

McLuhan Today

“Alors, McLuhan, toujours mort ?”

Radu Varia, art critic

For years, or at least until I had finished translating *From Cliché to Archetype*, I didn't understand McLuhan. However, long before I heard the words, I already knew about the Global Village: I had read with awe *The Human Phenomenon* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin which talked about the noosphere rapidly weaving itself around the planet. Perhaps because I was brought up for a few key years in India and Pakistan, I had begun to imagine the periodicity of evolution and the relativity of culture in my early teens. The sense of the globality of humankind which I rediscovered with McLuhan also came from there. It is still not clear whether McLuhan was influenced by Teilhard, and even if Tom Wolfe seems to think he was, the fact is that McLuhan would not acknowledge it. When I asked him what he thought about Teilhard, “Science fiction,” he scoffed, “all of it.” It was a big put-down and a let-down but I stayed with McLuhan because he was giving his students something that no other teacher had ever given me: the sense of teaching—and living—in real-time. McLuhan's way of talking—and writing—carried the authority of direct perception, very large at times, of thenowness of knowledge and understanding. Even today, reading McLuhan is to take a quasi existential part in an emergent reality, of which the ground and foundations are made visible in lightning-speed flashes. McLuhan developed in me a sensibility of emergence, a way of becoming permanently co-extensive with a larger realm of time and space.

McLuhan is one of those rare thinkers who can give us the sense of the immanence of the world.

25 years after his death, what is his legacy? This is the question raised in a book of collected essays about the now officially recognized “Toronto School of Communication” soon to be published by the University of Toronto Press. It must be said, first, that McLuhan cared no more about his legacy than about his critics. He certainly did little to secure this legacy. Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, he said, “As for critics, don't even bother to ignore them.” The book is written for and by academics, so it gives priority to critics and to other academics who gave or took credit for some of McLuhan's best insights. The list is growing and includes some prestigious names (among many others, the book names Jonathan Miller, Susan Sontag, Frank Kermode, George Steiner, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Walter Ong, Paul Levinson, Brian Stock, Joshua Meyrowitz, Neil Postman, and so forth). One of the authors of the book, James Carey, calls McLuhan the “first Postmodernist” and proceeds to give one of the best explications of McLuhan's most famous koan, “the medium is the message.” Says Carey: “[The message is] the complex of habits, dispositions, extensions, metaphorical, and imaginative reproductions it creates and the secondary service background or industry it creates around it.”

But McLuhan's legacy goes well beyond growing a specific academic vine. His ideas may have been obscure but they somehow changed our collective mind. More than any other scholar of culture, including Harold Innis, Eric Havelock and Lewis Mumford, and even his (almost) contemporaries, such as Raymond Williams, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas or Fredric Jamieson, McLuhan promoted in the general public, as well as in business, government and education the awareness of media, and of their impact on the way we know the world. People can hardly associate his name with the Global Village cliché, but they have already internalized that notion and they identify with it culturally and socially.

It is one thing to draw attention to a significant object in a field, but it is quite another to draw attention to the whole field, the “ground” as he called it. First McLuhan drew atten-

tion to literacy which he opposed to orality as a main driver of western sensibility. It all comes down to how technology treats language. Words that are spoken control the listener (as we know from tribal chiefs and dictators in the radio era) but it is the reader and the writer that control words that are written. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* shows that, by allowing people to take control of language, and to appropriate it on their own terms, literacy had effected a quantum leap in individualism on the personal level. On the collective level, by making local languages visible and standardized, literacy had encouraged nationalism. Furthermore, by allowing anybody who could read to make up his or her own mind about deep religious matters, literacy also accelerated and split oral cultures to the breaking point and to the atrocious religious wars from the profound schismatic tendencies that followed the invention of the printing press. The social and ethical stabilization of the private citizen would take over two hundred years. Globalization is challenging it yet again and it is McLuhan's approach to "media fallout" that is providing us with the tools to figure out where we are going.

It was by writing a report on the effects of television and other electronic media for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters that McLuhan saw that electricity had become the ground of culture and a factor in our lives even more significant than the alphabet and the printing press. The title of the report was also to be that of the book which would bring him international fame three years later, *Understanding Media* (1963). He saw the effects of electricity as reversing those previously observed in literacy. His favorite metaphor for this was the story of Humpty Dumpty "put together again." Just as reversing the film reel can reconstitute exactly the pieces of a broken egg, electricity was throwing the whole world back into a previous state, a new oral condition, but one that was now globalized, transnational, multicultural and given to transborder politics of the image, subject to a kind of generalized "butterfly effect" where anything anywhere affects everything everywhere else, where "half the world's business is to spy and report on the other half," where private identity melts in crowds, mobs and networks and endless gossip groups (blogs?). A village, in other words, but an electronic one in which the closeness can occasionally become uncomfortable. He observed the implosive nature of electricity and could have predicted terrorism as both a condition of "oral man, to whom everything is sudden," and the natural form of war in a total information environment where "rumors are the real thing," He feared the total loss of private identity in the electronic data gathering that he foresaw in the early sixties: "The more they know about you, the less you exist." We had arguments about that. I kept thinking (hoping?) that computers would allow us to recover some of the control we had lost to TV. Marshall thought that electricity would wipe us out as individuals, like a tidal wave. "Don't even bother swimming," he would add, wryly.

Like Vannevar Bush and Ted Nelson, he pondered about what the new technologies would do to the way we think:

It is the almost total coverage of the globe in time and space that has rendered the book an increasingly obsolete form of communication. The slow movement of the eye along lines of type, the slow procession of items organized by the mind to fit into these endless horizontal columns-these procedures can't stand up to the pressures of instantaneous coverage of the earth.

And elsewhere he opens the question of the social and political consequences of massive acceleration of information flows: "It is the sheer quantity of information which has alienated us from political and social reality. The large city isolates the individual citizen, but the multi-cultural perspectives of the press have isolated the human spirit itself from any milieu."

The Internet may be about to give a solution to this problem now that it is populating itself with social software that creates just-in-time communities such as blogging or social tagging practices.

Before hypertext, McLuhan wrote in a hypertextual way. It helped to read him that way, too. His writings always seem to make connections across chasms of logic and incongruity. A la Edward De Bono, but much earlier, he had invented a 52-card game where each card carried an (often funny) statement. Your job as a user would be to pick a few cards at random and relate what they said to your question or problem, personal or corporate. Here is an example of a few of these statements. Just trying to relate them to any question that comes to mind, you will find yourself thinking in the same way that you surf the web, clicking from site to site:

“Thanks for the mammaries”

“I have a small brain and I intend to use it”

“Break-down is break-through”

“Cubist art: inside-outside-inner-outer”

“Sea-shell ebb music wayriver she flows”

“The mini-skirt and the trial balloon: the end is in sight”

“The jester is the King’s PR (public relations) man”

Sure, we could dismiss this technique as yet another self-help method of lateral thinking. With McLuhan, it becomes a trigger for an epistemological revolution. I see the new hypertextual way of thinking relating to something much more ancient, more effective and more durable, the millenary practice of the *Yijing*, the book of divination created by the Chinese four thousand years ago. It works a bit like your horoscope. With a throw of dice, or the Chinese equivalent, you obtain a series of statements that you must relate to your situation seen as a totality encompassing past, present and future. McLuhan called that sort of practice “predicting the present.” It is the kind of mental space that surfing kids, Wikipedians, social bookmarkers and networking taggers are developing today.

It is fitting for Ars Electronica to celebrate McLuhan during this anniversary. Surely, he was a poet of electricity and he gave the greatest attention and respect to the arts and to artistic sensibility. He gained his understanding of the rhetorical power of advertising and media by studying poetry. Edgar Allen Poe taught him to start with the effects of media, rather than their causes. What attracted McLuhan in the French symbolists was a special frame of mind that he likened to an effect of electricity. Synesthetic, pointing to the invisible and to the magic of action at-a-distance, symbolism is a movement which McLuhan explicitly associated with electricity, with Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and in the Anglo-Saxon cultures with Elliott, Pound, and Joyce. Like James Joyce, he considered artists as people who “forge the

uncreated consciousness of their race.” Helping himself to large insights of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, he made evident and palpable the changes in our ways of feeling and thinking coming from electronic media ranging from the telegraph to the mainframe computer.

Dealing with the effects of media upon the senses, McLuhan turned to other arts to find clues about sensibility. Electricity, by resensorializing language, revolutionized our sensory life, and according to McLuhan, only the artist, the person “of total awareness” as he called artists, was capable of reporting accurately on this phenomenon. The artist studies the effects, not the causes, of the contemporary situation and of the new media; hence the artist alone can truly predict the psychological consequences of these media.

McLuhan insisted that the electronic world is not visual, but tactile. He pointed out the connection and the fluid continuity between the organic currents in the body and the technical ones in the electronic grid of the Earth. Electronic media are deeply involving. All interactive media and interfaces generally could usefully be viewed as variations on a tactile extension of the hand and the body. They modulate the intervals between our bodies and the world, like music, or dance. It is also possible to see cursor, mouse, touchpad and keyboard as tactile modalities to navigate in information by clicking, dragging, dropping.

A good proportion of the artists who have been invited to *Ars Electronica* over the last 26 years would gladly acknowledge their debt to McLuhan’s inspiration.

McLuhan today is hypertinent. True, he did not predict the Internet, but he observed that, after having extended our senses and our central nervous system, “it was but a small step to externalize also our consciousness.” The amazing thing is that while he had no idea about personal computers, the Internet, or even mobile phones, what he addresses in all his writings, from *Understanding Media* onwards, seems always to include these new media and helps to better understand them. Although the state of the world today is far from being as hopeful as it was during McLuhan’s lifetime, despite the nuclear threat at that time, his relentless probing of the ground of our present condition helps us to recognize that this too is a transition, and helps us see the contours of electronic humankind.

One of McLuhan’s most challenging-and beautiful-thoughts is “In the electric age, we wear all mankind as our skin.” Elsewhere he makes an important connection between this awareness of the world and our own: “We are compelled to react to the world as a whole ... because electric media instantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate.” In that sense, we are forever connected physically to the whole contemporary scene. There is a sense of the total surround, of the intimacy, of the immediacy of electronic technology, of our interfaces with the world such as, for example, the closeness we entertain with our mobile phones.

Eventually, electricity will breed transparency and bring about a new global ethic to ensure peaceful cohabitation. Because electricity is so much faster than literacy, that may happen sooner than we think. It is this hopes that, for me, is the public legacy of McLuhan.