

In Memoriam

Edmund Snow Carpenter (1922-2011)

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Certain media favor while others do not, certain ideas & values,
or more simply: each medium is a unique soil. That soil doesn't
guarantee which plants will grow there, but it influences
which plants will blossom or wilt there.

Edmund Carpenter

The year 2011 not only constituted the centenary of Marshall McLuhan's birth, it also marked the passing of his collaborator extraordinaire and major figure in the field of media studies, Edmund "Ted" Carpenter, my former teacher and mentor.

As an undergraduate at Sir George Williams University (now part of Concordia) during the late 1960s, I was in awe of two forces in the cultural Zeitgeist: the films of Stanley Kubrick and the phenomenon of Marshall McLuhan. However, it was Carpenter's writings, which I came to through McLuhan, that inspired me to pursue graduate work in anthropology and then later seek a career in communication studies. When I eventually entered the M.A. program at the New School for Social Research, I carried with me a copy of the Carpenter/McLuhan anthology, *Explorations in Communication* (1960), which contains choice morsels from one of the great intellectual experiments of the twentieth century, the Explorations project they developed at the University of Toronto from 1953-59.¹ A Carpenter essay in *Explorations*, "The New Languages," remains to this day the most revealing and accessible elaboration of what is now often called medium theory.

When in graduate school it never occurred to me that I would ever meet, let alone have the opportunity to take courses with Carpenter, given his enigmatic reputation, global wanderings, and disdain for the more formal constraints of academe. But it did happen. I took something called "Anthropology of the Present," with the instructor listed as, "Sessional TBA," always an iffy sign. The fact that he introduced himself as "Carpenter, but just call me Ted," I took to be a coincidence. Could an Edmund be a Ted? However, when he began speaking I recognized the same insights and lyricism that characterize his writings. My fellow students had no idea who he was. "Okay," I thought, "more of him for me" and for two years I attended all his classes.

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In recounting this story two decades later to the late Don Theall—I had read and admired his *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror* as a graduate student—he told me how he was the one who had brought Ted and Marshall together. Don was taking courses with both of them at the University of Toronto and, sensing that they represented two parallel currents that should be bridged, arranged for a meeting. Thus were sown the seeds of the great collaboration that led to *Explorations*, in which Don also became involved.

It is a tribute to a belief in the power of ideas overcoming temperament that two personalities as different as Ted and Marshall could be close intellectual collaborators. In this respect, Ted was like Engels to Marshall's Marx. In other words, he was what the other was not—approachable, down to earth, and open to differing points of view. And, like Engels, Ted, all too modestly in my opinion, downplayed his own legacy whenever it was discussed with respect that of that of his senior partner. On one occasion, when Marshall became indisposed, Ted wrote the commissioned article in his name, just as Engels had done for Marx.

Ted moved to New York around 1970 and began sessional teaching at the New School and at Adelphi. This was the period in which he published *They Became What They Beheld* (1970) and *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me* (1972), books that examined mediated realities several years before post-modern theorists began dispensing the term “simulacra.” It was also the heyday of structuralism, and though Ted was far from being one, he admired and had us read Lévi-Strauss and Piaget.

His lectures were inspirational—open-ended invitations to explore a cornucopia of ideas. They were also punctuated on occasion by some delightfully quirky comments. When a student asked if she could tape his lectures, Ted was taken aback, or pretended to be. “You shouldn't have to ask,” he said (or words to that effect), “any teacher who would refuse is out of touch with the world of contemporary media and its relationship to education.” In a related vein, he said that anything he had ever written is open for citation-free use by anyone, an observation that would not have endeared him to his publishers. He also spoke fondly of his years in Toronto with Marshall, but when asked if he was a Canadian, replied with, “When the University of Toronto found out I was getting a divorce, they asked for my resignation.”

As an anthropologist Ted worked with the Avilik Inuit, producing a remarkable collaborative book, *Eskimo* (with artist Frederick Varley and filmmaker Robert Flaherty). His ethnographic film research in New Guinea documents a traditional society about to face the onslaught of contemporary media. We are indeed fortunate in having access to some of these materials by virtue of an excellent DVD produced by John Bishop and Harald Prins (2003). The disk also contains interviews with Ted, a text of reflections on his days in Toronto with Marshall, and the complete text of *Oh, What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me*. Prins and Bishop contextualize these resources by providing a detailed overview essay on Ted's career. One of the most intriguing aspects of the disk are clips from Ted's appearances on CBC TV during the 1950s. He never courted the media as Marshall did, but always thought of himself as a public intellectual. His publications even include an article written for *TV Guide*!

Ted and I corresponded sporadically over the years. He was appreciative of a book I dedicated to him, but I'm sure he must have thought it a bit too conventionally academic. I last saw him in 2005 at the Media Ecology Association Conference at Fordham University in New York where Harald Prins and I led a session that honoured his legacy. That evening became an unforgettable occasion when it was Ted's turn to speak. Adding some new twists to his media insights, he earned three standing ovations from a packed house. Later, we reflected on our both having arrived in New York at around the same time those many years ago. He also said that he was getting ready to leave in a few days to continue a fieldwork project in Siberia.

Edmund Snow Carpenter was born on 2 September 1922 in Rochester New York and died on 1 July 2011 in Southampton, New York.

Note

1. Under the auspices of a SSHRC grant, a comprehensive assessment of the Explorations project is being conducted by Michael Darroch at the University of Windsor and Janine Marchessault at York University: "The Culture and Communications Seminar and Explorations Journal: Interdisciplinary Collaborations and Contributions to Media Studies, 1953-1959."

Reference

Bishop, John, & Prins, Harald. (2003). *Oh, What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me*. DVD. Portland OR: Media Generation.

