

# Reading over McLuhan's Shoulder

John Durham Peters  
Yale University

## ABSTRACT

**Background** This article<sup>1</sup> presents a reworked keynote address given at the “Many McLuhans” conference held at the University of Toronto in September 2018 on the occasion of UNESCO recognizing Marshall McLuhan's library as part of its Memory of the World program.

**Analysis** The article explores McLuhan as a reader and suggests that his greatest work might have been what he read rather than what he wrote.

**Conclusion and implications** The library, as a genre, is one of the great media forms of modernity and antiquity and a marker of the fragility and majesty of the things that humans do with their large brains.

**Keywords** Marshall McLuhan; Harold Innis; Library; Reading; Apostolic succession; Memory

## RÉSUMÉ

**Contexte** Cet article consiste en la révision d'un discours principal donné au colloque « Many McLuhans » tenu en septembre 2018 à l'Université de Toronto, à l'occasion de la reconnaissance de la bibliothèque de Marshall McLuhan par l'UNESCO dans le contexte de son programme Mémoire du monde.

**Analyse** L'article explore McLuhan en tant que lecteur et suggère que sa plus grande œuvre consiste en ce qu'il a lu plutôt qu'en ce qu'il a écrit.

**Conclusions et implications** La bibliothèque, en tant que genre, est une des grandes formes médiatiques de l'Antiquité et de la modernité et une instance de la fragilité et de la majesté de ce que font les humains avec leurs grands cerveaux.

**Mots clés** Marshall McLuhan; Harold Innis; Bibliothèque; Lecture; Succession apostolique; Mémoire

## Introduction

I feel a lot of pressure as a Yankee trying to talk about a great Canadian treasure and a great Canadian trickster. Anthony Burgess once quipped that John Kenneth Galbraith and Marshall McLuhan were the two greatest Canadians that the United States had yet produced. So maybe I am playing the classic role as the American relay or amplifier.<sup>2</sup>

**John Durham Peters** is a María Rosa Menocal Professor of English, Professor of Film and Media Studies, Yale University, author of *Speaking into the Air* (1999), and *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015). Email: john.peters@yale.edu .

But I hope to do more. I recently came across a quote from one of my favourite poets, William Blake (1793): "I see a serpent in Canada who courts me to his love." I too feel courted by a serpent in Canada. This might not sound like a particularly promising way to win one's audience at the beginning of a speech, but I mean no insult: the joke's on my nation, not yours. The ever-renewable resource of American innocence can have dangerous effects. One of the things that draws me to the Canadian intellectual tradition is its recognition that we are out of the garden, that there is a serpent that gives you the gift of knowledge of good and evil, that the world of space and time is messy and conflicted. It can be good to be malevolently well informed as well as blithely ignorant!<sup>3</sup>

I also feel a little bit belated or of late birth compared to some of the company in this room, because I did not know Marshall McLuhan. I first started to read him the year after he died, so I have had almost four decades of engagement off and on, but I am definitely a latecomer. The debate in early Christianity about who could be a real apostle is relevant. According to the New Testament, Jesus chose twelve apostles before his own death and resurrection. Judas Iscariot's betrayal and suicide left a vacancy in the quorum. Peter, acting as leader of the group, steps forward in the first chapter of the Book of Acts with two potential candidates who are to be picked by casting lots. Peter all but takes it for granted that the only possible candidates are those "men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us" (Acts 1:21, *New International Version*). That is, the only legitimate apostle was a (male) acquaintance and eyewitness of Jesus during his lifetime. If you did not know Jesus in the flesh, you could not be an apostle, because you could not bear witness of him.

Along comes Paul of Tarsus and flips the qualifications on their head.<sup>4</sup> He had not known Jesus as a mortal, and indeed had been a fierce antagonist of the Jesus movement. Paul's apostolic call came instead by a divine vision on the road to Damascus. His brethren in the establishment quorum eyed him warily. He had not come up through the ranks or paid his dues and was slow to check in with the standing apostles in Jerusalem who seem to have thought him a freelancing showboat and loose cannon. The debate was not only generational but doctrinal, as Paul foregrounded ideas about race (you did not need to be a Jew) and gender (men and women were alike before God), which others might have thought peripheral to Jesus's message. His letters show remarkably little interest in the life and teachings of Jesus: he is much more interested in the abstract fact of "Christ crucified." It is almost as if Paul explicitly devalues firsthand experience; he almost seems to relish being "born out of due time" (1 Cor. 15:8). He claimed to be the prototype of all believers who come after, because instead of the flesh-and-blood Jesus, he knew the spiritual Christ. For Paul the path forward was precisely through the enabling distance of the Johnny-come-lately. The "follower at second hand," as Søren Kierkegaard (1844, 89) put it, might have a better grasp than those who risked being blinded by concrete immediacy. The contemporary may have better access to the accidental features of a teacher's doctrine, but has no advantage in understanding its essence.

There was a genuine custody battle in that first generation of Christianity, and perhaps there is a custody battle about McLuhan. There are still many among us in

this room who knew him and enjoyed at close quarters his oracular charismatic presence: the rotund voice, the witticisms, that unique way he clipped his “T”s while talking. And there are many of the rest of us who come belatedly. Who has the best connection? Who has the authentic authority to speak of the great guru? Who is better positioned to interpret the work? I am obviously not comparing McLuhan to Christ, but considering a succession crisis. Obviously the debate between Paul and Peter was not only generational, it was about what mattered in the teachings of Jesus. The same is true for the heirs of McLuhan.

Those who knew McLuhan in the flesh have an argument for a kind of interpretive privilege based on presence, but presence does not always yield the greatest insights. To quote another poet, W.H. Auden (1940), “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.” The Gospels disagree on all kinds of details about Jesus’s life and death, some trivial and some potentially significant enough to spawn a large number of websites nervously explaining them away as insignificant to believers in biblical inerrancy. At dinner the night before this talk, Michael McLuhan and I discussed the fact that John Lennon never did visit the McLuhan home, although that story has become a legendary fixture in McLuhan lore. Lennon and Yoko Ono did visit the Centre for Culture and Technology in 1969, as a BBC video attests (YouTube, 2016), but there is disagreement even among the first generation about what happened otherwise. You can learn things about McLuhan from people who knew him—his preference for reading single pages on the recto rather than verso side; his pleasure in the music of Paul Whiteman, the aptly named “sweet jazz” conductor from the 1920s and 1930s; or his way of lying on the couch when he got home from campus. These experiences cast light on his thought in ways that the page and screen cannot. Thus, perhaps reading the right side of the page might help account for the herky-jerky style of exposition; perhaps his prone position helps explain McLuhan’s (1964) quip about the couch extending “the integral being” in contrast to the more specialized chair, an “ablative absolute of backside” (p. 21). But very few people during his lifetime had access to his library. This belated gift may actually bring us closer to what he was thinking than his fleshly presence. The collection in this library favours the witness at second hand.

One last New Testament story (one of McLuhan’s most read books!). The last chapter of the Gospel of John broaches the theme of this article: a fantastic library. First of all, this final, twenty-first chapter seems not to have been written by the same author as the first twenty, even though it is vociferous about its own authenticity. Second, the very last verse posits the wild idea that if all the stories of Jesus had been written down, the entire world could not hold them all. The Gospel of John ends with a fantasy of a world overflowing with uncontainable books. Even a cosmic library filling the planet could not sufficiently hold the stories of a single life. We, the readers of John’s Gospel, are belated and have to trust the testimony of the author. We get what few stories we get by relay. The point is similar to Paul’s preference for the belated witness: it is a good thing not to be snowed by all the details. John’s ending makes a virtue of a necessity: the gradual disappearance of first-hand testimonials is not a loss but an opportunity. Indeed the recording of the Gospels, which took place decades after Jesus’s death, seems motivated by the gradual disappearance of the first generation of

eyewitnesses and the need for a more durable form of witness. The Gospel of John culminates in a media analysis of the different affordances of oral memory and literary records, and it wants the best of both: a spiritual witness and a properly pruned library (i.e., itself).

McLuhan started as an English professor but became a media scholar, while I recently made the opposite trajectory. It is worth revisiting him as a literary thinker. The question that I want to pursue here is reading, and more specifically, how did McLuhan read and how did he teach us to read, and what mediated forms did such reading take? This central question of media studies and media theory is a question indistinguishable from literary studies in some ways. Media studies likes to read beyond content, “to read what was never written,” as the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1894) put it. Clouds and grunts and geological strata were never consciously “written” by an author, but they are still richly readable. We have learned the skills for such creative reading of traces, substrates, and infrastructures from the long history of close reading by critics, judges, and other hermeneuts. (McLuhan might call them hermenauts, space explorers of interpretation!)

Throughout the world, literary studies has often been the incubator for media studies. That is the case in England, Russia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Other cases are more complicated: In the U.S., Canada, France, and Germany, robust social-scientific traditions cross-fertilized with literary ones. No one I know has ever accused Harold Innis of being literary, but some, such as James W. Carey, have plausibly tried to make him a kind of sociologist, and Innis and McLuhan provide Canada with its one-two social-literary media-theory punch. McLuhan teamed successfully with Ted Carpenter, an anthropologist, in 1950s Toronto. Jack Goody, an anthropologist, teamed with Ian Watt, a literary scholar, in 1950s–1960s Cambridge. And Georges Friedmann, a sociologist, and Edgar Morin, an all-purpose intellectual (still alive and actively tweeting in his late 90s), teamed with Roland Barthes, the literary theorist, in 1950s–1960s Paris. Such literary-anthropological-sociological mixing was the interdisciplinary soil in the postwar period for the early sprouts of media studies (Schüttpeitz, 2010).

McLuhan belongs among the immensely fertile lineage of scholars following—whether in inspiration or defiance—the Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis, such as Richard Hoggart, Ian Watt, and Raymond Williams, all of them skilled at engaging anthropologically with an exploding world of textuality. In postwar England, the criticism of culture and society was encouraged by the study of literature more than of sociology. It is remarkable how literary early British cultural studies was. Stuart Hall’s Rhodes Scholarship brought him to England in 1951 to study English. In the early years of British cultural studies, film, television, and popular music were not yet the bread and butter. Hoggart’s (1957) *Uses of Literacy* was all about popular literature. Williams’ (1958) *Culture and Society* reconstructs the literary-intellectual-political tradition of the very long nineteenth century in Britain. E.P. Thompson’s (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class* paid attention to literacy and the radical press. McLuhan belongs methodologically and topically with the postwar interest in letters (broadly speaking) as a springboard to larger social prognostication, though his politics are quite distinct from the Marxism of most of these figures.

McLuhan was a New Critic or formalist, the term often used for the dominant mode in mid-twentieth-century literary criticism. Formalism was an account of reading, of course, but it was also sometimes a social theory, and a vision of politics, especially in its southern version, in which McLuhan was very interested. "The Southern Quality" is a remarkable essay that tells us a lot about McLuhan (1947) as a reader. One of the points he is eager to make is that a formalist approach need not be stodgy or stuffy. Southern literature is not only genteel but respects "monstrous outlaw forms" (p. 360). (The mention of monstrous outlaw forms makes you want to look for Flannery O'Connor in his library, but I could not find her there. He must, however, have read her at some point, and she probably read him.<sup>5</sup>) An interest in forms does not mean that they are always petite or prim: they can be monsters. McLuhan's later work certainly bears this point out.

Further, he argues that southern writers were not "tortured" by a need to revolt. This highly indicative point is in part a tweak of left-wing progressivism. This essay gives us McLuhan at his most conservative, as a belated volunteer in the Confederate army, as Geoffrey Winthrop-Young quips (2008). It is also a zinger against the U.S. love of revolutionary culture and a defence of Canadian modesty. He thought the South preserved humanism in a kind of happily arrested development and thus avoided the curse of dialectic that ran wild in New England. The South appreciates the entire horse; New England tries to figure out how to extract the horsepower. McLuhan sounds like Martin Heidegger (1954) a few years later going off about modern technology and what he calls its "standing-reserve." The Northeastern United States does not fair very well in this essay. McLuhan (1947) calls New England intellectuals "an upstart party of vermiculate disputationists!" (p. 368) *Vermiculate* means wormlike—think of creepy crawly dialecticians—whereas the South inherited the Christian humanism of rhetoric and grammar, of Cicero and Erasmus. As a Canadian and a Catholic, he is able to make political and religious hay here: the South and Canada can make common cause as bullied by the industrial North, and he lauds Christian humanist calm against acids of Puritan brew. (The southern Agrarians loved to hate Ralph Waldo Emerson.) McLuhan can go too far, as when he lauds the South for its creative political thought, from Thomas Jefferson to Woodrow Wilson, whose love of the Ku Klux Klan-positive film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is well known. (Maybe Wendell Berry or even Al Gore would provide a better bookend for his southern political thinkers.) McLuhan's (1947) identification with the losers, with their greater insight and monstrous forms, certainly carols throughout the essay.

I did not feel that I could give a keynote about McLuhan without some initiation into his library, and I arrived a day before the conference. I went straight to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library from the airport and spent the day there—happy as a clam or a kid in a candy store, depending on your preferred cliché—looking at the treasures that John Shoesmith and colleagues brought forth. (In the conclusion, I will have to say more about the wonder of encountering McLuhan's externalized mind in the form of marginal squiggles.) Among the items of his library, I discovered that his wife, Corinne Lewis McLuhan, gave Marshall *In Praise of Folly* by Erasmus for Christmas in 1942. This book lies at the core of how McLuhan thought. It is both a hilarious and de-

vout book that recognizes the absurdity of life. In a 1976 letter McLuhan (1987) wrote that all of his books should be read as “Menippean satire, presenting the actual surface of the world we live in as a ludicrous image” (p. 517). Perhaps he was thinking of Erasmus, who is funny and merciless in going after the vices of his fellow scholars (Peters, 2017). In “The Southern Quality” (McLuhan, 1947) there is a very interesting moment in which he says that the South never forgot chivalry: it was courtly, it was elegant, and recognized feminine elegance. The obituary of Corinne says that she was known for her beauty, grace, intelligence, wit, and southern charm. So perhaps McLuhan did know something about the South.

This little reading exercise—an old essay filled with wit, charm, and misguided zeal mixed with a tender familial treasure unearthed from an archive freshly opened to the public—introduces the key problem. I am puzzled. May I be frank with you? I do not know what to do with McLuhan. We are celebrating McLuhan and we love him—and find him troubling and jarring. Should we even be focusing on him when there are other worthy candidates for inclusion in the canon? He is so interesting; he is so maddening! He has got such wonderful sentences; he has got such horrible paragraphs! How do we make sense of someone who is often completely sloppy about historical periodization and much else? Take his frequently made claim about three thousand years of literacy: hello women, people of colour, poor people, working people? Confronted with evidence of the patchy social history of literacy, he would doubtless admit it, shrug, and move on. Why let facts get in the way of a good story? He loved to make vatic pronouncements, to divide history into epochs. He also loved to proclaim obsolescence for things that were still going strong among people who had missed the news and did not know better. He claimed to have secret knowledge of vast transformations that no one else had noticed. And then he gets anointed the “patron saint” of *Wired Magazine*.

Let us feel guilty for a minute: guilt can be useful. Archive Theory 101 reminds us that every archive is based upon a forgetting. We all know that if you honour one person, you do not honour someone else. We *should* worry about the distribution of honour and attention, who gets remembered and who does not. Many worthy wonderful people are forgotten and we all know the lines of force upon which forgetting and remembering happens (Lang & Lang, 2001; Thompson, 1978). Does McLuhan deserve it? To be crude: should we honour a dead White guy? There are some things about McLuhan that are troubling or annoying—and I am not referring only to his style. He seems cranky and unenlightened about *racial narcosis*, as Armond Towns (in review; also an author in this issue) calls it. McLuhan writes about women as the first beasts of burden and homosexuality as inversion. These views are off-putting, to say the least. They were of course common opinions in his age, but the appeal to historical context as exoneration is unsatisfying and not interpretively imaginative or rigorous enough. Should we stick with somebody who can look like an odd kind of White supremacist, a masculinist, and a friend to fascist aestheticians such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound?

For my part, my presence at this event suggests that I value the ongoing grappling with his legacy. Along with several other mid-century intellectuals—Hannah Arendt,

Ralph Ellison, Heidegger, Innis, André Leroi-Gourhan, Lewis Mumford, Gilbert Simondon, Norbert Wiener, and Frances Yates for starters—McLuhan gave us tools and vocabulary for understanding our mediated condition. And almost uniquely, he made *media* his central term. That is gift enough to assure ongoing relevance. The parents you want are not always the parents you have. Obviously, McLuhan entertained opinions both harmless and toxic, to use the word of the moment. But we should read through them with rigour and charity. Generosity in reading does not mean amnesty or sentimentality. If we had to stop reading everybody who had a bad attitude, the whole library would be gone. Libraries face many threats—funding cuts, doodling readers, silverfish, flood, and fire. Tyrants and emperors burn libraries just as kings and philanthropists build libraries, but neglect can also damage libraries by consigning large chunks of them to oblivion. Questions about structures of time, power, canon, and attention deserve wide-open debate. Such debates inform good reading. But our age often has a certain lack of compassion, boycotting thinkers all too quickly. It sometimes reminds me of the French Revolution. If you cannot live up to Maximilien Robespierre's level of virtue, step right up to the guillotine. As Hegel (1979) pointed out, the reign of virtue is also the reign of terror. People's heads roll with the ease of a head of cabbage (para. 590).

It is lazy to attribute changes in modes of reading to new technologies, but let me try nonetheless. Much of online life produces social formations that are more like crowds than publics. The mark of a public is the suspension of the personal. In old-style public debate (e.g., according to *Robert's Rules of Order*, (1876–2011; written by one of McLuhan's southerners) “personalities” are forbidden (i.e., ad hominem or ad feminam attacks). The stoic flavour of the public sphere meant that citizens were supposed to practice the severe art of self-abstraction—to separate themselves from their opinions. Social media, in contrast, are typically designed to feel personal. One addresses “friends,” not a public. The failure to require a disciplined filter between personal and public expression means that online discussion is often profoundly judgemental. There is nothing quite as moralistic as an audience on a daytime talk show or a series of comments on a Facebook page. The logic of crowds at best is one of pile-on, and at worst, one of excommunication.

Mercy for the imperfections of others should be the starting point. Counting coup does not require our highest intellectual abilities. It is easy to hit a big target. In *Culture and Society* Williams (1958) did important work reading conservatives such as Edmund Burke, Thomas Carlyle, and T.S. Eliot for notions of culture he thought were lacking on the left. His own analysis was better for the deep dive and the thinkers he studied shone—and glared—in new ways. Walter Benjamin got good work out of reading Carl Gustav Jung, Ludwig Klages, and Carl Schmitt—a conservative, an anti-Semite, and a Nazi, respectively. Thinkers with unimpeachable radical pedigrees, such as Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, have found nourishment in the fruit that fell from Heidegger's tree without dining on the manure that fed its roots. None of these thinkers ignored the many faults of the authors they read, and not all of their readings were squeaky clean enough to suit everyone either. Now more than ever we need to be willing to practice the art of delicate dialectics, of reading people with strong

ideas and politics we do not share. Otherwise, we risk getting really stupid. We need the fibre of offense in our intellectual diet. This conference shows how rich the results can be when McLuhan's ideas are read with rigour and imagination.

Let us take, for example, McLuhan (1964) on women. Were they the earliest pack animal? How do we read that statement: Is it clueless? Tongue in cheek? A robust sociological description about who does the grunt work in most cultures? A deeper point about the wonder of pregnancy by which a woman carries another being in her body? A pregnant woman might be one who "consents not to be a single being," to reapply the rich words of Fred Moten.<sup>6</sup> McLuhan is actually talking about life before the invention of the wheel. His larger point is a rather Innis-like one about the price of specialization: he thinks women have been relatively spared from its crimes, because the domestic sphere is a sphere of generality in which everybody is a captain, no one is a passenger, everybody is an actor, no one is a spectator. Is he appreciating women's work, putting them on a pedestal, providing an apologia for a patriarchal division of labour, or suggesting a subtle way to rethink gender and technology? It is not quite choose-your-own-adventure, but if you never get past the eek! sexist! alarm bell, you risk missing facing some interesting questions. In the same way, if you invoke some hermetic mouth-to-ear knowledge passed down from the master himself to say that the objectionable-sounding words are not what he meant, you risk disrespecting the words as they stand and miss out on the demanding task of reading. Secret doctrine can be an enticing "out," but it fails to meet the rigour and imagination of public argument.<sup>7</sup> In the long run, as the Gospel of John shows, the oral cedes to the textual.

As teachers, we are always teaching students to incorporate the obstacles into a richer reading. Reading with compassion and subtlety requires the suspension of the hair triggers that we have all cultivated so exquisitely as a way of navigating our way through the information overload. Taking offense might just be an efficient adaptation to having too much print matter to manage. This is the kind of observation McLuhan taught us to make. We can read McLuhan against McLuhan; *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) is fundamentally about gender and specifically about how women get mechanized and how machines get feminized. We can take the intelligence of his analysis without the baggage of his prejudices. We can follow Sarah Sharma's wonderful coinage and study "The Mechanical Bro." Just because McLuhan was worried about Dagwoods, effeminate men, and henpecked husbands does not mean we need to be. We can take his analysis without taking his attitude.

Let us go to Auden (1940) again: "Time that with this strange excuse/ Pardoned Kipling and his views,/ And will pardon Paul Claudel,/ Pardons him for writing well." Perhaps in the case of McLuhan, we should say time pardons him for reading well. To read McLuhan is to read the English-language library, and much else, from the 1930s through the 1970s. Here is my argument: what we have of McLuhan via his writings is bits and pieces and fragments. The great McLuhan *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, is actually his library. Perhaps his greatest work was as a reader. He talked and read incessantly—two well-established facts. But he wrote intermittently if at all, and his published writing often came through dictation. (Michael McLuhan reports that he never typed on a typewriter.) Perhaps the greatest quantity of words he produced

non-orally were the prolific marginalia in his books. His vision of Christian humanism took on the encyclopaedic task of trying to put together the universe. His publications are remnants, off castings, or occasional pieces that come out of the broader work of cosmic understanding. (He might have enjoyed Jacques Lacan's pun about *poubellications*.) In McLuhan's famous series of puns, his writings are just brief utterances, utterings, outerings, outer rings. He got famous for his thoughts on media, but his thoughts on media are part of a larger project of trying to see the divine comedy in all its beatific splendour amid all the human muddling and middling, meddling and modeling—i.e., media. *Media salutis*, the media of salvation, to use a medieval term for the sacraments, were his interest, even if he was often upset about the amputating effects of what we might call *media damnationis*, the media of damnation.

McLuhan's reader has to struggle, almost by design. Reading was a full-on contact sport requiring the fullest physical, ethical, and intellectual engagement. It could be a kind of calisthenics or cooking, work or worship. McLuhan took a producerist approach (pardon the ugly word) to reading. It was up to the reader to read well.

Consider his marginal note on page three of his copy of Innis' *Empire and Communications* (the essay is "Minerva's Owl"): "Innis/ tech of animated/ cartoon as explanation?/ mosaic struct of insights/ involu in process, not consumer product for reader." Here you see thought in the marking. These lines are a rough draft of McLuhans' (1953) essay "The Later Innis," in which he argues that Innis avoids the easy packaging of his ideas and opts instead for a "complex mental cinema which he could have managed more expeditiously had he mastered the method of James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake* [sic]" (p. 389). The idea that readers should rise to the occasion of difficult texts is one of the hallmarks of modernism, and McLuhan generously places Innis in a lofty pantheon of forbidding Mandarins who refuse to stoop to the public, such as Theodor Adorno, Eliot, and Arnold Schoenberg. It is just as likely that Innis was a lousy writer, or a man in a hurry. McLuhan is fine with the idea that reading should be strenuous and not simply ingestion.

McLuhan often demands that of his readers, but he obviously practices it himself. This is nowhere so true as in his reading of the book he wished Innis had mastered: *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce, 1939). Somehow the thought of Innis writing like James Joyce tickles the funny bone, but in McLuhan we get hints of what that might look like; indeed he is perhaps the child of this odd couple. McLuhan's first, and stunningly annotated, *Finnegans Wake*, makes this connection in a marginal notation. On the inside front-cover dust jacket he wrote, "Rivers the/ traditional highways of/ trade and culture." The novel, of course, is among other things, the story of rivers, especially the River Liffey, but McLuhan's note brings a nice Innis-like touch. Innis, a man who explored the Canadian northwest in a birch-bark canoe, helps us read *Finnegans Wake* as a history of civilization (which it is).<sup>8</sup>

As we open the first page, we see McLuhan co-writing the text, which is the only way to read *Finnegans Wake*. One could spend days studying this page and its marginalia. The first word of the book is "riverrun," and McLuhan has fun playing with its almost palindrome-like shape. (The opening sentence of course starts mid-stream, completing the sentence that ends the book.) Long before Douglas Hofstadter's (1979)

celebrations of florid recursiveness in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, McLuhan notes that a Bach fugue runs bach-wards, and that the German *Bach* means *brook*. (The old joke is that Bach should have been named *Meer* for ocean.) Further down on the page McLuhan glosses “thuartpeatrick” with “Tu es petrus,” the Latin version of Christ telling Peter, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). As McLuhan liked to quip, the Catholic church was founded on a pun (*petrus* for Peter, rock), and he punned that the word *pun* itself came from the Latin *punctum*, or point, a remarkable point from someone who claimed to not have a point of view.

Books are changeable creatures—like the weather, like people. They show different faces at different times and evolve with the seasons. McLuhan read *Finnegans Wake* over and over, and in different editions, and in the first edition it is striking to see him grappling with lines he would later make famous. Joyce (1939) writes: “(Stoop) if you are abcdminded, to this claybrook, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this alaphbed!” (p. 18). This passage merits an eruption of coded marginal notations from McLuhan’s hand; he knew he had hit the jackpot for a text on how the alphabet’s a-b-c-d-e linear thinking makes us forgetful of other modes of sensory being. But later in this edition, you see him not noting a passage with any particular fanfare, given its afterlife in McLuhan’s work. This is the brilliant passage about television as, among other things, “the bairdboard bombardment screen” (p. 349). It is somehow comforting to know that so astute a reader as McLuhan did not get everything on the first pass. The treasures of the text often unfold only after several visits.

As Andrew McLuhan argued in his stunning presentation on his grandfather’s library, libraries are alive. There are species in this collection that are now proliferating vermiculately—since we all have this word now, let us use it! We do not know what is going to come out of that library. McLuhan’s mind lives on belatedly. Like many others at mid-century, McLuhan was a dreamer and builder of fantastic libraries. He was an architect of a memory palace. McLuhan (1967) wrote a brilliant review of Frances Yates’s book on the art of memory and was always interested in the question of how we fend off time’s destruction, forgetfulness, and loss. He was a common-placer and a quote-magpie. McLuhan is a thinker of the library. He is a modernist who gets the relevance of the classical tradition and the Renaissance. Among mid-20th-century modernists thinking the about library, there is Walter Benjamin; Joyce obviously; Paul Otlet and the whole field of documentation studies; Jorge Luis Borges; Alain Resnais, whose short film *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) is a kind of McLuhanish film; and Frances Yates. McLuhan is also a sort of fellow traveller with Romanists such as Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius, and Leo Spitzer, who all thought about the book and its fate in a world of tumult. As you look at McLuhan’s marks of reading in *Finnegans Wake* and elsewhere, you can see that he is engaged in a kind of kinaesthetic, tactile, and graphic battle against forgetting. Stuck between voluminous reading and a brain cursed with strokes, he was always building a memory palace. Here in the Fisher Rare Book Library, we get to be guests in its windy halls.

Let me be the hundredth person to note that it is wrong to read McLuhan as the prophet of the book’s decline. He is a “library cormorant” (Coleridge, 1796) who is trying to figure out how to put together fragments that we have shored against our ruin.

Let us conclude with a consideration of the metaphysical squirrelness of libraries, one of the most important of all media forms.<sup>9</sup> A personal library, said Walter Benjamin (1928), becomes the memory palace of its owner. (As with debates about pets, it is obvious that *owner* might be the wrong word.) What would not even register on an e-reader might be the most important thing in a special collection: bindings, dust jackets, scuff marks, scribbles, slips of paper left between pages, the family tree written in, all the contingent material details in individual copies. Individual quirks make books havens of memory against the universal scatter of too many copies. (This is the inverse of Benjamin's famous idea about technical reproduction as destroying the aura.) Each book fends off what we might call entropy's "dizzy-pation." In a library entropy goes briefly uphill. Benjamin called a library a "magic encyclopaedia" (p. 60) to its owner, holding histories available to nobody else, and he thought little spirits (*Geisterchen*) dwelled jointly in his books and his memory. Latecomers tend to have access only to the books in the library, not to the little spirits, although there is always that rattling footstep on the floorboards: you never know who is in the library with you. Only occasionally do we conspire with the lingering vapour trails. Nothing quite makes the bridge between subject and object, mind and body, so problematic as a library.<sup>10</sup>

McLuhan has been gone for four decades and finally his library has grown up enough to venture forth. Who knows what seeds of thought it holds. Libraries are buffers against catastrophe. Renaissance encyclopaedists thought about themselves as building storehouses of knowledge to prevent a second vanishing of classical learning. The encyclopaedia, like the library in its stretch for totalities, harbours something surreal. Jorge Luis Borges saw the encyclopaedia as the best genre for representing philosophical idealism's drive to build and furnish imaginary worlds. The genre also has a clear paranoid streak, the sense that everything is relevant and has potential meaning. The library is an irresistible temptation and also an abyss. Bottomlessness is one challenge. (Ask any doctoral student beginning a dissertation). You have to be a bit of a surrealist, a melancholic, a megalomaniac, a paranoid, and a voluptuary to hang about libraries. McLuhan was all of those in various ways and times. Probably most of us within range of these words are. I certainly felt all of those modes yesterday as I scurried among the volumes, trying to learn enough to give this talk.

Maybe here is the ultimate lesson of reading over McLuhan's shoulder. We are near his *Gesamtkunstwerk* in all its quotidian reality (so many shelf-feet of books) and its suppressed little spirits. What a crazy thing—a university, a library, a mind, a universe! What we are gathered here today to celebrate is not just one scholar and his legacy. What we honour today is that improbable thing called mind, the rarest substance in the universe, rarer than diamond, gold, or the Higgs boson. The mind has fragile housing, and we are in the midst of a place that has successfully, for now, fought off that fragility. What a lavish and wonderful thing it is to be in a temple to consciousness. In their prodigy and expense, folly and splendour, libraries make me proud to be a human being. Every mark in a book testifies that there was once a person who held this book and read, ignoring the call of many obligations and pains. McLuhan's scribblings mark the suspension of the everyday, his brief sidestepping of the world's demands. So, more generally, do libraries. A library is an entity with an essence that is

not explained by the principles of carpentry or chemistry, though it needs much care, labour, and money, and every librarian knows how political everything about a library is. The existence of a library is a tribute to the blessed frivolity of what humans can do, the higher madness of dreaming and thinking, writing and reading. Borges once said that he always imagined that paradise would be a kind of library. I think Marshall McLuhan understood that better than any of us.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Sarah Sharma for the invitation and her confidence in me, Andrew McLuhan for advice about handwriting and interpretation, and John Shoemith for guiding me through McLuhan's library.

### Notes

1. This is a reworked keynote speech given at the "Many McLuhans" conference, held at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library on September 21, 2018. It retains the spoken style and sense of occasion.
2. I wish English had an adjective such as the Spanish "estadounidense," such as "united-statesian," to prevent the United States from monopolizing "American" identity.
3. Joni Mitchell's lyric that "we've got to get ourselves back to the garden" might be an ironic comment rather than a utopian program. We might claim her as a Canadian media theorist.
4. Including the possibility of female apostles. See the much discussed verse, Romans 16:7.
5. That O'Connor may have read McLuhan argues Jon Lance Bacon (1995).
6. Moten's (2010) argument is fully aware of and astute about the kinds of complexities that come from putting consent and pregnancy in the same sentence.
7. One could blame me for selling short the "oral tradition" here. Fair enough. I have made my case in favour of dialectic and text in "McLuhan's Grammatical Theology" (Peters, 2011).
8. I should mention the thrill that came in discovering the handwritten dedication in McLuhan's copy of Innis' *Bias of Communication*: "For H.M. McLuhan/ from H.A.I." Here the baton passes in Canadian media theory. So few letters, so much significance!
9. For a good historical orientation to developments over the past five decades, see Kenneth Cmiel (2009).
10. For more on the media theory of libraries, see the postscript to Cmiel & Peters (2020).

### References

- Auden, W.H. (1940). *In memory of W.B. Yeats*. URL: <https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats> [November 5, 2019].
- Bacon, Jon Lance. (1995). A fondness for supermarkets: *Wise Blood* and consumer culture. In M. Kreyling (Ed.), *New essays on Wise Blood* (pp. 25-49). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1968). "Unpacking my Library." In Hannah Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (pp. 59-67). New York: Schocken. (Original published 1928)
- Blake, William. (1793). *America: A Prophecy*. URL: <https://www.bartleby.com/235/257.html> [November 5, 2019].
- Cmiel, Kenneth. (2009). Libraries, books, and the information age. In D.P. Nord, J.S. Rubin, & M. Schudson (Eds.), *A history of the book in America* (pp. 325-346). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cmiel, Kenneth, & Peters, John Durham. (2020). *Promiscuous knowledge: Information, image, and other truth games in history*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. (1796, November 19). Letter to John Thelwall. URL: [http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/MembersOnly/Acourtbird.html#\\_edn3](http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/MembersOnly/Acourtbird.html#_edn3) [November 5, 2019].

- Griffith, D.W. [Director/producer]. (1915). *Birth of a nation*. [Film]. Adapted from The clansman: An historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan by Thomas F. Dixon Jr. United States: D.W. Griffith.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1979). *Phenomenology of spirit*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1954). The question concerning technology. In D.F. Krell (Ed.), *Basic writings* (pp. 287–317). New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. (1894). *Der Tor und der Tod*. <https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/der-tor-und-der-tod-1009/1> [ November 7, 2019].
- Hofstadter, Douglas. (1979). *Godel, Escher, Bach: An eternal golden braid*. New York, NY: Basic Books Inc.
- Hoggart, Richard. (1992). *Uses of literacy: Aspects of working-class life*. New Brunswick: Transaction. (Original published 1957)
- Innis, Harold. (1950). *Empire and communications*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Joyce, James. (1939). *Finnegans wake*. London, UK: Faber and Faber.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. (1985). *Philosophical fragments* (Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Ed. & Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original published 1844)
- Lang, Gladys Engel, & Lang, Kurt. (2001). *Etched in memory: The building and survival of artistic reputation*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1947). The southern quality. *The Sewanee Review*, 55(3), 357–383.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1951). *The mechanical bride: Folklore of industrial man*. New York: Vanguard Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1953). The later Innis. *Queen's Quarterly*, 60, 385–394.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1964). *Understanding media*. New York, NY: New American Library.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1967). Review of The Memory Theatre. *Encounter*, 28, 61–66.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1987). *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Toronto, ON: Toronto University Press.
- Moten, Fred. (2010, February 15). *Poetry Foundation*. URL: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/02/to-consent-not-to-be-a-single-being> [November 7, 2019].
- Peters, John Durham. (2011). McLuhan's grammatical theology. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 36(2), 227–242.
- Peters, John Durham. (2017). “You mean my whole fallacy is wrong”: On technological determinism. *Representations*, 140(Fall), 10–27.
- Resnais, Alain [Director] & Brauberger [Producer]. (1956). *Toute la mémoire du monde*. Les France: Films de la Pléiade.
- Schüttpelz, Erhard (2010): “Get the message through”: From the Channel of Communication to the Message of the Medium (1945–1960). In Ludwig Jäger, Erika Linz, & Irmela Schneider (Eds.): *Media, Culture, and Mediality. New Insights into the Current State of Research*, (pp. 109–138). Bielefeld: Transcript 2010.
- Thompson, E. P. (1966). *The making of the English working class*. Vintage Books: New York, NY. (Original published 1963)
- Thompson, Michael. (1978). *Rubbish theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Towns, Armond. (In review). *Racial narcosis: Black matter and the mediations of man*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Winthrop-Young, Geoffrey. (2008, February 15). *From the cursed and promised lands of media studies: Canadian speculations on a German theory phenomenon*. Iowa City, IA: Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa.
- Williams, Raymond. (1963). *Culture and Society*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original published 1958)
- YouTube. (2016). John Lennon & Yoko Ono interview with Marshall McLuhan: Part 1. University of Toronto, Canada. (Original work from BBC Motion Gallery, 1969) URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzFasnhF7zM> [November 5, 2019].