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Discarnation: Expounding on Marshall McLuhan's Critique of Modern Subjectivity

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DISCARNATION: EXPOUNDING ON MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S

CRITIQUE OF MODERN SUBJECTIVITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Amanda L. Sevilla

December 2018

DISCARNATION: EXPOUNDING ON MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S

CRITIQUE OF MODERN SUBJECTIVITY

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Approved October 30, 2018

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ABSTRACT

DISCARNATION: EXPOUNDING ON MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S

CRITIQUE OF MODERN SUBJECTIVITY

By

Amanda L. Sevilla

December 2018

Dissertation supervised by Calvin L. Troup, Ph.D.

This project presents Marshall McLuhan's work as an explication of discarnate

subjectivity in mediated environments, with special focus on the consequences of

technological environments in society. The first and second chapters focus on McLuhan's

ground, sensibilities, and practice to shed light on his intricate discussions of social

perceptions emerging in modern times—i.e., communal awareness propels perceptual and

cultural shifts. The third chapter attends to people's perceptual compass, or their ability to

interpret the world around them. Chapter four considers some of the phenomenological

aspects of McLuhan's probes. The ideas show disconnects between time and space that

contribute to discarnation in everyday life. Chapter five showcases ways the Incarnate

represents a hermeneutic inquiry into media omnipresence in the social forum.

Ultimately, in the final chapter, I show that McLuhan's well-known phrase "the medium

is the message," as I will maintain, bypasses popular culture's surface-level assumptions

about media and leads us instead to the heart of McLuhan's work, which is the notion

that discarnation is a consequence of—and directly linked to—modern subjectivity.

DEDICATION

For Marv, "my person," thank you for always believing in me more than I ever have.

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As I explored Herbert Marshall McLuhan's work, I was intrigued and inspired by his quick wit and genuine love of learning. Now that I am finishing this part of the journey, I would like to acknowledge several people who have helped me succeed as I worked to complete my Ph.D. at Duquesne University.

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To my niece, Aashi, I hope you always follow your dreams, little bean.

Then there is Marv, my sweet husband, thank you for being my best friend. I am lucky to be on this journey with you by my side.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by (or co-authored with) McLuhan:

BOP   *Book of Probes*

CAC   *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media*

FCA   *From Cliché to Archetype*

GG   *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*

GV   *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*

LOM   *Laws of Media: The New Science*

MAL   *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*

MB   *Mechanical Bride*

TOC   *Theories of Communication*

TCT   *The Classical Trivium*

UM   *Understanding Media*

WP   *War and Peace in the Global Village*

Other Works:

AOD   *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Postman)

BAT   *Being and Time (Heidegger)*

BOC   *Bias of Communication* (Innis)

LE   *Lecture on Ethics* (Kant)

PH   *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Gadamer)

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Within the purview of Rhetoric and Philosophy of Communication study, this project addresses the following question: *What are the implications of Marshall McLuhan's rhetorical critique of modern subjectivity within a mediated world?* This question provokes a rhetorical inquiry into McLuhan's explanations of technological environments, including how technology affects social thought, perception, and communication. Media ecology and its rhetorical coordinates connect McLuhan's work to an understanding of the human condition. My goal for this project is to more clearly situate McLuhan's critique of modern subjectivity within communication studies.

McLuhan's expansive literary and historical references reflect his popular musings that human life is not organized in a tidy, linear narrative. His writings offer a scholarly framework of interdisciplinary discussion, which explores literary works and historical events that have shaped public perceptions and social narratives through the ages. One work that stands out is *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* because it is widely known, but it also becomes the subject of misunderstandings and misappropriations in the public forum. For example, McLuhan is often credited for popular sound bites extracted from his work, including broad generalizations of "the global village" and trite cultural references to "the medium is the message," phrases popularized after appearing in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* and *Understanding Media.*

McLuhan is interested in the ways technological change affects time, space, and perspective. He often explains the present moment as a perspective of all history, and yet we can only view "the old mechanized environment of the industrial age" in hindsight (see McLuhan,

1

UM 13). McLuhan's work offers a rich explication of rhetorically driven perception in the mediated world. This dissertation project will explore McLuhan's interpretations of perception, space and time, as well as his critical interpretations of an autonomous self as they unfold in *Laws of Media: The New Science,* which he edited with his son Eric McLuhan. The goal is to move these ideas toward a communication theory of an involved, communal nature of perception informed by McLuhan.

Scholarship and Related Topics

Communication study continues to explore the nature of perceptual habits in an actively connected world. Technologies are extensions of the human body, according to Marshall McLuhan, because they are inherently extensions of the senses and, at their most sensual, engage the entire central nervous system, as explained in *Understanding Media.* Therefore, the question herein explores the philosophical implications of technology usage and its impact on human identity. The theoretical approach in this inquiry will include a hermeneutic conversation that places literacy and media as significant to media effects.

McLuhan extensively refutes early philosophical conversations that preceded his work in the early twentieth century. These models sometimes placed emphasis on a fragmentation among unreflective technology use, active life, and perception (e.g., hypothesizing a so-called "mind-body" disconnect). For McLuhan, no such division exists, and such a line would simplify a rich conversation on the inextricable link between human perceptions and action. McLuhan's *Understanding Media* is still one of the most influential books in media ecology studies, and it now employs a more deeply grounded connection to the conversation regarding how people experience everyday life. For McLuhan, perception includes not only thought but is also directly

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tied to tactility and "kinesthesis," or kinesthetic sense (*Understanding Media* 66). Through these types of explanations, McLuhan creates a labyrinth of relevant intersections between media ecology and philosophy of communication.

Even into the second decade of the twenty-first century, and more than three decades since Marshall McLuhan's death in 1980, scholars call for a clearer exploration of McLuhan's ideas (see Anton; Logan; Marchessault; Strate). McLuhan's thought is still so pervasive and explanatory that scholars seek out his expertise to explain our current public forum. Robert K. Logan recently published *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* as not only an ode to McLuhan's predictions for technology, but to outline the rippling effect of "new media," a grounding from which McLuhan works (1). Logan also refutes popular claims that McLuhan was a technological determinist, which Logan says typically emerge from those who "who have not read him carefully or thoroughly" (3). The recent wave of conversation on McLuhan's work indicates that those who carefully unravel the complex ideas in his corpus may recover his scholarly reputation.

A new inquiry into McLuhan's philosophy is vital to recovering excerpted *McLuhanisms,* including popular metaphors such as "the global village" and "the medium is the message," and explicating them more clearly within communication study. The French term "*mcluhanisme*" is a "synonym for the world of pop culture," as noted in the opening of his 1969 *Playboy* interview republished in *Essential McLuhan* (233). McLuhan's prophetic understanding of embodied, sensual perception moves beyond trite expressions to a significantly more intuitive approach, which is even more valuable now than it was when he first brought the issues to our attention.

According to Janine Marchessault, misinterpretations of widely quoted definitions, including basic denotations of "hot" and "cool" media, indicate that even critics can ask good

questions but ultimately interpret McLuhan incorrectly (175). Marchessault notes an egregious misinterpretation of television as a "hot" medium (instead of its correct label of "cool") in neurologist Jonathan Miller's work (175). With language and interpretation at the center of McLuhan's inquiries, it is seemingly even more important to carefully explicate his observations in order to avoid misappropriations of his discussions in order to maintain intellectual fidelity with his ideas.

McLuhan's corpus challenges explanations of everyday activities that cling to past innovations and deny present day inventions. This is how McLuhan is able to move phonetic explanations to ideas on the library and changing patterns of social literacy. For example, Paul Levinson's *YouTube* channel presents a clip of McLuhan saying, "The possibility of recreating libraries has become fantastically real. For example, all the books in the world can be put on a single desktop. Twenty million. Twenty million books can now be put—open, every page—on a single desktop. The book is no longer a package; it's information service" (qtd. in Levinson, "Marshall McLuhan: Then and Now"). The fact that the video is readily available on the Internet is a current example of McLuhan's prophetic understanding of literacy change in society. An example like this not only highlights McLuhan's media ecology, but also indicates his status as a grammarian, as indicated in his conversations on the *trivium*. The rhetorical underpinnings of McLuhan's ideas on perceptual shifts ascend from a deeply rhetorical approach to explore mass cultural change.

An integral insight into McLuhan's understanding of culture and its connection to artistic media can be seen in his grammatical assessments of language. His corpus often posits that language in the forms of speech and scribe is at the heart of all mediated communication. One of McLuhan's assertions in *Counterblast* illustrates an emphasis on cultural analysis, "In Western

history it is the period when a brief balance between written and oral experience emerges for a few decades that we mark as the great cultural flowerings. Today we are approaching the means of initiating and prolonging such conditions" (82-83).

A sequential passing of time is important to McLuhan's ontological treatment of perceptions in time and space as part of a larger issue. McLuhan's ideas on patterns and habits are permeated by technology, thus manifesting human "discarnate existence" due to a deprivation of philosophical ground in individuals' daily activities, particularly focusing on the activities that require an immersion in media and an apprehension of the senses (McLuhan, *Letters* 479; Zingrone and McLuhan 3). An electronic disconnection from the natural body creates the discarnate self and is therefore an escape from a conscious experience.

In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan discusses the time differentiation in people's lives as divided between "pre-electric age" and post-electric age patterns (6). His explanations on the evolving patterns of existence inform communication theory because McLuhan looks at the effects of media as they emerged at different historical moments. Importantly, Harold Innis's work on time-space connections inspired much of McLuhan's initial analyses of an ever-changing social forum. The lived environment is the place for human communication, and this notion refutes the individual as necessarily an autonomous actor.

Social activities include interpretation of the world, perception, identity, and interpersonal relations. McLuhan's work often presented "probes[1]" (i.e., aphorisms and literary metaphors) that set up philosophical markers and their subsequent elaboration. These probes add insight into the social aspects of the lived experience, and therefore position a rhetorical ground

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[1] *The Book of Probes* is a collection of poignant "McLuhanisms" on perception, language and its correlation to "formal cause" (McLuhan and Kuhns 407).

within McLuhan's dialectical discussions of life in a technology-saturated historical moment. The postmodern moment engages a modern dialectic of progress and is foundational to McLuhan's argument for societal implosion. McLuhan, whose work offers a holistic inquiry into thought patterns, described how an entranced giving of the self in body and mind leads to personal and societal implosion.

McLuhan's legacy takes rhetorical analyses of technology beyond the bounds of simplistic methodologies. Unfortunately—and much to the detriment of McLuhan's early reputation—McLuhan's work was (and still is) often generalized in a sound bite fashion, thus distracting from the longitudinal possibilities for rhetorical inquiry that his work invites. If a defining characteristic of a public forum involves cultural tendencies and ubiquitous habits during identifiable historical moments, then Marshall McLuhan's work showcases these metaphors in a way that explores dialogue that can define an era through such extensive historical accounts.

McLuhan explains lived experience and psychic impulses as culled by a social technological presence. In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan includes perceptual examples and describes how perceptions are engaged via sensory awareness. An overview of the dialectical problem emerges here. If, for example, art is examined separately from its history, then an observer sees only what a person embedded in a highly technological age can see. McLuhan discusses the psychological and neurological immersion in technology that the human being experiences, describing the technological seduction as a "private manipulation" (99). Although McLuhan does not fully discount the content of a medium, he instead shows greater concern for a symptomatic, widespread, and subliminal social takeover that stems from widespread technological surrender. McLuhan declares a need for awareness of a sweeping assault on

tradition that has persisted through history and posits in epideictic terms, "If we persist in a conventional approach to these developments our traditional culture will be swept aside as scholasticism was in the sixteenth century" (103).

The study of visual bias is important to the discussion of the lived experience and a general lacking societal awareness when interpreting one's own place in the world. Then follows human understanding of the world itself, grand human histories and philosophies that get lost in the minutiae of news reporting and specialized technologies. McLuhan's ideas were grounded in historical substantiation as well. When he published *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962 and *Understanding Media* in 1964, McLuhan presented a philosophy of communication explained from the teachings of antiquity through postmodernity, an expansive inquiry that mirrors a rediscovery of art and literature during the Renaissance. Writing on the cusp of a monumental transition from modern to postmodern theories, McLuhan identifies patterns of communication similar to those in the culturally transitional Medieval and Renaissance periods.

McLuhan's use of philosophical inquiry is embedded in literature, art, and history. The major point of interest here is the movement away from a philosophical attitude to individualism, a self-reflective attitude that discounts the importance of thoughtful communicative praxis. McLuhan claimed that the problem in the twentieth century was a lack of philosophical inquiry at not only the individual level but also at the social level—where philosophies of communication and media ecology complement each other. For example, the connection between books, news media, and their creation of "re-cognition" of human experiences, according to McLuhan, is where we discover a place of contention within a discussion on human perception and humankind's social subjectivity (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 283). This is ultimately McLuhan's introduction into an epistemological study of media that often takes

control of "collective awareness" (114). The ideas point to what the public knows and the internal processes through which they achieve that knowledge. Culture becomes pertinent in such an inquiry as well.[2]

At the Media Ecology Association (MEA) 2000 convention, Neil Postman explored the cultural climate of media ecology studies and said, "A medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking" (Postman, "The Humanism" 10). Hereby concentrating on culture, Postman describes the parallel between the notion of culture and the word "ecology" (10). He then defines "ecology" in the Aristotelian sense as "'household'" (10). Postman explains further that media ecology illustrated the world in which we live as a merge point for natural environments and technological environments, at least in the early stages of media studies' scholarly agenda (10).

However, McLuhan had opposed the positioning of a dichotomous question in media ecology that asked whether technology is "good" or "bad" for humanity, according to Postman (11). Citing McLuhan's repeated references to a Stephen Vincent Benét poem—*John Brown's Body*—Postman recounted the lines that McLuhan quoted: "Say neither, it is blessed nor cursed. / Say only "'It is here.'" (11). Postman continues with an explanation of McLuhan's approach and says, "McLuhan claimed that we ought to take the same point of view in thinking about modern media: that they are neither blessed nor cursed, only that they are here. He thought that this moral neutrality would give the best opportunity to learn exactly how new media do their stuff"

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[2] Media ecologists are interested in the ways McLuhan navigates the idea of social change. For example, Joshua Meyrowitz opened the 2001 Media Ecology Association (MEA) Convention with a discussion titled, "Morphing McLuhan. In the talk, he explored McLuhan's attentiveness to *change* in the social sphere, saying his corpus contains a "call for us to look at changes in the nature of change: change in the rate of change, change in the type of change, change in the criteria used to judge change, change in the narratives used to describe change" (11).

(11). For McLuhan, too, the issue is not necessarily the content of what is being said in the

public forum, but instead an inquiry into the communally engaged individual.

In *Counterblast,* McLuhan recognized the communal, physical space in which language,

text, and visual art are engaged. Within what McLuhan calls "post-literate acoustic space" (16)

an individual meets an environment in a space that is not always seen. The perception of this

meeting is in the real-time moment, likely in the social setting, and also encompasses McLuhan's

notion of "loneliness" (16). We see and experience, but we do so in a perceptually dependent

way. In such a case, knowledge was already amassed in the past. The remnants of the past

therefore construct the thoughts and reactions, thus creating a mythical "hidden environment" in

the technologized world (see McLuhan, *Counterblast,* 17, 22). The concept of an ongoing

mythical real-time experience is central to McLuhan's understanding of technology's influence

on communication patterns. Specifically, technology-based communication is therefore

asynchronous and certainly not static. Not incidentally, this put forth McLuhan's caution against

a moralism in media ecology studies (Postman 11). In his speech, Postman admitted that he [i.e.,

Postman] was amenable to placing a moralism in his own media studies (11).

Instead of implementing a moralism in his work, McLuhan poses questions that

hermeneutically examine liturgy, human faith, and devotional time and space. In *The Medium*

and the Light: Reflections on Religion, one such question opens the essay, "Do Americans Go to

Church to Be Alone?" (116). Here McLuhan's first major move offers an examination of

"involuntary" indoor and outdoor migration, paying close attention to the defining factors of

private and social spaces, in North American culture (119). A contrast between American and

European senses of privacy is an entrance into McLuhan's understanding communally derived

messages in the public forum. McLuhan explains, for example, how advertising has become

annoying but tolerated by American audiences. Furthermore, American audiences are generally more annoyed by "invasions of privacy" that occur when other movie-goers talk too loudly in a theater (120). The recognition of communal existence therefore becomes important to an interpretation of shared environments.

McLuhan's work focuses on the relevance of information dissemination, shared media exposure, and a consequential influence on human perception. For example, within his discussion of time, McLuhan positions a critical view of Lewis Mumford's take on "the mechanization of society," saying that Mumford neglected the role of "the phonetic alphabet as the technology that had made possible the visual and uniform fragmentation of time" (*UM* 200). We can see that McLuhan is careful to weigh his analogies against several technological advancements through history. McLuhan's definition of understanding and interpretation when dealing with multifaceted media unfold within such analogies. An important intersection occurs between McLuhan's discussions of the liberal arts and media studies as well.

McLuhan, who wrote extensively about the nature of perception (i.e., an often interchangeable term for "consciousness" throughout his corpus), was able to raise questions about a cause and effect argument regarding media studies and the philosophy of communication. Essentially, an exploration of consciousness falls at the center of my investigation of McLuhan's work. That is, a probe into perception asks whether any popular medium takes hold of human consciousness *unawares*. McLuhan's insights on literate culture, oral and written communication inform communication studies by redefining the notion of literacy, specifically creating new denotations of literacy in the digital age.

Additionally, McLuhan's work on moving communication study from content to form, particularly elaborating the importance of the media that drive perceptual change, has affected

the way scholars talk about media effects within a social dialectic. His findings elucidate a need

for communication studies to discuss a heedless media swell as a harbinger for the public's

changing patterns of social literacy, perception, and lived experience. This is why, I think,

McLuhan included discussions on the delusions of Narcissus, who falls in love with his mirrored

image—without recognizing that the reflection is his own—which exemplifies the numb,

extended self. It is a perception of sorts, but the perception is not a consciousness of self but

instead a consciousness of an attachment to something outside of the body. The human ability to

be caught unawares exemplifies McLuhan's notion that says, "Everybody experiences far more

than he understands" (*UM* 424).

 While McLuhan was a talented critical literary theorist, especially because of his

extensive literary expertise, his work often showcases a disdain for the reductive practices in

academia. He was quite good at critical analysis, but he also involved a constructive hermeneutic

approach whenever he engaged in a debate about the historicity hoisted upon cultural

interpretations of progress, for example. In this respect, McLuhan's ideas make it clear that

perception is not bound by a mere chronological sequence. He was interested in the big picture,

society-at-large, and a narrative that drives human understanding and responsiveness in life.

In the introductory section of McLuhan and Parker's book, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space

and Poetry in Painting,* Ruth Nanda Anshen places McLuhan's work within a scholarly

conversation about social changes in the late 1960s. The book is part of a series called *World*

Perspectives. She writes the following about the state of affairs relevant to the time:

 It is the thesis of *World Perspectives* that man is in the process of developing a new

 consciousness which, in spite of his apparent spiritual and moral captivity, can eventually

 lift the human race above and beyond the fear, ignorance, and isolation which beset it

today. It is to this nascent consciousness, to this concept of man born out of a universe

perceived through a fresh vision of reality, that *World Perspectives* is dedicated. (xv)

McLuhan's ideas show that subjectivity is embedded in media environments and grounds his

claims within a hermeneutic inquiry. New patterns of interpretation and biases in the social

forum are part of his critique of modern thought.

Importantly, McLuhan's son and scholarly protégé Eric McLuhan points to his father's

intentional focus on patterns in the mediated social forum in their co-authored collection of

essays titled *Media and Formal Cause*. An Aristotelian understanding of rhetorical ground

emerges to exemplify the *realness* of reality. Perception is tied directly to the ground on which

an audience stands. For example, in the essay, "On Formal Cause," Eric McLuhan further

explains that of Aristotle's four causes—*i.e., material, efficient, formal, and final*—"formal

cause" includes *all forms,* especially when applied to an examination of sense experience (see

91). McLuhan offers a hermeneutic analysis, "Moralism works at the same level as efficient

cause; both tend to become preoccupations of strong biases" (91). This is one of the points Neil

Postman noted about McLuhan's work—that McLuhan was not necessarily pushing a moral

code, nor was he necessarily seeking to create one.

Patterns and waves of communication greatly interested McLuhan. He understood that

modernity was very much interested in *telos* than cause. The greater effect of a technology would

become more important than its origins. Prior research on his corpus that explored points of

rhetoric, poetics, and psychology will vary in their exegesis of human perception. Terrence

Gordon's introduction to Marshall McLuhan's published Cambridge dissertation, *The Classical

Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time,* points to exegesis as a driving

force within the trivium. Gordon's introduction highlights one of the greatest accomplishments

of the work—i.e., McLuhan's understanding of human perception and reaction to social phenomena.

McLuhan's scholarship situates his ideas about perception in deeply rhetorical study based on the *trivium.* McLuhan understands perception through his examinations of rhetoric and the seven liberal arts, which are comprised of the linguistic *trivium* (rhetoric, dialectic, and grammar) and the scientific *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). The visual or acoustic delivery of messages through technological advancement is at the center of McLuhan's understanding of perceptual subjectivity in the mediated world. The way McLuhan confronts traditional notions of a fractured subjectivity is through various analyses on perspective, which suggests that human interaction is at its best in an acoustic space. Therefore, these social phenomena become important coordinates where McLuhan contributes to the expansion of theories on human subjectivity, as my dissertation will examine further.

The Medieval Period was a time of intellectual growth beyond the phonetic alphabet (a hot medium) that moved diplomatic relations to paper in the form of written letters using typography (39). This movement of information is the impetus for later revolutions to come, as McLuhan explains as an emerging "global village" in history due to a "reversal" in writing patterns and says, "The printed word with its specialist intensity burst the bonds of medieval corporate guilds and monasteries, creating extreme individualist patterns of enterprise and monopoly. But the typical reversal occurred when extremes of monopoly brought back the corporation, with its impersonal empire over many lives" (*UM* 39). McLuhan is then able to surmise that paper became a social and political turning point in the Middle Ages. He says, "The hotting-up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism and the religious wars of the sixteenth century" (*UM* 40). It is the repetition of print that shakes the

dynamic of a culture that once relied on cool technologies and creates a shift toward dominant

hot technologies.

McLuhan offers a complex application of rhetorical coordinates that emerge as a

historicity of social space and a narrative of human understanding. During the eighteenth-century

Enlightenment, the mind's relationship with (or its separation from) the body was scrutinized. In

the book *The Enlightenment,* Dorinda Outram says the social nature of communication goes

beyond a dismissive relativism, a view of history that McLuhan also emphasizes as important,

"Enlightenment scholars have yet to come to grips with the issues of the relationship between the

Enlightenment and the creation of a global world. "Globalisation" is meant herein to be the study

of the history of factors which, with the accelerating speed since the Enlightenment, have come

together to make the world a single system" (8). It is in a "single system" comparison that we

find some explication of McLuhan's idea of the global village and shared perceptual space. The

fast dissemination of information through technology is a greater "sum" of the mass effects in a

media-saturated society (*GV* 52; see also Outram 8; McLuhan, *UM* 40;). Therefore, a medium

produces cultural shifts and affects communication evolution more powerfully than the content it

carries.

Communication evolution is a harbinger for communication scholars' study of

McLuhan's ideas. Some of the earlier articles from *Explorations in Communication,* published in

an edited 1960 anthology, include essays by Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye, Edmund

Carpenter, and several other groundbreaking scholars. The editors, McLuhan and Carpenter,

provide an introduction that highlights the ontological aim of the selected essays. The opening

deliberation covers the ways scholarship was being handled in the mid-twentieth century, which

emphasized a critical approach to what this introduction labels "a one-thing-at-a-time analytic

awareness in perception" (McLuhan and Carpenter xi). Thus, we are introduced to some early

deliberations of the subliminal and the subconscious that emerge in McLuhan's work. For

example, even in a short synopsis of the major ideas in *Explorations,* we also get a preview of

the most phenomenological aspects of McLuhan's approach to mediated perception and

subjectivity. Importantly, the word "perception" is seemingly more a favorable approach for

McLuhan than the word "subjectivity," as it is not used here, but it seems the notion of

"personal" experience is of high priority in general (xi).

  At some points, the individual is described in *Explorations* as having an internal, personal

awareness but also functioning in a communal way in "the global village," for example (x-xi). In

this brief section of text, we can see the critical line of thinking that would permeate McLuhan's

(specifically) analyses of the global village as lived experiences—tribalized, detribalized, or

retribalized—due to different effects of media and varied levels of visual and acoustic exposure

in public space. They explain the notion of public space further, "Postliterate man's electronic

media contract the world to a village or tribe where everything happens to everyone at the same

time; everyone knows about it, and therefore participates in, everything that is happening the

minute it happens. Television gives this quality of simultaneity to events in the global village"

(xi).

  In the first *Explorations* article*,* McLuhan introduces the notion that there is an

"individualistic" aspect of print media (1). In "Classroom without Walls," he says that the mass

production of books allows people to read silently and alone, yet everybody could own the same

book, potentially (McLuhan 1). In reaction to this line of thinking, Neil Postman confronts the

subliminal aspects of the media environment. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse*

in the Age of Show Business Postman posits, "What is so peculiar about such interpositions of

media is that their role in directing what we will see or know is so rarely noticed" (11). Instead of seeing the media message as something that makes the most impact on the social due to the patterns McLuhan so often describes, Postman views the message as more closely linked to "metaphors" that emerge from content and as a way to know "what the world is like" (*AOD* 10).

Marchessault describes McLuhan's contributions to a scholarly debate about the ways people perceive the world while embedded in a mediated world. She also examines the critical debates surrounding McLuhan's understanding of language in his ongoing study of perception. Marchessault notes, too, that "Dorothy Lee…is the original explorer of the journal *Explorations"* (87). Marchessault highlights the common McLuhan connection to Lee's work with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which attempts to explicate a mind-language relationship. Lee, a humanist anthropologist, placed importance on the interdependence of dialogue, orality, and culture. Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf explored a thought-language connection that becomes important to the rhetorical aspects of media environments as we study them today.

British linguist David Crystal famously and extensively addresses questions on language, thought, and behavior. In an excerpt titled "Language and Thought" from his widely studied and renowned *Cambridge Encyclopedia,* Crystal contests aspects of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This is important to note in my dissertation because it informs the argument between linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity. The former, Crystal says, "states that language determines the way we think" (14). The latter, linguistic relativity, "states the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other language" (14). Crystal notes, too, that we need be neither determinist nor relativist in our assumptions between cross-cultural language differences (14). For McLuhan, this type of analysis leads us to see the contrasts of acoustic and visual spaces, and for Lee, this is a linguistic anthropology that outlines the ways words and images are

assessed in the mind. Similarly, for Lee, it seems that an anthropological vein of intercultural inquiry is a way to understand the variables when people communicate and experience the world from different viewpoints and intellectual understandings.

A notable point of reference to my discussion on McLuhan's examinations of subjectivity and perception, Crystal identifies a variation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that is less deterministic in so much as refuting an absolute correlation between thought and language (15). He does say, however, the following about language-perception connection, "Language may not determine the way we think, but it does influence the way we perceive and remember, and it affects the ease with which we perform mental tasks" (Crystal 15).

The *Explorations* essays are descriptively hermeneutic because of their emphasis on culture, habits of interpretation, and cultural biases. S. Giedion's essay, "Space Conception in Prehistoric Art," also part of the collection, offers the collection deeper insight into the mystery of artistic expression and interpretation in a given cultural forum. In a phenomenological approach to artistic interpretation, Giedion examines particular artistic forms of "space conception" that emerge in art from different historical periods (86). Much of this essay is devoted to the differing historical understandings of time that do not necessarily translate in the current historical moment.

For McLuhan, similar observations regarding historically embedded written works emerge. According to Marchessault, McLuhan "understood modernity in terms of mediation, and as a fundamental reconfiguration of reality—of subjectivities and bodies—through time and space technologies, or the mechanical bride" (71). The role of perception is embedded in McLuhan's understanding of the discarnate individual who becomes embedded in mediated communication and wooed by technological advancements. In relation to this, McLuhan

discourages a fragmentation of subject-relationships between bodies and objects confronted in the world.

Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Investigations

To inform my discussion on McLuhan's critique of subjectivity in *Laws of Media,* I turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's phenomenological descriptions of interpretations that occur in the social forum. In *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* Gadamer puts forth the notion of a hermeneutic of interpretation that requires attention to a communal horizon. This horizon transcends personal engagement of a particular moment or event, but instead requires an individual to interpret beyond the limits of one's personal history (Gadamer, *PH* 18). For Gadamer, involvement in the world must include a dialectic that moves beyond empathetic approaches to human understanding. The way this unfolds more deeply becomes more apparent in Gadamer's explanations of language and conversation in the social forum.

Hence there is in fact a way to better understand perceptual patterns of the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste) utilizing a hermeneutic investigation. The connection between McLuhan's work and hermeneutics leads to the notion that mediated perception involves pattern manipulation. In more pointed terms, perception and social thought patterns are shaped by such interpretations of mediated discourse. When Gadamer discusses "interpretation," he equates it with understanding. He says, "All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language" (Gadamer, *TM* 390). Interpretation is a major hermeneutic entrance into social understanding that encompasses Gadamer's philosophy.

Additionally, also in *Truth and Method,* Gadamer talks about a "fusion of horizons" instead of placing emphasis on an intersubjective approach to interpretation (390). Gadamer

attests to a necessity for philosophical movement beyond the "limitations" of subjective

understandings of life, placing emphasis on praxis that moves the hermeneutic inquiry even

closer to a rhetorical "reflection" (see *PH* 18-19). We see a break away from subject-object

divide here. For McLuhan, specifically in *Laws of Media,* the media environment is a place

where technological involvement can ultimately lead to a discarnate existence (65). In the

collected essays, *McLuhan: Hot and Cool,* McLuhan offers a philosophical definition of the

objects in an environment, "Objects are unobservable. Only relationships among objects are

observable" (260). In his responses at the end of the collection, McLuhan also emphasizes a call

for the study of environments as an entrance into cultural understanding. This is why a

hermeneutic entrance into McLuhan's work is so vital to my discussion.

Within the scope of rhetorical hermeneutics, explanations of language change begin with

McLuhan's ideas on the metamorphoses of language throughout history, which is explained as a

result of Gutenberg technology that affected human senses by essentially "stripping" them away

(*GG* 17). Two years later, in *Understanding Media,* McLuhan offers tactile examples of changes

in the sensual environment regarding education. He offers the example of students' curriculum

"blueprints," which outline courses of study that become the "myth" of patterns in schooling

(McLuhan 13). The questions about subjectivity begin to transcend the need for content-oriented

attention and instead move to the cultural patterns that shape people's lives. The ways we read,

interpret, and engage any content-level materials are always contained within a larger medium,

wherein we can discover the cultural message.

Through media study, we see interdisciplinary coordinates between phenomenological

ideas of subjectivity as well as the presentation of self that occurs when engaging a shared time,

space, or cultural event. Moving from a pre-literate culture of orality (i.e., tribal) to a culture of

typography created new social patterns of consciousness and reaction (i.e., detribalized with movement *toward* retribalization via advanced technologies), for example. All of this deals with the notion of illusions, myths, and varied focus of attention in terms of subjective selves in shared mediated space. McLuhan is not necessarily an existentialist, particularly because of his *attentiveness qua attentiveness* in reference to consciousness as something to acknowledge*,* but he certainly engages other questions of phenomenological relevance. Different analyses of literacy—including media usage and its effect on literacy, as well as the notion of *media literacy*—offer insight into the subjective dimension of consciousness. The unconscious is treated as effected by media *unawares*, which causes a person to unwittingly develop a disconnected, discarnate self and a numbing effect upon the central nervous system.

I do not presume to indicate the existence of only one type of awareness in philosophical terms. Instead, the hermeneutic entrance into this project attends to the varied notions of the intersubjective self that must function among other selves. The humanity behind selfhood can be found in the varied explanations of experience. McLuhan's insights on praxis and tactile experience become important to an explication of being the subject of experience in a mediated world. Within this mediated world, our bodies often act and react as part of technological apparatuses. McLuhan is careful to look at the various ways, for example, that we pay a price for our advancements towards freedom with physical captivity. This is the case, he says, when we use our foot to press on the pedal to accelerate an automobile. Through a type of "autoamputation," the foot is not able to function in its natural state; therefore, its function is to remain attached to the pedal, not to walk or run (see McLuhan, *UM* 64). McLuhan states, "Self-amputation forbids self-recognition," which refers to the "isolated function" that a body part can

employ (64). In much the same way, the central nervous system becomes the ultimate example of a narcotic effect on subjectivity when it offers itself up to technological stimuli.

A hermeneutic entrance that is identifiable right away in McLuhan's work is the notion of "hot" and "cool" media. *Hot* media require low participation of the senses, while *cool* media require high participation of the senses (39). The former contains a lot of data, whereas the latter does not. As a hermeneutic element, which McLuhan calls perceptual "probes," we get a direct explanation of sensory participation with the world around us. It is through such probes that McLuhan presents his ideas on perception. In *The Book of Probes,* McLuhan succinctly states, "Effects are perceived, whereas causes are conceived. Effects always precede causes in the actual order" (303). The issue at hand is the effect preceding its cause and so leads to a perceptual conclusion regarding an unseen cause. The assertion that effects always come before causes is precisely why McLuhan's work is so prophetic about technological development, acoustic space, and perceptual change. The change is a part of the perceived need for something new, but when a changeover occurs, most people never notice the event while it is happening.

In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan addresses human consciousness as a starting point of interpretation. In *Laws of Media,* McLuhan addresses some of the academic questions that surfaced after *Understanding Media.* In McLuhan's continued discussion, it becomes clear that people and their surroundings encompass each other. Mediated environments shape culture and perceptual patterns in the public forum. The elements of language, interpretation, and action are extremely important to McLuhan because they offer insight into the human psyche. All of this is the impetus of my project on McLuhan's rhetorical critiques of subjectivity through his explanations of perceptual habits.

From these observations, we can see a new organization for human life in the social sphere. A disruption occurs continuously through the communal enthusiasm for technology wherein people are isolated, disconnected, and unreflective, which is part of McLuhan's main idea in both *Understanding Media* and *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. An act of reflection could bring new figure to the surface, such as a realization of one's isolated existence, which can also prompt awareness of one's lack of activity in physical communal spaces. The notion of the pseudo-experience involved picturing a virtual experience only available through images in the mind, created by a new subjective impression of participation in the world.

Overview of Discussion

The following foundational question is presented in the introduction: *What are the implications of Marshall McLuhan's rhetorical critique of modern subjectivity within a mediated world?* The second chapter will introduce McLuhan's involvement in ongoing academic examinations of public life and its rhetorical facets of language and literacy. The first issue concerns the philosophical underpinnings of McLuhan's ideas on technology and its effects on human life. One of his major claims—that formal cause includes the other four of Aristotle's causes—opens up a trajectory of clarifications regarding the defining characteristics of content, media, a medium, and patterns of human perception.

Epistemological concerns are considered in chapter three. The movement of knowledge in oral and written form comes directly from McLuhan's insights in Understanding Media. In terms of aural/oral culture and the Gutenberg Era of print, knowledge and understanding involve a rhetorical understanding of epistemological turns in history. Here, of particular importance is McLuhan's continuation and re-examination of modernity, idea of progress, and the growth of

the city that Harold Innis and others explored in the first part of the twentieth century. All of this

pertains to human perceptions, memory, and subjectivity.

In the second half of the project, McLuhan's phenomenological understanding of time

and space is critical to a discussion on obsolescence, a notion that environments change but build

upon past environments. Traditional phenomenological questions have deliberated the subject-

object relationship. Within McLuhan's definitions of electric speed and imbalances of the sense

ratios, we can see a valuable discourse on the immersion of humankind in mediated

environments. The fifth chapter will discuss the rhetorical exegesis of visual and textual biases in

society. Social activity and *techné* become a major grounding from which McLuhan examines

perceptual involvement. Much of *Understanding Media* is devoted to unraveling the transitions

between tribal (oral) culture, the Gutenberg Age, and an electronic retribalization of humankind

due to full sensory captivity while engaged in specific mediated activities. This becomes the

harbinger for critique of different facets of individual subjectivity.

The final chapter explores McLuhan's explications of lived experience as arrested in a

mythical state when consumed by observational glances (e.g., a gaze directed at electronic

gadgets) or a general lack of kinesthetic movement and involvement of the entire body. A

higher-order analysis of cultural affinity for effects rather than causation becomes important to

explain McLuhan's contribution to communication studies. McLuhan talks about the numbness

of being, or a trance-like narcosis, that chains a person's psyche to a mechanization of thought.

He explains the influence of a medium, "Media effects are new environments as imperceptible as

water to a fish, subliminal for the most part" (22). I will explain that the word "discarnation" is

an allusion, or intentional metaphor, in *Understanding Media, Laws of Media*, and his various

works, which will also indicate a clear hermeneutic approach in McLuhan's philosophy.

CHAPTER TWO

Marshall McLuhan's

Ground, Sensibilities, and Practice

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born on July 21, 1911, in Edmonton, AB, Canada, to Herbert Earnest and Elsie Naomi McLuhan. His father worked in real estate and insurance, and his mother was an intellectual and stage performer. He had a brother, Maurice, who was born in 1913. In his early academic life, young McLuhan began to show interest in intense intellectual inquiry and later dedicated himself to expansive literary studies. McLuhan's college life began at the University of Manitoba, where his mother had also attended. McLuhan often wrote to his family, sometimes writing them all at once or individually. His epistolary nature extended to colleagues, friends, and family, and some of his select personal letters were published as a collection in 1987. McLuhan documented his inquiries throughout much of his academic journey, graduating twice from the University of Manitoba for his bachelor's and master's degrees, and also from Cambridge University, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees and a doctorate.

McLuhan's doctoral thesis, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time,* was approved at Cambridge in 1943 and published posthumously in 2006. His project explores important rhetorical interpretations of history. McLuhan understands perception through examinations of rhetoric and the seven liberal arts, which are comprised of the linguistic *trivium* (rhetoric, dialectic, and grammar) and the scientific *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). McLuhan's dissertation on Nashe offers insights into ways historical probes can ground grammar, dialectics, and rhetoric. As a hermeneutic entrance, McLuhan delves into the discussion fully aware that any shifts in understandings of history will

have an effect on the ways history is recounted (Gordon, Introduction to: *The Classical Trivium* xii). McLuhan's career emerged from an amalgamation of English studies and the media ecology tradition, a tradition that he helped to create.

McLuhan's Ground

Elsewhere, in McLuhan's published letters, a powerfully interpretive metaphor that sparsely emerges is "discarnate existence," which is missing as an explicitly stated metaphor in most of his published works. The metaphor extends McLuhan's insights on a "condition of public helplessness" (*MB* v) as an interpretive inquiry into the current historical context of public consciousness. In McLuhan's work, his framing of public consciousness is often critical of popular and advertising culture. Communication scholarship opens up many instances of social subjugation especially within the discussion of consumerism and personal autonomy. McLuhan sheds light on many of the social issues in modern (as well as contemporary) times.

McLuhan is particularly attentive to this issue in *The Mechanical Bride,* where he highlights the ways collective consciousness is captured by mass media and advertising techniques. He opens the book with a critique of "public helplessness" in a world of mass information and overload, saying, "To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike" (v). Evident in this assessment is an overt assertion that the language and general approach of advertising and entertainment had a pre-existing problem to fix—they needed a way to mesmerize the public in a systematic yet appealing way.

This exploratory chapter outlines several facets of McLuhan's focus on figure and ground as a foundational aspect of perception that emerges in new environments. I first highlight some

of McLuhan's insights into literature and history as his own educational path moved his scholarship forward. Second, I discuss ways McLuhan's work is embraced by media ecology scholarship and explore his many contributions within communication that have subsequently emerged. Third, I examine the evolution of McLuhan's ideas and their connection specifically to philosophy of communication and rhetoric. The chapter concludes by discussing the issues developed in the project.

The intellectual groundwork for media ecology can be directly linked to rhetoric and philosophy of communication in many ways. Widely known today for his ideas on mediated communication, McLuhan's extensive literary and philosophical explications contribute to an ongoing critique of modern subjectivity. McLuhan is able to dissect each literary genre not only as isolated moments in history, but as connected sets that trace changes in thought throughout human history. He says of the ways historical time periods, "What we ordinarily think of as present is really the past" (McLuhan, *Understanding Me* 126).

A quotation from McLuhan appears opens the 1967 essay collection, *McLuhan: Hot & Cool*, "I am an investigator. I make probes. I have no point of view. I do not stay in one position" (xii). At the end of this statement, McLuhan references a view from Jacques Ellul, stating "that propaganda begins when dialogue ends. I talk back to media and set off on an adventure of exploration. I DON'T EXPLAIN—I EXPLORE" (*Hot & Cool* xii). He would often make such assertions during public presentations and interviews as well. McLuhan was careful to regard himself as flexible because he was aware of the changing social structures of history that were seemingly always embedded in chaotic social environments. Mediation of many types, but mostly technological mediation, rose to the top of McLuhan's research.

The Sensibilities of Communal Thought in the Mediated World

In *Laws of Media,* McLuhan ruminates over the social, spiritual, and linguistic effects of media and technological change. His understanding of effects is not that they are linear, but instead posits that effects occur ahead of a cause—e.g., new media (see also "Formal Causality" 15). This means that newness of things, including inventions, methods of production, and potential for widespread use indicates a manifestation of anticipation. For McLuhan, time is always in flux but also offers change as a type of simultaneity. Something new is always anticipated. Society's expectations for progress in the modern mindset can fuel this anticipation, but the anticipation is more of an assumption that almost always goes unrecognized until a changeover has already happened. In this way, people often think in terms of obsolescence of old ways of doing things. For McLuhan, obsolescence is merely a look back at once was, even if the change shifts "collective consciousness," as he calls it (see *Gutenberg Galaxy* 268). A collective consciousness is more of a communal awareness, because people are embedded in an in-flux social realm. What *is*, is built upon what *already was* in society.

This chapter frames the philosophical ground that McLuhan established in his work on orality, literacy, and varied environments. This framing is intended to expound upon McLuhan's perspective on human interaction in technologically mediated environments. While the topic is embedded in media ecology, there are identifiable intersections between philosophical hermeneutics and rhetorical studies procured in McLuhan's work as well. The world in which we live is constantly adapting to newness, yet McLuhan was able to capture an idea of non-linear change in the wake of new social environments. Because of the rapidly changing definition of audience—particularly in a mediated setting—communication scholars must attend to McLuhan's contribution to the rhetorical study of cultural formations and communal experience.

An effect of changing technologies is a communal *unawareness,* in so much as people do not take note of every sensual response to new experiences. The body becomes involved in an automated way, in sync with new experiences yet disconnected. From these assessments, McLuhan is able to explain the problem of modern progress, which is a hermeneutic critique of progress that says once an experience is changed, something important to the human experience is lost. These experiences of change include changes in the way people see the world. The people who make up the world are the readers, the teachers, the workers, the friends, the family, and so on. All roles coexist communally. McLuhan is able to showcase ways everyday life changes when an embeddedness of existence requires the full immersion of the person—mind, body, and spirit. If parts of existence are altered, then the lived experience is as well. Therefore, interpersonal and intrapersonal thought, language, and an embeddedness of life evolves into a new environment. McLuhan talks extensively about new media environments and the symptoms of exposure within human consciousness. The essence of what it means to be a human being living among (and communicating between) other people becomes obscured in a society that no longer sees itself with a sense of clarity.

The idea of not noticing the mental and bodily shifts that occur with technology use is indicative of ongoing "somnambulism" that affects the mind tremendously (*UM* 40). Intellectual thought or expectations for hard physical work become less and less important in a world where people can extend or replace their bodies with nearly any medium they engage. The person on television does not have to speak the same way as somebody on the stage, for example. McLuhan looks at television, radio, print, and theater as having varied "ratios" of sense interaction (*UM* 77-78). Interpersonal communication implications are evident here. Therefore, the idea of *audience* takes on a new narrative in a changed communicative setting.

The modern notion of progress encourages a different way of living, and people usually fall into line and conform if the medium becomes pervasive enough in society. In these ways, McLuhan explains the extensions of the body that make corporeal existence more controlled. Of course, the four laws of media (i.e., *enhancement, reversal, retrieval, obsolescence*) demonstrate the idea that even the descriptions of experience change in the social forum with the emergence of new media. There is not only simultaneity within personal experience of these changes, because communal experience shifts with it as well. Simultaneous change moves from decade to decade, innovation to innovation, yet with no clear-cut stops and starts. The change is anachronistic in this respect.

McLuhan discloses an individualistic turn in social habits, which occurred more often at certain moments in history. These habits are explained in terms of a narcosis, or a numbness, of an integrated and technologized world (McLuhan, *UM* 23). People would become sleepwalkers, in the throes of *somnambulism*, a narcotic state, brushing up against each other in their new patterns of thought and behavior, according to McLuhan (23). Those experiencing the change would not even notice it happening, but they would still be somehow inherently convinced of its necessity.

In the grips of modern habits of thought, people lose sight of their communal nature, even if there is a claim that a communal awareness is enacted. This is why McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message" serves as a major critique of modern notions of reality. The medium carries content, but it is not the content that changes social habits. In many cases the content barely changes; it is the medium that takes over body and community. McLuhan understands this process as a restructuring of awareness, as he explains in *Understanding Media*. The individual mind is then a part of the communal push toward trends and ubiquitous ideas, yet what still

remains is the illusion of individualism and singular subjectivity among the crowd.

Once a medium takes hold of communal attention, it can increase the participation of the audience as a collective entity. This participation is where the patterns of change occur in the social realm. Additionally, waves of communal participation are also an indication of the ways media became so pervasive in the twentieth century. Specific types of media, including advertising, created a mythical existence that appealed to the audience and its desires. This is one of the most rhetorical aspects of McLuhan's critique, and even McLuhan himself is careful to make this distinction. He says that a visually-effected world is rhetorical (and not necessarily philosophical by itself) because of the ways language and visuals are linked to people's thoughts. Here we have a direct link to the communal understanding of *logos* in McLuhan's critique. Through this explanation, we can see the ways an effect is always in an anticipated state. Essentially, the effects of a medium encompass a communal experience that promotes anticipation of new innovations.

The hermeneutic discussion in McLuhan's work is the search for grounding in human understanding. This is not so much a methodology in the work, but instead functions as a way to pursue the cultural impact(s) of both visual and acoustic media. At the same time, McLuhan is aware of changing patterns of thought and behavior in the mediated environment. Simply having more technological advancements, which create more environments, does not equate to media literacy. Perceptions and interpretive habits in the social sphere are therefore imperative to explore in this assessment.

Overlaps between Rhetoric and Media Ecology

Media ecology is the study of media environments. As one of Neil Postman's former professors, McLuhan influenced Postman's assertions that new media have an impact on culture. These ideas were prominent in Innis's work as well. In his introduction to Harold Innis's *Bias of Communication,* McLuhan differentiates between *insights* and the limited function of *point of view* (see *Unbound #8,* "Introduction to: The Bias of Communication" 7). This is a juxtaposition that McLuhan acknowledges as vital to Innis's examinations as well as his own. Part of this differentiation is relevant to the ways knowledge is either categorized or recognized as "patterns" (7). If categorized, then knowledge is assembled through "point of view" by looking *at* something, McLuhan says (7-8). Because both McLuhan's and Innis's explorations delve into patterns of knowledge development, McLuhan is apt to point out the importance of a historical science-philosophy separation as having distinct "structural forms" in history (9). From here, readers are encouraged to note the "interaction" between the two forms, rather than emphasizing their structural qualities (9).

While McLuhan's introduction includes some criticism of Innis's ideas on the phonetic alphabet—including the idea that Innis too quickly connected writing as a mere "hybrid product" of speech—McLuhan saw an entrance point for expansion and clarification through deeper exploration of these forms of communication (11). Nevertheless, McLuhan attributes to Innis a historical emphasis placed upon studying culture within the history of communication. Of particular importance were Innis's assertions regarding cultural patterns, which could explain variables of human innovation that quantitative analyses could not always explain. While some of Innis's ideas were debatable, McLuhan was more interested in Innis's notion that a culture's "dominant" technologies would mirror its "entire structure" (12). Additionally, these ideas move

Innis's work toward the notion of communal shifts in not only technology preferences, but also the shifts in public perception and opinion formation. As related to communication history, Innis's ideas explore a historical narrative of culture as it occurs through developments in speech, writing, and technological innovation.

In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan expounds upon the ways culture is affected by its technological inventions, which he suggests is the impetus of Innis's work. For example, in chapter seven, "Challenge and Collapse: The Nemesis of Creativity"—a direct reference to Innis's work—McLuhan describes the captivity of the American home due to the ubiquitous sense control that technology creates for its inhabitants (see *UM* 92, 101). He describes some of the social symptoms that occur when the public succumbs to the call of technology. That is, an arrangement of functions adjusted to one set of intensities becomes unbearable at another intensity. And a technological extension of our bodies designed to alleviate physical stress can bring on psychic stress that may be much worse (McLuhan, *UM* 98). Such a statement opens up a critique of modernity's obsession with technological advancement. McLuhan pointedly diagnoses the problem of total immersion in and assimilation to technology. What occurs is a necessity for physical and sensorial compliance.

This section of *Understanding Media* also offers one of the clearest demonstrations of his notion that *the medium is the message.* McLuhan outlines a type of social servitude to technology as well and says, "Perhaps the most obvious "closure" or psychic consequence of any new technology is just the demand for it" (99). Additionally, McLuhan shows that a constant use of certain technologies goes beyond an affinity for content here:

> …the need to use the senses that are available are as insistent as breathing—a fact that
>
> makes sense of the urge to keep radio and TV going more or less continuously. The urge

to continuous use is quite independent of the "content" of the public programs or of the

private sense life, being testimony to the fact that *technology is part of our bodies*

[emphasis added]. (*UM* 99)

This explanation encompasses what McLuhan (as later would his son Eric) defines as side effects

of technology. The explanation also demonstrates formal cause because of the intangibility of the

changed space created by technologically extended bodies.

"Formal cause," according to Eric McLuhan, "embraces all of what we call media and

culture" due to its lack of sequenced cause-and-effect, as well as its ability to cover all of the

causes—i.e., *efficient, material, final, and formal* (see "On Formal Cause" 83-84). The

technological environment is an ongoing effect, and thus creates the philosophical ground on

which McLuhan's ideas stand. The ever-changing environment is therefore representative of

formal cause as well. Language is an important thread in McLuhan's work, because it engages

the notion of logos as its fundamentally rhetorical value (see *Laws* 35-36). Logos, defined in

Laws as "the spoken word," is a ubiquitous and necessary element of cultural growth. Therefore,

McLuhan ties together the logos with formal cause.

The rhetorical facets of language and literacy make their home in McLuhan's

understanding of culture as it exists within ever-mediated environments. In his article "Poetic vs.

Rhetorical Exegesis: The Case for Leavis against Richards and Empson," McLuhan juxtaposes

the F. R. Leavis's "poetic exegesis" and its place within the rhetorical aspects of prose and

rhetoric in the respective works of I. A. Richards and William Empson (270). Much of this

article relies upon an understanding of Kenneth Burke's analyses of audience within the scope of

rhetorical exegesis. While poetry creates within an audience a response that constantly changes

due to (presumably) psychologically based ideas, rhetoric (or prose) is intended for an audience

("Poetic," McLuhan 267). McLuhan highlighted these specific authors of the twentieth century because they were prominent in the academic understanding of social literacy and academic inquiry.

The patterns of perception and action indicate the social pervasiveness of a medium or its environment. The illusion, McLuhan shows, emerges through the idea that technology or new media environments act alone in cultural transitions. Instead, people's narcotic conformity toward new media patterns becomes a social formation of understanding and participation in new environments. This is precisely why a medium is not only its content. McLuhan says "the "content" of a medium is always another medium," for example (*UM* 19). Conventions, therefore, are fleeting and temporal in form.

Using a rhetorical entrance, McLuhan critiques linearity vs. simultaneity in social reading and speaking patterns. From there, many variations of literacy can be discussed as a hermeneutic entrance into social thought and communication. Interpretations of human artifacts, including art, become an impetus for discussion on simultaneity of sensations. Instead of looking closely at content of a TV show or a painting, McLuhan probes the historical patterns of thought to assess culture. McLuhan uncovers the problematic nature of socially conventional or formulaic interpretations, or readings, of art, music, or other elements of culture as well.

McLuhan's hermeneutic inquiry evolved from the notion that a medium forms perspectives in the Western world. Where tradition created stable patterns in history, McLuhan says, technologies and other media moved from explosion to implosion (*UM* 5). One scholar who helps to explain the hermeneutic qualities of tradition is Gadamer. At the forefront of hermeneutic study, Gadamer explicates perceptual realities of the social forum. These realities include biases, trends, and natural historical shifts. The rhetorical coordinates within hermeneutic

exploration uncover elements of thought and interpretation that occur in human life.

For McLuhan, language is one of the realms of communication that makes life move forward, while maintaining a link to the past. The inner and outer dialogue of one's life is a vital part of this discussion. These ideas involve some Aristotelian threads that define *logos* within the lived experience. Within this framework, a connected past, present, and future shape the thoughts an individual encounters in the social setting. Questions regarding the nature of friendship and the role of the self are most important in a society that has slipped into a seemingly unconscious state of being. The foundations of human interaction and communication have therefore changed.

Rhetorically, McLuhan frames communication early in his career in his dissertation on Nashe. In the introduction to McLuhan's dissertation on Nashe, W.T. Gordon discusses the ways the trivium is laid out in the work, wherein:

> …grammar is the art of interpreting not only literary texts but all phenomena.
> Above all, grammar entails a fully articulated science of exegesis, or
> interpretation. Dialectics is…a way of testing evidence or the study of kinds of
> proofs for an argument, a method of dialogue, or simply logic. (*The Classical Trivium* xi)

In the dissertation project, McLuhan carefully addresses the distinct yet connected aspects of the trivium. Subsequently, Gordon offers an examination of rhetoric in the work:

> Rhetoric…includes the rhetorical devices such as alliteration that are most commonly
> associated with it in general usage today, but as set out by McLuhan in the following
> pages, it proves to be a very complex feature of discourse, involving five divisions. These
> are *inventio* (discovery), *dispositio* (arrangement), *memoria* (memory), *elocutio* (style), and
> *pronunciatio* (delivery). The dynamics of the classical trivium both presuppose a science of

exegesis, or interpretation, and predispose authors to engaging in the historical

controversies surrounding the dynamics in question. (xi)

The five canons are embedded in McLuhan's analyses of social literacy and communication. The

shifts between manuscript culture and print culture are indicative of changes in style, or *elecutio,*

thus shaping the notion of *audience* in general and as a rhetorical situation. Subsequently,

Gordon ties dialectics to the issue of social argumentation and logic (xi).

The deep canons of rhetoric McLuhan's work in *Laws of Media* and *Understanding Media*

encompass the historical evolution of rhetoric and grammar as they define social literacy

patterns. This becomes an epistemological framework because of McLuhan's close analyses of

oral-aural culture and the initiation of writing as a social requirement. As an inquiry into human

existence as it plays out in mediated environment(s), McLuhan examines the development of

interpretive patterns in the social forum. These examinations include inquiries into the

procurement of human knowledge, which often include discussion points such as: (1) What is the

changing definition of literacy?; (2) How does a communal thought process cultivate changes in

social dialectic?; and (3) Why does the mediated environment become important within

rhetorical analyses of shared human space? These topics take the discussion beyond the surface

of bodily experience and into an exploration of psychic experience, as a way to examine human

perception as an unconscious effort.

A theory of the tribal "inclusive gestalt" unfolds, wherein the individual always functions

within communal space and time (*UM* 120). McLuhan explains that the Western attachment to

phonetics is one way that consciousness underutilizes the other senses. The tribal senses are not

reliant on the prescriptions of phonetics, but instead rely upon acoustic space. This theory can

also illustrate movements in and out of tribalization that have occurred in Western history. The

human tendency toward individualization in more prevalent in Western cultures because of a

"lineal structuring of rational life" that is often perceived as a hallmark of Western thought

(McLuhan, *UM* 121). A major argument surfaces here. McLuhan clearly articulates that

consciousness is not bound to a linear phonetic structure. Therefore, communal consciousness is

primarily procured from humanity's habituated reliance on the senses.

Everyday conveniences in Western culture promote a sense of order, linearity, and visual

bias. A tribal culture relies on the enactment of culture and traditions to learn and communicate.

Essentially, anything that provides a direct line between action and consumption, or *speedup* of

production, will be a specialist, fragmented culture. Anything that requires "intense

involvement" of the community will subsequently retribalize the participants (McLuhan, *UM*

41). McLuhan points to the dominance of specific senses—e.g., visual dominance over oral

dominance—within his critique of modernity. One of the more popular examinations of this

phenomenon involves the visual bias created by television. In the ABC interview, McLuhan

candidly explains that television does not offer photographs, but instead "resonates" with a

person visually. He then points to the viewing of the hologram being 360 degrees of full-body

experience within an environment constituted by visual bias.

The visual bias contributes to a consumerist environment in the social setting. At the heart

of any discussion on modernity, we will find concerns about money and commerce. One of the

greatest detribalizing factors in Western society is its reliance on money systems. Instead of

focusing on societal spending and politically-driven economical concerns, McLuhan focused on

a driving influence on consumer thinking—advertising. Money's impact can lift a person to false

confidence, or its impact can, conversely, devastate a person's sense of self-worth. In *The*

Mechanical Bride, McLuhan's 1951 book on advertising and economy, a variety of critiques of

modernity present a troubling indication that collective thought embraced entertainment and excess. McLuhan opens the book describing this phenomenon as an impetus for a problematic development of "public helplessness" (v).

A telling story of public helplessness is people's constant connection to advertising, entertainment, news, and socializing. Advertising targets people's vulnerabilities with promises of a better life, depicting a theatrical art of consumerism that plays out in the social forum. Buying becomes the muse. Visual representations of wealth teach the public that money buys happiness. In the meantime, droves of people become trapped in an endless yearning for self-actualization through conspicuous consumption. The visual aspects of media also present a rhetorical voice that compels an audience to seek immediate gratification and constant entertainment. A constant barrage of technological stimulation has created the effects of a distracted, captivated, and misaligned society.

One of the more pervasive critiques of consumer culture and its embedded messages—via advertising—is developed in *The Mechanical Bride.* The notion of mechanical thought processes among consumers is directly tied to the mental processes involved in experiencing language. The internalization of real-time language is part of McLuhan's description of sensory immersion. As McLuhan and McLuhan explain in *Laws of Media,* an understanding of thought and perception highlights the ways *logos* functions. McLuhan was educated on the foundations of rhetoric and its transformations throughout history. Contextualizing communicative habits, McLuhan often delved into the relational aspects of self and audience.

Historically, *logos* emerges in specifically rhetorical terms within ancient explanations of *rhêtores* who were often either affluent or known for their ability to participate successfully in the Athenian legal arena. Speech was the foundation of rhetoric in public life. McLuhan attends

to the historical flux regarding implementation of *logos* as humans changed and expanded their environments. Within this framing, McLuhan's work is indicative of an understanding of environments as a living place. Spiritually and philosophically, the body—including action and speech—performs tasks that are often mediated by technology. Thought processes and levels of mindfulness are affected by these mediated situations. The senses will then dictate the direction of action and speech.

When McLuhan talks about a medium's impact on culture, he's talking about the changing thought patterns in society that follow various affinities for different types of technology. Technology is a man-made environment that becomes the new normal, or a new type of nature, according to McLuhan. The modern conception of thought involves a linearity in its structure.[3] McLuhan focuses on the antithesis to linear thought, which is simultaneity of thought and various levels of stimulation of the senses. In his book *The Medium is the Massage,* co-written with Quentin Fiore, we find descriptions of the human environment as a place of observable changes in perceptual habituations. For example, they say, "We now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception and to make everyday learning a process of discovery" (McLuhan and Fiore 68). McLuhan notes in several places that such observations about cultural and social patterns are best captured by artists who not only interpret the social milieu, but also make acute assumptions about future events in the social forum.

New environments create new concerns (and subsequent observations) about the lived experience. For example, in his essay titled "Formal Causality in Chesterton," McLuhan

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[3] In an interview conducted by Nina Sutton in 1975, McLuhan talks about the ways people use certain senses to structure their world. He says, "the simultaneous is necessarily acoustic, and anything sequential is necessarily visual." Therefore, *pre-literate* communities used the ear to "order existence" because they "didn't have powerful technologies that would equal to the power of the ear to order existence" (Sutton, "1975 Interview with Marshall McLuhan").

addresses formal cause in terms of spiritual foregrounding. For example, it is here that McLuhan explicitly discusses Incarnation as the "formal cause of fallen man" (*Theories of Communication* 16). While formal cause is one aspect of McLuhan's philosophical discussions, it is important to note due to its relation to another theory about cause and effect in society—including the integral notion that effect always precedes cause in terms of societal shifts. We can see variations of this interpretation throughout McLuhan's work. For example, a linguistic comparison in *Counterblast* illuminates an etymological representation of biological processes, such as the term "blastoderm," wherein an original environment gives birth to a new emergence, is new development in a changing culture (McLuhan 5). Therefore, from one "vernacular" in culture, another emerges (see McLuhan, *Counterblast* 16).

For McLuhan, exploration of a new environment encompasses the notion that a society adopts new ways of thinking, without realizing it, and this is an important indicator of "implosion" (*Counterblast* 35)[4]. McLuhan's framing of implosion emerges often in *Understanding Media.* For example, in the introduction to the first edition, McLuhan writes:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies into space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. *Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole human*

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[4] McLuhan makes an analogy, "To the blind all things are sudden" (*Counterblast* 41), in order to demonstrate the immediacy of technological change and lack of *seeing* what is changing culturally. Also emerging here is a wary notion that the world becomes a classroom where all new things are taken in as fascinating and alluringly new.

society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by various media.

(emphasis added, *UM* 5)

Additionally, McLuhan explains the aspects of implosion that follow the massive explosion of interest in various electric technologies.

Even the term "implosion" is indicative of McLuhan's inclination toward phenomenological concepts. Once there is a point of some type of chaos, the explosiveness of a medium begins to implode, as McLuhan suggests that this is the breaking point where a medium reaches its limits to the point of implosion. At that point, a medium cannot evolve any further. Its anticipated functions have been realized. One definition of implosion is the way electric technology moves people from the individual experience to the role of involvement with others. The involvement creates the communal ideas in the public sphere that indicate implosion has occurred. At this point, an innovation or technology cannot and will not continue to expand, but it will begin to change into something that meets the new expectations of its users.

A renaming of our senses, in their sometimes tangible manifestations, is rhetorical framing these instruments of our making as extensions of the body. A demonstration of McLuhan's symbolic understanding of forms in human existence emerges. Language, one of the earliest forms of communication known to humankind, is an impetus for McLuhan's demonstration of rhetorical implications of *nomos* in his explanations. That which becomes customary to human function due to technological advancement, as well as cultural change, is thus part of a new way of functioning in everyday life. McLuhan refers to a "general environment" wherein bodies no longer function in only a physical way and the central nervous system is greatly involved in one's existence (*Counterblast* 42). Instead, the body functions as part of an implosion of itself,

by wearing its insides—i.e., the central nervous system—on the outside[5]. Therefore, the issue of *formal cause* becomes important to an understanding of what exists due to humankind's tendency to name, create, and enact new behaviors in the social forum.

Formal cause is a major philosophical factor in McLuhan's rhetorical framing of patterns of human engagement with the content of media, which is ultimately driven by whatever carries that content—a medium. From here, McLuhan's critique of subjectivity in the modern world becomes more palpable. It is a medium that carries cultural change. The psychic (i.e., perceptual) habits change more so than the physical habits, according to McLuhan (*Counterblast* 42). In terms of the media used within a modern culture, McLuhan is concerned about the perceptual changes due to literacy developed in the West. As a primary harbinger of change, the phonetic alphabet disrupts the natural senses that occur in the body, including the processing of sight, sound, taste, scent, and touch. The most heightened sense is sight in a visual culture, it seems, where the printed word is pervasive and dominant. Print also promotes an individualization of thought in Western cultures. This is an important aspect of McLuhan's awareness of modernity's tensions between print, electronic orientation, and subsequent cultural impact.

Patterns of Human Perception

In a 1977 interview on the television show "Monday Conference" in Australia, recorded at the Sydney Hilton Hotel[6], McLuhan answers audience questions related to his idea that "the medium is the message," a too-often-simplified concept from McLuhan's corpus. To explicate this idea further in *Understanding Media,* McLuhan clarifies the phrase with the addition of the

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[5] The example McLuhan uses in *Counterblast* is a "turtle" that flips its shell inside-out to expose its insides, thus making it more vulnerable to the outside world (42). This represents a parallel to a person's central nervous system.
[6] This three-part interview was conducted by Robert Moore via ABC Radio National (Australia).

social aspect and says, "The medium is *socially* the message" (*emphasis mine* 22). McLuhan alerts readers to a social aspect of cultural patterns that emerge in a mediated world. Within his examination of modern sensibilities, McLuhan is able to formulate theories that delve into human participation in terms of speed of thought, the appeal of mediated environments to particular senses, and wherein a linearity of thought becomes problematic to understanding media effects.

In this historical interview, McLuhan gives a clear explanation of his conceptualization of "the rearview mirror," which he says he originally meant it as an "outdated, nineteenth-century" way of thinking, but later revised the concept to represent that which is *coming* rather than what has already passed—i.e., the rearview mirror is therefore "the foreseeable future" ("The Medium Is the Message: Part I" 1977). A philosophical concern for *public versus private* emerges from the audience during this talk when a woman, who appears to be a practicing Catholic nun, asks McLuhan about his comments on staying *indoors for socializing* and going *outdoors for privacy,* as she ponders humanity's possible turn toward a "private self" that embraces an internalized spirituality. Paraphrasing ideas from Jane Austen, McLuhan discusses the notion that people went outside to "prove their inner resources" to show that "they don't need people" and "can make it alone," which he aptly notes as ideas emerging from the Romantic Period (ABC TV, "The Medium Is the Message: Part II" 1977). He later cites Nathaniel Hawthorne's criticism of outdoor privacy, which described habits of social privacy as an indication of *aristocratic* habits unfolding, as detrimental to democracy. Continuing with his presentation, McLuhan also points out social moralists' ideas as typically concerned with specific content of media (figure) rather than media effects (ground) (ABC TV, "The Medium Is the Message: Part II" 1977).

This portion of the conference offers a set of McLuhan's ideas on the ways society had

been changed by technology up to 1977. The ideas therein also attend to the preceding thoughts that had emerged in McLuhan's corpus, especially highlighting concepts that unfold in both *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media.* In those works, McLuhan is notably attentive to ways environments involve the everydayness of life. Individuals are therefore immersed in new environments that encompass most of their activities and modes of expression.

Rhetorical Facets of Language and Literacy

G. K. Chesterton's work influenced McLuhan's philosophical observations of the effects that precede cause in the world. In the essay, "Formal Causality in Chesterton," McLuhan quotes Chesterton's ideas on material objects in the world, or those things that can be visually observed, to demonstrate ways that human subjectivity can be fallible. In "The Wind and the Trees" from the book *Tremendous Trifles,* Chesterton tells the story of a young boy who hates the wind because it always blows off his hat. The young boy sees the trees violently blowing around and asks his mother to "take away the trees," thus incorrectly inferring that the trees cause the wind to blow. McLuhan compares these types of stories to formal causality, saying that it "reveals itself by its *effects"* ("Formal" 17). Chesterton writes:

> […] The trees stand for all visible things and the wind for the invisible. The wind is the spirit which bloweth where it listeth; the trees are the material things of the world which are blown where the spirit lists. The wind is philosophy, religion, revolution; the trees are cities and civilisations. We only know that there is a wind because the trees on some distant hill suddenly go mad. We only know that there is a real revolution because all the chimney-pots go mad on the whole skyline of the city. ("Tremendous" 27)

The influence of this thinking is evident in McLuhan's position on technological environments as misunderstood by an audience. The public thinks it sees what exists, but cause and effect no

longer follow a necessarily linear path in logic in this theory. In the ABC interview, McLuhan highlights a similar notion regarding effects as they function within the rearview mirror. What happened in the past always had (and has) the future already in its grasp, especially within the realm of technological advancement. Modernity is a time of perpetual anticipation of newer versions of the currently new, and a time when effects are mistaken for causes of social change.

A critique of modernity and its fixation on progress emerges in McLuhan's framing of figure and ground here. Essentially, McLuhan believes that if an emphasis is placed on content, then the emphasis is on figure rather than ground. The ground encompasses the social effect(s) that influence societal patterns of change. In *Laws of Media* McLuhan says, for example, "With the new ground of alphabetic awareness, objectivity and detachment became the rule" (19). However, this is not a deterministic model, which is important to note because of the common opinion that McLuhan was a technological determinist. Instead of outlining a prescriptive model, McLuhan offers conditions that explain effects that impact an exigent environment.

In the opening commentary for *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* McLuhan writes, "Printing from movable types created a quite unexpected new environment—it created the PUBLIC" (par. 3). As a side effect of the alphabet, the public has been pushed into a linear movement of thought in literate cultures. McLuhan says that literacy has led to the acceptance of specializations of knowledge, a type of organizational, linear pattern structure. This also becomes a way for cultures to name the things that they make and seemingly idolize, which is an idea rhetorically connected to a reliance on *nomos* in antiquity, a time of intellectual curiosity concerning the difference between laws (*nomos,* or humankind's rules of order) and the naturally occurring environment (*physis*). Much of this tension represents the ongoing critique of modernity that unfolds in McLuhan's discussions about space, time, human history and communication.

In his introduction to the second edition of *Understanding Media,* McLuhan offers insights on shifts of attention in an interaction with various forms of technology. The first emphasis in this section is on the issue of "hot" and "cool" media. McLuhan uses these terms to define the ways the senses are involved in understanding the world. The *cool* medium requires great participation and "completion by an audience," as the senses (i.e., perceptions) are tapped to a greater degree (McLuhan, *UM* 39). A cool medium also requires people to fill in information, which indicates a notable amount of audience involvement. Examples of cool media include—but are not limited to—television, telephone, and speech. Hot media often require the intense use of one sense. For example, McLuhan viewed print media, including books, as hot media because of a linear dissemination of information, without much effort from the reader to fill in any information (see *UM* 366). These are examples of sensory bias, where one sense can be overtaken by the demands of a technologically mediated task.

McLuhan identifies various modes of visualization that emerge in environments that demand a visual bias. The consciousness and cognitive processes within a technologically based environment became the impetus of McLuhan's lectures and written works. For example, he discusses the images on television as "cool" because they require high participation of the senses. This high participation is *subjective* or "totally involving" (ABC TV, "The Medium Is the Message: Part I" 1977). In the rhetorical sense, McLuhan points to the ways TV has an effect (the "message") on the entire individual, and he is careful to correct the notion that he completely dismisses or ignores the presence of content. The TV program, he says, "is incidental" (ABC TV, "The Medium Is the Message: Part I" 1977). He cites, too, that there is a perceived "pattern recognition that is new in media" with "cognitive" consequences and "extreme self-awareness," which shapes our experience (Part II). Therefore, even though the

terms (i.e., "hot" and "cool") have often emerged in sound-bite form due to McLuhan's popular culture fame, his observations lead to rhetorically extended concepts.

Orality & Literacy

The ancients, including Plato and Aristotle, shared ideas in an oral culture. Especially after Aristotle created the Lyceum, stories were memorized, told and retold, in a peripatetic setting. This becomes deeply rhetorical within McLuhan's explanations of the function of language in ancient discourse and, subsequently, the changing effects of language in later centuries with the development of manuscript, print, and mass media. For example, a scholarly conversation about "symbols" emerging from language would surface soon after the invention of the printing press. At the heart of his historical inquiry are many shifts in habits of knowledge acquisition. Additionally, we see influences from Harold Innis's work on communication change apparent in McLuhan's ideas on cultural patterns—especially in terms of the purposes of cities and various spaces of power—and on knowledge acquisition as well.

In *Gutenberg Galaxy,* McLuhan shows that an oral culture is pre-print, pre-Gutenberg, pre-literacy and unaware of a written history. A social and intellectual movement from orality to literacy, retrieving orality in modernity, is paramount to McLuhan's project. Therefore, it is after the emergence of print media that a shift in social structures begins to emerge historically. McLuhan sees the shifts in communication as electricity began to move information as well (*UM* 21). In this way, McLuhan's ideas on the "medium as message" offer an epistemological framework that explores the post-print structures of awareness in the social forum. In *Empire and Communications,* Innis devotes much of his inquiry to the issues of time, space, and power struggles in history due to differing means of communication. Innis says, "Greek civilization was

a reflection of the power of the spoken word" (78), citing Socrates' disdain for writing and its effects on sharing and internalizing true knowledge in the *Phaedrus.* This protest against writing and criticism of poetry, Aristotle would later abandon. Innis explains that the dialectic approach used in Plato's Socratic dialogues instead became a narrative approach (81), where Aristotle's voice laid out ideas in manuscript form.

Innis influenced McLuhan's insights on the ways space and time differ historically. McLuhan describes the procurement of knowledge, which is developed historically within social movements that represent orality, literacy, manuscripts, typography, and electronic media, labeled in recent scholarship as "epochs" by Casey Lum[7], a leading media ecology scholar. Here emerges one of the rare linear moments within McLuhan's theories, wherein the social movements from orality (prioritizes oral-aural bias) to literacy (prioritizes visual bias) and later into electronic media (retrieves orality) show how the senses are vulnerable to new and changing environments. As part of this discussion, spatial issues concerning extension and amputation emerge as useful to explicating McLuhan's ontological explanations of cultural traditions of knowledge acquisition as well.

In his 1964 introduction to the first reprint of Innis's book *The Bias of Communication* (1951)*,* McLuhan notes that his own ideas in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* are a "footnote" to Innis's work on "the psychic and social consequences, first of writing then of printing" in the book (8). At the start of *Bias,* Innis presents a question he encountered from philosopher James Ten Broeke, "Why do we attend to the things which we attend?" (preface). Innis's first essay in the book, "Minerva's Owl," addresses the issue of "knowledge collapse," an idea introduced in the preface as a major point of inquiry in the book. The chapter is Innis's 1947 Presidential Address

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[7] For more on media ecology and its current scholarship, see also Lum, C. M. K., ed. *Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton P, 2006. Print.

to the Royal Society of Canada, where Innis discusses changes in knowledge and communication through technological expansion. Innis's phrasing is particularly intriguing to McLuhan, who writes:

> As soon as the readers grasps that Innis is concerned with the unique power of each form to alter the action of other forms it encounters, [s]he will be able to proceed as Innis did. [S]he can begin to observe and estimate the action and counteraction of forms past and present. He will discover that Innis never repeats himself, but that he never ceases to test the action of oral forms of knowledge and social organization in different social contexts. Innis tests the effects of time-structured institutions in their varieties of contact with space-oriented societies. (See *Unbound #8:* "Introduction to: *The Bias of Communication* [Harold A. Innis, First Edition, 1951]," 10)

The ways knowledge shifts and changes under the influence of powerful entities within a culture, such as universities, can also greatly impact historical events and social knowledge, and so on. One phrase that stands out in Innis's first essay is "flowering of culture," which indicates that anything that rises to a full "flowering" in a culture will ultimately "collapse" (5). We can see a parallel with McLuhan's ideas on the ways an explosion of interests within a culture will ultimately lead to an eventual implosion, an idea also developed extensively in *Understanding Media.* Perhaps one of the most obvious places where a powerful form impacts public knowledge today would be the Internet.

Communication strategies are inherently shaped by the level of attention people give each other in the public forum. However, within a manuscript culture, McLuhan notes that there is a difference in the ways communication is enacted. For example, McLuhan says in *GG,* "Manuscript culture is conversational if only because the writer and his audience are physically

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related by the form of *publication as performance"* (84). In terms of the *logos,* which encompasses the rhetorical notion of thought processes and reasoning, we can see that performance art offers a more human connection and communicates something deeper between author and audience. The medieval shift in the ways an audience is engaged is of special importance in McLuhan's observations of historical uses of the written word versus the spoken word.

The shift from manuscript culture to print culture both mark a turn toward "speed and visual stress" in the public forum (McLuhan, *GG* 84). The ways people acquire knowledge—and subsequently disseminate and share knowledge—shape cultural thought processes in a highly rhetorical way. These habits of literacy consequently become patterns of engagement, as they shape a common discourse of ideas. In "The Effect of the Printed Book on Language in the 16th Century," McLuhan puts forth the idea that space is affected in different ways in the oral versus visual culture. Here he says that the "scanning eye" functions much differently when assessing the phonetic placement of words on the page, rather than the inflection-driven, oral-aural processing of words ("The Effect" 125). I will show in the second chapter how this relationship between the written and spoken word have an impact on McLuhan's rhetorical and epistemological coordinates.

In our current historical moment, the communal lived experience exists within an immersion of technological dominance, and this makes it difficult for participants to see the wave of effects that answer a call for constant technological innovation and turnover. The human experience is then philosophically clouded by anti-involvement, which de-emphasizes mindfulness, intellectualism, and direct involvement with others. Additionally, the pursuit of wisdom becomes less rigorous, and this is of great concern for McLuhan. The senses become

overwhelmed by technology, thus furthering the probability of implosion. In chapter one of *Understanding Media,* McLuhan offers a telling insight about media consumption, saying, "Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users" (34).

The "structures of awareness" are changed within a technological culture (McLuhan, *UM* 40). This explanation sheds light on the psychological issue of hyper-awareness, which could be, perhaps, equally problematic in the social forum due to its direct link to sensorial stressors. The numbness that a technological society provides is much like a cocoon of safety from stress. At the same time, bodies have become conditioned to extend into space through the use of technology. The human element in existence plays a role secondary to technological privilege, which is not readily available in all parts of the world.

McLuhan was keenly aware of the detribalization of culture due to technological advancement just as much as he acknowledged the tribal communities that do not have the resources available in developed regions. The existence of different ways of life is important to McLuhan's discussions on differences between social habits of those exposed to technological mediation and those who are not. Contextually, the notion of everydayness is changed dramatically in the technologized world. These issues are part of a critique of modernity and social contexts driven by mass communication and consumerist ideologies. I will show in later chapters how this contributes to the philosophical notion of human experience lost to machines and a flow of truncated information, thus creating a *discarnate* existence. This notion highlights the framing of an externalized, extended existence in McLuhan's work.

Although McLuhan is known for saying he did not present theories, he relied on probes in order to open up discussions on specific subjects. *Understanding Media* responds to a mid-

twentieth century push for technological progress. To probe further into the notion of progress as a modern idea of content-driven media, McLuhan is careful to differentiate the higher-level effects of a medium versus the content of a medium. Therefore, patterns of perception are socially framed by new technological environments that are provided by a new medium. This is how McLuhan offers insights on the philosophical underpinnings of technological change and its influence on human life and culture.

The technological progress of the twentieth century translates to multiple facets of power struggles between various specialties that wish to gain control of social knowledge. Citing Mumford's book *The City in History,* McLuhan extends the idea that such power struggles become a harbinger for implosion when the speed of technology allows people to see past its originally intended uses. To demonstrate this, McLuhan cites the first roads used for travel. They eventually became a direct link to leisure and "recreation" (McLuhan, *UM* 132). Furthermore, the idea of travel is no longer the traveling itself, but what comes *after* one reaches his or her destination (132). These changes in physical space impact the ways the mind perceives space and time, as well as the body's performance within newly designed spaces. If the change creates a dominant way of doing things, power structures are formed according to participants' reliance on a new environment.

The story of Western culture has been shaped by technological innovation, but another factor in cultural shifts is the way humans perform with and react to innovations. This part of the discussion emphasizes audience awareness in McLuhan's understanding of human behaviors as heavily mediated by technological influences. In a December 1, 1966, letter to William Jovanovich, McLuhan pays special attention to the rhetorical element of *memoria,* citing Francis Yates as an important source on rhetorical aspects of consciousness (*Letters* 339). In *The Art of*

Memory, Yates begins with a rhetorical analysis of the notion of memory, starting with the "three latin sources for the classical art of memory" (117). These initial ideas mirror those that intrigued McLuhan about perceptions formed through memory, as well as the cultivation of memory through an intermingling of human bodies in shared spaces. Specifically, at issue are the ways the printed word changed thought, memory (*memoria*), and the "memory theatres" of medieval churches (McLuhan, *Letters* 338).

Yates tells the story of Simonides of Ceos whose poetry was showcased at a banquet in Thessaly. Simonides inexplicably gets called away, and during his brief departure the roof collapses upon the banquet audience. To identify the bodies, Simonides used his memory to recount where attendees had been sitting, and Yates asserts that this is why Simonides is often credited with the invention of "the art of memory," which he aptly notes as also present in Cicero's *De Oratore* (17-18). What comes from this story, too, is the notion that physical arrangement, or more specifically "orderly arrangement," would help to organize memories (17). McLuhan's interest in the memory of language is clear, but an interest in the memory of space and time sequencing is also vitally important within his ideas on images and visualization.

Yates shows that the senses stimulate perceptions that are developed as part of memory, alongside other rhetorical elements such as the ways each physical sense cultivates an understanding of the world. Citing the *Ad Herennium,* Yates is attentive to the five canons of rhetoric—i.e., *inventio, disposition, elecutio, memoria, pronuntiatio*—and explicates memory as it unfolds therein. Essentially, the text tells us, "The art of memory is like an inner writing" (Yates, *The Art* 22). McLuhan's writings reflect an intense interest in this notion of the innermost

precepts that emerge in thought.[8] McLuhan is particularly interested in the ways "memory theatres" of the past would be transformed by the printing press, thus moving toward a "memory theatre of the corporate rather than the private consciousness and marks a major transition toward the retribalizing of human consciousness," a transition he attributes to the publication of *The Golden Bough* (*Letters* 339).

Patterns of Perception

A common coordinate between Innis and McLuhan is the issue of social patterns of perception. James Carey highlights this connection in "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan," where he discusses ways McLuhan and Innis ground their respective ideas in a *medium as message* approach. However, Innis emphasized culture and social change more prominently, while McLuhan extended that work to include a stronger emphasis on perceptions and individual thought and "sensory organization" (Carey 15). In "Myth and Mass Media," published in 1959, McLuhan offers a close examination of specific ideas that would emerge several years later in *Understanding Media*—i.e., print culture perpetuates a visual bias, and oral culture allows for a simultaneity among the senses. He says, "Oral cultures are simultaneous in their modes of awareness. Today we come to the oral condition again via the electronic media, which abridge space and time and single-plane relationships, returning us to the confrontation of multiple relationships at the same moment" (339). This reflection opens up the ways technological situations affect human existence and thought.

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[8] In James J. Murphy's *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages,* the opening line places importance on the precept. He states, "Any study of the development of Western theories of communication must begin with the first impulses toward laying down precepts (*praecepta*) for future discourse" (Murphy 4). Subsequently, he calls it an ancient Greek "preceptive movement" that eventually spread to other communities (4).

Language is a mediator of thought. Language permits rumination over the past through the visualization informed by memory. The way the ear functions along with the eye in the electronic environment is especially important for such an analysis. There is a visual component to the language we use, according to McLuhan. By constructing a meaningful utterance and sharing it with another individual, we create anticipation—an internal visualization—of something to occur either immediately or in the future. Given McLuhan's emphases on spatial understanding, his examinations of human bodies functioning in time and space become integral in his study of consciousness and perception. Grounded in a rhetorical examination of language as part of acoustic and visual space, McLuhan's discussions often look closely at the way the mind processes word and image.

In the "Automation" chapter of *Understanding Media,* McLuhan talks about a type of automation of language and thought. He says:

> The very toil of man now becomes a kind of enlightenment. As unfallen Adam in the Garden of Eden was appointed the task of the contemplation and naming of creatures, so with automation. We have now only to name and program a process or a product in order for it to be accomplished. (*UM* 465)

From there, McLuhan uses the example of a 1940s cartoon character "Schmoo," whose image evokes a representation of something else—i.e., pork chops and caviar (465). He then posits, "The custom-built supplants the mass-produced," which leads to a focus on "subliminal effects" that surround us (McLuhan 465). That is, "Subliminal have been the effects" (465).

McLuhan's reference to Yates is indicative of the importance of memory in everyday actions. Yates cites variations of the words we choose to use—essentially asking whether we memorize things outside of ourselves for the sake of utility or instead assign intrinsic and

extrinsic meaning to those word choices (24). Working with the rhetorical ideas from Cicero's *De Inventione* and the *Ad Herrenium* (of debatable origin)*,* Yates poses a question that reflects the stance that McLuhan applies to discussions on technological environments: "Why is it…that some images are so strong and sharp and so suitable for awakening memory, whilst others are so weak and feeble that they hardly stimulate memory at all?" (25). The excerpt that follows explains that daily events that become routine or are part of the "ordinary" aspects of the world (e.g., the sun rising and setting) will alter the ability for a mind to produce a related memory, as presented in the *Ad Herrenium* (qtd. in Yates 25).

In a technological environment, human experience can transcend the temporal moment (or at least appear to do so). McLuhan is interested in a paradox of existence that directs memories forward, toward new discoveries that seemingly emerge by surprise, but were indeed already in motion to become reality. Human language is the epitome of this notion. In this explanation, we see a variation of perceptual awareness in that, "Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered and outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness" (McLuhan, *UM* 85). Again, we see the metaphor and symbol as an interpretation-making process that evokes, and sometimes skews, the senses in everyday life.

McLuhan attends to a spiritual element of lived experience. The type of involvement in a spiritual engagement is not embedded in literacy, but instead requires a participatory response, much like rituals enacted in tribal communities (McLuhan, *UM* 88). The value in scrutinizing the role of language is that it explains a dimension of *logos* that engages consciousness in a different way, thus showing a significance of involvement that happens outside of the individual person, therefore functioning in a more communal way. The element of sense impressions in shared

space, especially with others' senses involved, becomes important to analyses of intellect and the inner being of a person (i.e., the soul).

There are semiotic implications in McLuhan's work, especially as he examines the philosophy of intellect and interpretation. The world in its material form cannot encompass the entire essence of the sensations of life. Questions remain about the tangible and intangible, the tactile and non-tactile, and action and inaction in daily activities. *If an image comes to mind for some things, can images emerge for those things that can never be seen?* Another issue is the absence of images for things seen but not remembered or even recollected. For McLuhan, this is part of a fruitful discussion about modern notions of self and interpretations of the world.

Not all variables of life fall into Aristotelian, demonstrative proofs. For Aristotle, the image would be scrutinized for particulars, in so much as they can be abstracted as such. McLuhan is not necessarily looking at particulars when he examines the relationship between people and things. Instead, he follows a thread of thought that moves the discussion toward general patterns of thought and behavior. As one of the founders of ethics in the social forum, Aristotle offers a different rhetorical layout in the form of specific categories for behavior. McLuhan emphasizes the senses, and this is a point where his work diverts away from the scientific models presented in some ideas in antiquity. The senses (and the ratio of usage between them) become the impetus for interpretation in McLuhan's work.

As this chapter has shown, the notion of formal cause in McLuhan's corpus works as a turning point away from linear or scientific models of interpretation that emerge out of modernity. The functions of memory and language help with interpretations of the senses as part of shaping the understanding of lived experience. At issue are the mediated environments that create new images and language in the minds of those who encounter a new environment.

Additionally, the habitual shifts in speech from the advent of writing and print help to define a changing literacy among the masses. The role of the entire body is therefore influenced by technological dependence.

The next chapter will explore McLuhan's alternative epistemology to modernity. The questions will encompass modern notions of progress, as well as the modern expansion of the city as part of a post-Gutenberg social shift. These social changes contribute to a rhetorical understanding of epistemological turns that were particularly pervasive throughout the twentieth century. Included in this discussion will be the role of the person living among—and sometimes subordinate to—machines, electric technologies, and new media. Two specific scholars, Lewis Mumford and Harold Innis, are included in McLuhan's rhetorical response to modernity's preoccupation for growth. Each new environment created by humankind is a move toward a new way of thought and action. This is an issue of great importance in terms of its relation to communication and human subjectivity within McLuhan's writings.

CHAPTER THREE

A Rhetorical Response to Modernity:

McLuhan's Mediated Epistemology

  This chapter attends to McLuhan's epistemological stance on human perception and subjectivity. Specifically, the notion of reality as shaped by the senses is examined as part of McLuhan's critique of perceived knowledge and memory. The movement of knowledge in oral and written form comes directly from McLuhan's insights in Understanding Media. In terms of aural/oral culture and the Gutenberg Era of print, knowledge and understanding involve a rhetorical understanding of epistemological turns in history. Subsequently, McLuhan's continuation and re-examination of modernity, idea of progress, and the growth of the city that Harold Innis and others explored in the first part of the twentieth century reflect changes in social acquisition of—and perceptions of—knowledge.

New Media Environments and Epistemology

  In the current media culture (and the electric environments of the twenty-first century), McLuhan's ideas are perhaps more palatable today than they were in the twentieth century because of the ubiquity of media and the attendant pressure toward media dependence. Therefore, the question brought forth by the rhythmic pulse of technology in the social forum is: *What has changed about people's ability to interpret the world around them—i.e., their perceptual compass—due to immersion in electronically mediated environments?* This central question of the chapter confronts a realm of epistemological concern and leads to new considerations about the changing nature of both perception and subjectivity.

  To address issues affecting the social milieu and perception in McLuhan's work, I explore several avenues of media saturation in the social forum. First, I attend to the notion that new media environments change people's intellectual ground, especially altering their epistemological pursuit of truth. Second, I show that McLuhan's explanations are epistemological, and that he outlines the ways knowledge is procured in an electronically-mediated public. Third, I argue that McLuhan's insights form a critique of modernity, an analysis

pointing to the problem of a shifting subjectivity that leads to a general malaise among the public.

Understanding Media offers an epistemological framework that highlights changes in not only what people know, but also subsequent changes in perceptual patterns that grow in a social and communal way. The advent of printed works in the sixteenth century would prove to move language and ideas more expeditiously than the slower manuscript culture could (McLuhan, "The Effect" 126, 132). "Technology is explicitness" is a characterization from Lyman Bryson that highlights a difference between the manuscript and print cultures (qtd. in McLuhan, *UM* 132). Such a distinction leads to McLuhan's critique of the various layers of interpretive losses that written language has endured. The implications of the written word moving to print include McLuhan's notion that the inflections of meaning would be changed due to prescriptive grammatical patterns, which would differ from readers' "auditory patterns" (132). What would follow in McLuhan's ongoing project is a critique of modernity's noetic (i.e., thought) structures.

Even the title of the book, *Understanding Media,* brings forth an inquiry into human understanding in a technological social forum. He discusses a perceptual divide between "pre-electric age" and post-electric age patterns (6). McLuhan is interested in the cultural effects that move through history as part of a changing perceptual milieu due to social adaptations toward the visual from the audile-tactile habits of information diffusion. This contrast grows within McLuhan's ideas on aspects of the natural (*physis*) and the cultural (*nomos*) that emerge through an influx of temporal technologies. On the surface level, the movement of technology can appear to be linear, but with deeper probing McLuhan articulates a permeating nature of technology that allows for retrospective analysis because the future of technology carries a necessary connection

to past innovations. To visualize his point for an audience, McLuhan often uses a "rearview mirror" analogy to explain the process of future technologies as built upon those of the past.

Interpretively, this notion is rich in epistemological exploration, especially in terms of discovering tacit, or communally understood, knowledge in the social sphere. The idea of simultaneity is directly connected to McLuhan's critique of linearity in modernity. If print is linear, then a simultaneous level of knowledge differs in its engagement with consciousness. Epistemologically, this is an ideal example of tacit knowledge. Even when careful observation of media effects occurs, the knowledge acquired is still a form of tacit knowledge. This type of knowledge exists as a parallel to immediate consciousness. Where causality seems like a surface-level source of knowledge among the general public, McLuhan instead sees *formal cause* as related directly to any effect we see in the social, technological community.

McLuhan's first critique of modern thinking occurs in the opening line of chapter one in *Understanding Media*. He says, "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message" (McLuhan, *UM* 19). McLuhan proposes a new way of understanding different perceptions of machine technologies and environments involved in automation. To elaborate on this notion, McLuhan attends to the ways human involvement is affected by media effects in a social way. Using Hans Seyle's ideas on physical and mental responses to external stressors, McLuhan demonstrates "the total environmental situation" (23). He was able to point his scholarship toward a rapid "inundation" of information that influences not only one's perceptual awareness, but also includes one's entire being (29). In McLuhan's work, we see that perception includes a kinesthetic aspect (see 66).

New technological environments would be the impetus of change in human behavior and perception.

In an early discussion regarding the social story of human habits, McLuhan explains how the act of ignoring a medium's implications for society is a common mistake of modern thinking, referring to the problem as "somnambulism" demonstrated by a *blame-a-particular-thing (a concept interchangeable with "content")* approach to social problems (25). What brought forth the ability to analyze such an expansive situation is an "electric speed and total field" way of thinking (25). As modernity throttled toward its goal of progress and constant change, especially after the Industrial Revolution, McLuhan identified something going awry with the role of the individual and a general disregard for tradition. While technology would drive people's attention inward, creating a state of obliviousness, the uniformity of culture would become dangerous to humankind if not examined closely. McLuhan shows that the popular acceptance of specific technologies leads to a denial of cultural patterns that emerge because of those technologies. He calls this individual "the technological idiot" (31). McLuhan understood the pace of new environments as overlapping and sometimes retrospective. Consequently, he cannot be called a Luddite, because he understood the ways old technologies will always lay the groundwork for newer versions of those technologies.

This chapter argues that it is within McLuhan's explorations of perceptual shifts that epistemological implications emerge, while emphasizing that these ideas put forth a critique of the individual who functions in a communal arena. The modern notion of individualism is vital to this critique. Print is the culpable force from which modern immersion in the self—and one's own point-of-view—contributes greatly to a "subliminal charge" that has inclined the modern self toward individualism since the sixteenth century (see McLuhan, *UM* 32-33). In chapter two

of *Understanding Media,* McLuhan shows how technological advancement once created social anxiety but eventually led to a modern state of boredom:

> The effect of electric technology had at first been anxiety. Now it appears to create boredom. We have been through the three stages of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion that occur in every disease of stress of life, whether individual or collective. At least our exhausted slump after the first encounter with the electric has inclined us to expect new problems. (43)

With the advent of rapidly evolving technologies, an electric mediation of reality began to unfold as well. The connection between books, news media, and their creation of "re-cognition" of human experiences, according to McLuhan, is where we discover a place of contention within a discussion on human perception and humankind's social subjectivity (*UM* 283). The formation of a "collective awareness" emerges as a reinforcement for ideas and communal knowledge that become socially agreed upon (114).

Patterns of a visual bias in writing (i.e., not as speech) become a "typographic extension of man," which works as a harbinger for widespread patterns of thought (McLuhan, *UM 235*). However, what occurs during the "explosion" of print in history, according to McLuhan, is an illusion of "immortality" and a quantification of history (238-239). This inquiry requires an exploration of figure and ground. Questions of importance for my purposes in this project arise as follows: *What do people notice, what goes beyond the surface? How do McLuhan's inquiries become a rhetorical response to modernity?* His examinations of communal perception offer epistemological explanations for changes in human subjectivity. For example, in his essay, "Formal Cause in Chesterton," McLuhan is attentive to the notion of formal cause as part of a rhetorical analysis of audience. He first references the work of Joseph Conrad, who was known

to address the ways an individual lives in isolation but still functions as part of a community. McLuhan highlights Conrad's implementation of formal cause in his philosophical understanding of the intellectual deficits—i.e., "defects"—within public knowledge (*Theories* 15-16). In terms of the ways experience shapes perceptions and knowledge acquisition, McLuhan's observations concerning the split between cause and effect show the ways history informs new innovations. Using a humanities-based approach, McLuhan is able frame social perception through analyses of figure and ground, which inform an examination of the *distance* between cause and effect.

McLuhan begins *Understanding Media* with the notion that individual bodies coexist in the global community. Published in 1964, the book is a pillar among a series of McLuhan's writings that delve into the notion of Western "implosion" (5). In order to accomplish the task of *understanding* the ways electronic media led to a "technological simulation of consciousness" in the twentieth century, McLuhan points to an implosion of social thought that cultivates a rapidity of action in electronically-mediated space and time (5). In this initial observation, McLuhan calls for an awareness of social anxieties and pressures that perpetuate a type of participation in a form of ubiquitous, yet somehow non-linear, awareness. This, McLuhan says, defines the "Age of Anxiety" (7).

Understanding Media, published in 1964, follows the 1962 publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* in which McLuhan explores open societies and their constant gravitational pull to a social realm, rather than staying contained in a tribal setting. The notion of the social context emerges from an "increase in knowledge through the advent of print and thus finds its roots in the spread of phonetic structures" (McLuhan, *GG* 8-9). The nature of the social mind is encumbered by a simultaneity of senses. At the same time, thought patterns would be very much

reliant on information available during a certain time in history, creating a communal perception marked by social knowledge. When times change, so do the values of the social setting.

One of McLuhan's trepidations about modern thinking is that "nothing is stable but change itself" (McLuhan and Nevitt 6). Rhetorically, McLuhan sets up an epistemological look at social knowledge, particularly within the modern social context. Here, I look to the phrase "social knowledge" as defined in rhetorical terms by Thomas Farrell, who defines social knowledge as part of *public conceptualizations*:

> Social knowledge comprises conceptions of symbolic relationships among problems, persons, interests, and actions, which imply (when accepted) certain notions of preferable public behavior. ("Knowledge" 4)

In much the same timbre of McLuhan's earlier ideas on the social, Farrell cites "specialized knowledge" as a mitigating factor for social patterns of thought, which requires a "*personal relationship* to other actors in the social world" (4). This definition is important to note within the historical-rhetorical conversation within McLuhan's project. McLuhan sees the impact of the social connections that in turn affect observational patterns, including changes in the communal way of describing social issues through common phrasings. Related to communal phrases, Farrell notes the common, public use of the phrase "as a rule" to demonstrate rhetorical effects in community-level thinking and perceptual patterns (5). Essentially, empty phrases gain significance within certain forums.

McLuhan's mid-twentieth century purview is important to note any time his ideas are analyzed. In the throes of shifting traditions, the twentieth century presented a clash between academic ideologies, especially bringing forth arguments dividing the arts and sciences regarding which realm could offer true knowledge. McLuhan, ever faithful to the liberal arts and the

trivium, speaks to these issues through a grammatical look at innovations of the time. Here, to think about life in a humanities-based way indicates a call for understanding the world in a qualitative way, to see how environmental effects answer the calls for new ways of doing things differently (yet still in much the same way) from the past.

McLuhan makes a case for an environmental development and organization of social patterns. This is where the philosophical elements behind the idea that "the medium is the message" turn toward social imperceptions of the effects of a medium that go beyond temporal content (see *UM* 13). Additionally, it becomes clear in the discussion that one cannot name a time period according to its innovations until its effects have been determined. McLuhan cites the retrospective perceptions of past innovation, using the examples such as Plato who "transformed the old oral dialogue into an art form" and so on (13). The effects of technologies have sped up this process, and the view of innovation becomes more forward thinking than retrospective. Old media become the "content" of new media, and new media always create new environments (14-15). In new environments, approaches to learning and education begin to shift. In general, these issues become epistemological concerns for McLuhan, as they represent turning points in the ways people interact within technologically mediated environments. Not only is communication mediated, but so too is the learning of a community.

Changing Environments and Subjectivity

Subjectivity is part of the social milieu because of its direct interaction with changing environments. McLuhan often relies on examples of changing societal methodologies to point out the methodical thinking that perpetuates media saturation. In *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*, McLuhan and Powers predict a

major shift in societal subjectivity. The book attends to the various ways the human mind

extends—and often spreads thinking across many planes—through the use of electronic media.

In the section on "Global Robotism: The Satisfactions," the notion of disembodied existence is

described as a consequence of future uses of communication media (*GV* 83). Also in that

chapter, McLuhan and Powers emphasize the global village and its impact on the U.S. through

the year 2020.

McLuhan and Powers use the term "electronic culture" to identify a collectivity that

occurs when societal patterns adapt to electric technologies. Through this dependence, the

authors predict some of the twenty-first century shifts in the economy as well. They say,

"Communication media of the future will accentuate the extensions of our nervous systems,

which can be *disembodied* and made totally collective" (McLuhan and Powers 83, emphasis

added). A belief in a literal extension of body to *outside of the body* is problematic to people's

perceptions in terms of their roles in the world in this example. McLuhan's next prediction is a

change in the consumer market, wherein a shift toward electronic communication creates a

global aspect and new ways of conducting business. This type of shift creates "producers" and

"consumers" because people would not only work in these new business models, they would also

participate in the databases created by electronic consumerism (McLuhan and Powers, *GV* 84).

McLuhan is especially attentive to historically notable attitudes about the spread of print

culture. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* McLuhan offers an important analysis of Alexander Pope's

criticisms of popular names and concepts presented in print in *The Dunciad.* With reference to

public "fogs of Dulness," McLuhan sheds light on the ways ancient curiosity made a turn toward

more linear ways of thinking, wherein a collective thought became a "anesthetized" after the

printing press emerged (259). This would become what McLuhan defines as "individual

detribalized man" at the start of *Understanding Media* (12). This literary commentary is

important because it promotes important aspects of rhetorical influences of media, especially

with regard to the ways people interpret media messages.

Not incidentally, McLuhan intentionally sheds light on the ways human bodies interact in

mediated environments—i.e., where all environments are mediated by *something*, and media

environments are mediated by technology. The notion that human bodies are somehow out there,

somewhere outside of the body as a duality of presence, is one of McLuhan's frequent

warnings.[9] A detachment of self from the self was becoming a new category of self-identification

in the twentieth century and took on new levels in the twenty-first century. In response, ideas

about presence and the mediated self are at the core of *Understanding Media*. Therefore, we can

see that a mediated self is, indeed, a historical identity marker of the technological age.

Epistemology of Experience Versus Veiled Perceptions

Without using the phrases "a priori" or "a posteriori" many times in *Gutenberg Galaxy*,

McLuhan effectively offers an exploration of human experience, as he critiques the idea that a

knowledge base can be assessed in relation to things that are either experienced and consciously

noted or conceived before any experience occurs. In relation to this, McLuhan finds important

emphases regarding the role of the person in his or her time and space. The notion of past and

future sometimes overlap in his explanations, and this gives us great insight into the

epistemological development in various historical moments. Challenging the linearity of

sequence that is so often implied about historical events (and epistemological categories of

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[9] In McLuhan's book co-authored with Quentin Fiore and produced with Jerome Agel, *War and Peace in the Global Village,* the explicitly stated idea that "[w]e are all robots when uncritically involved with our technologies" emerges (18). These extensions lead to humankind acting as "not only a robot in his private reflexes but in his civilized behavior and in all his responses to the extensions of his body, which we call technology*"* (*WP* 19).

understanding through time), McLuhan offers rich insight into which elements of the social sphere fight for social prominence and monopoly. That is, McLuhan understands that many facets of culture attack the human psyche and fight for control going forward—yet history has its place in the conversation because of its influence on what is to come.

In terms of epistemological value, McLuhan clarifies his point in *Gutenberg Galaxy*, "The theme of this book is not that there is anything good or bad about print but that unconsciousness of the effect of *any* force is a disaster, especially a force that we have made ourselves" (248). An intrusion of omnipresence is what concerns McLuhan the most, and his agenda—though he often claimed not to have one—was to shed light on its stress on one's entire being. What becomes clear is McLuhan's stance that the sensory aspect of existence is vitally important and ultimately defies a strictly empirical conceptualization of knowledge acquisition. McLuhan often tells us that when one medium is eclipsed by another, the social realm responds.

Attending to the social aspect of public representation, Alasdair MacIntyre explains some of the implications of social awareness and self-knowledge. He explicates some of the major themes that position virtue as "traditional" and within a "moral climate" that emerge in Jane Austen's book *Mansfield Park.* One character in particular emerges as a craftsman of his own reputation, Henry Crawford. MacIntyre points out Crawford's awareness of self-presentation, noting that "he takes *being a clergyman* to consist in *giving the appearance of being a clergyman.* Self is almost, if not quite, dissolved into the presentation of self, but what in [Erving] Goffman's social world becomes *the* form of the self is still in Jane Austen's world a symptom of the vices" (241). Here, we see the everyday aspects of social manipulations as indicative of a "counterfeit" crafting of personal representation (see MacIntyre 241-242). This

does not equate to true self-knowledge, however. MacIntyre's observations of public behavior in literature demonstrate a modern notion of the subjective self.

Subjectivity is directly tied to epistemological concerns in McLuhan's work. This is especially true when McLuhan makes assertions about the brain and its perceptual inclinations. That is, the mind translates what is seen with the eyes, but this happens according to well established patterns of assumption and illusion. An assumption is that we think we see everything, but we typically attend to the figure rather than ground. Therefore, if one sees an airplane in the sky, he or she might forget about the sky and focus only on the airplane. Ground is, essentially, where everything exists. To accomplish an epistemological explanation of this, McLuhan shows that an illusion emerges and shapes one's assumptions about reality.

In turn, the human body engages the senses to respond and act within a new environment. In McLuhan's general overview, implosion happens when sensory overload creates an almost painful existence; whereas explosion occurs when technology is still fresh to the senses (i.e., new environments, new sensory patterns). This is why people can become numb to technological presence. A new type of literacy emerges in this aspect of written words. McLuhan essentially says that this opens up our bodies to vulnerabilities, where parts and fragments of the body are easily accessible (see *UM* 100-101). More importantly, McLuhan suggests that people willingly participate in this pattern of technological effects (*UM* 100). Engaging in technological environments appears to bring a sense of speed and efficiency, yet it creates a consequence of extension that minimizes the role of the body itself. Perhaps this is a type of something gained-something lost scenario, or it could be where sense perception shifts. Either way, physical bodies are involved but then subsequently uninvolved.

McLuhan's epistemology involves a deep inquiry into the ways print (including typography) contribute to a changing subjectivity in the public sphere:

> The alphabet (and its extension into typography) made possible the spread of the power that is knowledge, and shattered the bonds of tribal man, thus exploding him into an agglomeration of individuals. Electric writing and speed pour upon him, instantaneously and continuously, the concerns of all other men. He becomes tribal once more. The human family becomes one tribe again. (*UM* 234)

For McLuhan, in the electric age, individualism and specialization shape social subjectivity. This idea encourages an interpretive inquiry into the current historical context of public consciousness, which reveals that people cannot easily manage the speed of technological environments and loads of information.

In a letter to Harry J. Skornia[10], McLuhan says, "Everybody knows that environment is a force" (*Letters* 311). Here, some telling information unfolds regarding McLuhan's trajectory for a critique of modern subjectivity. He explicitly addresses (and critiques) the notion of unconscious acceptance of new environments. As an example, McLuhan cites the United States' Telstar satellites utilized in 1962 and 1963 (see editors' footnote, *Letters* 311), which he says "create a new environment" and that the environmental "content will not only be TV and computer but the planet itself" (311). With regard to subjectivity and a critique of linearity of art forms that emerge in the social sphere, McLuhan posits that the emergence of orbiting satellites would not only change the role of television, but would instead "become an art form" in its own right, as compared to movies and so on (311). Importantly, he argues, "But in order to have

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[10] Dr. Harry J. Skornia was one of many people interviewed for McLuhan's 1960 *Report on Project in Understanding New Media,* a project that laid the foundation for *Understanding Media* in 1964 (see McLuhan, *Letters* 255-256). Skornia's published works explore the social impact of journalistic media and television.

autonomy we must push the unconscious and environmental parameters right up into consciousness" (311). If not, then the world would be at the mercy of these new technological environments that would control the entire dissemination of a wider potential for television and computer dominance.

Such a wide-reaching environment creates a dominance over the psyche of the entire planet, according to McLuhan. Perhaps most the important assertion in McLuhan's letter to Skornia is that the availability of satellite TV and computers creates high "demand" and "works for all modes of perception" (312). An epistemological inquiry unfolds here because of the ways perceptions are skewed—or even controlled—by the effects of a (somewhat omniscient) satellite orbiting the earth. McLuhan attends to the role of the person within shifting technological environments, wherein he says "consciousness becomes incidental rather than structural" in a letter to William Jovanovich, a colleague of McLuhan's who worked in publishing (*Letters* 338-339). The notion that thought processes are incidental is thus attributed to the ways a speeding up of information creates a new environment of the mind. McLuhan calls this an "all-at-once world" that is "like the subconscious" (338). Remaining unaware of the effects of new environments becomes a danger zone when considering the trajectory of human thought and behavior under a technological duress that goes unnoticed.

Throughout *Understanding Media,* media environments involve an interplay between procuring a basic intellectual acknowledgement of the world around us and being linguistically capable of asserting observations through language. While new media extend various aspects of body by creating mechanical conveniences, the new environments create new patterns (or messages) that extend the mind. However, the foundational idea behind new innovation is that "effects are perceived whereas causes are conceived" (M. McLuhan and E. McLuhan, *Media and*

Formal Cause 44; emphasis in original). A clear divide in types of perceptions is evident here. The former is an interaction with events happening in the present, but the latter deals with interpretation of the causal factors that happened in the past[11].

For inquiry into subjectivity as an epistemological coordinate in McLuhan, we have an entrance into the idea of point-of-view as McLuhan understood it. A new understanding of reality emerges out of a new environment for those who engage it. We see that his work intersects with ideas from John Locke, who was of the school of thought that experience and observation will shape one's purview. Reality, within this framework, is a given but not necessarily an *innate understanding,* which for Locke would defy logical understanding of acquired knowledge. Instead reality is perceived within the encounter with real things (tangible objects, the physical realm of existence, etc.) in the world[12]. This would be far too definitive to fit into McLuhan's ideas on extension. However, the process of forming symbolic understandings of everyday objects and concepts are precisely that—*conceptualized* through observation—and McLuhan is, indeed, at least attentive to these aspects of Locke's thinking. When extension occurs through new technologies or media, etc., an amplification (of the whole person) simultaneously occurs as well, so perception is "blocked," and conceptualizations are a product of narcotic state of thinking ("Editor's Introduction," *UM* xviii).

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[11] Deeper exploration of time as it relates to interpretation will be presented in chapter four and chapter six. Time becomes a major factor in McLuhan's dissection of the characteristics of modernity, for example.

[12] In John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* many questions about the rational acquisition of thought through empirical means or other types of observation arise. He asks questions in this excerpt, which seemingly describes his notion of the *tabula rasa,* for example:

> For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible. If therefore children and idiots have souls, have minds, without those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths; which since they do not, is it evident that there are no such impressions. For if they are not notions naturally imprinted, how can they be innate? And if they are notions imprinted, how can they be unknown? (Locke 27)

However, McLuhan shows how conceptualizations can lead to places where the mind functions in a type of trance where assumptions about social effects of a medium can seem correct to some. For example, McLuhan uses a parallel between the gun and "good versus bad" to show the problems of fallacious perceptions. McLuhan shows that people who say something—such as the gun, apple pie, or smallpox[13]—is neither good or bad but is instead determined only by its user are oblivious to the notion that the medium is the driving force of a message carried into everyday experiences. The use of technology is part of the critique as well. The spread of technology is its message. A reliance on technology has become a major factor in people's lives, making it a (conceptualized) necessity. Subjective errors are part of McLuhan's critique of modern thought as well.

Subjective generalizations run parallel to the structuring of social patterns. Subjective errors become a dialectical problem, because there is a lack of probing beyond surface claims. This is narcosis. For McLuhan, the probe is a path toward finding greater truths, rather than being loyal to overgeneralized or cliché opinions. It is in the book *City as Classroom* (*CAC*) that the notion of the "whole situation" becomes important to understanding the complexities of culture and society. "The *ground*," the *CAC* authors say, "is always the setting in which you exist and act. The *ground* is never static; it is always changing. The interplay between you and this changing *ground* changes you" (McLuhan et al. 10; emphases in original).

The figure, according to McLuhan, includes the conscious self, so even the self-as-figure is obsolesced. The unawareness of the masses is where narcosis overtakes critical inquiry,

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[13] In this section of *UM,* McLuhan references an assertion from General David Sarnoff, who said, "We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value" (qtd. in McLuhan 23). The medium is instead shown to have major social impact, which is the foundation of McLuhan's critique of subjective thought. The misconceptions about objects' roles in the world, McLuhan says, are evidence of somnambulism (23).

understanding, and analysis of the ground, as the figure and its role will go unnoticed. New ground, emerging from new mediated environments, thrusts the singular person into a maelstrom of detachment (see also *CAC,* McLuhan et al. 10). A human being cannot function in a meaningful, mindful way in this maelstrom of obsolescence, which is a vital exploration to be expanded in the final chapter of my discussion.

The social setting is the cultural context where conceptualizations can occur or change very quickly. Perceptions within a cultural setting are greatly impacted by innovation. McLuhan says perception can be shifted even more so within cultures deeply embedded in habits of literacy. Clusters of culturally like-minded people can then impact other cultures, such as the tribal, non-literacy-bound societies. We have the age-old tale of wealthy nations trying to impress its values on other nations' cultural landscapes, which prompts an ethical discussion about how much sharing of ideas becomes an *imposition* on others' lives.

Peoples' habits differ around the world, of course, and we know that not every community or tribe exhibits the global village mentality. In fact, many villages are interested in maintaining their own cultural mores in spite of any menacing intrusions from the outside world —even when such intrusions allege good intentions. With outside intrusions can come unsolicited changes within tribal communities or villages. The real danger is a resulting homogenization, or worse, a hegemonic tension between various communities. Tribes who are accustomed to their village's traditions, structural habits, and behavioral expectations do not necessarily have a need for Western culture's influence[14].

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[14] In *UM,* McLuhan cites *The Ugly American,* which showcases a widely known scenario where running water was installed in remote Indian villages, an initiative conducted by UNESCO (122). The installation of pipes ceased the meetings at the communal well, and McLuhan notes that the pipes impacted literacy habits of the village (122).

Some epistemological questions arise: *What do people learn about their roles in their community? How is community knowledge cultivated?* Literacy is not the same in the media environment, as the non-literate parts of the world will have different perceptions and understandings of the world. At the same time, McLuhan describes connections to cultural literacy as sometimes less obvious when it comes to everyday actions, including the ways people acquire food, water, and so on. People do not exist in relation to things in McLuhan's epistemological stance, but instead function as though the human element is lost or has been obsolesced into new, extended functions. Insofar as connections between perceptions of reality and questions about knowledge and learning are involved, we can see an overlap between ontology and epistemology here. The interplay between the two philosophical inquiries offers some insights into the ways McLuhan critiques modern subjectivity.

In the process of exploring the ways society shifts under the stress of innovation, McLuhan proceeds to position the community as a place where examinations of perceptual changes take place. McLuhan critiques the modern thinking about how things should be, especially in reference to social anticipation of new electric or technological environments. The social forum perceives its participation in technological environments, yet their perceptive tendency is based on the sensorium. McLuhan was especially interested in the sensorium and its role in the ways people understand their world and their role in this participation. There is an important aesthetic aspect to the ways people perceive the world. It is visual, of course, but it is also a larger issue surrounding perceptive inclinations, habits, and modern preferences (e.g., including expectations for linearity and efficiency) that impact culture.

McLuhan understands that an aesthetic appeal to technology (and other mediated environments) drives social consciousness, but his inquiry into how we view reality delves

beyond an aesthetic approach by itself. We see connections to art and the ways artists predict future patterns based on their intense attentiveness to social activity. Other metaphors of art in McLuhan's work point directly to the aesthetic qualities of perception. The notion of the obsolesced activity (such as the clock obsolescing leisure time) becoming an *art form*. That which becomes obsolete is therefore an art form in retrospect; at the same time, new innovations are built upon the old.

McLuhan's Epistemological Probes

McLuhan is interested in the extensions of the central nervous system, which is the springboard for discussion on the ways people perceive the world and reality. Especially in his ruminations about the role of the mind and body as *simultaneously* immersed in experience through the senses, McLuhan is able to include, at least partially, a humanist perspective that is attentive to a *humanness* of communicative praxis, participation, and perception. Communication is an enactment of one's perceptions in constant movement outward, rather than an inward reflection where people might embrace dichotomies between mind and body. Instead of reflection and inward analysis, people are thrown into a communicative space, and this is most evident in the ways people use technologies. The body appears to be out there, somewhere beyond the self, and it is all perceived as part of the person (i.e., and extension taken for granted as a type of physical "truth" for the majority of entranced participants in the social forum).

What happens in the outward, extended technological situation could be equated to *what's there is here, but what's here is here* (see *GV* 148). The numbing of perceptual knowledge and lack of awareness piques McLuhan's epistemological insights in his corpus time and time again. These reflections on meaning-making lead his work to deeply philosophical

questions that emerge from various epistemological thinkers from history, including many examinations of ideas from John Locke and Francis Bacon. Their questions about perception showcase learning as something outside of the mind and body, especially in terms of the ways we attempt to discover truth. McLuhan becomes interested in the emergence of symbols and metaphors emanating from technological innovation.

As a probe of social thought, symbols and metaphors are an indication of an understanding of humanity that becomes contrived through innovations throughout modernity. McLuhan looks for the ways earlier scientific ideas about traditionally separated concepts—e.g., mind-body, participation-unawareness, archetype-cliché, etc.—are instead part of a *simultaneity* of experience that has philosophical implications rather than scientific. For example, we do not hear McLuhan speaking in terms of dichotomies, as he is more inclined to focus on decentralizing elements in the world. Instead the people and the environment are inextricably intertwined, as indicated by his affinity for Joycean quips like, "The city is the centre of paralysis" (qtd. in McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype* 61).

The epistemological notion of innateness is not something McLuhan supports if we look closely at the ways he explores human narcosis. If people were innately aware of their true nature, for example, then reversals would likely cease to occur, yet we see movements toward whimsical shifts that reverse human nature at the moment implosion occurs. In *From Cliché to Archetype,* McLuhan is attentive to the reversals of human nature that ripple into the social forum and cause vast changes in how society thinks. In one example, McLuhan probes the environment that moves from humanity-based to service-based, creating a "jungle" of sorts (*FCA* 62). The city, especially big cities like New York City, are often referred to as "concrete jungles," where ruthless business tactics create survivalist tendencies.

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McLuhan says an environment contains hidden elements that elude perception much "like the perceptual bias of one's native language" (McLuhan, *FCA* 61). The hidden elements of an environment typically surface through the lenses of artists, who have the ability to "raise these hidden environments to the level of conscious appreciation," thus bring the invisible ground out of hiding (McLuhan, *FCA* 6). Prior to artistic intervention, or intentional shifting of focus, public perceptions are skewed in favor of what gets noticed first. Within epistemological terms, this is an important set of ideas concerning thoughts and perceptions within a humanist framework.

McLuhan is careful to avoid strict designations or categories in his examinations of perceptual patterns. However, the idea that knowledge is socially grounded is a central element in McLuhan's corpus. Through this distinction of knowledge being socially and technologically mediated, McLuhan undermines the earlier empirical ideas that created too linear and too strict definitions for perception. Instead, McLuhan is apt to put forth an emphasis on an interplay between figure and ground that results in "action" of perception (*CAC* 9). Therefore, figure and ground are in constant "interplay" (McLuhan, *CAC* 9).

Within the concept of an interplay between figure and ground, McLuhan was able to create a non-linear way of looking at effects through the tetrad. The tetrad, as we know, is comprised of four parts that are always, too, in an interplay. "Immediate awareness" is obscured when certain elements of our environment go unnoticed (McLuhan, *LOM* 19). Through a juxtaposition between *extension, obsolescence, reversal, and retrieval,* McLuhan created an ongoing loop for which to explain the ways visual and acoustic space differ in their impact on perceptions. To refute strict scientific rules that proclaim absolutes when assessing cause and effect, McLuhan was able to offer an outline of the constant action within the social forum and its understanding of the world. Through these observations from McLuhan, we can see that the

tetrad is constantly in action or motion when assessing the impact of a new technology or other mediated environment. The tetrad setup helps us see the movement of cultural shifts, especially in terms of technologically driven social change.

The tetrad solidifies the ways a change in perception can occur off of the radar of human awareness,[15] which shapes McLuhan's digital humanism. The total situation pushes the new laws of media, as discovered by McLuhan, into a realm beyond a linear analysis. Instead, McLuhan says, "The new electric structuring and configuring of life more and more encounters the old lineal and fragmentary procedures and tools of analysis from the mechanical age. More and more we turn from the content of messages to study total effect" (*UM* 43). The movement toward understanding total effect of a medium moves the discussion away from content and to the true social impact.

In McLuhan's preface to *The Mechanical Bride,* he opens with a pointed criticism of modernity's obsession with controlling "the collective public mind" (v). His response to new modern patterns for control is exemplified through questions about ways to reverse the trend: "Why not use the new commercial education as a means to enlightening its intended prey? Why not assist the public to observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon it unconsciously?" (v). These questions offer a humanist approach to understanding and assisting social perception to be more keenly aware of the forces ramping up through social patterns of control. Essentially, McLuhan promotes educating the public to notice and assess the hidden aspects of modern environments.

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[15] McLuhan's tetrad could be applied to any scenario or thing, from everyday technologies to large, organizational structures defined through architecture. Eric McLuhan, in the preface to *LOM,* says the "laws apply only to human utterances and artifacts" (x).

The literary nature of McLuhan's work tends to highlight the different states of being for those who notice what happens in a changing environment and those who do not. Many times, for example, Edgar Allen Poe's poem "A Descent into the Maelstrom" surfaces in McLuhan's explorations of humanity's need for understanding of their environment(s). He says, "Poe's sailor saved himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by co-operating with it" (*MB* v)[16]. We hear an indication that it would be a daunting task to make the book a moral code of sorts, but instead presents the book as an educational tool intended to help readers navigate and contemplate that "A whirling *phantasmagoria* can be grasped only when arrested for contemplation" (emphasis added, v). McLuhan probes a troubling aspect of society while maintaining an understanding of human curiosity and desire for amusement as well, as even the sailor in the poem admits to finding amusement through his observations of the whirlpool and its appearance.

McLuhan is careful to articulate his intentions in *The Mechanical Bride* as only a set of suggestions for entering into an observational stage. Perhaps one of the most memorable reflections on McLuhan's insights comes from Gossage who says in *McLuhan: Hot & Cool* that "[McLuhan's] theory is that the media a man uses to extend his[17] senses and his faculties will determine what he is, rather than the other way around" (20). Therefore, we see a leaning in media studies toward understanding the ways everyday environments directly impact the ways we think and behave. We learn how to react to our new environments, which is McLuhan's point about perception—we become accustomed to the way things are, not as they should be or *would*

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[16] McLuhan introduces *The Mechanical Bride,* saying, "The present book likewise makes few attempts to attack very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising. It does attempt to set the reader at the center of the revolving picture created by these affairs where he may observe the action that is in progress and in which everybody is involved" (v).
[17] *[or her]

be in other situations, such as pre-literate societies. We function within our immediate environment, even when extended into technological planes, yet it is literacy that acts as the harbinger for technological encapsulation.

The modern idea of mass communication began long before the twentieth century, as the Gutenberg press allowed for mass production of literature and other written works. These works migrated into the public, creating a new environment of ideas that has grown into a community of swirling opinions, much like a maelstrom of information and information-entertainment—i.e., or "infotainment," as it is sometimes called today. The modern mind after the printing press was introduced to a faster movement of ideas and attention, and the dissemination of information would also follow specific rules, such as reading from left to right or writing within a linear essay model.

Books, as part of the cultural and educational landscape, have an impact on the ways a culture interacts with ideas. Ideas about writing, reading, speech, and comprehension in McLuhan's work have also been influenced by his deep interest in the meaning of educational apparatuses, such as books, in our society. In his 1973 essay "Do Books Matter?" McLuhan explores the Enlightenment's implementation of learning upon children[18], as well as the shaping of public consciousness. Historically, anything deemed socially objectionable would be rejected, disputed, or censored, and books labeled as culturally valuable would be welcomed. Authentic learning would then be secondary to social expectations regarding social messages presented in literature and other learning materials.

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[18] Steven Mailloux discusses the history of reading in *Rhetorical Power,* where he notes the ways books are viewed as having great potential impact within a literate society. Presenting the example of the "cultural censorship" enacted when books, such as *Huckleberry Finn,* Mailloux discusses how certain books sometimes evoked objections from libraries [and schools, etc.] (*RP* 104).

In electronic environments, information contained primarily in books takes on a new cultural presence[19]. Books, specifically, play a contentious role in much of our history, especially because of the ways the book itself can prompt individualized study. Attitudes about reading and educational activities would begin to shift toward the self. Francis Bacon'sideas on learning have laid the foundation for much of McLuhan's inquiries into new epistemological territories beyond scholastic and Medieval attitudes toward learning. [20] McLuhan says that the book, or the printed word, for example, "submits to the whims of the user," especially in that it can be picked up or put down, where electronic media will "envelope the user" ("Do Books Matter" 209).

To decide what is real would require a break from this narcotic trance, which is an intersection where McLuhan's ideas meet epistemology. Correspondingly, McLuhan explicitly states that "*it is the sender who is sent*" within the "paradoxical *electronic reversal*" of books ("Do Books Matter" 209; emphases added). This type of assertion shows how McLuhan highlights the ways a person engages the ground—i.e., the actual environment where a person exists—and becomes a figure in the participation of electronically mediated environments. The ground dominates the figure (the person) so that the person is numb yet unaware of the numbness. Questions about the true meaning of nature in the mediated world is muddled because

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[19] For example, Neil Postman presents related media ecology concerns about the impact of print on culture throughout history in "The Humanism of Media Ecology," his 2000 Keynote at the Inaugural Media Ecology Association Convention. Postman says, "I think most of you know that in the *Phædrus* [Socrates] spoke against writing on the grounds that it would weaken our memories, make public those things that are best left private, and change the practice of education. Writing, he said, forces a student to follow an argument rather than to participate in it" (12).

[20] In his 2008 essay "Marshall McLuhan's Theory of Communication: The Yegg," Eric McLuhan explicitly declares that Marshall McLuhan and Francis Bacon "were committed empiricists," also saying the empirical approach is integrated "observation" into the realm of simultaneity of experience that McLuhan explores (27). The book *Through the Vanishing Point,* by Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, is a place where this line of thought is evident as well, according to the discussion points in E. McLuhan's essay ("Marshall McLuhan's Theory" 28-29).

of technological innovation. McLuhan decidedly looks for ways to uncover the hidden effects of technological ground.

McLuhan's attentiveness to the overarching "book of nature" offers epistemological insights within this part of the discussion as well. (McLuhan's explorations of the book of nature emerge most often in *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Global Village,* without explicit mention in *Understanding Media.*) Historically, the book of nature is parallel to the Bible, wherein great thinkers would say the whole understanding of human action and thought could be found[21]. The themes on nature emerge from the edifice of studying knowledge and thought in changing environments. Labels and categories that create social structures are juxtaposed—and contrasted—with the nature of humankind and lived experience.

Introducing the book of nature at the start of *The Global Village,* Bruce R. Powers says that he and McLuhan "concluded that video-related technologies might produce a form of psychological death for all [hu]mankind by separating it permanently from the natural order, the book of nature, through Narcissistic-like self-involvement, a conclusion reached by McLuhan operating on three analytical levels at once: the perceptual, the historical and the analogic" (xiii). The impetus of their discussion involves questions about conscious versus unconscious aspects of human existence. Those who see the world from within "are in danger of being lost in the funhouse of our unconscious," for example (introduction, Powers xii). The ways people see the world, either from an individual, internalized state or an outward one, will directly impact the way they interpret the world around them, as this part of their discussion indicates.

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[21] One particularly apt definition of the "book of nature" emerges in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things:* "The great metaphor of the book that one opens, that one pores over and reads in order to know nature, is merely the reverse and visible side of another transference, and a much deeper one, which forces language to reside in the world, among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals" (35). The twentieth century conversation about images, language, and meaning-making encompassed epistemological intrigue. Importantly, Eric McLuhan also addresses the Book of Nature within the context of interpretation, saying, "Reading the Book of Nature today means studying media and environments" ("Marshall McLuhan's Theory" 38).

Historically, interpretation of human nature has had many transformations. These ideas often swayed from either the scientific realm, even among scholars who tried to rationalize the existence of God via scientific explanations, to eventually moving the focus toward more humanity-based ideas that emerge from Romanticism. The weighing of good and evil in society has a great deal to do with epistemological turns in our historical conversation. We see, for example, McLuhan contending with varied historical interpretations of human nature through its artifacts and its changing ideas. McLuhan does not make moral judgments his aim, per se, but we can see an underlying allusion to historical ruminations about human nature in general. Poets, writers, and artists would begin to focus intentionally on the feelings and sensations felt throughout the course of life.

In the 2011 edition of *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* we see a newer essay from Elena Lamberti, "Not Just a Book on Media: Extending *The Gutenberg Galaxy,"* which presents some of the ways McLuhan critiques the modern notion of thinking, including some highlights of his attention to knowledge and reality. According to Lamberti, it is within McLuhan's "mosaic" that we receive a form, or formation, of ideas that come together to tell a bigger story, emerging from McLuhan's numerous snippets from literature, politics, sociology, etc. (See Kindle version; *loc.* 463-471). She highlights McLuhan's ability to encourage participation from the readers of his book through the following analysis:

> After having defined the "individual" as a "MONTAGE OF LOOSELY ASSEMBLED PARTS" McLuhan had fun in disassembling those very parts because "WHEN YOU ARE ON THE PHONE OR ON THE AIR YOU HAVE NO BODY." The point for us is how to remain "somebody" while having "no body." By encouraging our active participation in the process of discovery, McLuhan's mosaic also contributes to alert us

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and to keep us awake; by engaging with both the mosaic and its complex network of subtexts, we are trained to be conscious readers and not numbed or homogenized nobodies. (Lamberti, Kindle edition; *loc.* 478)

Lamberti directly addresses McLuhan's exploration of the "discarnate" as playing a major role in his assessment of reality for those who are extended into "cyberspace" (see Kindle edition; *loc.* 478). McLuhan's epistemological probes seek to uncover what establishes human understanding. He discovers a human inclination toward using literacy to form self-awareness. Structure is where human nature falls in line with its habits of literacy.

As a strong epistemological coordinate, the probe is able to provide insight into the way McLuhan assesses the epistemological implications of new environments, especially attending to the notion of true participation that will therefore lead to a deeper understanding of reality than can be achieved in a discarnate state. Probes shape various aspects of thought, as well as the narrative of learning and intellectual performance shifts through the marked revolutions of thought. According to Lamberti, for example, "The probe is used to convey a broken knowledge as in the aphoristic tradition; even if it often sounds like a formula, it forces you to become an active player" (*GG,* Kindle edition; *loc.* 515). The probe is one of the major links between recognizing discarnation and promoting awareness of information swirling about in a modern, electric society. From such insights, we can unravel the ways people perceive the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rhetorical Inquiry into Mediated Environments:

Phenomenology, Time, and Media

In chapter three, McLuhan's phenomenological understanding of time and space is critical to a discussion on obsolescence, a notion that environments change but build upon past environments. Traditional phenomenological questions have deliberated the subject-object relationship. Within McLuhan's definitions of electric speed and imbalances of the sense ratios, we can see a valuable discourse on the immersion of humankind in mediated environments.

The historical significance of phenomenology shows great importance in studying time and space connections. For McLuhan, "Phenomenology is dialectic in ear-mode—a massive and decentralized quest for roots, for ground" (*LOM* 62). The perceptual elements with this type of inquiry are evident in many of the facets of phenomenological investigations. In this chapter, I first explore themes that emerged out of phenomenology in the early to mid-twentieth century. Next, I examine the ways time influences McLuhan's phenomenological observations of electronic environments. This inquiry will also include discussion of McLuhan's reactions to Innis's ideas on space and time (thus connecting them to be "spacetime")[22]. This chapter explores McLuhan's observations on the myriad ways electronic media disrupt and decentralize space and time.

At the heart of this chapter is an inquiry into some of the phenomenological ideas that surface in McLuhan's work, including his idea that obsolescence is not a stable place for one's being when we look more closely at the ways present and future subjectivity is often shaped by past electronic environments. That is, his treatment of time and space relations are sometimes categorized within the scope of media ecology or communication work, as both are at the

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[22] In the introduction to *On the Nature of Media: Essays, 1952-1978,* a 2016 collection of McLuhan's essays, Richard Cavell presents the notion of "spacetime" as a combination of "the two biases of communication"—*space* and *time*. He points readers to McLuhan's essay titled "The Later Innis" in the anthology.

foundation of his ideas. These ideas demonstrate the ways technology moves not only in its creation, but also as an omnipresent force in society. Within this framework, the obsolesced person will not exist within a mindful place in their everyday life.

One of the underlying questions in the phenomenological realm includes the question of *subjectivity*. This concept is directly related observation and experience—i.e., perceptions, interpretations, opinions, observations, or beliefs—in this discussion. In many ways, McLuhan's work fits well within a twentieth-century affinity for time-space relationships, as he deliberates ways everyday encounters with modern innovations affect perception. The early-to-mid twentieth century was a time when phenomenology writers were contending with the ways the human body interacts with and within spaces. Similar ideas about subjective thought, including the notion of 'consciousness' and 'perception', became coordinates of phenomenological inquiry in McLuhan's corpus.

The movement into electric environments has real implications for human subjectivity in McLuhan's discussions, as indicated particularly clearly in the chapter titled "Proteus Unbound: Post-Euclidean Acoustic Space—The Twentieth Century" in *Laws of Media*. This discussion is deeply phenomenological because the basis of McLuhan's mosaic includes inquiries into the existence of things and the ways the human mind identifies the meanings of things in the world. It is from these aspects of the mind that open up a new way to look at the workings of the mind (but not based in psychology here), a major idea in Edmund Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Inquiry*. Husserl, widely credited to be the founder of phenomenology, brought to the forefront a question of reflection. That is, what is the *definition* of reflection within the mind? This section becomes an overarching inquiry that encompasses how McLuhan interprets consciousness, self-consciousness, or knowledge of things

in technological and electronic environments.

From McLuhan's definitions of electric speedup and imbalances of sense ratios emerges a valuable discourse on mediated environments that direct human subjectivity. One of the more important aspects of McLuhan's ideas of time and space, for example, involves the acoustic and visual realms of perception. McLuhan writes about the ways time and space is more "discontinuous" than precise, citing the ways Descartes had tried to make sense of time and space through mathematical and geometric precision (*UM* 219-220). Descartes' type of rigid approach goes against what McLuhan considers the foundation of philosophy—i.e., the questions that continue inquiry, or a dialectic beyond linear logic. Descartes, in his exploration of thought and awareness, seems more interested in rigid answers or a dichotomous identification of awareness. Highlighting that precision in assessing early print and its variations, McLuhan suggests that specialism is the result of such a rigid approach in the following excerpt:

> When Descartes surveyed the philosophical scene at the beginning of the seventeenth century, he was appalled at the confusion of tongues and began to strive toward a reduction of philosophy to precise mathematical form. This striving for an irrelevant precision served only to exclude from philosophy most of the questions of philosophy; and that great kingdom of *philosophy was parceled out into the wide range of uncommunicating sciences and specialties we know today*. (emphasis added, *UM* 219)

This assertion seems to be connected to McLuhan's preceding statements about the structures of language and print used to memorize visual factors of things in our world, using the example of "verbal description of plants," a quote from the first-century Roman philosopher Gaius Plinius Secundus (also known as "Pliny the Elder") (*UM* 216). Here, the notion that words *must* describe something (i.e., such as plants, concepts, time periods, and so on) is considered a diminishing of

deep philosophical inquiry. Language communicates a fixed impression of things in the world, which is what McLuhan understands to be a visual, semiotic element that accompanies a deeper understanding beyond mere denotation. At the same time, he is critical of the ways symbols can be deemed the only route to perception of things in the world, as subjectivity is multifaceted.

The manner of subjective inquiry shifts when oral recitation of texts (particularly concerning the early wooden blocks of printed materials) shifted toward a rote memorization style of putting concepts and names of things into set-in-stone definitions. McLuhan explains that print disseminates information, but it cannot necessarily offer descriptions past what's actually written on a page. To gain more knowledge, the act of speaking and gesturing aids in explanation and visual understanding, for example. Therefore, there is more depth to McLuhan's understanding of information intake. The process is not so linear as it would be described by Ferdinand de Saussure, for example. According to Phillip B. Meggs in the introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man,* McLuhan "searches for semiotics beneath semiotics" (xi).

The ways the human body interacts with objects in the world leads to a phenomenological aspect behind the denotative and connotative structures of language. Looking at the medieval approach to explaining things in the spaces they exist, McLuhan is attentive to the ways some cultures explain spatial relations differently. Perspective is key in his example here:

Nigerians studying at American universities are sometimes asked to identify spatial relations. Confronted with objects in sunshine, they are often unable to indicate which direction shadows will fall, for this involves casting into three-dimensional perspective. Thus, sun, objects and observer are experienced *separately* [emphasis added] and regarded as independent of one another. For medieval man, as for the native, space was not

homogenous and did not *contain* objects. (*UM* 220-221)

McLuhan is concerned about these perceptual variations, particularly within the context of technological and electric environments. What people perceive and understand spatially is dependent upon these differing structures, including the linguistic structures that make up perceptual patterns. These ideas lay a foundation for McLuhan's general idea that says culture is influenced by historically acquired patterns of perception.

The notion that person and object possessing shared spatiality leads not only to questions about what is outside of a person (a Heideggerian notion of the *outer*) and but also the inside of a person (the *inner*). Essentially, these observations in *Understanding Media* shed light on some of the phenomenological themes that surface in McLuhan's work in terms of subjectivity. Martin Heidegger's book *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* presents the issue of causality within perception as part of an intertwining of self, subjectivity, and the subject-object relationship. The question of what constitutes the internal verses the external, or outer realm, places emphasis on a discussion surrounding causation. In relation to this type of inquiry into awareness, McLuhan speaks about causation as something invented by the human mind, but not necessarily as a way to look at the effects of technology and other mediated forms of communication. Therefore, if effects of technology cultivate more effects, cause is not always a starting point in a sequential or chronological way.

How is it, then, that effects are processed in such a fast-changing environment wherein technologies speed up the lived experience? McLuhan was keenly aware of many theories of perception. For example, his observations in a 1935 letter to his mother Elsie, father Herbert, and brother Maurice present an interesting take on the changing nature of human perception as architecture began to change. He cites a conversation he had with a son of Sigmund Freud, Ernst

Freud, who was an architect. He writes that the younger Freud's work as an architect made him "a consistent functionalist…placidly accepting modern materialism as the basis of his craft" (*Letters,* 62). First, in this letter McLuhan expresses a clear reference to functionalism, which is typically defined as the parts of culture working together to create and maintain the things that a culture values or perpetuates. Working to build structures would also mean shaping the physical world that the world itself would demand during changing times or when trends would emerge. Available technologies and new innovations can dictate how a new structure will be built. For McLuhan, innovation has a direct impact on culture.

When McLuhan concludes the letter to his family, he ends with a story that Ernst Freud had shared about his meeting with a journalist who labeled him a "Psycho-Architect," probably because of his father's work in psychology (*Letters* 63). The story becomes symbolic of perceptual change in the cultural forum when McLuhan aptly notes that much of Freud's architectural work would cater to the new demands of society. Here, he points specifically to new ways people would want to heat their homes, for example. McLuhan recalls another part of his talk with Ernst Freud in the following excerpt:

> One of many remarks was that recent architecture is attempting to break down the division between the house and the out-of-doors by means of the new sort of doors and windows. The idea of the house as centered around the hearth was gone. Central heating makes people more interested in windows. (63)

The observation looks closely at patterns of physical and perceptual change that an architect might need to follow when assembling plans for new structures. Importantly, McLuhan points to Freud's unintentional participation in the realm of perceptions here. The physical relationship between person and place becomes important to a phenomenological discussion within these

types of observations from McLuhan.

This physical relationship between person and place is a central element of many of McLuhan's observations about cultural shifts that occur at different points in history. His argument about effects coming *before* causes is part of the way McLuhan presents the notion of *reality*. In an essay co-authored with Barrington Nevitt, titled "The Argument: Causality in the Electric World," one fascinating parallel emerges in the opening of the first paragraph, where the electric world is essentially called "the predicament of Alice in Wonderland" (5). The swirling of the electricity is in itself a framing of the body in chaotic space.

The bodily presence of a person is immersed in and *within* the realm of mediation of some capacity at all times. To explain this notion further, McLuhan would take inspiration from Giambattista Vico, whom he cites in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as an opposition to a Cartesian view that thought must absolutely remain detached from outer experience; therefore, he opposed the notion that the things of the mind became their own inner world of substance. McLuhan says that Vico understood moments in history that worked in a more simultaneous way and says, "Vico conceives the time-structure of history as "not linear, but contrapuntal. It must be traced along a number of lines of development …" For Vico all history is contemporary or simultaneous, a fact given, Joyce would add, by virtue of language itself, the simultaneous storehouse of all experience" (*GG* 250). Print was able to break up the linearity of public performance and the art of memorization within orality. Language would become a key to history, accessible at any point in history.

The phenomenological significance of these assertions becomes apparent in McLuhan's ideas on Euclidean geometry and the idea that tangible or measurable parts of space would be part of an absolute Kantian rule. Of course, McLuhan, whose focus defies absolutes, is more

interested in the simultaneous changes that occur in the social forum. These are not always quantifiable. To this notion, McLuhan posits, "Not only did Kant not know that number is audile-tactile and infinitely repeatable, but that the visual, in abstraction from the audile-tactile, sets up a world of antimonies [i.e., contradictions] and dichotomies of insoluble but irrelevant kind" (brackets added; *GG* 251). For McLuhan, reason is not unimportant and does factor into his consideration, but it is not assessed within such strict logical parameters that run contrary to a sensory experience through immersion and simultaneity of the senses.

When we look closely at some of the ways James Joyce's writings impacted McLuhan's work, we can find an element of existential historicity, wherein even the most mundane activities based in an everydayness of experience constantly come through in Joyce's storylines. In *Ulysses,* examinations of history emerge constantly in Leopold Bloom's observations as he merely walks down the street—i.e., which is also an acknowledgement of a living history existing all around him. Historical events become spatially present in the current moment. Bloom is environed by historical sights and artifacts. This idea of the complicated, phenomenological nature of the *everyday* is what intrigued McLuhan. For example, there are different ways of looking at an individual's history in similar ways of looking at all of history.

As McLuhan eases readers into an overt explanation of the idea "the medium is the message," he talks about the matrices of patterns brought about by what he calls "the electronic age" (*UM* 12). There is a change in the context of one's life. For example, regarding the student, McLuhan says, "The student *lives* mythically and in depth. At school, however [s]he encounters a situation organized by means of classified information. The subjects are unrelated. They are visually conceived in terms of a blueprint" (*UM* 13). As an archeological discussion of learning, these language choices are indicative of concerns about a total immersion in electronic

environments that speed up information faster than a person can apprehend or fully perceive it.

In the previously mentioned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 1977 interview, McLuhan clearly delineates the ways our surroundings impact our subjective and objective awareness. In the interview, he says that "literacy is objective," "TV is subjective, totally involving," and "the TV person has no objectivity at all" (ABC interview). With these assertions, he presents coordinates that represent ways people encounter electric environments. These environments have a larger impact than the more isolated experiences one has with content. The television experience is one of total consumption of the viewer. McLuhan tells us that watching television is an all-encompassing activity in which a person is basically surrounded, physically, by the output of the television. This full immersion is what diminishes a viewer's objectivity and results in a controlling function of television as a "huge environment" (ABC interview). These spaces create a variation in awareness where objectivity is "highly specialist," and an example of this is literacy, he says (ABC interview).

Literacy provides a means for observation from afar, rather than involving oneself in an event, for example. There is not a sense of total immersion in this example of objectivity. The nature of awareness—including aspects of objectivity and subjectivity—shifts within different types of environments. Through McLuhan's observations, we can see that subjectivity is part of a greater effect of the electronic environment. The subjective self is unable to detach from the environment and is therefore inextricably immersed in it. This is an examination of the subject-object relationship in action. There is a phenomenological understanding of time and space that clearly comes through in McLuhan's explications of technology use and a mediated existence.

Early-twentieth century phenomenology includes an *a posteriori* aspect of knowledge, or the ways things are perceived only through experience. (The *a priori,* of course, is considered to

be knowledge that already exists, or is previously known.) This idea places an emphasis on objective experience at the forefront of cognition. In other words, the presence of things outside of the body and the mind would be assumed to be separate from and *objectified by* the mind. Essentially, from this point of view, everything becomes a material object to behold or critique. Later phenomenological studies developed the notion that things in the world can have an *essence* beyond their scientific or reductive properties. Husserl talked about the essences of things, of course, but the idea of full immersion in an environment did not emerge until later explorations of phenomenology. Additionally, Heidegger's writings on *being-in-the-world* and *Dasein* shed light on the simultaneity of one's everyday activities. The consciousness of mind has great importance in this line of thought, as we can begin to see modern subjectivity playing a major role in awareness through a phenomenological lens.

McLuhan is known for examining the impact of electric environments on humanity, but he didn't immediately connect his accounts of subjectivity directly to phenomenology in his early work. We can see in some of his letters where he starts to become intrigued by phenomenological connections being made in academic circles. In a letter to Cleanth Brooks, a Yale Professor until 1975, McLuhan discusses the work of Roger Poole, whose work on subjectivity was highlighted in a 1972 book titled *Towards Deep Subjectivity*[23] (see first footnote, *Letters* 528). It seems McLuhan was interested in Poole's plan to critique phenomenological approaches in scholarship, but he does mention in a neutral way that he understood that people working from phenomenological perspectives were interested in his notion of *effects* (529). Exploring this more deeply, he issues a dual note of criticism of René Descartes and Northrope Frye ideas in this letter as well. He writes, "The pattern used by all

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[23] In this letter, we see McLuhan's direct interest in subjectivity and its phenomenological implications.

phenomenology began with Descartes in selecting *figures* without *ground,* the Norrie Frye style of classification without insight*"* (McLuhan 528).

This letter, though brief, is important to note in my exploration of McLuhan's critique of modern subjectivity. Once McLuhan saw that phenomenology was connecting with his ideas on *effects,* he clarifies that he includes figure and ground in his media studies, saying that these encompass "both the input and the consequences" (529). Even so, his ruminations on electric media surrounding the human subject are deeply ontological and phenomenological in the ways he consistently proves there is a *holistic* mind-body connection, which is simultaneous and driven by the ratio of the senses, rather than functioning in total separation.

In a 1977 letter to Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a Minister of Justice of Canada and eventual 15th Prime Minister of Canada, McLuhan explicitly expresses concern about "discarnate man" when he writes, "At electric speed, which is the speed of light, we are disembodied beings. On the phone or "on the air", we are instantly present, but minus our bodies. Politically, discarnate man may have an image, but not a physical body" (*Letters* 528). In this correspondence, McLuhan addresses various political identities—i.e., and their carefully crafted public "image"—describing not only the image of Canada's Trudeau, but also American politicians, including John "Jack" Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter. It seems his thinking here is pointing to political performance (527), which McLuhan mentions in the letter, while also complimenting an apparent public appearance by Trudeau around that time that had made a widespread, multigenerational impact.

McLuhan's ideas explore subjectivity through various examinations of visual and acoustic spaces. Phenomenological allusions become more palpable here. The Gutenberg era would present a spike in a social preference for visual space, where new ideas could be

compartmentalized and structured on the page. This environment emphasizes linearity and sequential thought. The acoustic space of openness and orality would not skew the senses as sharply, as the acoustic world is considered generally less restrictive. The senses can then engage an acoustic environment in a more simultaneous and holistic way. His approach works against Cartesian methods of deduction (and division) of the relationship between mind, body, and things. It is the medium that shifts the senses and sometimes skews them to meet the demands of the visual markers found in visual-oriented environments, according to McLuhan.

The full immersion of the self in an environment will shape a person's perceptual patterns. We can notice an interest in the ways perception is transformed, *socially*, in the 1960 anthology *Explorations in Communication.* For example, David Reisman writes, "Books bring with them detachment and a critical attitude that is not possible in an oral tradition" (110). A social shift from orality to print is important when considering the transformation of perception among those participating in the social forum. The physical space is encountered in a different way in the print environment, and thus creates a different way to either internalize—or subsequently communicate—ideas. At a turning point toward learning through reading, our actions and thoughts would begin moving in line with moveable type. According to McLuhan's approach, books simply present what we are expected to know. A reader's involvement in the reading process is low, as very little participation is necessary. Even the page itself becomes an example of the changing spaces in which information is printed when McLuhan says that "…paper is a hot medium that serves to unify spaces horizontally, both in political and entertainment empires" (*UM* 40).

If we explore McLuhan with phenomenological implications in mind, we can see that he has an interest in the ways our physical body, including its adornments such as clothing, cannot

only have an impact on the physical senses, but also the social forum in which the whole person or community is immersed. Phenomenology involves this type of attention to the physical being and its relationship toward other beings and things, whether the interactions be tactile, audile, or both (i.e., audile-tactile). McLuhan understood the ways the senses can tip in favor of one over all the others, and he was mindful of a need for attentiveness when assessing ways people function within modern, electronic environments.

The City and Its Phenomenological Coordinates

One way that McLuhan's work meets phenomenological concepts is where he talks about the differences between tribal life and the cityscape. In his chapter on the ways people build their dwellings, he says, "Men live in round houses until they become sedentary and specialized in their work organization. Anthropologists have often noted this change from round to square without knowing its cause" (*UM* 170). The visualization of one's residential styling involves a type of accommodation of a person's activities within that space. The comparisons, he says, are not between visual spaces, however. Instead, these are distinctions that show the changes that occur in a tactile space (rounded) versus a visual one (square/angular) (170). These architectural shifts show us a historical movement toward more angular structures as more and more people could access the technology to build custom-made spaces. Some of the most basic forms of space, such as the concept behind the Inuit igloo, later transformed into homes with electric temperature control.

Subsequently, McLuhan points to some of the ways our physical spaces contribute to the formation of new patterns in societies. For example, the igloo was once an "Eskimo's dwelling," he says, but after these groups were introduced to the potential for different types of housing,

including those with electricity, the igloo is sometimes used instead only when they are out as "trappers" for food (McLuhan, *UM* 172). Central to this discussion of heat, whether by means of technologies or even clothing, McLuhan shows how new innovations can change a person's *expectations*. He says that these specific types of need-based innovations can sway the senses, resulting in an "intensification" and a "new balance" (172). The idea that space and time are intertwined within these new patterns emerges from these types of examples of extensions of the human body into their physical spaces. We see this phenomenon in the earlier examples of architectural expectations and changes as well.

The phenomenological nuances are even more palpable when McLuhan addresses heating as types of "media of communication," where he points out that these are extensions of skin that "shape and rearrange the patterns of human association and community" (173). Essentially, these new spaces help to comfort us when the climate changes, for example. At the same time, we can lose track of the weather conditions, or we can forget that it's nighttime outside. This state of being is something McLuhan refers to the technological advancement as a "new extension" that creates new expectations within the lived experience, saying:

> Such a shift occurs with the extension of the body in new social technology and invention. A new extension sets up a new equilibrium among all of the senses and faculties leading, as we say, to a "new outlook"—new attitudes and preferences in many areas. (171)

Over time, the new expectations of living—i.e., with the comforts of technology—created some new patterns of unawareness of one's existence in space and time. The changes develop quickly, and McLuhan accounts for this by showing us how even something like the invention of mirrors would change the "history of dress and manners and the sense of self" (173). This type of shift in

perceptual habits plays a part in a new type of literacy that people share in the social forum as well.

The elements of space are also important when McLuhan addresses the religious aspects of the social sphere. As we have seen, changes in architecture brought about designs that helped to intensify the visual and the tactile impact within certain types of space. As one example of this, McLuhan points to the gothic churches with their long, pointed towers and ominous displays of grandiosity. There is meaning behind this architectural design. McLuhan is showing us that the body and the spirit become extended in physical spaces. Perhaps, too, this could be considered an example of a reification of things that represent our temporal (e.g., everyday spatial activities) and infinite conceptualizations (e.g., life after death) as well.

Incarnation, Discarnation, and Subjectivity

As we explore McLuhan's treatment of the Incarnate in his work, we will see that these explanations are not always explicitly presented in *Understanding Media.* It's in *UM* that he emphasizes the application of such notions such as figure and ground at social and cultural levels. His corpus has an interconnectedness for this reason. In one work, such as *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion,* he delves into some of the intricacies of religion and its impact within the new technological environment. McLuhan discusses the integrity of the Incarnation and its meaning for humankind. Regarding what happens inside of a church, he talks about the problem of too much concern on content, which is *figure* rather than *ground.*

Later, he addresses the church's handling of the Incarnation**.** Interviewer Pierre Babin asks, "…If I push your ideas to its limits, applying it to the Church itself, one could conclude that it isn't worth spending a lot of time working on 'the message'?" (qtd. in McLuhan, *Medium and*

The Light 102). McLuhan answers, pointedly, that the Church tends to present the "side-effects" of Christ's Incarnation, calling this merely a description of "Christ's penetration into all of human existence" (*ML* 102). The notion that the Church's focus on *figure* then hinders *ground* is at the forefront of McLuhan's critique of the handling of important religious ideas. It seems that religion grounded in objectivity restricts the subjective self, which must embody a sense of spirituality.

The Incarnation of Christ is an entrance into the Catholic humanist tendencies throughout McLuhan's work. If Christ would be God's messenger to save humankind from its sinful nature, the people could not see that he was sent as a divine intervention. The Incarnation is a way for God to manifest in human space and time. This is why he talks about the Incaration *not* as an effect of fallen man, but instead sees humankind as the *formal cause* of Incarnation (see McLuhan and McLuhan, "Formal" 16). To form what would be the embodiment of God in Christ, the senses would need to be attended to, because God is an omniscient, intangible and all-knowing being. God's existence is immeasurable for humankind in many ways, and faith supported by the Incarnation allows for God's direct contact with the *space and time* of human existence. An omnipresent yet invisible God does not reveal Himself to the human senses in a tangible, performative way, and the Incarnation is a way for God to exist among—and communicate with—His people.

There is a deeply phenomenological issue to contend with here, and it's (at least) two-fold. First, we have an inquiry into human subjectivity, which is sometimes alternatively referred to as "consciousness" in McLuhan's corpus. Awareness is the key concern within this context. Next, there is a question of whether discarnate existence is a product of a simulated existence, or if there is a greater problem for the spirit that exists in a paused state when technology is being

used. That is, does technology somehow disrupt human space and time within the lived experience? It seems that both of these issues are at play in many of McLuhan's discussions. For example, one popular assertion from *Gutenberg Galaxy,* which is also highlighted in the *Book of Probes*, speaks directly to a diminishing of a subjective interior once a new technology garner's one's attention, "Every technology contrived and outered by man has the power to numb human awareness during the period of its first interiorization" (*GG* 153; see also *BOP* 474).

Therefore, even the act of noticing particular technologies is a phenomenological consequence of their creation. In *UM,* McLuhan talks about the ways demand for a technology is cultivated in the social forum. He says that the senses play a vital role in the ways our bodies seemingly require technology as an all-encompassing factor in daily life. For example, he says that this could be part of the reason why we often hear people talking about having television shows playing in the background, as if it plays unnoticed. He says that "the need to use the senses that are available is as insistent as breathing—a fact that makes sense of the urge to keep radio and TV going more or less continuously" (McLuhan, *UM* 99).

A constant immersion in technology is like dropping the entire body into the electric environment, full immersion style. It is surrounded by the nonstop attachment to outside stimuli, which leads to a discarnate body that's *attached* to electric technologies (see *UM* 99). A problem emerges because of a general lack of awareness of this phenomenon. These attachments to technologies *are* the extensions of our bodies, but seeing the technologies as something outside of us is a way to deny the *attachment* that the senses establish. Therefore, a technological purview is a sensory experience, even if one is not focused on it.

With regard to subjectivity, the phenomenological effect of the technological environment is a shift from merely using technologies to extending the body to become part of

the technologies. The human element is extended to complete tasks, but the body is not involved through great effort. Instead, the body attaches to the technology in order to extend the body's abilities beyond its original state. The speed of the technology is unmanageable for the corporeal body, which is McLuhan's examination of technological speed.

Understanding Media is an examination of modernity's affinity for changes or "metamorphoses" (19). However, these changes do not fully support reductive assumptions that McLuhan is a technological determinist. Instead, McLuhan's purview includes poignant examples of effects preceding causes, as this project has explored. There are complexities in this idea that highlight a larger issue beyond linear societal changes.

How does McLuhan's work shed light on the ways human subjectivity is impacted by the electric environment and technology? First, it seems pertinent to mention that subjectivity is most often explained through various critiques of objectivity in *Understanding Media.* His foundational demonstration of the difference between subjective and objective purviews can be found in the idea that it is the emergence of an electric environment that created the most pivotal turn in history regarding human perceptions and subjectivity. The idea that older innovations become useless or "obsolete" seems to be the impetus of McLuhan's interest in the social perceptions of change.

When reflecting on modernity, we can see that the complexities of human life seem to shift toward new ways of thinking with the emergence of new technologies, and McLuhan finds this electric progression to be a key idea in the development of ground in the social sphere. The things around us, and not necessarily their content, represent what the world is thinking at different historical moments. These things can create a desire for individualism that pushes

socialization itself into a type of obsolescence. Wherever the senses go, so too will the mind, body, and spirit. Our created world shapes the temporal human identity.

Next, there are ideas within phenomenology that can inform a discussion on the presence of bodies among the things that they behold as meaningful for useful. A new social subjectivity is created through media, advertising, mass production, commodification of goods and ideas, and even people. These results of modern innovation move quickly. In much of his corpus, McLuhan sometimes talks about this speedup of technology as moving people at the speed of light, which means the entirety of a person can perceive experience in a place where the body is not even present. Electric environments speed up lived experience, according to McLuhan.

Why does McLuhan *work against objectivity,* rather than defining subjectivity in an overt way? That McLuhan works against Cartesian examples of linearity and mathematical explanations of the world becomes an integral point within this inquiry. The conversation about social change resonates and leads to an ineffable chain of events that move human growth in circles and simultaneity. As an entry point into his investigations, he offers a way to assess shifts in the sensorium of the body that will occur via experiences and immersion in the electric environment. McLuhan explores changes in the body, mind, and spirit in nearly every writing he presents. There is a restructuring of subjectivity in the electric environment, and the immensity of present-day effects answer only an anticipated call for more innovation. In fact, we know that McLuhan is attentive to the ways an effect precedes causation in a perpetual way[24].

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[24] McLuhan sheds light on a common misconception about the relationship between cause and effect through the Incarnation, for example. He says the following in *TOC*, as previously mentioned, "If formal cause of the Incarnation is fallen man, it is not surprising that the misguided audience of the creative person should be the formal cause of his endeavors" (McLuhan, "Formal" 16). Here, we see a differentiation being made between *final* and *formal* cause from McLuhan.

The electronic environment is a place where the body is extended by electric innovations. The body does not need to perform its natural abilities because there are extensions of the body to conduct those actions instead—e.g., the pedal drives the car, so the foot is then extended. McLuhan is interested in the ways these extensions change the ways we not only envision our roles in the world, but also how we survive in electric environments. He says, "Every technology creates new stresses and needs in the human beings who have engendered it. The new need and the new technological response are born of our embrace of the already existing technology—a ceaseless process" (McLuhan, *UM* 248-49). Consequently, action becomes homogenized and habituated and perpetuated by technical or electric innovation. This is a restructuring of culture. The electric world becomes the electric body and mind through total immersion of humanity.

This physical immersion in the electric environment results in a new way of identifying objects. Of great concern for McLuhan is the way tacit knowledge is eclipsed by the powerful inversions and restructurings occurring in technological, mediated, and electric environments. A great deal of human performance is extended by electric means, which essentially transforms the capabilities of the human body. It becomes a totality of one's existence to be intertwined with technologies of the electric world. McLuhan sees the human element as the "hidden ground" because of its complex existence in a world dependent upon the visual (versus the aural/oral), and the visual structure of society is the *figure* (see *Theories,* "Formal Causality in Chesterton" 17).

It is in the essay "Formal Causality in Chesterton" that a standard cause-effect relationship is a flawed type of subjectivity, which unfolds backwards in McLuhan's accounts of human perspectives. Instead, we see a poignant remark that offers some insight into the 'why' from which activities emerge. He cites the Incarnation in this essay as a way to correct the cause-

effect relationship, for example (McLuhan, "Formal" 16). Instead of philosophers (or artists, etc.) sharing ideas for the public to learn, study, or enact, the audience is the formal cause that *formed* the artifact. Therefore, the philosophical idea is not the product. It is not in the realm of so-called *final cause*.

Instead, we see a teleological foundation that guides us toward a new subjectivity of self in the world in this example. McLuhan says the following about formal cause:

> It appears that no Thomist has considered the audience or public of a philosopher as the formal cause of his work. Yet this is truly the case in Plato and Aristotle as well as in Aquinas. If the formal cause of the Incarnation is fallen man, it is not surprising that the misguided audience of the creative person should be the formal cause of his endeavors. (*Theories*, "Formal" 16).

Through this new account of cause-effect relationships, McLuhan describes perceptual misunderstandings that comprise social subjectivity in many ways. Not everything is a reaction in a linear way; sometimes the effects taking place in the public sphere will form a cause, rather than a result being an isolated *response to* another element. That is, we should not insist, then, that philosophy is only needed for teaching people how to behave. Instead, the people had already shaped the need for the philosophy itself. Every end-point is a beginning of something new, and nothing exists in isolation within this example. The pattern for this example is a new teleological way to examine human perceptions and the assessment of cause-effect relationships.

Mcluhan's critique of modern subjectivity involves extensive examinations of the body's engagement in various environments throughout history. These environments precede the electronic age and extend beyond even his own historical moment, taking us into the present-day

technological environments. For example, he makes the following assertion about children of the twentieth century:

> …our youngsters have been completely taken over by the electric world, which is acoustic, intuitive, holistic, that is global and total—a new world that has obsolesced our old scientific world with its quantities, its size, our over-industrialized First World. Young people refer to the Third World because it's more oral and acoustic. (McLuhan, *ML* 95)

When this new subjectivity reveals itself out in the realities of everyday life, there are new literacies that emerges. For example, McLuhan describes a "technology of literacy" that enables humankind to "act without reacting" (*UM* 6). He uses the example of a surgeon's ability to turn off his human emotions when performing an operation, which would likely render the doctor "helpless" (McLuhan, *UM* 6). Therefore, "complete detachment" becomes social consequence within this discussion of interactions within the world (McLuhan, *UM 6*). At the social level, we can be involved with others in a passive way. When McLuhan addresses visual space, he is subsequently addressing the ways experience their environment. From the phenomenological perspective, the body is typically situated within the world. In *Laws of Media,* especially in the "Proteus Bound" section, McLuhan and McLuhan look at ways the body, in its holistic form, engages new environments.

Continuing with "Proteus Bound" for my purposes here, we can see a significant focus on Martin Heidegger's ideas on the impact of technology in modern environments (see especially *LOM* 61-66). They say, "Heidegger quite accurately observes that modern technologies, electric media, are responsible for the return to acoustic and Eastern forms of awareness, which, as we shall see in the next chapter, render experience discarnate" (McLuhan and McLuhan, *LOM* 63).

When Heidegger uses phenomenological entrances to examine human interaction with environments, he attends to a natural shift toward utility when tools are within our immediate grasp. For example, he talks about the "serviceability" of tools like the hammer, where we will simply use something for its intended purpose without much additional thought about it (see Heidegger, *Being and Time* 109).

Inversely, McLuhan discloses a danger in tools, what Heidegger calls "equipment" (see *BAT* 109), that provide a serviceability that can begin to envelope, or environ, the user. For Heidegger, it seems in most cases subjectivity is not what drives a lot of activity, but for McLuhan the integral step toward subjective understanding is how a user connects and extends into the environment. Heidegger suggests that many actions are related to tasks within brief moments of time, while McLuhan sees a changing notion of self when extension creates reversals of self and eventual obsolescence (see *BAT* 109; *LOM* 65; *GV* 97, Kindle edition).

A Note on McLuhan's Phenomenological Considerations

A question about perceptual turns will subsequently emerge: Where will people perceive their participation taking place in day-to-day life? The loss of humanity becomes the impetus of phenomenological understandings within discussions of technologies personified or labeled as equal to humanity (see *LOM* 65). The text also discloses that "In dissolving the separation between inner and outer world, in turning us inward, the new ground of acoustic awareness turns the outer world (no longer 'out there') into an obsolete figment of the imagination" (McLuhan and McLuhan, *LOM* 65). Technological submission is an aspect of experience where either person or environment falls into the subjective understanding of reality, and McLuhan is attentive to the dangers of such a willingness to submit (see *LOM* 64). McLuhan almost

constantly refers to time and space considerations within his exploration of modern subjectivity. His phenomenological outlook focuses on the technical mind, which is immersed as figure in the technologically mediated forum. McLuhan describes variations in the interpretation of reality when he turns to authors who explore phenomenological implications of mediation, such as Husserl, Heidegger, and even Eric Fromm (see *LOM* 64-64). His commentary directly confronts differing assumptions about the nature of perception in mediated environments.

One of McLuhan's most directly phenomenological ideas is his understanding that extension directly impacts modern subjectivity. He looks for indications of where humankind is headed and what kind of people we are becoming. Something is happening to people, and McLuhan observes objectivity in a way that offers a media ecology perspective on what our extended bodies will *do to us*[25]. We see not only a focus on experience, but also a movement toward observation, as it is within observation that perceptual patterns and cultural shifts will be discovered. The new media environments are different from traditional forms of literacy in that the space is constantly changing, the ground constantly shifting. Extensions change the ground, which in turn changes the figure (the person and the mind).

How, then, does McLuhan offer insight into the living experience in new media environments? Ultimately, he is looking at the immersion of the person in a maelstrom of figures that emerge, disappear, and even re-emerge at times. When describing visual appeals in artistic works, McLuhan et al. point out that "In your own experience, you are always *figure,* as long as you are conscious. The *ground* is always the setting in which you exist and act" (*CAC* 10). The

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[25] McLuhan supported (and was influenced by) Edmund Carpenter's anthropological insights, especially ideas from the book *They Became What They Beheld,* which alludes to biblical notions of idolatry in the world. Carpenter offered many poignant observations about perception. For example, he writes, "Information speed-up reveals form & meaning. Any new technology, *e.g.,* print, going fast around an old technology, releases a flood of perception" (n.p.).

ground, or one's immediate presence in tangible spaces, obscures in favor of attentiveness toward the illusionary figures that create simulations of participation in spaces beyond the body. McLuhan's notion of the myth of various lived realities is based on this percept. Therefore, is the environment perceived, or is it an illusion of perception that results from bodily *overextension* or even *hyperextension*?

The senses react to various environmental factors, and when this happens, new spaces of existence emerge. Print perpetuates an isolated presence that focuses on the page—i.e., a space between page and reader. That is the visual obsession that replicates elsewhere in our society and captivates audiences (e.g., advertisements, etc.). The acoustic realm is more open and invites action while promoting greater perceptual and sensory awareness. However, the technological environment creates a new opening for McLuhan's probes, because the effects of technology impact perceptions about participation and persona. I maintain that McLuhan work presents extension as a pathway toward obsolescence of the person[26]. In relation to modern subjectivity, in this discussion, I find that a person cannot live well in a perpetual state of obsolescence.

From here, McLuhan's hermeneutic of subjectivity emerges as a particularly important aspect of his explorations of perceptual change in mediated environments. In the next chapter, I will expound upon McLuhan's notion that the rearview mirror offers insights into what is to come. What McLuhan attends to is the problem of subjectivity when he looks at the history of orality and its movement toward today's electronic media. The basis of his observations on perception and subjectivity are tied to the incarnate, as we see that individual subjectivity drives individual separation and detachment in the social forum.

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[26] (I.e., an idea that will be expanded in the final chapter of this project)

CHAPTER FIVE

McLuhan's Rhetorical Hermeneutic:

Facets of Literacy, Media, and Media Literacy

The fifth chapter discusses the rhetorical exegesis of visual and textual biases in society. Social activity and techné become a major grounding from which McLuhan examines perceptual involvement. Much of Understanding Media is devoted to unraveling the transitions between tribal (oral) culture, the Gutenberg Age, and an electronic retribalization of humankind due to full sensory captivity while engaged in specific mediated activities. This becomes the harbinger for critique of different facets of individual subjectivity. The relation between figure and ground continues within a discussion of interpretations of media. The notion of the incarnate as a function of the hermeneutic exploration of perception emerges here.

McLuhan's Hermeneutic of Subjectivity

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the main coordinates that lay the foundation for McLuhan's hermeneutic of subjectivity. Additionally, this chapter will shed light on the ways *discarnation* manifests in media environments, which opens up an exploration of manufactured environments that affect human subjectivity and perception. Explorations of subjectivity emerge in this chapter in the form of subjective interpretations of thought, wherein an environment of simulated realities can perpetuate manufactured responses. Finally, this chapter expounds McLuhan's understanding of ground in the social forum that impacts not only perceptual habits but also perceptions of culture. Humanity's historical purview is, according to McLuhan, shaped by the shifts in social patterns of perception and interpretative habits.

Human understanding is directly impacted by the shifting ground that occurs when new environments emerge. Within a new environment, electronic media intensify people's vulnerability to the new ground(s) that emerge. These shifts in the ground reveal sense perceptions that dominate the social purview. In *UM*, McLuhan says the following about new environments:

'The medium is the message' means, in terms of the electronic age, that a totally new environment has been created. The "content" of this new environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age. The new environment reprocesses the old one as radically as TV is reprocessing the film. For the "content" of TV is the movie. TV is environmental and imperceptible, like all environments. We are aware only of the "content" or the old environment. (13)

McLuhan's hermeneutic is philosophically significant within the scope of human experience. Everything that is noticed, on the surface of perception, creates a hermeneutic of foregrounding[27]. The new ground creates a standpoint of moving forward, rather than backwards, as the old become new in the background, which McLuhan references as the rearview mirror, where the past is more like looking toward the future. The past does not expire in the new environment, but it instead becomes *foregrounded* by the new ground(s) emerging with new media environments.

The issue of human understanding involves a deeply hermeneutic inquiry into recognition, which McLuhan describes as an almost neurotic, yet altogether unnoticed, affinity for and acceptance of changes in the cultural milieu. For example, it is the artist who can sense these cultural changes "long before the average man suspects that anything has changed" (McLuhan and Powers 6). The technological, mediated consumer exists within an overwhelming, euphoric level of biased sense perception too strong to notice that new environments change how he or she perceives the world. The artist, on the other hand, has an awareness of these cultural

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[27] In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer explains the notion of "foregrounding" as a hermeneutic of lived experience. An encountering of new environments creates new standpoints from which perceptual change can occur. Heidegger also talks about the ways people neglect the true understanding of Being, which seems to allude to Kantian notions about things being present and acknowledged on a surface level (see Guignon, "Being as Appearing" 37-38), to which Heidegger might designate the concept of "ready-to-hand" things, such as tools, etc.

sense perceptions, according to McLuhan. From there, the artist can predict possible turns in culture shaped by the public's anticipated environments and changes in communal perceptions.

These elements of figure-related shifts in perception are marked by what "becomes available to ordinary attention" (McLuhan and Powers 6). With great innovation, something is gained but something is usually lost, or at least altered, as well. The old software, hardware, and even old Internet browsers epitomize culture in the past tense. Identity becomes inextricably tied to past experiences with technology. The past creates a feeling of "new nostalgia" for things that represent characteristics and activities completed by a former version of the self in a previous environment (McLuhan and Powers 6). Examples from our current historical moment would be the "maker" culture that harkens back to times when one's focus would be on one task, especially in terms of one's occupation.[28]

The modern sense of subjectivity is captivated by a grand sense of participation from one's "fixed position" in front of a screen, which creates "the illusion of perspective" (see McLuhan, *UM* 461). Can one *experience* life with technology, or does one experience a *simulation* of participation while using technology? Modernity changed the ways people envision time and space, and technology has created a radical homogenization of place. Electronically derived communication has far-reaching implications, because the notion of one's place becomes obscured. Therefore, perception eschews ground that emerges out of various forms of literacy, including forms of literature, art, film, radio, and various technological advancements.

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[28] Today's inventive maker culture is comprised of people who embrace specialized talents or services, such as coffee roasters, jewelry makers, pastry artisans, DIY wedding photographers, and so on. Even technology-related shifts and their pseudo-environments can become the topic of nostalgia, such as the movement from MySpace to Facebook in the mid-2000s. Nostalgia can try to reclaim the sensory appeal achieved by past innovations. The maker culture could be considered one concession in this discussion that shows at least a slight resistance to the non-participation habits of the electric era. Even so, the notion of nostalgia is due to technological impact, so it pertains to the new habits of social settings in the current historical moment.

McLuhan is keenly aware of these cultural propensities for a general acceptance of figure, and he finds that interpretations can become mythical pathways of thought. In his essay "Communication Media: Makers of the Modern World," McLuhan refers to the impact of the modern, rapidly emerging media have on the community, saying the following:

> This increasingly terrifies ordinary people in the community. The general atmosphere in which they live is one in which total global information presses upon them daily as a continuous environment bringing with it all the dangers in decision-making. They have no feelings about this: *it's just their environment, the climate in which they live.*
>
> (emphasis added; *MAL* 34)

The environmental surround that McLuhan describes presents the community with new burdens for information management. However, the barrage of information becomes overwhelming in a way that prevents true management of the continuous ground, and *within* this continuous ground, I would maintain that there are internal *grounds* (i.e., plural) as well. A wave of information creates a system of dismissal and an auto-pilot frame of thought. Instead of struggling with the information directly, the community begins to consider it as part of their natural way of life.

However, some information is important, and some participants in the community must work to interpret any potentialities for concern within the information. This notion about the overwhelming, omnipresent barrage of information is covered in McLuhan's section of *Medium and the Light* titled, "The Church's Understanding of Media" (see 31).[29] A premise of pockets of a community working together to confront new information, issues, or problems develops when McLuhan talks about the setup of an office space where those holding the most power and

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[29] As mentioned in the editors' footnote, this talk is reprinted in *MAL* from the "twelfth annual Seminarians' Conference, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, 29-31 August 1959, and published in the volume, *Communications and the Word of God,* by St. Michael's College, pages 9-22" (34).

influence are placed together in open work spaces (34). I notice here that this seems similar to the setup of the church. In the shared space, the decision-making is more critical to the entire organization, thus making the space *communal* allows for less distraction when information must be confronted urgently.

With the idea of social and cultural thought in mind, we see that McLuhan's work does not simply *involve* a hermeneutic element, per se; his work on social interpretation *is* a rhetorical hermeneutic. Especially within the framework of "global robotism," McLuhan instantiates a rhetorical hermeneutic that explores the body and its sociality through extensions. That is, the body is extended into the technological social forum via the nervous system. McLuhan says, "Robotism...is a capacity to be a conscious presence in many places at once" (*GV* 83). At the same time, the notion that the body is only in one place at a time when it extends is a vital aspect of the hermeneutic (see McLuhan, *GV* 83). A social bias in one direction can lead to perceptual misinterpretations of reality or confused interpretations of one's realities. Nostalgia, for example, is a sense of time and place in the current moment, yet a person does not necessarily see the mythical aspect of nostalgic thought[30]. The sense of being part of something in the past, whether it is one's own past or not, creates a daydreaming effect upon the thinker.

When we think about the pervasiveness of so-called *noise*[31] in our surroundings, we are referring to the figures that vie for our attention, surreptitiously appealing to our human ability to shift focus immediately. A human being can find him or herself everywhere and nowhere at the

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[30] In contemporary author Thomas de Zengotita's book *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way We Live in It,* nostalgia equates to "representations" of past events, time periods, and/or activities (35). Nostalgia involves the senses, which put forth feelings of lived experiences even when one has not lived through that experience. Essentially, de Zengotita notes that we live through events *virtually*, thus leading to a sense of inclusion through representations of thought (35). McLuhan's treatment of representation(s) often includes examinations of advertising's effects on the public. That products can become tied to certain eras is due to this sensory apprehension of pseudo-memories (i.e., no real participatory event occurred, per se).
[31] Especially in *Understanding Media,* McLuhan explores "noise" as an advertising technique and says, "Noise and nausea as a technique of achieving unforgetability became universal" (310). These advertisements can be examined in order to identify cultural shifts, especially within the service industry (verses a DIY attitude), according to McLuhan (see *UM* 312).

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same time. The result is a constant state of disorientation of the subject and senses that reflect upon one's subjectivity. Historical accounts can become inherently altered by such disorientations, because the subjective self is overtaken by personal biases locked in a fixed sensibility of one's own particular historical moment. Communally, the pause button seems to be pressed with regard to intellectual habits and perceptual patterns.

McLuhan observes subjectivity to show us why human perception is becoming worryingly simplistic in Modernity. As hermeneutics points to "myth" as part of "unreflective life, not yet analyzed by culture" (see Gadamer, *TM* 275), we see the echo of history where the mythical state of intellectual thought has reached a stagnation that begs for something to break the communal trance at hand. The answer is an examination of *logos* by way of an account of attentiveness— i.e., an attentiveness of human biases and synthetically created moments in one's life.

By McLuhan's account, literacy separates people. Reflection upon ground is lost in literate societies, as the figure surfaces as the central focus of one's perspective. Thus, the discarnate individual engages others while fully encompassed by *technology*, not the body. Technology promotes an experience where the self undulates in (and around) the social forum via a *perceived* connectedness through a medium and one's central nervous system. "People lose their private identities in the process," McLuhan says, "but emerge with the ability to interact with any person on the face of the globe" (*GV* 118). Self-reflective meaning gets lost during this type of immersion in the mediated environment.

An image within the mind can greatly differ from reality. Some of the older examples (e.g., from the late-1970s *CAC* book) of perceptual "noticing" show how we make assumptions when we cannot see another person, which the authors show can happen when we make business calls and so on. McLuhan et al. also show that a great disturbance in perception occurs when two

people finally meet after only speaking on the phone (*CAC* 7-8). From this, we can also gather that we remain unaware of our perceptions until they are brought our attention. McLuhan critiques modernity for disregarding variations in perception and bias.

Examining Figure and *New* Grounds

McLuhan's work sheds light on perception through discussions on figure and ground. If the structure of an environment shifts, so too will one's attention. For example, the Internet becomes *ground* for the individual, because it is where the nervous system and all of the senses perform. The specifics of figure and ground are most clearly articulated in *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* (*CAC*). McLuhan's interest in the figure-ground interplay leads to many intriguing interpretations of subjectivity. As McLuhan shows us, we cannot have the same impact with a recorded voice, as the human voice (in person) carries a different significance within experience. In *Understanding Media,* he also shows that we cannot see a film in various formats (e.g., a play versus a movie theater, etc.) and have exactly the same experience from one forum to another. A modern push for uniformity in experience and perception creates a homogenization of human activity.

In *City as Classroom,* McLuhan, Hutchon, and McLuhan discuss the specifics of perception within certain types of environments, especially focusing on real-time environments where the body is involved in a physical way. They say that "the interplay between *figure* and *ground* is 'where the action is'" (McLuhan et al. 9). The parameters of perception are often determined by the context, such as whether oral/acoustic or visual/textual become the social bias. Speech and writing are inextricably linked within mediated communicative environments. Communication patterns emerge out of the new habits for speaking and writing. The culture has

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agreed upon the new patterns of communicating. As mentioned previously, McLuhan notes

markers for cultural shifts and says, "In Western history it is the period when a brief balance

between written and oral experience emerges for a few decades that we mark as the great cultural

flowerings. Today we are approaching the means of initiating and prolonging such conditions"

(*Counterblast* 83). Mediated communication leads to imbalances between speech and writing

(and other forms of visual versus acoustic biases) at times, and those imbalances create new

social perceptions.

Perception: The Interplay between Figure and Ground

One of the ways McLuhan demonstrates that techné is part of the interpretation of

spatiality is through the comparison between Eastern and Western methods of arranging flowers

(see GV 62-63). He describes an Eastern attentiveness to flower arrangement that differs from

the Western approach, for example. He says, "It is a matter of the experience of time and space.

A Westerner, for example, arranges flowers in space; the Chinese and the Japanese harmonize

the space between the flowers" (McLuhan, *GV* 62-63). Action within spaces presents an observer

with information about people's interactions within their surroundings. An appreciation for the

flexibility of shared spaces emerges when McLuhan juxtaposes different types of social

sensibilities. Even the patterns of socializing will be affected by the ways people meet their

surroundings. While one culture's purview indicates an openness to changing situations, another

uses formulaic, linear approach that perpetuates a fixed point of view (see *GV* 64).

As a hermeneutic exploration, McLuhan addresses the issue of human communication in

electronically and technologically mediated environments. Within these environments, people

develop a lack of awareness of their role in technological and electronic environments, and when

McLuhan reflects on the human role, he reveals its multi-sensory and simultaneous existence. Take, for example, his analysis of the satellite and its technological impact on human existence[32]. The notion of "global networking" as part of a system represented by large corporations—i.e., such as AT&T, whose early marketing depicts a globe as a symbol of human communication (McLuhan and Powers, *GV* 119). McLuhan delves into this far-reaching technology to shed light on corporate manipulation of communication in time and space.

To inform my discussion on McLuhan's hermeneutic critique of subjectivity, I turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's phenomenological descriptions of interpretations that occur in the social forum. In *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* Gadamer puts forth the notion of a hermeneutic of interpretation that requires attention to a communal horizon. This horizon transcends personal engagement of a particular moment or event, but instead requires an individual to interpret beyond the limits of one's personal history (Gadamer 18). In McLuhan's hermeneutic, the shifts between visual and oral inclinations and biases persist as examples of human action in certain types of space—i.e., space identifiable by either non-participation or participation. A hermeneutic entrance that is identifiable right away in McLuhan's work is the notion of "hot" and "cool" media. *Hot* media require low participation of the senses, while *cool* media require high participation of the senses (39). The former contains a lot of data, whereas the latter does not. As a hermeneutic element, which McLuhan calls perceptual "probes," we get a direct explanation of sensory participation with the world around us.

Controversy seems to swirl around the next point; McLuhan's ideas often predict an emergence of the Internet on the technological horizon. He says, for example:

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[32] In *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century,* coauthored with Bruce R. Powers, the satellite is examined through a tetrad that demonstrates the following effects of the satellite: "A. Enlarges global information exchange; B. Obsolesces language for images; C. Retrieves world-view, like early compass; D. Reverses into iconic fantasies" (116).

More and more people will enter the market of information exchange, lose their private

identities in the process, but emerge with the ability to interact with any one person on

the face of the globe. Mass, spontaneous electronic referendums will sweep across

continents. (McLuhan and Powers, *GV* 118)

Hermeneutically, the expansion of communicative abilities is part of McLuhan's understanding

of experience in real time. In this framework, a person contributes to many communicative acts

all at once in a technologized form of communication. There is a repeatability of the individual

person that does not necessarily exist during face-to-face communication. For McLuhan, the

media environment is a place where technological involvement can ultimately lead to a

discarnate existence (see *Laws* 65; *GV 119*). We can see that behaviors demonstrated within the

social media environment represent the ways people envision the presence of self among others.

The social forum—and, thus, the rhetorical situation—transforms due to these perceived spaces

of community.

In the collected essays, *McLuhan: Hot and Cool,* McLuhan offers a philosophical

definition of the objects in an environment, "Objects are unobservable. Only relationships among

objects are observable" (260). We can see within this description an account of ontological

interpretation. In his responses at the end of the collection, McLuhan also emphasizes a call for

the study of environments as an entrance into cultural understanding. The ways people function

in media environments provide a hermeneutic of observational points of inquiry (i.e.,

observations of observations in cultural settings). McLuhan is attentive to the philosophical ideas

that inquire into the ways human beings encounter objects and others in everyday experience.

McLuhan asserts that electric environments introduce another level of encountering others,

saying, "One of the consequences of electric environments is the total involvement of *people in people*" (emphasis added; 261).

Human Perception: Figure and Ground

As McLuhan's work highlights, when one thing reveals itself in consciousness (*figure*), something else falls into the background (*ground*). The tetrad, a turning point in McLuhan's exploration of human perception, enables us to assess the structure of any environment, including examinations of its past, present, and future implications. The hermeneutic aspect of the tetrad is its ability to showcase both figure and ground simultaneously.[33] The story of an environment can become more pronounced when demonstrated in tetradic form. Figure and ground make up perceptual spaces, and McLuhan shows that public attention on figure only (e.g., content) promotes a communal bias of perception. The essence of human understanding reveals itself in the realm of figure and ground, as McLuhan explains further:

> All cultural situations are composed of an area of attention (figure) and a very much larger area of inattention (ground). The two are in a continual state of abrasive interplay, with an outline or boundary or interval between them that serves to define both simultaneously. (*GV* 5)

When attention skews, so do the interpretive qualities of perception. He explains that figure and ground are not meant to be considered "categories," explaining further that they are "tools that will help you to discover the structure and properties of situations" (McLuhan, *CAC* 30).

Those who call Marshall McLuhan a technological determinist miss an important anti-

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[33] In *GV,* McLuhan and Powers talk about the visual descriptions that exist when we examine figure and ground. They use the example of the camera used in the 1968 *Apollo 8* mission, explaining that the Earth and the moon were pictured in the same shot. This example demonstrates an *interplay* between figure and ground (*GV* 4-5).

theory approach in McLuhan's corpus. McLuhan's work *tests* theories, but he envisions them in the rhetorical way that says an audience must be present for an environment to have relevance and make an impact. He probes are flexible enough that they can form an ongoing dialectic that assists us in understanding culture at various times in history.

Today's Concerns: *A Hyperbole of Events*

Contemporary authors echo some of the probes of subjectivity that McLuhan highlighted in the mid-twentieth century. For example, Daniel J. Boorstin's book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* ruminates over the incessant need for the public to find any event or artifact "interesting," saying:

> We need not be theologians to see that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman. We used to believe there were only so many "events" in the world. If there were not many intriguing or startling occurrences, it was no fault of the reporter. He could not be expected to report what did not exist. (8)

The pseudo-event environment calls for a constant superlative of meaning in so-called "events" big or small. Expectations for bigger or more interesting news creates further subjective captivity in that the mind becomes entranced by its fixation on news overload. Dead air and white space are intolerable propositions for such *busily* unfocused—yet simultaneously *harried*—minds. McLuhan acknowledges and expounds the pseudo-event in modernity, but he says there was always a medium that presented biases, created events, or represented reality[34]. The ground, which is where human existence happens, can and will shift as new environments emerge.

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[34] In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan directly addresses Boorstin's ideas on the "pseudo-event" created by the media, especially with regard to journalism. He says, "Today's press agent regards the newspaper as a ventriloquist does his dummy. [S]he can make it say what [s]he wants" (McLuhan, *UM* 285).

Hermeneutically, McLuhan delves into the biases of the media and the resulting "mosaic effects" that the newspaper brings (*UM* 289). The content of the newspaper is not the focus, because McLuhan offers the poignant observation that removing the date on a newspaper does nothing to the content (i.e., it all echoes much of the same from day to day), where "one day's paper is the same as the next" (285). One of the most important influences on culture that the news creates is the "image of community," according to McLuhan (285). A hermeneutic inquiry into various ways news media influence the community's cultural awareness or focus. From the hermeneutic teachings of Gadamer, we can explore the notion of culture and representations in relation to expounding upon McLuhan's probe of community.

Other treatments of synthetic forms of subjectivity emerge in works by McLuhan's famous student Neil Postman. For example, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* Postman explores the mental captivity that arises from expectations of constant entertainment, particularly when watching television. Postman calls entertainment "the supra-ideology of all discourse on television" (87). Like McLuhan, Postman is well aware of the visual appeal conveyed by televised news programs, and he says the shows are "a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis" (88).

Music is part of McLuhan's understanding of a "unified field" of the mind, where both sides of the mind work together to hear parts of a musical composition all together to form a powerful structure (*GV* 48). Rhetorically, we know that the issue of catharsis[35] (i.e., *katharsis*) is

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[35] Emerging from a brief intellectual contention between Kenneth Burke and McLuhan, it is worth noting Burke's critical point that McLuhan does not seem to address catharsis in *UM* directly. Burke says:

> The word "dramatic" keeps turning up at many points in the text, and at least once there is a shallow reference to the "cathartic." But drama and its motives get head-on treatment in only about three pages of the chapter on games. This omission is particularly important because the stress upon the media in the narrower sense reduces to a minimum such considerations such considerations as we find in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (with regard to the dialectical nature of the medieval manuscript). ("Medium as 'Message'" 411)

an important element of thought and perception. The rise and fall of subjective reactions help the mind reach a cathartic state, much like a musical note that hangs on a penultimate key and finally reaches its final bar and coda. When various parts all work together, not in isolation, genuine sensation can then reveal itself through a musical composition (see McLuhan and Powers, *GV* 48). Catharsis is achieved when the mind can interpret that final satisfactory note at the end of a composition (or even the resolution of a problem for a character in a story) that unifies an entire song, for example. Entertainment is on a loop in the world of media, and it never reaches a coda to alleviate tension in the mind or achieve catharsis in this manner.

Subsequently, people's mindfulness has been placed in a sort of purgatory, wherein they unknowingly wander the Internet and various social media platforms as part of their everyday routine. These patterns of behavior also render the masses into a communal state of narcosis, numbed by the anticipation of newness provided by innovations—which fits within McLuhan's notion of narcosis. We can only see this transition happening especially when an innovation is new, while people accept innovation without employing critical observation. McLuhan probes the manner in which a speeding up of technological change makes it difficult to rely on his early rearview-mirror analogy, as the transitions happen too quickly.

There may be an obstruction of realized time when a new innovation monopolizes communal attention. For example, if the speed of new technologies prevents a thorough sense of retrospect and it also captivates communal thought, then the community also lacks the ability to predict which technologies will transpire in the future. At the same time, from the language and perceptual changes, we can discover a movement *toward* the new waves of technology. The task

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From there, Burke offers in-depth analysis of McLuhan's "mediumistic geneology" (412), which directly addresses the issue of subjectivity and perspective that occurs as a potential "second nature" that emerges in our thinking in mediated environments (413). Overall, we do hear hints of catharsis in McLuhan's writing. Of course, Burke is (at least *somewhat*) critical of McLuhan's ideas on content, etc.

of predicting future events is not something we can procure in reality, but the patterns of new

behaviors can shed light on expectations of the masses. Consequently, these expectations are

signs of the future unfolding as new ground while another ground is still active. In the meantime,

there is a hermeneutical foregrounding that seems to occur at the moment a new innovation is

about to make a transition.

McLuhan explores how the act of understanding media can lead to understanding the

relationship between the sense perceptions and reality. There is a dimension of ground that

makes its way into one's sensibilities. McLuhan uses this idea to show the metaphorical value of

the tetrad, which "pushes" ground(s) to the surface (*GV* 4, 8). Running parallel to the tetrad's

ability to show us the transitional phases of a cultural or technological change, we have a

hermeneutic of subjectivity running through McLuhan's examinations of lived experiences,

especially where it is outlined in *The Global Village:*

> The tetrad not only reveals the configurational character of time, but also that the artifact
>
> (or founding idea) is always the product of the user's mentality. The tetrad includes the
>
> ground of the user, as utterer; and paradoxically, includes the user as ground. We make
>
> ourselves and what we make is perceived as reality. (McLuhan and Powers 10)

As an ecological explanation of humankind and its innovations, the tetrad offers a qualitative

map of the complex results of human subjectivity.

The Senses and Subject

Much like Francis Bacon[36], who was interested in social patterns of knowledge acquisition

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[36] In an interesting connection to the idea of sensation and visual planes, Francis Bacon was a painter, which is the
focus of Gilles Deleuze's book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation.* Deleuze discusses aspects of Bacon's art,
such as his use of color, depictions of bodies in open (and sometimes violent) spaces, and images of bodies in
various types of isolation as a "Figure" in an isolated space (6-7).

outside of linear models, McLuhan outlines how a wanton belief that the senses are always balanced would be a great intellectual—and rhetorical and dialectical—mistake. This is especially important when McLuhan addresses subjectivity as a human capacity derived from observation and experience, an important finding within my study of McLuhan's work. Emotion or judgments play a role in a subjectivity that literate, technologically dependent cultures enact. When confronted by factual information, a person is vulnerable to his or her own judgments, based on experience, impressions, and assumed personal knowledge.

The notion that the senses can define reality is much different from reality tipping the senses in one direction or another, thus creating an imbalance or sensual bias. McLuhan works from the stance that reality is essentially given, but our senses can become imbalanced and skew interpretations. The senses do not necessarily define reality within this framework, but they do frame *perception*. Common perceptions can also fall outside of the scope of the real versus unreal, because communal unawareness perpetuates in the social realm. The senses can create illusions about reality, and the subject can lose sight of true experience. In visual culture, the primacy of visual observations shows that literate culture is driven by whatever catches one's eye. From there, McLuhan examines what we can know in particular environments. The senses, memory, experience, and even objective observations of truths all factor into subjectivity. These examinations of subjectivity are inherently rhetorical, as they examine the ways an audience's immersion in an environment will change the nature of their social subjectivity.

A break between action and supposition does not exist in this case; instead, there exists only a subjective experience that encompasses the entire subject. One's beliefs, morals, and sensual biases all contribute to the connections made within the social forum. *UM* showcases the depths of subjectivity within the interplay between hot and cool media, for example. As we

know, regarding subjective assessments of hot/cool media, McLuhan explores participation and

its connection to thought and perception. He says, for example, the following about Bacon's

ability to capture the differences in perceptual patterns resulting from different levels of mental

participation:

> Francis Bacon never tired of contrasting hot and cool prose. Writing in "methods" or
>
> complete packages, he contrasted with writing in aphorisms, or single observations such as
>
> "Revenge is a kind of wild justice." The passive consumer wants packages, but those, he
>
> suggested, who are concerned in pursuing knowledge and in seeking causes will resort to
>
> aphorisms, just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth. (*UM* 49)

Therefore, the "packaged" information represents hot media, where personal and perceptual

involvement diminishes. With these assertions, McLuhan procures an important perceptual

prognosis of sorts—i.e., perception is bound to a subjectivity shaped by involvement and

participation.

A temporality of perception evolves in McLuhan's hermeneutic of subjectivity. The subject

is prone to become inattentive because of a careless acceptance of sensual biases. Functioning in

manipulated, trance-like state, the subject becomes more and more separated personally and

communally. The change can be seen in the ways people withdraw from others into private

space. A separation reveals itself in the form of passive disconnection from others. Therefore, a

person encounters the world but will do it internally, and a subjective metamorphosis occurs

because of inward tendencies created in new environments.

If the ground is always changing, so too is the figure. Attention is fleeting and focus fast

moving. This motif is important in the collected essays, *McLuhan: Hot & Cool,* which

sometimes explore the various type of environments that impact communal perceptions and

patterns of thought. Howard Luck Gossage calls those not yet affected by an environment, "extra-environmentals," saying they can include "a person within a society whose perceptions have not been conditioned to obliviousness of the structure of a given environment" (27). Those assimilated into the habits of literate society, which is very much visually based and print biased, could miss other cues in a new environment, or that a new environment as emerged.

As an element of mythical thought, the missed cues in a given environment represent a communal level of daydreaming. When observed, social carelessness becomes more identifiable when these aptly named "extra-environmentals" are brought to our attention (see Gossage, "You Can See Why" 27). What had fallen into the background in favor of new figures suddenly becomes obvious; what once had gone unnoticed becomes more noticeable. Gossage uses the example of the child in the tale of the Emperor's new clothes, saying the child does not possess clouded perceptions and tells everyone the Emperor emerged without clothes (see 27). This notion that a person could be duped by a false sense of reality created within an environment is at the heart of McLuhan's understanding of numbness.

The numb state of being is a type of narcosis where everything may *seem* to be going well, while the real story indicates something far more discombobulated and depressing. Engaging in a new environment is mostly automatic for the fully immersed person. One's level of involvement goes unnoticed, even when the level of participation exceeds reasonable use. The person is encircled by the mediated environment and cannot see outside of the boundaries in the environment. Social media, for example, is a concept named to represent a socializing environment. It is a specialization, a contrived form of socialization and community. For example, using social media platforms today can create the illusion of adventure and spontaneity when in reality a person has planned events around what might *look good* on social media. If

ever there was a full-on theory to emerge from McLuhan's work, it's that new technological environments often ensure that activity is forced, which results in experience manipulated, spontaneity lost. While social media platforms' designation of "hot" or "cool" can vary, social media is, generally, a harbinger for new forms of obliviousness in the social sphere. Each new platform offers much of the same form of communication as well, many with only slightly nuanced variations in function, creating a plateau of communication patterns in our society.

To work through McLuhan's perspective on communication's shifting patterns, we can see overt references to specific forms of mediums, such as the telephone, in his ruminations. He expresses some disappointment in the shifts that move away from closer, more involved communication and says, "The decision to use the hot printed medium in place of the cool, participational, telephone medium is unfortunate to the extreme. No doubt the decision was prompted by the literary bias of the West for the printed form, on the ground that it is more impersonal than the telephone" (*UM* 53). Not incidentally, this assertion shows that McLuhan believes in an "unconscious cultural bias" that can emerge in new environments, and he uses that specific phrasing as well (53).

Within the shifts of communication preferences, we can also see shifts in the perception of one's position in the global village. McLuhan quotes W.B. Yeats to showcase the reversal of feeling small in the universe, "The visible world is no longer a reality and the unseen world is no longer a dream" (qtd. in *UM* 54). We do not live in the same world that we always have—*or do we?* To interpret the implications of changed perception, McLuhan points to a new pattern of existence where "there are no straight lines in space," and this expanse of existence resonates in our daily lives, creating an impression of new realities and interpretations of "nature" (see McLuhan's interview with Powers (*GV* 133).

McLuhan's 'Hermeneutical Problem'[37]

In the chapter titled "The Written Word: An Eye for an Ear" in *Understand Media,* McLuhan delves into human interaction with electric technologies and the perceptual impact it creates. An emphasis on Heidegger and his ontological discussions regarding the interpretations of things in our proximity is one entrance for my inquiry into McLuhan's exploration of hermeneutic qualities of perception. McLuhan's ruminations are similar because he explores how things that surround us are either there on their own, or they must have representation through observation. He leans toward the latter explanation. McLuhan keenly makes a connection between people and their surrounding proximity (people use their tools, and people engage visual forms).

McLuhan interprets discarnate through philosophical dialectic that delves into human interpretation and understanding of the lived experience. For example, Heidegger is known for asking intricate questions about the ways human beings interpret and utilize the things around them. In his lecture "The Thing," Heidegger probes questions about the ways objects and things are differentiated in philosophical inquiries. Heidegger weighs philosophical arguments regarding ways objects can (allegedly) stand on their own, with an identity of their own (or *essence*) that does *not* rely on human "representation" (15), as a Kantian notion, or the ways a thing is actually *a thing* on its own. The Appendix to "The Thing" summarizes important questions about "thing" as a noun or a verb—i.e., asking "Do the things thing? Are things as things?—or are they only as objects? And the objects—how do they stand? What is the manner

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[37] In *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* Gadamer addresses "the hermeneutical problem" as a central question about life and its interpretations. He says it comes from a "central question of the modern age—a question posed for us by the existence of modern science. It is the question of how our natural view of the world — the experience of the world that we have as we simply live our lives — is related to the unassailed and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science" (3).

of their stance and their constancy—*as standing reserve?* The things are gone, gone away—where to?" (Heidegger 21-22). The questions highlight that, if unobservable, as McLuhan says in *Hot & Cool,* then the relationship between person and things matters deeply when assessing subjectivity and perception (see "Even Hercules" 260-62).

We see a revealing-of-ground as a hermeneutic metaphor within McLuhan's philosophical notion of experience as "discarnate" (see *LOM* 63). A philosophical implication of societal anticipation of new innovations—or even fear of future disasters, as Heidegger explores in terms of historical anxieties surrounding the atomic bomb in the preface to "The Thing"—is that people fail to notice their present situation (see McLuhan & McLuhan *LOM* 63; Heidegger "The Point of Reference" 4-5). As an element of experience, the lack of awareness is key when talking about hidden ground. McLuhan and Powers ask us to consider something specifically ecological about media's "linguistic structure," saying the following: "Not only are they like language but in their essential form they *are* language, having their origins in the ability of man to extend himself [or herself] through the senses into the environment" (Preface by Powers, *GV* x-xi). Their analysis leads us to see *logos* as the foundation of extension (see McLuhan and Powers, *GV* x).

In an earlier section, I proposed that McLuhan's ideas showcase language as the mediator of thought. In this section, we can see that the tetrad shows us the movement of a person into extension, where perceptions will be developed by the conditions of a mediated environment. The lived experience as it occurs in technological or electric environments will differ from the natural state of existence a person would experience in an unmediated state. Therefore, it is a reversal of the natural state according to early observations presented in *The Global Village* (see McLuhan and Powers 10).

McLuhan's hermeneutic inquiry explores a detachment from the self that mimics the feeling of being connected and aware. It is an immersion of self into the environment via extension. His "structures of awareness" include ideas about "hot" and "cool" media (see McLuhan, *UM* 39-41). Everyday activities, such as watching television (a cool medium that requires audience participation), are part of the cultural landscape because of their positioning as sources of entertainment in the social forum (see McLuhan, *UM* 39). Television of the mid-twentieth century emerged as a popular cultural artifact, and McLuhan attends to its perceptual allure. On the surface, McLuhan talks about the T.V. as a cool medium because the audience is paying close attention to it so not to miss anything and offering a completion through their reactions.

Awareness is mutable in technological environments. With technology at the center of his inquiry, McLuhan moves the discussion away from content and toward the ways seeking identity and connectedness through engagement of various forms of media. More philosophical hermeneutic implications emerge in his inquiry. For example, in seeking a feeling of experience, the subject may become entranced by cool media, which is where somnambulism can contribute to a narcotic state of being.

The issue of lacking social awareness drives McLuhan's critique of participants in new environments allowing shifting ground to impact their thinking. In accepting new media, users are considered "well-adjusted" to the purpose of the technologies, and McLuhan calls the "well-adjusted" technology user "sound asleep" (*GV* 11). In these new environments, which are not linear, participants have been "plunged into a new form of knowing, far from his customary experience tied to the printed page" (13). The new thinking patterns emerge out of "information structures which are simultaneous, discontinuous, and dynamic" (13). McLuhan explores the

elements of consciousness and perception developed in the subject's encountering of linear versus non-linear environments. Interpretations of perceptions of reality develop here within McLuhan's discussion of figure and ground.

In the media age, according to McLuhan, we can understand grounding of one's reality in terms of a "field" of perception (*UM* 44). For example, retribalization happens after oral, tribal habits have transformed into the "specialist" realm, but then a new turn brings back the tribal "total field" of perception (44). The tribal field of perception is open to newness of innovation in ways that differ from those who lost their tribal field of perception previously. Those who already developed habits in the electric age that could be considered "specialized" will have a more difficult time adapting to new electric or technological environments (see 43-44). The societies immersed in linear, specialized patterns of thought, such as those in print cultures, enact a different construction of meaning.

Those who live in societies of linearity, specialization, and detribalization also live in sensory captivity, a notion which McLuhan attributes to the myth of Narcissus, whose love for his own reflection is not himself, but a trance where the self goes unnoticed. McLuhan shows us that the numbness created in mediated environments directly impacts the condition of one's being. In terms of subjectivity, the subject is entranced where we idolize our extensions. McLuhan says, for example:

> It is this continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions. (*UM* 68)

McLuhan sees a degeneration of subjectivity that shapes the lived experience in mediated environments. A "sense 'closure'" occurs when a technology is embraced fully (McLuhan, *UM* 67).

What McLuhan is doing here resonates with Gadamer's understanding of a "fusion of horizons," which is the result of various subjects (people) and objects (inanimate things, tools, etc.) existing together in shared historical contexts.[38] A virtual happening is not in the body but instead an extension of the body through the central nervous system, and McLuhan attends to the ways extension contributes to perceptual shifts. With new environments comes a new version of perception, in many of the philosophical ways discussed so far in this project. A significant entrance into figure and ground highlights the representations of culture and humanity found within language and communication of ideas.[39] What McLuhan examines the issue of noticing— i.e., asking when it is that people might *notice* figure against ground and vice versa. The relationship between figure and ground says that the person functions as figure against an unnoticed environment, or ground (see McLuhan and Nevitt, *Take Today* 30).

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[38] A fruitful discussion on Gadamer emerges in Richard E. Palmer's *Hermeneutics,* where he describes the dialectic evoked by a "fusion of horizons":

> The dialectic of question and answer works out a fusion of horizons. What makes this possible? The fact that both are, in a sense, universal and grounded in being. So the encounter with the horizon of the transmitted text in reality lights up one's own horizon and leads to self-disclosure and self-understanding; the encounter becomes a moment of ontological disclosure. It is an event in which something emerges from negativity—the negativity of realizing that there is something one did not know, that things were not as one had assumed. (201)

[39] Palmer also presents a pithy set of hermeneutic questions that help to inform my discussion of McLuhan's understanding of extension as *language*:

> The disclosure, in other words, comes as the kind of even whose structure is the structure of experience and the structure of question and answer; it is a dialectical matter. And what is the medium in and through which this ontological disclosure can take place in the dialectical event of experience as questioning and answer? What is the medium that is of such a universality that horizons can interfuse? What is the medium in which the cumulative experience of a whole historical people is hidden and stored? What is the medium that is inseparable from experience, inseparable from being? The answer must be: *language*. (emphasis added; *Hermeneutics* 201)

Forming a discussion of Gadamer's fusion of horizons as dialectical, Palmer offers succinct questions that showcase the spirit of thorough hermeneutic inquiry.

Through McLuhan's hermeneutic of subjectivity, a revealing of humanity's proneness toward becoming inattentive and careless—because of a dependence on electric environments (*grounds*)—unfolds within this discussion. McLuhan's hermeneutic of subjectivity focuses on habits of attentiveness and the detrimental ways media in electronic environments impact the figure, which is the person impacted by new environment(s). Electronic media manufacture these perceptual grounds, or fields of perceptions (the latter is mentioned extensively in *Understanding Media*). Because of electric grounding, McLuhan finds that the subject as separated personally (i.e., discarnate) and communally (from others).

To fully demonstrate a plane of movements that occur hermeneutically, via explanations of technologies' impact on perception, McLuhan presents the tetrad as a visual demonstration of personal obsolescence. The notion that the personal is obsolesced directly corresponds with the ways the subject interacts with the world. The externalized aspect of subjectivity pushes the human element to its limit, which McLuhan frequently cites as implosion in our cultural forum. Once a subject's humanity is pushed too far into a cosmic plane of technologized, mediated existence and outward space, the personal state disappears. There is no truly *personal* state of being without the body, and we see that this is also true in descriptions of the Incarnate, such as in the way Christ exists in the world through physical presence.

Perspective from a sedentary, detached subject is much different than perspective shaped through incarnate speech and action. As an interpretation of human action, the incarnate promotes humanity, while the detached state of being promotes only a mythical state of humanness. McLuhan attends to the notion of perspective when he explores subjectivity in its

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externalized state, which is a deeply phenomenological-hermeneutic issue.[40] From the philosophical purview, McLuhan is sometimes considered an idealist in terms of his hermeneutic discussion, and this could be due to the ways he sometimes alludes to the internalized and externalized subject. Gadamer says, for example, that a "critique of subjective spirit which we inherit from German idealism, and above all from Hegel" contributes to some of the questions we ask about the subject and its mediated existence (*PH* 111-112). Gadamer offers insights into the hermeneutic discussion of the subject in a scientific world. He writes, "…the culture of inwardness, the intensification of personal conflicts in human life, and the pent-up expressive power of its artistic representation is gradually becoming alien to us" (Gadamer 111).

Art and expressionism are vitally important to McLuhan's understanding of variations of thought between common, communal subjectivity and the kind of subjectivity shaped by artists. Interpretation of environments can be fractured and assaulted by the modern notion of common thought, while the artist breaks through the boundaries created by modern thought. McLuhan explains in many places within his corpus that it is in the *art form* that we can see the true effects of media in our society.

Art and art history offer an entrance into the lived experience that moves toward the future, rather than the past (differing from McLuhan's "rearview mirror" approach to thought). In *Understanding Media,* art attends to the environment through a future lens, while "non-artists always look at the present through the spectacles of the preceding age" (325). Hermeneutic interpretative moves made here reveal a varied perspective between the common participant of

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[40] Sometimes McLuhan's examples of human extension offer insights into a cosmic plane that pulls the subject into a realm outside of the body. In his dialogue with Powers in *Global Village,* he says the following about the telephone: "Take the telephone, it enhances the speed of the human voice; it causes the body as hardware to become obsolescent, *retrieves* telepathy (ESP, mysticism, the occult), and at last flips into the group voice or omnipresence" (emphasis added; 140).

the community and the artist, who can remain on the outside of current activities so not to carry the weight of social biases already taking hold of the public sphere. Where the community exists inside of the modern fog of technological captivity, the artist explores the world from a vantage point outside of the haze with a different clarity of perspective. McLuhan says, pointedly, that "Art, like games, is a translator of experience" (324).

In this chapter, a guiding question always at the center of my attentiveness to McLuhan's hermeneutic of subjectivity is one that encompasses the human condition: *What is happening to people?* McLuhan shows us how the discarnate, emerging from extensions, leads to changes in subjectivity. Changes in perception, as related to subjectivity, have a corresponding impact on culture as well. Interpretations of media lead to the problems surrounding subjectivity through separation. Hermeneutics is loyal to a breadth of discovery within the framework of interpretations—e.g., interpretations of history, time, technology, texts, and communication, etc., all of which are situated within McLuhan's scholarship. Moving forward, the final chapter explores McLuhan essentially alludes to a *being-in-the-body* as an answer to the effects of discarnate, technology-driven detachment.[41]

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[41] McLuhan does not use this term "*being-in-the-body*." I am proposing an allusion to phenomenological terms in relation to the body-technology relationship—i.e., especially mimicking the phrasing style in Heidegger's language with his "*being-in-the-world*" that runs parallel to McLuhan's work on presence and being physically in the body (vs. concepts of being outside of the body through technology use).

CHAPTER SIX

The Rhetorical Impact of Narcosis

as Media Effect on Human Subjectivity

The final chapter explores McLuhan's explications of lived experience as arrested in a sedentary, mythical state when consumed by observational glances (e.g., a gaze directed at electronic gadgets) or a general lack of kinesthetic movement and impressions of bodily involvement. A higher-order analysis of cultural affinity for effects rather than causation becomes important to explain McLuhan's contribution to communication studies. McLuhan talks about the numbness of being, or a trance-like narcosis, that chains a person's psyche to a mechanization of thought. He explains the influence of a medium, saying, "Media effects are new environments as imperceptible as water to a fish, subliminal for the most part" (22). I explain that the word "discarnation" is a sparse metaphor in Understanding Media and Laws of Media in an attempt to improve its place as a more prominent metaphor in McLuhan's ideas than typically discussed in the intellectual forum.

Discarnation as an Oblivious State of Existence

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I expound upon a specific perceptual concern that unfolds in McLuhan's media studies—extension as *discarnation.* Discarnation is mentioned explicitly as a term only five times in *The Global Village,* but its representation can be felt in most of the book. At first mention, McLuhan and Powers present an analogy between astronauts and discarnate life. The clarity of this explanation uncovers an interpretation of human experience in simulated realities:

> Discarnate man is as weightless as an astronaut but can move much faster. He loses his sense of private identity because electronic perceptions are not related to place. Caught up in the hybrid energy released by video technologies, 'he will be presented with a chimerical "reality" that involves all his senses at a distended pitch, a condition as addictive as any known drug. The mind, as figure, sinks back into ground and drifts somewhere between dream and fantasy. Dreams have some connection to the real world because they have a frame of actual time and place (usually in real time); fantasy has no such commitment. (97)

The notion that the body becomes a weightless, floating figure in a new realm of activity, epitomizes the hypnotic state of discarnation. The whole person functions as captive audience in its new ground, thus placing the body in the background as figure.

The "discarnate" is not an explicitly stated metaphor explored in *Understanding Media,* but its principles factor into the discussion throughout the piece. *Understanding Media* sheds light on the simulated realities that arise out of a state of narcosis that occurs when new technologies reorganize the senses. It was written during a time when television had already begun to shift society's ability to focus on their own lives. Entertainment culture would prevail as a source of solace, escape, and narcosis. In our current historical moment, we have assimilated to a new screen format, but the narcotic effects of our bodily extension have reached startling levels. The mind functions in a realm of fantasy because of a sensation, or impression, of connectedness in the world.

Discarnation epitomizes a synesthesia of the electric age in McLuhan's corpus as a demonstration of the public's changing sensorium—people crave an *extended* version of existence. To expound upon this, my final chapter punctuates my explorations of McLuhan's effectual demonstration of discarnation as the marker of human detachment. First, I attend to the notion that the brink of humankind's ability to extend the nervous system into technological environments creates the problem of *discarnation*, where the self is no longer whole. If the person is always his or her own figure, as McLuhan posits, then the self is further obscured when the ground shifts outward and into a plane of technologized environments.

McLuhan critiques the notion that new environments are truly representative of reality, referring often to the "book of nature," wherein the human aspects of daily living are tied to

human functions, rather than being represented by human artifacts or inventions. A new divinity emerges in the landscape of new environments. In *The Global Village,* McLuhan and Powers say the following about the impact of new environments on one's senses and state of living:

> An artifact pushed far enough tends to reincorporate the user. The Huns lived on their horses day and night. Technology stresses and emphasizes some one function of man's senses; at the same time, other senses are dimmed down or temporarily obsolesced. The process retrieves man's propensity to worship extensions of himself as a form of divinity. Carried far enough man, thus becomes a "creature of his own machine." (3)

McLuhan identifies an inextricable link between innovation, humanity, and so-called progress. Humankind is fascinated by its inventions, and the pursuit of continual improvements create an illusion of modern progress.

Also, in *Global Village,* McLuhan and Powers open with a brief but powerful note about the notion of "angelism," which could be seen as interchangeable with discarnation. To grasp the fundamental problem of discarnation, we can examine the following note about things revealed through the tetrad, "Strictly left-brain thinking, or "angelism," allows technology to move as a dumb force because without perceiving all four-fold processes [of the tetrad] in operation, we are unconscious of their overall effects" (McLuhan and Powers, *GV* 3-4). Narcosis, in the electric age, is a state of numbness that occurs when a person becomes entranced or "fascinated" by a new innovation or technology (McLuhan, *UM* 63). In the opening of the aptly named chapter, "The Gadget Lover," McLuhan describes the parallels between the myth of Narcissus and narcosis that occurs when the self is extended through the senses. The user does *not* notice it, and much like Narcissus, will develop an infatuation with oneself without realizing it—oblivious to the self altogether—as the entirety of the body has been extended by the senses. Here, the notion

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of a mythical existence emerges from McLuhan's ideas on the narcotic state of being.

The far-reaching effects of electronic media not only impact daily life, but also have great impact on one's spirituality as well. In *The Medium and the Light,* Eric McLuhan notes that his father was interested in publishing more on the "The Christian in the Electronic Age"—a concept serving as the chapter title of a brief outline of ideas on the topic in the book. Unfortunately, the work only got so far as a thematic outline that would have included familiar themes: "…the left-brain/right-brain discoveries, which at the time were fresh and exciting, the "Law of Implementation," the effects of bypassing the body—making it obsolete—by all electronic media (the discarnate world), literacy and propaganda, etc." (175). Here, there is a clear interest in seeing the electric age as a discarnate age, a modern time marked by rapid degeneration of subjectivity and shifting perceptual patterns. During that time, even the popularity of the television would have great impact on powerful entities in the world, including the Vatican, according to Eric McLuhan's account of brainstorming with his father in the early 1970s (*ML* 175). Had the book been published, it seems this might have been one of the more robust discussions of discarnate existence of all his corpus (see 175).

What makes McLuhan's ideas a philosophical and rhetorical critique of modern subjectivity? Of particular import, McLuhan explores the questions—or probes—that examine life, communication, thought, and learning. Modernity, a time of mechanization and rapidly emerging new environments over the past few centuries, reflects a turn toward expectations of measurable progress and diminution of the human aspect of life.

Intellectual Changes in New Environments

In his dissertation, McLuhan includes analyses of historical tensions between past

innovations and predictions of future issues that could emerge. His apt historical accounts

emerge as hermeneutic probes that explain how history shows us changing thoughts and

behaviors among the public. The issue of human attachment to new environments is certainly not

new. In ancient times, even the act of peripatetic activity, where scholarship might be done while

walking or sitting in the shade of the trees would place the person in the realm of figure, the

world as ground. One such account includes a type of meta-analysis of Renaissance scholar

Petrarch's ruminations on humanity's dismal intellectual trajectory into the future[13]. Petrarch was

concerned about ignorance flourishing in social and intellectual spheres of the future. Petrarch

lamented a future of social ignorance, which is a social interpretation that McLuhan assesses

within his own explorations of human entanglement with electric media.

McLuhan's critique of nostalgia relates to his historical positioning between modernity

and postmodernity. In the Australian ABC interview, McLuhan points out one of his

foundational notion of the rearview mirror, which does not permit us to look only at the past; it

aims toward the future in the form of trends (ABC Interview). A lot of the trends are shaped by

the involvement of the people with new innovations. This is why, he says, that technologies like

the television are "all-encompassing" and in turn create "hallucinations" (ABC Interview; *UM*

50). What we perceive from television is not something procured through involvement. Instead,

there is a physical immersion in the cool environment, which creates a false sense of

involvement. Nostalgia related to TV programs would be mythical because the encounter is

similar to being held captive audience.

McLuhan's contribution adds ecological insight into the historical plot that leads to the

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[13] McLuhan explores Petrarch's *Res Memorandum*—for Petrarch, too, found himself in the midst of great changes between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—but McLuhan is also careful to note that there is a larger social context that Petrarch might have been assessing as well.

twentieth and twenty-first centuries' technology changing patterns. His understanding of subjectivity as susceptible to mythical living shows that perception is shaped by a media-encumbered mind. Some telling ideas on a "quest for identity" surface in McLuhan's ABC interview as well. He tells us that the process of seeking one's personal identity can pursue the question of "Who am I?" In the form of "abrasive encounters" with others, he says, we can pursue this question (ABC Interview). Sport or other games, for example, is an involvement that helps people understand who they are within a certain context (ABC Interview).

Moving away from psychological explanations of the subconscious, such as those that emerge from Freud, McLuhan posits that an "ecology among media" would enhance awareness and understanding of the forms of "beneficent," or social, effects of media (ABC Interview). Awareness and "social consequences" emerge in this talk as a poignant moment where McLuhan astutely articulates the need for social awareness of media effects (ABC Interview). On a surface level, McLuhan's perceptual compass appears to extricate content from its message and prioritizes the impact of a medium; perception is directed by the medium(s) we use.

Interpretations of perception and identity are tied to media studies. One of McLuhan's friends and co-editors, Edmund Carpenter, often looked at the impact of media in a very specific, anthropological way. McLuhan had often praised Carpenter's insights. One particular detail of import is Carpenter's demonstration of media theory in his book, *They Became What They Beheld.* The idea that people are changed by new environments is a theme of this work. Like McLuhan, the ecological aspects of media impact involve perception being only observable when an environment is obsolete. The notion that what is beheld is unseen is a running theme in this line of work. The biblical implications are clear here; there is a plane of existence that captures social loyalties and obscures their spiritual awareness. (The worship of the unseen

represents, too, the notion of narcissism in the social forum as well.)

Tetradic Facets of Modern Subjectivity

The tetrad helps bring to the surface some of the characteristics of the electric age that go unnoticed otherwise. While our current electronic trend involves immersion in the Internet and web platforms, McLuhan's idea that the "medium is the message" offers a template of sorts that aids interpretations of simultaneous effects of various mediated environments. The environment created by new media changes us, not simply the machine or medium itself, however. The Internet may be the most prolific and impactful medium because of its ability to capture (or intensify/enhance) all aspects of the mind and body—the subliminal, conscious, and unconscious.

Up to this point, I have shown that the onset of simulated realities is part of McLuhan's understanding of implosion. New environments emerge, explode, and implode over and over again, as humanity anticipates new innovations and pushes current innovations to their limits of usefulness and general attraction. The simulated realities of the electronic age obscure one's ability to see anything beyond an electronic trance rather than noticing a definitive reality of the self. Rather than presenting a cause and effect relationship between the public and technological environments, McLuhan's work shows the cycle of interdependence of electric, mediated environments—i.e., people use technologies and, in turn, the technological advancements are dependent on their continual implosion. Within this framework of technology use, a medium will reach its limit of desirability or usefulness and will subsequently obsolesce.

We live in a social setting where entertainment reigns and simplistic reasoning abounds. The intellectual implications of this new thought pattern are attributable to a contemporary echo

of Modernity's call for progress. What becomes immanent is not a spiritually grounded sense of self, but instead an immersion in electronic environments—these environments become all things, an all-encompassing presence. A person becomes detached from not only from the self but also from others when a fragmentation of the senses occurs. McLuhan's work encourages a continued evaluation of the lived experience in mediated environments. In today's version of the mediated world, McLuhan's insights on the ways people seek comfort from anxiety still ring true. An aimless, restless sense of anxiety is the norm, and people seek control over their lives without fully grasping it.[42] The chaos of mediated environments creates a prime factor for new patterns of humanity's impression of self-control.

McLuhan attends to a deeply rooted sense of individual subjectivity that Modernity cultivates. For example, in the pursuit of control, people seek entertainment—and a subsequent feeling of *catharsis*—because the fully immersed nervous system is often pushed to sensory limits. The chaos of the world becomes the impetus for seeking out closure, or relief, as a means of self-protection. In doing so, the rhetorical and critical value of his ideas comes through in his identification of a concerning new social patterns of subjectivity.

We know that in chapter six of his *Poetics,* Aristotle includes descriptions of catharsis as a thought pattern that moves toward completion at the end of a tragedy. The problems or "fears" that the audience notices in a story are typically related to the self. The unfolding drama of Modernity functions in a similar fashion, as McLuhan aptly notes in his corpus. There is an anxiety projected onto an audience that has no other choice but to exist within new environments. In the *Poetics,* Aristotle also emphasizes the ways drama attracts an audience and

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[42] In Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,* the notion of "parallel lives in virtual worlds" that the advent of the Internet created (xi). She shows how a "new sense of place" also emerged as people embraced the speed-up of communication on a huge scale (xi).

then perpetuates their affinity for comparison and representation. As a story unfolds, an audience member can imagine true stories a drama showcases.

McLuhan acknowledges a type of social drama that plays out in politics, commerce, and entertainment. Subjectivity is framed within and shaped by social biases and interests. In one poignant example of human behavior as it relates to the social conversation, McLuhan emphasizes the difference between a political society and a commercialized society. The commercialized society will be more self-concerned, engaging in social comparisons and partaking in a cycle of commerce that involves constant reflection on one's self-care.

A hint of this analysis of individuality and subjectivity appears in the title of chapter 23 in *Understanding Media,* which is titled, "Ads: Keeping Upset with the Joneses." The banalities of life become the focus while political chaos can continue in the background, noticed on a limited basis or not at all. A public consumed by its own obsession with individualism is a way to make nearly every aspect of life a crisis, setting the tone for a constant reel of panic and self-indulgence. These mundane aspects of life can most certainly cloud one's existence.

Implications and Applications

The problems of modernity include a diminishing human element, especially because of an extension of selves that involved exacerbating the temporality of the time and glamorizing an infinitude of space. Life is temporal, yet technological implications emerging out of modernity reveal problematic reconfigurations of one's personal experiences in the world. McLuhan was writing at a time when modernity was reveling in its ambitions. These ambitions have always included extending human bodies into the modern spectrum of faster communication while romanticizing a widespread global village.

McLuhan's work challenges us to develop an awareness of not only our own technological moment, but also to examine how we reached the current level of inattentiveness and precarious notions of togetherness. We are alleged to be global all hours of each day, yet people are enamored by a feeling of distant connectedness. A mythical state of reality shapes the ways modernity frames the body's capabilities as inferior to technological advancements. In many ways, human history represents various aspects of this technological demagoguery—i.e., the notion that technology can and will perform better than human beings could on their own.

The modern notion of subjectivity in one's life is problematic because an assumption of functionality presents itself in the form of chaotic immersion of mind and body. This busy-mindedness is a symptom of excessive attachment to technology. An unraveling of focused interaction with people and activities has become a manifestation of McLuhan's notion of the discarnate self. Some might suggest, like Dan M. Davin in "The Style…Prefers to Rape Our Attention Rather than Seduce Our Understanding[43]," that McLuhan merely points to the obvious when he explores media effects. However, it is quite the contrary, as McLuhan examines the facets of what it means to notice effects. The deeper elements of suggested literacies emerge in these explorations as well.

We learn from McLuhan's descriptions of discarnation that there exists a coordinate between technology use and sedentary, isolated habits. Instead of performing well-focused action toward good outcomes or community contribution, there is an observable subjective turn toward a *private*, *individualized* self. A perpetuation of sense-driven action becomes the false sense of involvement. A consistent involvement with technology does not mean there is a constructive subjectivity enacted. The sheer volume of information management interrupts one's *telos,* which

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[43] In *McLuhan: Hot & Cool,* several authors' critical responses to McLuhan's ideas on technology, advertising, and mediated environments are anthologized.

is an Aristotelian notion that something credible and worthwhile is being accomplished. Messages to the world are enmeshed by an obsession with projections of the self, rather than adding rhetorical awareness of one's social impact on the captive audience. The end result lands not on an observable product, but instead on an illusion of place and a misconstrued sense of connectedness with oneself and others.

As a display of the discarnate self, one's social presence via technology is aimless. There is a notable level of arbitrariness exhibited in the modern use of technology, especially regarding the use of social media platforms. Where public displays of self in the past were performance-based actions, with regard to audience impact and dramatic interaction with other players, the new focus is on a perpetuation of self that carries an expectation for the public to accept the performance without critical review. Perhaps a key element within this discussion is to examine the notion of "using" technology versus true involvement and understanding of one's own functionality when engaging technology. Modernity allows for the social subject to be defined as an individual traversing outward into the spaces of technological planes, yet these are mythical spaces of existence.

How can we make sense of discarnation and its grasp on the human condition from a humanist perspective? McLuhan has often shown us that a humanist inquiry offers substantial insights into the technological trance that captivates the modern mind. To probe this concern in a meaningful way, we can see that McLuhan sometimes mentions fourteenth-century humanist Petrarch (1304-1374 CE), who is known for contemplation and his many ruminations about what it means to be a human being on earth and with spirit.

In McLuhan's dissertation, his sporadic mentions of Petrarch's thoughts on humanity in the Renaissance have led me to ponder what it means to suggest that we, like Petrarch, may be

witnessing the brink of a new Dark Age. After all, McLuhan paraphrases a poignant note from the past, which states, "Petrarch says he cannot know what the past knew, but he is keenly aware of what the future will be ignorant" (*TCT* 151). The notion that our current historical moment, leading out of the twentieth-century stage of modernity, has brought us to a level of ignorance brought on by the grasp of technology on humanity.

Incessant technological immersion had been an intrinsic aspect of modernity. However, this immersion eclipses the human element in the form of restless thought and listless action. McLuhan's humanistic insights point to humanity's propensity to obsess over the newness of worldly inventions. In terms of the world this creates for humanity, we see an upsurge of entertainment related interests and activities that allow the mind to wander aimlessly from one focus to the next, almost in complete succession and for nearly entire days on end. The problem stems from a common expectation (and, perhaps, a sense of entitlement) for leisure time, but the reality is a dismal representation of true recreation. A chronic use of technology becomes a hedonistic waste of precious time disguised as so-called down time. Unfortunately, the richness of true leisure, in the form of exploration (in the mind) or recreation (through the body), is obscured. A technological preoccupation leads to a sedentary, lifeless existence. Avoiding the burdens of life may also be part of the attraction to time spent on another mental plane.

A life lived well in a Petrarchan sense involves a habit of involvement in one's life through reflection and an appreciation for learning. In a letter titled *On Religious Leisure (De Otio Religioso)*, written to his brother Gherardo who was living the life of a monk, Petrarch talks about the ways day-to-day life is based on exhaustion due to humankind's pursuits and desires. We, too, must learn to examine the notion of time in relation to the activities that *eclipse* the entire self, mind, and spirit. Technology invites people to do things that waste time, and then we

complain about needing more time, yet this leads not to a life of happy leisure, but instead a life of unreflective practices. Restlessness of existence becomes a human story of detachment and a false sense of active participation in a communal dialectic.

Philosophical Explorations of Subjectivity

We find ourselves at a paradox of societal anxiety—people cannot live with *or* without technology or other addictive modern products to which they are bound. The notion of leisure provides an important philosophical foundation for this discussion of human subjectivity. Of course, within the philosophical conversation, there are treatments of leisure that present varied distinctions. For example, Immanuel Kant's perspective on leisure appears in his *Lectures on Ethics* (*LE*), wherein he talks about the importance of noting a difference between excess and necessity with regard to human wants and needs. The framing of one's subjectivity can be guided by external influences, and the subject can become bound to outside forces. Kant explains that we must be able to live without something to consider it supplemental to real necessities, such as food and shelter. These are also things that bring us additional comforts. If we cannot live without something, then it becomes a necessity (*LE* 172).

From a philosophical purview, fixating on comforts leads to a reliance on "pseudo-necessities" (Kant 173). There is a difference between enjoyable activities and fixation or dependence upon these pseudo-necessities. The former is healthy, the latter is not. McLuhan makes distinctions between reality and pseudo-reality that modern inventions can promote in society. He sheds light on questions about what really brings us enjoyment and participation in our world and what does not. With new inventions comes new notions of leisure. McLuhan says

of the railway, for example, that it had less to do with transportation than it did with creating "new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure" in society (*UM* 20).

McLuhan contributes to the philosophical notion that time *objectified* manifests itself in the viewpoint that the chronology from birth to death must be filled with constant planning and apportioning of time. He says time "can take on the character of an enclosed or pictorial space that can be divided and subdivided" (*UM* 207). Leisure cannot be accomplished in that context. He says, "Leisure excludes time as a container" (208). The utilization of time relates to space in modern times because it can seemingly be filled up with being "busy." True leisure does not objectify time for utility, and a *false* sense of leisure apprehended through idleness and stagnation is where the fullness of lived experience diminishes. McLuhan shows us that time will not always be used to achieve leisure, a state of being wherein the spirit can grow and the body can rest; instead, time is divided, filled, and viewed as *only* a place for striving for progress. True leisure will bring enjoyment or rest, or lead to personal growth, but modern innovations support less human involvement, thus impeding humanity's personal involvement in new environments.

What we see emerging is an alternative epistemology in response to modernity that evolves through the examination of humanity under technological duress. The pressure created to live mythically via technology platforms intensifies under the right conditions. Such conditions have been ramping up for centuries, not decades. For example, it is interesting to note that there is a connection between humanism and the Greek *paideia,* which refers to mechanisms for learning and originates from classical teachings of Isocrates (436-338 BC). Humanist ideas often show us that the things humans deem important—and employ in their daily behaviors—will shape their dignity and integrity. Society shows signs of having less appreciation for—or attention to—the arts, intellectualism, and cultural literacy.

The individualized subject, as well as the social realm at large, has experienced a poverty of growth. In many ways, a humanist perspective emerges in McLuhan's observations of the world. McLuhan says, "The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy, and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of technology" (*UM* 7). In our contemporary moment, however, we see a movement toward needing to "unplug" and take intentional breaks from technological devices in order to pursue a type of *wholeness* in lived experience that comes from fully participating in one's life, not being held captive to technology's parameters of engagement.[44] More specifically, the grasp of social media platforms can lead to an altered perception and activity. McLuhan's work leads us to see where monumental or more nuanced transitions of perception and subjective habits occur in the social forum.

Certain activities can be shaped by one's plans for social media representation(s). The overuse of social media can lead to an obsession with self-representation in the 2-D spectrum. Even with the advent of video and live streaming on social media, we can see a movement toward contrived situations in people's lives. Philosophically, the course of one's activities may become less of a natural occurrence in one's day, but instead more involved in setting up one's public image. Especially within the past century, the modern mindset has been pushing toward a technological grasp where humanity is defined through a level of involvement.

McLuhan does not suggest that all forms of amusement should be avoided. An overtaking of the senses creates the precariousness of idleness. (Essentially, nothing good comes from *doing nothing* for too long.) Historically, a lack of activity leads to what Kant refers to an unproductive level of luxury (in terms of being addicted to excess) as "self-indulgence" (176). However, he

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[44] In Jennifer Rauch's article "Constructive Rituals of Demediatization: Spiritual, Corporeal and Mixed Metaphors in Popular Discourse about Unplugging," we have an overview of new habits of "unplugging" and its permeation into social discussions about technology overuse.

says there is type of luxury that promotes and supports intellectual pursuits, such as comforts

provided by details of hospitality or educational settings, and so on (see Kant 176). Excessive

self-indulgence creates a multifaceted set of barriers to learning and productivity. If

entertainment is absent, the contemporary learner finds him- or herself distracted in a way that

requires self-corrective behaviors.

As a philosophical underpinning within this discussion of leisure, Kant's view of

"pseudo-necessities" shows us that we may find discomfort in stepping away from bad habits,

but many habits are not necessities (see *LE* 173). He says, "The more dependent we are on such

pseudo-necessities, the more is our contentment at their mercy" (Kant, *LE* 173)[45]. Simply filling

up one's time with blatant idleness is neither work nor leisure. Nothing is accomplished, and

time is merely occupied. Therefore, in our contemporary situation, the expressed need to step

away from tech-based socializing is indicative of movement toward true contentment. When this

sentiment emerges in the social forum, the use of technology is labeled as a burden of existence

in need of correction, not a form of enjoyment or pleasure. Wasting time in a technologically

mediated trance, which involves the mindlessness of scrolling through images, does not lead to a

feeling of freedom or fulfillment, but instead results in a habituation of quick and simplistic

thought.

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[45] McLuhan would not be considered Kantian, but some historical philosophical ideas mirror some of the
explorations of time usage in our daily lives which is what I demonstrate with this example. There can be some
overlaps when such focused discussions intersect in philosophy. However, in a direct statement critiquing Kant,
McLuhan says, for example, "Neither Hume nor Kant, however, detected the hidden cause of our Western bias
toward sequence as "logic" in the all-pervasive technology of the alphabet. Today in the electric age we feel as free
to invent nonlineal logics as we do to make non-Euclidean geometries" (*UM* 121).

Conclusion: Dysfunctional Subjectivity in Modernity

Extending oneself into technological environments encourages people to envision new representations of the self. Concerns about one's self-representation evokes an "all the world is a stage" approach to life, where self-image and representations are important, rather than focusing on a deeper intellectual path or a more contemplative life[46]. De Zengotita explores the ways media ecology can shape our perception of social interaction. For example, in face-to-face interaction, the incarnate is the human being in its real-time presence. In online communication, he says we see "representational being incarnate" (de Zengotita 198). McLuhan's notion of the extended self plays out when gadgets take on the role of prosthetic for users' existence in the world. De Zengotita aptly calls the representational gadgets—and their personalized functions— a "virtual Mini-Me who never sleeps" (198). What emerges is an obsession with having a lot to do in life, which becomes a habitualization of encumbered existence that promotes discarnate existence in the world. De Zengotita says, "…Performative habitualities in a mediated adulthood that dims down the horizon of options through immersion in a numbing routine allow many of us to feel relatively real" (189). The imagining of what *realness* means is where the idea of the discarnate come forth in McLuhan's work. It leads to inquiries about the thought processes that surround one's understanding of participation in a technological, mediated world.

The rhetorical aspects of dialectic offer a way toward more intellectual activity in the social forum. The notion of questioning in a deeper way—i.e., while seeking answers to those questions—shapes a cultural milieu of thought. The setting sets the tone for trends and patterns of thought that will promote intellectualism rather than anti-intellectual tendencies. In *The*

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[46] In *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It,* de Zengotita also explores the *representational* characteristic of our lives employed through the use of technology. He talks about the ways communication between people's representational selves occurs because of the gadgets and software that support the interactions. He calls this an engagement between "the representational existence of others" (199).

Classical Trivium, McLuhan talks about the importance of dialectic within the humanist

perspective, and from this we can see connections between dialectic and life lived with focused

energy. We have a motif in the rhetoric of technology emerging rapidly, showing us that modern

productivity is impacted by constant interruptions in focus and attention.

In his early work, McLuhan presents ideas on interpretation in his dissertation, where he

says that "grammar" is "allegorical exegesis," following a discussion of the history of the

[metaphysical] book of nature (*TCT* 16). Adam's act of naming animals seems to be one of the

very first instances of a historical definition of nature as a "doctrine of essence," rather than a

"naïve notion of oral terminology" (16). McLuhan says that there is a connection between art and

the book of nature and subsequently discusses artists' aim of retrieving the "knowledge of that

language which once man held by nature" (16). McLuhan's probes, in the spirit of Francis

Bacon's aphorisms, observe concerning patterns of communal behaviors that disrupt the fullness

of existence and lead to an altered understanding of nature. The new way of living in

technological environments is indicative of a changing relationship with the world—i.e. a

mediated world.

Technology platforms tend to offer a sense of community, when they really only extend a

disembodied representation of reality. The body is stripped away in favor of image, epitomizing

the impersonal in communicative platforms built on technological planes of communication

(e.g., social media, etc.). In the article "The Invisible and the Visible: Intertwining Figure and

Ground in *The Gutenberg Galaxy,"* Dominique Sheffel-Dunand explores the image in terms of

an artificiality in the modern forum, saying that "The impulse to display and stage information

visually and acoustically though is still everywhere in evidence. Mosaics of picture, word, and

sound constitute playful artificial constructs that are projected from electronic monitors and

screens" (Kindle edition; *loc*. 995).[47] The placement of image would historically begin to eclipse the spoken word, which is a concern that McLuhan addresses as part of his examinations of modern technology's lofty effort to straddle both acoustic and visual realms via image and video. Additionally, McLuhan's use of the mosaic unstructuring of linearity is demonstrated in his style choices for *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Elena Lamberti includes a discussion of McLuhan's setup for the book:

> Just like in modernist avant-garde experiments, McLuhan designed a page which no longer assimilated "utterance to the human body," a metaphor which returns us to a well-known entity. McLuhan's pages lost the head (no titles but "chapter glosses") and the feet (no footnotes, all references are within the text); they lost their traditional "physicality," at the same time that the new "discarnate human beings" of the electric age were losing their sense of body by extending their psyches into cyberspace. (Kindle edition; *loc*. 480)

The idea of the *discarnate* is represented by the mosaic, or "tesserae," that instantiates the notion that human thought is non-linear and disconnected from corporeal action (see Lamberti in *GG,* Kindle edition; *loc*. 453).

From an introduction of the mosaic, McLuhan's account of electric retribalization discloses his hermeneutic entrance into a rhetorical impact of technological communication habits on society, while most specifically attending to discarnate being. Anything that can "carry the voice across both time and space are examples of material extensions," according to McLuhan (*GG;* Kindle edition, *loc*. 1164). McLuhan then explicitly explores society's ultimate goal of *transmitting* ideas and experiences, while also implementing a goal of efficiency (see

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[47] Sheffel-Dunand's essay appears in an updated (2011) copy of *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* which was also made available on the Kindle reader. In this project, other essays mentioned from the 2011 version of *GG* (via Kindle) will include work from Elena Lamberti and W. Terrence Gordon as well.

GG, Kindle edition, *loc.* 1164). McLuhan compares past closed systems of experience with a new consciousness in the electric environment: "Now, in the electric age, the very instantaneous nature of co-existence among our technological instruments has created a crisis quite new in human history. Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious" (*GG* 5). Technologically driven communication takes on its own ratios much like our "private senses," McLuhan notes (5).

Contemporary conversations in the social forum seem to be intrigued by the conversation about technological obsession and captivity. Because of technological innovation at such a rapid pace, reflection has become necessary in order to manage the anxieties that technology can incite. We hear new conceptualizations of the need for *unplugging* or going on social media "breaks." However, the concepts themselves would be unsurprising to McLuhan, most likely; his work focuses on the tension between true nature of humankind and conceptualizations of nature through our ever-changing electric environments (shifting grounds). The true meaning of nature and human understanding of nature is something McLuhan returns to in his work many times.

When Powers asks McLuhan, "Can modern Western man really experience the wilderness?" McLuhan says, "Not really. Because his senses are imbalanced" (*GV* 132). This assertion emerges after their discussion of the ways people talk about nature, agreeing that people have "…a sense keyed to the horizon, to a proportionate sense related to the vanishing point" creates a new perspective in modern times (Powers 131). Modern notions of nature differ, McLuhan says, from ancient understandings of nature because modern thinking identifies "everything outside his windows as wild," referring to activities like hiking as being equated with "nature" (132). The heart of McLuhan's corpus emerges very explicitly in this interview between him and Powers: "True nature, as we should understand it, is acoustic. Acoustic space

has no center" (132). There is an indication of what constitutes "multisensuous" activities, with McLuhan including "swimming or riding a bicycle" as examples (132). The modern notion of activity in time and space has been altered by new environments.

McLuhan's reflections on modern activities continue to reflect many of the same technologically driven activities of today. For example, at one point he mentions "new home information services," saying the following about new services that had at that time emerged and continue to exist now:

> … the computer is utilized by a person to organize particular data needs; that is, to order groceries or machine parts, home security, specialized news items, answering services, and paid work at home. A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve the individual's encyclopedic function and flip into a private line to speedily tailored data of a salable kind. (*GV* 143)

As McLuhan and his son Eric tell us many times in their explorations of media, any human artifact or invention can fit into the tetrad, wherein we can see the evolution of our innovations through their movement through *enhancement (amplification), reversal (flip), retrieval, and obsolescence* (see *LOM;* see also McLuhan and McLuhan, *The Lost Tetrads of Marshall McLuhan* 27). The examples above showcase the practical application of the tetrad and its interpretive qualities.

The process of retribalization has been realized in the electric era. McLuhan shows us how retribalization startles the sensorium into assimilating and adapting in new environments. Where the pre-literate tribal society is built on acoustic biases, the literate society has instead adopted a linear, formulaic, structural mode of thinking. The latter, McLuhan says, will have a

tougher time adjusting to any acoustic expectations demanded within technological

environments. When activities enacted via technological innovations, the simultaneousness of

the perceptual field disrupts the habits of the linearity acquired through habits of literacy.

Modern subjectivity has experienced some transformations with changing technological

innovations that have shifted the ground of human perception. New "dynamics" of

communication and representations of self are evolving in the social forum because of the social

immersion in technology.[48] According to McLuhan, the linear thinker, trained by modern

educational methods based on print, structures, categories, and the phonetic alphabet,

experiences a shock when thrust into the retribalizing state when engaging an outer plane of

mediated existence. McLuhan typically compares this shock to the disruption felt by tribal

participants who have only known acoustic space as their space for communication, sharing

ideas, personal growth, and learning.

Discarnation, as a state of existence, places subjective allegiance to representation rather

than action. The technologized version of action is essentially a myth or an illusion that comes

from a modern mindset fixated on habits of collective consciousness. We see a metaphor of the

embodiment of humanness in McLuhan's ideas on the incarnate state of being. Denotatively, the

term "incarnate" indicates that a person functions in bodily form. In McLuhan's discussions of

human nature, we see a shift from the incarnate toward a new form of existence in the discarnate.

This is a movement away from natural human reactions to the world.

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[48] Elena Lamberti offers a succinct overview of the shifting biases between the ear and the eye in McLuhan's ideas. She writes, "The passage from ear to eye indicates the passage from the ancient acoustic mode of perception – inclusive and simultaneous – typical of tribal society to a sequential and linear one pertaining to the literate Western society, now obsolete or no longer adequate to (at odds with) the electric environment (which, through its retribalization, is rediscovering acoustic and tribal dynamics)" (*GG;* Kindle Edition, *loc.* 512).

The speeding up of technology has had a great impact on the ways people interact with the world around them, and this speed-up is directly related to McLuhan's understanding of the incarnate element of human existence. McLuhan is attentive to an incarnate aspect humanity whenever he talks about technologized versions of reality. It is in fantasy or the mythical state of being that delivers people to a *discarnate* state of being. A communal push toward chaotic, technological relations with the world is tied to discarnate existence. According to McLuhan, all electric media encompass "the discarnate world" (*ML* 175). Electric media also represent a secular idolatry that demands not only extension of the central nervous system, but also the entirety of human identity. McLuhan says, "No one stays in one place long enough to strike up an acquaintance with anyone" (*ML* 47). Within McLuhan's ruminations, we can see that the community is no longer community in a spiritual, charitable sense; the fragmented, chaotic community is a result of technology (see *ML* 46).

Christianity provides the foundation that humankind was made in the image of Christ, with Jesus Christ as God's son, or Incarnate. McLuhan is sometimes assessed as not including religion in his works, but that is far from the truth. McLuhan's religiosity often emerges in his works, even though he does not always *explicitly* list Christian ideas in all of his writings. If human beings are changed and fragmented through technology, then their discarnate, detached existence is no longer in the image of Christ, no longer incarnate; the person exists instead in the image of *images,* of *technology,* of *electric grounds,* of *detachment.* The spiritual aspect of existence gets lost in a mode of chaotic extension into planes outside of personal understanding of one's world. Thoughts and decisions will not be tied to personal reflection or spiritual rumination if media have taken hold of a person's perceptual landscape.

Finally, I maintain that what makes McLuhan's ideas on the discarnate different than a mere Cartesian split between mind and body is a mental connection with the body in cosmic space (i.e., as new ground) due to the lack of focus on the self (i.e., as figure). Thought comes in the form of image and metaphor, but it is thought in an extended form. In the quest to perfect one's performance in technological environments, the body succumbs to a technologically induced state of sedentary (and sometimes sloth-like) physiological habits, which is a problematic issue that philosophers engage frequently. In his essay included in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (2011), W. Terrence Gordon highlights McLuhan's ideas on "writing as an achievement of sedentary societies" and subsequently offers some examples of the impact of the "sedentary" habits in human history (Kindle edition; *loc.* 184). Engaging in manufactured representation of self in manufactured technological settings creates a manufactured state of existence, too, as a result.

Discarnation does not inspire physical activity in immediate time and space; discarnation for McLuhan is the state of being sped-up and overpowered by the speed of electric spaces and information. In a 1973 letter to Clare Boothe Luce, McLuhan offers a succinct assertion about the impact of sped-up information on the technologically immersed subject. He says:

> Many things are moving far too quickly for comprehension, but at least the large patterns are discernible. One of the peculiarities of the electric intercom is that it is the sender who is sent. Thus electronic man tends toward the disembodied or discarnate condition of "angel". I suggest that the incarnational Church has need to confront this new discarnate state of the laity under electronic conditions. (McLuhan, *Letters* 478-479)

McLuhan helps us see that incarnate communication is always personal and located within the body. Personal communicative practices are missing the integral human, spiritual elements when

the body is extended through technology or electric environments. In *The Medium and the Light,*

McLuhan compares electric existence to the realm of the angel:[49]

> When you are on the air you are, in a way, everywhere at once. Electric man is a "super
>
> angel." When you are on the telephone you have no body. And, while your voice is there,
>
> you and the people you speak to are here, at the same time. Electric man has no bodily
>
> being. He is literally *dis*-carnate. But a discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a
>
> tremendous menace to an incarnate Church, and its theologians haven't even deemed it
>
> worthwhile to examine the fact. (50)

Modern existence embraces a mindless acceptance of *extended, disembodied* existence, and

McLuhan offers a mosaic of cautionary discussions on this impact of modern innovations. The

role of perception in its fragmented forms reduces the human experience to its extended parts,

rather than placing precedence or importance on the entire person (i.e., being present, in the

flesh, incarnate).

In this project, I have explored McLuhan's understanding of the human condition through

exploration of intersections between rhetoric and philosophy, hermeneutics and phenomenology,

and teleology and epistemology. In its overall presentation, the approach has been made in the

spirit of constructive hermeneutics (versus taking a deconstructive approach) that works from a

hopeful *opening up* of McLuhan's textual ideas on perception, thought, and communication in

mediated time and space. McLuhan's ideas on patterns and habits are permeated by technology,

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[49] The important notion of discarnation in McLuhan's work typically receives only passing acknowledgment, if any, in scholarship on McLuhan. Robert K. Logan mentions the problem of discarnation when deliberating the element of Christianity in McLuhan's work, saying: "With the advent of electrically configured information the highly visual and individualistic cultural patterns of literacy, especially those of the printing press, flip back to oral or tribal patterns of culture. And therein McLuhan saw a problem for the highly individualistic religion of Christianity" (*McLuhan Misunderstood* 179). He presents two quotations as well, including part of the quoted idea I have referenced here from *The Medium and the Light,* page 50.

thus manifesting human "discarnate existence" due to a deprivation of philosophical ground in individuals' daily activities, particularly focusing on the activities that require an immersion in media and an apprehension of the senses (McLuhan, *Letters* 479; see also E. McLuhan and Zingrone 3).

Examining McLuhan's explorations leads to ideas on electronic disconnection from the natural state of the body creates *discarnate* being as an escape from a conscious experience. From such an inquiry, scholarship can discover ways the human condition might improve with an understanding of the personal element of new electric and technological environments. McLuhan's intellectual mosaic offers a philosophical conversation about the future of the subject as humankind continues to create and encounter new innovations. Varied forms of technology can have varying degrees of impact, which is part of McLuhan's foundational discussions on the interplay between technologies that require participation from the user (cool media; e.g., speech) and those that do not (hot media; e.g., print) in *Understanding Media*.

The modern consciousness of the electric era has grown accustomed to extensions of self; there is an illusion—or even an assumption—of holistic presence while nurturing a sedentary, discarnate impression of busyness in one's existence. This is a common theme in our current social forum. McLuhan attends to the multiple ways the sensorium factors into modern subjectivity, as this project explores. The humanities, which are built upon a foundation of the seven liberal arts, appeal to the sensorium in a multifaceted way in McLuhan's work. The richness of McLuhan's exploration continues to lay a philosophical, rhetorical, phenomenological, and hermeneutic foundation for understanding of the perceptual and cultural impact of mediated environments. Discarnation is a major philosophical idea in McLuhan's assessment of a "condition of public helplessness" (see Mechanical Bride v), which speaks to me

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as a loss of the *humanness* in everyday experiences. McLuhan's ideas encourage an interpretive inquiry into the current historical context of communal consciousness, wherein participants cannot easily manage the speed of technological environments and their subsequent loads of information. The struggle for humankind existing within the grasp of a technological trance is at the heart of my interest in McLuhan's scholarship. If in this grasp the subject has no body, then the subsequent discarnation evokes an illusion of experience, action, and existence.

The future of mediation is already upon us and acknowledging this is a way to understand the cultural condition. This project ends with an understanding that the twentieth century mode of modern subjectivity has carried over into the twenty-first century, and the future of media ecology and the study of rhetoric of technology will continue to confront the consequences of the new environments, especially in terms of technological innovations.

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