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MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND COMMUNICATION

ETHICS: THE TAMING OF AMERICANITIS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Julie A. Cramer Hunsberger

December 2016

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND COMMUNICATION

ETHICS: THE TAMING OF AMERICANITIS

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Julie A. Cramer Hunsberger

Approved October 7, 2016

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ABSTRACT

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND COMMUNICATION

ETHICS: THE TAMING OF AMERICANITIS

By

Julie A. Cramer Hunsberger

December 2016

Dissertation supervised by: Dr. Ronald C. Arnett

In 1880 neurologist George Miller Beard identified the diagnosis of neurasthenia. Popularly referred to as *Americanitis*, Beard treated an increasing number of people for symptoms of anxiety, malaise and gastric discomfort. Per Beard, the illness resulted from the rapidly changing mechanical landscape of modernity. Similarly, contemporary Media Ecology literature suggests that *Americanitis* continues amidst our current digital moment. Manifest as narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, digital *Americanitis* results due to technological encouragement of existential and communicative closure, thereby negatively implicating the human condition, human communication and communication ethics practices. As such, this project considers Marshall McLuhan's Media Ecology to examine the communicative phenomena of *Americanitis*. Based on affable grounding assumptions as well as calls in recent literature, McLuhan's work is read through the presently underrepresented Media Ecology

scholarly approach of existential phenomenology. In particular, this Merleau-Pontean existential phenomenological reading enhances understanding of the implicit theory of human communication and communication ethics informing McLuhan's Media Ecology criticism. Once elucidated, McLuhan's theoretical assumptions, aims and ends comport with theoretical dimensions of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology to reveal how and why technology encourages our digital *Americanitis*. When placed into conversation, the two thinkers also offer possible responses to our ills – approaches to "taming" *Americanitis*.

DEDICATION

To: My parents. Thank you. I miss you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work, as with many human creations, is not the product of my efforts alone. Though I accept sole responsibility for my presentation of ideas herein, I am deeply indebted to a great number of people and institutions whose efforts directed, assisted, supported and encouraged my work. First and foremost, I am grateful to Duquesne University and the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts for awarding me the McAnulty Dissertation Fellowship. This honor permitted me the luxury of focus with my writing, which, I hope, has enhanced the quality of this work. Likewise, I am thankful to Duquesne University and the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies for allowing me the opportunity to pursue doctoral studies.

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To all whom I express gratitude, I consider you my heroes. I only hope that what I have done and what I might do in the future reflects the volume of gratitude I feel toward you. In closing, all the more I may say is: thank you for everything.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1880 neurologist, George Miller Beard identified the diagnosis of 'neurasthenia' (Bellah et al. 117). Popularly referred to as Americanitis, this anxious, nervous exhaustion resulted from the increasing pace of change and mechanization of life in industrial era North America. Work within the tradition of Media Ecology reveals that Americanitis affects us in the electronic and digital ages as well (Boorstin; McLuhan UM; Turkle). Americanitis, as it relates to the technologized mechanization, electrification and digitization of our milieu, raises questions about connections between technology, human communication, and communication ethics. This chapter introduces the phenomenon of Americanitis as a communicative response to particular historical moments and asks how Media Ecology, existential phenomenology and communication ethics may help us to understand and respond to Americanitis.

1.1 Introduction

In 1880 neurologist, George Miller Beard identified the diagnosis of *neurasthenia* (Bellah et al. 117). Beard treated an increasing number of patients for symptoms of anxiety, malaise, and gastric discomfort. Popularly referred to as *Americanitis*[1], the symptoms resulted from the increasing pace of change and mechanization of life in industrial era North America. As *Americanitis* manifests in response to the *modern condition* of rapid technological progress, two primary thinkers writing about tools, technology, and anxiety at the height of modernity are the subject of this investigation – Marshall McLuhan and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Writing as near contemporaries, separated by geography, primary assumptions and subject matter, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty share compelling themes that elucidate and respond to issues surrounding our ongoing *Americanitis*. This project is an investigation of McLuhan's Media Ecology and Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of human communication for purposes of understanding communication ethics practices in regard to our technologized, narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, our *Americanitis*, across the mechanical, electronic and digital ages.

The primary shared theme I will address is McLuhan's implicit humanistic, ethics of community and responsibility (McLuhan *MB* 75, *LOM* 96-97; Kroker), as it relates to Merleau-

Ponty's explicit existential-communal ethic of responsibility (Merleau-Ponty *Signs* 75, *WP* 87, *PrP* 136-39, 163; *HT*; T. Baldwin 27; Dillon 255; Levin 49). Although far from being equivalent, this shared concern for humanistic responsibility in McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's respective works rests upon each thinker's rejection of reductive, modernist, scientistic models of human communication in favor of a view attentive to relational practices. Additionally, each thinker's interest in humanistic responsibility rests upon the metaphors of *narcissism* and *anxiety* (i.e., *Americanitis*), thereby suggesting shared concern for understanding of self, other and the significance of our technologized world, elements also central to communication ethics.

That is, emphasis on communication ethics, which involves concern for human contact (Macke), acknowledgement (Hyde), change, choice and responsibility (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), aims to go beyond examination of technology-human relations, so prevalent in Media Ecology scholarship, to prioritize concern for human persons and meaning (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 25-41). As Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe, "communication ethics is the recognition that we take a given philosophy of communication, an understanding of the good, and apply it in interaction with others" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 32). The form, content and style of communication, occurring amidst the grounds of spatio-temporal contexts, reflect our underlying moral assumptions regarding goods, "central value[s] … manifested in communicative practices that we seek to protect and promote in our discourse together" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 2). As such, this co-reading of Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan should elucidate each thinker's implicit assumptions regarding *goods* while also considering communication ethics practices responsive to our present narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, our digital *Americanitis*.

This chapter first discusses *Americanitis* as a communicative phenomenon requiring attention. I then describe historical approaches to studying media and the emergence of Media

Ecology, as it relates to communication studies, to elucidate Media Ecology's intellectual influences, primary assumptions and theoretical groundings. Next, based on scholarship encouraging such investigation, I consider the presently underrepresented existential phenomenological approach in Media Ecology scholarship, followed by consideration of a possible conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. I conclude with consideration of *Americanitis*, the future of human communication and communication ethics practices amidst our rapidly changing, technical milieux.

1.2 *Americanitis*

George Miller Beard's *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion* offers a nineteenth-century, medical-biological read of "neurasthenia" as a "loss of nerve" (i.e., strength and will both physical and psychic), which often involves pervasive experiences of anxiety. Additionally, Beard notes in *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences*, that the "primary cause of this development … is modern civilization, which is distinguished from the ancient by these five characteristics: steam-power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women" (*vi*). Beard's *Supplement* points to technological innovation and rapid social change as primary causes of anxiety-related nervous exhaustion. Such a claim resonates with McLuhan's Media Ecology attention to anxiety as an *effect* of electronic media (*UM*).

I choose to broaden Beard's "neurasthenia" via the popular, vernacular term *Americanitis* (Bellah et al.) to describe technologically-propelled *narcissistically*, *anxious nervous exhaustion*. This is because Media Ecology theorists Daniel Boorstin, Marshall McLuhan and Sherry Turkle link the metaphors of narcissism and anxiety to describe mediated human relations in the electronic and digital ages. Similar to Beard's contention that mechanical, technical agents are the primary cause of *nervous exhaustion*, Media Ecology suggests that technology *encourages*

narcissistic anxiety. In our present digital moment, the seemingly meaningless (Tillich) milieu

through which we maintain shallow engagement with self, other and world, in pathologically

narcissistic manners (Lasch; Turkle), elevates the anxious and exhaustive experience of

Americanitis to new heights.[2] We are so anxious that we prefer to talk to robots over people,

gaze at a screen rather than a face (Turkle), and live life skimming the surface (Carr). We are

tired (Turkle). We are "overwhelmed" (Strate *Studying* 135; Thiebaud). Yet we continue to turn

to technology rather than understanding our dilemma.

   Americanitis, understood as narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, results in-part

from a sense of self so fragile that we undertake relational postures for purposes of extreme self-

protection (Turkle). Due to our technologized existence, McLuhan says that we become numb

and disembodied; Turkle that we control human contact, and Boorstin says that we seek only

what offers comfort and security. Implications include cultural stagnation, habitual and

instrumental relational engagements, and an overall lack of meaning or purpose (McLuhan *UM*)

– in short, a lack of community, responsibility and grounding significance. Media Ecology

clearly illuminates the communicative symptoms of mechanical, electronic and digital

technologies and raises questions of concern which call for response.

   As anxiety disorders have become "the most common mental disorders experienced by

Americans" in the contemporary United States (*Any Anxiety Disorder among Adults*),

Americanitis requires understanding in our digital moment. With an average age of onset for

anxiety disorders at 11 years, 18 percent (i.e., 40 million) of adults in the United States suffer

from anxiety.[3] "The modern era,"[4] upon which Beard blamed *neurasthenia*, was "marked by a[n

unquestioned] privileging of progress, science, and fractured human communities" (Arnett and

Holba 46). Modernity's promise of absolute freedom through autonomous rationality led us to

believe that we could technologically control our identities, others, and our world toward goals of unending human betterment and mastery over nature (Carey *TCS*). This promise continues to inform thinking about our human condition in the present moment (Arnett and Holba). Additionally, the pace of change has increased significantly since Beard's identification of *Americanitis*, amplifying experiences of meaninglessness, narcissistic engagements and anxiety – experiences reflective of the residual, modernist, ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Exploring *Americanitis* as a communicative response to given historical moments, framed by existential phenomenology of human communication (Merleau-Ponty), Media Ecology (McLuhan) and communication ethics, ought to "open … a hermeneutic door for increasing interpretive possibilities" to understand our *Americanitis* (Arnett and Holba 47).

1.3 The Horizons of Media Ecology

The term "media ecology" appears in contemporary works considering media and technology (e.g., Mitchell and Hansen). However, not all which include the term work within the tradition of Media Ecology. The Media Ecology[5] (Media Ecology or M.E. forward) approach was formally articulated at the 1968 meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English by Neil Postman per inspiration from Marshall McLuhan's work (Lum). A few years later, Postman instituted a doctoral degree in Media Ecology Studies at New York University. Postman's efforts served to legitimize M.E. as a formal approach, rooted in theoretical propositions that attend to the relationship between technology, communication, and culture (Anton *Comm.*; Lum).

Inspired by McLuhan's assertion that "any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment … [which is] not passive wrapping … but active process" (*UM* 12), Postman defines Media Ecology as "the study of media environments" (media-ecology.org).

Media environments, much like natural environments, are "complex message system[s], which impose … on human beings certain ways of thinking, feeling and behaving" through "structure, content and impact" (Postman cited in media-ecology.org). Postman suggests that we typically assume media are "passive objects" or "conveyance mechanisms," rather than environments that "affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value" (media-ecology.org). M.E. aims to elucidate the interplay of agency between human and technology to allow us to see clearly, "how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival" (media-ecology.org).

Although Postman formally articulated and instituted Media Ecology as a scholarly approach, his efforts stem from McLuhan's explicit assertion of media as environments. This assertion did not appear to McLuhan *ex nihilo*, but rather emerged from traditions of thought that comprise the overall history of media study generally and the historical roots of M.E. in particular. Strate offers a comprehensive overview of the variety of intellectual influences informing M.E.'s concern with media (i.e., technology), communication, and culture through several essays.[6] He says that M.E.'s influences:

> … can be traced to the studies of technology produced by Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, and Peter Drucker; the research on oral tradition, writing systems, and typography associated with Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and Denise Schmandt-Besserat, as well as Lucien Febvre, Henri-Jean Martin, and Elizabeth Eisenstein; the studies of media and culture of Harold Innis, Edward T. Hall, Edmund Carpenter, and James Carey; and the investigations into symbolic form carried out by Alfred Korzybski, Suzanne Langer, Dorothy Lee, and Neil Postman (Strate *Studying* 130)

Thus, like communication studies, Media Ecology encompasses a variety of intellectual influences and traditions (Carey *Roots*; Lum; see also Gehrke). Although Lum notes that review

essays in the communication field do not pervasively acknowledge Media Ecology as an approach to media study, he emphasizes how the disciplines are familiar and complementary (Lum 3). In fact, early approaches to media studies and the development of Media Ecology hold close to the development of communication studies as a field.

Drawing on the work of Casey Lum, Lance Strate and James Carey, this section offers a narrative account of the emergence of early media studies, the development of Media Ecology, and the assumptions and approaches of Media Ecology. Additionally, as McLuhan served as direct inspiration for Postman's formal establishment of the Media Ecology approach, I engage McLuhan as both figure and ground throughout this section to aid understanding. To conclude, I address contemporary media study and possibilities for future directions of Media Ecology.

1.3.2 The Emergence of Early Media Studies and the Impetus for Media Ecology

Carey, Lum and Strate (*Studying*) all place the emergence of early media studies in conjunction with the establishment of communication as a formal field of study. The field of communication studies, deeply connected to, yet still distinct from English, Psychology, Philosophy and mass media studies, "began in the years surrounding World War I as a response to widespread fear of propaganda" (Carey *TCS* 22). This interest intensified following World War II, due to Hitler's rise to power (Cohen; Gehrke). Additionally, the emergence of electronic media during this early twentieth-century moment, e.g., film, radio, and television, extended the reach of previous modern public relations and advertising efforts (Carey *TCS*; Strate *Echoes*).

Offering a critique of early twentieth-century, non-ecological media studies in "The Chicago School and Mass Communication Research," James Carey's tracing of the "history of mass communication research" helps to contextualize the emergence of Media Ecology as it relates to communication theory and the historical moment of modernity. Carey suggests that

there is "no history" of media and technology studies characterized as "mass communication research" (21). Scattered writings regarding particular communication media, such as the printing press and associated issues (e.g., freedom of the press), appear in a vast variety of literature beginning in the seventeenth century (21). An historical account of "mass communication research is a recent literary genre" that gathers "the accumulated literary debris into a coherent narrative" (21). The narrative generally shifts from practices suspiciously critical of mass media in the 1920s and 1930s to a story that merely "serves … to focus, justify and legitimate a 20th century invention, the mass media," as a means of positively contributing to socio-cultural stasis in the 1940s (Carey *TCS* 21).

Early mass media research strictly considered the "extraordinary power" of communication technology "to shape the beliefs and conduct of ordinary men and women" (Carey *TCS* 22). This approach, known as "media effects," unfolded in communication literature of the 1920s and 1930s and offered the picture of powerful media content often negatively impacting audience (Carey *TCS* 22). Lum, also addressing these developments, discusses two distinct schools of thought in the communication field that informed media effects and mass media scholarship – "The Administrative Empirical School" and the "Critical School" (Lum 13).

The Administrative School of "media effects studies" is "concerned with empirically verifiable short-term behavioral impact of media content on its users or consumers" (Lum 13). Lum explains that media effects research is quantitative and positivistic – concerned with how sovereign media content affects passive audiences. The Critical School, influenced by the Frankfurt School and reinvigorated interest in Marxist studies, takes a qualitative approach and "maintains a politico-ideological, as well as theoretical perspective that is somewhat … opposed to that of the ... Administrative School" (Lum 14; Carey *TCS* 26-27). Although both approaches

concern themselves with the power of media, the administrative approach focuses on effects upon the audience when media is used (Lum). The critical approach considers "how political and corporate control over the media may play an essential role in media content production, distribution and access" with the aim of liberating audiences from media power structures (Lum 13-14). Carey contends that such approaches are premised upon a Lockean view of communication and socio-political-cultural liberal utilitarianism through which it is believed that "once freedom [of rational universal consensus] was secured against" the power of media, "truth and social progress were guaranteed" (Carey *TCS* 27). This modernist view offers communicative agency as contingent upon absolute *freedom from* domination – absolute autonomy of rational will formation through the exchange of unrestricted information.

However, during the same decades, an alternative theory of communication stemming from the University of Chicago (i.e., *The Chicago School*) also emerged. "John Dewey … along with George Herbert Mead, Robert E. Park and Charles Cooley … reacted against the form in which utilitarianism was incarnated in the late 19th century" (Carey *TCS* 30). Their generally American pragmatist, interactionist, view situates communication as creative of culture, in "the sense of community building" (Carey *TCS* 33). Communicative agency in this view is a *freedom to* act – the idea that agents have the power to choose to act within limits of context and power structures, at times surpassing them. For *The Chicago School*, culture does not use communication; culture *is* communication – an ongoing and never completed communicative process through which we have the power to constantly shape, and reshape, our understandings (Carey *TCS* 32). *The Chicago School's* focus on culture rather than effects of media content and power structures influenced a Canadian political economy scholar, Harold Innis, whose work informs the theoretical assumptions of a third, ecological, approach to media study.

1.3.3 Media Ecology's Beginnings and Development

Like Carey and Strate, Lum says that, "the genesis of media ecology should be understood within the larger context of the rise of North American communication and cultural studies … the result of" competing intellectual "responses to the major social, economic, political and cultural currents that helped shape the 20th century as a century of change" (Lum 11). The quick pace of change, coupled with immigration, moral fall-out from World War II and "the rapid succession of innovations in transports and electronic communications that began in the latter part of the 19th century" (e.g., trains, telegraph, phone, film, radio and television) increased contact between people and influenced socio-political and cultural dynamics (Lum 12). Although Innis did not study directly with Dewey, Mead, Park and Cooley, he was a doctoral student at the University of Chicago who came to share their view of culture, social organization and communication (Strate *Echoes*). With this view, Innis historically traces moments of cultural rupture and change propelled by technological innovations (Carey *Roots*; Strate *Echoes*).

Following William Kuhns' 1971 *Industrial Prophets*, Lum identifies Innis as one of seven primary thinkers who shaped this ecological alternative to the administrative media effects and critical mass media approaches (Lum). The other six thinkers include Lewis Mumford, Siegfried Giedion, Norbet Wiener, Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Ellul and Buckminster Fuller (Lum 14). All seven offer an "ecological" and historical view of technology in terms of its relationship to culture, and their "writings have helped lay down part of media ecology's theoretical underpinnings" (Lum 14). The seven thinkers' view of technology as offering an "environmental and formal, structural impact on society and culture" unified their diverse approaches (Lum 14). As early as the 1950s interdisciplinary studies began to shape the M.E.

tradition encompassing political studies (e.g., Innis), classical studies (e.g., Havelock), rhetoric (e.g., McLuhan), and anthropology (e.g., Edmund Carpenter) (Lum; Strate *Echoes*).

In 1950s Toronto, Innis, McLuhan and Carpenter convened regularly to share ideas at meetings of what Lum describes as an "informal theory group" (Lum). McLuhan was definitively inspired and fairly influenced by Innis' ideas on communication media (Lum). Throughout his body of work, "Innis points to the interrelationships between a variety of factors, including communication, language and culture, knowledge and education, transportation, time-keeping, political economy, military operations, and science and technology, all of which interact to produce both unique historical circumstances and discernible historical patterns" (Strate *Echoes* 28). Per Innis, depending on their technological ecology, cultures organize toward biases of: synthesis or analysis, time or space, orality or literacy, and hearing or seeing (Innis). Innis is concerned with the sustainability of cultures through media that encourage a balance between the dichotomous biases (Innis). Although Innis only worked with McLuhan and Carpenter for a brief time, Lum suggests that the view from Toronto upon the changing technological environment of the United States offered enough critical distance for the three to assess clearly the early impact of electronic communication media. From this position, McLuhan would take up and extend Innis' ideas into the 1960s ecology.

Lum cites the 1960s as the decade during which mediated-environmental changes were most evident. The socio-political landscape of the U.S. was rife with calls for change – the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protests and nuclear contestation were reflexively encouraged by network broadcast television. However, critical observations about the impact of media during this tumultuous decade were not limited to McLuhan's Canadian view. At NYU, Neil Postman noticed shifts in students' learning during the 1960s and 1970s (Lum 18-19).

Postman was a professor of English at NYU in 1968. Many of the courses he taught placed communication, cultural change, education and technology in prominent positions. Postman also drew on communication theory of S.I. Hayakawa, I.A. Richards, Benjamin Whorf, Edward Sapir, the media critique of McLuhan, and the anthropology of Carpenter to inform his curriculum, eventually implementing the formal Media Ecology doctoral program in 1971.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed further development of Media Ecology. First in the 1980s, two seminal books – Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* – offered Media Ecology to academic and mainstream audiences.[7] Second, Postman and his students attended the annual convention of the International Communication Association in 1984 in an effort "to reach out to the mainstream communication research community" (Lum 26). Third, during the late 1980s and 1990s, Media Ecology program graduates began teaching at universities across North America, which helped to promote the perspective in various departments and disciplines (Lum). Although Postman articulated and instituted the M.E. approach, it is founded upon McLuhan's unique ecological view of media, which both sets and exemplifies the primary assumptions of the M.E. approach.

1.3.4 Media Ecology's Assumptions: McLuhan's "Media as Environments"

Postman's inspiration for articulating the Media Ecology approach stems directly from McLuhan's seminal *Understanding Media* with its explicit assertion that *media are environments* (Lum 28). As mentioned previously, Innis is one influential source for McLuhan's assertion. Per Carey, another influence for McLuhan's M.E. is Lewis Mumford, also one of the seven technology writers identified by Kuhns (*Roots*). While Innis examined technological change – revolutions – across history, Mumford examined epochs of technology (Carey *Roots*).

McLuhan readily appropriates two of Innis' ideas – his notions of bias and communicative cultural organization (Strate *Studying*). Mumford's influence is similarly two-fold. Strate suggests that McLuhan directly follows Mumford's notion that technologies are *extensional*, as evidenced in the subtitle to McLuhan's *UM* – "the extensions of man" (*Studying* 136). McLuhan additionally drew on Mumford's attention to "the human body" as "our primary medium" of interaction with the world (Strate *Studying* 136). Coupling Mumford's metaphors with Innis', McLuhan would eventually suggest that media as environments implicate the sensory function of our bodies, biasing and extending particular senses to the detriment of others, which leads to physical and psychical stress – anxieties – for individuals and cultures alike (*UM*). McLuhan's synthesis of these two founding, ecologically attentive scholars, offers a point from which Postman could formally articulate Media Ecology as *the study of media environments*, and as Lum suggests, there are four types of *media environments* at work in Media Ecology research.

First, M.E. views "media as sensorial environments" (Lum 28). From this perspective, a particular medium is a "sensory apparatus" (Lum 29). Although we typically, "perceive our immediate surroundings by using … all of our senses," (e.g., hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch) certain media "are our (sensory) extensions" (Lum 28-29). For example, the communication medium of the radio is an apparatus of the ear, television of the eye and ear, and so on. Throughout history, then, different generations have inherited dominant sensory extensions or apparatus that condition "the ways in which we receive sensory data with which we comprehend and re/construct the world around us" (Lum 29). As environments (i.e., media) change, so do the ways that we perceive and understand our world.

Second, Media Ecology views "media as symbolic environments," which indicates, "every communication medium ... is constituted by a unique set of codes and syntax" (Lum 29).

This perspective considers the epistemic impact of media. Lum acknowledges that these two perspectives – media as sensorial environments and media as symbolic environments – are not separate in Media Ecology; rather, they intersect and "interact" (Lum 30). Thus, one finds McLuhan and other M.E. thinkers, such as Walter Ong, exploring "the sensorial environments into which we enter when we use our media for understanding the world" (Lum 29) and correlatively how such environments implicate understanding.

The third perspective suggests that "media environments" are "multimedia environments" (Lum 30). In this regard, Media Ecology wishes to understand how all aspects of media – the particular sensory and symbolic structures of a particular medium – relate to each other. The media environment is a complex interrelated milieu "whose whole is qualitatively different from the sum of its (multimedia) sensorial-symbolic parts" (Lum 31). As appropriated by McLuhan, this gestalt, environmental view of media encourages attention to the figure-ground interplay of the message as figure (i.e., content, what we overtly interpret to make meaning) and the medium as ground (i.e., the particular communication technology). McLuhan says we must attend not only to content (figure) but also to media forms as hidden ground – as environments, which are given and therefore often unnoticed background (*UM*; *LOM*). Taken as wholes, the interplay of various figure-ground elements elucidates effects that exceed those noted in the "administrative" media effects approach and the "critical" power-centered approaches to media studies. This leads to the fourth environmental perspective that Lum offers – a reflexive view of "environments as media" (Lum 31).

Media Ecology assumes that all aspects of human experience are interrelated. Although M.E. emphasizes media as environments, it necessarily assumes that environments are media. "From this conception, we are situated within the [sensorial and] symbolic structures of media,

that is, we are 'engaging in' the media for our communication" – not standing "outside" of media and using it to communicate (Lum 31). Human institutions (e.g., schools) are environments through which we engage others and often involve various media environments. Such a view necessarily follows for McLuhan's environments. His media work considers all dimensions of interaction between humans and technologies as they relate to our experience and understanding of our worlds. As McLuhan's work helped to ground this primary assumption of Media Ecology, his work is no less influential in terms of the M.E. approaches to scholarship.

1.3.5 Media Ecology's Approaches: "Theoretical Propositions," "Questions" and "Epochs"

The four necessarily connected M.E. environmental perspectives rest on three "underlying theoretical propositions" (Lum 32). The first is that "media are not neutral, transparent, or value-free conduits for carrying data or information ... Instead, media's intrinsic physical structure and symbolic form plays a defining role in shaping what and how information is" (Lum 32). With influence from Innis and Mumford, McLuhan's Media Ecology posits that media environments affect us at sensory, symbolic and social levels of experience. This leads to the second proposition: media forms condition sensory and epistemic biases (Lum 32-33). This draws directly on Innis' assertion that communicative forms instantiate cultural and political biases (Innis). Lum contends that M.E. views media as reflexively conditioning the following biases: "intellectual and emotional"; "temporal, spatial, and sensory"; "political"; "social"; "metaphysical"; "content"; and "epistemological" (Lum 33), which have "consequences" for cultures and the human condition (Lum 32). While most evident in McLuhan's work, per his influence from Innis, these propositions are apparent in much M.E. scholarship.

In addition to its theoretical propositions, Media Ecology scholarship concerns itself with certain questions about the relationship between media, communication, and culture. Lum offers

a detailed account of these questions via discussion of a continuum of *technological determinism* and *historical epochs*. In terms of the former, Lum contends that Media Ecology scholars implicitly and explicitly raise questions about human agency. The two extreme ends of the continuum are: 1. "soft determinism," or the idea that human agency determines the form of technology, which in turn, shapes biases, modes of cultural organization, etc.; and 2. "hard determinism," or the idea that technological forms unconditionally condition biases and culture (Lum). Lum describes the middle position as "culture/technology symbiosis," which views "human culture as the result of the ongoing, interdependent and therefore mutually influential interaction between people and their technologies" (Lum 34). The middle position does not ascribe agency exclusively to humans or technology, but rather to humans *and* technology – a reflexive shaping of the world and the human condition. Although McLuhan has been exclusively labeled a techno-apologist and a techno-determinist,[8] his work actually reflects the *culture-technology symbiosis* view, due to his implicit emphasis on reflexivity (Van den Eede).

Additional questions of Media Ecology scholarship are often posed in terms of what Lum terms "an epochal historiography of media" (34-35). Beginning with oral-aural cultures, through various stages of literacy (e.g., script and print) to electronic media, Media Ecology scholarship is concerned with how dominant forms of media, during given historical moments, help to shape perceptive, social, cultural and political dimensions of human experience. Theorists working within the first two epochs, which are often brought together under the rubric of orality-literacy studies, "draw inspirations from the works by scholars from ... archaeology, classics, folklore, general semantics, linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and media studies. They include Jack Goody ... [Eric] Havelock ... S.I. Hayakawa ... Robert K. Logan ... [Walter] Ong ... [Neil] Postman ... Denise Schmandt-Besserat ... Edward Sapir ... and [Benjamin] Whorf" (Lum 35).

The work of these diverse thinkers informs Media Ecology scholarship seeking to understand sensory, communicative, social and political dimensions of cultures that existed prior to writing. Questions in this orality-literacy epoch aim to describe and interpret what communication media was for oral cultures, how that media conditions epistemic experience, and how environmental shifts toward literacy influence thinking about ethics.[9] McLuhan focuses his attention on the orality-literacy epoch in an early text, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

Interestingly, several Media Ecology scholars will address all historical epochs when questioning the forms, biases and consequences of media, including the most recent epoch to follow print – electricity. Early electronic communication media were mechanical – for example, the telegraph. As electricity evolved so did electronic media – the telephone, the radio, the television and the personal computer. Although one may think that we have moved beyond electricity to the digital age, digital technologies require electricity to operate. Questions for the epoch of electricity involve the reach of communication, where we may locate meaning centers amidst a climate of ever-present, speedy electronic information and change, as well as how the effects of electricity for culture relate back to the epochs of orality and literacy (Lum).

Lum explains that the epoch of electronic media, presented scholars with a sense of urgency to understand the relation between media, communication and culture. "Rapid technological changes … defined this electronic communication epoch … within just a little more than a brief century, scores of new media technologies are introduced" (Lum 38). These media developments instantiated rapid social, cultural and political change the world over, for they implicate "temporal and spatial, as well as symbolic and physical structural biases" (Lum 38), which reflexively shape cultures. The respective works of Ong and McLuhan illustrate Lum's discussion of M.E. epochs. Though the two address the epistemic, communicative and

moral implications of all epochs differently, both share assumptions about media thereby

positioning their work as complementary and coherent within the M.E. tradition.

That is, in contrast to early Administrative School media effects research and Critical

School mass media research, which view technology as tools external to humans that are *used* to

communicate, much Media Ecology literature offers an embodied view of technology as it

relates to culture and communication (Lum; Strate *Echoes*). For M.E., media is *engaged* (not

used) bodily, epistemically, ontologically, individually, and collectively *in* (not for)

communication (Lum).These general and overarching assumptions guide much of the research in

Media Ecology, yet, with nuanced appropriation.

Approaches vary from micro existential (e.g., Carr; Ellul, *Word*; McLuhan; Mumford;

Ong; Turkle)[10] to macro socio-cultural-political inquiry (e.g., Boorstin; Ellul *Society*, *System*;

Havelock; Innis; McLuhan; Ong).[11] These approaches are not mutually exclusive. M.E. scholars

who attend to micro existential aspects of the media ecosphere also attend to macro socio-

cultural-political matters (e.g., McLuhan).[12] Regardless of the particularities of approach, works

within the Media Ecology tradition cohere through nuanced appropriation of its propositions,

aims and approaches – all of which McLuhan's work definitively inspired and demonstrates.

1.3.6 Contemporary Media Study and Media Ecology's Future Directions

Current approaches to studying media still include the "Administrative School" and the

"Critical School."[13] Although these approaches may co-inform Media Ecology, their often

abstract theoretical analyses of media content and media power structures continue to advance a

representationalist, Lockean, utilitarian view of rational communicative freedom as *freedom from*

powerful media, as discussed by Carey earlier. Additionally, more recent approaches to studying

media include the philosophy of technology and the phenomenology of technology (e.g., Hubert

Dreyfus; Don Ihde; Mark Hansen).[14] Related to and informing Media Ecology scholarship, this approach attends heavily to the human-technology relationship as it affects human consciousness – embodied or otherwise. Unlike Media Ecology scholarship firmly rooted in the tradition, the power-centered approaches do not attend to media form, and the philosophy of technology approach rarely explicate implications for human communication and communication ethics.

As such, it is up to current Media Ecology scholarship to round-out media communication scholarship – to balance concern for context, content, power, agency, meaning and communication ethics. Although Media Ecology considers how technology implicates relations between humans – from prepersonal through intra, inter, cultural and institutional levels of human communication,[15] – M.E.'s treatment of such dimensions could be more explicit. By focusing attention on such elements, Media Ecology may offer enhanced consideration of technologically influenced communicative phenomena such as *Americanitis*.

In 2000, a special issue of *The Atlantic Journal of Communication*[16] focused on Media Ecology research in communication studies. Articles consider M.E.'s connections to linguistic anthropology (Nystrom), memory and social change (Gronbeck), literacy studies (Ramos), and the roots of Media Ecology in Mumford (Strate and Lum), Ellul (Gozzi) and Postman (Gencarelli).[17] Likewise, Strate's recent work encourages viewing communication as material, in the senses of physical materiality and fabric, to consider how technology encourages modes of interaction with self, other and world (*Echoes*). However, Strate discusses communication and meaning via coordinates typically associated with strict representationalist semiotic systems models (i.e., sender-receiver, encoding-decoding, etc.) (*Echoes*). Strate, a predominant voice in current M.E. scholarship, is not alone in his advocating a systems-driven view of human communication. There are explicit calls encouraging such approaches for future M.E. scholarship

(e.g., E. McLuhan; MacDougall, Zhang and Logan). While these views of human

communication comport with the M.E. tradition, there is room, as well as a need, to attend to

other ways of thinking about human relations between self-other-world. One alternative,

presently underrepresented in M.E. literature, is existential phenomenology.

1.4 Existential Phenomenology: An Underdeveloped Engagement of Media Ecology

An alternative approach to exploring connections between technology, communication

and culture reaches back to the 1980s and is highly complementary to the M.E. tradition. Jenny

Nelson's 1987 article "On Media and Existence" calls for existential phenomenological[18]

exploration of media that balances consideration of audience, context (i.e., form) and content.

Although Nelson does not mention Media Ecology, she does encourage exploration of media,

communication and culture through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of

human communication, and her ideas are echoed in recent literature. This section considers

current scholarship calling for cross-readings of McLuhan's Media Ecology and Merleau-

Ponty's existential phenomenology for the purposes of identifying points of intersection and

divergence between the two, with the hope of placing them into conversation.

1.4.2 Media Ecology and Existential Phenomenology: McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty

A triad of articles from Media Ecology, philosophy of technology and popular cultural

studies call for existential phenomenological consideration of McLuhan's work (Ralon and

Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon). As Vieta and Ralon say, "A mostly unexplored area of inquiry

… is the connection between … [McLuhan's] *perceptual model* of experience and Heideggerian-

inspired phenomenologies" (36). That is, the authors consider Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-

Ponty as representatives who offer existential phenomenologies. Across two publications (Ralon

and Vieta; Vieta and Ralon), the authors suggest that McLuhan's attention to "perception,

existence and lived-through world experience" corresponds with existential phenomenologists'

consideration of "the senses, embodiment and mediation" (Ralon and Vieta 186). Additionally,

Dennis Skocz suggests that understanding of McLuhan's work and metaphors may be enhanced

if examined through a lens of existential phenomenology.

Ralon and Vieta say that one reason why connections between McLuhan and

phenomenology are "unexplored" pertains to McLuhan's apparent "misunderstanding" of all

phenomenology as "Cartesian." All three authors identify particular metaphorical connections

between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty, which I address later in this section. First, it is necessary

to consider how McLuhan's Media Ecology relates to phenomenology, the nature of McLuhan's

misunderstanding of phenomenology, what existential phenomenology is and why an existential

phenomenological read of McLuhan is suggested.

1.4.3 McLuhan and Phenomenology

Ralon and Vieta build on J.F. Striegel's doctoral dissertation, which asserts that although

McLuhan claimed to offer an a-theoretical approach to media study that favors *percepts* over

concepts, his work does offer "a coherent general media theory" that rests upon a "subject-

centered," perceptive body and its "experience of mediated reality" (192-194). Additionally,

Ralon and Vieta offer that "the roots of the phenomenological movement and McLuhan's

general media theory can be traced back to the same fervent humanist – anti-positivist – revivals

in philosophy, art, social science and literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that

countered detached Cartesian intellectualism and modernity's scientism and positivism" (194).

Described as "returning to the experiencing-and-interpreting-subject," this trend in thought

accounts for "human subjectivity and perception at the center of reality" (194). The trend is

evident in areas such as "American Pragmatism … The Chicago School … Gestalt psychology

and phenomenology" as well as McLuhan's Media Ecology (194-195).

Yet, as Ralon and Vieta explain, McLuhan did not make the connection between his

approach to media study and phenomenology "until late in his career," pointing to personal

correspondence that indicates general unfamiliarity with phenomenology until 1977 (197).

Gordon corroborates this in citing letters between McLuhan and Roger Poole. McLuhan writes,

"… reading Newton's *Optics* … somehow enabled me to recognize phenomenology as that

which I have been presenting for many years in non-technical terms" (McLuhan in Gordon *MM*

312-313). Referring to Husserl and Heidegger, McLuhan continues, "I think the obfuscation via

jargon which has been going on under the name of philosophy during these centuries is a

professional racket" (McLuhan in Gordon *MM* 312-313). As Ralon and Vieta explain, this

correspondence, along with McLuhan's criticism of phenomenology in the posthumously

published *Laws of Media*,[19] reveal that McLuhan's preference for perceptual rather than

conceptual study of media led him to a lumped misunderstanding of *all phenomenology as*

abstract Cartesian philosophy, which *focused too much on figure at the neglect of ground* (Ralon

and Vieta). Yet as Ralon and Vieta explain, existential phenomenologies, like Merleau-Ponty's,

counter Cartesian assumptions and hold concern for both figure *and* ground.

1.4.4 McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology

Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon offer two common points of rationale for

reading McLuhan through an existential phenomenological lens – first, to clarify McLuhan's

ideas by offering possible theoretical grounding; and second, to enrich understanding of

McLuhan's theoretical assumptions, aims and ends via this grounding. All three articles also

contend that Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's shared metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, tools as

extensions of the human body, and *figure and ground* offer possibilities for enriching McLuhan's often vague and poetic deployment of these terms (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon). As Ralon and Vieta say, "had McLuhan taken a closer look at phenomenology's critiques of Cartesiansim, the post-Husserlian ways of addressing the phenomenological practice of bracketing … and existential phenomenology's use of Gestalt psychology's figure/ground [e.g., Merleau-Ponty]," he may have enriched audiences' understandings of his work (202). As Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon have established, these connections exist and hold potential to gain a better understanding of McLuhan. I add that such an investigation, particularly one exploring the lived communicative phenomenon of technologically encouraged *Americanitis* with McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's help, ought to contribute to Media Ecology scholarship by adding a presently underrepresented scholarly perspective to similar philosophical reads of McLuhan already underway (e.g., Van den Eede; Willmott).

However, the explicit metaphorical connections identified by the authors are only part of the story. McLuhan's misunderstanding of all phenomenology as Cartesian, as described by Ralon and Vieta, is curious. The posthumously published *Laws of Media*, which Marshall co-authored with his son Eric in the 1970s, includes a few brief references to Merleau-Ponty. The McLuhans engage Merleau-Ponty's *Signs*[20] to bolster criticism of abstract philosophy (*LOM* 10, n.2) and Hegelian historical synthesis (*LOM* 126, n.9). Thus, McLuhan, on some level seemed to accept aspects of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of communication over that of Husserl and Heidegger.

Additionally, though Ralon and Vieta and Vieta and Ralon are correct in suggesting that Merleau-Ponty offers a "Heideggerian existential phenomenology," I would like to suggest that there are important distinctions between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger that position Merleau-

Ponty's existential phenomenology as unique on its own terms. That is, as Richard L. Lanigan's

work in communicology indicates, Merleau-Ponty actually enriches Heidegger's phenomenology

by moving beyond conceptual consideration of speech to emphasize the concrete, lived

experience of a human subject speaking. Lanigan offers explicit clarification of "the subtle

distinctions" between "phenomenalism, phenomenology or existential phenomenology" that

correspond with nuances between Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (*Speak.* 27).

Lanigan's distinctions involve "a basic perception of the relationship between any given

subject and object" (27). Phenomenalism, like Cartesian assumptions, generally offers "this

relationship as a dualism" (27). As Lanigan clarifies, "Husserl's early theory represents in the

main what has been denominated 'phenomenalism' … inasmuch as Husserl's approach works

from the basis of an objective knowing to a purely subjective existence" (*Speak.* 135).

Phenomenology, in contrast to phenomenalism, considers the subject and object relationship as

synthetic (27). Lanigan suggests that Heidegger's relationship between subject and object is

synthetic (73), implicating phenomenology rather than existential phenomenology. Merleau-

Ponty's explicit and definitive existential phenomenology views this relationship as "synoptic" –

a seeing together of subject-object in a manner that accepts and admits of interplay between them

without absolute coincidence or synthesis (27).

Lanigan offers Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology as a philosophy of

communication, which holds concrete lived experience of a perceptive and speaking body-

subject as the starting point for understanding human existence (Carman; Lanigan *Speak.*).

Merleau-Ponty's unique attention to the body and his reconfiguration of Husserl's

phenomenological reduction in a manner that finds a middle way between idealism (e.g., Kantian

philosophies) and traditional empiricism (e.g., Humean philosophies) contributes to philosophy

by moving beyond abstract conceptual claims and strict representationalist theories of meaning (Carman; Hass). Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty offers an existential, hermeneutic phenomenology of human communication with central concern for human persons, meaning and ethics (Baldwin; Carman; Hass; Lanigan *Speak.*; Levin). Lanigan's nuanced description of existential phenomenology positions Merleau-Ponty's work as unique, thereby offering rationale for the McLuhans' engagement of Merleau-Ponty in *LOM* while also criticizing Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies. Additionally, the apparent gloss of this nuance by Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon might explain why work considering connections between Heidegger and McLuhan's M.E. (Van den Eede; Willmott) is present, while full investigation of possibilities for connections between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty are not yet developed.

1.4.5 A Conversation between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty to Help Us Understand

Based on Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon's calls to bring McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty together, my approach is to develop a conversation between them.[21] I select McLuhan as the primary figure in M.E., for he explicitly considers metaphors of narcissism and anxiety to describe the effects of electronic communication media, thereby implicitly addressing the phenomena of *Americanitis*. Additionally, McLuhan is the first theorist to draw together studies of media as environments, culture and communication within the M.E. tradition (Lum). Likewise, I select Merleau-Ponty as the figure from existential phenomenology, for he also acknowledges narcissism and anxiety while attending to our embodied experiences of perception, beyond-representational meaning and communication ethics (Carman; Hass).

To ensure that this conversation is fruitful and thorough, it is necessary to consider metaphorical connections beyond *perception*, *the body*, *extensions*, and *figure and ground* touched upon by Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon. Yoni Van den Eede's book *Amor*

Technologiae: Marshall McLuhan as Philosopher of Technology reveals several impactful avenues of exploration. Van den Eede corroborates Ralon and Vieta, Vieta and Ralon, and Skocz's attention to the four metaphors identified thus far. Additionally, Van den Eede says, "Three key terms characterize … McLuhan's work: *perception, awareness and understanding*" (41) – three elements also apparent in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (Carman; Dillon; Lanigan *Phenom.*). Engaging these metaphors as a "gateway" into McLuhan's ontology of media, Van den Eede says, "one central way into McLuhan's thought … is the visible-invisible dichotomy" (41), as McLuhan's *blindness* metaphor, related to *figure and ground*, directly implicates his primary assumption that media are *hidden grounds* (i.e., environments), of which we are *blind*, due to their *invisibility*. McLuhan's aim is to make us aware of hidden media environments through his playful poetic media criticism, which emphasizes the constant and pervasive interplay of *figure and ground* (77) via the *resonant interval* (*LOM*).

In addition to acknowledging McLuhan's phenomenological tendencies, Van den Eede reads McLuhan as offering a "hybrid substantivist-relational ontology of mediation" through McLuhan's metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure and ground*, *the visible and invisible*, *blindness*, and the *resonant interval*. However, Van den Eede assumes a philosophy of technology approach, which emphasizes human-medium relational aspects of experience and does not attend to human communication or communication ethics at length. Though he recognizes affinity between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty, particularly in terms of the metaphors of *extensions* (149) and *blindness* (132-133), and acknowledges Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* as attending to the ontological aspects of *blindness* he finds in McLuhan, Van den Eede does not develop those connections thoroughly.

Whereas Van den Eede emphasizes McLuhan's philosophical tendencies through Heidegger, via development of an ontology of human-technology relations, I suggest that investigation of McLuhan's existential phenomenological tendencies through Merleau-Ponty may elevate attention to human-human relations amidst a pervasive technical world. This emphasis on human relations ought to add to Van den Eede's efforts by offering a holistic picture of *Americanitis* attentive to communication ethics practices, which respond to McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's shared concern for community and responsibility amidst our digital moment. Yet, concern for such elements amidst modernity is not only common to McLuhan's M.E. and Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, but also communication ethics scholarship.

1.4.6 Communication Ethics, Media Ecology and Existential Phenomenology

That is, the beginning decades of the twentieth century not only offered the emergence of ecological and existential perspectives within academe, but also an elevated concern for communication ethics (Cohen; Gehrke). The experiences of World War I and World War II, illuminated problematic assumptions, rooted in the philosophies of Cartesianisms, scientisms, and rationalisms, informing the supposed "goods" of modernity (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 15-16). Scholars attentive to the grounds of their historical moment brought to question the ideas of absolute, individual autonomy, disembodied and disembedded universal rationality and unencumbered objectivity, which permitted ready acceptance of the modernist assumption, "that we can function without regard for the Other" (17). Building upon the ground laid by communication ethics scholars following World War II, Arnett, Fritz and Bell assume a beyond-representationalist philosophy of communication to articulate their project of *Communication Ethics Literacy*, which identifies the emergence of this ambivalent assumption amidst modernity, as well as its continued influence for communication ethics practices today.

Describing our postmodern moment as characterized by "difference," the authors "protect and promote" the "goods" of participatory, i.e., responsible, dialogic learning and understanding via reflective communicative discernment and negotiation of nuanced assumptions regarding goods – "central value[s] … manifested in communicative practices that we seek to protect and promote in our discourse together" (2). Per the authors, dialogic learning and understanding of a multiplicity of goods requires discernment of the layers of ground informing our assumptions regarding dimensions of self, other and world via persistent communicative negotiation of contraries structured as *natural dialectics*. The dialectic of "private and public" (88) is one such example that we must negotiate to avoid resting upon the deceivingly comfortable ambivalent extremes of relativism or objectivism so to communicatively constitute meaningful understandings regarding human experience. Thus, *Communication Ethics Literacy*, the ability to discern different goods and their grounds, first rests upon our ability to discern difference as well as the tensional relations between the natural dialectics of private and public, self and other, abstract and concrete, and proximity and distance. Such a suggestion requires that we persistently meet the dynamic grounds of self, other and temporally situated narratives by assuming a posture of openness, attentiveness and responsibility, which encourages the communication ethics practices of contact (Macke), acknowledgement (Hyde) and response.

As I will show, similar questions, assumptions and themes emerge amidst Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective responses to the historical moment of modernity. As discussed above, McLuhan's concern with our *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* of the *hidden grounds of media environments* resonates with Arnett, Fritz and Bell's emphasis on discernment of grounds. Additionally, Merleau-Ponty's concern with the synoptic structure of existence resonates with Arnett, Fritz and Bell's attention to our communicative negotiation of

natural dialectics. Moreover, however, McLuhan, Merleau-Ponty and Arnett, Fritz and Bell similarly express concern for responsible, communicative participation amidst community. I will refer frequently to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's *Communication Ethics Literacy* throughout the remainder of this project to assist with discernment of communication ethics assumptions held by McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty.

Thus, my overarching question of inquiry for this project is: How might McLuhan's Media Ecology of the electronic age, as informed and hopefully clarified by a cross reading with Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of communication, help us to understand our exhausted (Turkle), shallow (Carr; Turkle), meaningless (Tillich), digital *Americanitis* and what are the implications of insights gained, in terms of communication ethics theory and practice? In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's *hermeneutic phenomenology* (Lanigan *Speak.*), my approach aims to interpret McLuhan through Merleau-Ponty by way of a conversation.[22] With attention to each thinker's assumptions and their shared historical moment, I develop this project toward three ends.

First, in following Skocz, I suggest that a conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan should enhance understanding of McLuhan's Media Ecology. Next, I assume that this conversation should yield an enriched understanding of our lived experience of digital *Americanitis*. Last, this project should contribute to the Media Ecology conversation by developing a presently underrepresented scholarly approach to studying media in the digital age, existential phenomenology, which emphasizes human communication, meaning and communication ethics practices in a manner complementary to the M.E. tradition. The gestalt of this effort, with reference to Arnett, Fritz and Bell, is an attempt to discern and respond to the grounding assumptions which implicate communicative dimensions of digital *Americanitis*.

1.5 Implications for *Americanitis*

As George Miller Beard attributed *neurasthenia* to the modern condition of mechanical

progress and rapid social change, we are called to explore *Americanitis* in an attempt to

understand our plight – not only for this moment, but also for moments to come. The recent film

her, set slightly in the future, offers a concerning glimpse into technology's encouragement of

future *Americanitis*. The film tells the story of a man who falls in love with an artificial

intelligence, mobile computer operating system. Theodore, the main character, is in the midst of

an existential crisis. His marriage has dissolved because, in the words of his wife, he "left her

alone in their relationship." Theodore quickly falls in love again, a narcissistic and anxious love

in which he receives the relational *comfort*, *control*, and *security* (Turkle) he craves, with his

mobile operating system, a female disembodied voice named Sam. Once Theodore realizes that

Sam carries on intimate conversations with hundreds of users simultaneously, he is critically

anxious once more.

Beyond the human-machine relationship and Theodore's intrapersonal struggles, the film

reveals how evolving digital technology may influence human communication and

communication ethics practices. At the interpersonal level, people no longer choose to

communicate intimate, heart-felt messages to one another. Theodore earns his living by writing

love letters on behalf of others to their beloveds. Additionally, with each display of public

spaces, the film reveals background individuals engrossed in handheld screens, *speaking into the*

air (Peters) and hearing only what an earpiece delivers. No one acknowledges and responds to

others or their world. A seeming devolution of public phatic relational practices – from lengthy

stop-and-chats with neighbors in the middle twentieth century, to brief hellos or a mere wave in

the latter, to a nod, if anything, in the twenty-first century – is reduced further, to absence of any form of contact and acknowledgement, in the future set world of *her*.

Attending to McLuhan's and Merleau-Ponty's respective discussions of narcissism and anxiety; the shared metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure and ground*, *the visible and invisible*, and *blindness*; along with McLuhan's associated *resonant interval* and Merleau-Ponty's parallel of *reversibility* should yield a fruitful conversation that illuminates *and* responds to the lived experience of electronic and digital *Americanitis*. This conversation between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty ought to provide a basis from which we can rediscover the grounds of communication ethics practices (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) involving *contact* (Macke), *acknowledgement* (Hyde), *choice* and productive social *change* (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). As we find meaning in moments of tension and crisis rather than comfort (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), the hope is that this conversation between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty will help to reveal sources of significance amidst our pervasively disruptive and seemingly meaningless digital milieu – amidst our twenty-first century *Americanitis*.

Chapter 2

An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty's Life, Works, Metaphors and Explicit Theory

Three theoretical elements frame this exploratory study of technologically encouraged Americanitis through a Merleau-Pontean existential phenomenological read of McLuhan's work – human communication, communication ethics and Media Ecology. The present chapter aims to contextualize Merleau-Ponty's metaphors of perception, the body, extensions, figure and ground, and The Visible and The Invisible, blindness and reversibility according to these elements, via an account of his life, work and ideas, amidst his historical moment of modernity. This contextualization describes the assumptions, aims and ends of Merleau-Ponty's unique existential phenomenological ontology of human communication and communication ethics through which I will read McLuhan's work in Part-III.

2.1 Introduction

In his *Treatise*, George Miller Beard says, "we find more neurasthenia … in the northern part of the United States than in any part of Europe" (249) – hence the vernacular term *Americanitis*. As Beard blamed *Americanitis* on rapid technological progress and social change, this disparity is, perhaps attributable to the slower pace of European industrialization as compared to North America (Goubert 257; 276-279). The succession of wars in Europe, particularly France, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Goubert) offered one source of technological progress, yet the French did not seem to suffer the ills of modernity identified by Beard (*Supplement*).

As such, and as I will show, Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers a unique characterization of narcissism and anxiety as related to human communication. Based on Ralon and Vieta, Skocz and Vieta and Ralon's calls for an exploratory co-reading of McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty, this chapter introduces Merleau-Ponty's life and work along with the metaphors that he and McLuhan hold in common – *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure and ground*, *the visible and invisible*, *blindness* and *reversibility*. My aim is to introduce these metaphors, in Merleau-Ponty's work, as they relate to human communication, communication ethics, and *Americanitis*.

I present the chapter in six parts. First, through a biographical sketch, attentive to Merleau-Ponty's historical moment of modernity in France, and the larger context of communication and media studies in North America, I offer an account of his major works, and influences. Next, I introduce the metaphors that Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon identified as shared between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. I then address the shared metaphors of *blindness* and the *visible* and the *invisible*, identified by Van den Eede, while also considering Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of *reversibility* (Dillon) – a parallel to McLuhan's *resonant interval*. Description of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of narcissism and anxiety along with consideration of his views of communication ethics, language and human communication comprise the two sections that follow. In conclusion, I consider implications of Merleau-Ponty's theory for human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*.

2.2 Jean Jacques Maurice Merleau-Ponty – A Biographical Sketch

The purpose of this section is to contextualize Merleau-Ponty's work by considering the historical moment of modernity in France. Although a key figure in the history of philosophy, a complete biography of Merleau-Ponty does not exist. As such, I draw on the biographical descriptions from Jean Paul Sartre, Richard Lanigan (*Phenom.*), George J. Marshall, and Dermot Moran, to weave a narrative account, while also acknowledging the larger context of modernity in France and North America, including media and communication studies.

2.2.2 Merleau-Ponty's Life and Historical Moment

Jean Jacques Maurice Merleau-Ponty "was born March 14, 1908 at Rocheford-sur-Mer … France" (Marshall 16). After his father's death during World War I, a young Merleau-Ponty moved with his mother and sister to Paris. In his compelling eulogy, *Merleau-Ponty vivant*, Jean-Paul Sartre describes Merleau-Ponty's childlike awe as motivating his philosophy. Propelled by

a deeply close relationship with his mother, who shared her son's love of learning, Merleau-Ponty's childhood sense of wonder was something he strove to recapture as an adult (Sartre). In young adulthood, Merleau-Ponty's inquisitiveness led him to the *École Normale Supérieure* where he studied philosophy (Lanigan *Phenom.* 261; Marshall 13-25).

While a student, Merleau-Ponty attended Husserl's lectures in Paris, which were later published as Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. Husserl's lectures coupled with Merleau-Ponty's readings of Heidegger and Kojeve's humanist interpretation of Hegel deeply inspired Merleau-Ponty's interest in phenomenology (Marshall 13-25). Merleau-Ponty graduated from the program in 1931 – a moment between World War I and World War II (Lanigan *Phenom.* 261). These interwar years offer a bleak picture of existence in France. The massive loss of citizenry during World War I, a struggling economy, and political tensions between a conservative, Catholic-right and the Communist-left, suggest a sense of hopelessness pervading Merleau-Ponty's homeland (Goubert 287-293). Yet, amidst this climate, Merleau-Ponty's sense of wonder led him to return to the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1935 to pursue graduate work (Marshall).

In terms of the larger context of media and communication studies, the development of radio broadcasts in Europe and North America during the 1930s elevated the medium's status to that of mass media institution (Noam; Starr). Media study was still years away from McLuhan's assertion of media as environments, yet the American pragmatist, interactionist view of *The Chicago School*, eventually inspiring ecological approaches to human communication, began during the decades following World War I (Carey *TCS*). With the United States adopting the post-World War I position of isolationism, Hitler's Germany prepared to engulf Europe. On September 3, 1939, France joined Great Britain in World War II (Goubert 293).

Merleau-Ponty's military service in World War II delayed publication of his first major

work, *The Structure of Behavior*, until 1943. Although serving only for about a year, "Merleau-

Ponty was captured and tortured by the Germans" (Marshall 17). Following his capture, and per

the Armistice agreement of June 1940, France was subject to German occupation. French

citizens, perceived to be resistant to the occupation, including Communists and those of Jewish

faith were sent to prison camps. The conservative Catholic political contingent, meanwhile, were

allegiant or indifferent to the German Vichy Regime (Goubert 293-298). Dissatisfied with the

Catholic party's response to the occupation, Merleau-Ponty distanced himself from institutional

Catholicism and found greater allegiance with the Communist left. Despite this distance from

Catholicism, however, Richard Kearney indicates that Merleau-Ponty never fully abandoned his

faith as its practices and tenets greatly inform his work – particularly Merleau-Ponty's

"Eucharistic" treatment of the body. Arguably, the traumatic experience of war increased

Merleau-Ponty's passionate, natural tendency to a role as a "public intellectual," his emphasis on

embodiment, and his interest in how we understand self, others and our world (Carman 24).

Following French liberation at Normandy (June 6, 1944) and the end of World War II,

Merleau-Ponty published his doctoral treatise as the *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945. He

went on to hold prestigious faculty positions at the *University of Lyon* from 1945-1949 and the

Sorbonne from 1949-1952 (Lanigan 262). Additionally, around 1948, Merleau-Ponty delivered a

series of radiobroadcast lectures, later published under the title, *The World of Perception*

(Marshall 17). In France, as well as North America, radio continued to represent a powerful mass

media agent in the 1940s. Reeling from the effects of Hitler's propaganda, often delivered via

radio, the communication field assumed an ethical turn in scholarship (Gehrke). Media effects

studies, likewise, assumed concern for avoiding the terrors of propaganda with emphasis on the

unique U.S. importance of *freedom of the press* (Carey *TCS*) – especially with the rise of a new medium in the early 1940s, the television.

Although France began television broadcasting in the middle 1930s, it was state controlled through the 1980s, which limited the medium's normatization (Noam 96-98). In contrast, the American ethos of a free press encouraged the rapid spread and reach of commercial television into American culture and citizens' homes. Extending Beard's *Treatise* into the electronic age, one wonders if the tempered development of television in France further aided its citizenry in avoiding the narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion of *Americanitis*.

Though not suffering from anxiety per se, the decade of the 1950s, for Merleau-Ponty, was grief ridden. Through a series of political disagreements, Merleau-Ponty's friendship with Sartre dissolved, as did Merleau-Ponty's interest in the French communist party (Marshall 20; Sartre). Additionally, Merleau-Ponty's mother passed away in 1952 (Marshall 20). The loss of this close relationship deeply affected him (Sartre). As Dermot Moran, drawing on Sartre, describes, "the adult Merleau-Ponty's desire to discover" deep "attachment" with others, as well as his "attempts to find community, first in Christianity and then with the Communist Party, were … attempts to rediscover this original happiness" – the happiness that Merleau-Ponty found in his youthful wonder, which he shared with his mother (Moran 399). This series of detachments led Merleau-Ponty to become "a recluse, only leaving his home" to visit campus (Moran 399). The anxious experience of loss deeply affected his personal life.

Despite these personal difficulties, Merleau-Ponty's professional fervor remained unmatched (Marshall 20). "At the age of 44 (1952), Merleau-Ponty assumed the Chair of Philosophy at Collège de France, a unique honor recognizing him as the most outstanding French

philosopher of his time" (Marshall 20). Years later, while preparing a lecture, Maurice Merleau-Ponty passed away on May 3, 1961, leaving behind his wife and daughter (Marshall 21).

Although he published no major philosophical treatises between *PhP* and his death in 1961, he left audiences with two working manuscripts – *The Prose of the World* (1969; *PW* forward) and *The Visible and The Invisible* (1964; *VI* forward) (Lanigan *Speak.* 18-19). Merleau-Ponty intended to focus on "the phenomenology of expression" in the former, but halted progress in favor of emphasizing "a more profound concern for the ontological status of the meaning and signification process" in the latter (Lanigan *Phenom.* 262). "Although his topical writings range over psychology, socio-anthropology, politics, film, and philosophy, Merleau-Ponty hypostatized communication (speaking) as the foundation of each area of knowledge insofar as speaking is the vehicle of creation and preservation of knowledge in each" (Lanigan *Speak.* 19). The ways in which Merleau-Ponty develops his notion of the foundational nature of speaking attend heavily to a reflexive relationship between culture and communication – similar to *The Chicago School* view, which I described previously (Carey *TCS*). M.C. Dillon attends to this reflexivity through his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology.

2.2.3 Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Ontology: Assumptions, Aims and Ends

Dillon suggests that the aim of much of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy was to examine lived, human experience, via rejection of metaphysical dualisms, so to offer an intersubjective, embodied and relational account of human experience between the synoptically connected elements of self-other-world (Carman; Dillon; Hass; Lanigan). Merleau-Ponty's major contribution to phenomenology was to reorient its methodological focus from that of introspection to intersubjectivity via critical examination of traditional empiricist accounts of sensory perception, Cartesian accounts of consciousness and transcendent metaphysical idealism

(Carman; Hass; Moran). Finding terminological affinity with Media Ecology, Dillon indicates
that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology are "ecological" (xii). Although Merleau-
Ponty did not characterize his own thought as such, his attention to intersubjectivity, reflexivity,
and the reversibility of relational experiences comports with ecological perspectives (xii).
Against readings that divide Merleau-Ponty's early, middle and later works, Dillon offers that
Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology informs his later ontology in such a way as to offer a
relational, communicative "phenomenological ontology" that counters trends of thought in
modernity including empiricism, idealism, scientism, Lockean utilitarianism, the myth of
progress (Dillon 177-233), and the assumption that "we can function without regard for the
Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell17).

Ultimately, Dillon argues that Merleau-Ponty "provides an alternative to the skepticism,
the abyss of groundlessness that logically and historically follows from [traditional,
philosophical] dualism and infects the cultures in which it is sedimented" (Dillon 236). Merleau-
Ponty's overcoming of dualism does not result in monism, however (Dillon). Rather, his
phenomenological ontology eschews determinate "coincidence … in favor of a fundamental
identity-and-difference," synoptic, "hyperdialectic" of relations (Dillon 157; Lanigan *Speak.*).
Four primary assumptions that Merleau-Ponty makes to overcome dualism and its stagnating
implications for cultures are, *the primacy of phenomena*, *the primacy of perception*, *the thesis of
ambiguity* and *the thesis of reversibility* (Dillon). Throughout this chapter, I engage Dillon's
discussion of these theses, with help from Richard Lanigan, Taylor Carman, Lawrence Hass
and others to describe Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology that holds the concrete, lived,
embodied experience of communicative relations between self-other-world as grounds from
which community and human understanding emerge, and for which we are responsible (Dillon).

2.3 Merleau-Ponty's Metaphors

This section introduces Merleau-Ponty's metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *figure and ground* and *extension*, which he holds in common with McLuhan (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; and Vieta and Ralon). I reserve comment on the additional metaphors of *blindness*, *visible and invisible*, and *reversibility*, Merleau-Ponty's correlate to McLuhan's *resonant interval*, identified by Van den Eede for the subsequent section. This is because, Merleau-Ponty's text, *VI*, which addresses *blindness*, the *visible-invisible* and *reversibility* thoroughly, enriches understanding of Merleau-Ponty's earlier perceptive and corporeal metaphors (Dillon). That is, the four, shared metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *figure and ground* and *extension* are fundamental themes that undergird Merleau-Ponty's entire oeuvre (Carman), yet are treated most explicitly in his first two major publications – *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

The former (*SB* forward) offers "a critique of positivistic psychological theories" of behavior, which Merleau-Ponty thought reductive (Lanigan *Phenom.* 262), by arguing for a gestalt figure-ground, structural (i.e., formative-processes), and existential, ecological approach to considering human experience (*SB*; Carman; Dillon). Building on this critique, Lanigan says that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (*PhP* forward) offers "exploration" of the experience of speech "with respect to the problem of perception" (262). Merleau-Ponty's interest in the *mysteries* of sense perception receives early treatment in these works (Carman 11).

2.3.2 Perception

In *SB*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that natural, sensory equilibrium reflects a state of optimal health, and he is interested in considering that balance from a holistic figure-ground perspective in terms of self-other-world relations (*SB* 36). This equilibrium, per Merleau-Ponty, occurs in terms of a double aspect of the body – the sensorium-motorium (*SB*). Yet this pairing is not a

dualism. The two elements are synoptically connected – they are *seen together*. Contrary to a

"Cartesian-Lockean conception of the mind," as well as empiricist and intellectual traditions

(e.g., Hume and Kant), which claim that sense perception is passive reception of data impressed

upon the mind as *representations*, Merleau-Ponty's view of perception is a form of movement –

an intentionality. Perception, then, is a synoptic process (i.e., structure) of *activity-passivity*, and

presence-absence, which offers significance to human existence (Carman 14).

Taylor Carman explains that perception, for Merleau-Ponty, "is not an event or state in

the mind or brain, but an organism's entire *bodily* relation to its environment" – an ecological

activity (1). By rejecting traditional dualism in describing perception, Merleau-Ponty recognized

that, "we lose sight of perception itself when we place it on either side of a sharp distinction

between inner subjective experiences and external objective facts" (Carman 78). Further,

rejecting a basis of linear, Aristotelian causality in *SB*, Merleau-Ponty's embodied sense

perception involves an automatic, prepersonal, corporeal level of relating with the world, which

motivates, rather than causes, our attention and intentions (*SB*). This proprioceptive structure,

with structure being offered by Merleau-Ponty as the gestalt, *formative process* (Barral) of figure

and ground relations (Carman; Dillon), naturally offers unity and balance in human perception

(*SB* 36). That is, the interplay of figure-ground movements in perception, comprise the structures

of "meaningful actions and activities familiar to ordinary understanding" of human experience

(Carman 214). Thus, perception, according to Merleau-Ponty's thesis of *the primacy of*

perception, is our primary figure-ground movement of bodily contact, or meeting self-other-

world via lived experience (Dillon). Merleau-Ponty reveals this gestalt structure of perception in

SB, and offers fuller treatment of its relational dimensions in his *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Through his efforts to eschew the dualisms imposed upon culture by the hegemony of Cartesian assumptions (Dillon), a good majority of Merleau-Ponty's *PhP* involves his critiques of Husserl, atomistic psychology, intellectualism (e.g., Kantian philosophy) and empiricism (Carman). These currents of thought maintain traditional dualisms, which are also found in "classical Gestalt theory" (Dillon 69). Dualisms separate the "knower and known" in modes of human existence leading to skepticism and solipsism, which implicates incommensurability in experience (Dillon 34). Merleau-Ponty's recognition of our ready ability to meet self-other-world through perceptive experience, however, led him to attempt to overcome these implications.

2.3.3 Figure and Ground

To overcome dualism, Merleau-Ponty does not suggest determinate coincidence or "opposition between the order of being and the order of knowing" (Dillon 54). Rather, via his *good dialectic*, or synoptic (Lanigan) *hyperdialectic* (Dillon 46), Merleau-Ponty accepts the *paradox of immanence and transcendence* (i.e., subjectivity and objectivity; knower and known) to avoid the negating, Cartesian dialectical impossibility of mediation (Dillon 37). To accept and appropriate immanence-transcendence, leads Merleau-Ponty to posit his theory of our perceptive-expressive "movement of self-mediation" where reality and form are emergent instead of given – an ambiguous rather than ambivalent gestalt in which perceptive-expressive interactions offer the world as "matter-pregnant-with-form" (Dillon 46-47). This fecund position rests upon Merleau-Ponty's theses, which he establishes in *PhP* (Dillon).

Dillon identifies Merleau-Ponty's first three theses as, *the thesis of the primacy of perception, the thesis of the primacy of phenomena*, and *the thesis of ambiguity*. When coupled with his re-configured Classical Gestalt appropriation of *the principle of autochthonous organization* and "strong … adherence to the principle of contextual relevancy," these primary

assumptions allow Merleau-Ponty to describe human perception *and* expression in holistic terms (Dillon). To begin, "the main thrust of the thesis of the primacy of perception is that the perceptual world is the foundation of all knowledge and action, truth and value, science and culture. It is the ultimate source and the final referent of human cognition" (Dillon 52). Perception allows the significance of phenomena to emerge as theme (figure) amidst a horizon (ground) in ways that yield an equilibrium, or knowing, of a gestalt's form – its *autochthonous*[1] *organization*, or structurally endemic formation (Dillon).

"The thesis of the primacy of perception is properly phenomenological because … it asserts the ontological primacy of phenomena as its correlate" (Dillon 53). Such an assertion overcomes the Husserlian "experience error" of assuming that essence and existence must unequivocally correspond to an ideal form for understanding (Dillon 53). Instead, Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception, "invites us to attend to the phenomena as it appears in its richness and multi-determinability … within a plurality of practical horizons and theoretical contexts" (Dillon 53). Experience of phenomena is plural, horizonal, and thus necessitates Merleau-Ponty's "thesis of the intrinsic ambiguity of phenomena" (Dillon 53).

"Merleau-Ponty's thesis of ambiguity is conceived in opposition to the prejudice of determinate being …" that is, in disagreement with the view that a definitive, objective correspondence between phenomena and its ideal form is necessary for being and understanding (Dillon 67-68). Experience is ambiguous because the world is not a strictly objective, ideal form that imposes significance upon us (Dillon). That is, in contrast to modernist assumptions wrapped up in Husserlian, phenomenalist *experience errors* and Heideggerian phenomenological coincidence via synthesis of immanence and transcendence (Lanigan *Speak.*), Merleau-Ponty's four theses offer a phenomenological ontology of the lived body concretely experiencing a

tensional world of phenomena via gestalt perception. As such, the ambiguity thesis "is based on the Gestalt-theoretical 'principle of contextual relevancy'", which "maintains that the meaning of a theme [i.e., figure] is co-determined …" by a phenomenon's gestalt, emergent characteristics and the context in which it is experienced (Dillon 67-68). "Given that themes [i.e., figures] regularly do appear in different … contexts, and do so without losing their [*emergent*, rather than *static*] unity and identity, it follows that a single theme can take on a multiplicity of meanings" (Dillon 68). The consequence of *plurality and multiplicity of meaning*, resulting from the theses of, *the primacy of perception*, *the primacy of phenomena*, and *the thesis of ambiguity*, emphasize Merleau-Ponty's close attention to the role of the body in discerning emergent perceptual significance as well as its role in expressive lived experience (Dillon).

2.3.4 The Body

In *PhP* Merleau-Ponty offers that our bodies are our *presence-at-the-world* (Lanigan *Speak.*). Our bodies are invited by the world to participate. In this participation, and it is perpetual, we engage at prepersonal, intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels of communication, expression in Merleau-Ponty's terms, between self-other-world to discover significance (i.e., meaning, direction, a sense of things), which emerges through interaction (Lanigan *Speak.*). For Merleau-Ponty, the body as perceptive-expressive being is not *pure subject* or *pure object* (Dillon; Lanigan SS 45). Rather, it is always already both (Lanigan *Speak.* 45). Our bodies, as intersubjective, perceptive-expressive beings, perpetually relate to our worlds via processes of self-mediation – the perceptual, prepersonal, figure-ground interplay of our sensory-motor bodily structure that contacts phenomena (Dillon). This bodily movement carves out spaces, contexts, of contact and interaction, which Merleau-Ponty calls *phenomenal fields*, amidst contemporaneous, temporal horizons through which we then, choose to acknowledge and

relate with self-other-world via expression (*PhP*; Dillon; Carman). We are not *in* the world or *in* space or *in* time, we *inhabit* these dimensions of lived experience through perceptive-expressive experiences (*PhP*; Carman; Lanigan *Speak.*). We meet our world through mediating, synoptic dialectical interplays (Lanigan *Speak.*) of figure-ground relations, which both situates us (i.e., limits us) and permits us agency as a *freedom to* respond.

2.3.5 The Perceptive Body and Extension

Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of *extension*, which Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon identify as another shared metaphor between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty, exemplifies this *perceptive-expressive* bodily relating. Unlike Lockean and Cartesian assumptions, Merleau-Ponty's *extension* does not intend the objective representation of subjective thought via *extension*. Rather, Merleau-Ponty explores the metaphor in connection with lived, embodied practices – our "engagement" with tools (*PhP* 104). The metaphor in *PhP* is subtle and appears in various forms. For example, in discussing the permanent nature of "one's own body," Merleau-Ponty describes clothing as "appendages of my body" – as an addition, or extension of my body's natural clothing, my skin (*PhP* 104). Yet, the most explicit discussion of *extension* appears when Merleau-Ponty addresses the "spatiality of the body" in its prepersonal, habitual relations with "cultural instruments," tools (*PhP* 164-177). His famous discussion of *the blind man's stick* offers the most thorough treatment.

Merleau-Ponty describes how a visually impaired person may *engage* the tool of a guide stick as an embodied, sensory-bodily extension (*PhP* 166). Similar to his description of the sensorium-motorium in *SB*, extension for Merleau-Ponty, in *PhP*, is not extension alone, but rather *extension-incorporation* (*PhP*). This is because, "my body for me is not an assemblage of organs juxtaposed in space," like a mosaic, but rather, an element of which "I am in undivided

possession … I know through a body schema" (*PhP* 113). With the example of the stick, the

blind man's senses of sight and touch, and thus his body, are *extended* by *incorporation* of a

walking stick into his body schema – the prepersonal, proprioceptive or habit dimensions of the

lived body. Initial action with the stick may be clumsy, but once habituated (i.e., learned) by the

lived body, "the stick is no longer an object perceived by the blind man, but an instrument with

which he perceives. It is a bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis" (*PhP* 176). The

figure of the walking stick melds into the proprioceptive background of the man's body schema

– his tacit "motor intentionality," of embodied relations (*PhP* 127; Carman 111-120, 232).

Carman engages the term "ensemble" to describe the nature of Merleau-Ponty's

proprioceptive bodily dimension (Carman 115). Rather than a strictly visual mosaic gestalt,

which maintains sharp separations between each of its constituent parts, an *ensemble*,

particularly in the musical sense, offers a structure with distinct parts that weave and blend.

Whereas I may always clearly determine the divided parts of a visual mosaic, especially with

lack of distance, the distinct contributions violin and viola to a symphony orchestra, for example,

remain ambiguous. For a tool to act as an extension, requires incorporation into our bodies at the

prepersonal level of contact. Explicit interpretation of a tool's function at the level of

consciousness would conversely require distance. Once incorporated, proprioceptively, the tool

tends toward a bias of ground, rather than figure – a bodily habit of which we are often not

expressly aware, unless it becomes problematic.

A few points are worth mention here. First, the fact that Merleau-Ponty characterizes

human interaction with tools as *engagement* offers a point of affinity between his work and

Media Ecology scholarship. As previously stated, a good portion of Media Ecology literature,

including McLuhan's work, offers an embodied view of technology, which emphasizes that we

engage, *rather than use* media, while communicating (see *Introduction* 20-21). Second, the metaphor explains Merleau-Ponty's existential view of bodily *intentionality*, his "intentional arc," that unifies the self-mediating nature of our immanent-transcendent embodiment – not as consciousness, not as representation, but as lived significance – as movement to respond to natural and created aspects of our world (*PhP* 157). This view also implies that, our body "is our general medium for having a world" (*PhP* 169), which naturally grasps significance of worldly "gestures" (i.e., bodily, perceptual, linguistic, etc.), whether we appropriate "a natural instrument," (*PhP* 177) such as our eyes, or a "cultural instrument" (*PhP* 169) such as a tool, which aids our body through extension. This bodily movement, however, ultimately necessitates that our bodies are a medium, and not a tool, and that our embodied consciousness involves movement, as an "*I can,*" and not merely an "*I think*" (*PhP* 159).

Dillon's suggestion that Merleau-Ponty's later works offer enhanced treatment of early metaphors such as *perception*, *the body*, *figure and ground* and *extension*, along with the first three theses described above, leads me to the additional metaphors held in common between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. As Van den Eede's ontological read of McLuhan offers the metaphors of *blindness*, *the visible and invisible* and the *resonant interval*, I turn to Dillon's discussion of Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published work-in-progress, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Dillon develops Merleau-Ponty's ontology through consideration of this later work with reference to *The Primacy of Perception, Signs* and Merleau-Ponty's earlier, *SB*, and *PhP*, to describe Merleau-Ponty's fourth thesis – *the thesis of reversibility*.

2.4 Additional Metaphors: Blindness, *The Visible and the Invisible* and Reversibility

As Dillon indicates, Merleau-Ponty successfully eschews traditional philosophical dualisms by avoiding determinate coincidence or absolute synthesis in perceptive-expressive

experiences of human relating. Merleau-Ponty achieves this through his *thesis of the primacy of perception, thesis of the primacy of phenomena, and the thesis of ambiguity* in his early work. Merleau-Ponty's theses position experience in terms of his "hyperdialectic" (Dillon) or in Lanigan's terms, his *synoptic* dialectic. The seeing-together of immanence-transcendence is not absolute; it is rather, an *alternation* or a *reversal* (Dillon). "The idea of role reversal," or a continuous, and therefore, *decentered* reciprocity, "occurs in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as alternation, occurs in *The Visible and The Invisible* … under the heading of reversibility" (Dillon 144). Merleau-Ponty develops his *reversibility thesis* to describe *human being* through metaphors of touch, seeing, reflection and language (Dillon 157). I will offer Dillon's read of touch first and return to seeing, reflection and language in the next section of this chapter.

2.4.2 Reversibility as Touch and Blindness

Dillon says, "the notion of reversibility is modelled on the phenomenon of touch" (157). Through his account of Merleau-Ponty's example of *my right hand touching my left* (*VI* 130-155), Dillon says, "the roles of touching and touch are *prima facie* reversible because, after all, they are roles played by a unitary sensor, my own body. Yet this underlying unity does not produce an absolute identity: the touching hand does not coincide with the touched hand; there is already a de-centering" (Dillon 159). The experience of my hands touching one another in a reversible manner, involves an emergent space of ambiguity, a mediative space between them, created by the gestalt interplay of figure-ground; it is not clear to me which hand is figure and which is ground at any particular moment. Reversibility, then, describes the mediation of the *visible* (i.e., figure) and the *invisible* (i.e., ground) (Dillon 154-176).

Per Dillon, the *visible* indicates the transcendent, public dimensions of existence, while the *invisible* involves "the traditional spheres of privacy and immanence" (171). As Merleau-

Ponty assumes that we are truly embodied, perceptive-expressive bodies who are *free to* respond to self-other-world because we are situated (i.e., limited) amidst spatial and temporal bodily horizons, there always remains some element of relating which remains *invisible*. That is, when we relate with world, other, and even self, we remain *blind* to certain aspects of what it is that we touch, see, hear, smell and taste because our embodiment does not permit for absolute transcendence. Dillon says, "the essence of the reversibility relation … [is] that I am visible from the standpoint of [another] as [another] is from mine because we are both made of the same stuff: the flesh of the world" (Dillon 170). This is not to say that *visibility* is absolute transparency, or that Merleau-Ponty equates people with things. Per Dillon, the metaphor of *flesh* clarifies the *visible-invisible* reversibility of human relating.

2.4.3 The Visible and the Invisible – Reversibility of Flesh as Seeing

Although my reversible relationship with things (e.g., a mirror or a tree), that is the *flesh of the world*, (Dillon 162) is that of self-other, it is distinct from intersubjective, human interactions. People are not *things*. Merleau-Ponty's describes my *reversible* relatedness to other human beings, as that of common threads of *flesh*. This he finds in his Catholic faith, the "original message of incarnation – the logos becoming flesh and entering into the heart of … humanity" – the *transcendence-immanence* of God presenting (i.e., not representing) his presence to us as Christ, the *universal-particular* Being (Kearney 156). As embodied beings, we relate with self-other-world through the interplay of immanence-transcendence. We are not merely particular beings, but particular-universal beings or parts of the whole of humanity.

That is, though I am a particular situated being, I am also similar to others via the generality of my bodily existence. The decentering mediation of reversibility, considered with the metaphor of *flesh*, suggests a relation between me and an other person as one in which the "*I*

can," that "allows me to take up the other's vantage point" (Dillon 166) is tempered, limited by, the *element* (i.e., not substance) of *flesh*. In other words, the universal community of humanity persistently mediates my particularity (Hyde), the situatedness afforded by my particular body and the horizons of my unique lived experiences. That is, when understood as distinct threads, or crossing (i.e., chiasmic) layers of *flesh*, the elements of self-other-world are necessarily connected while also retaining distinction (Dillon). Though I may never see the world through another's eyes, I share with them the generality of bodily existence as *flesh*.

Dillon explains, "The anonymity of flesh prior to reflective differentiation is not … complete indefinition: there is an inchoate estrangement such that when … the differentiation between self and Other is thematized, it will be a grounded differentiation … in the fission of the flesh and not simply a fiat of consciousness which has made the unhappy choice of alienation" (Dillon 166-167). As the other and I are members of a common human community, yet also differ due to our particular situatedness, understanding is never transparently *visible*; some degree of *blindness* always exists. My identification with an other, then, is proximate and always unfolding through mediation, or *reversibility*, of the *visible-invisible* gestalt of *flesh* and is initiated through movements of self-estrangement, or othering. This experience of otherness is most often concretely "lived[,] rather than known" in abstraction (*SB* 173). Otherness emerges through self-other *contact* as something felt – as *anxiety* (Hyde xiii). As such, Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility of flesh* reveals his productive view of *narcissism* and *anxiety*.

2.4.4 Reversibility of Flesh as Narcissism, Anxiety and Communication Ethics

Merleau-Ponty views intersubjective relations between people as intercorporeal relations – as relations of bodies who are distinct yet united particular threads of a common *flesh*. In relating with others at prepersonal and intrapersonal levels of experience, I am decentered,

estranged, alienated or othered, from myself. My grounding in the generality of *flesh*, however, permits this anxious experience positive regard for Merleau-Ponty. He positions the anxious experience of estrangement as the basis from which self-mediation and mediative understanding are possible, and through which communication ethics practices reflexively shaping community and responsibility may emerge. I turn to Merleau-Ponty, an additional essay by Dillon, and the works of David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, and Thomas Baldwin to describe the assumptions informing Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics theory.

In "The Child's Relations with Others"[2] (*PrP*), Merleau-Ponty considers narcissism from a psychoanalytic perspective to describe the reversibility of *flesh* amidst intra and interpersonal relations. Describing the, childhood, mirror-phase of primary narcissism, Merleau-Ponty says:

> The phenomenon of the specular image … is the acquisition … of a new function … the narcissistic function. Narcissus was the mythical being who, after looking at his image … was drawn as if by vertigo to rejoin his image in the mirror of water. At the same time that the image, [i.e., the seeing, the reflection], of oneself makes possible the knowledge of oneself, it makes possible a sort of alienation. I am no longer what I felt myself, immediately, to be; I am that image of myself that is offered by the mirror (136).

For Merleau-Ponty, the mirror image elucidates seeds of self for the child. The mirror me – the concretely-lived body me and, the abstracted image of mirror me – allows me to *see* that I am available to be seen. This literal experience of self-reflection enables "the possibility of an attitude of self-observation," allowing us to have a sense of difference between self and not-self, self and other, self and object, self and world, etc. (*PrP* 137). This experience is alienating, othering, as the "real me" is "distanced" by "image me" (*PrP* 139). My exterior reflection of

myself *opens* me to meeting self-other-world, concretely, by "tear[ing] me away from my immediate inwardness" (*PrP* 136) – by disrupting the comfort of my particularity (Hyde xiii).

The ever-tensional and *reversible* interplay of the invisible-visible, private-public dialectic of the self is made spectacle during the mirror phase of development, thereby implicating self-awareness through estrangement (Dillon 166-167). Narcissism is a productive experience in Merleau-Ponty's view (Levin), for, the mirror phase introduces us to the ambiguity of perception as reversible – the *seeing seen*, the *touching touched*, etc. in childhood. Yet, we do not abandon this "distance of self" into adulthood (*PrP* 138). This anxious, self-estrangement and alienation become part of my tacit, perceptive-expressive bodily movement, the tacit self-mediation of reversibility through self-other relations. In addition, as this experience is ambiguous, my self, "is not a self through transparence, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought. It is a self through confusion, narcissism" – in other words, my self is a self through being othered (*PrP* 163). Narcissism helps us to gain a sense of distinction between the layers of *flesh* of me and mirror me in childhood and between self-other-world in adulthood.

Narcissism also elucidates that there are dimensions of self (i.e., both internal and external) that remain hidden from my view. "The flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it …" (*VI* 248); "the flesh is a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body" (246). Due to the reflective character of *flesh*, we catch glimpses of an "anonymity innate to" ourselves (*VI* 139). Seeing ourselves as seers elucidates that our bodies offer us only a particular perspective – a situatedness amidst space and time (*VI* 142). However this situated seeing opens our perspective to allow us to grasp the generality of *flesh* –

the ambiguity of relational being, tacitly habituated from childhood into adulthood, allowing us to recognize others as other persons and not as mere objects (Merleau-Ponty *VI* 141-142).

As Levin describes, we are *called* into this *openness*, "our moment of narcissism is subject to reversal: seduced into openness we find ourselves in each other and are slowly appropriated by and for a more mature intersubjective life … [of] mutual recognition" (49). Thus, Merleau-Ponty's narcissism is not pathological, neurotic or pejorative. Rather, it constitutes *contact* and possibilities for *acknowledgement* via a *reversibility* or mediation of situated perspectives (*VI* 143). The ambiguity of this opening power of narcissism, as the interplay of difference-similarity (i.e., particular-universal), and private-public, constitutes the very possibility of reciprocal relating, per Levin.

In a published collection of lectures, *World of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes this reciprocity, which reveals the primary assumptions of his communication ethics theory. He says, "Everyone is alone and yet nobody can do without other people … there is no 'inner' life that is not a first attempt to relate to another person. In this ambiguous position, which has been forced on us because we have a body and a history … we can never know complete rest. We are continually obliged to work on our differences … and to perceive other people" (Merleau-Ponty *WP* 87). As "the contact I make with myself is always mediated" (*WP* 86), there is no *pure I* to whom I may appeal as a closed system. The decentered, reversible, obligation of *flesh* requires the opening of my self-other *I* through anxious *contact* and the mediation of *reciprocal* communication. As Merleau-Ponty says, "speech and understanding are moments in the unified system of self-other" (*WP* 18). My communication presupposes and depends on this self-other, reversible co-constitution through mediation. Through his overcoming of traditional

philosophical dualisms, Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics emerge as a humanism – a call

to respond, i.e., participate; and a call to responsibility for our responses (Baldwin 27).

Baldwin explains Merleau-Ponty's position, "we have to accept that there is an

inescapable 'ambiguity' in human life, whereby we have to accept responsibility for our actions

even though the significance of everything we try to do is dependent upon the meanings others

give to it" (Baldwin 27). This *good ambiguity* (Lanigan *Phenom.* 65) of opening narcissism

involves anxiety (Baldwin 27). Yet, for Merleau-Ponty anxiety and courage "are one and the

same thing … anxiety is vigilance, it is the will to judge, to know what one is doing and what

there is on offer" – to be open to relating with self-other-world; to pay attention via intention

(*WP* 87). As such, I characterize Merleau-Ponty's description of this opening power of self-

estrangement and alienation as *the experience of good anxiety and narcissism*.[3]

Although not commenting on narcissism explicitly, Dillon sums up the structure of

Merleau-Ponty's humanistic ethics of community and responsibility in his essay, "Expression

and the Ethics of Particularity." Dillon says that Merleau-Ponty's mediative ethics "solved … the

traditional problem of intersubjectivity … by arguing that we are born into prepersonal

communality," i.e., *flesh* "and only later in life, through the achievement of … the alienation

constitutive of personal identity," i.e., particularity, "we become aware of the divergence of our

own perspectives from others," and "learn to mediate across these differences by expression and

discourse" (195). The elements of self-other, private-public, and particular-universal, always

held in irresolvable tension, are thus mediated communicatively.

Structurally, these descriptions suggest what Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe as "dialogic

communication ethics," (79-98) in that Merleau-Ponty "protects and promotes," self-other,

private-public mediation borne from emergent spatio-temporal anxious moments of "dialogic

openness" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17; 31). That is, in responding to the ambivalent, Cartesian,

modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell

17) Merleau-Ponty reminds us of our interdependence with others and our world. He ultimately

protects and promotes the *good ambiguity* (Lanigan) of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* – a courage

to meet the ambiguities of differing perspectives, time and perpetually partial understandings by

learning to readily and tacitly assume a corporeal posture of openness.

Due to his emphasis on the body, Merleau-Ponty's productive view of anxiety and

narcissism *protect and promote* our ability to discern the grounding-grounds of self-other-world

via responsibility to dialogic invitation, which encourages learning and understanding through

openness to negotiation of difference between self-other (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). The experience

of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, then, encourages communicative practices which implicate,

bodily *self-mediation* at the level of prepersonal, perceptual *contact*; *predicate mediation* at the

intrapersonal, intentional level of *acknowledgement*; and *communicative mediation* of private-

public at interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels of *response*. Per Merleau-Ponty, this is

possible as we are already "caught up in" language, culture and institutional life (*WP* 16).

2.4.5 The Reversibility of Language as Flesh

As the body's natural sensory-motor structure instantiates self-mediation at the

prepersonal level, the structure of language, which Merleau-Ponty understands as another layer

of *flesh*, helps to mediate our intra, inter, group and institutional levels of experience. Returning

to Dillon's treatment of Merleau-Ponty's *thesis of reversibility* it becomes clear that language is

flesh due to its inherent "double referentiality" – that "the flesh of language is the world

illuminating itself through us, the body that speaks both aloud and silently to itself" (Dillon 171).

Language is thus *infra-referential* and *extra-referential*– language both refers to itself and

beyond itself (Dillon 201-203). Merleau-Ponty also presupposes that language is a gestalt, autochthonous structure, which rests on "communality" (Dillon 197).

This sounds similar to Merleau-Ponty's view of perception described above, and with good reason. For Merleau-Ponty, there is an analogous relationship between the body and language – "body : perception :: language : thought" (Dillon 222-223). That is, like the self-mediating prepersonal perceptual realm of silent significance, language mediates predicate dimensions of lived existence in a manner that positions humans as both subject-to *and* agent-of language (Dillon 177-186). Thus language, as *flesh*, is not some strictly objective referential structure to which we refer from without, but rather is our way of being. As the structure of language is *living*, Merleau-Ponty's ontology indicates that this being is *being-becoming* (Dillon). Although Dillon offers this important theoretical description of Merleau-Ponty's ontological linguistics as the *reversibility of flesh*, his description of the structures' functions and implications is truncated. Richard Lanigan offers more thorough treatment specific to concerns of human communication including speech.

2.5 Language as Flesh and Embodied Human Communication

Lanigan says, Merleau-Ponty's lived body as *flesh* "achieves … communication because he lives the simultaneous separation and union of perception [i.e., prepersonal] and expression *in* himself [i.e., intrapersonal] and *with* others [i.e., interpersonal, cultural and institutional]" (*Phenom.* 47). Lanigan cites a quote from Merleau-Ponty's *Signs*, which offers Merleau-Ponty's "definition of speech" (*Speak.* 191). Merleau-Ponty describes speech as distinct "from language" – it is not a structure, but rather a "moment" (*Signs* 92). This event of speech occurs when my "significative intention," that is my movement to choose to respond, openly, in meeting self-other-world, "proves itself capable of incorporating itself into my culture and the culture of

others – of shaping me and others by transforming the meaning of cultural instruments" (*Signs* 92). Lanigan explains that this notion of transformation reflects Merleau-Ponty's reflexive and synoptic dialectic view of speech. I choose the term "sedimentation-creation" to expand Lanigan's description based on Merleau-Ponty's use of these terms in his *Signs*.

That is, in *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty builds on Saussure's dyadic, synchronic/diachronic structural linguistics to develop this sense of speech. What Merleau-Ponty accepts from Saussure is a temporality in which expression includes not only the intended aspect of meaning as it is offered in speech (i.e., the synchrony of *parole*) but also the residual meanings which present engagement carries forth from the past (i.e., the diachrony of the entire structure of language - *langue*) and toward a future. In other words, as an embodied communicative, i.e., perceptive-expressive, being-becoming, I am able to draw on the existing structure of language to iterate sedimented cultural meanings and to initiate transformative constitution to create new meanings (Lanigan 191-192). At times speech is speech-spoken, i.e., sedimentation, while at other times speech is speech-speaking, i.e., creation, and the interplay of this gestalt comprises the communicative mediation of human relations with implications for meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's communicative meaning, then, like perception, is context dependent and perspectival. As no two subjects have exactly the same experiences throughout each individual's unique life, our engagement with and understanding of our worlds differs by matters of degree (Lanigan *Speak.*). If we share the same culture and language, the degrees of difference in meanings and understandings are often negligible in terms of function but significant in terms of how we live them. If we communicate cross culturally, our degrees of difference in understandings may increase but we are united by our mode of bodily perceptive-expressive existence, i.e., *flesh*, and possibilities for understanding remain fruitful. As meaning is

"sometimes lived rather than known" (*SB* 173) and as we are "condemned to meaning" (*PhP* xxii), we make mistakes in perception-expression. However, due to Merleau-Ponty's theses of the *primacy of perception*, the *primacy of phenomena*, *the thesis of ambiguity*, and the *thesis of reversibility*, illusions and misunderstandings are not outright errors in judgment but rather moments of confusion requiring more communication for clarification (Dillon; Lanigan *Speak.*). As Lawrence Hass and Taylor Carman each describe, all of this positions Merleau-Ponty as offering a beyond-representational view of communicative meaning as significance.

2.6 Perceptive-Expressive Embodied Human Communication and Significance

Hass suggests that Merleau-Ponty's explicit view of perceptive-expressively constituted reality, as *flesh*, challenges strict representational theories of meaning which hold that words are containers of thoughts extended out into the world (i.e., the Cartesian and Lockean views of intentionality) (Carman 15). In strict representational semiotic models, the word directly corresponds with the thought intended. As such, understanding requires determinate, epistemic communion – a perfect coincidence of objective meanings through the static union of subjective consciousness (Peters). Representationalist semiotics also limits possibilities for meaning. That is, if all that we accomplish in communication is representation, then human elements of choice and change, transformation in Merleau-Ponty's terms, are either painfully arduous or impossible. Additionally, representationalist views of human communication suggest that meaning is something that is "possessed" – by words, by users, by context, etcetera – instead of a horizonally shared perspectival sense of significance regarding phenomena (Arnett and Holba).

How Carman describes Merleau-Ponty's beyond representational view of perception also applies to Merleau-Ponty's view of beyond representational meaning and sums up the point nicely, "Perception is not mental representation … but skillful bodily orientation and negotiation

in given circumstances. To perceive [and hence to express] is not to have inner mental states, but to know and find your way around … an environment [,] … intentional attitudes … are modes of existence, ways of being … [at] the world" (Carman 19). As Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology (Dillon) offers human communication as embodied meeting between self-other-world, we not only represent, but also present, refer to, indicate and perform meanings to constitute, not create *ex-nihilo*, the significance of lived reality, which is *pregnant with meaning* (*PhP*).

The space through which this beyond representational significance is born emerges between, that is amidst the *reversible*, mediating "-," of figure-ground perception and self-other communality of human communication. As meaning goes beyond representation, we need not experience coincidence or perfect communion of consciousness to see, recognize and understand significance. We instead require the anxious opening power of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* through which we mediate self-other, private-public and understanding-misunderstanding. Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics assumptions describe *how* it is that we are *free to* communicatively navigate this space of tension and anxiety toward responsibility, from experiences of *contact* in prepersonal experience, through *acknowledgment*, and toward *response*, in intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and institutional experiences. Like existence, significance, although pervasive, is often ambiguous and thus requires the work and responsibility of meeting self-other-world (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 31). Communication, then, is not a means or end, but rather our way of being *at the world* – we are responsibly response-able.

2.7 Implications of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Ontology

For Merleau-Ponty, anxiety is the courageous opening possibility for human communication and the emergence of communication ethics practices. Following George Miller Beard's claim that *Americanitis* was not prevalent in Europe during the late nineteenth century, I

suggested that the slower pace of technological progress in France, due to the prevalence of war, perhaps encouraged Merleau-Ponty's productive view of anxiety and narcissism. As such, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics, emphasizing community and responsibility, will enhance understanding of our digital *Americanitis* by offering consideration of anxiety as an order, rather than strictly a disorder, of human experience.

That is, as Merleau-Ponty assumes the *primacy of perception*, that active-passive self-mediating movement of figure-ground, presence-absence, he assumes that prepersonal *contact*, between self-other-world, grounded in communality, is required for human communication to occur. As Frank Macke explains, this tacit, phatic *contact* is "*outside* the realm of cognition and thought," yet serves as the "fundamental and existential ground of the communication event" (78). Against rationalist, enlightenment forms of humanism, which inform the ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other," (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17) Merleau-Ponty's identification of this prepersonal, phatic realm of affirming *contact* indicates that possibilities for the emergence of communication ethics practices begin prior to predication and reason as an affective form of knowing that tacitly recalls our embodied situatedness and our temporal embedment. This is because our bodily, perceptive mode of knowing permits us the mediative interplay of self-other, private-public, and proximity-distance to realize our situatedness amidst the grounds of self-other-world, thereby opening mediative moments between self-other and possibilities for affirming each other's particularity, tacitly.

Yet, Michael Hyde's work on *acknowledgement* suggests that the experience of anxiety at the level of prepersonal reflection persists at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of relating. Acknowledgement "operates as a form of consciousness" that results from the othering experience of contact, which challenges us by way of a questioning of our particularity (xv).

Acknowledgement is more than "simple recognition" (3). Recognition belongs to the habitual, phatic level of affirming contact (2-3). Though dependent on recognition, acknowledgement requires something more – authenticity of intention and attention toward others that involves "sustained openness" (3-4). This openness, initiated through the reversible, *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of self-mediating, prepersonal self-other contact, encourages the persistent mediation of perspectives throughout the intra and interpersonal levels of relating. To mediate the *felt* anxiety of self-other contact intrapersonally, I acknowledge this other as both similar-different and choose to intend my attention toward him or her in response.

This attentional response, as our *responsibility*, i.e., our participation, initiates our call to dialogic invitation (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) – to respond communicatively at the interpersonal level. When this occurs, self-other maintain their respective particularity, grounded in communality, through the mediation of private-public. When I speak with the other, I *make my private particular perspective, public* (*Signs* 20; Lanigan *Speak.* 192). The other and I, through interpersonal communication, persistently assume the courage to acknowledge and mediate the anxiety-inducing ambiguity of private-public – a synopsis, which Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe as a necessary condition for communication ethics practices (113).

That is, without the private-public distinction, which is both spatial *and* temporal, we tend to one or the other extreme. Tending toward the private, "eschews difference" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 100), which suggests strictly subjective communication ethics assumptions that result in solipsism, skepticism, incommensurability and relativism thereby perpetuating the ambivalent, modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Conversely, tending toward the public negates particularity, which implicates objectively

and unreflexively identified and imposed ethical assumptions, i.e., ideology. Neither ambivalent extreme offers much possibility for dialogic learning, understanding, reflection and change.

By contrast, the mediative space of the "-" which persists through all levels of human experience, offers the ongoing possibility for othering and opening of self through contact with, acknowledgement of and responses to self, other things, other people and world. Merleau-Ponty ultimately suggests that it is through the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* that we come to know and understand the grounding-grounds of self, other and world. By insisting on tensional, reversible distinctions rather than oppositional dualisms between the synoptically connected elements of existence, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology suggests a dialogic, communally-grounded, corporeal communication ethics, which assumes the opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* encourages our *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to the dynamic grounds of self-other-world, so to co-constitute significance together.

As this significance exceeds mere representation and involves a multiplicity of particular perspectives informing its constitution, human existence is necessarily ambiguous. This anxious uncertainty, due to a plurality of possible meanings, requires our responsibility for, and our participation amidst, the horizons of community, language and history. Though we are born into the making and doing of others who have preceded us in space and time, we must accept responsibility for communicatively maintaining and changing the world we inherit. When we choose to accept the *good anxieties* of otherness and ambiguity, amidst our responsibility to participate, and we communicatively mediate the tensional synopses of self-other and private-public, communicative creation as transformation is possible.

At this preliminary stage, one may see Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology indicating possibilities for *Americanitis* due to a lack of openness, which implicates a lack of

mediation. This recalls my discussion of the film *her*. That is, in the film, people engrossed in hand-held screens do not *see* each other or their world. This narrows possibilities for perception, and hence the opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* which encourages postures of openness amidst the spatio-temporal grounding-grounds of self-other-world. Though Merleau-Ponty's discussion of cultural instruments as bodily extension-incorporations thus far does not indicate that engagement of tools instantiate the extreme possibility of closure, his theory does suggest that contexts of communication (i.e., the grounds of communication and the endemic gestalt formation of meaning,) implicate lived relational experience and significance.

This raises two questions. First, how does Merleau-Ponty's limited discussion of various forms of communication media implicate experience according to his phenomenological ontology? Second, might Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics assumptions suggest that a lack of phatic contact due to cultural instruments, such as digital, mobile devices, reduce possibilities for communication ethics practices, by stripping away opportunities for the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*? I will return to the first question in Part-II and the second question in Part-III. Both questions should help us to understand better McLuhan's Media Ecological assertion that electronic technology encourages *Americanitis*, as well as offering possible responses to our pathology. At present, I turn to McLuhan to introduce his view of the metaphors he holds in common with Merleau-Ponty (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon).

Chapter 3

An Introduction to McLuhan's Life, Works, Metaphors and Implicit Theory

The Introduction to this project offered a preview of McLuhan's assumptions aims and ends through an overview of the Media Ecology approach to media study. As the previous chapter introduced Merleau-Ponty's life, works and metaphors, I now offer parallel introduction of McLuhan's engagement of perception, figure and ground, the body, extension, visible and invisible, blindness, and the resonant interval. As one primary concern is to understand McLuhan's Media Ecological assertion that technologies encourage the human experience of narcissistic anxiety, Americanitis, my treatment of him in this chapter will carry forward interest for the elements of choice, contact, acknowledgement and response as they relate to human communication and McLuhan's implicit communication ethics of community and responsibility.

3.1 Introduction

Just as George Miller Beard attributed the nineteenth-century diagnosis of neurasthenia (i.e., anxious, nervous exhaustion) to mechanical technological innovations, Media Ecology theorists Turkle, Boorstin and McLuhan suggest that technology encourages our electronic narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, our *Americanitis*. Although McLuhan does not explicitly say that electronic technology causes *Americanitis*, he does discuss connections between narcissism, anxiety and technology in his Media Ecology. Though he lived in Europe and the U.S. for a time, McLuhan's Canadian vantage permitted unique critical distance to assess the prevalence of *Americanitis* in the U.S. As such, his characterization of narcissism and anxiety differ from Merleau-Ponty's productive, opening view, as described in Chapter 2. Yet, the difference between viewing narcissism and anxiety as a symptom (McLuhan) versus an opening call to human relations (Merleau-Ponty) does not preclude consideration of metaphorical affinities between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty, as identified by Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, Van den Eede and Vieta and Ralon.

This chapter introduces McLuhan, his metaphors of, *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure and ground*, *the visible*, *the invisible*, *blindness* and the *resonant interval*, his discussion of

narcissism and anxiety, as well as his implicit theory of human communication and

communication ethics. As I did with Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 2, I consider McLuhan's life,

influences and work as related to the larger context of communication and media studies during

modernity in North America. However, as McLuhan's theory is implicit (Ralon and Vieta;

Skocz), I offer fuller treatment of his biographical "sketch" to address this obscurity. I then

introduce McLuhan's metaphors, followed by description of his discussion of *Narcissus-*

Narcosis and anxiety, as well as communication ethics and human communication. To conclude,

I consider the implications for human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*.

3.2 Herbert Marshall McLuhan – A Biographical Sketch

Parallel to my treatment of Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 2, this section contextualizes

McLuhan's work. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, biographical scholarship about McLuhan is plentiful.

As McLuhan's critical style is aphoristic, mosaic, and intentionally ambiguous, scholars

interested in the theory informing his ideas do not always find it explicitly in his work. Instead,

they look to McLuhan's background, his life experience, his education and his personal

correspondence. Although this is the case for biographers, including W. Terrence Gordon and

Phillip Marchand, their work permits more recent McLuhan scholarship, from authors like Glenn

Willmott and Yoni Van den Eede, to consider McLuhan's theory explicitly. Thus, I engage

Gordon and Marchand's extensive biographies of McLuhan here, with support from Jeanine

Marchessault and others, to characterize McLuhan's life and historical moment. I then take up

Willmott and Van den Eede's theoretical interpretations to frame consideration of his metaphors.

3.2.2 Early Life and Education

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born on July 21, 1911 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

(Gordon *MM* 9). He attended the University of Manitoba, earning his B.A. in history, philosophy

and literature in 1933, and his M.A. in English from the same institution one year later (Gordon

MM 34-36). Pursuing his love of learning and reading, McLuhan undertook doctoral studies, on

scholarship, at Cambridge University in England, in the fall of 1934 (Gordon *MM* 38).

      One of McLuhan's Cambridge professors, I.A. Richards, inspired him with a novel,

sensory approach to practical poetic criticism and plural, context dependent semiology (Gordon

MM 48-49).[1] McLuhan also studied the literature of Pound, Hemingway and Joyce,[2] whose

symbolist style appropriated semiological ambiguity as a mode of social commentary and

critique (Gordon *MM* 47). Willmott identifies Richards as one of McLuhan's primary influences,

as Richards not only encouraged McLuhan's focus on perception in his playful, poetic Media

Ecology, but also McLuhan's appropriation of a "non-synthetic" semiological plurality whose

ambiguities encourage our poetic modes of sensuous and cognitive understanding (11-12).

      After a return to North America in the mid-1930s and his formal conversion to

Catholicism in 1937, McLuhan taught at St. Louis University – a premiere Catholic institution of

the time. This intellectual climate encouraged McLuhan's close readings of Thomas Aquinas,

another primary influence for McLuhan's work (Marchand 55; Marchessault 35-41; Theall 208).

Although Robert K. Logan suggests that McLuhan's faith did not "bias his scholarship" (loc.

2840), others acknowledge a deeply Catholic personal life, bolstered by McLuhan's readings of

Thomas, informing his primary assumptions (Marchessault 35-41; Wachs). As Wachs, following

Kroker, says, "McLuhan's theory of communication is a direct result of his Catholicism," a point

I address later in this chapter (Wachs 203).[3] McLuhan, thus, found a welcome community of

faith in St. Louis as he taught and conducted dissertation research.

      Similar to Merleau-Ponty's 1930s interwar France, the U.S. struggled economically

(Zinn). Yet, the isolationist position of the U.S. permitted focus on domestic policy, including

communication technology development and regulation (Starr 222). Driven by the ethos of a *free press* (Carey *TCS*), and with over 50 percent of U.S. households owning receivers by the mid-1930s, radio assumed a dominant mode of electronic communication (Starr 354). The burgeoning field of communication studies also emphasized concern for audience psychology scholarship during this decade (Gehrke). Though not yet focused on media in his scholarship, the use of radio in Europe to spread Nazi propaganda, affected McLuhan's work.

Traveling back to Cambridge in 1939 for a two-year period of dissertation research, McLuhan returned to St. Louis early, in the fall of 1940, due to England's entrance into World War II (Marchand 63). Ultimately, McLuhan's dissertation "was approved *in absentia* on 11 December 1943" (Gordon *MM* 115) and later posthumously published as *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time* (*Nashe* forward). The work traces the trivium, from the classical period to the sixteenth century, culminating in a robust framework then applied to Thomas Nashe's writings. McLuhan "intended to provide a tool for modern scholars" that balanced the humanistic concerns of grammatical interpretation and rhetorical engagement with the modern hegemony of Cartesian dialectics (Gordon 111; Marchessault). This early work greatly informs the theory behind his Media Ecology, as I show below.

Following a move to Toronto in 1946, McLuhan published his first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (*MB* forward), in 1951. Not yet explicitly attending to environments of electronic media, *MB* is a collection of popular cultural materials and print advertisements that McLuhan engaged to teach his early literary criticism courses (Gordon *MM*). Inspired by F.R. Leavis'[4] *Culture and Environment*, which suggests, "that practical literary criticism could be associated with training in awareness of the environment," *MB* aims to promote critical

understanding of the less than humanistic effects of Cartesian, modernist mechanization and U.S. commercialism during the middle twentieth century (Marchand 40).

Scholarship in the communication studies field during the 1940s and 1950s holds similar concerns. Parallel to Shannon and Weaver's 1940s mechanistic model of communication and cybernetics in the 1950s, is a humanistic, ethical turn in communication scholarship – a concern spurred by the terrors of WWII (Gehrke 33-59). Critical concern for engagement of instrumental emotional appeals was primary, in civic contexts (Gehrke 33-59), and commercial advertising. After the WWII economic boon in the U.S., Americans were called to recapture the consumer fervor of the Industrial Revolution (Zinn). Advertising, like that critiqued by McLuhan in *MB*, now pervasive in print, radio and television media, offered much for scholarly consideration.

McLuhan's 1950s view of the U.S. from Canada, bolstered by his meetings with Harold Innis, fostered his forthcoming assertion of *media as environments*, which shape communication, offer epistemic biases, and have consequences for culture (Lum 32-33). McLuhan develops these assumptions more explicitly in his second text, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, which he labeled a *footnote to Innis*. The work ecologically considers the impact of print technology for cultures via the epochal, orality-literacy Media Ecology approach described previously.

Between the end of World War II and the 1962 publication of *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan advanced to full-professor at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto (Gordon *MM* 159-190). He recognized the spread of radio, and the growth of television as offering possibilities for entirely new patterns of perception and cultural organization in the U.S. (Marchessault 69). The capitalist approach to television in the U.S., contrasted with state control in France and Canada, led to rapid adoption of the powerful electronic medium.[5] A 1959 research grant from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) and the

United States Office of Education, allowed McLuhan to develop "a teaching method and syllabus for use in introducing the nature and effects of media to the curriculum of secondary schools" (Gordon *MM* 180). The curriculum would promote "*increased awareness of the forms of media, as they operate upon our modes of perception and judgment*" to provide "*a means of understanding*" for purposes of their "*prediction and control*" (McLuhan in Gordon *MM* 180).

Gordon views the NAEB project as the primary source for McLuhan's next major publication, his 1964 *Understanding Media* (*UM* forward). The work establishes McLuhan's primary assumption that media are *hidden environments* that affect individuals and cultures (*UM* 12), and also introduces several of McLuhan's notable aphorisms, for example, *The Medium is The Message*. The metaphor of *Narcissus-Narcosis* in *UM* also permits exploration of McLuhan's thoughts on electronic *Americanitis*, as I show below.

Following *UM*, and while teaching at New York's Fordham University in 1967, McLuhan experienced a series of seizures caused by a large brain tumor, which required complex surgical intervention (Marchand 212).[6] Although McLuhan was not necessarily anxious per se following surgery, sound, bright lights and busyness irritated his now "hypersensitive" being (Marchand 181-203; 213).[7] Facing these struggles, McLuhan published seven books between 1964 and 1972[8] (Marchand 223-247). Despite his professional fervor, however, McLuhan fell out of popular favor toward the end of the 1960s (Marchand 223-247).[9]

McLuhan coped well with the stress of losing professional ground, yet lamented the social fall from traditional, Catholic moral values evidenced by the youth movement and sexual revolution in North America (Marchand 248-249). He believed that electronic man had his "personal, private morality obliterated" over the course of increasingly rapid changes from the era of high literacy forward, and longed for revival of a universal, Catholic morality, a

community of responsibly (Marchand 249-267). Perhaps spurred by similar concerns in the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. communication studies scholarship attended to communication ethics from humanistic and existential perspectives (Gehrke 88-110). The turmoil of the 1960s public sphere, invading the private spaces of U.S. homes through TV and radio, arguably increased such concerns. Scholars' attention shifted away from technical emphasis on efficacy and efficiency, toward concerns for community, responsibility, and dialogue (Gehrke).

Following a heart attack in 1976 and a major stroke that induced aphasia in 1979, McLuhan retired from teaching. His son Eric, who earned his "B.Sc. in communication from Wisconsin State University," in 1973, assisted Marshall with ongoing writing projects (Marchand 261). After Marshall's passing, on December 31, 1980, Eric continued one particular work, eventually publishing the co-authored *Laws of Media* (*LOM* forward), in 1988 (Marchand 287). *LOM* is arguably the most theoretically explicit attempt at helping audiences to *understand* the effects of media as *hidden environments*, as ubiquitous grounds of which we are unaware.[10]

LOM seeks a *new science* – a balanced response to scientism, harkening back to the Renaissance thought of Francis Bacon and the critique of dialectic-heavy education from Giambattista Vico (4). Here, the McLuhans introduce a four-fold, interpretive, chiasmic, heuristic, the *tetrad*, "directed towards making visible the hidden grammars and etymologies underlying human artefacts" (Marchessault 222). Echoing his dissertation, the *new science* aims to balance the trivium arms of grammar and rhetoric with dialectic toward humanistic ends of understanding (*LOM* 7-9). Through presentation of the tetrad, and extensive critiques of phenomenology and scientism, the McLuhans aim for a "bridge" between the "ancient and modern phases of Western culture" (*LOM* 66) – an equilibrium amidst change.

McLuhan's body of work predominantly proposes "a pedagogical framework through which to get a hold of and understand the properties of everchanging [*sic*] mediascapes" (Marchessault 222). McLuhan, assuming the position of teacher, aimed to cultivate our rediscovery of sensory, relational balance amidst the rapid social and technical changes during his historical moment of modernity. Throughout this chapter, I will elaborate considerations introduced here. I now turn to introduce McLuhan's theoretical assumptions, aims and ends.

3.2.3 Marshall McLuhan's Media Ecology: Assumptions, Aims and Ends

In my *Introduction*, I discuss how McLuhan's work embodies and contributes to forming the primary assumptions, aims and ends of the Media Ecology approach. Yet, his specific theoretical assumptions are implicit (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz). As such, I draw together the preview of McLuhan's Media Ecology, the biographical description above and the work of Willmott, Van den Eede and others to consider, preliminarily, McLuhan's tacit assumptions.

As stated, McLuhan assumes that media are not neutral, but rather are active sensorial-symbolic, multimedia environments, or process agents, that reflexively condition perceptive, epistemic and ontological biases, thereby instantiating far-reaching existential and cultural effects. McLuhan's *culture and technology symbiosis* (Lum), reflexive view of the relationship between technology, human communication and culture, suggests that media are hidden environments, grounds of which we are not expressly aware, which we engage in processes of human communication (Lum; *UM*). Through his artful and poetic Media Ecology, McLuhan aims to raise audiences' awareness of *hidden media environments* and the agency they assume, with the aim of increasing understanding regarding media's formal effects (Van den Eede).

McLuhan's dissertation reveals his Media Ecology theoretical assumptions regarding human understanding. Though initiated by questions about the rhetorical tradition, Gordon,

Marchand, and Marchessault suggest that McLuhan's dissertation emphasizes grammar,[11] "the [*ancient*] art of interpreting … literary texts … [and] all phenomena" (Gordon *N-Intro* xi). This interpretive view of human understanding, is "based on the belief" associated with Divine Logos, "that all human knowledge inhered in language" (Marchand 63). As such, McLuhan describes his concern with grammar in *Nashe* as humanistic, "from the time of the neo-Platonists and Augustine to Bonaventura and to Francis Bacon, the world was viewed as a book … The art of grammar provided … the sixteenth-century approach to the Book of Life in scriptural exegesis … [and] the Book of Nature" (7). Ultimately Marchessault says that this rhetorical-grammatical, ancient, humanist "tradition held an attraction for McLuhan because of his own Catholicism, and also because it was a view held by one of the Catholic thinkers he most admired, Thomas Aquinas" (Marchessault 24). As such, McLuhan's assumptions regarding speech, understanding and community find ground in his Catholic faith and the work of Thomas, which emerge through his dissertation and reach across his body of work (Wachs). Ultimately, McLuhan aims for audiences to read, interpret and understand the *book of media* – i.e., to *discern* the grounding assumptions that media forms embody and portend through their existence and engagement.

How then might one identify McLuhan's philosophical assumptions? In my *Introduction*, I indicate that McLuhan assumes his approach to media criticism is *phenomenology in non-technical terms*. As described previously, Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon's see affinity between McLuhan's primary assumptions and the primary assumptions of *existential Heideggerian phenomenologies*. However, they do not explore affable groundings thoroughly. Glenn Willmott and Yoni Van den Eede, however, do elaborate ontological connections between McLuhan and Heidegger, which further elucidate McLuhan's theory behind his Media Ecology.

Willmott takes a literary-critical approach to suggest that McLuhan assumes a unique modernist rationalism, which simultaneously critiques modernity and rationalist philosophies, to appropriate "logical forms" that "enable human consciousness methodically, if poetically or aesthetically, to comprehend its situation to the fullest" (xiv). Willmott engages Heidegger to clarify McLuhan's "existential aesthetic" revelatory of his notion of human *being*. He uncovers McLuhan's primary ontological assumption that "the ground of our being is neither the existential chaos of existentia nor a metaphysical essence, but a historical and human form of mediation … Media is simply the category … by which McLuhan … [reveals] the more elusive phenomenological gestalt of existence" (188). As McLuhan's approach is poetic, stylistic "satire," art is what allows us to grasp dimensions of being, such as ground, which we often overlook (199).

Van den Eede also aims to uncover McLuhan's theoretical assumptions, yet, via a philosophy of technology approach. Considering Heidegger, and others, Van den Eede positions McLuhan as offering a "philosophy of mediation" (169) resting upon a *hybrid substantivist-relational*, *ontology* (183). Substantivist ontologies "see the universe as fundamentally composed of substances or entities, that do enter into relations with one another, however these are secondary" (162). Conversely, relational ontologies are a "response" to this modernist, substantivist view. A relational ontology "reverses" the "order of priority" to suggest "substances do obviously exist, but ... are constituted or co-constituted by their relations" (162). Van den Eede says that this relational ontology is implicit in McLuhan's M.E. and considers its structure via two, famous McLuhan aphorisms, "the 'meaning of meaning' is relationship" (McLuhan and Nevitt 3) and "the medium is the message" (*UM* 19-35).

When taken together, the aphorisms reveal McLuhan's notion of the "existence of networks of interlocking processes, hence … a relational ontology" (Van den Eede 164). Van den Eede sees affinity between McLuhan's relational aspect of his *hybrid ontology of mediation* and work in "phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, poststructuralism ... [etc.]" (171). The affable grounding he proposes – all such work, by emphasizing relation, rejects the "modernist dichotomies" of "subject … [vs.] object or organic … [vs.] technical" (171). McLuhan's hybrid ontology "urges us to consider formal structure and not just ... content" to "get beyond [our] ... technological blindness," while also maintaining that the "substance" of a medium remains "unattainable, untouchable, unreachable," that is, invisible (Van den Eede183). McLuhan's view of human being, then, seems to involve something like Merleau-Ponty's visible-invisible synopsis – the *seeing together* of traditional philosophical dichotomies. Van den Eede ultimately grounds McLuhan's hybrid ontology through his metaphors of *figure and ground*, *blindness* and *interval*, which I address below.

3.3 McLuhan's Metaphors

This section introduces McLuhan's metaphors of *perception*, *figure and ground*, *the body*, *extension*, *blindness*, *visible and invisible* and the *resonant interval* (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon; Van den Eede). Although I will not attempt thorough comparison with Merleau-Ponty's similar metaphors until Part-III of this project, I do keep Merleau-Ponty in view, calling on him for points of comparison, which help to clarify McLuhan's ideas (Skocz). Unlike Merleau-Ponty's clearly described metaphors, McLuhan purposefully appropriates metaphorical ambiguity with the intent to assist our understanding of media. Thus, the presentation below, though intended parallel to my treatment of Merleau-Ponty, in principle,

requires nuanced arrangement. With help from Van den Eede and others, I introduce McLuhan's metaphors with the secondary aim of elucidating McLuhan's implicit theory.

3.3.2 Perception

As stated, Van den Eede identifies "three key terms," which offer a "gateway into McLuhan's work: *perception*, *awareness*, and *understanding*" (41). Focusing on perception, Van den Eede says that, as McLuhan sees an interrelatedness of "environment," "human perception," and "intellect" – that these aspects of existence "touch" each other – McLuhan assumes that "one who wants to understand environments, must look into the way we perceive or not perceive" (45). In *GG*, *UM* and elsewhere, McLuhan discusses perception in terms of our *sensorium*. All five of our senses relate to each other through a balancing of *sense ratios*, mediated by the "*common sense*" of *touch* (*UM* 89). McLuhan explains that *touch* here is "not skin but the interplay of the senses … a matter of a fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell" (*UM* 89). Thus, "touch … is the cornerstone of McLuhan's … sensory infrastructure … the *sensus communis*" (Van den Eede 48). Searching for a theoretical anchor for McLuhan's idea of perception, Van den Eede follows Marchessault, Donald Theall and others to identify Thomas Aquinas as a source.

Van den Eede says that McLuhan follows Thomas' idea of human perception as "a creative act," rather than the passive reception of impressions upon our minds (48). Like Thomas, "McLuhan's interest in perception focuses on its role in experiential rather than rational terms of 'knowing'" (Van den Eede 48). Theoretically then, McLuhan assumes that perception "grounds our being" (Van den Eede 66), invites our participation, and allows us to grasp significant aspects of our lived experience. Yet, as stated, McLuhan's M.E. asserts that media bias or imbalance our perception, our *sensus communis*.

Though Van den Eede recognizes Innis as an influence for McLuhan's notion of *sensory bias*, he adds that it is "the Thomist influences in McLuhan's theory of perception," which reveal their significance (124). He explains, "in the Thomist scheme, cognition is always a form of perception and vice versa;" "every perceptual process is an act of understanding, and the other way around" (124-125). Bias, then, not only implicates perception, but also cognition. Van den Eede notes that while there seems a dichotomous separation in McLuhan's theoretical distinction between structural and intellectual perceptual biases, McLuhan maintains a unity between them in terms of "our organic, biological setup" (126) – in other words, our sensory bodies.

3.3.3 The Body and Extension

The body is an implicit rather than explicit metaphor in McLuhan's work (Skocz). One may easily assume, based on his Thomistic view of human perception, that McLuhan appropriates a Thomistic notion of the human body. Yet, as Thomistic embodiment prioritizes consciousness over the body (Barral), and McLuhan seems to indicate a more robust view of the perceptive body, united by touch, I suggest pushing beyond acceptance of such an assumption.[12] As such, one must attempt to uncover McLuhan's notion of the body through his related metaphors of *extension*, and *incarnate* (Skocz; Van den Eede 139-151).

Drawing on the work of medical researchers "Hans Selye and Adolphe Jonas" in *UM*, McLuhan characterizes a body whose technological *extension* instantiates "sensory stress" (63-70). *Sensory stress* then causes us to "autoamputate," or numb, our extended sense or organs, permitting us to avoid bodily "dis-ease" via maintenance of equilibrium or comfort (63-70). As McLuhan assumes that "every technology or medium is an extension of a human sense, body part, or capability" (Van den Eede 43-44), and that "human organisms and environments are … intermixed," (Van den Eede 149) the metaphors of *extension*, *sensory stress* and *autoamputation*

indicate, "qualitative alteration," "of the concerned sense [or] body part" (Van den Eede 43-44). This *alteration* ultimately rests upon McLuhan's reflexive hybrid ontology of mediated being.

Van den Eede says that *extension as alteration* suggests reflexivity because McLuhan views mediation as "two-way traffic between our bodies and our technologies or environments" (150). This is what I term McLuhan's double media thesis – the idea that media are both extensions of our bodies and environments in which are bodies are situated. The reflexivity, per Van den Eede, "holds huge implications for philosophical notions of 'embodiment'"(150) and he draws upon Skocz to offer discussion of "McLuhan's extension theory as parallel to Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment" (150). Per Skocz, McLuhan seems to assert a view of bodily extension as "unidirectional" (14-16). However, Skocz says that McLuhan's related metaphor of *sensory stress* actually reveals the implicit assumption of a sort of *backchanneling* or corporeal incorporation of media, similar to Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of extension-incorporation of tools (14-16). In Van den Eede's read, McLuhan, "stresses the centrality of embodiment, just like Merleau-Ponty does" (150). I agree with Skocz and Van den Eede, with qualification.

As Skocz and Van den Eede neglect the influence of McLuhan's Catholicism (Marchand; Marchessault; Wachs), I suggest, parallel to Richard Kearney's characterization of Merleau-Ponty's *Eucharistic embodiment*, that McLuhan's Catholicism is perhaps additively revealing of his notion of the body. In an early lecture, *Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters*, McLuhan says, "human perception is literally incarnation" (169). This quote coupled with McLuhan's notion that "speech is analogue with perception" (*M&L* 169) indicates that we embody the world through the reflexive interplay between *figure and ground* that is both *visible and invisible –* similar to Merleau-Ponty's view of the lived body.

Ultimately, McLuhan's body, extended and otherwise, is a biological entity and a perceptive grounding via the *sensus communis* of tactility. Our bodies are unitary (i.e., subject-object), yet not synthetic, constitutive vehicles that sense, think, speak and act. Our incarnate, perceptive bodies are exemplary of the poetic process of communication that mediates worldly relations (*M&L* 169; Wachs). As "true perception" for McLuhan, is "the ability to hold both figure and ground in one's attention, in a dynamic and resonating relationship" (Marchand 260), I turn to consider additional metaphors that deepen understanding of how our bodies perceive.

3.3.4 Figure and Ground, Blindness, Visible and Invisible, and *Resonant Interval*

McLuhan's metaphorical mosaic of *figure and ground*, *blindness*, *visible and invisible* and *resonant interval*, taken as a whole, reveals additional assumptions informing McLuhan's Media Ecology as well as his criticism of phenomenology. Van den Eede connects McLuhan's *figure and ground* metaphor with Eric and Marshall's *LOM* and its discussion of formal cause. Although Merleau-Ponty rejected linear views of Aristotelian causality, McLuhan maintains, in contrast to modernist, linear conceptions, a circular interpretation of Aristotle's causes (McLuhan *MFC*) – a conception Merleau-Ponty would accept (Carman 35).

In *LOM*, the McLuhans describe *formal cause* in terms of the traditional philosophical dichotomy of being versus becoming. The McLuhans, as with the *figure and ground* metaphor, view this relationship as being and becoming. Van den Eede explains, "Formal cause 'contains' the 'result' of being, i.e., becoming as well as being 'itself'" (189). That is, "formal cause" as *ground* in *LOM* suggests an "expectational horizon, as grasping of cause and effect of thing and word *in one*" through creative emergence of form via figure-ground interplay (Van den Eede 198). Van den Eede explains that the McLuhans' notion of form is three-dimensional and includes "an unattainable 'core' as 'ground,' the 'interplay' between the two as 'interval,' and

the 'effects' as …'figure'" (190). Thus, McLuhan's view of *form* involves *blindness* of its

always-elusive *core*, the *interplay* of *figure-ground*, and the *interval* or space of the "and", where

figure emerges, thereby allowing us to perceive aspects of ground (i.e., *formal cause*).

The McLuhans describe this interval as "resonant" and dynamic in *LOM* (70-77; 102).

The between, the interval, of figure-ground is relational mediation, which the McLuhans

characterize as "play" (77). Engaging the example of the *touch and play* between wheel and axel,

the McLuhans say, "Without 'play,' without … interval" between figure and ground, "there is

neither wheel nor axle. The space between the wheel and axle … defines both" (77). Van den

Eede says that this is a salient metaphor for McLuhan, one that makes his *hybrid ontology of*

mediation unique. For, as the McLuhans contend, even phenomenology has not grasped the

significance of the *interval*, "there is in Heidegger still no sense of interplay between figure and

ground; the attention has just been shifted from one to the other" (*LOM* 63). The McLuhans'

point here is crucial. Without *resonance*, the interplay of *interval*, we cannot grasp aspects of

lived experience – figure, ground, or their conjunctions and distinctions. We are *blind*.

Per Van den Eede, McLuhan's *hybrid substantivist-relational ontology of mediation*

attributes the experience of *blindness* to "our perceptual, existential, or cultural setup" (85).

Though speaking specifically of our *technological blindness*, Van den Eede's discussion implies

consideration of a more general *existential blindness* resulting from our corporeal situatedness,

amidst time and experiential space (see *LOM* Ch. 1; *LOM* 83). Though all human experience

seems to involve blindness to certain elements of the visible-invisible, figure-ground interplay

and interval of human experience, in *LOM* the McLuhans indicate that *technological blindness*,

that is, experience in a technological milieu, always "results in a transformation of sensibilities"

due to our bodies' seeking equilibrium (83). *Technological blindness* implies that the resonant

interval becomes arrested (*LOM* 82-85). Per McLuhan's M.E., though we aim for equilibrium

through *extension-autoamputation*, rapid technological innovation, from the printing press

through mechanical and electronic development, leaves us imbalanced, biased, blind and numb –

anesthetized, *dis-eased* and anxious, like Narcissus.

3.3.5 Anxiety and *Narcissus-Narcosis*

McLuhan's metaphor of *Narcissus* appears throughout his work and helps to elucidate the

significance of his related metaphors, *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure-ground*, *blindness*

and the *resonant interval*. Willmott (148-153) and Van den Eede (144-145; 331-352) each

indicate that McLuhan's Narcissus metaphor characterizes media as invisible grounds to which

we are often numb (i.e., blind) and which implicate our bodily perception via extension. Both

also acknowledge how the metaphor reveals McLuhan's views of subjectivity and the self. Only

Van den Eede inquires about McLuhan's metaphor and its connection with narcissism,

concluding that McLuhan's *Narcissus* is not structurally narcissistic, but rather reflects a

cultural-historical pathological narcissism, encouraged by the printing press and electronic media

(331-352). However, neither author acknowledges the proximity of McLuhan's *Narcissus* to his

characterization of the electronic age as "The Age of Anxiety" (*UM* 7). As such, I offer here a

synoptic read of *Narcissus* that also attends to media, narcissism and anxiety.

Narcissus first appears in *The Mechanical Bride*. One of McLuhan's primary points in

MB is that our ancestral priority of poietic "human responsibility and community," crafted via

balanced, natural perception, inclusive thought, and artful poetic communication, have shifted to

prioritize *comfort* through mechanization (75). The environment of image-based ads and life

spent "waiting on machines," arrests our perception. In turn, our bodies become abstract,

Cartesian machines[13] (134), whose primary purpose is to narcissistically seek individual

"comfort," as passive and desensitized vehicles of "sex and death" (*MB* 99; Marchessault 59).

      Later in *MB*, McLuhan aligns Narcissus with fear – anxiety (*MB* 141-144). Noting the

American ideals of rugged strength and power, McLuhan asserts that, "fear is the primary motive

in toughness" (141). He continues, "those who are confused or overwhelmed by a machine world

are encouraged to become psychologically hard, brittle, and smoothly metallic" (141). As a

mechanized style of living encourages the "annihilation of our individual humanity," some

persons experience feelings of "helplessness" thereby causing the fearful, the anxious, to

ambivalently align with the masses or to tend toward isolation for purposes of control (141).

      Yet, this phenomenon is not limited to the mechanical age. In *UM*, McLuhan engages

Narcissus to describe the effects of electronic media environments with attention to the related

metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, and *extension*. McLuhan contextualizes the metaphor by

contrasting the mechanistic "explosion," during which specific, specialized senses extend over

space, with the electronic "implosion," through which "we have extended our central nervous

system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time" (5). In the immersive

experience of electronic technology with its global point of view and pervasive simultaneity,

media extend human perception and expression to an unnatural level of situatedlessness (6).

      McLuhan suggests that this lack of situatedness results from an imbalance in our *sense*

ratios (*UM*). Technical experience isolates particular senses as dominant (e.g., the printed word

elevates sight). When a form of technical mediation persists and affects culture over time, the

sensory bias tends to create imbalanced perspective. McLuhan asserts that the electronic age is

an assault upon the gestalt of our sense ratios, which places our entire sensory system outside of

our bodies. Disembodied and dis-embedded, media seize us in modes of automatic participation

without actual involvement, which positions communication as an exchange of information that disregards otherness, learning and understanding.

As such, the electronic age, "is the Age of Anxiety for the reason of the electric implosion that compels commitment and participation, quite regardless of any 'point of view' … If the nineteenth century was the age of the editorial chair, ours is the century of the psychiatrist's couch … " (*UM* 7). The metaphor of the *editorial chair* indicates thought offered from a particular perspective, one's editorial, private points of view made public within a certain context. There is a clear distinction between private and public with the *editorial chair*. The psychiatrist's couch, conversely, "removes the temptation to express private points of view and obviates the need to rationalize events" from a totalized, gargantuan global context within which natural distinctions, including that of public and private, are not readily accessible. Without the private-public distinction, which is a necessary condition for communication ethics (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), our mechanistic anxiety intensifies, and it too is coupled with narcissism.

McLuhan says that Narcissus did not fall in love with himself. Rather, the mirror, as image-producing technology, offered an extension of Narcissus – an illusion of self as other through which Narcissus mistook his reflection for another person. This mistake caused him unending perceptual stress. "The extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image … He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system" (*UM* 63). In the electronic age, with our loss of distinctions and situatedness, we become extensively open to a point of sensory imbalance so severe that we must close ourselves off completely in order to survive. As this "self-amputation forbids self-recognition" (*UM* 64), the arresting power of electronic technology not only closes us off from the world but also others and our selves, leading to numbness.

Whereas anxiety is clearly a symptom of electronic technology for McLuhan, he seems to also suggest that narcissism is a means of coping with that anxiety. Yet, when electronic anxiety strips us of our situatedness to such an extreme, narcissism itself becomes symptomatic as narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, our *Americanitis*. McLuhan's read of narcissism and anxiety differs from Merleau-Ponty's discussion. Yet, like Merleau-Ponty's *narcissism*, the metaphor of *Narcissus* for McLuhan reveals assumptions regarding his communication ethics.

3.4 McLuhan's Implicit Communication Ethics

As McLuhan's communication ethics theory is implicit, this section attempts to elucidate its dimensions. To offer thorough treatment, I consult Van den Eede's discussion of McLuhan's humanism along with fellow Media Ecology theorist, Sherry Turkle's psychoanalytic read of pathological narcissism. Additionally, though I will reserve thorough development for Part-III, I do refer peripherally to Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics, involving *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, for assistance in clarifying McLuhan's primary assumptions (Skocz).

I have thus far, addressed McLuhan's desire for a return to traditional, Catholic moral values during his historical moment of rapid technological and social change. This observation, made by Marchessault, Marchand and others is reinforced in Van den Eede's ontological read of McLuhan. He says, "not in any way does McLuhan conceal his humanistic premises" (222).

Van den Eede suggests that McLuhan's humanism, absent of *hubris*, rests upon remembering "our fragility, our fallibility" (225) – the limits of our embodiment, through which we "bear the responsibility, in both an existentialist and ecological sense, for … [humanity's] preservation and protection … we are 'us' and at the same time we are 'the world'" (225). Per Van den Eede, McLuhan's point is that "we remake the world in our own image … [yet] paradoxically by imposing ourselves upon the world, it is exactly *ourselves* we risk to lose"

(223). One of McLuhan's aims, then, is to counter the ambivalent, modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17) by reminding audiences of their embodied *freedom to* act amidst limitations, rather than trying to abolish them. Building on this, I suggest that the metaphorical set of *perception-body-extension-sensory stress-Narcissus-narcosis-anxiety-auto(self)amputation*, coupled with the added metaphor of *discarnate man* reveals McLuhan's Catholic humanist assumptions informing his communication ethics theory, attentive to community and responsibility.

In *LOM*, the McLuhans say, "when people are on the telephone, or on the air, they have no physical bodies but are translated into abstract images … The discarnate user of electronic media bypasses all former spatial restrictions and is present in many places simultaneously as a disembodied intelligence … minus his private identity" (*LOM* 72). Our lack of material, bodily presence and situated perspective, via *extension*, generates *perceptual stress* and *anxiety* leading to a numbing and amputation of the extension – particularly in the a-temporal, a-spatial ecology of the electronic epoch. The *discarnate* metaphor makes clear that we not only *autoamputate* sensory organs, but also our selves. We literally amputate our selves by closing ourselves off, like Narcissus, from others and world in submitting to electronic situatedlessness.

As "human perception is literally incarnation," McLuhan indicates that electronic media strip us of deeply embedded and embodied sensory experience between self, other and world thereby causing us to be *discarnate* (*M&L*169; *LOM*). In other words, without an opening element, similar to Merleau-Ponty's corporeal experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, which permits for self-reflection, we are unable to perceive and experience the otherness necessary for human relating. We exist, then, merely in a world of objects available for our *use*. We do not get beyond a tacit, habituated level of touchless-contact, leaving us blind to the interplay of the self-

other and private-public, resonant intervals. We shift from public practices informed by *private morality* to a shallow, mass, *participation-without-involvement*, "public, austere ethic"[14](McLuhan *PAT*; Marchand 249-267).

While McLuhan does not elaborate this *austere ethic* of the electronic age, one can surmise that the lack of distinction between public and private, stemming from the simultaneous, fast and pervasive electronic media environment, conditions a deprival of self while also implicating an unreflective, Lockean-utilitarian ethos of everyman-for-himself-satisfaction, as suggested by McLuhan's engagement of the term *comfort* in *MB*. Our electronic dis-embedment and our un-situatedness, amidst an, a-temporal, a-spatial electro-technical, ethos advances a mass-public ethic through which we become mere observers, rather than interested participants. This is reminiscent of Sherry Turkle's discussion of pathological narcissism in *Alone Together*.

In asking *why people prefer to talk to robots over humans*, Turkle describes a narcissism that is "not to indicate people who love themselves, but a personality so fragile that it needs constant support" (177). This fragile, narcissistic self, unable to cope with the ambiguities of human relating, is intolerant of "the complex demands of other people," foregoing engagement with others in favor of instrumental, *use* (177). This is an unreflective, ideological, on-demand relating, through which an individual appropriates an other as abstract object, for purposes of gaining comfort, security and certainty (Turkle). One can easily see in McLuhan's culturally conditioned pathologically narcissistic, *Narcissus-Narcosis*, aspects of this properly *modern* identity who is led to believe "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Such a belief rests upon a view of self as a realm of linear, fixed development, achieving ideal completion by its own, individualistic willing and doing. In the context of McLuhan's *Narcissus*, this modern-illusion of self is encouraged by scientistic, rather than

humanistic, ideals of rigorous, dualistic dialectical logic, fixed objectivity and linear progressive, evolutionary development that arose with ambivalent, Cartesian thought, was reified in the visually biased epoch of high literacy and made spectacle with electronic technology.

In McLuhan's terms, our loss of carnal situatedness, implicates a loss of identity, which leads to a numb, fearful, fragile, existence through which we violently *use* others like machines to maintain personal comfort. Reinforced by the hegemonic influence of ambivalent, Cartesian assumptions embodied amidst the grounds of modernity, an *austere* ethos assumes that the only form of human reason is rigorous logic (Kroker). This dualistic, linear, modernist rationality, in search of absolute certainty, holds as requisite a *freedom from* domination to secure autonomous rational will formation and ensure strictly objective truth. While McLuhan suggests that we are *blind* to media environments and effects, he also suggests that we have become blind to our private-public *freedom to* reflectively, phronetically, relationally and affectively reason with self and others amidst the between of his *resonant interval*. In other words, with the speedy electronic atmosphere of information, we have no habit of, no desire for, and no time to reflect (Kroker). Per McLuhan, only *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* may remind us of our *freedom to* as a possibility for the emergence of communication ethics practices, such as contact, acknowledgment and response (Van den Eede).

To summarize, then, one may broadly characterize McLuhan's implicit communication ethics of community and responsibility as following similar assumptions of Merleau-Ponty's explicit theory. With knowledge of Catholicism and Thomistic philosophy informing McLuhan's primary Media Ecology assumptions, one can say that he presupposes something like Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, or at least a common community of humanity. Additionally, his humanism "protects and promotes" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) the limits of our embodiment, our *freedom to*

perceive, be aware, and grammatically (i.e., holistically, interpretively and reflectively) understand self, other and world (Van den Eede), which also comports with Merleau-Ponty's views. Further, as McLuhan's *Narcissus* metaphor reveals our closed, discarnate, electronic *Americanitis*, one may suggest that McLuhan's idea of human relating necessarily presupposes something akin to Merleau-Ponty's opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*.

McLuhan's *protection and promotion* of the necessity of distinctions, rather than oppositions, between elements such as private *and* public also suggests affinity. McLuhan indicates that the space of the *and*, the dynamic, resonant interval of the "-" between private-public, similar to Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility*, is necessary for *perception*, *awareness*, and *understanding* of self, other and world. Thus, McLuhan's metaphors along with his *hybrid substantivist-relational ontology of mediation* (Van den Eede) imply concern for openness to perceptive mediation at a prepersonal level of contact, the "sustained openness" (Hyde) of conscious-reflective mediation at the intrapersonal level of intentional acknowledgement, and mediative negotiation of difference, via response, at the interpersonal level. Building on these assumptions, I now consider McLuhan's implicit theory of human communication.

3.5 McLuhan's Implicit Theory of Human Communication

Marshall McLuhan does not explicitly offer "A Theory of Communication," (E. McLuhan *Yegg* 171). As such, this section draws on the work of Gordon, Marchessault, Eric McLuhan, Willmott and Van den Eede to uncover McLuhan's assumptions regarding human communication. Although he does not say what his theory is, Marshall McLuhan, along with co-author Eric McLuhan, indicate what this theory is *not*, in *Laws of Media*.

In *LOM* Marshall and Eric offer response to the "Shannon-Weaver model of communication, the basis of all contemporary Western theories of media and communication"

(86). Elsewhere Eric offers that Marshall assumed the influence of scientism, and Cartesian thought on Western culture, coupled with electronic speed, causes us lose touch with our senses (*Yegg*). Per M. McLuhan, without acknowledging the realness of significance amidst a prepersonal, perceptive "effective and mysterious form of communication," our models of human communication are insufficient (*M&L* 143). The Shannon-Weaver "pipeline," linear model of communication, in addition to "ignor[ing] completely the ground of users and sensibility," "stresses the [ambivalent] idea of 'inside' and 'outside' and assumes that communication is a kind of literal *matching* rather than resonant *making*" (*LOM* 86-87). Thus, the McLuhans address how this mechanistic model of communication, a model of *transportation* and representationalist, semantic correspondence, perpetuates Cartesian dichotomous divisions and arrest perception, denying the reality of human communication as *transformation* (Van den Eede 169).

McLuhan's view of communication, in this regard, then, is one of change (E. McLuhan *Yegg* 175). In fact, if one considers the additional influence of McLuhan's Catholic faith (Marchand; Marchessault; Wachs), one finds an explicit statement of this assumption in a 1973 essay, "communication is change," he says (*M&L* 128). Further, as "Christianity is concerned above all and at all times with the need for change in man" (128), one may contend, as does Wachs above, "McLuhan's theory of communication is a direct result of his Catholicism" (Wachs 203). Following this idea, I suggest that the Catholic Incarnation is exemplary of McLuhan's transformative view of human communication. That is, Christ, the divine-human Being, is not simply a representation of God, but rather God's *transformation* and presentation of his presence – God's communication with humanity (Gordon *Guide* 150). In the miracle of the Incarnation, God and humankind are qualitatively altered through this sensuous, poetic, process

of communication as transformation. Analogically, McLuhan's assumptions about embodied identity indicate that human communication, amidst everyday interaction, qualitatively alters our self-understanding, as well as understandings of others and world. The sensuous nature of human communication requires participation to discover and constitute significance our experiences offer, in turn transforming our understanding of self, other and world. McLuhan, thus, asserts that this involved, participatory, poetics is "the basis of Catholic humanism," (i.e., community), and existence (*M&L* 157).

That is, with McLuhan's reciprocal dialogic ideal of human communication (Willmott 72), speech and reason unfold poetically (Wachs). As mentioned, McLuhan assumes and appropriates non-synthetic, semiological plurality, ambiguity and context dependency for purposes of encouraging our perception, awareness and understanding of media (Van den Eede). He also assumes grammatical adherence to the belief that *all human knowledge inheres in language* (Marchand). Taken together, the assumptions imply that language carries forth patterns of tradition, i.e., ground, which, when interpretively discerned, illuminate the resonance of orality within mechanized and electrified human communication (*LOM* 9). Interpreting these patterns of tradition discloses that much of human communication is rhetorical for McLuhan, as it is intended intersubjectively and transforms audiences (Marchessault 24).

While the influence for McLuhan's view of language is definitively the rhetorical tradition, as a whole (Marchessault), Gordon cites Saussure as contributing to McLuhan's temporal-structural descriptions of language. As stated, Merleau-Ponty's readings of Saussure influenced his view of language as well. Like Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan found Saussure's description of the diachronic-synchronic structure of language compelling. Gordon says, "McLuhan noted that diachronic analysis is the chronological approach to language and society,

whereas the synchronic is the structural approach, in which any moment, or aspect of culture, can be made to reveal the whole to which it belongs, and in which all past cultures survive as *resonance*" (*Guide* 17). Saussurean temporality, then, not only informs McLuhan's view of language, but also his metaphors of *figure-ground* interplay and the *resonance* of its *intervals* (Gordon *Guide* 19). Additionally, Gordon indicates that McLuhan not only follows Saussure in viewing language as a medium, but also extends this idea to consider media as languages (*Guide* 17-21). Particularly in *LOM*, media are described as words, as languages, as metaphors that translate experience. As such, speech, like technology, is itself an extension.

Although Van den Eede accurately reflects that speech for McLuhan, "is an extension of … the thinking process" thus, positioning language as "the first technology" (152), Van den Eede does not acknowledge the Cartesian-Lockean residues of representationalism typically associated with viewing speech as an extension of thought. Due to McLuhan's rejection of such assumptions, as evidenced throughout this chapter, I aim for a richer understanding of this seemingly paradoxical assertion. Although McLuhan does discuss Bergson's notion of language as a "technical extension of consciousness that is speech" (*UM* 113), and he suggests that "the content of the medium of speech is thought" (*UM* 19-20), his underlying theoretical assumptions described above suggest that speech is something richer than mere representation. Speech is rather something like history (Gordon *Guide* 17; Marchessault 68).

"Speech is the encoded form of the collective perception and wisdom of countless men. Speech is not the area of theory or concept [i.e., like abstract writing], but of performance and percept" (*M&L* 123). For McLuhan, speech may be a mediative extension, a human artefact, a tool, but it is reflexive, concrete, presentational and, ideally, reciprocal engagement with others. This distinguishes his *speech as extension* from Cartesian-Lockean, representational *matchings*.

Ultimately, Marchessault says that McLuhan "sees human communication in terms of the

miracle of perception and of language ... premised on a faith in a common human bond" (225).

For McLuhan, human communication is a creative, constitutive, cooperative and complex

process of relating, initiated by the meaningful and magical prepersonal experience of perception

(i.e., contact), engaged intrapersonally in thought (i.e., choice), and enacted interpersonally in

speech (i.e., acknowledgement and response) to mediate human relationships. The grounds of

human communication are the human body and human community presupposed by McLuhan's

Catholic humanist assumptions informing his communication ethics theory. His view of speech

assumes an existential *sensus communis* and communality of humanity, which McLuhan sees in

the global human community of the Catholic Church, embodied via the Catholic Incarnation

(Wachs). With his acceptance of semiological plurality and ambiguity, speech is a living

phenomenon for McLuhan that embodies the resonance between tradition and novelty.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan hold similar theoretical assumptions, aims and ends

regarding human communication and communication ethics. Yet, their descriptions of narcissism

and anxiety differ. I consider these similarities and differences further in future chapters. At

present, I turn to consider implications of McLuhan's implicit theory for *Americanitis*.

3.6 Implications of McLuhan's Media Ecology as a *Hybrid Ontology of Mediation*

McLuhan, like George Miller Beard, views technology as encouraging our *Americanitis*.

His M.E. suggests that unawareness of the *hidden grounds* of electronic media strips us of our

embodied situatedness and our temporal embedment, limiting possibilities for *perception*,

awareness and *understanding* – in Arnett, Fritz and Bell's terms, limiting possibilities for our

discernment and negotiation of the grounding-grounds comprising self, other and world. Due to

the overwhelming, biasing extension of our nervous system, via our habitual incorporation of

electronic media environments, we become *discarnate*. Amidst the *anxiety* of *sensory stress* and *autoamputations*, we attempt to maintain personal *comfort*. We become *closed systems*, like *Narcissus*. With this numbing closure, we choose to retreat to the ambivalent extremes of private isolation or submit our particularity to the strictly public realm of the masses. Whether we choose the private extreme of *individualism* (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 161), or the public extreme of the masses, we experience the fragility (Turkle) of pathologically anxious narcissism. Per McLuhan's M.E., this experience becomes pathological, *Americanitis*, as we experience greater degrees of difficulty situating ourselves, temporally and spatially, amidst a technical milieu.

When stripped of our spatio-temporal situatedness, and synoptic distinctions, the *resonance* of McLuhan's mediative figure-ground interval is arrested. We become *blind* to both figure and ground (Van den Eede). The effect of electronic technology in arresting resonance leads to the eclipse of our grounds of being-becoming as an "historical and human form of mediation" (Willmott 188). We are unable to see people and things for what they are because the electronic masses, the pejorative sense of McLuhan's *global village*, have supplanted communal grounds. As such, communication ethics practices do not emerge, but are instead publicly imposed, ideologically accepted and upheld. Coupled with its discarnating effects, electronic media thus offer us the impression of a meaningless existence.

In terms of McLuhan's implicit theory, the effects of electronic media, then, implicate human communication and communication ethics practices. Disembedded and *discarnate*, we not only autoamputate senses and bodily organs, but also our selves. Out of fear and fragility, we either align with the masses or become reclusive to protect what little self remains. As we are *closed systems*, like *Narcissus-Narcosis*, there is no opening possibility for prepersonal, phatic contact via perception, thus minimizing choices for acknowledgement and response. At best, we

engage at minimal levels of "simple recognition" (Hyde). Motivated by personal comfort, and without opportunities for the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, we see others as abstract objects available for *use* (Turkle).

We implicitly *participate* in a Lockean-utilitarianism *without involvement* and ideologically accept an objectively imposed, strictly public *austere ethic*, depriving us of private morality, intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal communication. Only perception, awareness and understanding of the *hidden grounds of media environments* (i.e., *formal cause*) and their effects may remind us of our situated and embedded *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to self, other and world, via the limits of our embodiment. Similar to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's project of *Communication Ethics Literacy*, McLuhan's instructive and artful M.E., suggests that learning to *read the book of media*, i.e., the grounds of media, in interpretive, grammatical-humanist fashion may help us to regain possibilities for perception, openness and resonance encouraging the emergence of communication ethics practices.

Discovering significance amidst our *Americanitis* thus depend on McLuhan's implicit communication ethics of an ideally Catholic community of responsibility grounded with human communication. Though McLuhan does not offer a theory of human communication, he clearly rejects mechanistic, transportation theories, like Shannon and Weaver's model, in favor of the poetic process, which awakens our senses, accepts ambiguity, semiological plurality, and permits possibilities for the communicative ideal of spoken, dialogic reciprocity (Willmott). This is due to McLuhan's view of communication as change – as *transformation*, rather than *transportation*. With speech as a concretely embodied *extension*, each interaction at the prepersonal, intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels *qualitatively alter* our understandings of self, other and world. Reminiscent of the Catholic Incarnation, the significance

which emerges through embodied and embedded human communication, is presentational rather than representational – a *making* which requires the resonant interplay of the novelty-tradition and self-other, private-public intervals rather than objective, correspondent *matching*.

Considering Merleau-Ponty's view, it seems as if McLuhan implicitly suggests that *Americanitis* results from electronic technology disrupting the mediative space of *resonance*, which minimizes possibilities for the *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of phatic contact. Without this open and affirming contact between self-other, we are unable to choose to acknowledge others and respond. Electronic media, per McLuhan, disrupts our properly human self-mediation of self-other and private-public to preclude productive, communicative mediation of plurality and ambiguity necessary to constituting significance as well as to the emergence of communication ethics practices.

Yet, despite the deterministic tone, we must remember that McLuhan's M.E. adorns the accent of the technical ethos he wishes to critique (Willmott). Thus, his M.E. illuminates that we choose to relinquish this agency. He attempts to remind us of our responsibility to respond by artfully drawing attention to matters that we often take for granted. As such, McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty, assumes that as we are able to perceive and express, we have agency to respond, responsibly, to transform self-other-world, through communication practices that eschew the modernist, ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Additionally, similar to Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan, by asserting the meaninglessness of our utilitarian concern for purely personal comfort, control and security, suggests that we constitute significance through uncomfortable work. McLuhan's implicit *hybrid ontology of mediation*, like Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, in rejecting dualism in favor of distinctions, and in responding to the misgivings of modernity "protects and promotes"

(Arnett, Fritz and Bell) our openness to spatio-temporal moments of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* that call us to participate, learn about and understand the grounds of self, other and world as implicated by our engagements and disengagements of media.

In McLuhan's case, the film *her*, demonstrates how bodily extension-incorporation of electronic, digital mobile devices curtails perception, prepersonal contact and, thus, communication ethics practices encouraging of community and responsibility via contact, acknowledgement and response. This ultimately leads to our narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, our digital *Americanitis*. Considering their theoretical affinities and their nuanced views of narcissism and anxiety, one wonders how Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan may co-inform one another to offer a holistic picture of technologically encouraged *Americanitis*. One may also wonder how a conversation between them may offer possible responses to our present pathology.

To consider such elements, I must first look to Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's theories in practice by describing and interpreting their respective discussions of particular communication media including, *speech*, *reading*, *writing*, *telephone*, *recording*, *film* and *news*. This examination should respond to questions posed at the end of Chapter 2, as well as to help to elucidate additional questions to frame a conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan in Part-III. I maintain that this conversation is important to consider in our current milieu. For, per McLuhan's implicit theory and his M.E. criticism, our illness of *Americanitis* positions us as perpetually experiencing the answer to Hyde's ethical question, "What would life be like if no one *acknowledged* your existence?" (1).

Chapter 4

Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenological Ontology" – Theory in Practice

Part-I of this project introduced Media Ecology, and existential phenomenology along with Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's life, works, metaphors, assumptions, aims and ends. Part-II, beginning here, considers each thinker's theory in practice. This chapter applies Merleau-Ponty's theory to his thoughts on our experience with communication media including, speech, reading-writing, a phone call, recordings, film and News Items to consider his possible thoughts regarding McLuhan's view of technologically encouraged Americanitis. With attention to their similar views regarding human communication and communication ethics, this endeavor should enhance understanding of theoretical elements introduced in Part-I, and contribute to framing of the conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan in Part-III.

4.1 Introduction

Thus far, I have introduced Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's common metaphors, as identified by Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, Van den Eede, and Vieta and Ralon, to reveal similar theoretical assumptions, aims and ends. As one concern with this project is to understand why and how McLuhan implicitly suggests that technology encourages our *Americanitis*, I shift focus to consider Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective theories in practice. Thus, to commence, I pose the question: How does Merleau-Ponty's limited discussion of various forms of communication media implicate lived experience according to his phenomenological ontology?

Attempting to answer the question, this chapter applies Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology (Dillon) to his discussions of *speech*, *reading-writing*, *a phone call*, *recordings*, *film* and *News Items*. My aim is to understand better how Merleau-Ponty views communication media, "cultural instruments" in his terms, implicating the *good anxiety* and *narcissism* necessary to phatic contact, human communication and communication ethics practices, which encourage responsibility amidst community via openness to contact, acknowledgement and response. This effort should elucidate additional similarities and

differences between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, which will inform consideration of McLuhan's implicit suggestion that electronic technology encourages *Americanitis*.

I open with a brief review of Part-I that recounts similarities and differences between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan identified thus far. I then review Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology (Dillon), via a narrative example that considers how we meet, experience and understand self-other-world, and via discussion of Merleau-Ponty's horizonal dimensions of such experience. Next, I introduce and describe Merleau-Ponty's various discussions of communication media. Thereafter, I interpret these discussions to characterize Merleau-Ponty's views of self-mediation and mediation involving *cultural instruments*. To conclude, I consider implications for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology view of media in terms of human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*.

4.2 Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan: Similarities and Differences in Theory

As shown, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and McLuhan's Media Ecology sprung from similar concerns in response to the modernist hegemony of ambivalent, Cartesian assumptions that "infect" Western cultures (Dillon) and inform the impression "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Responding to this cultural sediment in nuanced ways, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan hold similar theoretical assumptions and thus offer similar ecological perspectives. Both thinkers assume anti-Cartesian, anti-dualist ontologies of mediation, which accept synoptic, tensional distinctions, rather than absolute divisions or syntheses between traditional philosophical dichotomies of subject/object, nature/convention, form/content, and reason/emotion.

The two also hold similar views regarding the importance of perception, the body and human understanding in terms of human communication and communication ethics. With the

former, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan each advance a mediative view of language and speech, grounded in community and history, through which we come to phronetically know and understand the dynamic grounds of self, others and world. Their similar emergent, humanistic communication ethics theories, informed by Catholicism, *protect* community and responsibility by *promoting* embodied and embedded communicative experience that emerges between self-other amidst our world. Additionally, their respective discussions of narcissism and anxiety illuminate the communicative phenomena of *Americanitis* and may serve to complement one another in terms of offering possible responses to our present digital moment.

Yet, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggest nuanced views of narcissism and anxiety – the two terms that advance Beard's nineteenth-century, anxious, nervous exhaustion of *neurasthenia* to our twenty-first century, narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, *Americanitis*. Following Beard's observation that *neurasthenia was more prevalent in the Northern United States than elsewhere*, I suggested that perhaps Merleau-Ponty's particular experiences in France, with its slower development of electronic media, as contrasted with McLuhan's Canadian view of the Northern U.S., implicates their nuanced views. As stated, Merleau-Ponty views the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* as opening possibilities for de-centered, reciprocal relational engagements, through which significance, human communication, communication ethics practices and community may emerge via our *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to others. McLuhan views anxiety and narcissism as symptoms, and as means of coping with our closed, *discarnate*, electronic existence, complicating human communication and communication ethics practices. Despite these nuances, however, I suggest that their differing views may co-inform one another as both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggest that anxiety and narcissism relate to communication ethics.

That is, by assuming a synoptic structure of existence, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan address the self-other, private-public distinctions necessary to communication ethics (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), in theory and practice, via their similar metaphors of *resonance* (McLuhan) and *reversibility* (Merleau-Ponty). The synopses of self-other and private-public *reverse* or *resonate* at grounding, contextual levels to help foster an open, reflexive, synoptic relationship between particular persons and their cultures, permitting possibilities for constitutive, communicative change. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's theory describes our experience of this reversibility as the *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of otherness and openness, McLuhan suggests that electronic media arrest reversible resonance, closing us to self-other-world thereby encouraging *Americanitis*. As such, an understanding of how Merleau-Ponty views communication media should assist with consideration of how Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan may co-inform one another.

4.3 A Review of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Ontology

Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenological ontology" (Dillon) is grounded upon four theses: *the thesis of the primacy of perception*, *the thesis of the primacy of phenomena*, *the thesis of ambiguity* and the *thesis of reversibility*. The primary assumptions offered by each thesis, in turn, inform the metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure-ground*, *blindness*, *visible-invisible*, and *reversibility*, which Merleau-Ponty holds in common with McLuhan (Ralon and Vieta; Van den Eede). The theses also inform Merleau-Ponty's view of human communication as communally grounded, mediative, spoken engagement with others – as our mode of being-becoming. Merleau-Ponty's humanistic communication ethics theory, protecting and promoting community and responsibility, likewise rests upon his theses, particularly the *theses of ambiguity* and *reversibility*. These theses together inform Merleau-Ponty's non-*Americanitis*, productive-

view of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, which offer communally grounded experiences of otherness, phatic contact, acknowledgement and response.

Yet, how, does his theory work in practice? To consider this question, I first offer a descriptive, narrative example of how Merleau-Ponty's theory suggests that we contact, acknowledge and respond to self-other-world. I then consider dimensions of this experience by addressing Merleau-Ponty's horizons of experience. This effort will help to contextualize my description and interpretation of his thoughts regarding media forms below.

4.3.2 A Narrative Example of How We Meet, Experience and Understand

Imagine standing at a scenic overlook of a mountainous nature preserve. You are invited by your prepersonal, perceptive, bodily *presence at the world* to experience the landscape. Your sensorium-motorium opens a lived-space of experience, the *phenomenal field*. You focus on the horizon for a moment to catch a glimpse of movement amidst the cloudless blue sky. Your eyes focus up a few degrees to witness small, dark objects circling above.

At this prepersonal level of experience, you are not consciously moving your eyes about the landscape and choosing to focus on certain objects. Rather, the prepersonal proprioceptive structure of your sensorium-motorium interacts with the *phenomenal field* – the "background" constituted by your "perception" (Carman 64). You begin to, quite naturally and automatically, intend toward the figures, circling above, that invite your engagement, amidst grounds of your body, your culture, your context, your history and the history of humanity.

At the intrapersonal level, you say to yourself, "What is that?" Focusing more intently, you raise your binocular, the *incorporated cultural instrument*, *extension* of your vision, and observe further. With your vision extended, you decide, based on prior experience, that the objects are birds, a group of seven vultures. You watch them for a moment and hear something

moving in the brush. Your attention shifts from the sky to the woods. Your body also responds without express awareness. You become anxious – preparing to flee in case the noise is a vital threat. Suddenly, a fellow hiker emerges. Through the self-mediating contact of the self-other, figure-ground, prepersonal realm, you look to her and smile. You tacitly experience the reversible alienation of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, which allows you to see this hiker as another person, as a common thread of *flesh* with whom you are reversibly similar and different. At the intrapersonal level of predicate reflection, you affirm this reversible relation by intending to acknowledge your feelings of otherness, by choosing to attend to the other.

You engage interpersonal, phatic practices of human communication in response to the other's presence by greeting her and inviting her to consider your perspective. Directing your acquaintance's attention to the vultures above, you share the experience of how you first noticed them. She nods, affirming your presence and that she understands your language. In attempts to mediate a shared perspective, you offer your binocular to her. She struggles to *incorporate* this unfamiliar *cultural instrument* into her body initially, but with help and a few moments of practice, she is eventually able to focus her *extended* vision to the birds circling above.

"I see!" She says. "They look like eagles. What did you call them again?" She asks. "They are vultures, turkey vultures to be exact," you reply. "Those are turkey?" She asks again. As a seasoned birder, you sense her general unfamiliarity with birds. You focus your attention to her, explaining how to identify turkey vultures in flight and how they are similar and different from eagles and turkey, two species with which she seems acquainted. Suddenly, you notice a glimmer of recognition in her eyes. "Ah, yes! Turkey vultures! We would see those when we visited my uncle's farm every summer when I was young! I think my brother taught me about

them once. He loved birds. I have not thought about those visits or those birds in years! I am glad to have run into you … such wonderful memories!" she replies, enthusiastically.

While you each have made *visible*, dimensions of your persons, experiences and selves to one another through this dialogue, there is not transparency. In addition to opaque dimensions of self, world and the birds you attend to, you each remain *blind* to *invisible* dimensions of one another. Blind to the fact that the woman's brother recently passed away, you witnessed the significance of an older woman experiencing joyous recognition of something long forgotten. She experienced the warm significance of a spiritual embrace by her brother, via the memory of him teaching her about birds in childhood.

You also experience the *visibility-invisibility* of self during this meeting. As an avid birder, your familiarity with birds is visible to your awareness. Yet, prior to your meeting with the woman, you were blind to your ability to teach others about birds. Whether through lack of previous opportunity to share your knowledge or simply something unrealized through previous encounters, your ability to speak about birds, intelligibly with others, only becomes visible due to this self-other interaction. Through this mediative engagement, you each have learned something about self-other and thus experience some degree of communicative change. As you separate, you each reflect about your meeting and what you have learned, incorporating the experience into the structure of your particular history, which reflexively informs the dynamic, grounding-grounds of community, culture and history.

4.3.3 Dimensions of Lived Experience: The Horizons of Space and Time

Considering the above in terms of Merleau-Ponty's theory in practice, we meet, experience and understand self-other-world perceptively, bodily and communicatively. The space through which *find our way around an environment* (Carman), the *phenomenal field*, is not

merely geometric space, but rather *lived space*, which encompasses "possibilities, impossibilities, and necessities constitutive of our … world" (Carman 82). In the example above the *phenomenal field* is offered by the movement of your perception, body and expression. This is Merleau-Ponty's notion of our *presence at the world*, through which our embodied, embedded situatedness allows us to see and understand, perceptively and expressively, the significance of phenomena (Lanigan *Speak.* 116). Yet this situatedness is not only spatial, it is also temporal.

Lanigan explains that for Merleau-Ponty, "time is a simultaneous condition of space because time is a genesis of being and movement within lived space allowing for relations" (*Speak.* 117). The interaction of spatial and temporal dimensions of experience is horizonal, for Merleau-Ponty, they are not containers or measured durations but rather interwoven, circular elements of here-there and past-present-future (Dillon). Merleau-Ponty's notion of contemporaneous horizons does not suggest that the past and future are total in our *presence at the world*. Rather, my personal history of prior experience, as well as the whole structure of people and relations who comprise the histories of humanity, unavoidably informs my lived present. Yet, as I am situated, I never capture or coincide with the present in total (Dillon *Preface* xviii). Each moment is a present that moves backward and forward (*PhP*; Dillon).

In the example above, you and your interlocutor carry forward aspects of your experience to the present. Although the woman did not immediately recall her childhood experience of learning about the vultures with her brother, the present situation with you allowed her to re-live experience from an earlier moment. As Merleau-Ponty says, memory is not "a constituting consciousness of the past" but rather a perceptive-expressive bodily "effort to reopen time on the basis of … the present" (*PhP* 210). Her *situation* with you made possible this movement of her past into her present. Understanding is thus the unavoidable result of self-mediating figure-

ground perceptual significance, mediating similar-different inter-corporeal-subjectivity of expressive significance and the figure-ground structure of the *phenomenal field*, the aspect of the world we are invited to experience via our spatial situatedness and temporal embedment.

Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics theory, resting upon the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* offers and necessitates openness – our presence. Yet, due to our embodied situatedness, this presence is always a presence-absence. There are aspects of self, other and world that remain hidden from view. Understanding then is never total, but rather persistently unfolding with each experience of perception, expression and relation. Possibilities for misunderstandings hold equal to possibilities for understanding, yet the woman's initial misunderstanding of the "turkey vultures" as "turkey" did not terminate your meeting. Rather, your continued meeting with her, through additional communication, permitted her understanding. In other words, your intersubjective relations mediated self-self via self-other, to make visible an aspect of her existence previously invisible to her.

Though much experience involves mediation for Merleau-Ponty, the narrative above exemplifies his theory in a minimally mediated figure-ground context of a face-to-face dialogue, involving the cultural instrument of binocular, amidst a common space and moment. How, then, does Merleau-Ponty's discussion of other forms of mediation impact understanding of this theory? As shown, Merleau-Ponty's theory is explicit and McLuhan's is implicit. The reverse applies here. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of media is implicit whereas McLuhan's is explicit.

4.4 Merleau-Ponty on Various Forms of Communication Media

As stated previously, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly address technology (Ihde and Selinger). Yet, he does address "cultural instruments" as *extensions* (*PhP*), in a manner that is similar to McLuhan's engagement of the metaphor (*UM*). Based on their similar theoretical

groundings, this section describes Merleau-Ponty's discussion of various communication media to consider implications for human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*.

As Merleau-Ponty suggests that speaking is foundational to human existence (Lanigan *Speak.* 19), I begin by considering Merleau-Ponty's view of speech – the *oral medium* of human communication. I then consider Merleau-Ponty's discussion of communicative forms analogous to speech, followed by his thoughts on film and *News Items*. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Lanigan, Dillon, and others, I describe Merleau-Ponty's discussions of media, with reference to aspects of his theory identified previously. Though I reference McLuhan briefly and speak peripherally to Merleau-Ponty's theory in practice here, I reserve interpretation of implications for human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis* for the section below.

4.4.2 Speech

Previously, I described Merleau-Ponty's theory of human communication. Here I wish to consider his thoughts on our experience of "the medium of oral communication" (Lanigan *Speak.* 191). Although he describes language as a "cultural object" in *PhP*, speech is not necessarily a *tool* for Merleau-Ponty (*PhP* 415). He views speech as *distinct* "from language" – as a transformative, mediative "moment" through which my "significative intention … proves itself capable of incorporating itself into my culture and the culture of others" (*Signs* 92). Though distinct, our experience of speech obviously presupposes language as part of our embodied perceptive-expressive gestalt. As such, language for Merleau-Ponty "is not a prison we are locked into or a guide we must blindly follow" but rather *flesh*, a living element, which we *engage* in expression (*Signs* 81). As Lanigan explains, whereas "language is both the instrument and the product of speaking" (*Speak.* 161); "speaking is the dialectic result of [the] language and silence" synopsis (*Speak.* 165; see *PW* 46).

Speech, which *is* speaking-listening, emerges with the moment of the "-," between language-silence as the mediation of perception-expression, self-other and private-public. Through our lived experiences as perceptive-expressive individuals "we have a need, a passion, for speaking" (*Signs* 17), that is felt amidst spatio-temporal moments of silence. As Lanigan says, speaking, "is an immanence that must always be contrasted against the silence that is transcendent around it … as the range of possibility that speech can always invoke" (*Speak.* 166). Yet, silence is not opposed to speech – it is a form of communication itself (*Speak.*166). Speech "breaks-through" silence to mediate intersubjective significance (*PW* 140-146) (Dillon).

Resting on his adapted Saussurean synchronic-diachronic view of language, Merleau-Ponty asserts that, at times speaking-listening merely reflects culturally sedimented meanings (i.e., *speech-spoken*), while at other times creates new meanings (i.e., *speech-speaking*). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *PhP* (207, n.4) Lanigan addresses this distinction to two types of speaking, "empirical speech" and "authentic speech" (*Speak.* 185). For Merleau-Ponty, the former is "the descriptive or instrumental domain of communication, while existential speech," or *authentic speech* "is an originating or intentional creation of meaning" (Lanigan *Speak.* 187). If one considers Merleau-Ponty's empirical-authentic speech distinction in McLuhan's simpler terms, the former for Merleau-Ponty is a *conceptual* and *abstract* degree of speech, whereas the latter is a *perceptual* and *concrete* degree of speech (see Lanigan *Speak.* 187).

Per Lanigan, poetry exemplifies the empirical-authentic, abstract-concrete hyperdialectic interplay for Merleau-Ponty (*Speak.* 192-193). If one were to read a poem empirically, one would grasp the meaning of the words as objectively defined by the existing cultural institution that is language. This approach would merely reflect or indicate sedimented, empirical meanings of word units derived from language. If, however, one experiences the poem, authentically, by

reading it aloud, one may readily grasp its significance. This is because, "in poetic language the idea is not produced by the words" but rather, "the very words of poetry are their meaning as signs which serve to communicate a lived-experience" (Lanigan *Speak.* 192-193). The significance of poetry for audiences is not found merely in the words themselves, but rather in the relations of words to words, as well as the various embodied aspects of the poetic situation, including "accent, intonation, gesture and facial expression" when poems are performed (Merleau-Ponty *PhP* 174). Certainly, one may reduce poetry to empirical speech and find meaning. Yet, if one experiences poetry in its rhythmic presentation of authentic speaking, one may be struck by something meaningful – a lived-through significance. Authentic speech pushes beyond empirically given meanings to constitute meaningful meanings, i.e., significance, for human existence via an ever-present "excess" of possible significations (*Signs* 75).

In the example above, your words, "turkey vulture," carry forth the empirical meaning, established previously by some anonymous naturalists, to abstractly classify a particular species of animal. This conceptual naming of the bird complements the communicative significance, the authentic meaning, of "turkey vulture" for the woman, as it creates and/or re-creates significance in excess of the referential application of a name or concept to an object. The words present to her several movements and moments – a summer moment at her uncle's farm, the significance of her relationship with her brother then, and the significance of his absence now. This significance exceeds the empirical meaning boundaries of the term "turkey vulture" as well as the spatio-temporal horizon at hand. Yet, the authentic meaning, the significance that exceeds abstract conceptual naming, is only possible because of your self-other speaking-listening.

This communicative significance exceeds representation (Lanigan *Speak.* 191). Contrary to Lockean and Cartesian views, Merleau-Ponty indicates that we do not first think and then

transport thoughts verbally in a rigid, lineal manner (*PhP* 207; Lanigan 191). Speech rather

performs my thought (*PhP* 207). "Thought and expression are simultaneously constituted" (*PhP*

213), and speech "teaches," "us … our own thoughts" (*Signs* 17) just as an other's speech,

"make[s] me speak and think" (*VI* 224). Ultimately, speaking-listening mediates the

hyperdialectic of perception-expression by transforming "private into public" (*Signs* 20; Lanigan

Speak. 192). Speaking-listening is thus "praxis" for Merleau-Ponty (*VI* 201) – "an action that

proves itself in being carried out" (*PrP* 155), and its form is "maieutic dialogue" (Lanigan *Speak.*

194-201).

That is, similar to the emergent form of Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics theory,

communicative significance surfaces with the illumination of language-in-act (*Speak.* 194-201).

As speaking-listening is already intersubjective, even at an intrapersonal level, the mediation of

perceptive-expressive reversibility is synoptically dialectic and dialogic. Similar to the endemic

emergence of an object as figure springing from the ground of its figure-ground structure,

meaning and significance emerge through dialogic invitation, learning and understanding

(Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Our perception, which self-mediates prepersonal significance, opens us

to and requires of us expression for purposes of learning and understanding (Lanigan *Speak.*

194). That is, "in the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and

myself a common ground … we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our

perspectives merge and we co-exist through a common world" (*PhP* 413). Yet, as stated, this

common ground, *merging*, *co-existing*, and *common world* are not some monist, determinate

unification (Dillon).

Due to the synoptic, *hyperdialectic* structure of our immanent-transcendent existence, this

is a decentered commonality, grounded in community, acknowledging of particularity and

accepting of ambiguity, which permits, if not demands, for difference and diversity rather than ideal consensus and synthesis. Whereas my perception alone merely offers the "bad ambiguity" (*PrP* 11) of strictly private significance, my perception, in reversible relation to my public expression, via speaking-listening, allows my particularity to emerge, mediate private-public, and be constitutively acknowledged as real, intersubjectively. Per Lanigan, my "act of speaking is the constant affirmation of the lived-existence that separates and unites," self-other-world (*Speak.* 208). The ever-present and persistent *hyperdialectic* of perceptive-expressive existence involves an ongoing questioning and response, affirming the grounded particularity of body and *flesh*.

Thus, speech is *not* strictly a *tool* in Merleau-Ponty's terms. Speaking-listening *is* the *act* which *opens* being to becoming – to *change* (Lanigan *Speak.* 207). Each *event* of *speech* for Merleau-Ponty implies possibilities of dialogic learning and change, possibilities for *qualitative transformation*, in McLuhan's terms, of self-other-world. Yet speaking-listening is not our only available medium of communication. Merleau-Ponty also discusses analogues to speech.

4.4.3 Media Analogues to Speaking-Listening: Reading-Writing, Phone Call, Recording

For Merleau-Ponty, speaking-listening is analogous to other forms of expression. For example, as speech mediates private-public, it is analogous to a bodily gesture, an "act that aims beyond itself" (Lanigan SS 208; *Signs* 89). Speaking-listening is also analogous to reading-writing for Merleau-Ponty (*Signs* 19). Related to the empirical-authentic synoptic addressed by Lanigan above, Merleau-Ponty says that the first time I read an author, I "begin by giving the words he makes use of their" *empirical meaning* (19). As I continue reading his work "his speech comes to dominate his language, and it is his use of words which ends up assigning them a new and characteristic signification" for me (19). When I grasp this speech-speaking, the

author has "made himself understood and his signification comes to dwell in me," as an interpretation, of his intended *authentic speech*, presented through his written words (*Signs* 19).

Though the words in his text are static, I dialogue with the author. His private views of self-other-world are presented publicly through his arrangement of words, i.e., his speaking through the medium of the text. This experience is not equivalent to authentic, concrete face-to-face dialogue. Due to increased spatio-temporal distance between the author and reader, reading is a more abstract form of dialogue, yet, one through which significance may still emerge. Thus, the analogy between speaking-listening and reading-writing suggests that we come to constitute and understand emergent significance in similar ways, by manner of "degree" (*PhP* 385).

A related example is that of a phone call. Merleau-Ponty says, "A friend's speech over the telephone brings us the friend himself, as if he were wholly present in that manner of calling and saying goodbye to us, of beginning and ending his sentences, and of carrying on the conversation through things left unsaid" (*Signs* 43). Merleau-Ponty's view of language as "indirect," and "allusive," (*Signs* 43) allows for the experience of telephonic mediated dialogue to approximate the experience of face-to-face interaction. The phone delivers, or reveals, our friend's vocal style of speech to us over distance, which approximates a degree of his presence.

Though the phone is an auditory medium, my particular, embodied spatio-temporal dimensions cohere with the context of a phone call to approximate the reciprocity of face-to-face interaction. As implied by the phenomenal field in the example above, shared spatiality tends towards concrete proximity and presence in terms of the concrete-abstract, proximity-distance, presence-absence synopses of existence. The opposite is true while conversing over the phone, positioning our experience of a phone call as offering a greater degree of abstraction due to spatial fragmentation. Yet, the temporality of our dialogue, similar to the example above, is

synchronous. Thus, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that this shared temporal horizon allows us to cope, tacitly, with spatial distance when engaging the phone, offering the experience of telephonic dialogue a degree of concreteness similar to face-to-face relating.

However, when experience tends greatly toward the abstract, as it does in a tape-recording of a conversation, the richness of lived experience is compromised. Merleau-Ponty says that in listening to a recorded conversation, the concrete presence of interlocutors is "lacking" (*Signs* 57; Lanigan *Speak.* 190). The recording abstracts the spatial and temporal horizons contributing to the figure-ground, phenomenal field of interaction (*Signs* 57). Such abstractions are not necessarily "arbitrary" or "fictional," but they do "flatten" the richness of lived perceptive-expressive experience by modifying horizonal elements such as space and time, which implies degrees of difference between communicative forms (*Signs* 57).

Though experiences of reading, a phone call and recordings can "never hem … us in on all sides as our lived experience" of concrete, face-to-face dialogue "does" (*Signs* 57), we are able to approximate and mediate the presence-absence, proximity-distance, abstract-concrete synopses pertaining to experiential dimensions. Such coping allows us to constitute significance in a manner similar to that of face-to-face relating. This implies that lived experience involves diverse layers of synoptic mediation, which Merleau-Ponty addresses with his discussion of film.

4.4.4 Film

Merleau-Ponty addresses movies in *Sense and Nonsense* (*SNS*) and in *PhP*. He considers film as a "perceptual object," and in applying Gestalt assumptions to our experience of it, he "illuminates the nature and significance of the movies" (*SNS* 54). He begins by suggesting that film is "not a sum total of images but a temporal *gestalt*" involving "a montage of noises … sounds" and images (54-55). "The expressive force of this montage lies in its ability to sense the

coexistence, the simultaneity of lives in the same world" (55). This is because a film director artfully presents his aesthetic-affective view of the world, like a painter, much as he sees the world through perception (55).

The form of film coupled with its content, models our perceptual process as movement and therefore offers significance. Similar to speech, reading and a phone call, this significance is realistic. "Movies do have a basic realism," Merleau-Ponty says (57). However, "that does not mean … that the movies are fated to let us see and hear what we would see and hear if we were present at the events being related" (57); we do not *live* the experience we observe on the screen.

Though film is analogous to our perceptive process, which is our *presence at the world*, a film screen is not a *phenomenal field*, for a "screen has no horizons" (*PhP* 78). "When, in a film, the camera is trained on an object and moves nearer to it to give a close-up view, we can remember that we are being shown the ash tray … we do not actually identify it" (78). By contrast, in "normal" perception, I focus "upon a sector of the landscape, which comes to life and is disclosed, while the other objects recede into the periphery[,] … with them I have at my disposal their horizons … [which] guarantees the identity of the object throughout the exploration" (78). With film, the direction of the camera focuses our attention. The field of experience is given by the director, rather than constituted by our perceptive-expressive bodily movement.

This is not to say that we do not understand or know the "ash tray" shown in close up. We are able to identify the object due to our prior lived experience with similar objects in different contexts. Our understanding of the "ash tray" on screen is a different, more abstract degree of understanding than my lived experience of the large, heavy, army-green, glass ash tray that I broke at my grandmother's house when I was a child. Merleau-Ponty's point is, without

bodily situatedness amidst spatio-temporal horizons, we merely experience a "probable" rather than "actual" identification an "object-horizon structure," which implicates a greater degree of abstraction in experience, significance, and understanding (*PhP* 79).

However, Merleau-Ponty's analysis also implies that there are multiple layers, or degrees, of experience, which unfold while viewing a film. If I go to the theater to view a film, I experience the concrete, lived field of the room – the stickiness of the floor, the smell of popcorn, the engulfing feel of my seat, the action on the screen, the incessant mumbling of the couple sitting behind me, and a ringing cell phone. In contrast to the abstract, "probable" experience of film, my embodied experience of the movie theater is an "actual," concrete, existential "object-horizon structure," which includes the screen and the movie as part of a larger whole. When the movie begins, it becomes figure and abstracted ground. The screen, the room, my body, and the phenomenal field recede to a deeper degree of unnoticed background as I choose to allow the film director's presentation to guide my perception. I consider additional implications of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of film in the next section of this chapter. At present, I turn to consider the last form of communication media he addresses – *News Items*.

4.4.5 *News Items*

Merleau-Ponty's essay, "On News Items" appears in *Signs*. He opens the essay by saying, "there is perhaps no news item which cannot give rise to deep thoughts" (*Signs* 311). He reflectively considers viewing a news story about a man throwing "himself onto the tracks from the top of an embankment in the railroad station" to commit suicide (311). Merleau-Ponty puzzles at how none in the crowd, officials or bystanders, seemed to express concern. He intimates shock at such a display "By seeing an unknown person die, these men could have learned to judge their own life" (*Signs* 311). This leads Merleau-Ponty to consider what the

nature of news is, how it affects our experience and why such phenomena exist. He says, "The taste for news items is the desire to see … to make out a whole world similar to our own in the wrinkle of a face" (311). This implies that my spatio-temporal abstraction from the lived horizons of this experience affect the mediation of self-other and private-public. Although we may experience feelings of anxiety or dread in seeing such a scene in the news, we are positioned as "unacquainted observer[s]" somewhat sheltered from the degree of emotional impact (311). In other words, our distance (spatial and temporal), our abstraction, from the scene permits us some degree of comfort amidst witnessing horror.

That is, exposure to selected, minimal and distantly *unacquainted* aspects of the scene encourages us to narrate the experience of others as if they were things. "Seeing is that strange way of rendering ourselves present while keeping our distance and, without participating, transforming others into visible things" (311). With reference to the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, Merleau-Ponty's comments on news suggest that as *we are seeing without being seen*, we do not participate with others. In viewing news, there is no impending possible risk to self, no otherness, and no anxious narcissistic alienation. We *reduce* others "to a few words, a few gestures" (311). As voyeurs of such spectacles, we experience "stupefying emotion" and "cut ourselves off from ourselves" because news items "teach us … our bias of looking without understanding" (312). Without understanding, we judge the scene as a concrete whole based on abstract fragments of content, which appear without ordinary, horizonal, perception and draw on sedimented beliefs (e.g., ideology) to arrive at our view, i.e., not understanding, of the spectacle.

Thus, per Merleau-Ponty, media forms, i.e., the form of communication, implicates communicative experience and significance in terms of degrees of difference. Similar to McLuhan's M.E., which emphasizes consideration of media forms, Merleau-Ponty's discussions

of *speech*, *reading-writing*, *a phone call, recording*, *film and News Items* address content and form. What remains is consideration of how and why Merleau-Ponty's discussions of communication media implicate his theory in practice in terms of human communication, communication and *Americanitis*.

4.5 Merleau-Ponty's Theory in Practice: Media, Self-Mediation and Mediation

This section considers Merleau-Ponty's discussions of communication media in terms of its implications for the role of self-mediation and mediation in his phenomenological ontology. The salience of the private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance synopses, revealed through my description of Merleau-Ponty's comments on media above, become meaningful, significant, when considered through dimensions of his phenomenological ontology. I draw on Dillon, Corey Anton, Macke and others to interpret Merleau-Ponty's discussions above.

Dillon, recalling Merleau-Ponty's theses of the *primacy of perception* and the *primacy of phenomena*, indicates "the real world is the perceived world is the phenomenal world" (156). Merleau-Ponty suggests that we accept such assumptions based on *perceptual faith* afforded to us by the grounding-grounds of our embodied situatedness, our embeddedness and the lived significance we experience (Dillon 156). Yet, Merleau-Ponty's additional theses of *ambiguity* and *reversibility,* along with his commitment to the gestalt principles of *contextual relevancy* and *autochthonous organization*, call this tacit, faithful knowledge into question and necessitate a correlate activity. Thus Lanigan's assertion, "perception is never complete without expression and expression always relies on perception" (Lanigan *Speak.* 194). We communicatively mediate the differences between our private, immanent particularity and that of others. This is similar to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's assertion that communication ethics practice involves the persistent "negotiation" of the private-public synopsis via expression. Though the various forms of

communication described above permit perception-expression, media implicate the reversibility between private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance differently, by matter of degree. The salient synopsis of concrete-abstract seen above exemplifies such difference.

Per Merleau-Ponty, experience involves the resonant reversibility of "centripetal," "concrete movement" through which *grounds are given* by my body and my situation, and "centrifugal," "abstract movement," through which *grounds are thrown out* via intellection (*PhP* 128). Like McLuhan's contention regarding electronic media's effect upon the private-public synopsis, Merleau-Ponty indicates that certain forms of experience tend to amplify these synoptic elements to greater or lesser degrees (Anton *Agency* 181). As Anton indicates, "Differences in intendableness refer to differences in spatialization and temporalization" (*Self.* 38). Though Anton draws on Strauss and Heidegger to make this assertion, one can see clearly a similar idea at work in Merleau-Ponty.

That is, as we are situated being-becomings, we *live* experience through our bodily constitution of *phenomenal fields*, i.e., contexts, via an interweaving of spatial and temporal horizons. Though the experiential ground of our perceptive-expressive body persists for Merleau-Ponty across all forms of communication, phenomenal fields do not. In the example that opened this chapter, you and your interlocutor are engaged amidst a phenomenal field of concrete, lived experience through which your particular horizons – grounds given to you by your bodies in contact – weave-together, *temporalizing* and *spatializing* (Anton) a common situation involving openness to self-other-world. While the dialogue of face-to-face, speaking-listening parallels, and perhaps undergirds, the emergence of significance across all media forms considered above, similar experiences of reading-writing, a phone call and a recorded conversation, modify, flatten, strip and abstract this temporalizing and spatializing.

This is not abstraction due to strictly material aspects of proximity-distance, but rather regards dimensions of our perceptive-expressive existence. For example, we experience the concrete dimension of *depth*, "the most 'existential' of all dimensions because … it belongs to the perspective and not to things," differently depending upon our bodily situation, our spatialized and temporalized perspective (*PhP* 298). In total darkness, *depth* is *overwhelming proximity* for my perception is consumed by its envelopment (Whitney). Film offers us a similar situation as we choose to relinquish our perceptive agency to the horizonless screen. The perspective permitting depth also tends toward the opposite of shallow voyeurism with *News Items*, as we *close ourselves off* and merely *look without understanding* – we see and judge without first discerning the contextual dimensions, the grounding-grounds, of self-other-world. The communicative forms of film and news thus encourage a greater degree of abstraction and closure in terms of abstract-concrete, synoptic experience. The possibility for "authentic" (Eicher-Catt) understanding is thus implicated accordingly to a greater degree of abstraction.

As we choose to engage these media forms, however, Merleau-Ponty maintains that our bodily perceptive-expressive agency allows us to span varieties of mediation without the complete arrest of reversible, synoptic mediation. As Merleau-Ponty says, "precisely because" I may choose to allow "my body" to "shut itself off from the world, it is also what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation" (*PhP* 191). Due to the body, possibilities for agency and significance may always intervene to mediate and reverse those moments of closure, to transform closure into openness and an attunement to *authentic* (Eicher-Catt) *dialogic invitation* between self-other amidst world (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). What, then, does this mean for Merleau-Ponty's views of human communication and communication ethics, and how might Merleau-Ponty's read of communication media implicate his possible thoughts on *Americanitis*?

4.6 Implications for Human Communication, Communication Ethics and *Americanitis*

Though Merleau-Ponty maintains that our embodied agency offers persistent opportunities for openness, which would permit avoidance of pathological narcissism and anxiety as *Americanitis*, his discussions of *speech*, *reading-writing*, *a phone call*, *recording*, *film* and *News Items*, seem to indicate an equal possibility for the experience of *Americanitis*. That is, the form of communication implicates possibilities for perception-expression, mediation, and as a result, significance. Communicative forms, such as *film* and *News Items*, which tend to abstract spatio-temporal dimensions of lived experience promote a greater degree of sensory and communicative closure and thus implicate, reflexively, possibilities for communication ethics practices. In terms of Arnett, Fritz and Bell's project of *Communication Ethics Literacy*, communicative forms that encourage the weighting of experience toward abstraction, private, distance and closure complicate our ability to adequately discern the grounding-grounds of self-other-world by eschewing difference and the private-public distinction. As such, the forms of mediated communication such as *film* and *news* encourage us to see others as mere objects upholding the modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (17).

Conversely, forms that promote a greater degree of concreteness, like face-to-face dialogue, allow for the self-mediating, situating experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, thus permitting possibilities for communication ethics practices such as, contact, acknowledgement, response and *authentic* significance to emerge between self-other – much like the narrative example above. That is, media forms which encourage the situating experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* cultivate our discernment of difference between self-other, which invites us to dialogic mediation, i.e., *negotiation* (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) of private-public. Through the persistent *good ambiguity* of reversibility, the "-" self-mediating between of the silence-

language, self-other, private-public, etc. gestalten, communicative practices which permit us to discern, tacitly and expressly, the spatio-temporal grounds of self-other-world, *protect and promote* the "goods" of situated, openness to otherness and change (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Thus, in terms of Arnett, Fritz and Bell's helpful heuristic question, *what goods does a theory protect and promote?*, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty *protects and promotes* the opening, situating experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* through which we carve-out spatio-temporal moments, phenomenal fields, between concrete, i.e., particular, self-others via the reversibility of private-public and the interplay of proximity-distance and abstract-concrete.

As previously stated, Arnett, Fritz and Bell identify the *distinction* between public and private as a necessary condition for communication ethics practices. In terms of Merleau-Ponty's theory, *good anxiety*, *good narcissism*, and *good ambiguity* are required for the prepersonal, tacit opening of phatic contact that encourages possibilities for our discernment of the private-public synopsis. Phatic contact self-mediates self-other, allowing me to *see* self-other as two particular threads of *flesh*, who are distinct, concrete, particular, private-public persons rather than objects available for personal appropriation. The spatializing and temporalizing experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* persistently discloses "that there are other landscapes besides my own" – that my perspective and an other's are not interchangeable, but rather must be negotiated through communicative expression, and the mediation of the reversible private-public synopsis (*VI* 141; Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Thus, similar to Arnett, Fritz and Bell, Merleau-Ponty *protects and promotes* the persistent reversibility of the private-public synopsis at a grounding level, which helps us to see and understand differences between our particular situatedness and that of others.

As Merleau-Ponty indicates, communication "introduces us to new experiences and to perspectives that can never be our own," thereby challenging our particularity (*PW* 90). Similar

to the *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of prepersonal, phatic contact, the expressive experience of speaking-listening also involves anxiety (Macke *Intra.* 51). We experience the opening power of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, with greater *depth*, via face-to-face speaking-listening. Particularly when this speaking-listening involves authentic speech-speaking, the self-mediation of the self-other, similar-different dialectic in perception is taken further to permit communicative mediation of private-public in both concrete, *actual* and abstract, *possible* contexts of meeting. As such, we experience increased opportunities for discernment of the grounding-grounds informing our communicative practices to encourage situations through which the ethical choices of contact, acknowledgement and response may emerge (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Thus, Merleau-Ponty *protects and promotes* the discernment of, reflection about and authentic understanding of the grounding-grounds made visible, albeit in perpetually partial fashion, via the reversible and often anxious constitution of significance between particular, situated persons.

However, when the reversibility of self-other and private-public tends away from the between toward either extreme, due to a greater degree of spatio-temporal abstraction, we run the risk, of viewing others as interchangeable objects. As previously stated, tending to one or the other extreme of private-public impinges upon the mediation of self-other, reducing communicative practices to instrumental action and offering representational, empirical, sedimented meaning rather than significance (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Additionally, we view other persons as abstract objects, who we subsume and/or conceptually reify as absolutely self-same *or* other-different, without concern for reciprocity, community or responsibility. Thus, by correlation, Merleau-Ponty also *protects and promotes* the grounds of spatio-temporal communities via the communicative work of responsibility, i.e., participation.[1]

Participation *is* our responsibility for the situation through which the anxious experience of otherness invites contact, acknowledgement and response. This process that *proves itself in act* requires the participation of particular individuals, grounded in communities of humanity who come together to intersubjectively and reflexively constitute a world of horizonal possibilities. Communicative forms which encourage tending to synoptic extremes discourage discernment, mediation and negotiation of grounding-grounds, which portend and embody cultural assumptions informing communicative praxis – for example, the modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on grounded participation thus indicates that he *protects and promotes* the reversibility of proximity-distance. That is, in terms of the *good* of understanding, we require the persistent interplay of proximity-distance from phenomena for purposes of reflection. Additionally, with either too much or too little distance between self-other, we run the risk of abstracting, subsuming and reifying other persons, stripping them, and us, of particularity.

That is, distance is not a problem for Merleau-Ponty when I read his books or speak over the phone with my good friend. The layers of my lived experience enhance these abstracted, analogous forms of speaking-listening to permit some degree of reversibility between proximity-distance thereby offering an approximation of concrete, maieutic dialogue. Yet, when I view a film, or watch a man commit suicide in the news, the situation is weighted, never absolutely but nonetheless weighted, toward abstract, uninterested *seeing*. As with the *overwhelming proximity* of *depth* that is darkness, we choose to relinquish our perceptive-expressive situatedness to the screen, which encourages a closure – the inability to see difference and the ability to ignore moments of dialogic invitation that constitute emergent significance between self-other. Per Merleau-Ponty, I do not *live* these voyeuristic situations; I do not participate in the situation; I

merely *look without understanding* and thus do not reflect on significance. This also promotes a

technical ethos of closure rather than openness, contact, acknowledgement and response.

Though the potential for abstract closure is present with certain forms of communication

media, Merleau-Ponty hopefully suggests that the various forms of human experience, along

with our bodily agency, help us to maintain correlate possibilities for openness – even when we

appropriate extensions-incorporations. As "everything is both manufactured and natural in man"

(*PhP* 220), "cultural instruments" may assist us through our lived experience in ways that permit

horizonal interplay. For as Merleau-Ponty indicates, we continuously seek situations, which

permit us "optimal" mediation so to perceive and express with "maximum" richness (*PhP* 352;

Carman 109). Per Dillon, if natural, i.e., biological change, does not keep pace with cultural

change we alter our perceptive-expressive bodily structure "with prostheses: microscopes and

telescopes, parabolic dishes, radar, sonar, and all the instruments designed to tune in the world"

to assist us (*Preface* xvi). Merleau-Ponty's remarks above remind us, however, that when we

engage such extensions-incorporations without understanding their impact upon bodily

comportments and habits of perception-expression we run the risk of ambivalent closure.

Yet, in protecting and promoting our bodily, communicative agency, i.e., our *freedom to*,

Merleau-Ponty suggests that we may readily engage and disengage a variety of communicative

forms which reflexively encourage greater and lesser degrees of openness to difference,

discernment of grounding-grounds and synoptic mediation. He says, "as long as … [cultural]

institutions last, they never cease to grow and to transform within themselves the events that

confront them, until the movement begins … to reverse itself and the situations and relations

which the institutions cannot assimilate alter them and give rise to another form which ... would

not have been possible without them" (*PW* 92). Thus, even when particular forms of

communication become institutionalized, normative practices for cultures and persons, possibilities for our *freedom to* intersubjectively mediate, i.e., negotiate (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), the synopses of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance persist thereby permitting possibilities for communicative *creation*, i.e., change, via the difficult work of communication ethics praxis. As such, and due to his contemporaneous view of the temporal structure of existence, Merleau-Ponty *protects and promotes* the "good" of creative, communicative change. Thus, in terms of *Americanitis*, Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on various media forms indicate that we may habituate technical practices, which promote abstraction, to protect our anxious, fragile, narcissistic selves (McLuhan; Turkle). Yet by the grace of our spatio-temporally situated bodies, we face the persistent hope of being called to moments of complex and rich situations, which help us to remember our situated responsibility to contact, acknowledge and respond to self-other-world.

One may readily note that the type of communicative change I describe based on Merleau-Ponty's work is in sharp contrast to the imposed cultural and existential change McLuhan critiques during the electronic media epoch. That is, McLuhan identifies the electronic masses as erasing the important distinction between private-public (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), thereby stripping individuals of their *private morality*, instantiating a publicly imposed, meaningless *austere ethic*, and encouraging our narcissistically, anxious, nervous exhaustion, our *Americanitis*. Based on the above application of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology to his discussions of media, it seems that his theory would accept the possibility of pathological narcissistic anxiety and *Americanitis* resulting from a lack of private-public reversibility due to experience tending toward abstraction, in terms of his abstract-concrete synopsis.

What then does this mean for McLuhan's claim that electronic technology encourages our *Americanitis*? Tentatively, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's read of communication media admits of possibilities for *Americanitis*, due to certain media form's implications for the perceptive, self-mediation of self-other amidst phatic contact, and the expressive mediation of private-public amidst communicative negotiations. Additionally, certain media forms, like *News Items*, promote a *bad ambiguity* of an imbalanced way of seeing, a voyeurism, through which we subsume others, assume absolute identification, i.e., rather than *identity and difference*, and come to *know* without reflection, *without understanding*. In these particular situations, we may *forget* the grounding-grounds of body, community, space and time; we may *forget* our responsibility to participate amidst life via self-other mediation; we may *forget* the need to assume *good anxiety* as *courage* – as a call to responsibility, i.e., participation, *with* community.

Without responsibility and community, without communicative practices encouraging contact, acknowledgement and response between self-other via private-public, concrete-abstract, proximate-distant mediation, our particularity is persistently disconfirmed and our anxiety manifests as irresolvable pathology due to our inability to see, accept and mediate the ambiguity of particularities inherent to human existence. One may easily imagine how persistently unmediated anxiety, may lead to the pathological narcissism of the fragile self, which encourages *Americanitis*. As such, Merleau-Ponty may agree with McLuhan, to a degree, about electronic media's potential effects upon individuals and cultures, while also maintaining hope for a rediscovery of our situated agency, our *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to others in a manner through which we resist the modernist, ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17).

Thus, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan may dialogue about how and why different forms of experience implicate communication and communication ethics praxis. I consider how Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan may co-inform one another via development of a conversation between them in the next section. At present, I turn to consider McLuhan's discussions of *speech*, *reading*, *writing*, *the telephone*, *phonograph*, *film* and *the press* – his correlates to the few forms of media Merleau-Ponty addresses.

Chapter 5

McLuhan's Media Ecology as "Hybrid Ontology of Mediation" – Theory in Practice

As the previous chapter offered Merleau-Ponty's theory in practice, via consideration of his thoughts on various communication media, I now attempt parallel treatment of McLuhan. This chapter applies McLuhan's implicit theory, informing his Media Ecology, to his explicit criticism of communication media including, speech, writing, reading, the telephone, phonograph recordings, film, a phone call, and the press to consider why and how specific media encourage our narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, Americanitis. With attention to McLuhan's implicit theory of human communication and communication ethics, this chapter should enhance understanding of theoretical elements introduced in Part-I, while also revealing nuanced differences between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's theories. The differences revealed here, along with similarities identified in Part-I, comprise a frame through which I attempt to build a conversation between them in Part-III.

5.1 Introduction

McLuhan views *Americanitis*, our narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion as a communicative response to the a-temporal, a-spatial *effects* of electronic technologies, which arrest figure-ground resonance of the self-other, private-public synopses. This arrest instantiates existential closure and imposed rather than communicatively constituted, personal and cultural change (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). The results of which involve a *discarnate*, seemingly meaningless, mass, interchangeable existence, ideologically informed by a strictly *public austere ethic*. This ethic is an instrumental utilitarian pathological narcissism through which a self uses others to seek only personal *comfort*.

As suggested, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology view of various forms of communication media, some of which tend toward abstraction rather than concrete lived experience, acknowledges a possibility for McLuhan's read of *Americanitis* as well as a possible avenue of hope. However, as this suggestion remains preliminary, I must attempt a parallel reading of McLuhan's views of specific forms of communication media. With Merleau-Ponty, I addressed the media of *speech*, *reading-writing*, *a phone call*, *recordings*, *film* and *News Items*,

for these are the few forms of media he implicitly addresses. To attempt parallel treatment with

McLuhan, this chapter considers his discussions of the similar media forms including, *speech*,

writing, *reading*, *the telephone*, *the phonograph* (i.e., recordings), *film* and *The Press* (i.e., *News

Items*). Such consideration should help us to understand better, McLuhan's pathological view of

anxiety and narcissism as *Americanitis*, as well as its implications for human communication and

communication ethics.

Similar to the chapters in Part-I, an exact parallel comparison between McLuhan and

Merleau-Ponty's respective discussions of media is not possible. That is, Merleau-Ponty's

discussion of media implications is implicit whereas McLuhan's discussion of the effects of

media environments is explicit. As such, I carry forth, from the prior chapter, the salient

synopses of self-other, private-public, concrete-abstract and proximity-distance to establish a

common frame. This frame should help to offer proximate consideration of McLuhan's

discussions of media.

I open this chapter with a brief recap of McLuhan's and Merleau-Ponty's similarities and

differences. I then offer a review of McLuhan's *hybrid ontology of mediation* (Van den Eede) via

a narrative example that considers experience in a technological milieu as well as McLuhan's

spatio-temporal dimensions of experience. I then describe McLuhan's various discussions of the

media forms indicated above, followed by a section that interprets his discussions in terms of his

mediational theory. I conclude with a section considering implications for human

communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*, as well as offering suggestions as to

how and why McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty may co-inform each other.

5.2 McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty: A Reminder of Similarities and Differences in Theory

As I have established, McLuhan's M.E. and Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology emerged from similar concerns, which respond to the hegemony of Cartesian assumptions, such as the notion "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17), which complicate reflexivity and communicative mediation. As these dualistic and deterministic assumptions suggest that communicative agency requires a *freedom from* sources of powerful domination, both McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty aim to remind us of our situated communicative agency, our *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to otherness and others amidst our embodied limits and our world.

As such, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty both insist upon distinctions, rather than divisions, between tensional and synoptic elements of existence. The particular synopses of self-other, private-public, concrete-abstract and proximity-distance, inform each of the thinkers' similar communication ethics of community and responsibility, influenced by Catholicism, and akin to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's characterization of *dialogic communication ethics*. McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty each insist upon *resonance* and *reversibility* between these synopses to permit a space, the "-", through which communicative agents may mediate particularity, community, ambiguity and tension to co-constitute emergent significance towards the tacit ends of reflexive communicative change for persons and cultures alike. Due to the tensions of these synopses and the tensions between particularity, plurality, and ambiguity, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty identify anxiety as an element of such relations.

However, whereas Merleau-Ponty views the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* as a productive form of meaningful, uncomfortable meeting, which opens us to possibilities for reciprocal relating and therefore communication ethics practices encouraging community and

responsibility (i.e., participation), McLuhan views narcissism and anxiety as pathological

symptoms we experience to regain *comfort* amidst the *sensory stress* of speedy electronic media

environments. McLuhan's characterization seems to suggest that pathologically anxious

narcissism results from electronic media's stripping away of opportunities for Merleau-Ponty's

good anxiety and *narcissism*. That is, the electronic arresting of resonance, or reversibility,

encourages a closed posture to otherness, in-turn, complicating possibilities for communication

ethics practices such as contact, acknowledgement and response. Combined with the rapid pace

of technological and social change, McLuhan's symptomatic view identifies the technical causes

of *Americanitis*.

However, as suggested, this difference offers that McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's

respective theories may co-inform one another. Per investigation of his discussions of media

forms, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology permits for the possibility of McLuhan's

pathological narcissistic anxiety, indicating that a conversation between McLuhan and Merleau-

Ponty should help us to understand the phenomena of, and possible responses to, our experiences

with electronic and digital *Americanitis*. Yet, to develop this conversation thoroughly in Part-III,

I must first review McLuhan's theory and consider his thoughts on specific media forms.

5.3 A Review of McLuhan's Media Ecology, *Hybrid Ontology of Mediation*[1]

Previously, I introduced McLuhan's metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure-

ground*, *blindness*, *visible-invisible*, and *resonant interval*. Perception, as a "creative act" and as

"incarnation," involves processes of tacitly mediated contact between self, other, and world that

discloses a type of "effective and mysterious" prepersonal significance through the unifying

sensus communis of touch – our embodiment. Our situated bodies, reflexively implicated by our

environments, are *qualitatively altered*, i.e., extended, by our engagement, our incorporation of,

media. Such alterations condition sensory, bodily and epistemic biases, which implicate

communicative mediation of private-public and the reflexivity between communication and

cultures. This leads to individual alienation, cultural stagnation, and imposed rather than

communicatively constitutive change, which complicates possibilities for the emergence of

community, responsibility and communication ethics practices encouraging contact,

acknowledgement and response (Marchessault; Van den Eede).

Per McLuhan, our perceptive bodies interact with self, other and world through the

interplay of interval, "-," between figure-ground. When resonant, the interval allows us to

mediatively perceive and recognize aspects of both figure and ground, yet never to points of

totalization as our situatedness leaves us *blind* to certain invisible substantive dimensions (Van

den Eede). This blindness extended to extremes of *technological blindness*, compromises

resonance, as well as our embodied, perceptive equilibrium through biasing and *autoamputating*

our senses, bodily organs and capabilities (Van den Eede). Particularly in the electronic epoch,

McLuhan views media as affecting the "-," the between of the interval, arresting perception.

In turn, we are numb, narcotic and closed like Narcissus. With our senses arrested and

our bodies *qualitatively altered*, we experience fear and anxiety. As such, we seek comfort,

assuredness and affirmation by assuming the role of spectator sheltered in the strictly public

anonymity of mass society, or in retreating to the strictly private realm of solipsistic isolation.

With meaning imposed by the masses, we no longer require the work of discovering significance

through the arduous, poetic processes of mediation, i.e., *perception as incarnation* and

communication. This implicates strict instrumental communicative exchange, i.e.,

transportation, rather than human communication, i.e., *transformation*, allowing us to forget our

freedom to – our responsibility to participate with others amidst communal grounds.

How, then, does McLuhan's Media Ecology, as a *hybrid ontology of mediation*, work in practice? As with the previous chapter on Merleau-Ponty, I offer a narrative example of how we experience relating. Yet, in this case, as McLuhan's discussions of media are explicit, I consider how we meet, experience and understand self, other and world amidst an electric, technical milieu. I then address McLuhan's views of space and time as dimensions of this experience. This discussion contextualizes the section below regarding McLuhan's thoughts on media.

5.3.2 A Narrative Example of How We Experience amidst a Technical Milieu

Imagine making your way to work at a large city office building. After parking your car, you traverse a few city blocks amidst the bustle of morning rush – groups of pedestrians, the smell of exhaust, and the cacophony of horns, motors and building ventilation systems surrounding you seem almost overstimulating to your senses. You feel anxious, attending to every environmental modulation to ensure that you are not accosted by some vital threat, like the passing motorist who ran a red light in haste. As you approach the door to your office high-rise, a woman is just ahead of you looking at her smartphone and wearing earbuds. Engrossed in the *extension of her nervous system*, via the bodily incorporation of her smartphone, she is unaware of the presence of others and does not hold the door for the lobby worker carrying a large box.

You rush to assist the person with the box, and then enter the building to join the small crowd waiting for the elevator. There is the woman who did not hold the door, along with two other women also engaged with their phones and earbuds. As the elevator arrives, you and the three women with their phones begin to enter the lift car. The logistics of this movement are a bit awkward. Two of the women attempt to board the car while others are still exiting. The third woman does not even seem aware that the elevator has arrived. You wait for the remaining passengers to exit and assume your space in the lift. Suddenly, you hear "hold the door!" coming

from the lobby. Standing near the panel, you press the *door open* button and another passenger enters – a woman holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a briefcase in the other. She looks to you, smiles and says, "thank you."

Traveling upward in the lift, you look at the three young women with their phones. You can hear fragmented blips of tin and bass emanating from the mash-up of music coursing through their headphones, and you notice something vacuous about each of their gazes, illuminated by the reflection of screens in their eyes. Quite unaware of your comportment at this particular moment, you are startled when you hear the woman with the coffee and briefcase say, "I think maybe you and I are thinking the same thing right now." Blushing, you turn your eyes toward her and smile, as she continues "my son is like that … always has his phone in his face."

Anxiously surprised at her ability to notice what you were thinking, you reply, "Oh my, yes! I have a smartphone too, but I just can't use it like that, I'd walk into walls or get run over by a bus if I tried to plug-in while making my way to work." The three other women do not even seem to notice that you and your new acquaintance are conversing, let alone that they are amidst others in the elevator. The woman with the coffee laughs in response, "me too," she says. "I just get worried that something like that will happen to people who are always in their phones … I mean, that one lady broke her neck because she tripped into a fountain at the mall while she was texting," she continues. "With my son, I try to tell him all the stuff he misses when he's in his phone. I'm like, go take a walk! Look people in the eye! Smile! Engage! And, he just rolls his eyes at me. I don't know, maybe I'm just getting old, but there's something about looking at people and things without a phone in the way that I don't ever want to give up," she asserts.

As the elevator approaches your floor, you affirm her perspective with a smile and say, "Yes! I know what you mean!" A bit hurried, you continue, "Oh, this is my floor, I have to run

but I wish I didn't. It was so nice talking with you this morning. Hope you have a great day and I hope to run into you again sometime." The woman with the briefcase says, "Absolutely! I'm up on the 54th floor! Maybe we can grab a coffee sometime." As you exit the door she continues, "Take care! And, have a great day yourself!"

Departing, you reflect about your conversation. *Blind* to how easily read your gestures are, you consider how surprised you were when she noticed your non-verbal cues in the elevator. This prompts you to realize that your interaction with the woman holding the coffee and briefcase was unsettling and energizing, simultaneously, as people rarely look at or speak to you on your way to work. Most others are engrossed in some sort of electronic device, or a newspaper, or a magazine, and do not seem to notice and acknowledge the presence of you or others. Your interaction with the woman made visible to you elements of your habitual, daily engagement between self, other and world, previously invisible to your awareness.

As you both resisted technical incorporation-extension of smartphones, and situated yourselves via relating, you were able to perceive and communicate about the significance of the other women's detachment from the immediate context at hand. In other words, your *perceptive incarnation* self-mediated the presence-absence synopses to permit for true perception, i.e., *the dynamic resonant interplay between figure and ground*, of the smartphone environment *effects* for the young women. Additionally, the intervals between self-other and private-public resonate between you and the woman with the coffee, permitting communicative mediation, encouraging of *authentic* significance. The experience of the women with their phones differs, however, due to the implications of electronic media for contextual dimensions.

5.3.3 Dimensions of Experience: Space and Time

Considering McLuhan's implicit *hybrid ontology of mediation* in practice, your phatic contact with the woman holding her coffee and the briefcase opened a space of figure-ground resonance, a mediation, a space between, self-other, through which you each share awareness of the *effects* of the hidden media environment, the ground, of smartphones. You both privately notice how the young women seem less than aware of others and the space amidst which they move. Their laser focus of attention, the *depth* of their participation with this extension, *closes* their visual and auditory *sensus communis* of perception. The *mysterious and effective significance* offered by *true perception*, which keeps figure and ground resonating in *dynamic equilibrium*, is given, rather than constituted by the extension of the sensorium, via the incorporation of the smartphones into their bodies.

By contrast, you and the woman with the coffee, in foregoing this sensory-nervous extension-incorporation, experience *true perception* and thus attend to aspects of both figure-ground via the *resonant interval*. As the McLuhans suggest, the young women with their phones are *connected*, whereas you and the woman with the coffee, *contact* one another, "when we touch something, we contact it and create an interaction with it: we don't connect with it, else the hand and the object would become one" (*LOM* 6). Thus, you and the woman with the coffee engage *true perception*, remember your embodied and embedded situatedness, and are *in-touch*, which promotes *dynamic equilibrium*, allowing you to *perceive*, communicate about and *understand* aspects of self, other and world.

Your interaction with the woman is not a mechanized or digitized exchange of information, but rather the *resonant interplay*, the *participatory*, and thus *responsible*, public presentation of your private, particular perspectives via *reciprocal*, dialogic contact,

acknowledgment, and affirmation by response, amidst space and time. By contrast, the young women, who turn away from the public space of the immediate context at hand, are closed-off, like Narcissus, in electronic cocoons that offer on-demand information important to only their particular, private comfort. Engaged with smartphones, their closure protects them from the anxious experience of otherness. Though arguably not a strictly solipsistic context, McLuhan would say, "the effect of an electronic environment is to turn people inward and to substitute the inner trip for outer exploration, being for becoming" (*LOM* 110). The smartphone, in *substituting* the private for the public, abstracts the spatio-temporal dimensions of experience that encourage resonant mediation of self-other, private-public mediative communication as *transformation*.

Similar to Merleau-Ponty's spatio-temporal horizons of phenomenal fields, McLuhan suggests that the face-to-face embodied and embedded reciprocal dialogue between you and the woman with the coffee carves out a resonant *field* of concrete contact and relating. This is because my bodily participation opens "acoustic space," which involves the "spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous" *resonance* of "tactility [i.e., our *sensus communis*] and other senses," by constituting "a flux in which figure and ground rub against and transform each other" (*LOM* 33). Though "acoustic space is a complete contrast to visual space," McLuhan does not necessarily oppose *acoustic space* with *visual space* (*LOM*).[2]

McLuhan's hybrid ontology rejects Cartesian divisions (Van den Eede) and suggests something similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of synoptic distinctions between tensional dimensions of existence. One may suggest, then, that McLuhan's *acoustic space* is not a space of pure sound, or even representative of earlier aural-oral cultures, but rather a spatio-temporal moment, a mosaic field, that offers the greatest possibility for resonance, mediation, sensory equilibrium, learning, understanding and change. Due to McLuhan's insistence on dynamic

sensory balance, our return to un-situated aural-oral habits of perception and attention in the electronic age results in McLuhan's pejorative *global village*, through which our *field* extends beyond possibilities for embodied participation. Thus, *acoustic space* may be understood, not as a space of pure sound, but a field of spatio-temporal situatedness and perceptive *resonance*.

The temporal dimensions of McLuhan's implicit theory emphasize the interplay of past, present and future. For example, McLuhan suggests that electronic technology, by focusing on the immediate present, effects the forgetting the grounds of history from which constitutive cultural change emerges. As such, McLuhan's field seems similar to Merleau-Ponty's description of the *phenomenal field*. Considering the example above in terms of McLuhan's theory in practice, his ideal of face-to-face dialogue (Willmott 172), offers the greatest possibility for figure-ground *resonance*, permitting *true perception*, and thus *incarnate* communication, between concrete others to occur. While I showed previously that McLuhan views electronic media as abstracting spatio-temporal dimensions of experience, I have not yet considered his thoughts on particular media forms. As such, I describe McLuhan's views of speech and other media below.

5.4 McLuhan on Various Forms of Communication Media

McLuhan's style of approach is a form of aesthetic criticism designed to reorient audiences to the poetic, perceptive realm of concrete lived experience and significance so to illuminate the hidden grounds of media environments, which implicate sensory, bodily and epistemic biases that reflexively condition cultural practices. Per Willmott, McLuhan's often confusing and contradictory style is intended to help his audiences *read the book of media* by "assuming the mask of the culture subject to his criticism" (172). Thus, when one reads in McLuhan the mark of Cartesian philosophical division, the separating "/" either/or "digital logic"

(Lanigan *Phenom.* 14-16) it is not necessarily representative of McLuhan's implicit hybrid relational ontology of mediation that serves as background to his criticism. Rather, his engagement of the Cartesian, technical, oppositional grounds of technology reflects a style of *play*, an attempt to create *resonance* with audiences whom McLuhan views as presently living the numbing residues of Cartesian narrative grounds implicating U.S. cultures. As such, my description of McLuhan's discussions of media in this section attempts to mediate his confusing criticism with the theoretical assumptions, aims and ends informing the theory behind his M.E.

As stated, McLuhan's body of work thus proposes "a pedagogical framework through which to get a hold of and understand the properties of everchanging [*sic*] mediascapes" (Marchessault 222). McLuhan, assuming the position of expert and instructor, aims to cultivate our rediscovery of sensory and relational balance through his criticism. In *LOM*, McLuhan and son Eric premiere "a new tool … the 'tetrad'" which offers a four-fold, interpretive heuristic "directed towards making visible the hidden grammars and etymologies underlying human artefacts" to achieve such aims (Marchessault 222). The McLuhans explain:

> The tetrad was found by asking, 'What general, verifiable (that is, testable) statements can be made about all media?' We were surprised to find only four, here posed as questions: What does it enhance or intensify? What does it render obsolete or displace? What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced? What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme? (McLuhan and McLuhan 7).

Arranged in an abbreviated, chiasmic, appositional form, the four questions apply to any human creation – philosophies, scholarly approaches, material objects, and, of course, technologies. The form of the tetrad appears as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c|c} \textit{Enhances?} & \textit{Reverses-into?} \\ \hline \textit{Retrieves?} & \textit{Obsolesces?} \end{array}$$

The tetrad is necessarily chiasmic as it performs in a crisscrossing manner. A gestalt, circular-like relationship is revealed through inherent relations between the "enhances-obsolesces" and "retrieves-reverses-into" fields of the form, allowing thought to cross over and around the figure thereby revealing artefacts as ground. This heuristic permits audiences to discover the *hidden grounds* and effects of media while also promoting understanding of media toward ends of McLuhan's community and responsibility. Thus, I engage the tetrad in each section below to offer holistic consideration of McLuhan's thoughts on *speech*, *reading*, *writing*, *the telephone*, *phonograph recordings*, *film* and the *press*. I commence with consideration of McLuhan's discussion of speech.

5.4.2 Speech

Like Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan views speech as analogue with perception (*M&L* 169). Also similar to Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan's Saussurean views suggest that language, the ground of speaking, encompasses the synchronic-diachronic interplay of speech-speaking and speech-spoken. This reflects McLuhan's belief in the doctrine of *Divine Logos*, which suggests that *all of human knowledge inheres in language*. Thus, also similar to Merleau-Ponty McLuhan views language and speech as distinct, though not divided (*LOM* 113) – as interdependent.

Speech is a primal and "originary dimension" of existence, for McLuhan (Willmott 124). As such, it involves the responsibility of participation. The McLuhans say, "As a man speaks, his language is in a state of birth, as is also the thing about which he is talking. Such parentage confers responsibilities" (*LOM* 68). Speech is a highly participatory medium for McLuhan, one which "involves all of the senses dramatically" (*UM* 111) and is thus a form of movement. As McLuhan indicates, when a radio host addresses an audience, "he moves entirely in the spoken area of experience," he "soars … swings … and scampers" (*UM* 111). This suggests that speech

"always preserves a play of figure/ground relation between experience, and perception and its replay in expression" (*LOM* 121). Speaking is thus a concrete form of mediative relating, which permits increased possibilities for self-other, private-public, mediation, i.e., negotiation, toward ends of *dynamic equilibrium*, meaningful meanings, and *qualitative change*.

This is evident in the McLuhans' tetrad analysis of the "spoken word" (*LOM* 186). The McLuhans say that the "spoken word" *enhances* the "outering of self: Logos: utterance that transforms, that IS" (186). Crossing the chiasm, it *obsolesces* the "integral gesture," as it is a form of *touch* itself (187). Speaking also *retrieves* the "replay of perception and experience" and eventually reverses into "cliché, solidifying meanings via recyclage" (186) – in Merleau-Ponty's terms, *sedimentation*. Ultimately, the McLuhans suggest that speech is "action," as "the word" is "evocative power, not a sign," which encourages not only the "sharing" but also the "shaping" of "the world" (186). Thus, similar to Merleau-Ponty's view of speech as praxis, McLuhan indicates that through the interplay of synchronic-diachronic *resonance*, one may share his or her private, perceptive perspective, publicly, to co-constitute existence between self-other amidst spatio-temporal moments of relating.

Through the synchronic resonance of private-public, speech draws on the sediments of diachronic language and has the power to shape, to change, to mediate temporal dimensions of *is-was* by adding new significance. If this novelty becomes sedimented once more, such speech is incorporated as cliché, as an often repeatable and seemingly empty expression, which affirms and maintains particular cultural practices. The need for speech to occur between two interlocutors, who engage via face-to-face dialogic reciprocity, necessitates shared elements of space and time like those of *acoustic space*, which are experienced, not measured.

As McLuhan views human existence and culture threatened by the Cartesian grounds of electronic media (Willmott), he wishes for us to rediscover the resonance that permits *true incarnate perception* and its affirmation through self-other contact via the resonant, communicative reciprocity of acknowledgment and response. Thus, speech, when face-to-face, offers the greatest possibility for this resonance, i.e., openness, and thus a greater possibility for us to rediscover our particular situatedness, which McLuhan says we have forgotten. As such, McLuhan's view of speech, the oral-aural medium of human communication, seems similar to Merleau-Ponty's view. Yet, does McLuhan share Merleau-Ponty's view of the media of reading, writing, phoning and recording as analogous to speech?

5.4.3 Media Analogues to Speech: Writing, Reading, Telephone, Phonograph

As McLuhan explicitly concentrates on media forms and their effects for human existence, and as his critical tone assumes that of the technical ethos he in turn critiques (Willmott), he tends to juxtapose and contrast media forms rather than stressing their analogous aspects. This section considers McLuhan's discussions of media forms, which Merleau-Ponty contends are analogous to speech – *reading*, *writing*, *the telephone* and *the phonograph*. The last of which is McLuhan's parallel to Merleau-Ponty's comments on *recordings*. I engage McLuhan's *LOM* and *UM*, the posthumously published collections of essays, *The Medium and The Light* (*M&L*) and the McLuhans' posthumously published, *McLuhan and Formal Cause* (*MFC*). I begin with *writing* as McLuhan considers it *juxtaposed* to speech (*LOM*; *UM*; *GG*).

The McLuhans consider *writing* as "the written word" in *LOM* (154-155). In terms of the tetrad, the "written word," *enhances* "private authorship, the ego" due to its individuating powers (154). Writing *obsolesces* "vulgar slang, dialects; separates composition and performance" which, in turn, "displaces" "the integral 'common sense' of interplay and ambiguity" (155). The

"written word" also *retrieves* "elitism" for "an older language is retrieved" and privy to a privileged "in group" of writers and readers. Last, the "written word" *reverses* "with the corporate reading public" (155).

To translate this tetrad with McLuhan's *hybrid ontology of mediation* in mind, McLuhan suggests that mass literacy, in contrast to tribal, primary oral-aural cultures, instantiated the idea of the individual, as well as individualism, during the era of mass print production. As he explains, "the written word … is a detribalizing force" (*M&L* 43). This is because the written word, beginning with the phonetic alphabet, "translates" "the audible to the visible," due to the visual form of writing (*M&L* 43). In other words, with writing, "you pay attention to … words in a new way," that is linear and "arresting" of the movements found with speaking (*M&L* 43). Writing permits the "power of withdrawing from that auditory structure which is the tribe" to exist amidst "a private world created by … [the] ability to inspect static aspects of thought and information" (*M&L* 43) – the ability to abstract speech from space and time, which establishes distance for intellectual reflection.

McLuhan's attention to the correlate of the "written word," reading, assists further here. The McLuhans' do not offer an explicit tetrad regarding reading. Yet, they do offer a tetrad of hermeneutics. This practice of close, interpretive reading *enhances*, "clarity" and *obsolesces* "naïveté," while also *retrieving* "depth" and *reversing into* "obscurity" (*LOM* 140). With this tetrad, the McLuhans likely have scribal culture in mind. Prior to printing, reading, especially close interpretive readings, were cooperative, communal engagements (*GG*; *UM*). The practice of private, silent reading emerged only after the development and institution of the printing press. As McLuhan explains, "When Gutenberg technology hit the human sensibility, silent reading at high speed became possible for the first time. Semantic uniformity set in as well as 'correct'

spelling. The reader had the illusion of separate and private individuality and of 'inner light'

resulting from his exposure to seas of ink" (*M&L* 71). The effect of this shift to linear, visual

space and eternally repeatable temporality was a tendency toward the vicious modern

phenomenon of individualism. Though McLuhan speaks negatively of this effect born from

literacy, he does not view reading and writing as entirely compromising of resonance.

As he says, "The printed word created the Public. The Public consists of separate

individuals, each with his own point of view" (*MFC* 23). By contrast, "Electric circuitry does not

create a Public. It creates the Mass. The Mass does not consist of separate individuals, but of

individuals profoundly involved in one another" (*MFC* 23). As mentioned, Arnett, Fritz and Bell

indicate that the distinction between private-public is a necessary condition for the emergence of

communication ethics practices. In terms of McLuhan's implicit theory, the distinction he

establishes between the public and the masses reflects his concern for private-public resonance in

terms of community and responsibility. For him, community is possible with a literate public for

the form of written communication permits for some degree of *resonance* between private-

public. By contrast, community is not possible with the masses for electronic forms of

communication offer a-temporal and a-spatial biases which discourage private-public resonance.

Thus, when individuals are able to maintain their private, particularity amidst a larger

reading public, they are able to mediate concrete, actual experience with the more abstract

experience of silent, private reading. The private co-informs the public, and vice versa, to

maintain resonance between private-public and concrete-abstract layers of experience (see

Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Time is a big factor here for McLuhan as the slower pace of change with

literacy permitted space and time for grounded, private reflection and public deliberation. Due to

monocular focus on the immediate present, electronic media forms abstract spatio-temporal

dimensions of existence and arrest the resonance of the private-public and concrete-abstract synopses. Similar to Merleau-Ponty, then, McLuhan seems to suggest that writing and reading involve resonance between self-other, yet such resonance is not equivalent to the ideal of face-to-face relating.

McLuhan's criticism of the telephone reinforces this idea. The McLuhans' tetrad indicates that the telephone *enhances* "dialogue" and *obsolesces* "privacy by universal cable access," by altering "the old barriers between physical spaces" (*LOM* 152-153). The telephone also *retrieves* "instant access to users" and *reverses* into "the sender is sent" (152-153). As discussed previously, all of these effects implicate a *discarnate* mode of existence, through which persons "can be in two places at once" (152), because they are sent through time and space as "abstract images" (*LOM* 72). Per McLuhan's *ontology of mediation*, this spatial fragmenting of the self, via the *incorporation* of the phone, an *extension* of the ear, instantiates *sensory stress*, *auto-self-amputation*, anxiety and narcissistic closure.

However, simultaneously, the McLuhans contend that the telephone paradoxically *enhances* dialogue. Though we are spatially fragmented, the temporal resonance of face-to-face dialogue is maintained to a degree, which permits for some element of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance *resonance*. However, such resonance is implicated differently depending on the situation of particular phone calls. That is, when I speak with an unfamiliar other via the phone, I have difficulty compensating for spatial proximity. As the phone does not encourage "visualization" (*UM*) amidst its auditory emphasis, the other may remain an abstract, faceless object whose presence is known, but not necessarily felt. Space is abstracted from its resonance with time and thus the resonance of the synopses mentioned above tend toward the ambivalent extremes of self, private, abstract and distant. Though McLuhan

arguably would suggest that speaking with a close friend over the phone more closely approximates concrete face-to-face reciprocal relating than speaking with a stranger, the medium's elimination of material elements does not position the phone as a favorable approximation of speech. Although both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate that a telephone conversation involves a greater degree of abstraction than face-to-face dialogue, McLuhan's read is much less generous than Merleau-Ponty's analogous view. How, then, does McLuhan's view of sound recording compare with Merleau-Ponty's discussion?

McLuhan addresses the medium of sound recording in *UM*, and only in association with the technology of the phonograph. As such, the McLuhans do not offer a tetrad of the phonograph in *LOM*. Therefore, I offer my own analysis: The phonograph *enhances* private auditory presentation and hearing, while also *obsolescing* public musical performance and presentation. Phonographic recordings *retrieve* the aural, yet *reverse into* the privacy and linearity of *visual space*. As the phonograph enabled individuals to experience privately what was once only available through public, live performance, the abstraction of spatial and temporal dimensions in phonograph recordings does not offer the resonance of concrete, reciprocal relating. Though the phonograph *retrieved* the aural dimension of our *sensus communis* amidst the visual bias of high literacy, its tending toward abstraction along with its emphasis on privacy, flips the experience of resonant *acoustic space* to the abstract and fragmented linearity of visual space. This is because recordings diminish the resonance of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance.

One finds, obscurely stated, a parallel to Merleau-Ponty's view of recordings *flattening* lived experience in McLuhan's discussion of jazz music. As "jazz is alive, like conversation" due to its improvising form, "it is a truism among jazz performers that recorded jazz is 'as stale as

yesterday's newspaper'" (*UM* 376). The element of "performance," that "insures maximal

participation among players" and the audience, is missing with recorded jazz music and by

extension, the lived experience of impromptu conversation. Thus for both McLuhan and

Merleau-Ponty, sound recording media tends toward a greater degree of abstraction than the

telephone, by compromising both spatial and temporal dimensions, and thus flattening the rich

resonance of concrete face-to-face dialogue.

Thus far, it seems as if McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty hold similar, though not equivalent

views, regarding the impact of particular media forms for human experience. While McLuhan is

not as generous as Merleau-Ponty in permitting experience of the telephone approximation to

face-to-face communication, the two do commonly suggest that reading, writing, a phone call

and recordings tend toward greater degrees of abstraction, which alters the reversibility and

resonance between persons who communicate. To consider this further, I take up McLuhan's

discussions of film and the press.

5.4.4 Film

As with recordings, the McLuhans do not offer an explicit tetrad for the medium of film.

As such, I again attempt an analysis. Movies *enhance* writing and *obsolesce* reading. Movies

retrieve novels and *reverse into* live musical theater performances. Though movies *obsolesce*

reading, they retrieve the narrative structure of the novel amidst the emergence of the electronic

epoch. Yet film enhances this literate structure, i.e., writing, because the medium encourages

interplay between the visual and auditory senses in a manner similar to *true perception*, yet one

that "manages to approximate and even to surpass real life" (*UM* 389). Thus, similar to Merleau-

Ponty's observation, McLuhan suggests that film models the process of perception, yet in a more

abstract manner, for, "whatever the camera turns to, the audience accepts" (*UM* 384).

For McLuhan as for Merleau-Ponty, film is an abstract modeling of *true perception* because the field of experience is given by the camera, rather than constituted by the figure-ground resonance of embodied perception. As McLuhan explains, "in ordinary perception men perform the miracle of recreating within themselves … the exterior world. This "miracle" is "the work of the … poetic or creative process" (*M&L* 165). With film, perception is "mechanized," "electrified" and "distorted" (165). Per McLuhan, then, film offers "merely a dream world which is a substitute for reality rather than a means of proving reality" (165). Thus, similar to Merleau-Ponty's contention that film offers only *possible* rather than *actual* perceptual grasping of objects, per McLuhan, the form of film reverses "the perceptive process to representation," – an abstract *matching* rather than abstract-concrete *resonant making* (Willmott 35).

Though similar to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of film, McLuhan makes the strong claim that the form of film deceives us and offers merely a fictive simulation, an "illusion," of true perception due to its abstraction of material and spatio-temporal dimensions of concrete, lived relating (*UM* 389). While McLuhan's concluding remarks about film seem stronger than Merleau-Ponty's assessment, one may suggest that McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty view film similarly. Film models the perceptive process and offers an aesthetic communication, through which we choose to abstract, remove ourselves from, material spatio-temporal dimensions of concrete lived experience. Might McLuhan also view *news* media similarly to Merleau-Ponty?

5.4.5 The Press

McLuhan's description of "the press" (*UM*) correlates with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of *News Items*. The McLuhans do offer an explicit tetrad of *the press* in *LOM*. The press *enhances*, "today via date-line" and *obsolesces* "yesterday; the sequential" (*LOM* 149). The press also *retrieves* "'coverage,'" and *reverses into* "'soft news'" like "advertising" and "good news"

(149). News, with its globe-spanning, abbreviated form and its focus on the simultaneity of not

necessarily connected events, implicates our spatial situatedness and our temporal embedment.

Though the press encourages audience "participation" (*UM* 283), it "creates a visual, not-too-

involved" spatio-temporal context encouraging of imbalance (*UM* 288).

This is particularly the case with televised news. McLuhan describes this form of news as

"human interest" (*UM* 276). Like Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan says, that *human interest* stories are

reductive, as they take "multiple book pages or multiple information items" and reduce them to

truncated fragments (276). Whereas "the book is a private confessional form that provides a

'point of view,'" by contrast, televised "press is a group confessional form" (276). The reductive

nature of televised news may break us free from the visually intense, private individualism of

high literacy, but tending toward the opposite extreme of electronic publicness associated with

the masses does not promote the *resonant*, *dynamic equilibrium* that McLuhan advocates.

Though global news "coverage" offers a sense of unity with others, it does so in a manner

forgetful of history and tradition by focusing on the immediate present. In the electronic era of

televised news, this unity is that of dystopian connection – the *global village* – rather than

communal contact. As stated, *connection* implicates a subsumption of one particular by another

or by the electronic masses. Connected participation is that distanced and abstracted mass

participation – in Merleau-Ponty's terms, *looking without understanding* – which permits us to

view other persons as abstract objects. This arresting of resonance between self-other, in turn,

implicates that we judge, rather than understand, a whole, based on abstracted parts.

Thus, for McLuhan, as for Merleau-Ponty, different forms of mediation implicate

differences between human experience, understanding and significance. Yet, whereas Merleau-

Ponty views these differences a matter of degree, McLuhan's commentary implicates greater

discrepancies. What remains is to consider how and why McLuhan's discussions of communication media implicate his theoretical dimensions of perceptive and communicative mediation in practice.

5.5 McLuhan's Theory in Practice: Media and Mediation

As mentioned, McLuhan's *hybrid ontology of mediation* (Van den Eede) is premised upon his Richardian-aesthetic, ancient-grammatical and Thomistic, Catholic-humanist assumptions that implicate humanity's need to interpret and understand the effects of media as complex grounds, which reflexively shape culture. McLuhan's aim is to raise audiences' grammatical awareness of the need to *read the book of media* to understand how the form of our communication implicates responsibility grounded amidst community. With rapid technological progress and social change, we must learn to mediate the effects of our technical actions with ongoing, participatory, situated communication to sustain and protect the complex resonances of existence. The form of communication we engage contributes to possibilities for such resonance.

With the elevator example above, your embodied, perceptive openness orients you to a spatio-temporal field amidst which such resonant mediation is likely. This shared spatio-temporal field tends toward a greater degree of concrete-proximity than abstract-distance. As such, you and the woman with her coffee experience the resonance of contacting one another as particular individuals who are simultaneous similar-different. Conversely, the closedness of the three women with their smartphones orients them to the abstract boundless depth of private connection rather than the contact offered by the concrete context at hand. Similar to the media forms of film and the press addressed above, the context of the smartphone disrupts perceptive mediation and the communicative mediation of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and

proximity-distance to minimize possibilities for communication ethics practices like contact,

acknowledgement and response to emerge between self-other.

For example, as Van den Eede indicates, with resonant experience, "'Abstract' and

'concrete' are … inextricably intertwined" for McLuhan (245). Like Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan

suggests that certain forms of experience modify synoptic mediation to amplify an imbalance

between abstract-concrete. Reading, writing, the telephone, recordings, film and news tend

greatly toward abstraction and distance, for McLuhan, due to the spatio-temporal dimensions of

these fields. Each of these media forms conditions our perceptive self-mediation in a manner that

narrows its scope. Fields that promote the interweaving of spatio-temporal and synoptic

elements, like the face-to-face dialogue with the woman in the elevator, offer the greatest

possibilities for openness to perceptive self-mediation and communicative mediation of such

ambivalent biases. Thus, also similar to Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan suggests that media-

encouraged biases are not merely due to material proximity or distance, but also lived

dimensions of our existence.

Merleau-Ponty's idea of *overwhelming proximity* nicely reflects McLuhan's notion of

electronic media implicating possibilities for perceptive and communicative resonance, as such

media forms complicate our orientation amidst spatio-temporal grounds. Yet, for McLuhan, the

resonance of acoustic space also involves *depth* – in a positive sense (*LOM* 54). That is, when

contextual conditions amplify the maximum interplay of *true perception*, our *sensus communis*

carves out the resonant between of *acoustic space* to permit the greatest possibility of mediative

participation via our situated bodies. This requires a *depth* of participation – a *depth* of

movement. For example, with face-to-face dialogue, we experience a high degree of

participation – we are deeply and concretely in-contact with others. By contrast, film conditions

the negative dimensions of *depth* as *overwhelming proximity*, for we choose to relinquish the

self-mediation of our perceptive movement to the director's eye of the camera. Additionally,

with televised press, we experience the *overwhelming proximity* of a global context and

participate to only a shallow, uninvolved degree. Communicative forms that encourage the

closing, negative aspects of depth diminish perceptive, communicative agency offering a greater

degree of distanced, abstract involvement, which promotes the technical, modernist Cartesian

assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17).

McLuhan's point with his hyperbolic, paradoxical aesthetic M.E. criticism is that media

forms promoting self-mediation at the perceptive level and resonant mediation at the

communicative level, offer the greatest possibility for reflexivity between synopses – the greatest

possibility for openness, participation, resonance, reciprocity, significance, and the emergence of

communication ethics practices such as contact, acknowledgement and response. When we

choose to close ourselves off like Narcissus, McLuhan suggests that we become subsumed by

our habituated extension-incorporations, and their biases overwhelms us in disorienting fashion,

like *darkness* (Merleau-Ponty *PhP*). Yet, with proper orientation, via resonant mediation

between the depths of openness *and* closure, we are afforded with greater possibilities for the

emergence of communication ethics practices and change. What, then, does this mean for

McLuhan's views of human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*?

5.6 Implications for Human Communication, Communication Ethics and *Americanitis*

While McLuhan's M.E., grounded by his *hybrid ontology of mediation*, suggests that

electronic media encourage pathological narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion,

Americanitis, via sensory closure and spatio-temporal dis-embodiment and dis-embedment, his

discussions of other media forms, like speech, offer correlate possibilities for openness. Similar

to Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan's theory in practice suggests this hope due to our bodily agency. Thus, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty agree that the form of communication, in McLuhan's terms its *formal cause* or the ground from which perception, significance and communication ethics emerge, reflexively conditions possibilities for remembering and enacting this agency – possibilities for realizing our situated, embodied and embedded *freedom to*.

Communicative forms permitting for a greater degree of concreteness, like your dialogue with the woman above, offer increased possibilities for *true perception* to carve-out an *acoustic space*, a situating field of space and time, through which we are most likely to resonantly negotiate, i.e., mediate, the complex dimensions of existence, thereby offering greater opportunity for the emergence of communication ethics practices. By contrast, forms like reading, writing, telephone, recording, film and press, abstract certain dimensions of existence and compromise such resonance. Per McLuhan's M.E., when communicative forms instantiate divisive biases, and when such biases become individually habituated and culturally institutionalized, their effects have the potential to arrest resonance, i.e., mediation, to leave us numb, closed and stagnant like Narcissus.

As stated, forms of communication encouraging closure implicate tendencies toward the ambivalent extremes of abstract, private, and distant. Such leanings complicate our ability to *read* the grounds of *hidden media environments*, and the grounding-grounds of self-other-world by eschewing distinction and upholding the ambivalent, Cartesian assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Thus, in terms of Arnett, Fritz and Bell's heuristic question, *what goods does a theory protect and promote?*, I suggest that McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty, *protects and promotes* opening and situating forms of perceptive

and communicative experience, which encourage resonance between the important synopses of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance.

As stated, Arnett, Fritz and Bell contend that the distinction between private-public is a necessary condition for communication ethics practices to emerge. Additionally, our negotiation of this distinction and the other "natural dialectic" distinctions of self-other, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance, rests upon our ability to discern the spatio-temporal grounding-grounds of self-other-world via participation and reflection. Per McLuhan, electronic forms of communication, like film and the press, close us to discerning such distinctions. Due to the *overwhelming proximity* of the global with the local amidst the electronic age, we close ourselves off from ourselves and submit our particularity to the comfort of mass, tribal belonging. As abstracted spatio-temporal field dimensions and rapid information flow offer reduced possibilities to mediate public experience with private reflection, we are stripped of our particularity, our *private morality*, and exist as strictly public, abstract, interchangeable objects. Per McLuhan, then, the effects of electronic media include the forgetting of our situatedness, our particularity, our responsibility and our *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to moments of dialogic invitation which arise amidst the ambiguity of private-public resonance. Thus, I suggest that McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty, *protects and promotes* resonance between the private-public synopsis at a grounding level, which enables us to see differences and distinctions between particular self-others at the perceptive level, and encourages resonant, communicative mediation of particular perspectives via the interplay of private-public.

Without such resonance, possibilities for the emergence of significance and communication ethics practices are reduced to what McLuhan describes as a strictly *public austere ethic* – ideologically imposed ideals implicitly *protected and promoted* by our blindness

to the grounding-grounds of existence, including the *hidden grounds of media environments*. Through his M.E. criticism, McLuhan implicitly suggests that our electronic posture of closure promotes *blind* acceptance of abstract, technical promises such as speed, efficiency, prediction, control, ease and comfort. By contrast a posture of openness promotes the situating, *temporalizing* and *spatializing* (Anton *Self.*) experience of phatic, self-other perceptive contact, i.e., similar to what I refer to as the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, as well as possibilities for the emergence of communication ethics practices and constitutive communicative significance. Thus, like Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan *protects and promotes* the *resonant making* of human communication as the situated constitution of significance, which exceeds the bounds of empirical matchings to implicate creative change, and which rests upon the phatic, alienating, i.e., othering, opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*.

As Willmott's read of McLuhan indicates "alienation makes of participation a kind of discursive dialectic" (72-73). Without alienation grounded amidst community, i.e., *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, possibilities for resonant mediation and possibilities for participation, i.e., responsibility, are reduced. For example, in the abstract-heavy experience of film and the press, opportunities for responsibility are diminished, thus offering what McLuhan describes as only uninterested, *participation-without-involvement* (*PAT*). Similar to Merleau-Ponty's voyeuristic interpretation of film and *News Items*, such *seeing without understanding* (*PrP*) is reflexively conditioned by abstraction of spatio-temporal dimensions of existence – we are closed to mediative participation amidst these forms of communication. Thus, Per Willmott's read of McLuhan, our closure to the dialectic of alienation and participation is a perceptive-affective closure through which lack of mediation leads to the pathology of *Americanitis*. Similar to Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan *protects and promotes* responsibility amidst the grounding-grounds of

communities; as this involved, open participation invites and encourages synoptic resonant mediation.

Therefore, one must assume that despite his dramatic and determinist tone McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty, also insists upon ongoing possibilities for openness. As the McLuhans say in *LOM*, "The imposition willy-nilly of new cultural grounds by the action of new technologies … is only possible while the users are 'well adjusted' – sound asleep … there is no inevitability where there is a willingness to pay attention" (128). Technology does not determine existential closure and pathology, but rather encourages such tendencies via modification of spatio-temporal experiential dimensions. Thus, similar to Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan suggests that closure is a choice – a choice to relinquish our *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond to self-other-world by implicitly and expressly avoiding the opening and situating experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. Yet, McLuhan also maintains hope. If we attend to the grounding-grounds of media environments as well as the grounds of self-other-world, i.e., if we "pay attention," we have the situated, bodily agency to open ourselves, to choose responsibility, amidst community.

In *protecting and promoting* community and responsibility, McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty also *protects and promotes* resonance amidst the synopsis of proximity-distance. That is, McLuhan similarly suggests that through the situating, opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* we are better attuned to moments of "dialogic invitation" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) emerging between particular self-others amidst spatio-temporal fields of interaction. Forms of communication encouraging such comportments foster resonant mediation of proximity-distance to allow us increased possibilities for understanding.

The *good* of understanding requires persistent, resonant interplay between proximity-distance to enable space and time for reflection regarding worldly phenomena, as well as

dimensions of self-other relating. With too little distance from phenomenon, we are subsumed by

it and blind to its dimensions, i.e., Merleau-Ponty's *overwhelming proximity* of darkness. With

too much distance, the phenomenon is abstract, offering a voyeuristic posture of *participation-*

without-involvement (McLuhan *PAT*). In terms of self-other, too much distance implicates

abstraction and the treatment of others as mere objects. Too little distance between self-other

implicates the converse – subsumption, substitution and reification of others as self-same,

denying of particularity. Thus, like Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan suggests that when proximity-

distance resonates amidst communicative experience we have increased possibilities for a type of

felt and known, i.e., phronetic, understanding which exceeds the bounds of empirical

significance and contributes to the creation of constitutive communicative change. Thus,

McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty *protects and promotes* the resonance of proximity-distance toward

the *goods* of understanding and communicative change.

Overall, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty each respond to the Western, cultural

institutionalization of modernist, technical promises and the Cartesian assumption "that we can

function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Such assumptions, which are

clearly identified by McLuhan as embodied amidst some of the media forms described above,

encourage postures of closure and tendencies toward ambivalent extremes rather than resonant

mediation. By encouraging postures of closure to self-other-world, these electronic forms of

communication encourage us to view one another as instrumental means for on-demand use.

That is, we use others to ensure strictly personal comfort, security and control by implicitly and

explicitly eschewing the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* that is central to emergent

possibilities for communication ethics praxis like contact, acknowledgement and response.

In responding to such assumptions via their respective descriptions of media forms, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty similarly *protect and promote* the goods of *dialogic openness* to learning and understanding. As described by Arnett, Fritz and Bell, a posture of *dialogic openness* encourages possibilities for constitutive significance, i.e., *resonant making* in McLuhan's terms, discernment of difference and negotiation, i.e., mediation, of synoptic ambiguity rather than the ambivalence of extremes. Thus, McLuhan, like Merleau-Ponty, *protects and promotes* the good of ambiguous, situating openness (i.e., prepersonal, phatic contact) that allows us to see distinction and difference thereby offering possibilities for discerning and understanding the grounding-grounds of self-other-world, including the grounds of media environments. The two also similarly *protect and promote* resonant mediation between self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance, which offers greater possibilities for responsibility amidst community so to permit opportunities for the constitution of authentic significance and understanding between self-other about our world. Ultimately, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's similar communication ethics theories, emphasizing community and responsibility, *protect and promote* the *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* (Van den Eede) of the grounding-grounds reflexively shaping self-other-world. Such orientations encourage participative communicative change, which is responsive to the rapid imposition of technical change amidst our digital moment. Therefore, the two nuanced communication ethics theories, when examined practically, similarly respond to our pathologically narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion of *Americanitis* amidst the electronic age and beyond.

Thus far, I have shown that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology and McLuhan's M.E., informed by his *hybrid ontology of mediation*, offer similar theoretical assumptions, aims

and ends. As such, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty similarly assess the implications of certain forms of communication media for human communication and communication ethics praxis. I maintain my suggestion that the differences in their views of narcissism and anxiety, mediated by their affable communication ethics assumptions, offer opportunity for a productive conversation between McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty that elucidates and responds to our narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion – our *Americanitis*.

Similar to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's project of *Communication Ethics Literacy*, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan each encourage attunement to the grounding-grounds of our bodies, our environments, our spaces and our temporal moment to better discern the assumptions reflexively shaping our existence, our culture, our communicative practices and our understandings of self-other-world. As such, I proceed to place Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan into conversation to consider how the prepersonal, phatic, opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* relates to the pathological, narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion that is *Americanitis*. Additionally, this conversation attends to how the synoptic *goods* Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan *protect and promote* are mediated amidst the experience of self-other relating. Such emphasis considers our corporeal ability to discern distinction, difference and grounding-grounds, which encourages mediation of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance. For, through such mediation, possibilities for communication ethics practices, such as contact, acknowledgement and response, emerge between self-other amidst a technical milieu. Thus, I turn to gain a better understanding of *Americanitis* via this conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan.

Chapter 6

A Conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan on *Americanitis*

Whereas Part-I introduced Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's common theoretical groundings and Part-II elucidated this theory in practice, Part-III, beginning here, attempts to explain the experience of human relating amidst a technical milieu through construction of a conversation. This conversation must account for communicative and communication ethics dimensions revealed thus far, as well as consideration of Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's shared historical moment. This chapter aims, primarily, to consider why and how the experience of good anxiety and narcissism relates to the pathological experience of Americanitis and the mediation of synopses important to communication ethics practices. The conversation resulting from this chapter will then inform my concluding remarks in Chapter 7, which offers response to our digital Americanitis as well as discussion of why and how this existential phenomenological read of McLuhan contributes to scholarship.

6.1 Introduction

As stated previously, my aims for this project are threefold. First, based on calls in recent literature, I interpret McLuhan's M.E. through Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenological ontology to gain a better understanding of McLuhan's often-confusing media criticism (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon). Second, I aim to place McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty into conversation so to better understand our experience of *Americanitis* amidst our digital moment. Third, I wish to suggest possible avenues of response to our digital *Americanitis* via consideration of McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty's similar communication ethics theories, emphasizing community and responsibility that respond to the modernist, Cartesian, ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17).

Having interpreted McLuhan's M.E. through Merleau-Ponty's thought this chapter addresses my second aim of constructing a conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan to understand *Americanitis*. To borrow related metaphors from Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, I must attempt interweaving a *resonant interplay* between their similar theoretical assumptions, aims and ends, their similar views of communication media, and their nuanced understandings of

narcissism and anxiety informing their similar communication ethics of community and responsibility. This effort of appropriating Merleau-Ponty's tacit *reversibility* and McLuhan's *resonance* ought to encourage *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* of *Americanitis*, as well as the emergence of possible avenues of response to our present condition.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of dialogue, I must first contextualize the dynamic *common ground* between him and McLuhan – the shared historical moment of modernity. I attempt to texture this dynamic between with attention to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's project of *Communication Ethics Literacy*, which shares Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective responsiveness to the ills of modernity. I then offer a brief review of Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's similar metaphors and thoughts on various media forms with attention to the context of modernity. Following this, I interweave the salient aspects of each thinker's work to create interplay about how and why our engagement of communication media implicates human communication, communication ethics and *Americanitis*. Through this effort, better understanding regarding *Americanitis* ought to *emerge* between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. In conclusion, I consider implications for this emergent understanding as they pertain to mediation and communication ethics practices, such as contact, acknowledgement and response.

6.2 Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan, Modernity and Communication Ethics

With his *Supplement*, Beard offers specific symptoms of *neurasthenia*. In addition to "insomnia, flushing, drowsiness, bad dreams … and mental irritability," *neurasthenics* experience intense anxieties involving "fear of responsibility … [and] fear of society," arguably instantiating a pervasive "lack of decision" – a lack of choice (7). As communication ethics involves concern for our communicative responsibility through our embodied agency of choice amidst community and limits (Arnett, Fritz and Bell), one may easily suggest, like McLuhan,

that the elevation of Beard's neurasthenia to electronic and digital *Americanitis* limits

possibilities for mediative, communication ethics practices such as, contact, acknowledgment

and response. Though McLuhan explicitly identifies electronic technology as encouraging the

uninvolved and strictly *public austere* mass *ethic* informing *Americanitis*, he shares with

Merleau-Ponty, and Arnett, Fritz and Bell the identification of modernist, technical assumptions

as propelling such encouragement.

Similar to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, McLuhan's M.E. criticism is

also a direct response to the *Cartesian residues infecting Western cultures* (Dillon). Though

McLuhan's M.E. seems to critique only material, technological forms, I have shown, as Willmott

and Van den Eede indicate, that his work also responds to the anti-humanist ideals of Cartesian

modernity, which are embodied amidst technologies that reflexively inform our communicative

practices. As stated, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenological ontology, McLuhan's M.E.

and the living ground of communication ethics scholarship share concern for scientistic,

progressive, Cartesian ideals and the implications for the health of the human condition.[1] As

Arnett, Fritz and Bell's project of *Communication Ethics Literacy* describes, the modernist,

ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (17) informs the

grounds of self-other-world amidst modernity and our present historical moment with significant

implications for our understandings of the human condition and human experience (Arnett, Fritz

and Bell 20).

That is, as Descartes' philosophy divided body and mind and idealized the latter, the

illusory modern self is conceived as an autonomous reasoning and willing monadic mind,

ensnared by a mechanistic body (Dillon 17). As entirely separate Cartesian, monadic minds,

when *free from* the constraints of human existence such as body, space, time, culture, and others,

the modernist, *fictive* "autonomous self" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 146) exists merely in a world full

of objects available for purely conscious appropriation (Dillon 19). Standing outside of time,

space, community and responsibility, each autonomous, disembodied agent willfully reasons his

or her personal, groundless reality into existence *ex nihilo*, rather than engaging situated

reflectively reflexive choice. Such assumptions aim for the annihilation of contingency in favor

of absolute determinacy and control (Dillon 19). The implications of this include the dissolution

of particularity and community, the related falling away of participation, i.e., responsibility,

cultural stagnation and ideologically imposed morals, rather than narrative, situated experiential

ethical praxis (McLuhan *PAT*).

As previously described, Arnett, Fritz and Bell's project of *Communication Ethics*

Literacy responds to the modernist, Cartesian, ambivalent assumption "that we can function

without regard for the Other" (17). Specifically, the authors *protect and promote* "temporal

agreement on minimalist values protected and promoted by more than one narrative that will

permit us to function together" (54). Similar to Merleau-Ponty's concern for *looking without*

understanding and McLuhan's concern for *participation-without-involvement*, the authors

respond to the temptations of modernist individualism, which encourage eschewal of the

temporal by elevating "concern for one's own view" taking "precedence over a tradition that

embeds a particular human being" (219). As Arnett, Fritz and Bell identify, this individualist

practice of "standing above" the temporal ground of "history" to "render an accurate assessment"

of what is *good* (169) implicates a posture of ambivalent closure, like that of Narcissus.

By contrast, Arnett, Fritz and Bell's advocacy of communication ethics theories assuming

"temporal agreement on minimalist," communally grounded "values" *protects and promotes* a

posture of dialogic openness, an attunement to difference and distinctions which reveal the

complex textures of grounding assumptions that reflexively shape how we see and meet the dynamic grounds of self-other-world. Such openness also attunes us to moments of dialogic invitation. For, as Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe, reading the grounding-grounds of self-other-world, along with their synoptic and spatio-temporal dimensions, helps to counter the Cartesian impulse of ambivalence by encouraging mediation between the important synopsis of private and public (218-219), as well as the synopses of self-other, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance.

That is, as Arnett, Fritz and Bell indicate, "attending to the ground ... of self and Other calls forth a natural act of dialogic negotiation, necessitating a dialogic ethical competence that requires us to walk with knowledge of temporality and inaccuracy [i.e., ambiguity], requiring us to privilege learning over telling propelled by conviction" (225). Ultimately, this open and mediative posture, accepting of ambiguity, encourages the *good* of understanding. As Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe, "To understand ... is not to add up a number of details … but to be willing to meet the unexpected, the ambiguous, and the imprecise" (166) via *dialogic openness* to learning and change. Thus, Arnett, Fritz and Bell suggest that the "listening, attentiveness and dialogic negotiation" emerging between self-other amidst postures of dialogic openness, "constitute temporal dialogic ethical competence" (206) – a literacy through which we may recognize "that we can[*not*] function without regard for the Other" (17).

With related concerns, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan respond directly to anti-humanist, ambivalent assumptions, filled with *hubris* (Van den Eede) and devoid of limits, which permitted many to rationally accept and support the atrocities of Hitler's reign, as well as Hiroshima and Nagasaki. McLuhan, likewise responding to such inhumane action, notes the unreflectively accepted Cartesian ideal in the promises of technology – both mechanical and electronic. McLuhan identifies the promises of electronic technology as *comfort*, *control*, *connection*, *speed*,

and *efficiency* (*MB*; *UM*). Per Arnett, Fritz and Bell, it is not necessarily that these goods are problematic themselves, but rather the gestalt of the technical groundings through which they are understood by Western culture – grounds that, according to Hyde, condition the additional modernist assumption that "the authority of boundaries" e.g., our bodies, "should be conceived as limitations to be overcome, not merely accepted" (Hyde 231).

Per Willmott, and as evidenced when read through Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenological ontology, McLuhan's M.E. suggests, then, that mechanical technology exemplifies and perpetuates Cartesian ideals while also realizing the Cartesian promise of *discarnate* being. This preserves the individualism of the mechanical epoch while also offering promises of tribal syncretism. With the common ground of responding to the misgivings of modernist, Western cultural practices between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan contextualized, I suggest that the nuances between their views of narcissism and anxiety illuminate the narrative ground of the historical moment of modernity as well as our present digital moment. Further, this productive difference should offer suggestions as to how we may possibly recover human communication ethics practices as praxis, encouraging of community and responsibility, amidst the residues of Cartesian ambivalence and a technical milieu.

One common theme emerging through Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan and Arnett, Fritz and Bell, is the embodied and embedded communicative mediation, not resolution, of dialectical tensions resulting from the plural, diverse and complex human condition, situated amidst a speedy, technical milieu. Cartesian assumptions, by implicating the solipsistic, monadic, autonomous, rational mind, narrow possibilities for mediation, as the space between humans is conceived as an irreconcilable gulf of dualistic *ambivalence*, rather than an opening of *ambiguity* permitting of mediative possibilities (Dillon; Levin; Merleau-Ponty *PrP* 103). As such, both

Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's dialogic, ontologies of mediation, similar to the *postmodern*[2]

communication ethics of Arnett, Fritz and Bell, insist upon understanding the structure of being-

becoming as situated-yet-decentered bodily, perceptive and expressive, synoptic, dialectical

mediation of elements crucial to existence – a *freedom to* mediate, constitute and reconfigure

significance. Of importance to Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's similar humanist,

communication ethics of community and responsibility are the synopses of self-other, private-

public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance which relate to their similar metaphors, theories

of human communication and discussions of communication media. I thus proceed to offer a

concise review of these elements as responses to modernity.

6.3 Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan on Media and Communication Ethics: A Review

Based on the calls of Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon to read McLuhan

through an existential phenomenological lens, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology has

thus far served as a sort of ground for my reading of McLuhan. Through this reading, an

existential phenomenological understanding of McLuhan's M.E. criticism is possible via their

shared metaphors of *perception*, *the body*, *extension*, *figure-ground*, *blindness*, *visible-invisible*,

resonance and *reversibility*. As I have shown, though their metaphorical affinity is not a pure

equivalence, their respective views cohere to yield a common narrative that responds to the

modernist, ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett,

Fritz and Bell 17) by similarly *protecting and promoting* the tensional synopses of self-other,

private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance.

Such synoptic tensions, in turn, call for the prioritization of self-mediating prepersonal,

perceptual and bodily modes of knowing thereby promoting a type of *literacy*, which enables us

to see, feel, predicate and understand the limits and dimensions of spatio-temporal grounding-

grounds. According to McLuhan, amidst the electronic age we become blind to such elements due to media forms' promotion of ambivalent leanings toward Cartesian discarnality, i.e., individualism, or mass *tribalism*, i.e., syncretism. As previously addressed, the significance of efforts to elevate concern for perception and the body in human communication are a response to Cartesian assumptions (Carey *TCS*). Such responses aim to remind us of the vital and existential value of tacit and affective experience, which reorients us to our limited, situated embodiment and embedment as selves reflexively interdependent with others and our world. McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty correlatively agree that this situatedness has not only physical and psychical, but also metaphysical import.

For both, broadly speaking, the gestalt situation of the perceptive body self-mediates spatio-temporal dimensions of existence to constitute emergent fields of experience. As I have suggested, Merleau-Ponty's *lived space* is similar to McLuhan's *acoustic space*. For both, space is a dimension of existence. Space is not a container or position, but rather a lived contextual element of life that inescapably contributes to shaping figure-ground interplay. Temporality also contributes to this interplay as the present, for both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, always carries forth elements of history, i.e., sediments, while also pushing into the future, i.e., creation. The interplay, *resonance* in McLuhan's terms and *reversibility* in Merleau-Ponty's terms, self-mediates perceptual, affective significance informing tacit bodily practices and, in turn, the conscious praxis of human communication at intra, inter, group, cultural and institutional levels.

For both thinkers, this *ambiguous*, not *ambivalent*, form of self-mediative significance opens us to and requires of us the correlate activity of expression, which consciously mediates ambiguity by affirming, denying, maintaining and transforming our experiential understanding of phenomena. However, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan each also acknowledge that due to a

multiplicity of possible meanings and a plurality of situated, particular perspectives, expressive attempts always also involve ambiguity. For both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, as evidenced through their common metaphors of *blindness* and *visible-invisible*, understanding is never total but is rather something like a reflexive, transformative unfolding which is always partial, biased and open to change. Communicative meaning thus exceeds representation to present and constitute significance that does not strictly correspond to, but rather enacts and correlates with lived experience. As such, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, contra modernist assumptions, suggest that embodied perception and expression, due to their ambiguity, are forms of human being, knowing and doing, which emerge via interplay between complex elements and dimensions comprising the structures of bodily perceptive-expressive existence.

The manner by which this interplay implicates existence and experience is undeniably reflexive for both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. As such, *what* is communicated, i.e., the *content*, the figure, as well as *how* we communicate, i.e., the *form*, the ground, contributes to the reflexive shaping of cultural, linguistic and spatio-temporal understandings. Though Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's discussions of particular media forms differ (e.g., writing), their assessments demonstrate shared concern for how speech, reading, writing, the telephone, recording, film and news effect perception and expression, which in turn implicate resonance and thus understanding. As we are embodied, embedded and limited, mediation is a fact of human existence and human communication, yet certain forms of technological mediation compromise lived, bodily, ontological mediation.

As such, forms of human communication that tend to the resonance of reversibility between the complex synopses constituting human existence, especially the synopses of self-other, private-public, concrete-abstract and proximity-distance, offer the greatest possibilities for

perceptive-expressive participation, i.e., responsibility, and understanding. Conversely, forms of communication, like film and news, compromise perceptive-expressive resonance and reversibility thereby negatively implicating possibilities for participation, communication, synoptic mediation and understanding. Whereas Merleau-Ponty offers an intellectually generous and hopeful critique of media forms, which compromise reversibility and alter significance by manner of degree, McLuhan's criticism is far more dramatic.

Per McLuhan, mechanical and electronic media arrest the resonance of perception-expression via the abolishment of metaphysical field dimensions. The a-spatial, a-temporal, totalized, global field of awareness implicated by electricity causes us to become *discarnate* and leads to a waning of responsibility – a reduction of perceptive-expressive bodily, participatory agency due to resisting our embodied and embedded limitations (*UM*). Though Merleau-Ponty does not suggest an explicit parallel, this notion is present in his discussion of the uninterested *seeing without understanding* involved with the *voyeurism* of news. The opening self-mediating ambiguity of perception and its resonance with expression, i.e., private-public, are necessary for situated human communication and the emergence of communication ethics practices for both McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty. Thus, forms of communication that promote the opening agency of perception, expression and the complex reversible resonances of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance, encourage greater possibilities for contact, choice acknowledgment and response – greater possibilities for communication ethics practices to emerge between self-other.

For Merleau-Ponty this opening originates through self-other relational reversibility involving *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, which begins in childhood and is incorporated into the structure of our perceptive-expressive bodies into adulthood. For McLuhan, media reduce

possibilities for the opening power of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* thereby leading to pathological narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion – *Americanitis*. I have offered thus far that the affinity between their theoretical assumptions regarding language, meaning, human communication and communication ethics of community and responsibility suggest that Merleau-Ponty's *good anxiety* and *narcissism* would admit of McLuhan's pathological read and vice versa. Yet, this notion remains undeveloped. As such, amidst the common grounds of Cartesian modernity, and similar theoretical affinities, I turn to consider how Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's views of narcissism and anxiety may co-inform their similar communication ethics, emphasizing community and responsibility, by focusing on the grounding-grounds of self-other amidst the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*.

6.4 Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan on *Narcissism*, *Anxiety* and *Americanitis*

As Levin states, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of anxiety and narcissism is not only an attempt to gain a deeper grasp of the origins of moral reciprocity through self-other relations, but also to "recast" Cartesian assumptions regarding "the conflict between autonomy and interdependence" as well as "the dialectic between individuation and socialization" (49). Levin recognizes Merleau-Ponty's work as critically responding to Cartesian-modernist assumptions with a perceptive-expressive humanistic ethics of reciprocal relating. In contrast to pathologically narcissistic "attitudes" of the Cartesian self, who is *withdrawn*, *self-absorbed*, privy to "demonic self-doubts and anxieties" as well as "fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience," the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* reverses "the 'narcissism' of the monadic metaphysical subject … into its very opposite, a communicative intersubjectivity" (54). Yet, Levin's work not only contextualizes Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics theory,

involving what I term the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. Levin also strikingly

illuminates McLuhan's anxious *Narcissus-Narcosis*.

That is, as I follow Willmott in assuming that McLuhan engages Cartesian assumptions

to critique Cartesian assumptions,[3] and as I follow Van den Eede in assuming that McLuhan's

Catholic humanism of community and responsibility is a response to the Cartesian hubris of

Enlightenment humanism, Levin's description of the narcissistically anxious Cartesian subject is

thoroughly applicable to McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis*. As Levin suggests, "in Descartes, the

narcissism essentially constitutive of the ego creates an affective and epistemological abyss

between self and others. No sense of community can join together what has been separated by

this abyss" (58). As previously indicated, McLuhan's M.E. criticism suggests that the abstract

tendencies of literacy and the discarnate effects of electronic media arrest the resonance between

self-other in similar, yet also different, ways, which encourage a "waning of affect" (Willmott

172), as well as the dissolution of community and responsibility. In the case of literacy, we tend

to the extreme of Cartesian narcissism, in the case of electronic media, the extreme of mass

tribalism. In both regards, the self-mediation of perception is compromised, implicating phatic

contact and minimizing possibilities for synoptic, communicative mediations, which also

compromises opportunities for acknowledgement, understanding and response. Yet, as stated,

Merleau-Ponty's *good anxiety* and *narcissism* offer a persistent hope for openness. Why and how

does he maintain this faith and how does it co-inform McLuhan's thoughts?

To explore this question, as well as to consider why and how we experience *Americanitis*,

this section unfolds in three parts. As Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan, and Arnett, Fritz and Bell

encourage attention to difference, distinction and our ability to *read* the grounding-grounds of

our world, I intend to focus attention on the originative synopsis of self-other and its importance

for the emergence of communication ethics practices. Thus, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's previously

referenced essay, *The Child's Relations with Others* (*PrP*), to consider alternatives to the

mechanical, Cartesian, modern self and the tribal, electronic mass self. I then interweave

McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor to consider why and how we experience mechanical

and electronic *Americanitis*. To conclude this section, I illuminate possible responses to our

experience of mechanical, electronic and digital *Americanitis* by attending to ideas that *resonate*

between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan.

6.4.2 Merleau-Ponty's Self-Other: A Self between the Cartesian and the Syncretic

As translator, James M. Edie explains, Merleau-Ponty's concern, in his 1960 Sorbonne

lecture, *The Child's Relations with Others* (*PrP*), is to describe the "origin of intersubjective

relations" (*PrP* 97, n. 1). Likewise, Levin suggests that Merleau-Ponty's attention to the

perceptive-expressive, "*already* pro-social" body, in this lecture, which "has an order of its

own," offers a "'source' of moral … knowledge" (79-80). In other words, Merleau-Ponty's

phenomenological ontology offers that relational praxis is a vital, affective and situating activity,

through which an alternative to the Cartesian, modern self and the tribal, mass self emerges.

Merleau-Ponty opens the lecture inquiring about the phenomena of *psychological rigidity*

as related to racism.[4] *Psychological rigidity* is an attitude, or mode of being, that promotes an

ambivalent, strict either/or form of *digital* reasoning, which aims for absolute certainty.

Ambivalence prohibits the interplay of *ambiguity*, which requires a *dynamic equilibrium* between

either/or *digital* and both-and *analogue* forms of experience (Lanigan *Phenom.*). Merleau-Ponty

says, "ambiguity is an adult phenomenon … which has nothing pathological about it. It consists

in admitting that the same being who is good … can also be annoying and imperfect" (103). In

other words, whereas *ambivalence* alone separates, *ambiguity* offers a synoptic, valuative

approach to existence. Though Merleau-Ponty is establishing the *indissoluble link* between the

vital and social bodies as well as between affect and consciousness, and though he does not

explicitly suggest as much, one may easily see his critique of the Cartesian subject at work here.

Ambivalence in adults hinders openness and thus mediation. With ambivalence, one often finds

oneself at the precipice of abyss rather than the mediative between of the world. In Merleau-

Ponty's terms, with ambivalence one may be *beside* others, but not *with* them (*PhP*).

Yet, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this ambivalence as an aspect necessary to self-

development. In considering the imbrication between affect, the "family environment" and the

acquisition of language during childhood, Merleau-Ponty notes how children are *psychologically*

rigid, i.e., ambivalent, in their temporal tending and desire for environmental stasis. Merleau-

Ponty's exemplary emotion, jealousy, is particularly revealing of how we become less

ambivalent and more accepting of ambiguity as we recognize (i.e., not yet acknowledge) our

vital and social situatedness.

In describing a young girl who faces the change of becoming a "big sister" to a new

"little brother," Merleau-Ponty notes how she seemingly suddenly acquires new vocabulary. Not

only is the girl asserting the pronoun *me* more frequently, but she also begins to appropriate the

imperfect tense of verbs. As Merleau-Ponty indicates, this demonstrates the child "becoming

capable of understanding that the present changes into the past … the baby is what the elder

sister used to be in the world of the family" (112). The girl, in coming to realize her situatedness

more fully, reflexively assimilates this shift in her familial structure by acquiring a temporal

awareness that reveals her role as an embedded member of a familial community. This

realization is achieved via the interplay of reason and emotion, which are mediated by language

(113). However, this is not yet the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. The girl who is a

"big sister" has not necessarily realized the fullness of her self-other embodiment. Her self

vacillates between the *ambivalence* of self/other, at times seizing moments of an *ambiguous*

reciprocity she may later more fully realize as self-other.

As Merleau-Ponty elaborates, this early phase of "pre-communication," during which

there is some degree of differentiation, yet not distinction, between me and others depends on the

anxious alienation borne via the reflective acknowledgement of my body as a body that *is* both

subject-object. Between inchoate, infantile (from the Latin *infant*, meaning *without speech*),

primordial sociality and Merleau-Ponty's Lacanianesque mirror phase experience, which I term

as *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, we pass through various, circularly co-informing moments of

self-other differentiation. One particularly interesting moment is that of *syncretic sociability*.

Through this moment the child, having not yet fully experienced the *good anxiety* and

narcissism of the "specular image," "lacks … visual consciousness of his body" (135). As such,

"he cannot separate what *he* lives from what *others* live" (135). Whereas the "big sister"

assimilates the temporal situation of her familial role, she has not yet recognized the visual,

spatial orientation offered by the specular image. She does not yet acknowledge her mirror image

as a reflection of her particular self. Instead, during this syncretic moment, she recognizes her

reflection as a second self – the *non-specular image* of her body is comprehended as some

double, another other, rather than her self.

Without acknowledgement of one's body as synoptically subject-object, as with syncretic

sociability, there is not "I" and "you" but rather a homogeneous collectivity of "me" who

comprise a unified "we." If the child desires a hug, everyone the child sees also desires a hug. If

the child feels pain, everyone else feels pain. If others cry, the child cries. Though a necessary

movement in self-social becoming, this purely concrete, and direct relation to, not with, others

involves ambivalent and abstract subsumption and substitution through which the distance of the proximity-distance synopsis is erased – the opposite extreme of the Cartesian abyss.

As stated previously, only when the child acknowledges that he or she is a body *who sees and may also be seen* – i.e., Merleau-Ponty's *good* anxious alienating moment of narcissistic self-reflection via a Lacanianesque specular image (136) – does the ambiguity of the synoptic structure of her body as subject-object emerge. As Merleau-Ponty explains, with the experience of the specular image, "for the first time the *me* ceases to confuse itself with what it experiences or desires at each moment" (137). Through the *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of the specular image, "me" emerges as an "I" who is a temporally and spatially situated body, who is both subject and object (153). Such acknowledgment, realized through anxious contact with oneself, not only permits the spatial situatedness of self by distancing self from self, but also introduces the lived experience of distance between self-other (154).

Building on this acknowledgment of self as bodily subject-object and the interrelatedness of self-other via the incorporation of proximity-distance through the extended specular image, the body and dimensions of the lived body assume new significance. The extreme experiences of divisive Cartesian ambivalence and the ambivalence of *overwhelming proximity* amidst syncretic depth discover an alternative situation (154). As Merleau-Ponty indicates, through *good anxiety* and *narcissism* we "acquire" "a certain state of equilibrium in our perception which … tends to maintain itself unsheltered from the intervention of experience" (141). Only through this tacit experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, may we feel *and* know the vital *and* social significance of ambiguous self-other relational reciprocity.

This ambiguous rather than ambivalent self illuminates that our "state of equilibrium" is dynamic. Self is a circular process of emergences, assimilations, returns and transformations

through which our bodies tacitly seek appropriate degrees of interplay between self-other, private-public and abstract-concrete so to assume appropriate degrees of spatio-temporal proximity-distance, allowing us to *find our way around an environment* (Carman 19). *Dynamic equilibrium* sought through the self-mediation of perception and the communicative mediation of private-public requires appropriate amounts of distance between self-other – with too much distance, we experience the Cartesian autonomous self; with too little distance, we experience the syncretic self.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's description of self-development suggests *a self between* the monadic, Cartesian inward self and the mass, tribal outward self. The mature, synoptic subject-object bodily self is able to see and understand the grounds of one's own self by being called to participate with other selves in a manner through which one's spatio-temporally situated body has the *freedom to* contact, acknowledge and respond amidst a situation. The effect of this spatializing and temporalizing experience I have termed *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, is to allow self-other to carve-out and assume an appropriate amount of distance between self-other-world. This, in turn, opens a space of ambiguity amidst which community, history and responsibility are endemic to their figure-ground reversible resonance, encouraging reciprocal engagements between particular, embodied and embedded being-becomings. What, then, does this reveal about McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis*, and how might Merleau-Ponty's self-between illuminate why and how we experience *Americanitis*?

6.4.3 McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty on Why and How We Experience *Americanitis*

Most saliently, Merleau-Ponty's lecture reveals points of affinity between the Cartesian self, the syncretic self and McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis*. As stated above, Merleau-Ponty's syncretic self does recognize some *differentiation* between self/other but does not yet

acknowledge this as a *distinction*, i.e., self-other. The mirror image of one's own body for the syncretic subject is an ambivalent, definitive double. Incorporating McLuhan's notion that *Narcissus-Narcosis* mistakes his own reflection for another person into this line of reasoning, one could suggest that McLuhan views electronic media encouraging a recollection of this syncretic self in adulthood – as electronic media offer the *overwhelming proximity* of the global with the local, compromising resonance of proximity-distance rather than encouraging its mediation as a resonant between.

As McLuhan's M.E. suggests, ancient oral-aural cultures are syncretic (*GG*). Oral-aurals create present-focused time and space through syncretic action (e.g., ritual, myth, etc.). There is no situated "I" who participates amidst a community of distinct, particular others, but rather a "me" who is propelled by a homogenous "we." There is thus no private-public distinction and action tends to the extreme of strictly-public, concrete involvement. One's situation is given by one's place amidst the group rather than being mediatively constituted through the resonant between of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance.

As Merleau-Ponty indicates, during the syncretic moment, "the child *is* … the situation and has no distance from it" (147). Without the spatialization and temporalization – the situatedness of self, borne through the *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of the specular image – there is not time or space for any degree of abstract reflection. The immediate and proximate structure of syncretic existence does not permit such activity. As McLuhan, influence by Innis, contends the extreme tendencies of purely oral-aural cultures encourages a pattern of closed social organization through which one experiences *connection*, i.e., the subsumption of particular distinctions, rather than mediating *contact*. In other words, the electronic age of *Narcissus-Narcosis* retrieves elements of purely oral-aural social organization to offer a similar, yet also

wildly different, syncretic social structure – the crucial difference, of course, being the scope, size and reach of the tribe, which complicates the necessary element of distantiation.

Purely oral-aural cultures are spatially coherent and temporally unified via a single common moment. Electronic tribalism conversely is comprised of spatio-temporal diversity and historical narrative multiplicity. What is more, as the extremely distanced and abstract Cartesian medium of mechanical print precedes this seemingly syncretic electronic environment, the human condition must now cope with the stress of shifting ground as we transition from the unbridgeable, ambivalent abyss of Cartesian individualism to the ambivalent *overwhelming proximity* of situatedless depth.

The syncretic, concrete extreme negates distance to equate the person with the tribal situation. The Cartesian, abstract extreme increases distance to remove the person from his or her situation entirely. Thus, I suggest that for both McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty, the former is a realm of pathological anxiety and narcissism due to *overwhelming proximity*; the latter is a realm of pathological anxiety and narcissism due to unbridgeable distance. Both extremes offer the possibility of pathology. For, without acknowledgment of our vital and social need for self-other, self is rendered a fragile and unmoored "figure-minus-ground" (McLuhan and McLuhan *LOM*). Per McLuhan, to achieve comfort we withdrawal and close ourselves off or submit our particularity to the masses. With the Cartesian, abstract, private-self extreme, we are closed to affect and other. With the syncretic, concrete public-we extreme, we are closed to reason and self. Electronic communication media encourage both forms of closure as the residues of the Cartesian self, blend into the syncretic (*GG*; *UM*).

As previously stated, McLuhan suggests that choosing to retreat to the extremes of private isolation or public mass existence are easy paths to personal *comfort*, which we assume

due to our *technological blindness* and our tacit acceptance of the promises of technology. Yet, this comfort is paradoxical. Without the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, which discloses self-other reciprocity, we suffer narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion – *Americanitis*. We find sporadic glimmers of comfort in extremes due to relief from the anxious work of existence, and we find shelter from the threat of the temporal, i.e., change, in the *psychologically rigid* commitment to strictly private or strictly public reifications.

Thus, for both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* is necessary to human existence as we are perceptively introduced to the ambiguity and situatedness necessary for experiencing human communication and communication ethics practices. Communication media technologies encourage *Americanitis* because their material presence and their embodiment of prevailing cultural assumptions perpetuate ambivalence. Both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan idealize face-to-face, dialogic speaking-listening due to the structure, the rich, dynamic form, the grounding process, of the situation. When I am physically distant from my interlocutor (e.g., reading), and when the media form compromises intersubjective reciprocity (e.g., news, film), I am not always able to *feel* the perceptive-expressive *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of self-other.

Without self-other, other is an abstract-general other, an object available for my inspection, subsumption and use.[5] I may attend to the spectacle through which they are presented, yet I do not attend to the other as a *sinew of my common flesh* with whom I am similar-different (Carman 124). With face-to-face dialogue, the reverse often results. The quality of the situation temporalizes and spatializes self-other in a manner that invites our attentive openness – our bodily *presence at the world*. The originative, incarnating self-mediation of perception tacitly calls upon that anxiously narcissistic incorporation of our extended bodily

reflection to open our intentional attention. Through the perceptive-expressive opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, I contact and choose to acknowledge self-other as concrete, particular, similar-different bodies, who respond together to *poet the world* (McLuhan *M&L* 169; Merleau-Ponty *Signs* 313).

Yet, amidst electronic media environments, communication technologies complicate the attendant perception necessary for contact by reflexively shaping spatio-temporal dimensions of existence, as well as the ambiguous distinctions between self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance. Though McLuhan definitively addresses the abstraction of the physical, material body with his *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor, his corpus also offers a critique of the entire Western philosophical tradition. From his dissertation through *LOM*, McLuhan's Thomistic, Catholic humanist assumptions suggest that neglect of the body in the philosophical tradition produces amnesia regarding our vital need for perceptive-expressive engagement with others amidst a world. This amnesia, reinforced by the narrative grounding-grounds of mechanical and electronic technology, allows us to forget our need for self-other.

This need is not only social. With their prioritization of the perceptive-expressive body, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate that self-other relating is also vitally important, revealing that the experience of pathological anxiety is a physiological, psychological and communicative response to the unmet need for self-other. Traditional medical and psychological interpretations indicate that we experience anxiety, a correlate with the fight-or-flight sympathetic response, when we perceive a danger that is *not actually present*.[6] However, per Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, as well as a recent study from the University of Chicago, the lack of self-other engagement *is actually* a vital threat (Scutti; Cole et al.).

Persons who indicate feeling lonely demonstrate biological evidence of increased fight-or-flight responses, which compromise physical health by increasing white blood cell count and inflammation as well as decreasing the body's ability to fight infection (Scutti; Cole et al.). This conclusion is noted in earlier literature as well. Physician Mimi Guarneri, who began with traditional practice, pioneered the *Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine* in the late 1990s after noticing the correlation between heart disease and loneliness. Additionally, a series of sociological studies regarding phenomena of narcissism, anxiety and loneliness emerged during the middle decades of the twentieth century with attention to our vital need for community (e.g., Bellah et al.; Lasch; Reisman et al.; Tillich). Like Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective works, this acknowledgement of the vital-social link, and our need for self-other is a recollection of our embodiment, embedment and vitally interdependent need for ambiguous, reciprocal relating that emerges between the Cartesian and syncretic ambivalent extremes of technologized human experience. Pathological narcissism, involving fight and flight, is thus a physiologically and psychologically protective response to an unmet, vital need for self-other (Turkle; Lasch; Levin) – an adverse reaction stemming from the modernist, ambivalent assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). Yet, as McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty indicate, the protection found by *ambivalent* Narcissus only perpetuates the anxiety of loneliness – an *actual* threat to human existence.

Ultimately, what emerges through this interweaving of Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's assessments of human existence, human communication and communication ethics is a narrative understanding[7] of how and why we suffer the ills of *Americanitis*. The narrative indicates that divisive ambivalence, particularly when coupled with the rapid pace of technological change, encourages a desire for controlled connection without responsibility, rather than ambiguous

contact with others. The electronic self suffering from *Americanitis* is extremely fragile, unable to comprehend and tolerate the *complex demands of others* (Turkle), and strives for absolute autonomy or absolute belonging. The electronic self also commands the immediate satisfaction of affirmation without concern for reciprocity. The appropriation of objects, including persons who we perceive as abstract objects rather than particular beings, satisfies our desire to a degree, yet also leaves us facing the vital threat of loneliness. The promises of technology indicate that we may remedy our vital disequilibrium by breaking free from the body and controlling our environment. Yet, *Americanitis* offers evidence to the contrary. How, then, might we respond to our narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion – our digital *Americanitis*?

6.4.4 Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan on Responding to *Americanitis*

The notion that mediates Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's nuanced metaphors of narcissism and anxiety is the shared assumption that existence is inherently ambiguous and anxious, yet, with positive regard. For, ambiguity and anxiety permit for and invite opportunities for perception, expression and understanding (see Arnett, Fritz and Bell 113).[8] For example, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan similarly suggest a primordial need for *good anxiety* as an order, and not strictly a disorder, of experience, for the affective experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* alerts us to our bodily, vital and social "need for the other as other" (Merleau-Ponty *IP* 30). In technical milieux reflexively promoting ambivalence, we easily forget that the presence-absence of self-other is a call to participation, i.e., responsibility, to courageously assume the anxious ambiguity of otherness and the mediative between, amidst limits, challenges, risks and possible errors.

Thus, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan share similar assumptions about our lived experience of anxiety and narcissism as a synoptic order of experience. On one side is the

good, opening *anxiety* and *narcissism* of mediative contact, responsibility, acknowledgement and response; on the other side is the bad, closing anxiety and narcissism of bi-polar voyeurism, connection/division and silence. Yet, as we are embodied and embedded being-becomings Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan each maintain faith that we are able to mediate this synopsis of good-pathological anxiety and narcissism. For, as perceptive-expressive bodies we have the power and ability to choose a variety of comportments to better understand self-other-world.

As previously stated, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan both desire *dynamic equilibrium* through bodily, perceptive-expressive mediation of extremes. Our body is a primordial layer of dynamic ground that we must constantly traverse, i.e., mediate, amidst the ambiguities of existence. For Merleau-Ponty, we must navigate, negotiate and mediate the synoptic poles, i.e., ambivalence, in order to understand and acknowledge the valuable burden of *good ambiguity* (Lanigan *Phenom.*). In complementary fashion, McLuhan describes how particular media forms, which are both implicative material objects and metaphors for guiding cultural narratives, encourage the eclipse of ambiguity, minimizing mediation and perpetuating ambivalence.

For McLuhan, as for Merleau-Ponty, if we are to faithfully hope for balance through synoptic resonance and reversibility, we ought to engage forms of experience that encourage the spatializing, temporalizing and opening experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. Grounded amidst the situated yet ambiguous corporeal space and time of self-other-world, which is the *flesh* of history, language and people, moments of opening, situating perceptive-expressive mediation rest upon the resonance between self-other, through which the abyss of incommensurable distance, and the *overwhelming proximity* of its depths, becomes instead a chiasmic opening of actuality-possibility (*VI*; *LOM*). This opening as a space of praxis, which depends on the bodily, perceptive self-mediation and expressive, communicative mediation of

proximity-distance, allows us to discern distinctions while also remembering our situatedness, thus encouraging mediation of self-other and private-public rather than tending to extremes. Tending toward and resting upon the comfort of ambivalent extremes is simple; tending toward ambiguous *dynamic equilibrium* requires labor, vigilance and courage.

Similar to Paul Tillich's suggestion of *ontological courage* and Christopher Lasch's suggestion of avoiding pathological narcissism by accepting limitations, Merleau-Ponty suggests we must do both. As stated previously, Merleau-Ponty views *good anxiety* as *courage* – as the difficult choice to acknowledge and accept ambiguity, limitation, responsibility and a lack of control. We are assaulted, perpetually, by the ambiguity of existence. The limiting spatiality of the body offers the ambiguity of perception (*PhP*). Our temporal embedment offers the "aggressive" ambiguity of the future and tacit ambiguity of the past amidst the present (*PrP* 112) as well as the ambiguous lack of control associated with the prospect of nonbeing, i.e., death (Tillich). The experience of self-other, private-public mediation offers an ambiguity, which challenges my particularity by introducing me to *other landscapes*, questioning my being-becoming and calling for intentional participatory responsibility despite my lack of control of the situation at hand (Macke *Intra.* 51; Merleau-Ponty *PhP*; Dillon *Desire* 152; 155). Self-other relating also offers the threat of transition, change, and transformation, which can rip us from the comfort of ambivalence (Macke). To resist the paradoxical comfort of ambivalent extremes, at which Merleau-Ponty indicates, "existence perishes" (*SNS* 40), we may courageously accept ambiguity, openness, our *freedom to*, and our limits by *paying attention* (*WP* 87) and by assuming, "that we can[*not*] function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17).

McLuhan offers similar sentiments. His metaphor of *Narcissus-Narcosis* suggests that when tending to the extremes, *existence is numbed* (*UM*; *LOM* 128). He also suggests that

resisting perceptive-expressive closure requires the courage of our "willingness to pay attention" via interested, situated participation (*LOM* 128). The choice to participate is anxious, requires great courage and reflexively depends upon a multiplicity of elements contributing to the complex and layered grounds of existence. As Dillon reminds us of Narcissus, he has "two faces" (*Desire* 161). McLuhan encourages us to resist Narcissus' ironically comfortably numb pathological face of fragility and forgetfulness, by remembering the Narcissus "who searches for" self "in the eyes of a face whose beauty is not of his making" (Dillon *Desire* 161) as he attends to the anxiety of otherness called forth through his bodily, perceptive-expressive, being-becoming with others.

As Arnett, Fritz and Bell indicate, by accepting ambiguity, we may see difference, attend to distinctions and read the grounds of self-other-world as well as the goods we *protect and promote* through our discourse together. A posture open to persistent mediation of synoptic tensions, endemic to the figure-ground structure of human experience, enables possibilities for the exercise of our responsibility to respond. Thus, per this interweaving of McLuhan's and Merleau-Ponty's nuanced interpretations of anxiety and narcissism, we ought to respond to *Americanitis* by assuming, tacitly and expressly, a posture of openness to otherness, by remembering the importance of our situated limits, and by learning to read the grounding-grounds of our milieu.

Yet, though we are able to respond, we ought to also acknowledge that possibilities for closure and ongoing suffering with *Americanitis* persist. As such, we should not hope for perpetual states of comfort achieved through resolution of our ills. Rather, we may hope for the taming of, i.e., the mediation of, bad, pathological anxiety and narcissism with *good*, opening *anxiety* and *narcissism*, which necessarily involves the perceptive-expressive mediation of self-

other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance. Though we may not be *free from* the plight of anxiety and narcissism, we are *free to* undertake the taming of our ills. Thus, I consider the taming of *Americanitis* further below.

6.5 Implications for Human Communication, Communication Ethics and Taming *Americanitis*

The primary implication emerging between Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's nuanced metaphors of narcissism and anxiety is the suggestion that human communication and communication ethics practices encouraging mediation between self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance are socially *and* vitally crucial for human existence. By retrieving the forgotten perceptive-expressive embodied, embedded particular-communal body, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan offer similar theories of human communication. Their theories push beyond the *matching* of strict representationalist, semantic correspondence to demonstrate our *freedom to* poet self-other-world via resonantly reversible and reflexively laborious *making*. These similar-different efforts also suggest that how we communicate implicates our *freedom to* – that the form, plus the content of communication reflexively shapes a certain style of being-becoming for individuals and cultures alike. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan illuminate how and why the narrative assumptions of mechanistic and electronic, modernist, Cartesian media environments encourage the extremes of strict ambivalence rather than resonance between self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance amidst the electronic age and beyond.

Additionally, the narrative assumptions carried forth via mechanical and electronic forms of communication media, such as film and news, devalue perception, emotion and desire for synoptic balance by promoting communicative practices of detached instrumentality. During the mechanical and electronic epochs, cultural practices encourage abstract *use* of language, others

and world to shelter agents from the threats of uncertainty, limitations and lack of control. Per

McLuhan, such encouragement not only devalues but also compromises opportunities for the

dynamic resonance of perception, i.e., the *sensus communis*, leaving us blind to the layers of

grounding-ground that reflexively shape our assumptions, actions and understandings. Similarly,

per Merleau-Ponty, certain forms of communication encourage an uninvolved *seeing without*

understanding – a voyeurism that detracts from authentic, significant understanding and change.

Thus, the intervening additional layers of material and narrative ground, which are *hidden*

media environments, encourage our tacit and express forgetfulness of the multiple, interwoven

layers of *flesh* that comprise situated existence. As such, Merleau-Ponty would agree with

McLuhan that mechanical and electronic technologies encourage pathological narcissistically

anxious nervous exhaustion, *Americanitis*, as they discourage the openness, ambiguity, courage,

responsibility and mediative comportments borne from *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. Likewise,

then, McLuhan would agree with Merleau-Ponty that our bodily agency offers the ongoing

possibility of and hope for communicative responses to *Americanitis* due to persistent

possibilities of movement and the value of *good ambiguity* (Lanigan *Phenom.*).

Ambiguity, as an indicator of our limited embodiment, embedment and vital need for

self-other communication, thus indicates a need for a change in our assumptions regarding

human communication as well as communication ethics praxis. To tame *Americanitis*, Merleau-

Ponty and McLuhan encourage us to communicatively question, reconfigure and constitute

ground with others by engaging communicative forms that offer increased opportunities for the

opening and situating self-mediation of perception as well as the communicative mediation of

expression. Such situations and mediations emerge amidst experiences of *good anxiety* and

narcissism, alerting us to difference and opening us to self-other. I suggest that this experience

becomes particularly important amidst our digital moment.

If we easily eschew *good anxiety* and *narcissism* due to the overwhelming distance of

mechanistic, Cartesian media and the *overwhelming proximity* of electronic, tribal media, then

we ought to have concern for the digital epoch. As suggested previously through the narrative

dialogic examples offered,[9] as well as my discussions of the film *her*,[10] our extension-

incorporation of digital technology, in particular digital, mobile technology, closes us to our

situated body, others and our world. In McLuhan's terms, incarnating perception is extended to

the eyes and ears of the incorporated device offering an abstracted spatio-temporal realm of

information subject to my autonomous, purely conscious control.

As Hyde indicates and as Megan Boler elaborates, digital communication media, such as

computer mediated communication, texting, etcetera, intimates that humanity has achieved the

Cartesian ideal of communing consciousnesses. Yet, as Hyde's ambivalent assessment[11] and

Boler's definitive analysis indicate, the utopian hopes of neo-liberal, critical identity politics,

such as *freedom from* corporeal indications of race and gender, are impossible. With the body

concealed by distance, screens and text, persons communicating online engage one another as

abstract others, i.e., objects, and ascribe negative, stereotypical characteristics about their

interlocutors' imagined bodies (Boler).

That is, like electronic forms of media, digital communication technologies abstract

spatio-temporal field dimensions, leaving us *discarnate*. The reduction of interlocutors' situated

particularity, in turn, minimizes opportunities for the felt call to openness borne amidst the

experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, thereby transforming the other into an abstraction

available for my personal appropriation. Further, as Arnett, Fritz and Bell contend, such

reductions encourage a lack of distinction between private-public (106-107). Thus, the resonance or reversibility of the private-public distinction is obscured promoting the ambivalence of the individualist, Cartesian self and the mass, tribal, syncretic self. Ultimately, the hope for the experience of otherness via *good anxiety* and *narcissism* is narrowed amidst our digital milieu. As such, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan call for us to remember our vital and social need for the communication ethics practices of contact, acknowledgment and response, which emerge between self-other via the mediation of private-public, concrete-abstract and proximity-distance.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's communication ethics theories disclose the necessity of phatic *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, as well as the pervasive experience of anxiety across all levels of human communication. This pervasive anxiety is not a disorder, but rather an order of human experience that we must accept, assimilate and appropriate toward human being-becoming. Ongoing *good anxiety* stems from the phatic contact of our specular image during childhood, is perpetuated by the ambiguous, temporal nature of human existence and becomes an indicator of our need for self-other, as well as our need for significance, in adulthood. This indicator of anxiety may never be resolved but may be tamed. Thus, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggest that we may attempt the taming of *Americanitis*, i.e., *bad anxiety* and *narcissism*, by acknowledging the vital necessity of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance mediation through responsibly responding to our misgiven, modernist assumption, "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17).

Taken together, Merleau-Ponty's attention to the grounding-grounds of body and self-other-world along with McLuhan's encouragement to *learn to read the book of media* indicate a need to cultivate the tacit experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. We may undertake such

cultivation through practicing postures that increase our degree of bodily presence, both material and attentive, thereby increasing possibilities for mediative perception-expression. We may also choose to predicate the assumption "that we can[*not*] function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17) by recognizing our vital need for self-other, private-public resonance. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan encourage resistance to the lure of paradoxically comfortable ambivalent extremes, which close self to other and thus to self and world. We may undertake such resistance by courageously choosing to participate, to assume the risk and responsibility of ambiguous, mediative openness, for the rewards of such participation far outweigh the risk. The reward is life itself (Arnett, Fritz and Bell; Merleau-Ponty *SNS* 40; McLuhan *LOM* 128).

Thus, a conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan regarding *Americanitis* helps us to understand why and how we suffer. What remains is to consider the significance of this Merleau-Pontean reading of McLuhan in terms of communication theory and communication ethics praxis, as well as the relationship between Media Ecology, existential phenomenology and communication studies, to help us understand our experience of digital *Americanitis*. I now proceed to the concluding chapter to offer such consideration.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The previous chapter offered a conversation between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan regarding technologically encouraged Americanitis with consideration of their communication ethics, attentive to community and responsibility. This chapter concludes my project by considering why and how reading McLuhan through Merleau-Ponty helps to clarify his metaphors and ideas to offer a better understanding regarding Americanitis. Additionally, I offer discussion of the values and contributions of this project for M.E. and communication studies. To close, I consider why and how McLuhan's Media Ecology, clarified and elucidated by Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, can help us to understand our narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, our Americanitis, as well as the taming of our digital ills.

7.1 Introduction

Through this cross reading between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, *Americanitis* emerges as a communicative, i.e., psychic and physiological, response to compromised self-other relations, encouraged by the reflexive interplay between technologically influenced communicative forms and communicative practices. Per my interweaving of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology (Dillon) and McLuhan's *hybrid ontology of mediation* (Van den Eede), pathologically narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, *Americanitis*, manifests when we forget our vital and social need for self-other relations due to the influences of a technical milieu. As stated, certain forms of technologically mediated communication encourage *Americanitis* by eschewing the ambiguous *good anxiety* and *narcissism* of phatic contact, tending away from *dynamic equilibrium*, toward the ambivalent extremes of abstract/concrete, private/public, self/other and proximity/distance. Our bodily extension-incorporation of digital instruments encourages forgetting by closing us, perceptively and expressively, to self-other-world. As such, McLuhan and Merleau-Ponty wish for us to remember our need for openness – our need to accept ambiguity, situated, bodily limitations, the responsibility of participation, and the risk of relating via the invitational experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*.

The prepersonal, corporeal and affective, phatic experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* helps us to remember our situated, limited and communally grounded existence as it inaugurates our openness to difference and the discernment of grounds via perceptive self-mediation and expressive communicative mediation of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance. The experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* as phatic contact allows us to situate self-other temporally and spatially amidst a world thereby opening possibilities for discerning difference and the grounding-grounds informing our communicative postures and practices. Yet, as previously demonstrated, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggest that the communicative practices reflexively shaped by communication media technologies such as film,[1] news,[2] smartphones[3] and personal mobile digital devices, like those featured in the film *her*,[4] eschew the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* to encourage perceptive, expressive and existential closure, in turn, perpetuating the ambivalent, modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17).

That is, as expression, i.e., human communication, depends on contact for initiation, in the digital epoch we experience the reality of Hyde's ethical question, *what if no one acknowledged my existence*? For, without contact, we readily habituate ambivalent, pathologically narcissistic closure, instead of the sustained openness required for acknowledgement and responsible response. However, as shown previously, it is not only the form of communication shaped by technology, but also the cultural narratives carried forth via technology, which encourage us to choose such a terminal path. As such, this chapter aims to assess the gestalt picture emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan regarding *Americanitis* as well as to explain why and how such a picture is important for human communication and communication ethics theory and practice amidst our digital epoch.

This concluding chapter unfolds through four sections. I commence with consideration of the revelations emerging between Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and McLuhan's Media Ecology regarding human communication and *Americanitis* while also speaking to how and why this cross reading helps to illuminate McLuhan's obscure media criticism (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon). I then pointedly discuss implications of *Americanitis* for communication ethics praxis, specific to our digital milieu. Thereafter, I elaborate Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's thoughts regarding the taming of *Americanitis*. In closing, I offer concluding remarks regarding why and how we should attend to Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's insights regarding our digital malady.

7.2 Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology and McLuhan's Media Ecology

As Lum, Carey, Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon suggest, the intersection of Media Ecology and existential phenomenological theories of communication rests upon similar humanistic assumptions that emerge as responses to dehumanizing, Cartesian, modernist, ambivalent, technical sediments. This existential phenomenological ontological reading of McLuhan through Merleau-Ponty thus, helps to reveal the resonance between Media Ecology and communication studies (Lum) by offering a holistic approach considering intersections between culture, communication, technology, persons and significance. That is, the resonant, reversible space opened between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan encourages attention to, not only the human-technical relationship but also, the human-human relationship in scholarship thereby offering a gestalt, figure-ground approach to understanding the implications of technologies.

As I have shown, McLuhan's emphasis on media environments, and Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on human persons and communicative significance opens a space of *resonance* and *reversibility* through which *dynamic equilibrium* may emerge to offer thorough scholarly

consideration of the complex *flesh* of human existence amidst a technical milieu. Thus, as with this study, future scholarship emerging between the similar, ecological grounds of Media Ecology and existential phenomenology ought to increase holistic understanding regarding the implications of *hidden media environments* thereby speaking to both how and why we ought to learn to read, i.e., discern, the grounding-grounds of self, other, world, history and media, reflexively informing the health of the human condition.

Yet, this cross reading between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan not only illuminates the resonance between Media Ecology and communication studies by developing a presently underrepresented approach to media study. My efforts here also help to clarify McLuhan's often confusing media criticism (Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon) as well as our experience of *Americanitis*. This section offers a review of the significant assumptions, aims and ends informing the narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. I also attend to how my efforts help to enhance understanding of McLuhan's work.

7.2.2 Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan: Discerning Theoretical Grounding-Grounds

As Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon suggest, reading McLuhan through an existential phenomenological lens, like that of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, helps to illuminate his often-confusing media criticism by offering theoretical groundings for vague metaphors and hyperbolic criticism. My efforts here add texture to McLuhan's metaphors of the *body*, *extensions*, *figure-ground*, *blindness*, *the resonant interval* and *Narcissus-Narcosis* to elucidate his implicit theoretical assumptions, aims and ends, his implicit theory of human communication and his implicit communication ethics theory. Such efforts shed light on additional dimensions of human-technology relations that inform thinking about connections between communication media technology, culture and the human condition.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly address technology (Ihde and Selinger), his phenomenological ontology complements and implicitly reflects the overarching assumptions, aims and ends of the Media Ecology approach thereby revealing McLuhan's implicit theory of human communication and communication ethics. The affinities between Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenological ontology and McLuhan's Media Ecology rest upon the common ground of the historical moment of modernity. Though each thinker assumes a different approach to considering this common ground, and although each thinker's particular experiences offer affable yet nuanced views of narcissism and anxiety, similarities between their assumptions aims and ends constitute a fruitful conversation through which we gain a deeper *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* of *Americanitis* amidst the *hidden grounds of* mechanistic, electronic and digital *media environments*.

As demonstrated, Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective situations amidst modernity reflect the overarching academic desire to address the horrific anti-humanistic atrocities of World War II. This desire, shared by phenomenology, Media Ecology, American pragmatism and other ecological approaches, aims to understand the human condition in holistic and practical fashion (Carey *TCS*; Ralon and Vieta; Skocz; Vieta and Ralon). In contrast to non-ecological approaches to media study, such as the content-focused administrative school or the power-focused critical school (Lum),[5] Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan offer that form and content ambiguously interweave to reflexively constitute style – the style of cultures reflected through their normative practices, and the style of being amidst such practices that serve to question and reinforce them. Such an assumption permits for a humanistic communication ethics *protecting and promoting* embodied and embedded dialogic openness to otherness, learning and understanding through the mediation of tensional synopses, including self-other, private-public,

abstract-concrete and proximity-distance, to emerge between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan as a response to modernist ambivalence.

As shown, Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective metaphors of narcissism and anxiety explicitly and implicitly respond to the mistaken, modernist assumption "that we can function without regard for the Other" (17). Merleau-Ponty's articulation of a self between the Cartesian and syncretic co-informs McLuhan's M.E. critiques of mechanistic and electronic technologies to reveal grounding assumptions that remind us of our interdependence with others and our situation amidst the world. As the narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan demonstrates, we have a social and vital need for situated, self-other relating through which we tacitly assume openness to contact, acknowledgment and response via participatory constitution of understanding between self-other about world.

The implications of this view for communication ethics praxis include attending to the open-ended, ongoing reflexivity between self-other-world, which shape the invention, adoption and institution of worldly objects as well as cultural practices and guiding narratives. Considered as an ongoing conversation between a multiplicity of situated actors, such a view of culture, communication and the human condition, suggests a complex, chiasmic, emergent ethical praxis that resists the extremes of universalism and particularity in favor of their mediation. This mediative, chiasmic between is a spatio-temporal field amidst which a multiplicity of grounds, objects and persons co-inform one another to encourage dialogic learning and understanding between self-other about self-other-world (Arnett, Fritz and Bell). Thus, in addition to *protecting and promoting* openness to otherness and mediation of synoptic dimensions of existence, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan similarly *protect and promote* the rich ambiguity of spatial

embodiment and temporal embedment, i.e., our situatedness, in theory and practice. This is due to their shared metaphors of the body and media as extensions.

7.2.3 Theory and Practice: Grounding Metaphors of the Body and Extension

As shown, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's similar metaphors of the body and extension help to illuminate the grounding-grounds of persons, objects and contexts amidst moments of perceptive-expressive relating. In terms of theory, Calvin Schrag explains that existential phenomenology's attention to the body as both a physical object and a living layer of grounding-ground for human experience reconfigures assumptions regarding "bodily presence" and thus space, time and significance. Rather than viewing time and space as durations and containers, Merleau-Ponty's specific configuration of the perceptive-expressive body as our *fleshy presence at the world* indicates that our embodied, situated activity constitutes fields of interaction involving dimensions of space and time. This phenomenal body, implicitly paralleled by McLuhan's beyond-Thomistic incarnate-discarnate synoptic body, is a primordial layer of existence through which we are able to orient ourselves and through which we are able to act, make choices and change aspects of self-other-world.[6]

Through such acts, choices and creations, our bodies persistently seek out the best possible orientation to perceive and express our world. At times, we qualitatively alter, i.e., extend, our bodies by incorporating tools, technology and media into our prepersonal proprioceptive background with the aim of getting the best grip of a situation (Merleau-Ponty; Carman). Yet, such extension-incorporation, by qualitatively altering our bodies, also qualitatively alters the horizons of lived space and time implicating relating and the resonant, reversible synopses of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete, and proximity-distance.

For example, the binocular you engage in the nature preserve example alters the proximity-distance of the vultures circling above. Yet, your incorporation of this cultural instrument extending your vision also alters the proximity-distance between you and your interlocutor. For, when she fumbles with incorporating the instrument to extend her own vision, she is temporarily unable to catch a glimpse of your perspective thus encouraging a greater degree of relational distance in terms of the proximity-distance synopsis. Likewise, with the example of the women in the elevator, the grounding-ground of the smartphone encourages the extreme posture of distance. That is, despite the physical presence of their bodies, the communicative form of the smartphones encourages distance due to perceptive and expressive closure – an intending of attention toward the realm of the screen rather than the situation at hand. Such is the case with electronic forms of communication media as well.

Both Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan acknowledge that media such as film and news, by throwing perceptive-expressive *dynamic equilibrium* off-kilter, imbalances perceptive and expressive mediation. Though each thinker views this occurring to a greater or lesser degree of consequence, the two share the notion that when perception and the body are extended, the quality and thus the significance of relating are affected. One of the primary themes pervading all of McLuhan's analyses of particular media forms is the human desire for communicative reach. Yet, I suggest that it is not strictly the desire or reality of "action at a distance,"[7] that troubles McLuhan. Rather, when read through Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan's concern with distance and its discarnating effects emerges as a theoretical query regarding the effects of distance for human relating and thus the quality of human life amidst a technical milieu.[8]

Based on discussions in previous chapters,[9] I suggest, then, that though McLuhan's incarnate-discarnate body does speak to the material, physical presence of body in time and

space (see Scott), a richer interpretation of a phenomenological body is possible. That is, if *human perception is literally incarnation*, then "discarnate" indicates something more than mere spatial position. Following Schrag's description of an existential phenomenological notion of the body, I suggest that McLuhan's body is an "event" and not merely "a position" (155). Discarnate thus means something like a lack of attending to the *happenings* of human relations (*UM*). As subject-objects, both Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective bodies are situated amidst space and time. Theoretically, this horizonal, lived and mediative bodily metaphysics suggest that how we communicate, as well as the overarching cultural practices of our spatio-temporal moment of movement, reflexively implicate, not determine, our style of being-becoming.

In terms of practice, the form of communication, the comportment of our bodies and the spatio-temporal dimensions of past-present-future inform the grounding-grounds shaping our assumptions regarding self-other-world. As Merleau-Ponty's discussion of media forms and McLuhan's M.E. suggest, communication technologies are figure-ground elements that condition the dimensions of communicative situations to encourage certain postures toward and assumptions regarding self-other-world. Mechanistic, electronic and digital media forms similarly encourage postures of closure, abstraction and distance by way of their alteration of contextual dimensions and by way of the cultural assumptions they embody and portend, such as the modernist, technical ideals of comfort, control, security and efficiency. As this Merleau-Pontean reading elucidates, McLuhan's idea of *media as metaphors*, as *translators of experience* does not only indicate the idea of material objects, but also, á la Gilson,[10] as practices that embody cultural ideals, moral and otherwise,[11] which reflexively shape our spatio-temporal, situated human condition.

Thus, like Arnett, Fritz and Bell, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan direct practical attention to the grounding-grounds of the biases shaping our communicative practices. Our ability to discern the grounding-grounds of human existence requires that we "acknowledge bias" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 90) – that we understand why and how we assume what we do as well as how and why such assumptions implicate our understandings of self-other-world. For, such assumptions inform communicative practices, which in turn reflexively shape understanding. Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's theoretical attention to the body as subject-object reveals the potential power we have to respond to and reconfigure biases through communicative practices which encourage openness, mediation, reflective learning and understanding to shape temporally situated significance regarding self, other and our world.

Thus, with Merleau-Ponty drawing out McLuhan's softer side, his *Eucharistic embodiment*,[12] his insistence on the primacy of perception, that mysterious form of significance, the tacit reflexivity of subject-object, etc. McLuhan's *making* semiotics emerge as something more than the production of signs. Human communication as *resonant making* is the presentation of, the presencing of, significance from a particular perspective. Although McLuhan took issue with "point of view" (Marchessault) his issue is arguably with the fixed, ambivalent point of view of the modernist, Cartesian, mechanically-literate self, who desires certainty by imposing his inner perspective on the outer world of nothingness, and who judges, ambivalently, rather than seeking ambiguous understanding through embodied and embedded mediation of extremes.

Therefore, in addition to clarifying McLuhan's metaphors of the body and extension, this Merleau-Pontean reading also reveals McLuhan's assumption of a beyond representational semiotic as well as a view of self contrary to modernist understandings. That is, theoretical emphasis on spatio-temporal, being-becoming bodies indicates the shared assumption of a

beyond representationalist semiotic emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. Illuminating this assumption deeply implicates interpretations of McLuhan's understandings of media, his *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor and his view of the self.

7.2.4 Theory and Practice: Media, *Narcissus-Narcosis*, and the Self as Self-Other

As stated, McLuhan's assertion of *media as hidden grounds* indicates the intervening agency of technology in both material and metaphorical terms. As I follow Willmott's suggestion that McLuhan selects media as a lens through which to offer criticism of the modern human condition,[13] I suggest that McLuhan engages communication media forms as metaphors for the overarching ideas and practices reflexively shaping culture, communication and the human condition amidst particular historical moments. That is, if media environments are hidden grounds, i.e., formal cause, then it stands to reason that media metaphorically indicate the grounds for human existence, according to McLuhan. For example, McLuhan's critique of the mechanical-print epoch indicates a larger, overarching critique of the Cartesian assumptions serving as ground for modernist, Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Likewise, his critique of syncretism amidst the electronic global village reflects concern for the dehumanizing phenomena of mass existence, like that of Nazi Germany.

The metaphorical technological epoch McLuhan lauds is that of medieval, manuscript culture (Wachs; Marchessault). The grounding assumptions of illumination through faith, sense and reason, the embodied and embedded cooperative, communal spirit of the scribes, and the acceptance of mystery, ambiguity and limitations, all indicative of scribal culture, suggests an ethos similar to McLuhan's Catholic humanism of community and responsibility. Understood in this way, McLuhan's existential dimension of his *hybrid ontology of mediation* emerges to reveal an added aspect to his famous aphorism. *The medium is the message*, not only plays with the

relationship between form and content, but also suggests, á la Innis, that the dominant form of communication technology, and hence, the dominant form of communication of a given cultural moment, illuminates the assumptions and ideals of the culture engaging those technological forms. Thus, the tools that we invent, engage and embody reflexively influence the form of our cultural communicative practices as well as our bodies, our beings, our selves and our creation of beyond representational significance.

Although I follow Willmott and Van den Eede in certain ways, I also depart from their respective gestalt positions regarding McLuhan. Whereas Willmott and Van den Eede view McLuhan as assuming ambivalence,[14] this Merleau-Pontean reading of McLuhan suggests that he is instead a philosopher of ambiguity. This allows us to see his Media Ecology as Lum describes it – a mediative, synoptic, ecological alternative to the divisive administrative and critical school approaches to considering media during modernity.

Therefore, reading McLuhan through Merleau-Ponty also offers alternatives to strict material, representationalist and critical theory interpretations of his work (Galbo; Genosko; Stamps). Though such readings of McLuhan are valuable, they emphasize consideration of how media, as physical, material objects, implicate semiotic production by reducing the presentation of significance to the mere representation of meaning. Meaning in these terms is often conceived as a material in the metaphorical sense, and a product in the Marxian sense – the production of which once dependent upon us, its makers, has shifted to merely reproduce meaningless simulations that implicitly reign sovereign over us (Galbo). Again, such readings of McLuhan are compelling and valuable, yet begin with a semiotic that assumes representational, semantic correspondence as well as the primacy of consciousness.

Kenneth Rufo's work considering the metaphor of *Narcissus-Narcosis* and the medium of the mirror is exemplary of a critical, representationalist reading of McLuhan. That is, Rufo's read of *Narcissus-Narcosis* addresses meaning in terms of production, the mirror as a medium of strict representation, and the primacy of consciousness rather than the primacy of the perceptive-expressive body. Rufo's neglect of the body leads him to confusion regarding McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor as well as McLuhan's implicit theoretical understanding of the self and the medium of the mirror (126).[15]

Rufo's assumption of the primacy of consciousness and his emphasis on the mirror re-presenting an actual being as an illusory image yields confusion regarding the theoretical significance of McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor for matters of *subjectivity*. By contrast, this beyond representational, Merleau-Pontean reading offers understanding, as Ralon and Vieta, Skocz, and Vieta and Ralon suggest. As I have shown, one may understand McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor as indicating a self who is not merely "subject," but rather a subject-object body. Additionally, contrary to Rufo, this Merleau-Pontean reading offers understanding regarding the medium of the mirror as presenting, not representing, self to self. That is, reading McLuhan with attention to Narcissus as body and consciousness reveals McLuhan's assumption, shared by Merleau-Ponty, that the *subject is always mediated*. This implies that the mirror image, though an extension, does not merely re-present but also presents, i.e., mediates, a view of the self. As such, for McLuhan, Narcissus' reflection is not a mere representation but a presentation, which he mistakes for another person.

Per Merleau-Ponty, the mirror image is not a representation either. Rather, the specular reflection of one's body is the presentation of self to self that initiates a posture of dialogic openness to otherness, learning and understanding via the experience of *good anxiety* and

narcissism. The mirror image is not a mere representation for it reflects the lived body in a given figure-ground situation, which is spatial and temporal. Such assumptions indicate that each moment I meet myself in the mirror, the image-me who I see is always similar-different. Thus, my reflection is not a re-presentation of my body – it presents my body to me at a particular moment and communicates something different with each reflection. Through this Merleau-Pontean reading of McLuhan, *Narcissus-Narcosis* is not numb merely due to his disembodied, represented mirrored presence (Rufo). He is numb because he is closed to self-other-world, which temporalizes and spatializes his perceptive-expressive, mediative, bodily being-becoming thereby opening him to experience life with others amidst a world.

In terms of theory, the assumption of a beyond representational semiotic implicates attention to the importance of temporality for the emergence of significant understanding and communication ethics practices. Per Arnett, Fritz and Bell, theoretical attention to the temporal characterizes a view of significant understanding as tentative, contingent, ambiguous and situated (6), thereby pointing to the importance of communicative negotiation of natural dialectics toward ends of dialogic openness, learning, understanding and change. For, as Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan each suggest, communication ethics practices, such as contact, acknowledgement and response, which mediate the tensional synopses of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance often involve change – a transformation of understanding regarding the grounding-grounds of self-other-world.

In practice, theories attending to the temporal bring awareness to our need to attend to difference and the grounding assumptions informing our communicative practices. As Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe, "when we meet others in our life circumstances, we communicate from … 'temporal narrative ground'…" (40) reflected in our comportment and communication with

others. We become aware of this narrative ground, constituted by the interplay of past-present-future and self-other-world, only when we assume a posture of openness to otherness, ambiguity, mediation and change. What is more, our resonant, reversible, mediative perceptive-expressive communication with others reflexively contributes to the reconfiguration of understanding as well as the grounding-ground itself.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's shared assumption of a beyond representational semiotic not only elucidates McLuhan's metaphor of *Narcissus-Narcosis* to reveal a deeper understanding of his theoretical assumptions regarding the self and significance but also illuminates the role of the temporal dimension in practice – change. Yet, as mentioned previously there are two types of change addressed throughout this consideration of Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. There is technical, imposed change and communicative, constitutive change. Based on Arnett, Fritz and Bell's work,[16] I would like to suggest a dialectic of technical-communicative change to consider the relationship between *Americanitis* and communication ethics.

7.2.5 Theory and Practice: *Americanitis* and Communication Ethics

Per Beard, technological innovation and rapid social change surrounding the Industrial Revolution contributed to the anxiety-related nervous exhaustion, *neurasthenia*, of the nineteenth century (*Supplement*). Similarly, Boorstin, Turkle and McLuhan suggest that communication technology and the rapid pace of technological change contribute to electronic and digital narcissistically anxious nervous exhaustion, *Americanitis*. Additionally, McLuhan contends that our struggle with *Americanitis* involves the assumption of a strictly *public austere ethic*, which discourages participation, mediation and communicative change. As shown, this lack of mediation between technical and communicative change also encourages *Americanitis*.

The narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicates the stagnant persistence of modernist, Cartesian, technical cultural assumptions encouraging mechanical, electronic and digital *Americanitis*. As mentioned, one primary assumption propelling our ills is the ambivalent, Cartesian belief "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). This premise suggests that persons are autonomous beings, i.e., not being-becomings, whose rational minds create and sustain self and world toward ends of progressive, totalizing development when free from constraint.

Digital technologies embody this stagnant belief by promising the realization of the Cartesian ideal of communing consciousnesses whose exchange of information yields objective meanings via perfect semantic matchings, i.e., not experiential makings. Additionally, as shown, the Cartesian, technical promises of digital media lead us to believe that we can control others and our world toward ends of persistent, individualistic comfort and security. Yet, as my presentation of Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's understanding of *Americanitis* suggests, a circular effect results from the persistence of such beliefs. Per Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, communication technology encourages *Americanitis*, which in-turn encourages perceptive-expressive closure to self-other-world, which in-turn discourages the dialogic openness to learning and understanding necessary to create constitutive, communicative individual and cultural change needed amidst such problematic sediments. Thus, the synopsis of technical-communicative change emerges between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan.

Technical change is imposed, objective change which implicates culture by forcing alterations to how we live amidst our communicative milieu. Though technical change originates amidst human ingenuity, it is encouraged and imposed by ambivalent, unreflective acceptance of novelty.[17] By contrast, communicative change involves resonant reversibility between the

synopses of self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete and proximity-distance. With such

resonant reversible, perceptive-expressive communication involving human contact,

acknowledgement and response, we reflectively and reflexively shape and change individuals

and cultures via the interplay of sedimentation-creation toward ends of understanding. As such, a

lack of resonant reversibility between technical-communicative change complicates the dialogic

learning and understanding involved amidst communication ethics practices.

That is, as Arnett, Fritz and Bell suggest, "communication ethics remains tied, from its

very conception, to learning, adaptation and change" (xxi). As I have shown, Merleau-Ponty and

McLuhan suggest that certain forms of communication media complicate the emergence of

communication ethics practices of contact, acknowledgement and response due to alteration of

perceptive openness and resonant reversibility between the synopses of self-other, private-public,

abstract-concrete and proximity-distance. With such resonant reversibility compromised,

perceptive-expressive meetings between persons are reduced to instrumental exchanges of

empirical, i.e., not authentic, meanings, i.e., not significance, thereby implicitly upholding

existing assumptions and resisting change. Though our present postmodern moment is

characterized by "change and difference" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 80) Merleau-Ponty's and

McLuhan's works, in terms of *Americanitis*, demonstrate that we find a sense of control and

comfort in the *routine* of persistent, modernist cultural beliefs (see Arnett, Fritz and Bell 162-

165).

As Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggest and as Arnett, Fritz and Bell say, the comfort of

the familiar can be dangerous – "too much routine will move us to rejection of all that is

unfamiliar" (165). The extreme of *too much routine* offers us a sense of control and comfort, yet,

also closes us to the experience of otherness and mediation thereby perpetuating our

Americanitis. As Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's narrative understanding of *Americanitis* indicates, the comfort achieved via perceptive-expressive closure to self-other-world offers momentary relief from the symptoms of *Americanitis*, yet also perpetuates our plight. For, lack of mediation between the self-other and private-public synopses leaves us blind to the mediation of similarity-difference as well as our spatio-temporal situatedness. This implicates a lack of understanding of the grounding-grounds of other and world as well as self.

As previously indicated, without *perception*, *understanding* and *awareness* of our need for self-other, self becomes a fragile, *figure-minus-ground* who engages others to seek only personal comfort. Too much of the familiar encourages a *psychologically rigid* posture amidst self-other-world, through which we ambivalently retreat to the sedimented, familiar and comfortable synoptic extremes of the Cartesian, individualist, strictly-private self or the mass, strictly-public self. Such ambivalence not only compromises the *protection and promotion* of reversible synoptic resonance through which communication ethics practices emerge but also encourages the "unethical communicative acts" of "assuming that you know everything, and assuming that what the other knows is not worth knowing" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 221). As Arnett, Fritz and Bell indicate, comfort arising amidst prolonged postures of closure, whether individualistic or syncretic, ought to be recognized as a resistance to learning and understanding. For, amidst such postures, we *tolerate* "only what we can control" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 110). Thus, our desire for control reflects sediments of ambivalent, Cartesian, assumptions such as autonomy and freedom from spatial, temporal and bodily limitations.

As Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate, we are situated being-becomings who vitally and socially require the perception, awareness and understanding of our situated limits, the grounding-grounds of existence, our vital need for self-other and our responsibility to contact,

acknowledge and respond to self-other-world via negotiation, i.e., mediation, of self-other, private-public, etcetera. Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's ambiguous, rather than ambivalent, theoretical assumptions emphasizing mediation, "reminds us of the consistency of change that 'I' can never control, but that 'we' must negotiate together" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 133). Thus, together, Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan and Arnett, Fritz and Bell suggest that responding to our malady of digital *Americanitis* requires *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* of: our lack of control due to our spatio-temporal embodiment and embedment; our discomfort (e.g., anxiety) as offering both positive and negative dimensions; and our need to meet and respond to moments of dialogic invitation and change, together, so to mediate the dialectic of technical-communicative change. For, the quality of our lives as particular persons and as members of communities, cultures and institutions depends upon our ability to perceive, be aware of and understand the grounding-grounds of self-other-world (Arnett, Fritz and Bell).

In terms of communication ethics theory, the narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggests that communication ethics practices such as contact, acknowledgement and response, not the ambivalent closure of self-protection, are crucial for responding to the rapid pace of technical change amidst modernity and our present postmodern moment (see Arnett, Fritz and Bell xix).[18] In terms of practice, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate that we are responsible for questioning and reconfiguring the cultural assumptions and practices that we inherit. As such, we ought to learn to mediate technical change with the often anxious work of constitutive communicative change with others – for we cannot control the past we inherit but we may respond to our present and our future (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 147). That is, if the rapid pace of technological change, along with the stagnation of modernist cultural sediments embodied and portended by communication media technologies,

encourage *Americanitis*, the taming of our illness requires response. Thus, I turn to elaborate Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's previously referenced suggestions for taming of *Americanitis*.

7.3 Taming *Americanitis*

Through his *Treatise*, Beard describes treatment for neurasthenia as "a long voyage to health" (176). Though this implies the possibility of ultimate resolution, the overall philosophy of treatment is that of being responsive to what the patient's health invites at given moments on an ongoing basis (176-249). Like Beard, the narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicates that we may not resolve our symptoms but rather must attempt to manage, or tame, our ills by way of our communally grounded responsibility, i.e., participation, which is responsive to the grounding-grounds of self-other-world and the narrative assumptions informing them. Thus, our "long voyage" involves the ongoing effort to be open to understanding our symptoms and to recognizing that dimensions implicating our discomfort are beyond our absolute control yet invite mediative responses.

Arnett, Fritz and Bell's chapter on "Health Care Communication Ethics" (191-208) offers similar ideas. Assuming a broad characterization of health, Arnett, Fritz and Bell describe "health care communication ethics" as involving the *protection and promotion* of responsible "responsiveness" and "care" for self-other and world. The authors identify "responsiveness" as "responsibility that meets the call of the Other, even when the call is unwanted" (192) and care as "human caring of one for another … in all contexts where decisions affect the quality of life" (199). In other words, *health care communication ethics* involve not only the actual health of persons but also of cultures and the human condition in the face of trying circumstances.

Arnett, Fritz and Bell align the metaphors of responsiveness and care with "Victor Frankl's reminder of the notion of final freedom"[19] to suggest that negotiating the natural

dialectic of bad-good health depends upon how we choose to respond to events that are beyond our control amidst moments of discomfort (194). Put another way, this "final freedom," as our *freedom to* respond, indicates that we must build ground between self-other amidst world to understand and respond to, i.e., to tame, our digital *Americanitis*. The authors explain that the degree of understandings and responses, grounded with care, emerging amidst moments of *final freedom* disclose, not only "how," but also "why" we should respond (201). Drawing on Jacques Ellul, the authors contend that attention to "how" alone is indicative of *technique* – technical, instrumental reactions rather than laborious communicative responses. However, when coupled with the "why," the "how" becomes situated amidst our "labor of care" for self-other-world, allowing us to discern and attend to the particular calls of the moment and the other (201). Tying the "labor of care" to Frankl's "final freedom" Arnett, Fritz and Bell reveal that with "a sense of 'why' … [we may] bear the 'how'" (201) – that with understanding, tacit or express, of "why" we ought to respond, we may endure the, at times uncomfortable, communicative work of care.

As such, this section engages Arnett, Fritz and Bell's chapter to enhance understanding regarding the suggestions for taming *Americanitis*, which emerge between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan. I first offer pointed discussion of why and how we suffer with digital *Americanitis*. I then consider how communication ethics practices of contact, acknowledgment, responsiveness and care can help us to tame our digital malady.

7.3.2 Digital *Americanitis*: Why and How We Suffer

As shown, the narrative understanding emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicates that we suffer *Americanitis* due to the influences of technical milieu. In addition to altering spatio-temporal contextual dimensions, media metaphorically embody and portend persistent ambivalent cultural assumptions that leave us blind to our vital and social need for

self-other, as well as understanding anxiety as an order of experience and not merely a disorder requiring technical intervention. Mechanical and electronic forms of communication encourage postures of perceptive-expressive closure by eschewing the self-mediative experience of phatic contact and complicating the communicative mediation of synoptic extremes. As shown, this leads to ambivalence and the suppression of communication ethics practices, i.e., contact, acknowledgement and response, necessary to personal and cultural communicative change.

This closure occurs due to the disruption of bodily, spatio-temporal dimensions of experience intervening between self-other amidst mediated engagements. For example, Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate that the media of film and news alter spatio-temporal experience toward the ambivalent extremes of closed, abstract, distant, etcetera, leaving us unable to discern difference and grounding-grounds while also encouraging judgment rather than understanding. The case is similar with digital forms of media such as the smartphone.

Engaging McLuhan and McLuhan's heuristic, a *tetrad* of the smartphone indicates that the medium *enhances* monologue, *obsolesces* situated dialogue, *retrieves* the extreme of literate privacy and *reverses into* the extreme of tribal, mass publicity. That is, as with film, the smartphone screen is not a *phenomenal field*. The screen of the phone "has no horizons" (*PhP* 78) and consumes our perceptual attention leaving us blind to moments of dialogic invitation that emerge between self-other amidst world. Though we may attend to invitational moments arising through the device, the communicative, mediational, *dynamic equilibrium* between the synopses of self-other, private-public, and proximity-distance is disrupted by our perceptual closure amidst abstracted spatio-temporal field dimensions. With the *overwhelming proximity* of this global context at the tips of our fingers, we easily assume ambivalent, closed postures.

Though similar, I suggest that the type of closure encouraged by smartphones occurs to a greater degree than with film. Self, not other, directs the action on the screen. Though the screen presents information to us that is not of our making, we autonomously control the movement of content. As indicated, the type of communicative engagement occurring amidst computer and smartphone screens does not encourage the emergence of dialogic moments – we rarely seek engagement of difference online.[20] The sheer quantity of information encourages content that merely affirms our purely private perspectives so to comfort ourselves with an air of certainty. Thus, at the intrapersonal, communicative level we are easily able to gain the comfort of affirmation via connection rather than anxious experience of contact. This implicates the interpersonal level of experience by allowing us to consider mediated others as abstract, distant objects available for our personal use and appropriation. As such, the remaining levels, from the cultural to the institutional, suffer due to lack of mediative participation, a lack of significance and a lack of communicative change emerging between self-other-world. Ultimately, without communicative change, the technical-communicative change synopsis tends toward the extreme of technical change, increasing and perpetuating our suffering. Yet, the degree of our suffering with *Americanitis* is enhanced amidst our digital moment as opportunities for the mediating experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism* are reduced. How and why might we respond?

7.3.3 *Americanitis*: The How and Why of Responsible Responsiveness

As stated, similar to Arnett, Fritz and Bell's advocacy of "dialogic openness to learning and understanding," Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan suggest that we begin to respond to *Americanitis* by cultivating postures of perceptive-expressive openness to otherness grounded amidst the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. This opening, situating experience emerges at the prepersonal level of phatic contact to garner the sustained openness of

acknowledgement at the intra and interpersonal levels of relating, thereby encouraging

responsible response at the interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels of communication. The

protection and promotion of the self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete, and proximity-

distance synopses emerging amidst the interplay of open contact, acknowledgement and response

allows us to discern difference as well as the grounding-grounds, narrative and otherwise,

informing our cultural assumptions. As such, the communicative learning and understanding

emerging amidst communication ethics practices of contact and acknowledgement enables us to

read the grounding-grounds of our spatio-temporally situated situation and to respond.

Our literacy, i.e., our *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding*, of these grounding-

grounds opens possibilities for *dynamic equilibrium* between technical-communicative change.

Thus, the *protection and promotion* of openness and mediation, borne amidst phatic contact offer

possibilities for "meeting what is before us, like it or not" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 92). In

assuming such an open posture, accepting of otherness and ambiguity, we perpetuate our bodily,

communicative agency, our "final freedom," our *freedom to*, via questioning problematic cultural

assumptions with others, and by assuming the responsibility of responding to the seemingly

relentless pace of technological evolution. Therefore, to meet *Americanitis* requires attention to

our spatio-temporal situatedness and our lack of control amidst the discomfort of change – both

technical and communicative. That is, the situated, involved and interested understanding,

protected and promoted by Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, as well as Arnett, Fritz and Bell,

allows us to respond to, not react to technical change, in a manner that promotes moments of

reflection and the interplay of communicative labor, thereby offering hope for taming our

Americanitis. In Arnett, Fritz and Bell's terms, the "how" of a "health care communication

ethics" approach to taming *Americanitis* involves the communally grounded participatory

illumination, questioning and reconfiguration of the grounding-grounds of human existence –

whether they be media forms, human bodies, languages, cultural assumptions, etcetera.

Yet, as shown, media complicate openness, mediation and discernment of grounds.

Therefore, at times we ought to appropriate certain heuristic extensions-incorporations like the

McLuhans' tetrad[21] and like Arnett, Fritz and Bell's heuristic questions, which encourage time

and space for reflective reading of grounding-grounds. As demonstrated, the tetrad is a mode of

questioning that attempts to elucidate grounding elements of particular figures amidst particular

spatio-temporal moments. Though the tetrad is applicable to many types of human artifacts, it is

particularly well suited for reading the *grounds of hidden media environments*. Due to their

affable relations with Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's respective communication ethics

assumptions, Arnett, Fritz and Bell offer elements of their *Communication Ethics Literacy*

project that may assist as well. To discern the grounds of self-other and the realm of tacit cultural

assumptions and practices, we may begin with the question of, "What good does a person, group,

institution, society, culture, or other social formation [e.g., media forms] seek to protect and

promote?" (4). We may also consider their guideposts of, "listening without demand ...

attentiveness ... [and] dialogic negotiation," which each offer questions geared to encouraging

open participation, reflection, learning and understanding (205-207).[22]

An added heuristic that McLuhan offers is "the artist" (*UM* 96-97). The artist is not

merely one who sculpts, paints, creates film, etcetera. The artist is anyone, "in any field … who

grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time," the person "of

integral awareness" (*UM* 96). Similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of *good anxiety* as the courage

of accepting the ambiguity of the future amidst the present (*PrP*), McLuhan suggests that the

artist can illuminate how to meet the future without having it overtake us (*LOM* 128). Thus, the

"how" of taming our *Americanitis* ultimately involves our *perception*, *awareness* and *understanding* (Van den Eede) of our communally grounded responsibility for self-other-world via attentive participation, care and responsiveness. We must learn to read and respond to self-other-world with care. As stated, this is extremely difficult and uncomfortable work requiring the courage borne amidst the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. "Why" ought we undertake this "labor of care"?

Our experience of *Americanitis*, like the experience of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*, is an alert or indicator calling for our attention and response amidst particular spatio-temporal moments. Thus, our "why" for bearing the "labor of care" responsive to our illness involves our responsibility for our particular communities as well as the larger community of humanity. As we are all embodied and embedded bodily being-becomings, the quality of our lives depends upon our interested participation with others that is geared toward learning, understanding and reflexively contributing to shaping self-other-world. This mediative work depends upon the *dynamic equilibrium* between closing *Americanitis* and opening *good anxiety* and *narcissism* amidst phatic contact. Thus, the open posture encouraged by Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan, and Arnett, Fritz and Bell, in theory and practice, not only encourages us to learn to *read the book of media* but also to respond. For, our particular health and the health of our culture depend on our responsive *labor of care* (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) which begins with self-other amidst world.

7.4 Concluding Remarks: Our Digital Historical Moment

This cross-reading of Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan not only helps to elucidate McLuhan's Media Ecology assumptions, aims and ends, which illuminate implications of digital communication media for cultural communicative practices. My efforts also offer response to our ills by considering *why and how* (Arnett, Fritz and Bell) we ought to understand and tame

our digital *Americanitis* via responsiveness to our situation. The narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan helps us to discern the cultural assumptions embodied and portended by persons, media forms and practices reflexively informing the complex texture of human existence amidst our digital moment.

As with the mechanical and electronic epochs, digital U.S. culture favors extremes. For example, our current presidential race offers the ambivalent, digital choices of political correctness or xenophobia; the phenomenon of the "selfie" renders the body to the extreme of pathological, narcissistic object; and digital mobile devices encourage the extremes of sensory, bodily and existential closure. Additionally seemingly infinite amounts of information allow us to perpetuate closure and a lack of responsibility by offering answers to questions that merely reinforce ambivalent desires. The resonate tensions between aspects of life such as self-other, private-public, concrete-abstract and proximity-distance become absolute, ambivalent divisions, rather than ambiguous distinctions, which perpetuate misgiven modernist assumptions.

As Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate, the assumptions informing our digital epoch communicative practices are unsustainable. If we continue to assume, "that we can function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17), our suffering will continue unabated. As McLuhan shows, we must *learn to read the book of media* as our refusal to *perceive*, be *aware* of and *understand* how the *hidden grounds of media* implicate our communicative practices will cause us to *lose our selves* (Van den Eede 223). As my efforts show, the *hidden grounds of* digital *media environments*, by way of the assumptions they embody and portend as well as their alteration of dimensions involved amidst communicative experience, encourage tending away from ambiguous mediation, toward ambivalent extremes at which "existence perishes" (Merleau-Ponty *SNS* 40). Our *blindness* to the closing assumptions and practices

encouraged by ambivalent, modernist ideas and disruptive media environments leaves us facing the vital and existential threat of loneliness (Cole et al.). As such, we perpetually experience the answer to Hyde's ethical question: *What if no one acknowledged my existence*?

With nearly 40 million U.S. adults suffering the plight of pathological anxiety[23] amidst our digital moment, many of us suffer ill health with little suggestions for managing our condition. Pharmaceutical treatments are a popular avenue of *reacting* to *Americanitis*. Yet these tiny technological remedies deliver additional problematic side effects, do not address grounding issues that call for response and erroneously promise to "fix" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 191-208) or resolve our condition. The narrative emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicates that anxiety is an important order of experience, not simply a disorder requiring prescriptive resolution. As such, we ought to attend to Merleau-Ponty's and McLuhan's calls for us to participate with others so to build significant, communicative understandings and responses to tame *Americanitis*. The conversation emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan, with valuable support offered by Arnett, Fritz and Bell, is a call for us to pay attention to the grounding-grounds of our existence. This call reminds us of our need to participate amidst perceptive-expressive, embodied and embedded life with others to undertake the difficult yet sustaining work of existence.

Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan also remind us that we, as embodied and embedded bodies, are able to choose to engage and disengage particular extension-incorporations amidst communicative mediation with others. Barring structural illness, injuries, disabilities, etcetera, our incarnate-discarnate, perceptive-expressive, particular-communal bodies are imbued with a power of discernment through which we may seize possibilities of responsibility to constitute communicative change amidst the actualities of a technical milieu. Certain forms of experience,

e.g., face-to-face dialogue, offer us vital nutrients important to the responsive work of taming our illness. Other forms of experience are empty calories that offer comfort, yet may compromise health. When the opportunity arises, choosing to engage forms of experience that encourage the courage of responsiveness and care for others shapes the health of self-other-world via the incorporation of open orientations to difference, mediation, learning, understanding and change (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 191-208). Thus, digital communication media technologies may serve as supplements to, but ought not to be substitutes for the rich, fleshiness of anxious and laborious face-to-face, phatic contact, which encourages embodied, embedded, mediative speaking-listening, learning, understanding and change via openness to otherness.

As the significant, narrative understanding of *Americanitis* emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicates, "We can[*not*] function without regard for the Other" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 17). The quality of our lives depends on the reversible resonance borne amidst the anxious, opening experience of phatic contact involving *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. Ultimately, the mediative, dialogic communication ethics theory emerging between Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicates *why and how* we ought to reconfigure communicative practices amidst our experience of digital *Americanitis* in a manner that acknowledges our vital need for self-other through moments of contact, acknowledgement and response. As Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan indicate, we may only perceive, understand and respond to our digital illness via comportments encouraging openness, attentiveness and responsiveness to uncomfortable, ambiguous moments of meeting otherness. Though our "Age of Anxiety" (McLuhan *UM* 7) persists beyond electronic modernity, we have the continuous bodily ability and power to responsibly respond to the grounding-grounds of self-other-world via our openness and our "willingness to pay attention" (McLuhan and McLuhan *LOM* 128).

Notes for Chapter 1

1.   Bellah et al. and Carey and Sims cite that even important public figures suffered the ills of *Americanitis*, including William James, Eugene Debs, Woodrow Wilson – see Bellah et al. 118; and Harold Innis – see Carey, James W. and Norman Sims. "The Telegraph and the News Report." *Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism* August (1976): Print.

2.   I address experiences of anxiety and narcissism, characterized as *Americanitis*, throughout this study. Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*, suggests that the experience of one of three forms of anxiety related to meaninglessness is countered via the faith of ontological courage. Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* suggests that narcissistic culture results from our lack of willingness to give ourselves over to imaginative aspects of life (e.g., myth) which leads to an inability to distinguish between reality and illusion in a productive manner that keeps a self grounded. Per Lasch, without ground, we are narcissistically fragile, unable to self-sooth and therefore subsume and/or objectify others for purposes of gaining personal certainty, security and comfort – an egological shoring up of self.

3.   Of the 18 percent suffering anxiety, most are women (60 percent more likely than men to experience anxiety disorders) and most are between the ages of 30 and 44 years. See http://www.nimh.nih.gov.

4.   The "historical moment" of the "modern era" spanned the late eighteenth through middle twentieth centuries. An "historical moment" is not a chronology of significant events, but rather reflects how, "our ideas, theories and actions are foregrounded responses to the background of a given time" (Arnett and Holba 42). Drawing on Piercey, Arnett and Holba conceive of an, "historical moment as a communicative dwelling that illuminates and shelters a given

'philosophical picture' enabling a particular textured communicative comprehension" (35). In other words, attention to history may tell us what has happened, but attention to the historical moment illuminates the significance of those happenings.

5.   I capitalize the term Media Ecology to reflect a particular tradition of approaches, assumptions and aims. Lower case media ecology would speak to ecological views of media that do not consider or adhere to the M.E. tradition.

6.   Strate offers three sources that review the history of M.E. They include, Strate, Lance. "Studying Media *as* Media: McLuhan and the Media Ecology Approach." *Media Tropes* 1 (2008): 127-142. Print; Strate, Lance. *Echoes and Reflections: On Media Ecology as a Field of Study*. New York: Hampton, 2006. Print; Strate, Lance. "A Media Ecology Review." *Communication Research Trends* 23.2 (2004): 3-48. Print.

7.   Although Meyrowitz, a graduate of the M.E. program, would eventually offer his own "closely related" approach that he calls "medium theory," which focuses on differences in media forms to help us understand their effects, his early work helped to bring attention to Postman's M.E. (Meyrowitz *MT* 518). See his essay, "Medium Theory: An Alternative to the Dominant Paradigm of Media Effects." *The SAGE Handbook of Media Processes and Effects*. Eds. Robin L. Nabi and Mary Beth Oliver. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009. Print

8.   Gordon discusses critics mislabeling of McLuhan as a techno-determinist (*MM* 302) and a techno idealist (*MM* 303).

9.   Although Lum does not say as much, questions belonging to the orality-literacy epoch are actually rooted in antiquity. In Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, questions regarding the value of writing and its detriment to memory, an aspect of life crucial to oral cultures, are raised (Anton *CUC*). The epoch of oral-aural culture begins the M.E. historiography, and the epoch of

literacy is closely connected. Elizabeth Eisenstein offers the most comprehensive account of the historical development of the printing press within M.E. Lum identifies one of her primary questions as being "how does the diffusion of printing refine society's notion of the nature of information?" (37). Eisenstein, a Ph.D. in history, takes an acknowledged Media Ecological approach to her historical question and response account of the development of the press to suggest that it instantiated some of the most radical, social, political, cultural and epistemic changes in Europe during the Renaissance (Lum 37).

10. See: Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*. Amazon Kindle Edition, 2011. Electronic Book; Ellul, Jaques. *The Humiliation of the Word*. Joyce Main Hanks (Ed.). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985/1981. Print; McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Ed. W. Terrence Gordon. Corte Madre, CA: Gingko, 2003/1964. Print; Mumford, Lewis. *Technics and Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010/1934. Print; Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Routledge, 2002/1982. Print. Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Amazon Kindle Edition, 2011. Electronic Book.

11. See: Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage, 1992/1961. Print; Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological Society*. John Wilkinson (Trans.) New York: Vintage, 1964/1954. Print. Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological System*. Joachim Neugroschel (Trans.) New York: Continuum, 1980/1977. Print. Havelock, Eric A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1963. Print; Innis, Harold A. *Empire and Communications*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007/1950. Print; McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto,ON: University of Toronto, 1962. Print; Ong, Walter. *The Presence of the Word*: *Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. New Haven: Yale, 1967. Print.

12. In his *Editor's Introduction* to the critical edition of *Understanding Media*, Gordon notes that although McLuhan's insights apply to culture, "his starting point is always the individual, because media are defined as extensions of the body" (xix).

13. For "administrative school" examples, see: Nabi, Robin L and Mary Beth Oliver, Eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Media Processes and Effects*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009. Print; Perse, Elizabeth M. *Media Effects and Society*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001. Print; For examples of the "critical school approach," see: *Critical Studies in Media Communication*; Other examples of the critical approach include: Kahn, Robert and Kellner, Douglas. "New Media and Internet Activism." *New Media & Society* 6.1 (2004): 87-95. Print. Koch, Andrew. "Cybercitizen or Cyborg Citizen: Baudrillard, Political Agency and The Commons in Virtual Politics." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 20.2-3 (2005): 159-175. Print; and Schules, D. "The Online Public Sphere: A Move to Simulation over Representation." *A Paper Presented at the International Communication Association 2005 Annual Meeting*. 2005. Scholarly paper; and Hansen, Mark, B.N. and W.T.J. Mitchell, Eds. *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Electronic Book.

14. See: Dreyfus, Hubert, L. *On The Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print; Hansen, Mark, B.N. *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print; Ihde, Don. *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction*. New York: Paragon House, 1993. Print; Ihde, Don. *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context*. Evanston: Northwestern, 1995. Print.

15. This is a rubric I suggest based on an adapted form of Reusch and Bateson's four levels of human communication intra, inter, group and cultural – see *Communication: The Social Matrix of Society* pp. 273-289.

16. Previously published under the title, *The New Jersey Journal of Communication*

17. In addition to the recent special issue of *The Atlantic Journal of Communication* that focused on Media Ecology and communication, the Media Ecology Association (MEA) holds annual conferences and publishes the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology*. For examples of recent Media Ecology scholarship within the MEA forums that explicitly explore connections between M.E. and communication, see: Hongchao, Qian. "Maxims of Human Communication: Explorations into a Media Ecology Maxim." *A Paper Presented at the 15th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*. Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 19-22 June 2014. Scholarly paper; Miller, Melinda. "Historical Parallels: Peter Ramus and Walter Ong." *A Paper Presented at the 15th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*. Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 19-22 June 2014. Scholarly paper; Sevilla, Amanda. "A Discussion on Marshall McLuhan's Rhetorical Examinations of Lived Experience." *A Paper Presented at the 15th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*. Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 19-22 June 2014. Scholarly paper; Troup, Calvin, L. "On-Board Memory: Tending Hearts and Minds in a Mediated World." *A Paper Presented at the 15th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*. Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 19-22 June 2014. Scholarly paper; and Cali, Dennis. "Presence and Intersubjectivity in the Existentialist Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel." *A Paper Presented at the 15th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*. Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 19-22 June 2014. Scholarly paper.

18. "Phenomenology was announced by Edmund Husserl in 1900-1901 as a bold, radically new way of doing philosophy, an attempt to bring philosophy back from abstract metaphysical speculation wrapped up in pseudo-problems, in order to come into contact with the matters themselves, with concrete living experience" (Moran, Preface). The approach proposes to

bracket existing assumptions about our experiences via reduction and reconstitution of experiential elements that reveal the form and nature of experience (i.e., the *phenomenological reduction*). Similar to Media Ecology, various phenomenologists approach the reduction in nuanced ways but are united in general primary assumptions and an aim for understanding. See, *Moran, Dermot. Introduction to Phenomenology. New York: Routledge, 2000. Electronic Book*.

19. The McLuhans criticize Husserl for perpetuating the Cartesian split between mind and body, and Heidegger for failing to move beyond abstract, conceptual philosophies (*LOM*). Merleau-Ponty critiques Husserl and Heidegger on similar grounds.

20. See *Laws of Media*: "Maurice Merleau-Ponty has put the matter succinctly …" (McLuhan and McLuhan 10, n.2). Merleau-Ponty's quote appears in the essay "Everywhere and Nowhere" in *Signs* (157).

21. I am not the first to engage Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan for a dissertation project. Charles (Sandy) Baldwin (NYU/WVU) engages Merleau-Ponty, McLuhan and Virilio to consider aesthetics from the perspective of general media theory. Baldwin does consider the speed of change and the value of aesthetic experience but does not engage Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan in terms of Media Ecology and human communication. Baldwin, Charles, A. *Vanishing Aesthetics: Mediality and Literature After Merleau-Ponty, Virilio and McLuhan*. Diss. NYU, 1999. UMI Ann Arbor. Electronic File. For other approaches to Merleau-Ponty and technology see: Barker, Rachel. "Presentation of the Virtual Beyond-self on Cyber Stage: Real, Constructed, Staged and/or Masked?" *Communicatio* 34.2 (2008): 189-209. Print; Frentz, Thomas, S. "Transcending Embodiment: Communication in the Posthuman Condition." *Southern Communication Journal* 79.1 (2014): 59-72.Print; Jung, Hwa Yol. "A Critique of Autonomous Technology." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 12.2 (1985): 31-47. Print;

Killmeier, Matthew A. "The Body Medium and Media Ecology: Disembodiment in the Theory and Practice of Modern Media." *Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association* 10 (2009): 35-47. Print; Kraidy, Marwan M. "The Body as Medium in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities." *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 10.2-3 (2013): 285-290. Print; Mul, Jos, de. "Digitally Mediated (Dis)Embodiment." *Information, Communication and Society* 6.2 (2003): 247-266. Print.

    22. Although Merleau-Ponty's method is not necessarily intended as an approach to revealing the meaning of texts, (i.e., it is a method to reveal the structural origins of lived human experience), Lanigan's communicology broadens Merleau-Ponty's method to a hermeneutic phenomenology of human communication, speaking to questions of *what*, *why*, and *how* things are meaningful (Arnett and Holba; Lanigan *PC* 16).

Notes for Chapter 2

1.   The term autochthonous derives from the Greek autochthon meaning *to spring from land*. In Merleau-Ponty's view, the figure 'springs from ground' of the figure-ground gestalt interplay

2.   For more on "The Child's Relations with Others," see Lanigan, Richard, L. "From Enthymeme to Abduction: The Classical Law of Logic and the Postmodern Rule of Rhetoric." *Recovering Pragmatism's Voice: The Classical Tradition, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Communication*. Eds. Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew R. Smith. Albany: SUNY, 1995: 49-70. Print. Lanigan engages Merleau-Ponty's essay, along with his assumption of self-other, similar-different to exemplify the role of abductive, deductive and inductive logics associated with Aristotle's enthymeme, C. S. Peirce's pragmatic, semiotic theory and S. Toulmin's theory of argument. The overarching concern of Lanigan's essay is the tension between information-communication, power-desire and modernity-postmodernity.

3.   My characterization of this opening, othering and differentiating experience as *good anxiety* and *narcissism* stems from Merleau-Ponty's attention to the necessary, positive experience of the specular image associated with Lacanian *primary narcissism* and the opening "fear" associated with the "Crisis at Three Years." As Merleau-Ponty describes this "fear" (French: *la peur*) is not anchored with a specific aspect of negative affective avoidance. The fear is rather a positive, productive affect itself that results only from the anticipation of being seen by others. As such, I attempt to capture the complexity of the experience of the specular image, which includes good, *primary narcissism*, being othered (i.e., good, synoptic alienation that calls one to participation) and positive, productive anticipatory "fear," via the characterization of *good anxiety* and *narcissism*. Merleau-Ponty ultimately suggests that a self between the Cartesian, individual and the syncretic depends upon self-other. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the good

narcissism and alienation-participation amidst the experience of a Lacanianesque specular image appears throughout the essay. I offer his specific discussion of "fear" here, first in English and then French: "The ego, the *I*, cannot truly emerge at the age of three years without doubling itself with an ego in the eyes of the other. In the case of this phenomenon, it is not a question of shame in the sense in which it exists later on as the shame of being naked (which appears only around the age of five or six) any more than it is the fear of being reprimanded. It is simply a question of the fear experienced by the child when he is looked at" (*PrP* 153). "L'ego, le je, ne peut émerger véritablement à l'âge de trois ans, sans se doubler d'un ego aux yeux d'autrui. Car où elle existe plus tard, la honte d'être nu (elle n'apparait que vers 5 ou 6 ans), et pas davantage de la peur d'être réprimandé, il s'agit simplement de la peur que l'enfant éprouve à être regardé" (*Les Relations Avec Autrui Chez L'Enfant* 1960 Centre de Documentation Universitaire Paris Sorbonne 58).

Notes for Chapter 3

1.   Although Richards greatly influence McLuhan, the latter did not blindly accept the

former's ideas without qualification and modification. Marchand says "Not everything about

Richards impressed McLuhan favorably … He was disgusted by … [Richards'] atheism and his

clinical psychologist mentality, which tended to base all of human sensibility on such things as

'stimuli' and 'impulses.' He also had no use for Richards' attempt, in the Matthew Arnold vein,

to turn poetry into a sort of substitute religion. McLuhan eventually overlooked all of these

faults, however, because of the boldness of Richards' approach to criticism, as expressed chiefly

in his books *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism*" (37)

2.   In Pound, Hemingway and Joyce, along with the Symbolist poets and G.K. Chesterton,

McLuhan began to notice how play with language (in trickster fashion to shock readers) spoke to

concerns of culture in modernity (e.g., mechanization, electrification and the rapid pace of

change). These artistic forms of criticism, through which novelty spurring cultural enrichment

arose, directed McLuhan's attention (Marchand) and inspired his aphoristic, satirical style

(Willmott)

3.   Wachs offers thorough treatment of how McLuhan's Catholic Thomism influences his

thought to yield a "neo-medieval theory of communication," through which: body, mind and

world are holistically implicated through logos (i.e., reasoned speech); linguistic understanding is

productive of "transformation;" and that this linguistic, transformative reasoning involves a

"unified field of mind," by which understanding is poetic in nature (see 212-215)

4.   Leavis was a student of Richards. McLuhan met him while in Cambridge – although

Leavis was not his "classmate." (See Marchand p. 38).

5.   Per the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, 85 percent of U.S. households had at least one television set by 1960 (fcc.gov).

6.   Noticing that McLuhan would sometimes lose his train of thought mid-sentence, colleagues, students and his family wishfully attributed McLuhan's strange episodes to exhaustion. However, when the episodes began to include overt loss of consciousness, coupled with the appearance of tonic limbs, McLuhan sought medical advice. Although a Toronto physician offered the diagnosis of epilepsy prior to his time at Fordham, McLuhan chose to forego treatment and immerse himself in work (Marchand 211).

7.   In a poignant manner, the *effects* of McLuhan's surgery are similar to symptoms of neurasthenia described in George Miller Beard's treatise on the subject. Although Beard would likely not diagnose McLuhan with neurasthenia, the particular symptom of sensory irritation, biologically caused in McLuhan's case, is common to Beard's diagnosis of "American Nervousness" (*Treatise* 89-90, 106; *Supplement* 109-112). Both works may be found, open-source, through Google Books.

8.   Titles include, *The Medium is the Massage*, *Through the Vanishing Point*, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, *Counterblast*, *Culture is our Business*, *From Cliché to Archetype*, and *Take Today: Executive as Dropout*, many of which are co-written with McLuhan collaborators. Extensive bibliographies of McLuhan's entire corpus may be found in W. Terrence Gordon's 2003, Ginko Press, *Critical Version* of McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* and through McLuhan's official website: marshallmcluhan.com.

9.   Additionally, his books were not selling well (Marchand 223-247). Critics, including Johnathan Miller, took issue with McLuhan's assertions about and approach toward studying media on grounds that McLuhan's M.E. was over deterministic (Marchand 243-244).

10. Of McLuhan's entire corpus, Marchessault identifies *The Mechanical Bride*, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, *The Medium is the Massage*, *City as Classroom* and *Laws of Media* as McLuhan's major media criticism publications. For purposes of my project, I limit focused consideration to a selection of this subset, *MB*, *GG*, *UM*, and *LOM*, with reference to others as needed, due to overlap of ideas between texts.

11. Gordon offers a helpful characterization of these terms: "Grammar is not to be understood here in the narrow modern sense of parts of speech and sentence structure but as the art of interpreting phenomena. It takes in all of literature and includes etymology and exegesis. Dialectics is, variously, a way of testing evidence, the study of kinds of proofs for an argument, a method of dialogue, and logic. Grammar was primarily a humanistic activity; dialectics a philosophical one" (Gordon *MM* 104).

12. Although Thomas considers the body and perception, mind, or intellect, comes first for Thomas and is the unifying element of sensory existence – the *sensus communis*. Thus, embodiment for Thomas appears to be a form of semantic embodiment that relies upon correspondence between two separate realms – outer and inner: See Barral, Mary Rose. "Thomas Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophy Today* Fall (1992): 204-216. See also Richard Lanigan's description of semantic phenomenalism in *Speaking and Semiology* 58-60.

13. Note McLuhan's quote here: "The idea of a self-regulating economic system, free from rational controls and powered simply by human appetites and passions, occurred very easily to the traders of 1690, who were goggling at the mathematical clockwork cosmology held up to their eyes by the speculations of Descartes, Leibnitz, and Newton. God, the great geometer, was outside the machine of the universe, to which he had merely given an initial push. The number of mechanical inventions, which sprang into existence at this time, including clockwork robots that

could walk and write … is striking evidence of the power of philosophy in everyday concerns. Both the human body and the body politic soon came to be thought of as machines geared to the mathematical laws of the universe" (*MB* 134)

14. See: McLuhan, Marshall. "Politics as Theatre." *Performing Arts in Canada*. Winter (1973): 14-15. Print. McLuhan, discussing Watergate, says, "Under electric conditions of instant association of everybody with everybody, there is not only a great loss of private identity but a corresponding decline of ethics and values in the private sector. There is at present, as by complementary compensation an unexpected stringency and absolutism springing up in the ethics of the public sector. The very same psychic congestion that brings on the decline of the private dimension of individual responsibility via instant speeds of association, also reveals the need for new patterns of corporate behavior and idealism … an austere public ethic which accompanies the new politics of total involvement and participation" (16). I think what McLuhan suggests here is an ethic that eschews private-public mediation in favor of a morality that unreflectively follows public trends, in other words, ideology.

Note for Chapter 4

1.   For Merleau-Ponty, responsibility involves "a sustained acceptance of participation" (*Nature* 134). As John Russon explains, "the very nature of embodiment" for Merleau-Ponty, "is to find oneself compelled … to find oneself *called upon to respond to the situation* in a specific way: the form in which the other exists for the body is *as a call to action*" (299). In other words, "our experience of" others and otherness "reveals the commitments which constitute our selfhood" and thus reflexively our world (304). This means that we are "responsible for a situation ... and … for answering its call" (300), which is similar to Hyde's contention that *sustained openness* is necessary for acknowledgement. Such openness helps to ensure that we concretely experience the affective, anxious *feeling* of a call to communication. Merleau-Ponty's communication ethics are thus *felt*, i.e., *lived* in concrete participation with others amidst world, *rather than* strictly *known* in abstraction. Thus, situations, contexts, involving communication media, which tend toward the ambivalent extremes of the self-other, private-public, abstract-concrete, and proximity-distance synopses thus implicate our degree of perceptive-expressive participation, i.e., responsibility.

Notes for Chapter 5

1. See: Chapter 3, pp. 72-73

2. As McLuhan's critique of Bergson in *The Medium and The Light* indicates, "In terms of eye and ear, both are completely right, but when one begins making value judgments about the other – as Bergson did – the trouble begins. Bergson simply went over to the ear side of things and denounced the visual order as the enemy of all being" (44). McLuhan's *acoustic space* is thus not a realm of pure sound, but rather a field encouraging sensory resonance, i.e., the *dynamic equilibrium* of the *sensus communis*.

Notes for Chapter 6

1. See: Chapter 1 pp. 27-29

2. I engage the term *postmodern* in the sense of being responsive to modernity. Based on Arnett, Fritz and Bell's discussion of our postmodern historical moment, see paragraph beginning on p. 14 "This postmodern moment is an opportunity …," along with their suggestions that modernity is *a moment of change and difference* (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 80; 212), I suggest that postmodern indicates a moment of opportunity to respond to misgiven, modernist assumptions.

3. See my discussion of Willmott on McLuhan: Chapter 3, p. 71

4. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's attention to racism in this essay indicates his concern for the horrors of the holocaust thereby reinforcing the idea that his project is a response to Enlightenment humanist hubris, as well as the anti-humanist attitudes of modernity.

5. Drawing on George Herbert Mead and Seyla Benhabib, Arnett, Fritz and Bell address the abstract, *general other* and the concrete, *particular other*. See: Arnett, Fritz and Bell p. 38; 128.

6. I offer encyclopedic understanding such traditional, scientific views of anxiety. See: *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*. Ed. Richard L. Gregory. New York: Oxford, 1987. Print. See the entry for "Anxiety" (30-31).

7. I draw the term "narrative understanding," from Arnett, Fritz and Bell's discussion of "Narrative" – pp. 38-41 and from Walter J. Fisher's *Narrative Paradigm Theory*. Narrative understanding, as I intend the term, reflects understanding in terms of narrative fidelity and coherence. Fidelity is a quality of narrative that indicates how well a story, i.e., a set of assumptions informing practices, *rings true*. Coherence is a quality of narrative that indicates how well a story *hangs-together*, i.e., how well a narrative makes sense. Although Merleau-

Ponty and McLuhan do not explicitly offer narrative theories, their respective theoretical assumptions, aims and ends comport with Fisher's narrative model. Arnett, Fritz and Bell's discussion of narrative brings Fisher together with Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. See Fisher, Walter, J. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1987. Print.

8. Addressing the ambiguity amidst public spaces, Arnett, Fritz and Bell offer that a "lack of comfort … is good" due to our attunement to difference and otherness amidst moments of discomfort (113).

9. See: Chapter 4 pp. 99-103 and Chapter 5 pp. 130-135

10. See: Chapter 1 pp. 30-31

11. Hyde addresses the implications of digital technology for acknowledgement in Chapter Ten, "The Computerization of Acknowledgement" (222-255). As suggested, Hyde assumes an ambivalent stance toward possibilities for authentic acknowledgement online. On the one hand, he views the *faceless* (225) interaction of online exchange as discouraging acknowledgement while also noting possibilities for acknowledgement despite this *facelessness*.

Notes for Chapter 7

1. See Chapter 4 pp. 110-112 and Chapter 5 pp. 144-145

2. See Chapter 4 pp. 112-114 and Chapter 5 pp. 145-147

3. See Chapter 5, pp. 130-135

4. See Chapter 1 pp. 30-31

5. See Chapter 1 pp. 8-9

6. As Isaac Catt explains, though additional layers of mediation in experience sometimes "extend us to the point" of "repressing our bodies," "the body always remains the sufficient condition in communication. It is only a body who can write … only a body who can read" (137). Our bodies cohere and unify our particular existence allowing possibilities for agency and contact, as well as our freedom to choose to acknowledge and respond to otherness and others through which possibilities for constitutive, significant change persistently persist. See: Catt, Isaac, E. "The Signifying World between Ineffability and Intelligibility: Body as Sign in Communicology." *The Review of Communication* 11.2, 2011: 122-144. Print.

7. "Action at a distance," drawn from physics and applied to communication, is a major theme of John Durham Peter's *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, which traces the evolution of communication theory, including attention to the Cartesian ideal. See: Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012. Print.

8. As Arnett, Fritz and Bell suggest, "The quality of our lives rests in the interplay of difference that begins with the natural dialectic of public and private" as well as self-other (Arnett, Fritz and Bell 114). Though Arnett, Fritz and Bell address "Public Discourse Ethics" here, their sentiments may be generalized to encompass other engagements.

9. See Chapter 3 pp. 75-77

10. In *The Medium and The Light*, McLuhan addresses his approach as being similar to Gilson's. McLuhan suggests that Gilson's "reconstructive" approach to philosophy and history exemplifies "Maritan's principle that there is in every great period and civilization a dominant idea" (*M&L* 155). Additionally, Gilson does not simply state what the ideas are, but rather invites his readers to discover those ideas with him as they read (*M&L* 155-156). This is similar to the nature of McLuhan's M.E. criticism as revealed by this Merleau-Pontean reading.

11. Though Neil Postman has implied that McLuhan's media criticism lacks evaluation of technology's moral implications, this existential phenomenological reading suggests otherwise. McLuhan resisted application of digital-either-or assessments of particular media forms because every technology assumes a synoptic good-bad structure. See: Postman, Neil. "The Humanism of Media Ecology." *Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication*. Ed. Casey Man Kong Lum. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2006. 61-70. Print.

12. Richard Kearney engages the phrase "Eucharistic embodiment" to describe the nature of Merleau-Ponty's embodied and embedded body. I suggest that the characterization also applies to McLuhan based on Wach's suggestion that McLuhan's Catholic faith inspires his work. See: Kearney, Richard. "Merleau-Ponty and the Sacramentality of the Flesh." *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion and Perception*. Eds. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo. London: A&C Black Publishing, 2010. 147-167. Print.

13. See Chapter 3 p. 71; See Willmott, p. 188

14. Ambivalence is a theme of Van den Eede's text. He addresses the theme most cogently throughout his "Introduction" (15-34). Van den Eede also addresses McLuhan as recognizing an ambivalent structure of technical existence in Chapter 14, "Into Ourselves: Is Narcissus a

Narcissist by Design?" – see p. 123 in particular; Willmott suggests that McLuhan's M.E. demonstrates an adherence to modernist, ambivalent ideals in Chapter 9, "Being There" (180). Willmott offers this interpretation in the opening paragraph on p. 180 and the paragraph beginning with "Even within a postmodernity which has seen modernization …" (193).

15. Rufo emphasizes the priority of consciousness. He says, "McLuhan contends that communication media produce a numbness in the *psyche* of those reared on them" [emphasis mine] (126). Rufo also suggests that McLuhan's metaphor indicates that "Narcissus falls in love with *his extension*, *his presence* in another medium" [emphasis mine] (126). Though the psychic dimension is undoubtedly reflected in McLuhan's *Narcissus-Narcosis* metaphor, by passing over the significance of Narcissus' body Rufo eschews McLuhan's point that Narcissus mistook his *own image* in the water for *another person* – a double that is not he (*UM*). Rufo also suggests that as McLuhan "formulated" "media as 'extensions of the self'," he must "presume something from which to extend" (126). This something, Rufo claims, "remains theoretically vague in McLuhan's texts" yet Rufo "gets the impression of some originary subject, existing prior to media" (126). By neglecting concern for the body and by relegating consideration to representationalist assumptions, the "originary subject" is obscure for Rufo. Ultimately, Rufo also concludes that, "the subject is always already mediated" (126). However, his adherence to representationalist assumptions, which eschew the body, lead him to suggest that, "media … must be understood to constitute the subject rather than to modify it" (126). Rufo's thus paints McLuhan a technological determinist who holds little hope for possibilities of communicative change amidst a technical milieu. As I have shown, McLuhan's implicit theory of communication and communication ethics suggest otherwise.

16. Arnett, Fritz and Bell offer the natural dialectic of direction-change amidst discussion of "Business and Professional Communication Ethics" (173-190). I broaden this dialectic to speak to the context of a technical milieu thus indicating the dialectic of technical-communicative change.

17. As Arnett, Fritz and Bell explain, the theoretical imbrication of learning, discernment and difference, which characterize communication ethics amidst our postmodern, digital moment encourages reflective consideration of change (212). In contrast to the blind acceptance of technical imposition of novelty which McLuhan describes amidst modernity, Arnett, Fritz and Bell indicate that our postmodern moment, *characterized by difference*, does not privilege ready acceptance of novelty (212). The ecology of modernity with its ambivalent, Cartesian assumptions protected and promoted unreflective acceptance of new technologies and ideals based on the universal assumption that the limits of our embodiment and embedment were constraints that must overcome.

18. "The quality of our lives together rests within a pragmatic hope that learning about the new will trump our short-sighted, *self-protective* impulses to reject whatever is in contrast with what we already know and do" (Arnett, Fritz and Bell xix)

19. Arnett, Fritz and Bell offer Frankl's notion of a Final Freedom as follows: "when life seems to offer no way out of a bad moment, apparently offering only a sense that we are left to swim with no dry land in sight, our final freedom frames a pragmatic question: 'What do we do in those moments of treading water that seem to last forever, while we wait for the end—or until an unexpected rescue saves us?' … when there is no longer an easy answer given to us, we must find a creative response that breaks free of our demand for options no longer available. At such a moment, we choose the manner in which we meet the inevitable" (218).

20. See Chapter 6 p. 185

21. See Chapter 5 pp. 136-137; The tetrad is a heuristic device comprised of four questions" "What does it enhance or intensify? What does it render obsolete or displace? What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced? What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?" that help to elucidate dimensions of figure-ground relations involving human creations such as media (McLuhan and McLuhan 7).

22. Arnett, Fritz and Bell offer a set of guideposts, applicable to considering dialogic communication ethics practices amidst contexts of dialogic, public, organizational, intercultural, and health care communication ethics. The guidepost of "listening without demand" speaks to the importance of openness to difference, learning and understanding and offers the question, "What is happening in a given moment?" (205). The guidepost of "attentiveness" directs our attention to discerning the grounds of self-other-world via the question, "What are the coordinating grounds upon which stand the self, the Other, and the historical moment?" (205). Last, the guidepost of "dialogic negotiation," promotes ambiguous communication between self-other in a manner that encourages reflection and authentic, significant understanding via the question, "What temporal communicative ethics answers emerge 'between' persons, pointing to communicative options for action, belief, and understanding?"

23. See Chapter 1 pp. 4-5

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