

McLuhan's Grammatical Theology¹

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ABSTRACT This article offers one more assessment of the work of Marshall McLuhan, using his recently published dissertation on the trivium as a window for reading his later, more media-focused works. Seeing McLuhan as a grammatical theologian casts fresh light on several well-known themes in his thought: his encyclopedic method with its surrealist juxtapositions, his insistence on medium specificity, his trouble with mathematics, his love of conceptual incommensurabilities, and, above all, his suppression of dialectic as a mode of thought and argument. In terms of the trivium, McLuhan was a grammarian in his intellectual commitments and a rhetorician in his practical performances, but he was never a dialectician.

KEYWORDS McLuhan; Philosophy; Rhetoric

RÉSUMÉ Cet article offre une évaluation de plus de l'œuvre de Marshall McLuhan, utilisant sa thèse récemment publiée sur le trivium (grammaire, rhétorique, dialectique) pour interpréter ses travaux ultérieurs davantage axés sur les médias. En le percevant comme un théologien grammatical, on envisage sous un autre angle plusieurs thèmes bien connus de sa pensée : sa méthode encyclopédique avec ses juxtapositions surréalistes, son insistance sur les particularités de chaque média, ses difficultés avec les mathématiques, son amour pour les incommensurabilités conceptuelles et, surtout, sa suppression de la dialectique comme mode de pensée et d'argumentation. Par rapport au trivium, McLuhan était un grammairien dans ses engagements intellectuels et un rhétoricien dans ses jeux d'interprète, mais il n'était aucunement dialecticien.

MOTS CLÉS McLuhan; Philosophie; Rhétorique

“Dialektik offenbart vielmehr jedes Bild als Schrift.”
[Dialectic, on the contrary, reveals every image as writing.]
Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2006)

The project of “re-reading McLuhan” presents us with a classic hermeneutic problem. It is hard to know even where to begin. Should we treat McLuhan as a person or as a whole climate of opinion—“macluhanisme,” as the French called it? Should we focus on the texts he authored or co-authored, the effect he had on the avant-garde

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arts in the 1960s and 1970s, or his media profile as an intellectual celebrity? Shall we grant him the reverence and careful reading he rarely granted to other scholars? Should we even think of him as a scholar or media theorist at all, or as something else altogether?

I remain puzzled by these questions and by the multiple McLuhans in circulation at this conference and elsewhere. McLuhan has been read in many ways: as the English-professor author of *The Mechanical Bride* (1951b), morally critical of mass culture in the spirit of his Cambridge teacher F. R. Leavis; as a Canadian techno-determinist historian and philosopher of media in the footsteps of Innis; as a modernist literary critic in the spirit of Joyce, Pound, and Eliot; as an intellectual surfer/creator of 1960s effervescence; as the first intellectual to discuss TV on TV; as a Catholic humanist critic of modern (print) culture; or as a countercultural prophet of cyberspace in the spirit of *Wired* magazine or its precursor, Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*. Some see him as a fellow traveller of poststructuralism or the Frankfurt School or place him in what he called "the Canadian condition of low-profile identity and multiple borders" (McLuhan, 1977, p. 248). Others, less favourably, see him as a sell-out to consumer society, as British cultural studies has long complained. Hans Magnus Enzensberger bluntly (and unoriginally) called McLuhan a "charlatan," (1970, p. 29) while also, as is usual, borrowing a lot from him.

This paper offers one take on the problem of reading McLuhan. Though it tries to engage some of the vast wealth of scholarship around McLuhan, it remains a tentative and somewhat personal assessment, one North American media theorist reading another and trying to sort out the affinities and disturbances. Those who have no time to write books, as McLuhan knew well, write papers; clearly much more could be said!

Specifically, I want to add one more McLuhan to the mix, based on a reading of his recently published 1943 dissertation and its resonance for the rest of his work. Re-reading can retroactively enrich texts, and McLuhan's dissertation, long in *samizdat* circulation (I first read it in 2000), provides us with tools to understand and criticize his more famous media-focused later work. The later work helps explain the earlier work and vice versa. "Is it not significant that the Centre for Culture and Technology is behind the Medieval Centre [at the University of Toronto]?" asked McLuhan in 1973 (Gordon, 1997, p. 323). In his Cambridge dissertation, we have a work on which he laboured for years, in contrast with the increasingly rapid production of his later work (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962, famously having been written in one month). McLuhan's work of the 1940s and 1950s is undoubtedly more substantial as scholarship than that of the 1960s and 1970s, and his dissertation forms much of the intellectual capital on which he drew for the rest of his career, though often only implicitly. To be fair, some commentators argue that his later work is best understood not as scholarship or theory. Theall (2001) sees it as an attempt at an aesthetic synthesis in the spirit of James Joyce, and Cavell (2002) as an intervention into the avant-garde art world. In any case, his dissertation provides an answer to his question of 1973 and the basis of the ever-ripe pun, the "media" that sits at the heart of "mediaeval."

McLuhan's Cambridge dissertation officially concerns the English Renaissance satirist Thomas Nashe but actually covers the history of the trivium from antiquity to

the Renaissance. The study is a history of European education that traces the mutual influence and rivalry among grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic as modes of interpretation, creation, and conception from Plato to Nashe. It is a partisan history narrated from the special point of view of grammar (McLuhan, 2006). McLuhan's sympathies for grammar provide suggestive foreshadowing of some of his most innovative—and perhaps most annoying—habits of mind as a student of media and interpreter of culture, and in this paper I want to argue that he is most fruitfully understood as a grammatical theologian in the spirit of St. Augustine or Erasmus. In one bid to capture the central theme of McLuhan's work, Gordon argues, “[T]he analogical method of the ancient grammarians [w]as the unifying element of his own life's work” (1997, p. 305). Seeing him as a grammatical theologian is a more pointed version of the traditional understanding of McLuhan as a Catholic humanist, but it also clarifies his take on language and his vision of media analysis, his systematic blurring of the logical and the analogical, his fondness for arresting assertions (the pun is intended), and above all his repression of dialectical thinking,

Intellectual historians always wrestle with continuity and periodization in the development of thinkers. We have, for instance, the “earlier” and “later” Marx, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Foucault, or Kittler, sometimes with one or more middle periods added for good measure. McLuhan's opus can be carved into a wildly diverse range of periods, but I would follow other scholars in arguing for a certain continuity in style and method throughout his career, starting at least (and certainly before) with the dissertation. In an early paper on Chesterton, McLuhan suggested that “philosophy and art have been revitalised by the study of medieval achievements” (1936, p. 457). McLuhan was persistently interested in revising the dissertation for publication, even late in his life, and the trivium made an appearance in his posthumous *The Laws of Media* (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988). It is not correct, I argue, to regard his dissertation as a youthful excrescence; rather, it launches a program he followed more-or-less faithfully (often perhaps less) during the rest of his life. The later McLuhan showed a number of habits of mind that could be read variously—as a genuine revolutionary thinker, as savvy career management, as delight in showmanship, as willing adaptation to the sound-bite medium of television, as the genius of the self-aware court jester or the irresponsibility of the dazzling sophist—but his dissertation provides a handy device for reading his career: the trivium.

For a refresher on the trivium, there is no better guide than McLuhan himself. Grammar, the art of interpretation in general, flourishes best in concert with rhetoric, whose task is the production of an eloquence that is inseparable from political and ethical virtue, and with dialectic, whose task is theoretical argumentation and explication. Grammar means a literary, encyclopedic, liberal arts education, as in the term “grammar school.” In modernity, grammar lost its glamour (the two words have the same root) and became a set of often pedantic rules of permissible language use, but in classical antiquity, *grammatikē* meant letters, the art of literature. Ancient grammarians took grammar to be the art of interpretation in general, extending beyond literature to the universe, the book of nature, itself. To grammarians, a relation is “held to exist between the order of speech and language and the order of nature” (McLuhan,

2006, p. 21). For the Stoics, natural philosophy (later known as physics) was a sort of grammar to be accessed by linguistic categories and signatures. Pliny's *Natural History* is probably the chief exhibit of a Stoic grammatical reading of nature, and Saint Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* is the chief among the works of the church fathers as a grammatical reading of scripture. Stoic and patristic thinkers converged on the idea of a cosmic *logos* that informed everything and that could be best read allegorically. As McLuhan summarized: "Grammar is the art of gathering and interpreting congruous instances, whether phenomenal or textual" (McLuhan, 2006, p. 57 n. 45). Grammarians are alchemists and encyclopedists, confident in their mandate to learn and study everything in terms of the grammatical forms of an underlying language (2006). Since nature is a language, the liberal arts can explicate nature (2006). Grammar is the royal road to reading both scripture and the book of nature. Grammarians were always media scholars without knowing it, and McLuhan did not know this yet in 1943, though we do now.

The central drama of the dissertation is that of overweening dialectic repeatedly threatening to engulf and destroy grammar. The dialectical onslaught comes in waves—neo-Platonism, Scholasticism, Cartesianism. The trivium became trivial only because dialectic separated itself from its connection with the other liberal arts. The historical high point of dialectical hubris, for McLuhan, came with Descartes and Pascal, whose mathematics continue the know-nothing hostility toward the encyclopedic liberal arts that was found in medieval argumentation. Descartes and Pascal figure as villains in contrast with Erasmus and Francis Bacon, who more-or-less reincarnate for McLuhan the patristic and Stoic grammatical interest in sacred text and natural history, respectively. He does not address other kinds of dialectic here (Hegelian-Marxist and deconstructive), but they fall under his critique. (McLuhan studied both Hegel and Derrida in the late 1970s and seems to have understood the latter better than the former; on Hegelian themes in McLuhan, see Mersch, 2006.)

As a grammatical theologian, McLuhan is closer to Erasmus than Bacon in his dissertation's consistently patristic hermeneutic (but later, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Bacon plays a starring role). The text and the world are to be read analogically in quest of their underlying *logos*. The dissertation is also a defence of the intellectual worth and continuity of the Middle Ages, and McLuhan relies heavily on French Catholic humanists for his arguments, especially Étienne Gilson, his future colleague at the University of Toronto, who earns a fulsome note of gratitude for returning "us to the camp of ancient grammatological analogists" (McLuhan, 2006, p. 36). "It is no longer possible to skip from antiquity to the Renaissance in discussing the origins of the modern world" (p. 58), McLuhan wrote. "The Renaissance ... is no leap backward over the centuries to Cicero, but the outcome of a continuous tradition" (p. 68).

If his dissertation linked antiquity and the Renaissance via the Middle Ages, many of McLuhan's 1950s essays up to *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) sought to link the moderns and the medievals. In a very suggestive 1951 essay on the "Joyce-Aquinas axis," McLuhan argues that Saint Thomas' mode was "discontinuous or cubist." It operated by "abrupt juxtaposition of diverse views of the same problem," providing "a total intellectual history ... in a single view" (McLuhan, 1951a, p. 3). By seeing Aquinas as a

cubist, McLuhan builds a bridge to the thirteenth century. The discontinuous landscapes and unmotivated juxtapositions of modernist literature, thought, painting, cinema, and physics were not a radical break with tradition, but trailed clouds of grammatical glory. McLuhan was a medieval modernist, both in his ultimate confidence that things are intelligible and in his practice of argument by juxtaposition and analogy, and even more, in his theory of media without mediation and metaphors without internal dynamism.

The *Nashe* (McLuhan, 2006) has a number of legacies for McLuhan's work on media and culture, of which I will examine six.

First, McLuhan was a magpie encyclopedist who loved to collect shiny intellectual objects. The very genre of encyclopedia (i.e., an encompassing learning) owed much to the grammatical liberal arts, and it always had a surrealistic face since it depends upon the aggregation of knowledge in abrupt juxtapositions, as Jorge Luis Borges famously noted. (Alphabetical order, as we did not need McLuhan to tell us, is a cubist mode of organizing knowledge.) McLuhan's interest in preposterous classifications and striking juxtapositions owes as much to his ancient encyclopedism as to his surrealist modernism. This capacious attitude toward knowledge and joy in miscellanies are among his most important legacies to media studies. If a medium can be defined as any fabrication, then our field is as big as Google. It is almost a mark of tribal identity for media scholars today to seek out and then transfigure obscure knowledge into higher relevance, and it is a style perfected by McLuhan.

Second, 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 (Schüttpehl, 2002). When Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, wrote that "the fundamental idea of communication is that of the transmission of messages" (1954, p. 104), he provided the perfect foil for McLuhan. McLuhan sought to create a vision of communication based not on transporting content but moving souls. The arts, not telecommunications, provided the practical basis for his thinking about media (Cavell, 2002; Theall, 2001). He loved the idea found in Pound, Eliot, and other modernists that the informational content of a work of art—like the meat the burglar gives to the watchdog, in Eliot's famous line—is a distraction from the real work of transforming perception. Communication was the creation of experiential effects, not the conveyance of signals.

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. Though his notion of synaesthesia sometimes flirted with the hope for some higher, noetic synthesis of all input that might shuck off its erstwhile sensible material, one of his greatest contributions to media theory was the grammatical insight that embodiment matters radically. Messages and people alike are incarnate beings. In this insistence, I would read McLuhan as a dissident against his later *Wired*

magazine avatar as the seer of all things cyberspace. To his credit, McLuhan had an acute sense for the tragic aspect of media prosthetics, the amputation that accompanies every extension. In the 1970s he regularly railed against the “angelism” and “gnosticism” he found in thinkers, even Teilhard de Chardin, who wanted to transform the body and its finitude into some kind of electrical or pharmaceutical transcendence. The state of being “discarnate” he found a disaster, whether for messages or human beings (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 543). There was no such thing as a message without a medium. The medium, as one should say at least once in every paper on McLuhan, was the message. A sense for embodied groundedness was one salutary aspect of his grammatical vision, although it was of course in constant tension with some of his own more psychedelic or Pentecostal celebrations of the electrified body, which one is tempted to read as camouflage throw-away lines or ventriloquial mimicry of the views he was mocking. In the end, one never can tell his position, for reasons I will explore in conclusion.

Third, McLuhan wanted to encompass nature and culture, science and humanities equally in his media grammars, but he ran aground on mathematics. Instead of blaming Descartes and Pascal for deracinating the tradition, he might have tried harder to see why calculus became the grammar in which the modern book of nature was written. But his exclusively literary understanding of grammar left him out of step, which is twinned with his shunning of dialectic, despite his warm endorsement of scientific modes of thinking, or at least of metaphors ransacked from such fields as evolutionary biology, quantum mechanics, and neurology. His insistence on the continuity of the grammatical tradition missed its rupture into a very different kind of thinking, leaving him shipwrecked on the postwar “two cultures” problem of the sciences and humanities. In fairness, he certainly sought both to bridge and to diagnose this split, but his lack of mathematics obstructed full reconciliation and prevented the more relativized or pragmatic view of scientific inquiry available to the practitioner. Further, he often portrayed his research in classic scientific terms. His methodological disclaimer in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* gives the standard line of postwar positivism: “Needless to say, the ‘is,’ rather than the ‘ought,’ of all these developments, is alone being discussed. Diagnosis and description must precede valuation and therapy” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 7). We should ask to what extent this is mere posturing, but there is no doubt that McLuhan had scientific ambitions that were ultimately vain without mathematical (dialectical) tools. He stole from science and gave to the arts.

Fourth, McLuhan was fond of positions of radical incommensurability (such as “oral man” versus “typographic man”). It is perhaps a stretch to see this habit as stemming from his grammatical theology, but grammar is at least an account of how things fit into non-overlapping boxes. Thanks to his long interest in Gestalt psychology and his reading of the posthumously published linguistics of Benjamin Lee Whorf as well, his notion of “media grammars” provided him, as he wrote to Walter Ong, with a way to see things as “separate closed systems” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 285). For McLuhan, the world was arranged into underlying orders, and you either understood it or did not. Most of his most provocative and also most annoying statements are unargued assertions whose insupportability is instantly obvious. “The goose quill

put an end to talk,” for instance (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 48). One could collect 1001 such claims from McLuhan’s writings, but he would instantly reply that each was only a “probe,” a foray in a larger attempt to jostle thought into a greater synthesis. Unlike most scholars who fuss over the details and leave the big picture to emerge by itself, McLuhan fussed about the whole and burned through details as nothing but fuel for thought. Truth for him was in the constellation (or “galaxy”), not in the integrity of the parts.

In my view, McLuhan was not primarily a student of the senses, but rather of *noesis*, that is, of how the senses analogically filter the universe into one whole of intellection. (For a helpful treatment of universal analogy that McLuhan used in McLuhan, 2006, see Gilson, 1940). He was closest, here, to Aquinas, whom he once claimed along with G. K. Chesterton as his two most important intellectual influences (Gordon, 1997). In a letter to Ezra Pound, he said, “[T]he poetic process was nothing else than the process of cognition ... sensation itself was imitation ... the first stage of apprehension is already poetic” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, pp. 228-229). Note the definite articles: there is one poetic and cognitive process. More emphatically, McLuhan wrote in 1971: “One of the advantages of being a Catholic is that it confers a complete intellectual freedom to examine any and all phenomena with the absolute assurance of their intelligibility” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 440). Here you see a characteristic mixture for McLuhan: first, encyclopedism (“any and all phenomena”); second, a self-confidence that sometimes brimmed to the point of arrogance (“absolute assurance”); and third, noetic theology (“intelligibility”). It is a heady potion and inspiring in its grandeur. It is also almost expressly designed to alarm scholarly scruples. McLuhan will not help much if you are interested in nuance, contingency, history, uncertainty, and incongruity—that is, if you cannot shake off your nominalist conscience. (The medieval tradition of nominalism was in McLuhan’s scheme one of those dialectical revolts against grammar.)

Putting it differently, McLuhan had a digital understanding of understanding. You either got it or did not. Like Freud, McLuhan had a theory of denial, an account of why people would reject his theory. In neither thinker was this theory very flattering to the sceptic. McLuhan’s critics were “somnambulists,” mesmerized by the invisible environment. Each medium has an invisibility cloak that hypnotizes its users—a fact he calls “the impercipience of the ubiquitous” in his dissertation (McLuhan, 2006, p. 68), nicely stating one of his lifelong themes. In a letter he wondered,

Why have men never considered the consequences of their own artefacts upon their modes of self awareness? I have devoted several books to this subject. There is a deep-seated repugnance in the human breast against understanding the processes in which we are involved. Such understanding involves far too much responsibility for our actions. (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 370)

Christianity, in contrast, he called “awareness of process.” So there was a kind of ethical-religious urgency in exposing the media grammars through which we absent-mindedly (“abcdmindedly,” he would say, borrowing from *Finnegans Wake*) swim, a duty of wakefulness about our environment, even if this urgency placed McLuhan

(again like Freud) in the self-flattering position of being the prophet whose message humanity defies. McLuhan's notion that "'sin' might be defined as the lack of 'awareness'" (Gordon, 1997, p. 220) conveniently made hipness into a religious duty. (Note McLuhan's self-portrait as the first thinker ever to consider how artifacts affect consciousness, heroically swimming against the tide of human repugnance.)

McLuhan could be quite opportunistic in claiming breakdowns of comprehension. His critics just did not "understand." To *The Listener*, for instance, he complained that Jonathan "Miller cannot even begin to disagree with me, if he cannot understand the reasons I have given ..." (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 442; that McLuhan had reason to be exasperated with Miller I leave to the side here). It was never McLuhan's fault; other people just refused to see. Deliberation did not matter; everything depended on your starting assumptions. McLuhan consistently treated disagreement as a failure of vision rather than as an invitation to argument. He defied the scholarly dictum that the truth ("*der liebe Gott*" or "the devil," depending on which quotation you prefer) was in the details.

Fifth (and this will be my most sustained point), McLuhan suppressed dialectic. I mean this broadly, in the sense of his dissertation: dialectic as conceptual argumentation. In this sense, deconstruction, for instance, would be a kind of dialectic (even though in a more narrow sense, deconstruction can be understood an alternative to dialectic). Dialectic means logical analysis. But McLuhan, like his hero Erasmus, thought folly praiseworthy. He rarely stooped to explicate, giving his prose in *Understanding Media* (1964) and afterward the rapid-fire quality of accumulating assertions. The intellectual action for McLuhan took place off-line, off the page, in the noetic apprehension of the thinker who synthesized perceptions into a total Gestalt.

It is not going too far to see in McLuhan a practice of dialectic at a standstill, *Dialektik im Stillstand*, one of the many ways in which he had an uncanny resemblance to Walter Benjamin. As is well known, the two thinkers share a great deal: interest in allegory and intoxication (*Rausch*), fascination for the link of the optical and the "haptic" or tactile, the project of historicizing modernism into connection with older moments (for McLuhan, the Middle Ages, for Benjamin, the *Trauerspiel* of the seventeenth century), praise of the mimetic faculty, and the tactic of freezing intellection into epiphanies (McLuhan) or profane illuminations (Benjamin). Both owed much to surrealism and to the filmic montage of Eisenstein (on similarities between Benjamin and McLuhan, see Cavell, 2002, and Stamps, 1995). What McLuhan said could apply to Benjamin's thinking about allegory: "The pursuit of psychological order in the midst of a material and political chaos is of the essence of grammatica. Thus, modern symbolism in art and literature corresponds to ancient allegory" (McLuhan, 2006, p. xi).

But their differences are just as important. For McLuhan, allegory is a transcendental grammatical-alchemical interpretation of the cosmic *logos* achieved in ecstatic contemplation; for Benjamin, allegory is a melancholy meditation on the skull by a survivor whose alchemy always stops short at lead. McLuhan has a cathedral; Benjamin has the ruins.

Their political visions are also strikingly distinct. Benjamin was a quirky Marxist, and McLuhan a quirky reactionary. McLuhan resembles the Frankfurt School as fellow

critics of mid-century mass culture, as Judith Stamps (1995) illuminatingly shows. But such a link does not make McLuhan into any kind of leftist—his views on gender, family, and modernity show him to be a clear man of the right. (For McLuhan's views on gender, see Bergermann, 2008.) Further, to share ground with the Frankfurt School is not necessarily to be on the left. Its critique of industrialized culture, as generations of cultural studies scholars have argued, can be taken as elitist and anti-democratic rather than progressive, despite their Marxist philosophy. For another thing, the affinities between McLuhan and Benjamin owe in part to their common interests in the right-wing critique of modernity, “reactionary modernism,” as Herf (1986) calls it. (We sometimes forget that critical theory can be plied by the right as well as the left.) Benjamin's messianic Marxism drew on right-wing thinkers such as Ernst Jünger, Ludwig Klages, and Carl Schmitt. McLuhan's critique of modernity likewise drew on—I apologize for the ugly but accurate word—fascist thinkers such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound and cultural conservatives such as Chesterton and the Southern Agrarians (e.g., McLuhan, 1947).

Stamps also pushes Benjamin too close to Adorno (as a negative dialectician) and McLuhan too close to Innis (as a historical materialist in love with oral dialogue), in my view. To be sure, Adorno was Benjamin's greatest disciple, and Benjamin's lasting influence can be seen in great abundance in Adorno's (1997) last work, *Aesthetic Theory*. On the other hand, they had a bitter disagreement in the 1930s—precisely on the question of dialectic. Adorno berated Benjamin for a compositional and intellectual practice that lacked “dialectical mediation” but presented a montage of constellated phenomena for critical uptake (Anderson, 1977). McLuhan shares with Benjamin a fascination with frozen dialectics, but Adorno, who as an essentially musical mind was one of the most time-based thinkers of the twentieth century and who thought any cessation of dialectic a potential resignation to things as they are, would be a clear antipode for McLuhan in many respects. As Stamps uses it, “dialectic” means both critical historical analysis and “conversational openness,” but the less friendly but more precise sense of conceptual argumentation and specification was foreign to McLuhan. Publication of the *Nashe* dissertation (McLuhan, 2006) clarifies McLuhan's distance from Innis on this point and shows why he was not a dialectician. Innis may have loved the give-and-take of dialogue in oral culture, but McLuhan loved the decentred immersive environment of acoustic space. Innis was about winnowing truth through talk; McLuhan was about the non-verbal experience of implosion.

McLuhan, as Richard Cavell (2002) convincingly shows, was a thinker of space, not of time. If Benjamin flirted with a “cessation of happening,” it was always dialectical in the end, a point of arrest in a broader philosophy of history. But McLuhan was never a dialectical thinker. He looked for the still point of the turning world, the point of intersection of time and eternity. McLuhan sought timelessness; Benjamin sought timefulness. Benjamin was interested in the ripeness of historical time, its pregnant expectancy of the Messiah or revolution (which may have been the same thing for him). McLuhan awaited—or tried to provoke—an experience that bypassed temporal process. He was a medieval modernist who was quite opposed to modern thought's obsession with time. He wanted another mode—the poetic (grammatical) process, in

which the totality is apprehended all at once. The artist, he said of James Joyce, has Daedalus' job of slaying "any movement of appetite within the labyrinth of cognition" (McLuhan, 1951a, p. 5). "The creative process [i]s the natural process of apprehension arrested and retraced" (p. 7). What we seek is "a moment not in time's covenant" (p. 9), a lovely phrase borrowed from Eliot's *Four Quartets*. And of course, the dialectical enemy lurks in wait: "[T]he Cartesian cries against cubist discontinuity have always been raised by those ignorant of analogy and equivocity" (p. 9).

McLuhan was a media theorist without a theory of (dialectical) mediation. He thought of media in terms of immediacy. Recent media histories written in the wake of Friedrich Kittler and Jacques Derrida always discover media as displaced (misplaced) writing. The *sola scriptura* of Kittler's *Aufschreibesysteme* (1985; see Winthrop-Young, 2000) or Derrida's incessant grammatological conversion of image and voice into writing are the two operations most exciting, in my view, in media history and theory during the past three decades. For McLuhan, in contrast, audiovisual media fit into his overall story in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964) as an alternative to—a rupture with—writing, not its radicalization. Audiovisual media are a return to a kind of acoustic space unmarked by graphic techniques rather than an extension of writing's old functions of recording, transmission, and organization. Put in terms of hopelessly crude but suggestive religious categories, McLuhan's intellectual Catholicism assures a noetic apprehension of the underlying *logos* that the Lutheran-tending Kittler or the Jewish-tending Derrida never have, see, or even desire thanks to their commitment to writing/écriture/scripture. The latter two carry on with the litter of letters unceasingly; McLuhan wants it all to come to arrest.

McLuhan's defiance of dialectic also provides, I believe, a key to sorting out his affinities with recent French thinkers. As Theall (2001) notes, the three main candidates are Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze. There is also a case to be made for Derrida, but for me their difference on the question of writing is decisive. Baudrillard is the most obvious but least interesting connection. His deadpan talent for delivering absolutely outrageous claims as if they were secret wisdom hitherto unknown to anyone else must have been directly styled on McLuhan. The link with Barthes is more telling. McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* (1951b) and Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) are both pioneering engagements with mass culture using the techniques of literary analysis, both scholars were co-founders of two of the earliest centres for the study of communication—in the case of McLuhan, the Ford Foundation Seminar on Culture and Communications (founded 1953), leading to The Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto (1963), and in the case of Barthes, the Centre d'Études des Communications de Masse (1960) in Paris, widely known as CECMAS—and both were editors of two of the most important postwar journals in this new interdisciplinary confluence, *Explorations* (McLuhan) and *Communications* (Barthes, 1972). Barthes' *S/Z* (1974) also suggestively resembles McLuhan's musings about the narcotic narcissism and erotic infatuation that can follow bodily extensions and amputations. In the end, however, I would vote for Deleuze as the recent French thinker McLuhan resembles in the most intriguing way. Not only are there approving citations to McLuhan in Deleuze's work, as there are in Baudrillard and Barthes, but Deleuze's

anti-dialectical assemblages and endlessly creative philosophical bricolage suggest a deep affinity in working method. Both Deleuze and McLuhan owe a lot to the improvisational ethic and hip demeanour of jazz; *Mille plateaux* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), after all, can be translated as “one thousand turntables.” Both wanted to provoke and prod fresh thinking rather than nail down empirical truth; both wrote maddeningly brilliant anti-texts.

Dialectics at a standstill are also found in McLuhan’s account of metaphor and the pun. Saussure, Freud, Lacan, and Ricoeur, among others, have taught us to see the pun as a slippage on the paradigmatic or syntagmatic axis, as a condensation or a displacement. For McLuhan, the pun is a *punctum*, a point, an unmoved mover, an axle, the still point of the turning world. The pun is (ec)static. In a letter to the analytic philosopher P. F. Strawson, McLuhan wrote that “acoustic space is a perfect sphere whose center is everywhere and whose margins are nowhere.” Not content to add another “omni” to the collection of theological attributes (omnidirectionality might take its place alongside omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence), he continued, “This, of course, is the character of a pun. The word is derived from *punctum*. The point about pun is that there is no point or fixed semantic space. The point is everywhere and its resonance extends to the verbal universe. ... The Catholic church was founded on a pun, very naturally” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 368; the specific pun in question, presumably, was the rock—*petra*—upon which Peter—*petros*—would found the church: see Matthew 16:18.). A pun for McLuhan is a point and not a vector. *Extra punctum nulla salus*, we might say.

McLuhan defies the structuralist dictum that every metaphorical assertion is also a negation. In metaphor, every “is” is also “is not,” says Ricoeur (1976) in a brilliant dialectical spirit. The power of metaphor is the contrapuntal tension of insight and impossibility. “My love is a red, red rose” means that my love is also obviously not a red, red rose. One ascends to understanding, in Ricoeur’s account, through the to-and-fro of assertion and negation. McLuhan’s metaphors stand still: he makes the assertion and leaves you hanging. He consistently resists supplying any clue about ontological qualification or specific pull-back from the overreaching claim. He is much more a builder of Gestalts than of arguments; he tries to get words to behave like images. (A picture famously cannot say “not.”) McLuhan is not particularly interested in the cunning of the negative.

In McLuhan, the metaphors often do not defer or refer to another kind of writing: they point away from history, toward the free vacant space of eternity or surrealistic poetic free-play or cognitive process. The noetic office of analogy in Thomist thought recurs amid McLuhan’s modernism. Instead of metaphor’s exchange of properties, you have an immediate perception of truth—not the density of matter in interaction, but the clarity of the material falling away. McLuhan renounces concepts (in favour of percepts) and dialectics (in favour of grammar). McLuhan is about immediate intuition—he wants to be Adam on the first morning every darn day after the other. He would cleanse the doors of perception: “[T]he prosaic is invariably the false appearance of things to fatigued intellect and jaded spirit” (McLuhan, 1936, p. 455). To an awakened mind the world is miraculous. There is something childlike about the freshness of vi-

sion McLuhan seeks—and also about the non-sequential nature of the thinking he can engage in.

Metaphor is famously a theological matter. As Gibbon quipped, Christianity nearly split into two over the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet. He was referring to fourth-century debates about whether the three persons of the Godhead were the same (*homoousios*) or similar (*homoiousios*). The iota marks the divide between metaphor and simile, between ontology and metaphor. In the theology of the Eucharist, the bread is not a metaphor for the body, and the wine not only a metaphor for the blood of Christ: they *are* his body and the body. Transubstantiation is not a transfer of metaphorical properties but an ontological alteration. The host is not a metaphor that got ontologized, but rather a fact of underlying substance that metaphors can only point to (Gordon, 1997). The Catholic “*hoc est corpus*” in turn looks like “hocus pocus” (as Kant punned) to a Protestant eye, always looking for negation, the “is not” that sets things back on their dialectical feet. In turn, Protestant suspicion of a substance that is many-in-one always looks like failure to grasp an astounding wonder to a Catholic eye.

Understanding Media has some brilliant cubist connections and encyclopedic ornaments, but I have to confess to finding it an ultimately wearying read. Some of McLuhan’s sentences are marvellous, but his paragraphs all too rarely build to coherence. It is one thing after another in service of an all-at-once vision. So often here, McLuhan omits the saving stinger of negation at the tail end of propositions and does not mind the symbolic gap between the logical and the analogical, which is otherwise so heavily policed by scholars. His hermeneutic lacks an “as-if,” the counterpoint to the central point. His conjectures often lack refutations. He reserved the right to make language idle: “I use language as probe, not as package. Even when I seem to be making very dogmatic statements, I am exploring contours” (Gordon, 1997, p. 214). “Analogy,” he bluntly asserted, “... is the cognitive process itself” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 369). He praised Pound for making ideograms that would lead to “to metaphysical intuition of being” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 202). McLuhan put his program and its intellectual context well in a 1961 letter to Walter Ong: “My theory is only acceptable to Thomists for whom consciousness as analogical proportion among the senses from moment to moment, is quite easy to grasp. But print technology actually smashes that analogical awareness in society and the individual. ... A *sensus communis* for external senses is what I’m trying to build” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 281). Grammatical theology gave him the resources to re-build that *sensus communis* under electrical conditions. (Whether Thomists actually find his theory acceptable is another matter; McLuhan’s take on analogy was, like everything else, idiosyncratic.) The irony is that his lack of dialectic prevented him from any kind of outreach to people who held different grammars and motives. “My theory is only acceptable to Thomists. ...” (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 280). His theory of media was so radical that it brooked no explanation to the outsider. He had no use for dialectic, since its task was to try to build bridges across the unbridgeable.

McLuhan’s much criticized “technological determinism” is a subset of his resistance to dialectic: the issue is not so much that he sees technologies as the drivers of history, but rather that he is not interested in qualification and nuance, the whittling

work that dialectic provides to grammar. He is interested in congruities rather than differences and generalizations rather than specifications. The bothersome claim is not that artifacts interact with mind and world in diversely determinative ways. This is a reasonable and researchable proposition. The problem, rather, is that history is treated not as a jagged mass of will, conflict, and documentary contingency, but as clear relational structures. "The transformation to visual space from acoustic space occurred in ancient Greece," proclaims *The Laws of Media* (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 4). Grand claims that "lump" without "splitting" can be found on almost any page McLuhan wrote in the 1960s and 1970s. Even the most undocinaire historicist wants to ask: For whom did this transformation occur? What about slaves, women, and outsiders? When did this transformation occur? In Athens only, or in Sparta, Delos, Macedonia, and Syracuse as well? Did anyone resist it? Were there transitional forms? What kinds of sources can be adduced to suggest this shift? Is this space physical, sensory, physical, architectural, literary, or conceptual? McLuhan's methodological misdemeanour is not to attribute causal force to media but to treat history as a noetic process undisturbed by the jumble of social action, the confusion of agents fumbling through the world. One important role for dialectic is to keep supplying the blessed word "but."

Sixth and finally, though McLuhan may have been a grammatical theologian in theory, he was clearly a sophist rhetorician in practice and performance (Gronbeck, 1981). The apple did not fall far from the tree—his mother, Elsie Hall McLuhan, was one of the leading monologists of her day and regularly left her family for extended performance tours in Toronto and elsewhere. McLuhan was an endless source of epigrams and sound-bites, a producer of uncannily fluent oral patter, an improvisational vocalist who clearly took the greatest pleasure in the sound of his own famously mellifluous voice. After 1961, he stopped writing scholarly books. His close collaborator Ted Carpenter noted in a late, surprisingly bitter score-settling recollection: "His later books were all collaborations, all edited, all hash" (2001, p. 254). Cavell (2002) would more positively see them as book arts or performances. In any case, McLuhan was quite willing to make himself part of the joke. In his public performances, one hears his self-parodying floods of blarney; his persona on television is a forerunner of the observational comedy that has become the dominant comic practice in North America (the point of wit is to observe trends in their oddness and not to crack jokes). He was a keen observer of social flotsam who never tired of recycling his one-liners and twirling out his paradoxes and reversals, an Irish dandy in the tradition of Oscar Wilde (though straight and Catholic). Perhaps even more relevant to the dissertation, we should see McLuhan as a literary journalist like Thomas Nashe, a learned trickster whose satires were encompassing—and generous—enough to include himself (Theall, 2001).

We return to the problem of how to read McLuhan. While I greatly admire his intellectual program of thinking theologically about media and the methodological tactic of reading the entire universe as a storehouse of grammar and am consistently impressed at how much one can learn by reading over his shoulder, I am left short at the execution, especially in his work after *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). Perhaps I read with the blinders of a more traditional scholarly gaze, looking at what he did as media

theory rather than as something much grander that busted through the academy and its bookish norms. One scores no points by calling McLuhan a strange or deficient sort of scholar. Carpenter again: “He treated academic boundaries as barriers; professionalism as constipation, ignorance as asset” (2001, p. 245). Defiance of academic truth-games was precisely the point, and heaven knows that university life needs—and more-or-less openly craves—such rebellion. But I do not think my unease with McLuhan is simply methodological; it lies with his teleological suspension of the ethical, his gamble that you can dispense with the facts for the sake of truth. Here is the chief difference with Innis, as Carpenter (2001) notes: Innis was a rock of integrity, while McLuhan was frankly irresponsible. Probes deserve probity. The otherness of the fact is a blessing we should not want to wish away. A world without objects would be a sensible emptiness. Knowledge needs what Hegel called the cunning of the negative.

Reading always involves hard choices. Re-reading McLuhan invites us to question our most fundamental commitments. According to McLuhan, my commitments to time, theory, and dialectic might disqualify me from appreciating his experiments in apophasis, in speaking away in order to reveal (a long practice in mystical traditions). He wanted to use speech like painting, to bend words away from themselves to point to what Eliot called the “the Word without a word” (Ash Wednesday, line 153). That words slip, strain, crack, and sometimes break there is no doubt, especially for anyone who has recently read McLuhan! But that the preferred form of noesis is an all-at-once vision rather than open-ended serial synthesis of part and whole I cannot agree. As time-based creatures living amid events whose significance is always contingent on our current and future actions, we humans need dialectic as our lifeblood (and if we are lucky, there will be a few moments of ecstasy, in or out of time’s covenant, along the way). Dialectic fits our contingent fate.

Whether McLuhan was joy-riding the wave of electrical modernity or surviving its maelstrom was never quite clear. He generally claimed they were the same thing. I am not so sure. A contemplative in the clothes of a jet-setter, McLuhan’s hectic life and feverish mode of production in his later years lent themselves to sound-bites and juxtapositions that did not add up to any coherent position. And that was precisely what he wanted in principle—if you can see his defiance of all principles as principled at all. McLuhan updated the liar’s paradox: his point of view about points of view was that there can be no points of view. To criticize him for having no principles was to violate his principle that principles are the artifacts of an obsolete print culture and thereby to prove oneself out of touch. It is a hard question whether his avoidance of a unified point of view was an accommodation to fame or a statement of Zen-like subtlety about the ultimate impossibility of being without a point of view and thus an implicitly evangelical call to return to the *punctum* upon which the church was built. Perhaps he did not know himself.

With his amoral grooviness in public and his devout faith in private, McLuhan made surrealist disconnection into a life practice (Winkler, 2008). Perhaps he was rendering that which is Caesar’s unto Caesar and that which is God’s unto God, this man who said that “Christianity is itself a theory of communication,” and who knew well

Jesus' hermetic strategy of speaking in parables to those "who have ears to hear" (see Gordon, 1997, p. 233). Perhaps, on the other hand, to use another Biblical saying, McLuhan was trying to serve both God and Mammon. To use a wicked phrase of Milan Kundera's, McLuhan was the willing ally of his own gravediggers. His celebrity persona was a calculated risk, a praise of folly to a world that probably would not get the point. The farther away he got from his theological-grammatical substance, the less ballast he had to tether his endless supply of hot air to the ground. To quote Kundera again, the hardest thing to deal with in Marshall McLuhan is his unbearable lightness.

Note

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