McLuhan never stopped being an influence on me, and I believe that the core principles of his work are still very relevant today, not only for
media theory, but for the larger project of the humanities. The first principle is what I think of as McLuhan’s cheerfully anarchist sensibility, his refusal to be ‘serious’, and to avoid promoting his ‘methods’. He regarded theories, not as foundational structures, but as ‘probes’ into a network of problems, rather like an electronics analyst touching various nodes in a highly complex circuitry to see what lights up. I am sure when I thought of the title *Picture Theory*, an attempt to free theory from the shackles of discursive logic into the analogical and imaginary register, McLuhan was hovering over me. When he was accused of contradicting himself he was unabashed. As he cheerfully observed in his memorable encounter with the insufferably pedantic Columbia professor and media theorist in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, ‘you mean my entire fallacy is wrong’! I don’t say that everyone has to aspire to emulate McLuhan, but we could certainly use some of his wit and panache in public representations of the humanities today.

And then there are three or four other concepts that he introduced which seem just as relevant as they did in the 1960s. The notion of media as ‘extensions’ of the body and its senses has not been superseded in my view, especially in McLuhan’s complex dialectical account of extensions as simultaneously forms of *amputation*, and his cagey understanding of the way extensions can become reified and fetishized: ‘the Indian becomes the servo-mechanism of his canoe’. Today, we are the canoes that carry our smart gadgets around in pockets and backpacks, counting on them to send us messages about where to go and what to do. He understood that media innovation was a process very like Joseph Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’, creating obsolescence in its wake, ‘dead media’ that could come back to life in unpredictable ways, especially in the arts, which he saw as both lagging behind and forging ahead of the dominant media clichés of the time. His account of intermedia relationships in terms of what I would call ‘nesting’ (‘the content of a medium is always an earlier medium’) has been recycled to great effect by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s notion of ‘re-mediation’, and adapted to accommodate the anticipation of yet-to-be-invented media in the notion of ‘pre-mediation’ (*The Matrix* is probably the best cinematic example). His account of inter-media, and what I would call the ‘braiding’ of distinct media types in variable ‘sensory ratios’ (especially what Hegel called the ‘theoretic senses’ of sight and hearing, plus the common sense of touch) is as fresh as ever. It only needs to be supplemented by the Peircean ‘semiotic ratios’ of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolic, and leavened by the Lacanian registers of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, and the scopic/vocative drives – i.e. the drive to see/depict/touch, on the one hand, and to hear/speak/write, on the other.

McLuhan’s understanding of the electronic revolution as an extension of the central nervous system was infinitely more timely and prophetic than Benjamin’s ‘mechanical reproduction’, a concept which tended to over-estimate the importance of photography and other image technologies. Benjamin was mainly useful for pondering a selection of 19th and early 20th century technologies, but he had no clue that an age of biocybernetic
reproduction (drones, clones, and computer viruses) was on the horizon. It is not surprising, then, that when Friedrich Kittler wrote his classic media history cum Gothic novel, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), he cited McLuhan prominently and quickly earned a reputation as the ‘Dark McLuhan’. There are only two differences between these wonderful scholars: (1) Kittler’s pessimism versus McLuhan’s optimism; (2) Kittler believed that media determine our situation; McLuhan thought that media are our situation. Aside from that, they share the gifts of mordant humor, sparkling wit, and an ability to make connections that we need more than ever today.

**References**


**WJT Mitchell**

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Chicago
[email: wjtm@uchicago.edu]
McLuhan at Taksim Square

I was carrying a fresh copy of *Understanding Media* with me on Istiklal Street, Istanbul, alongside people in gas masks and police in riot gear. It no longer felt relevant to write about past experiences of engaging with the book or to reflect on McLuhan as a forerunner of media archaeology. This time I did not want to write about ‘anti-McLuhan’ minor histories of media technologies: the ones that do not take media as extensions of Man but as extensions of the animal – for instance, insects – as their starting point (Parikka, 2010).

Travelling from the Anatolian side of Istanbul with a ferry to Kabatas, the chapter on ‘Weapons’ seemed to strike a chord. Extensive tear-gassing and police operations had turned some parts of the city into something unrecognizable, like in a state of emergency. The events at Gezi Park and its occupation grew from an environmental protest to widespread demonstrations across Turkey. Besides the environmental context, the demonstrations were against the authoritarian measures of the state: excessive tear-gassing, random arrests, and persecution of journalists, spokesmen and – women.

In the light of McLuhan one starts to think about the various cultural techniques and media contexts of the events in Istanbul. The usual suspects – social media such as Twitter – were quickly acknowledged as important platforms of knowledge sharing but also for a circulation of the affects of outrage, disbelief and defiance. Online media services seemed to quickly open up a new forum for political discussion, crystallized in the inventive use of hashtags as forms of software literacy. When the mainstream media were airing documentaries on penguins, tweets from Gezi were distributing a whole different set of images about what was happening to public space in Turkey. Tear gas produced its own eerie *atmosphere* on the streets of Istanbul, which had quickly transformed into policed spaces accessible only with gas masks: a denial of the breath (Sloterdijk, 2009).

Walking up from Kabatas port towards Taksim, one could observe this sort of expansion of the meaning of media. This is where McLuhan is at his best.
Media are not only about cinema, television, and radio. We start to see the world as media in itself: roads and surfaces, windows and squares become ways of mediating our relation to time and space. Walls are painted with ad hoc slogans; sprayed with images and words in order to mark a territory but also to leave a trace for the next passerby. The huge letters ‘GAZDOGAN’ referred to the prime minister Tayyip Erdogan and the tear-gas tactics of the government. Not only Facebook walls, but the city walls became quick and dirty media surfaces: I was struck by a photograph of an older Turkish man, in his 70s, drawing the face of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on the wall. Then he walked to another street corner and drew another face of Mustafa Kemal. It was Kemal who introduced the Latin-based alphabet to Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s: in addition to a Europeanization of Turkey as a way to detach from the writing systems of Arabic and Persian origins, it was also ‘modernization’ in relation to the media technologies of telegraphy and the printing press to which the discrete nature was better suited. The alphabet escorts both a geopolitical orientation as well as entertains a relation to various technological changes not without an effect on our perceptual dispositions.

Atatürk persists as a symbolic reference point for various nationalist protestors: his political heritage nature is remediated as content of chants and demands of political nature. The visual space is not only about figures of Atatürk but also more carnevalistic: penguins (as a reference to mainstream media censorship) are suddenly as popular a source of remix and memes as cats usually are in internet culture. Political expression takes the form of artistic expression: ‘the artist must ever play and experiment with new means of arranging experience, even though the majority of his audience may prefer to remain fixed in their old perceptual attitudes’, writes McLuhan (2001: 276) in the chapter on the telegraph.

The online and the city are paired up in this production of visual resistance, but let’s not get too focused on content. One is struck by McLuhan’s reminder that ‘the city, itself, is traditionally a military weapon, and is a collective shield or armor plate, an extension of the castle of our very skins’ (p. 374). This idea is informative of the role of security, war and the city, but it also misses the point about the past years of security regimes which turn the city into an autoimmune disorder: the inhabitants become the targets of police forces, in relation to global events such as G8/G20 meetings (Renzi and Elmer, 2012), as well as such events as those in Turkish cities. But this autoimmune disease of the city does not extend the skin, but attacks the respiratory organs of people with tear gas. It burns the skin when the chemicals are infused with the water in water cannons.

McLuhan is constantly useful as a reminder that media are everywhere, and are able to lock our senses in particular ways – perhaps not in the way that there would be always one dominating media episteme, such as literacy (cf. McLuhan, 2001: 373), but more temporarily as a form of attention management. Instead, there is a constant contestation as to the forms of media power: mainstream television might be producing visions of coldness,
like documentaries about penguins, but that feeds back to remediations that expand the time and space of what we mean by media itself.

References


Jussi Parikka
Winchester School of Art
University of Southampton
[Email: j.parikka@soton.ac.uk]
McLuhan

*Understanding Media* left in its sprawling wake a froth of catchphrases, worthy of the TV ad-man/aphorist that McLuhan was soon fated to become; catchphrases that mystified even as they captured the pulse of their historical moment: hot and cold media, the global village, the medium as message, media as neural extensions, all-at-onceness, implosion and explosion, retribalization, the electric age.

All are short-cuts to core components in the McLuhan idearium: an idearium that, by the early 1960s, had expanded to the point of channeling the work of the entire Toronto circle, but in ways that increasingly attenuate McLuhan’s once less encompassing but more distinctive disciplinary voice. So there’s a lot of Innis and Carpenter bouncing around in MM’s media echo chamber along with Havelock, Hall, Wyndham Lewis, Teilhard de Chardin and others. What never gets stripped away in the process is what I consider McLuhan’s main theme in *Understanding Media*: acceleration, the speed-up, instantaneity, modernity as rush and crush.

McLuhan is a true heir of Marinetti (whom he arrived at via Lewis). But, whereas the Futurist founder is a shameless evangelist of modernity’s destructive and psychopathic urges as well as its constructive and heroic ones, his electric information age successor is caught in a moral bind. In the opening pages of *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan tells us his faith is in something conventionally transcendent:

> The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology ... There is a deep faith to be found in this new attitude – a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being. Such is the faith in which this book has been written. (p. 21)

The aim is to bring the media extensions of man into ‘orderly service’. But the tone is anything but upbeat as regards any imminent return to orderliness. To displace *panic, fright, revulsion, future shock*, the pervasive
conviction that ours is an age of anxiety, Understanding Media proposes not much: a fresh look, a remedy for depression, coping strategies, a sense of hope amidst pervasive hopelessness.

Weak or strong, the medicine in question arrives in the very pattern language that induces the tachycardias of contemporary life. The introductory chapter is a masterpiece in its genre. It caroms from cognitive splitting to electric light to Shakespeare to the failures of classical economics to airplanes breaching the sound barrier to Cubism. Then it just as quickly shifts gear to deal with Napoleon and the French Revolution, EM Forster on the impossibility of East meeting West, tribal Africa in the television age, criminals and children as nonconformists, Arnold Toynbee’s concept of ‘etherealization’, television and radio as commodity, only to conclude with CG Jung’s reflections on ancient Roman nobles and their slaves as a model for the ‘fixed charge’ on our personal energies exacted by electrical relays of modern life.

McLuhan never argues or proves a point. Instead, he brilliantly surfs along the spine of history and chronology, cutting, pasting and improvising along the way, building circuits of ideas rather than clear-cut channels or well-regulated highways. The backbone of his argument still bears traces of the commitments that informed The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962), but little more than traces. We hurtle from spoken to written to printed word, but via rich but jumbled detours into roadways, numbers, clothing, residential architecture, money and clocks. Wheels follow printed words, motorcars race after the printing press. The concluding crescendo of media types appears roughly chronological with telegraphy giving way to typewriting, telephony, phonography, the cinema, radio and then television.

But the book ends almost exactly where it began: with two consummate expressions of ours as an age of anxiety – weapons and automation. The first signifies either total annihilation or the constructive state of total impasse achieved when ‘weaponry is a self-liquidating fact’ (p. 300). The second refers to the moment when traditional jobs understood as ‘fragmented tasks and specialist slots for “workers”’ become meaningless and we all become teachers: learning becomes the principal kind of production and consumption … Paid learning is already becoming both the dominant employment and the source of new wealth in our society’ (p. 204). There’s good news along with the bad, excitement as well as fear, as life-jacketed faith ‘in the ultimate harmony of all being’ is left bobbing hopefully at the boundary line.

Fifty years of Understanding Media and the undertow of pathos is mostly gone. McLuhan is back clothed less as the diagnostician of a crisis in civilization than as a prophet who got things completely right even as he got things completely wrong.

References


Jeffrey T Schnapp
MetaLAB
Harvard University
[Email: jeffrey@metalab.harvard.edu]
McLuhan’s World, Or, *Understanding Media* in Japan

Marshall McLuhan was a divisive figure. To some he was a revolutionary media theorist and thinker, who literally put media theory on the map. To others he was a mere prophet (or profiteer) of the new media age, a public figure who lectured to private corporations, and was a hot topic in Madison avenue circles whose aphoristic style blended well with advertising copy.

In Japan, McLuhan was a divided figure. Before he was translated he was introduced, and this introduction was performed by two different people in two markedly different ways. In lieu of discussing my own encounter with McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, I’d like to use this space to ask us to think of a different space of reception: late 1960s Japan. Here interest in McLuhan had a fireworks-like intensity matched by an accompanying brevity. There would be McLuhan revivals – around his death in the early 1980s, and from the late 1990s into the 2000s, as his work was repurposed for a new media era. But what is fascinating about the reception of McLuhan in Japan – in addition to its impact on media theorization thereafter, and its important place in the still-to-be-written story of McLuhan’s global reception – is the way that the divisive figure of McLuhan is literally mapped onto two very different writers, who introduce two very different McLuhans.

The McLuhan boom in Japan was brief, but intense. It began in late 1966, and had all but died out by mid-1968, barely lasting long enough to see the translation of *Understanding Media*, which appeared in November 1967. Far more popular than the translation was the 1967 *McLuhan’s World* (Makuru_han no sekai), a work of applied McLuhanism by a man who did the most to shape the reception of the figure in Japan: Takemura Ken’ichi. Takemura is known as the preeminent McLuhanist in Japan, and his 1967 *McLuhan’s World* sold 10 times more copies than the eventually translated *Understanding Media*, and made it up to #8 on the bestseller list of 1967. *McLuhan’s World* was the *Understanding Media* for Japanese audiences. What marked Takemura’s work was its appeal to general audiences, and perhaps even more significantly its presentation of McLuhan as the prophet of the electronic age, best read by business people, salaried workers, television industry heads and marketing executives.
Takemura channeled a very specific McLuhan for Japanese readers: McLuhan the business visionary, McLuhan the adman, McLuhan the prophet of media industries and their transformations. And perhaps most importantly, a McLuhan localized for the Japanese context, complete with references to Japanese popular culture, ads, and politics with predictions thrown in to boot. McLuhan’s focus on television as tactile medium meshed with then current journalistic discussions about TV kids as the so-called ‘skin tribe’; television was presented as a ‘happening’ medium, a conception that influenced both TV producers and advertising directors; Toyota and Honda came in for praise for grasping the current age as one of variety, market segmentation and post-mass production; and so on (Takemura, 1967). In Takemura’s capable hands, McLuhan’s work was living theory, easily shaped to address current trends and business discourse. In fact McLuhan’s work was so marked by his most vocal proponent in Japan that the latter became known as ‘Takemura McLuhan’ (Takemura, 1970: 30).

Takemura’s main rival in the presentation and reception of McLuhan was Goto Kazuhiko, a researcher affiliated with the NHK Broadcasting Research Department. As might be expected from someone working for the national broadcaster in Japan, Goto emphasized the need to read McLuhan carefully, to ignore the popularization attempted by Takemura, and to take a step back before proclaiming McLuhan a business prophet and the key to newest marketing techniques. Part of the emerging field of communication studies, Goto wrote for both leftist magazines and for advertising journals; while his tone and approach toward McLuhan varied according to the venue, his main preoccupation was to disabuse people of the notion that the writer ‘could be used like a prescription drug for management, advertising, marketing and store window displays’ (Goto et al., 1967: 72) – as some sought to imply. Goto was one of the co-translators of Understanding Media, presented in Japanese as Ningen kakucho no genri (The Principles of the Extensions of Man). A month after the publication of the translation, in December 1967, Goto released a co-written book described on the cover as ‘The first genuine introduction [to McLuhan] in Japan’ (Goto et al., 1967) – a clear dig at Takemura.

This rivalry had an interesting effect. In North America, Britain and France, assessments of McLuhan’s intricate combination of media theory and mediatic persona tended to be polarized; either negative or positive. But because of the forcefulness of Takemura’s introduction, discourse around McLuhan in Japan tended to be rather more about the promises made about McLuhan than about the value of his work. And so, rather than criticize McLuhan the thinker or media personality, writers would criticize Takemura’s performative adoption of McLuhanese. Criticisms of McLuhan’s work were more often than not framed as evaluations of how he had been presented. Writers often concluded that while the media theorist may not be the salvation for the marketing world after all, this didn’t mean there was no value in his work. Rather than writers treating McLuhan as a false prophet, they tended to treat Takemura as the false prophet, thereby immunizing
McLuhan to attacks. Indeed, the greatest critics of Takemura were in fact those who claimed to find theoretical value in McLuhan – like Gotô, as well as art critics like Tôno Yoshiaki.

And so there were two McLuhans in Japan: the sober academician introduced by Gotô; and the media personality and prophet of a new era brought to life by Takemura. McLuhan’s physical and medial absence from Japan at the time allowed Takemura and Goto to stand in for him. The divisive figure of McLuhan was quite literally a divided figure in the 1960s McLuhan boom in Japan. Japan’s encounter with *Understanding Media* in the 1960s was for better or worse mediated by a detour through *McLuhan’s World*.

**References**


**Marc Steinberg**

Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema  
Concordia University, Montréal  
[email: marc.steinberg@concordia.ca]
Media Analysis Beyond Content

*Understanding Media* (1964) carries with it a complex legacy. Although it is a single text, its reception varies wildly, shaped in a variety of ways by the multiple fields through which it reverberated over the last half century. Woody Allen movies aside, this is especially true of the book’s most famous adage, ‘the medium is the message’.

Most often the formulation is read through ongoing debates about technological determinism. Raymond Williams’s (1992[1974]: 120–124) critique is the most famous, and collects all the standard charges against McLuhan: formalism, idealism, the separation of media forms from ‘practices’; and most polemically, calls McLuhan’s method ‘the cancellation of history’. The exact nature and extent of McLuhan’s determinism is up for debate, for instance when Michael Heim (1992: 312) calls him a ‘soft’ technological determinist ‘accepting destiny while studying the different ways of absorbing impact’ and Brian Winston (1986) reads him as more of a ‘hard’ determinist in *Misunderstanding Media*. Meanwhile, a tradition of Canadian intellectuals situates the adage as a distillation and popularization of Harold Innis’s more sophisticated media history (Heyer and Crowley, 1991; Kroker, 1984).

The determinism debate is fundamentally about how we read McLuhan’s most famous formulations in terms of technology as an object of study. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (2011: 120–124) is certainly right that the label technodeterminist is more often an accusation than a careful description of an analytical position for the purpose of serious argument. But scholars are not free agents. As Western intellectuals debate the power of technology, the broader discourse on technology pendulates from the extremely affirmative to the fetishistic, only occasionally swinging in other directions. To even discuss McLuhan – write about him, and often now read – we dwell in a branded world made of devices marketed as revolutions.

Yet the interesting thing about ‘the medium is the message’ as a proposition is that it emerges firmly from the 20th century’s humanist tradition, and *not* from a mechanistic antihumanism. Ruth and Elihu Katz (1998) trace
Sterne Media Analysis Beyond Content

the formulation back to his teachers Richards and Leavis. Friedrich Kittler (2010: 29) wrote that because McLuhan ‘was originally a literary critic, [he] understood more about perception than electronics’. Amplifying this reading, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (2011: 61) considers McLuhan as a kind of cultural physiologist, bringing Claude Bernard's method of exploratory vivisection to the study of media and the senses: ‘remove a liver or spleen, observe and measure the resulting physiological changes, and you will be able to pinpoint the function of the extracted organ.’ Even more recently, John Durham Peters (2011: 231) has placed McLuhan in the grammatical tradition:

McLuhan’s grammatical theology was critical in helping launch an appreciation for medium specificity as such. McLuhan helped to dash forever the notion of abstract ‘content’ carried by the neutral ‘pipes’ of diverse media. In a sense, he was the anti-Shannon, and his media theory was the counterpoint to the mathematical theory of communication that dominated intellectual life in the 1950s … Perhaps it took a thinker familiar with the theology of the incarnation to take seriously the essentially embodied quality of communication. There is for McLuhan no information without form, and any percept is always coloured or constituted by the organs of perception.

All of these readings announce a humanism of mechanisms, where we read technologies and their constituent dimensions as arts and artifacts of human activity. From a normative perspective, Peters is right to pitch McLuhan against mid-century information theorists and cyberneticians. No doubt they understood themselves in conflict with McLuhan’s propositions. But both sides of the argument accepted a more fundamental assumption as the basis of debate: that form and content could be separated, and that the important thing to track and account for was form. ‘The medium is the message’ sounds a humanist echo of Shannon’s mathematical separation of channel and content. To use Wolfgang Ernst’s (2013: 23) phrase, both authors provide a ‘non-contentist analysis’ of media. Certainly, Shannon’s mathematical theory (and Norbert Weiner’s cybernetics) carried with it a normative implication that the communication channel ought not affect the message. But the entire engineering culture that provided an intellectual resource for Shannon was based on the proposition that neither media nor human senses were transparent conveyers of meaning (see Mills, 2011; Sterne, 2012). For Shannon, this was a condition to be negotiated or overcome – to be engineered against. For McLuhan, the non-neutrality of media and the senses was the starting point for cultural analysis.

Today, the legacy of this conceptual separation is the very basis of many different forms of media analysis across the disciplines. Certainly the greatest advances sympathetic to McLuhan’s propositions come out of the various German traditions that have built on his work alongside that of
Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Lacan and others (Winthrop-Young, 2011: 145). But even writers less sympathetic to McLuhan’s politics have to acknowledge the importance of a mechanical humanities. Foucault’s notion of a dispositif, which widely resonates across the Anglophone humanities, makes a similar point, and when we turn it toward media analysis, we get very close to McLuhanite formulations even if we are undertaking a project of transformative social criticism. We can find the combination explicitly at work in Jody Berland’s essays on ‘cultural technologies’ (e.g. 1992, 2000); a too-infrequently cited contribution that appeared long before Bernhard Siegert’s (2011) recent turn to ‘cultural techniques’ (see also Chun, 2011; Fuller, 2005; Galloway, 2004; Gitelman, 2006). The ability to read and interpret mechanisms in relation to sensory apparatus has been essential to my own work as well. I have critiqued McLuhan for his racism, his psychologism, his social conservatism and his misunderstandings of the actual operations of the senses, but in privileging the morphology of media over what they carry – and framing it that way – I have accepted essentially the terms of argument he laid out.

Like arguments about technology, humanists’ separation of form and content in the analysis of media does not occur in a vacuum. Toward the end of ‘The Medium is the Message’ chapter from Understanding Media (1964), McLuhan famously wrote that the ‘content of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind’ (p. 18, echoing TS Eliot on meaning in poetry 30 years before). Today, as Anna McCarthy and Aurora Wallace note, cultural goods are increasingly conceptualized as content: the scarequotes have been removed. As McCarthy (2013) argues, ‘the word is now central to the trade argot of media corporations’ as well as the arts, philanthropy, legal discourse, contracts, and civic regulation. Books, cinema, music, television, photography, love letters, conversation, traffic, sleep and sexual hookups are all flattened into ‘content’ by an industry that places the highest value (at least in terms of actual revenue) on infrastructure and bandwidth, and secondarily on consumer electronics, and those who adopt its language. As writers in the humanities turn to media and their epiphenomena as our objects of analysis – from the interdisciplinary push for media studies, to the new fascination with big data – we need to be careful not to simply abandon content, and all the cultural domains it implies, to the people who make the stuff we study.

Note

1. There is something poetic about the fact that Williams’s critique of technological determinism and Winthrop-Young’s (half) defense of it appear in exactly the same page ranges of their books. Draw your own conclusions.

References


Jonathan Sterne
Department of Art History and Communication Studies
McGill University, Montréal
[http://sterneworks.org]
The Greatest Art Form of the Twentieth Century

To the extent that the ratio of time to money is a value indicator in a capitalist culture, Marshall McLuhan was spot on in his 1953 Commonweal claim that ‘Ads represent the main channel of intellectual and artistic effort in the modern world’ (p. 557). A decade later in Understanding Media, he developed the idea, saying ‘Historians and archaeologists will one day discover that the ads of our time are the richest and most faithful reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities’ (1964: 232). And by 1976, appropriately enough on the pages of Advertising Age, insight morphed into aphorism: ‘Advertising is the greatest art form of the twentieth century’. This trio of quotes plucked from the ample comments McLuhan made on the topic can be put to many uses. They encapsulate the broad contours of his career-long rhetorical trajectory, suggest his shift in interest from human agency to what Raymond Williams described as ‘instrumental formalism’, and underscore his uncanny knack of declaring boldly that which his contemporaries simply overlooked. Anyone who has spent time in the Middle Ages section of a museum, surrounded by religious statuary and painting that was not only ubiquitous in its day, but a manifestation of the social order and repository of its values, understands the truth of McLuhan’s insight.

McLuhan made these pronouncements in the period during which humanities-based media studies programs slowly took institutional form. Often beginning as film studies programs, they hewed tightly to a textual bias inherited from literary studies, struggled for legitimacy within the university by embracing an historicist and aesthetic agenda, and clad themselves in the armor of high-powered (and jargon-rich) theory, staying in the forefront of the intellectual trends of the day. It took time (and the leadership of the French) for popular film such as Noir, Westerns and their ilk to appear in the American research agenda; it took even more time for television to penetrate this bulwark. From this perspective, McLuhan’s pronouncements of advertising’s cultural centrality were absolutely at odds with media studies of his day, which took advertising as ephemeral, ideologically tainted and
categorically beyond the Pale. In retrospect, McLuhan was not only correct; his mode of explication was in tune with the culture he wanted to reach. Although McLuhan’s academic pedigree and wit equipped him to go head to head with the most erudite humanist scholar, he chose the ad man’s vernacular and pithy one-liner, amplifying his message through television and popular publications. And as a public intellectual, he demonstrated his acute understanding of media with robustness largely absent in mainstream media studies.

2

Forgive an autobiographical indulgence. Thanks to my father’s eclectic reading habits, I first stumbled across Understanding Media the year it was published, 1964, when I was nearing the end of grade school. Ironically, this follow-up to the Mechanical Bride and Gutenberg Galaxy began life in 1959 as a US National Association of Educational Broadcasters’ commission for an 11th grade media studies curriculum. The NAEB rejected McLuhan’s curricular plans, and he developed them into the book that marked the start of my fascination with the media. From that point on, I followed McLuhan’s work in ‘real time’. A few years later, thanks to a terrific high school history teacher, things became complicated. I encountered EP Thompson’s History of the English Working Class and Raymond Williams’ Culture and Society, setting me up for the debate that would play out years later while I was in graduate school with the publication of Williams’ Television: Technology and Cultural Form. By that point, I struggled to reconcile the work of McLuhan, Harold Innis and Lewis Mumford, which I found inspiring, with the work of Williams, which I found far more convincing. The social specificity, and indeed, the cultural materialism Williams advocated had a profound impact on me.

Still, full disclosure notwithstanding, McLuhan’s and Williams’ positions are more complex than usually portrayed. Both share degrees in English literature from Cambridge and an initial fascination with the Leavisite tradition. Both explored media at the intersection of culture and technology, McLuhan through his Centre at the University of Toronto and Williams in Television; each offered fundamental media-centric alternatives to the text-centric approaches far more common in the period’s formation of film studies; and each interrogated the relationship between media and community. But the meanings of those conjoined words and interests differed profoundly and played out in the domain of determinism, one technological and the other social, in nuanced and - for the field - generative ways. McLuhan’s ‘instrumentally formalist’ approach conflated ‘medium’ with ‘technology’, evacuating any social or institutional agency, instead positioning the social as an effect. Williams’ interest in the social institution of technology, in culture as a practice, obviously offered a sharp counterpoint, as their ‘debate’ would spell out.
3

Media studies owe much to these two figures for nudging our understanding of media beyond the comfortable particularities of the text and restoring technology to the culture mix. Whether conceptualized as social practices and institutions or as prostheses with implications for the calculus of sensory perception, each view enables a notion of culture that goes far beyond an invented tradition, and that brings with it distinct implications for the question of community. Advertising, despite the critique it would receive in Williams’ hands, is, ironically the enabling element in his understanding of broadcast flow, constituting precisely those ‘differently related units’ whose timing is ‘undeclared’ and that replace the ‘programme series’. Williams (2003[1974]) considered flow ‘the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form’ (p. 86), and although his reasoning as so often differed from McLuhan’s, it’s not difficult to understand the centrality of advertising to his views. As always, McLuhan made his case pithily and provocatively, using the language of advertising recursively as the métier of his intervention. Today’s logics of advertising, evident in AdSense, data tracking and predictive algorithms, badly need a McLuhan and Williams to interrogate this latest conjuncture of culture and technology and to dislodge the field from its comfort zone.

References
McLuhan M (1953) *Commonweal* 58.

William Uricchio
Comparative Media Studies
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
[email: uricchio@mit.edu]

A generation of film and media scholars weaned on 1980s videocassettes are sparking renewed interest in the home viewing apparatus and video spectatorship. This field is not quite television studies or new media studies, so Caetlin Benson-Allott coins the name 'new video studies' to include her work alongside an assortment of articles and books by scholars such as Lucas Hilderbrand, James Moran and Daniel Hebert. Benson-Allott’s background includes new media, spectatorship, and queer and masculinity studies, and her intervention here explores how cinema’s ongoing platform and distribution changes since the late 1970s have affected both the text and the viewing subject. What she accomplishes is thus a revival of screen theory and a revision of platform studies. She reframes exhibition as an essential component in the affective functioning of the apparatus while expanding Ian Bogost and Nick Monfort’s conception of platform to include such analog ‘mechatronic’ devices as VCRs. The cross-connections between technology and media culture are most visible, she maintains, in the ‘low’, mass entertainment genre of horror. In order to provoke audiences, filmmakers must tap into the cultural anxieties of their historical moment, which also demands that they anticipate how the latest distribution and exhibition practises can work to their advantage. For this reason *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens* is filled with close readings of sumptuously described scenes of horror that evince the interwoven historic contexts of technology, industry, political economy, and nation.

The book’s central thesis and method are encapsulated well in its first chapter, an historical overview of five succeeding platforms elegantly mapped onto the zombie films of George A Romero. Each new platform requires that Romero adjust his formal style and ideological content to engage the spectator accordingly, whether that spectator is watching in a shopping mall cinema (as in the 1978 *Dawn of the Dead*) or online through their mobile devices (2007’s *Diary of the Dead*). Romero customizes his style
to suit the format, for example, by muting the color palette and restricting depth of field to facilitate the anticipated VCR viewing of *Day of the Dead*, a direct to video release. But Romero’s political polemics are also responsive to the media literacy of the time. For instance, he simplifies the mise-en-scene and tinges it with an unsightly digital blue filter as part of his critique of the ‘cloistered withdrawal’ of the DVD viewer of *Land of the Dead* (p. 51).

The following two chapters are single film analyses that bookend the reign of the VCR. Both *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983) and *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) channel the industry’s anxieties surrounding this format into the ‘abhorrred’ figure of the videocassette. By the time of *The Ring* the videocassette had accrued such stigma from piracy that it began to figure as a murderous parthenogenetic black box, like Barbara Creed’s monstrous-feminine, reproducing without male fertilization (i.e. industry consent). Not that this ‘anti-tape rhetoric’ is an hyperbole, either; Benson-Allott observes its real world correlate in the litany of anti-piracy petitions before Congress, many of which she humorously ventriloquizes through the ribald exhortations of MPAA president Jack Valenti, who campaigned tirelessly to ‘plug the analog hole’ (pp. 110, 21).

On the other hand, Benson-Allott reads *Videodrome* as metonymic of the viewing body’s mutation to meet evolving media. She writes: ‘*Videodrome* looks at how the viewing body adapts in response to video technology rather than representing video as an extension of that body’ (p. 80). Thus she asserts the movie ‘offers an alternative mythology to the ... prosthesis model popularized [in part] by McLuhan’ (p. 83). Indeed it does; however, it should be noted that this popularized model is also a common misreading of McLuhan. I would counter that *Videodrome*’s new media mythology effectively elaborates McLuhan’s central thesis, which is that media not only extend (and amputate) our senses, but while doing so, simultaneously reshape sense ratios and patterns of perception, not to mention social relations. In light of contemporary biomediation theory, Richard Cavell has further expounded McLuhan’s thesis to suggest that our subjectivities are not located in the autonomous hierarchal personhood of self, but bleed into our media while those media bleed back into us.

Just as bodies merge with media, so does digital video form a symbiotic relationship with celluloid, which had become evident by the time the industry finally ‘terminated’ VHS production in 2006. To illustrate the advent of post-cinematic spectatorship, Benson-Allott makes instructive use of *Grindhouse* (Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2007) as a modular narrative intended to reshape and recombine in the different viewing platforms of cinema, DVD, and Blu-ray. Probing deeper into *Grindhouse*’s distribution and production strategies reveals that theatrical releases have become little more than expensive box-office trailers targeted to home viewers. So, too, has damaged and degraded celluloid become a (special) effect of cinema. In its restaging of these and other effects – both analog and digital – *Grindhouse* aspires to an aura of what she calls ‘cinematicity’. This movie’s cinematicity, in particular, discloses the ‘simulacral heart of
cinema [and] ... subverts the cinema’s phantasmatic status as original’ (pp. 161, 165). Cinema persists to haunt the post-cinematic age, she argues, but it is not cinema that we mourn so much as medium specificity in this era of digital convergence.

Several strains of thought that were opened in these chapters are revisited in her final one, which explores the industry’s present strategies to combat the interminable issue of piracy, today’s most popular form of movie downloading. Expanding on the aforementioned premise that movies can stigmatize through their content, Benson-Allott isolates the ‘faux footage’ horror sub-genre as a conveyor of an industrial tactic to breed spectatorial paranoia about orphaned media. Twenty-first century faux footage such as Quarantine (John Erick Dowdle, 2008) and Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2007) are distinguished from early ‘found footage’ forerunners like Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) by their absence of metacinematic framing stories. Beginning innocently and ending abruptly with the violent death of the cameraperson, faux footage mystifies the original filmmaker’s intentions and arouses anxiety about watching content obtained through illicit back channels.

This last chapter is the book’s most contentious and daring, to be sure. It may seem like a stretch to propose that these movies serve as the industry’s ‘weapon in a format war fought by copyright holders and pirates over e-spectatorship’, because piracy and digital distribution are nowhere represented in their content (p. 171). Even so, Benson-Allott’s argument stands as an exemplary model of film studies method. She maps the discourse of digital era piracy as it winds through the multivalent dimensions of blogs, ‘hactivist’ polemics, community guidelines of P2P services, NET act and DMCA legislation, MPAA lobbying and anti-piracy ads, as well as studios’ production, distribution, and marketing strategies. Indeed, her approach is akin to the cultural studies practice of radical contextualization and articulation of power relations.

Paranormal Activity is a case in point. Consider Paramount’s decision against a big-budget repackaging of the original upon deducing something intrinsically horrific in the low-budget, found footage format; Spielberg’s intervention into the ending – making it more sudden and terrifying; the limited-release marketing campaign – encouraging younger demographics online to ‘Demand It’ in their neighborhood; and the pirated circulation of the pre-Paramount cut – serendipitously reinforcing the uncanny doubleness of the format within the cultural imaginary. Taken together, such paratext demonstrates the lines through which the format war over e-spectatorship may be channelled into the movie-text itself. Additionally, Benson-Allott’s nuanced close reading of faux footage’s formal style occasions a revision of Christian Metz’s theorization of primary and secondary identification. She observes:

The spectator's identification with the diegetic camera and cameraperson exposes her to the physical threats that menace her surrogates in these movies in a way that conventional slasher cinematography does not.
However, faux footage horror movies invite their spectators to become – or rather to acknowledge that they are – part of a precarious and defenceless mechanical apparatus. (p. 192)

The violent and abrupt endings common to the genre violate the spectator in their very act of watching and engender an ambivalent paranoia toward the apparatus – that the apparatus is unauthorized, unsafe, and the stream can be cut at any moment.

Benson-Allott’s rich, multi-layered work is packed with such case studies and compelling inroads that pave the way forward for an expanded apparatus theory. The apparatus, which is contingent upon technology, exhibition space, and socio-cultural milieu, distinctly shapes the formal style of the texts themselves as well as the political polemics infused therein. In effect, Benson-Allott’s argument is an elegant working through of Vivian Sobchack’s proposition that ‘seeing images mediated and made visible by technological vision … enables us to not only see technological images, but also to see technologically’ (quoted on p. 94). Vision, here, is socialized; platforms interpellate the viewer in a historically specific manner, inducing patterns of formal style that dictate what and how we see – processes basic to identity formation.

While her theory inspires several new concepts and directions for further exploration, the book’s most generative contribution is its exemplary method. If it’s true that the art of close reading has been relegated to the cloistered study of aesthetics and auteurs, Benson-Allott reinstates it to its rightful place by means of historically embedded, keen textual analysis. Readers should be left with little doubt that the historicity of platform is decipherable in acute audio-visual details, and that it is precisely such details that court, agitate, and interpellate the viewing subject. In further expanding upon these readings with theory, Benson-Allott is omnivorous and non-partisan. Skillfully deploying Sobchack and phenomenology for Videodrome, Žižek and psychoanalysis for The Ring, and Deleuze and simulacrum for Grindhouse, she selects the theories best suited to her subject rather than squeezing her argument through one or two theoretical frames. So it is that this book succeeds in teaching film theory alongside film history as it opens new horizons for thinking video spectatorship. An indispensable film history text for film and media scholars, it will also prove useful to graduates and advanced undergraduates, who will benefit from Allott’s model of substantiating connections between theory, history, and text. Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens is as timely as it is thorough, as crafty with its methods as it is challenging in its arguments.

**Brent Strang**  
Stony Brook University, New York  
[email: brent.strang@stonybrook.edu]

Erkki Huhtamo has produced his magnum opus with *Illusions in Motion: Media Archeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*. Almost 450 pages, and more than a decade in the making, this volume documents the shifting panoramic formats that characterized popular visual culture over the 19th century. Its hundreds of images and meticulous references reflect Huhtamo’s unprecedented primary research and his relationships with an international network of panorama enthusiasts and scholars. Presenting many examples that have not been discussed until now, Huhtamo offers a revisionary history of the panorama as a hybrid, mutable, and moving-image medium. He attends to the panorama’s material and historical specificity, reproducing engravings and photographs and depicting many artifacts from his own extensive collection. But, he also addresses the panorama as a broader discursive formation, drawing on printed ‘ephemera’ and written accounts – broadsides, popular press, letters, and novels. The book will be immediately canonical for scholars of visual culture, cinema, and media studies, and will also be valuable to scholars of literature, American studies, and 19th-century history.

*Illusions*’ 12 chapters follow a roughly historical trajectory. Huhtamo introduces the format in chapter one, discusses its ‘incubation’ in chapter two, and traces stages of its development in chapters three (on ‘the peristerphic panorama’), six (on British and American ‘panoramania’), and ten (the ‘medium’s final fanfares’). In the interleaving chapters, he considers the panorama’s relationship with other media and modes of exhibition: theater, the diorama, the magic lantern, and the tradition of lectures and attractions. Chapter eleven expands to consider the panorama’s cultural impacts – especially how it shaped literary and religious imaginations in the 19th century. The final chapter briefly concludes by situating this history of the panorama within the broader emergence of media culture over the 19th century, arguing that media is best understood through ‘complex discursive
exchanges’ and suggesting areas of future research (such as ‘the economic and legal ramifications of showmanship’) (pp. 366, 361).

Huhtamo’s emphasis on the moving panorama contests the emphasis that other accounts have placed on the wrap-around, panoramic paintings installed in the early 19th century in urban centers such as London and Paris (Comment, 1999; Oettermann, 1997; Oleksijczuk, 2011). The more influential panoramic formats, Huhtamo argues, were hybrid and intermedial variations that circulated much more broadly, interwoven with related spectacles such as optical toys, cabinet viewers, dioramas, theatrical performances, and magic lantern shows. Rather than addressing the panorama as a static, art-historical object, Huhtamo describes panoramic representation as a cultural practice. He spends less time discussing the ‘content’ of particular panoramic images or the experience of panoramic spectators, and more time discussing details of production and exhibition. For example, chapter seven delves into the biography of Albert Smith, a ‘panorama exhibiter’ who performed narratives of adventure in front of scrolling illustrations (pp. 215–237).

Wary of how ‘critics’ interpretations easily start leading their own lives, and get superimposed on the past’, Huhtamo endeavors to treat the panorama ‘as a complex and contradictory token of its own time’ (pp. 333, 18). He eschews overarching claims or ‘sweeping parallels’ that would approach the panorama as ‘an ahistorical entity, a projection from the future, or an anticipation of things to come’ (pp. 333, 18). Refuting a contemporary tendency to emphasize the panorama’s verisimilitude as a link with subsequent cinematic and digital media, he argues that ‘the moving panorama was primarily a storytelling medium, and only secondarily an illusionistic and immersive experience’ (p. 363). This analysis implicitly resists Anne Friedberg’s (1994) theorization of how the panorama began to construct the ‘virtual, mobilized gaze’ of cinema and Oliver Grau’s (2003) genealogy of virtual reality from panoramic ‘illusion’ to digital ‘immersion’. In the book’s introduction and conclusion, however, Huhtamo suggests that his re-evaluation of the panorama bears particular relevance for emergent forms of digital media. This may be explained by, or may help explain, this book’s appearance in the Leonardo series at MIT Press, which skews toward an emphasis on digital aesthetics.

As its subtitle makes plain, Huhtamo understands his approach as that of ‘media archeology’; and throughout the book he refers to ‘the media archeologist’ as an imagined proxy for his point of view. Though media archeology currently names a concatenation of disparate methodologies and theoretical allegiances, Huhtamo has been a primary voice in defining it as a field of media studies; one important function of this book is to solidify his definition through demonstration. Huhtamo’s interest in ‘discursive “transfigurations”’ draws on Michel Foucault’s (2010[1972]) ‘archeology’ of discourse and Friedrich Kittler’s (1990) analysis of ‘discourse networks’; but he eschews Foucault’s ‘large-scale’ theorizations as well as the kinds of infrastructural analysis pursued in Kittler’s lineage (by Wolfgang Ernst,
2012, for example) (p. 17). Instead, Huhtamo identifies most strongly with ‘Anglo-American cultural studies’ in focusing on how media is shaped by ‘humans’ and ‘their interactions’ (p. 17).

Huhtamo argues that the moving panorama is ‘ideally suited for a media archeological investigation’ because it constitutes a ‘missing medium’ in the history of media studies, a ‘huge lacuna’ (p. 16). He claims that ‘media archeology corrects our understanding of the past by excavating lacunas in shared knowledge’; it is, for him, ‘a way to penetrate beyond accepted historical narratives, uncovering omissions, gaps, and silences’ (pp. xviii, 16). Poststructuralist and feminist perspectives might resist such metaphors, insisting that lacunae are not waiting to be exposed, mined, or filled; if blind spots are produced by whatever way we view the past from the present, then to fill an apparent gap might not be to correct or complete the historical record as much as to produce a different narrative with shifted omissions and silences.

One area of 19th-century visual culture that Huhtamo largely passes over is photography. Given the book’s impressive coverage, this is not a fault, but a notable choice. In the several pages on this topic, Huhtamo frames the relationship between panoramas and photographs through questions of authenticity and indexicality, pointing out how photographic images supported the production of panoramas and their claims of verisimilitude. He subsumes photography within a larger discussion of the relationship between the panorama and the magic lantern, suggesting that photography found its integration with the panorama in the glass photographs of sliding magic lantern slides. Other scholars have approached this intersection differently, exploring how tensions between the still and the moving or the singular and the multiple – tensions later engaged by cinema and digital media – already appear in the relationship between panorama and photograph (Belisle, 2013; Rodowick, 2007; Sandweiss, 2002; Streitberger, 2013).

Huhtamo describes his particular style of media archeology as ‘researching the life of “topoi”’, defining topoi as ‘building blocks of cultural traditions’ that ‘manifest both continuities and discontinuities and transformations in the transmission of ideas’ (p. 16). Reading the panorama as a topos, he analyzes it as an unstable and yet ‘persistent cultural formula that appears, disappears, and reappears, gaining ever-new meanings in the process’ (p. 15). He traces his ‘topos approach’ from structuralist literary theory, and admits it is haunted by Jungian ideas of archetypes that, at worst, posit a cultural, collective unconscious. On the other hand, he also cites a precedent which has been receiving growing scholarly interest and admiration: Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas, which visually grouped art historical images to suggest patterns against conventional periodizations (Huhtamo, 2011; Michaud, 2004).

The encyclopedic structure of Illusions suggests an affinity with the scholarly atlas, an almost scientific collection of specimens. A challenge of this approach, and of a project with such scope, is that the task of presenting information and identifying connections can overtake explicit argumentation.
The existence of a pattern can appear as the point, obscuring specific critical contexts and cultural implications that shift with each example. Given Huhtamo’s enviable expertise, it is hard not to wish he had engaged more directly with existing scholarship on the panorama. Major theoretical claims by figures such as Walter Benjamin, Wolfgang Shivelbush, Anne Friedberg, and Jonathan Crary make only the smallest cameo appearances, and fleeting mentions could have been expanded into important interventions.

Huhtamo turns away from speculative critique to offer his readers, instead, painstaking research. If Illusions is in some ways limited by being written by the panorama’s biggest fan and collector – a confessed ‘panoramaniac’ – it also benefits from this, produced as a prodigious labor of love. Huhtamo has replaced a relative silence on the moving panorama with a strong statement that realigns dominant narratives about the history of visual culture and demonstrates a powerful methodology for cinema and media studies. It will stand as a lasting contribution and inexhaustible source for future scholarship. Though Huhtamo might prefer if more scholars joined him to unearth primary sources, many will find rich material to ‘excavate’ within these pages.

References


Brooke Belisle
Stony Brook University, NY
[email: brooke.belisle@stonybrook.edu]