

HOW DOES McLuhan Mean?

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## INTRODUCTION

This study is designed to examine the message, the myth, and the methods of meaning of Marshall McLuhan. It is the thesis of this study that, though McLuhan's message is hardly original or new, his synthesis of ideas from other sources is original and new and has suddenly caused considerable confusion, consternation, and discussion among an audience that could almost be considered a mass or popular audience. What might account for this vast and sudden concern for already stated ideas and concepts? The popularization of McLuhan's ideas may be attributed to something unique in his style, in his methods of meaning. It is the purpose of this study to explore the following three concerns:

1. Discuss the ideas McLuhan is trying to convey.
2. Observe the effects he is attempting to elicit.
3. Observe the methods he employs to elicit the given effects: observe the style or rhetoric of several of his major works.

## CHAPTER I

### McLUHAN'S MESSAGE

The McLuhan message revolves around subjects ranging from Plato to psychedelic experience. He has been titled a "Pop Philosopher,"<sup>1</sup> an "Oracle of the Electric Age."<sup>2</sup> Yet he quotes Plato, Marx, Whitehead, Joyce, Kroeber, and dozens of others of equal intellectual magnitude which takes him away from the "fad" or "cute" type of writer. As is characteristic of all notable works, the message set forth in his writings is multi-faceted, subject to ambiguities and various interpretations. There are a few points on which most critics agree and it is with these areas of consensus that the writer will begin.

#### Printing Detribalized, Fragmented, and Specialized Culture

McLuhan suggests that primitive man lived in a tribal state --an audile world. He received his information about his culture, its taboos and habits, by actively participating in the process of the tribal life. The young were instructed verbally by the elders and then allowed to learn by doing the actual skinning of the bear or shaping of the arrowhead. The youth learned by exercising all of their senses, but of particular importance was the auditory nerve. Tribes were dependent on the memorization of incantations, rituals, tales, and laws for social and religious organization. The closeness of the tribe and the dependence on the group probably resulted from high participation at both the

perceptual and social level. The tribe was integrated at the perceptual level. Each individual exercised all of his senses. His total physical being participated in informing him about his environment. The tribe was integrated at the social level in that it had to be in close contact, within "ear-shot," of the clansmen in order to survive physically and maintain a culture or heritage.

With the advent of print, man became more independent, more specialized, more fragmented at both the perceptual and social levels. McLuhan attests that print has had gross perceptual effects on civilization. Before print, man indulged all of his senses in receiving information about his environment. After print, man became visile, single-sensed, linear. Print imposed stringent perceptual blinders on all of man's senses except the eye. Man no longer functioned as an integrated human being, but as a machine which assigned various functions to various senses. His sense of insight became a sense of sight. His information came to him in a linear, sequential, logical, beginning-middle-end manner. He in turn shaped his experiences into linear, sequential, logical, beginning-middle-end phenomena and adopted the philosophy that "seeing is believing." While at one time in the history of mankind it was possible to memorize whole books, or long "news reports" after one hearing from a village runner, now students find it difficult to recall a sixteen-line sonnet. If the student does take in any information via the ear, in order to retain it the message must be organized in a very linear, logical,

beginning-middle-end manner. He must be able to "see" the speaker's "line of thought" through his auditory nerve. One never hears, "I don't hear your line of reasoning."

Not only does print structure man's interpretation and transmission of information, but it also allows little perceptual participation. Print is, in McLuhan's terms, a "hot" medium. "A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled with data."<sup>3</sup> Shortly put, black marks on a white page provide all the information necessary to convey a message. The reader is required to do very little at the perceptual level to comprehend the message. Unlike hieroglyphics or ideogrammatic writings, the reader does not fill-in any information. Unlike T.V., the reader uses only his eyes. The T.V. viewer must use his eyes, ears, and a sense that McLuhan labels "tactility." This sense involves the perceptual activity used to connect the dots on a T.V. screen to form some comprehensible figure from the mosaic of dots.

In addition, print permits no social participation. The reader is perhaps most effective when he reads alone. Certainly print does not demand social participation for comprehension of information. Print allows man to be independent from the tribe. It is not necessary to be within "ear-shot" of the rest of the community in order to keep up on the latest taboos, ways of preparing foods, and other cultural information. Harold Innis points out in his book The Bias of Communication (University of Toronto Press, 1951) that Christianity developed, spread, and has



resisted change because print provided the Bible, a set of rules that have remained unaltered. Reading is essentially a singular, sequential, private activity that emphasizes repeatability, stability, apartness, and independence.

The results of the effects of print are also perceptual and social. McLuhan offers a number of examples of the linear, sequential phenomena in our culture. He suggests that Johnny can't read, not because Johnny is stupid, or underprivileged, or lacking in language skills, but because Johnny is perceptually organized for total participation. Like tribal man, children indulge all of their senses in dealing with the world outside themselves. A child given a piece of cake will attempt to rub it in, taste it, feel it, and look at it. But after being exposed to a linear, single-sensed culture for five years, Johnny learns to use only one sense in dealing with food. His responses become specialized and fragmented. When Johnny starts to school he expects to learn by using all of his senses. He finds that school demands the rejection of all senses but the visual. It is no wonder that Johnny prefers T.V.--a medium that lets him use his eyes, ears, and sense of tactility. No wonder Johnny finds recess so enchanting. He can go about learning as the tribal man--involved perceptually and socially in discovering his environment. No wonder Johnny doesn't want to learn to read.

Turning to the adult world, which of our activities reflect the linear bias? The greatest American pastime--baseball--is a prime example of an event that requires very specialized jobs,

sequential behavior, and linear organization. The assembly line is certainly the ultimate result and example of print technology. Print emphasizes repetition, repeatability, specialization, fragmentation, all of which are manifested in the assembly line. People themselves become cogs in the machine of production and of living. The language used in the American culture reflects the linear bias. Expressions such as "do you follow me" and "line of reasoning" suggest that the world is perceived and structured visually and linearly. McLuhan points out that American women are offended by European men who are more touch oriented than eye oriented. When the European male attempts to touch a woman either with his hands or eyes, he is said to be "out of line."

Though McLuhan points out all these many examples of our linear, print bias, he further suggests that the print bias is being overrun by electronic speed. He notes the increasing popularity of football (nonlinear as opposed to baseball), the expression "how does that grab you" (tactile as opposed to the visual "do you follow me"), and the rejection of rigid social rules. These examples suggest that though we were once a print culture, fragmented, detribalized, and segmented, now--

**Electronic Speed Has Retribalized, Unified,  
and Synthesized Culture**

McLuhan has taken the stand that man is moving out of a print culture into a culture that emphasizes electronic "all-at-onceness." The cause of this move from specialized linear organization to instantaneous total involvement is the electronic



speed up of information exchange. Electronic speed has made it possible to see patterns as opposed to seeing details. Much like the movie process, man has moved from seeing innumerable still photos (a very segmented, specialized activity) to seeing a total configuration or pattern of action. The speed up of details results in pattern recognition. Speed provides a synthesis of vast amounts of information into obvious structures or systems.

Another perceptual effect of the electronic era suggested by McLuhan is the concept of "cool" media.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to a hot medium, a cool medium is one in which one or more senses are extended in low definition allowing high participation. A cool medium like T.V. requires the active participation of several senses: eyes, ears, and tactility. The Gestalt or closure process in making a figure from the dots on the screen as suggested earlier (p. 3) is a prime example of the perceptual participation involved in using a cool medium. Such media cause the fragmented, specialized sensorium of print man to become once more unified under one skin. That is, all senses function together to provide the organism with integral awareness about his environment.

Not only has electronic speed synthesized and unified the individual, but has also retribalized the culture. However, the tribe is no longer the thirty people around the campfire. The tribe is the world. Electronics make it possible for every nation on earth instantaneously within "earshot" of every other

nation. With the development of Telstar, nations can also be within "eyeshot." Even more extreme, nations can "touch" one another by experiencing the tactile message of T.V. The new electronic media have certainly permitted a tribal state in which everyone is instantaneously and integrally aware of everyone else at both the perceptual and social levels.

Some readers of McLuhan hail the two above-mentioned concepts (print technology and electronic technology) as profoundly new and exciting. His uniqueness is reflected in his appeal to hippies, his recognition (not necessarily acceptance) in academic circles, and the large amounts of attention given him by writers from various areas of concern. Yet a review of the literature surrounding McLuhan's writings will reveal that the content of his concepts is not new. The unique characteristic of McLuhan's writings is his synthesis of information, his ability for pattern recognition.

The vast amount of knowledge now known by modern man is no longer meaningful by itself. Francis Bacon, the last man supposedly capable of knowing all things, today would have to concern himself not with specific details, but with structure and form, for the quantity of information is now too great for any one man to assimilate. It is this concern with structure, form, and pattern recognition that is becoming increasingly important in all disciplines. Marshall McLuhan is the man in the discipline of rhetoric who has risen above the details in an effort to find meaning in the structure and patterns of man's environment in

terms of the discipline of rhetoric. He is examining the patterns evolving in various areas such as psychology, communication, literature, anthropology, and history and attempting to synthesize these patterns into a larger, more inclusive pattern.

The effect of a medium on perception is not a new idea to general semanticists, psychologists, and linguists. Semanticists such as Alfred Korzybski have long realized the perceptual influences exerted by language.

For the central insight of McLuhan's system--the famous aphorism that the 'medium is the message'--has a striking relationship to one of Korzybski's central principles. He pointed out that the medium of our thoughts--our particular Western language--not merely conveys but shapes, limits, constrains, guides, and in numerous other ways determines our messages to ourselves and others. . . . The medium of language, then, is the message. . . . The static quality of language which makes us forget that we live in a world of process, not of stable entities; the tyranny of assumptions and abstractions which blind us to the fact that all experience is concrete, specific, particular, unique; the class names which enable us to see similarities but make it difficult to discern differences.<sup>5</sup>

In Wendell Johnson's People In Quandaries (Harcourt and Brace, 1946) much evidence is presented to indicate how an individual comes to structure reality in terms of the coding system he utilizes. Johnson suggests that neurotic disorders or psychosis may be indicated by the language a person uses. By studying the language or language patterns of a person one can determine the kinds of preferential judgments he makes and the way he chooses to view the world. George Miller's primary concern in Chapter Four, "The Statistical Approach," of Language and Communication (New York, 1963), pp. 80-99 is finding

statistical evidence of the correlation between language patterns and psychological phenomena. He notes the high predictability of each individual's choice of words and syntax. The probability of how this indicates a person's preferential judgments was not suggested. Research by Johnson indicates that students who show rigidity in their sentence patterns (formal rigidity), topics (content rigidity), or attitudes or beliefs (evaluational rigidity), also show rigidity in other phases of behavior. This type of personality uses such words as always, never, only, all. Moreover, he may view the world as "either/orish" because of the structure our language imposes. One is either a success or a failure, good or bad. He may be unable to "take the words out of his eyes" when he looks at himself or his world.<sup>6</sup>

Dorothy Lee suggests in her work "Lineal and Nonlineal Codifications of Reality" that the Trobriand Islanders are non-lineal in contrast to our own lineal phrasing.

Basic to my investigation is the assumption that a member of a given society--who, of course, codifies experienced reality through the use of the specific language and other patterned behavior characteristic of his culture--can actually grasp reality only as it is presented to him in this code.<sup>7</sup>

The Whorfian theory from linguistics further supports the idea that a medium such as language imposes perceptual as well as structural limitations on messages. The traditional examples used to prove this point are the following: When exposing an individual from America and one from Rhodesia who speaks Shona to a color spectrum, quite different realities are reported. The

American will report seeing distinct and definite colors, probably six or seven. This is because of the specific method of division which is part of the structure of English. By contrast, the Shona speaker divides the spectrum into three major portions. "The convention of dividing the spectrum into three parts instead of into six does not indicate any difference in visual ability to perceive color, but only a difference in the way they are classified or structured by the language."<sup>8</sup> The American Indian has no history of the phenomenon of stuttering in his culture.<sup>9</sup> Several Indians who have been in contact with white men have been identified as stutterers, but no Indian free of contact with white men has suffered from stuttering. It has been suggested that this may be due to the fact that there exists no word for stuttering in the culture and thus no reality is structured to fit the word.

All of the above examples point out the effects of a mass medium such as language on perception and structure of reality. One of the first writers to seek out or suggest the influence of other mass media on cultural features was Harold Innis, a Canadian historian who was McLuhan's inspiration and most fruitful source of information. Innis' ideas about media have been amplified and extended by McLuhan. In fact, McLuhan states that "I would like to think of my own book The Gutenberg Galaxy (University of Toronto Press, 1962) as a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the psychic and social consequences, first of writing and then of printing."<sup>10</sup> McLuhan's recent work goes far



beyond the scope of Innis, but his basic approach was acquired from Innis. McLuhan's philosophy is most clearly stated in the following excerpt:

We can perhaps assume that the use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated and suggest that the pervasive influence will eventually create a civilization in which life and flexibility will become exceedingly difficult to maintain and that the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization.<sup>11</sup>

This statement, which could have come directly from McLuhan, is taken from Innis' last work. This indicates how closely related their work was and is.

McLuhan's concern with the instantaneous, immediate experience and rejection of aristotelian ways of categorization and linear organization is reflected in many academic disciplines today. One of the more recent trends in psychology emphasizes the phenomenological approach. The writings of Carl Rogers and Kirt Lewin hinge on the importance of the individual's immediate situation. Phenomenology rejects the idea that understanding must be tied to experiences of the past and to logical, sequential "working through" a problem. Freudian analysis is unnecessary for the phenomenologist. He is willing to take the individual as he is and deal with the immediate sensory experience. Phenomenologists such as Rogers or Timothy Leary would go so far as to suggest that as soon as one attempts to communicate or formalize his experience, he immediately decreases understanding. When one attempts to externalize or communicate understanding, he imposes



unreal, restrictive biases on the experience. These psychologists and McLuhan believe natural experience does not come in a sequential, fragmented manner, but rather is an all-at-once, total sensory happening that defies accurate externalization or communication.

Another psychologist, Norman Brown in two books Life Against Death<sup>12</sup> and Love's Body<sup>13</sup> deals with the retribalization concept of McLuhan. Brown, in Life Against Death takes the stand that not only was Freud correct in the idea that repressiveness of civilized society is the prime cause of neurosis, but further that mankind is slowly eliminating instinctual repressions for a more fully libidinal existence. In Love's Body Brown describes a Dionysian frenzy in which society is totally submerged in Bros--love. McLuhan parallels each of these ideas. He states that "Schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy."<sup>14</sup> He says that mechanized society which is derived from print, alienates man from his environment and even segments his physical body. He now feels that electronic media ushered in the end of alienation by 1) extending man's senses into his surroundings; 2) favoring more participational, low definition experiences; 3) recreating the oral bond that tied primitive society together.<sup>15</sup> Both Brown and McLuhan foresee a new tribal state.

Anthropologists such as Kluckhohn and Kroeber support the idea that Culture supersedes the individual will. Again presented is the idea that man is controlled not by the content of the life he leads, but rather by the way the structures and forms

in his environment manipulate the content. Culture seems to the anthropologist to be an overriding power that shapes man's behavior. If Culture is defined as all those artifacts and art forms of a tribe and McLuhan defines media as any extension of man, then certainly definite correlations can be drawn between McLuhan and the trend taken by some anthropologists.

In religion the world is seeing a vast attempt at convergence and retribalization. The Catholic Church recently organized the Ecumenical Council in an effort to re-evaluate its doctrine and come to some agreement on major issues. Many Protestant religions are joining together under one name, attempting to converse, regroup, synthesize. The World Day of Prayer is an example of the effort to unify a world on the basis of shared belief. This would be possible only in an electronic, instantaneous world.

Dissimilar figures such as Brown, an amateur psychologist; Kroeber and Kluckhohn, anthropologists; Benjamin Whorf, linguist; Wendell Johnson, speech pathologist and semanticist; Carl Rogers, psychologist and father of counseling; Harold Innis, historian all seem to be heading in a similar direction. They reflect the range of the spectrum of convergence and synthesis. McLuhan has been able to sit back and see the scope and importance of the convergence reaction and formulate some sort of progression of activity to explain it.

On examining the literature surrounding McLuhan's writings and looking at some of the trends in other academic and social areas, one is struck by several considerations.

1. McLuhan's ideas are not new, but the synthesis of information from various areas is unique and the elaboration of some suggestions made by others is significant to future studies in communication.

2. McLuhan, though in a sense rehashing old ideas, has become popular and important and has been critiqued by men from diverse backgrounds.

3. McLuhan's popularity cannot be attributed to the newness of his ideas, but may be due to his synthesis or pattern recognition and style of presentation.

In further investigation of these ideas about McLuhan's style, the following kinds of literature will be consulted. McLuhan's four major books on mass media will be the major concern of the study. The Mechanical Bride (Toronto, 1951) was his first book of consequence. This book (further discussion on p. 27) is an example of the mechanical age in which America was living at the time. The book strikes at the specialized, fragmented nature of our culture. He points particularly to the segmenting of the human body by the advertising world's emphasis on fragmentation of the total physical body into beautifiable hair, legs, eyes, etc. During the time between The Mechanical Bride and The Gutenberg Galaxy (Toronto, 1962) McLuhan's ideas changed radically. He observed that we had moved from the mechanical age to the electronic era. The difficulty he notes in this work is that we are unaware of this change in our sense modalities and ways or forms of living. His effort is to make us

aware. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York, 1964) is a similar attempt to elicit awareness and understanding. This book is more "catchy" and "cute," but purports the same concepts as The Gutenberg Galaxy. It appears to be an effort to popularize the McLuhan Myth by eliminating scholarly amplification and utilizing information which requires less intellectual and educational background for comprehension. Understanding Media and The Medium is the Message (New York, 1967) are both simple repetitions of The Galaxy, but written in a more popular, saleable style. The Medium is the Message is a picture book representation of McLuhan's message. By employing special techniques of print and photography, McLuhan and Quentin Fiore were able to graphically recreate McLuhan's message. The book is comprised of the most unique and memorable McLuhanisms found in his works. It seems to be a synopsis in print and photography of McLuhan's entire philosophy.

The only sizable critique of McLuhan is McLuhan Hot and Cool (New York, 1968) which is a collection of reviews and interviews. This collection contains the most significant comments made either for or against the McLuhan Myth. Other reviews will be consulted, but this book contains most of the extremely relevant and serious commentaries on McLuhan's work.

Several books on style are referred to in discussing McLuhan's methods of meaning. Style in Language (M.I.T. and Wiley, 1960) edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, is a collection of essays on style from three major areas: literary criticism,

linguistics, and psychology. Some of the contributors are Archibald Hill, Roger Brown, I. A. Richards, Dell Hymes, and George Miller. Another work consulted and from which the title of this study is derived is How Does A Poem Mean? (Boston, 1959) by John Ciardi. This entire work parallels the McLuhan philosophy that the How of communication transcends the What in effects on the receiver of the message. Ciardi is more concerned with how a poet elicits a meaning than with what meaning he elicits. The Phaedrus in Dialogues (New York, 1895), is, of course, one of the classic works in rhetoric that exemplifies the attempt to join form and content, style and subject in a manner paralleled by McLuhan. Another work which receives brief mention but which supports the basic tenet of the thesis is Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1959).



## CHAPTER II

### McLUHAN'S MYTH

McLuhan's message has radical ramifications for the world. Consider the effects of print and electronics on education. McLuhan suggests that our current educational system is a direct reflection of the mechanized print era. Knowledge is segmented into separate compartments--English, mathematics, geography, logic, physics. It is interesting to note that children, employing the use of their total sensorium, receive instruction in all of the disciplines in the same classroom. However, as the student learns greater methods of differentiation, as he learns to segment his physical body, as he learns a linear, fragmented orientation to all that he does, he not only segments knowledge into various subjects, but even goes from room to room, building to building, and in the case of large universities, from campus to campus. McLuhan suggests that the form education takes is more important than the content. This idea is supported by others.

Edgar Friedenberg, the sociologist, has based a whole critique of American secondary schooling on the fact that what is really learned in school isn't what's in the curriculum, but it's what the students pick up just from being in a place run like a school. The medium--in other words, the school itself with its organization, forms, mores, and constraints--teaches far more effectively than does the officially taught curriculum which contains the supposed messages.<sup>16</sup>

McLuhan feels that children today receive far more information outside the classroom than they do within. In his essay



"Classroom Without Walls"<sup>17</sup> he points out that even in our own recent American history rural children did most of their learning outside the classroom. Today this is even more true because the amount of information conveyed via the mass media far exceeds the amount conveyed by teachers and books. The ramifications of the perceptual and social consequences of these media on education are frightening. If McLuhan is right, if we are a society begging for participation, total involvement, retribalization, synthesis, then our education system will have to acquire an electronic instantaneous, all-at-once, integral orientation. The traditional knowledge in neat packages dispensed in neat compartments will have to give way to information environments. McLuhan suggests that this shift to integral understanding is already in progress and offers as evidence the "teach-in" and "dialogue." Both are highly participational activities. They reject the linear teacher-student relationship, the formalized lecture presentation, the non-involvement of contemporary education. Education, to keep up with its participants, will have to make severe and sudden changes in its sense ratios. It will have to change from a single-sensed, eye-oriented, linear activity to a totally involving psychic and social process.

Consider the effects of the electronic technology on art. Perhaps Paulkner's "stream of consciousness" technique is an attempt to get away from a rigorously formal grammar so dominant in a literate society. This technique is a visual effort, nonetheless an effort, to create a new form of writing that requires

large amounts of perceptual filling in of jumps in reasoning and incomplete sentences and thoughts. e. e. cummings is a poet who visually attempts to create new sense ratios by using various types and irregular spacing on the page. Yet both of these artistic endeavors are still children of a print culture. In contemporary books, movies, short stories, and plays we see less and less evidence of "story lines" or plots. Much of the popular discotheque and electronic music lacks the organization of a particular form of music such as a waltz, concerto, or even the loose form of the Negro spiritual. One could compare the rigid linear waltz to the frug, mashed potato, or surf--dances which encourage the high participation and freedom sought in our culture. To appreciate these new art forms, one is required to develop new sensibilities.

McLuhan's definition of art is a key to another dot in his mosaic of understanding. McLuhan's definition takes the same attitude as does Wyndham Lewis', another of McLuhan's oft-quoted sources. "The artist is engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he alone is capable of seeing the present."<sup>18</sup> McLuhan describes the artist as the individual capable of viewing the immediate and seeing what is happening. The artist is able to see what others are submerged in--the environment. "The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness."<sup>19</sup> The artist is that man who can lead the way, point the direction,

describe the media, and make the mass aware of the ways we react to environments. "I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to arrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties."<sup>20</sup>

The above two examples are just two of the many areas that will be and are radically affected by the electronic technology. The ramifications of McLuhan's ideas strike at the heart of almost all human activity. In order to avoid complete chaos or inability to adjust to these changes of environment, what is the most logical solution? McLuhan suggests that man become aware of and learn to cope with the changes in his sense ratios. "Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act--the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change."<sup>21</sup>

The ratios have changed, yet men have not. McLuhan claims we are looking "backwards into the future." We are getting a rear-view mirror look at the world. We are looking into an electronic environment with print filled eyes. "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future. Suburbia lives imaginatively in Bonanza-land."<sup>22</sup>

He further suggests that "environments are invisible."<sup>23</sup> This statement demands an about-face of our sense ratios. Almost every child from first grade on learns that environment is all of those things in the physical world surrounding him. The air,

water, earth, buildings, plants, compose environment. How, then, can environments be invisible? Perhaps the molecules and microscopic living beings in air and water? McLuhan's definition hinges on Joyce's view as presented in Finnigan's Wake. Joyce proposed that language itself is the most massive of all sensory environments and attempted to reveal its powers of social and psychic structuring. He noted that electric technology goes beyond classified, semantic data in favor of the pattern recognition of syntactical structures. Most children absorb enough information from their invisible environment to be able to use all basic language patterns before they go to school. Their non-visual knowledge equips them with an adequate communication system long before they become literate. When they attend school their language becomes an anti-environment. That is, when anything in the environment is set apart and looked at as a separate entity it comes into the realm of the consciously perceptible. One becomes aware of the object and its effects. Joyce makes an effort to maintain language as an anti-environment in his works. By using language in unusual ways, he forces attention to center on the old environment and change it into an anti-environment. "Long used as an environment, language became an instrument of exploration and research. It became an anti-environment. It became pop art as in Jabberwocky."<sup>24</sup>

The influence, proportion, and awareness of an anti-environment is discussed by McLuhan.

'In a social situation a very small number of events at one extreme--the first 10% to 20% at most--account for 90% of all results.' What Drucker is discussing here is the environment as it presents itself for human attention and action. The ground rules, the pervasive structure, the overall pattern elude perception except insofar as there is an anti-environment or a countersituation constructed to provide a means of direction. Paradoxically, the 10% of the typical situation . . . is environment. The 90% area is the area of problems generated by the active power of the 10% environment.<sup>25</sup>

To illustrate this point, T.V. has a small minority of engineers (10%) creating a set of radical changes in the 90% area of daily life. New environments create anti-environments of old environments. Old mediums go unnoticed until they become the content of a new medium. The effects of the medium are imperceptible until it becomes the content of another medium. Speech became the content of writing and was then considered an art by Aristotle.

The new medium as an environment creates new occupations. As an environment it is imperceptible except in terms of its content. That is, all that is seen or noticed is the old environment, the movie! But even the effects of television on the movie go unnoticed, and the effects of the television environment in altering the entire character of human sensibility and sensory ratios are completely ignored.<sup>26</sup>

This is a possible reason for the development of Pop art. Pop art is merely an attempt to readjust sense ratios, to move something from the environment to the anti-environment. Pop art takes things that are invisible to us because of their commonness and banality--coke bottles, ads, junk--and makes them an object of awareness. As soon as something moves from the invisible to the visible or comprehensible, it becomes an art object because it demands integral awareness and new perceptual ratios.



The Balinese say, "We have no art--we do everything as well as we can."<sup>27</sup> In preliterate, tribal societies art is a means of living in the environment. The individual and the environment are one. In literate societies man has fragmented and specialized himself. His eye training has caused him to be aware of only given perceptual experiences. The Balinese have no specialized eye for art because they are integrally aware of environment. Art in our society represents those events or objects that attempt to induce integral awareness. Place any object or event in a museum or school and one has created an art object in an anti-environment.

Two further examples of the environment-anti-environment relationship are presented by McLuhan.

Professional sport is environmental, and amateur sport is anti-environmental. Professional sport fosters the merging of the individual in the mass and in the patterns of the total environment. Amateur sport seeks rather the development of critical awareness of the individual and, most of all, critical awareness of the ground rules of the society as such.<sup>28</sup>

The story of Humpty Dumpty suggests a parallel to the 10%-90% distribution of causes and effects. The impact that resulted in his fall brought into play a massive response from the social bureaucracy. But all the king's horses and all the king's men could not recreate the old environment: they could only create a new one. Our typical response to a disrupting new technology is to recreate the old environment instead of heeding the opportunities of the new.<sup>29</sup>

This discussion will provide a background for further development of the myth that McLuhan is attempting to establish and the methods he utilizes to create his myth. To understand his myth one needs to be made aware of the environment, the anti-environment, and the sensibilities involved in experiencing both.



Another concept of McLuhan's, developed most fully in Myth and Mythmaking (George Braziler, 1960), relates closely to his discussion of anti-environment. McLuhan suggests that language is a myth. "Can we, perhaps, say that in the case of a single word, myth is present as a single snapshot of a complex process, and that in the case of a narrative myth with its peripety, a complex process is recorded in a single inclusive image?"<sup>30</sup> He suggests that myth is a "means of static abstraction from live process."<sup>31</sup> Certainly language, written or spoken, is abstraction from reality. He offers as an example of his theory of myth the Madison Avenue advertising agency. Definitely ads in any medium strive to comprise in a single image the total social action or process that is imagined as desirable. He asks his reader to extend this idea even further by submitting to the idea that all the new media are in a way a new language--at least a new way of codifying experience achieved by new perceptual habits and inclusive collective awareness. If the reader is willing to accept this analogy, then he will probably concede McLuhan's further extension. "But when such a new codification has reached the technological stage of communicability and repeatability, has it not, like a spoken tongue, also become a macromyth? How much compression of the elements must occur before one can say that they are certainly in mythic form?"<sup>32</sup>

An immediate question becomes apparent. If language functions mythically and if technologies become macromyths then wouldn't these myths (abstractions from reality) function as

fragmenting, specializing agents that would do away with instantaneous, integral awareness?

The collective skills and experience that constitute both spoken languages and such new languages as movies or radio can also be considered with preliterate myths as static models of the universe. But do they not tend, like language in general, to be dynamic models of the universe in action? As such, language old and new would seem to be for participation, rather than for contemplation or for reference and classification.<sup>33</sup>

Myth has in common with the new electronic environment multi-layering of several meanings in a single image. Moreover, myths create or structure one's beliefs about the world and its order. McLuhan asks, "Is there any significance in the fact that the Oedipus myth has so far not been found among the preliterate?"

In order to bring the concept of myth away from literature and its connotations, he suggests an example of a myth from a living experience.

Many people have puzzled over the fact that children refuse to roll these hoops hulahoops on roads or walks. A mere thirty years ago a hoop was for rolling. Today children reject the lineal use of the hoop in an external space. They use it in a nuclear mode as a means of generating their own space. Here, then, is a live model or drama of the mythic power of the new media to alter sensibility.<sup>34</sup>

The effects of the narrative myth on a preliterate culture are definite and irrefutable. Mythic gods and myths concerning social and religious organization provide eternal laws for modes of living. The strength and basis for adherence to these myths go unobserved and unquestioned, yet the environment makes compliance, not a "must," but rather an inevitability. Because the preliterate live integrally with the environment, there is no

possibility of an anti-environment to make them aware of the subliminal influences of these myths. This idea is paralleled by McLuhan.

We can see both that media are mythic 'images' and that they have the power of imposing subliminally, as it were, their own assumptions. They can be viewed at the same time as intelligible explanations of great tracts of time and of the experience of many processes, and they can be used as a means of perpetuating such bias and preference as they codify in their structure.<sup>35</sup>

With these concepts of environment-anti-environment and myth in mind, this study can move forward to the realization of its intent: That is, a discovery of how McLuhan means. "By now, after all, McLuhan's doctrine is relatively familiar, acceptable, it is even becoming comfortable. But what still has potency, what still affronts, what therefore is of most residual value . . . is the style."<sup>36</sup> Since McLuhan hypothesizes that electronic circuitry has changed our sense ratios and we as yet are still looking through a rear-view mirror, the logical way to stimulate new sense ratios and awareness is to create an anti-environment which will make us aware of new sensibilities. Moreover, the establishment of a new myth, multi-layered and integrally involved will provide the image or structure for the future. The following statements, then, seem to establish the effects, the myth, McLuhan is attempting to elicit.

1. He tries to elicit new sense ratios.
2. He tries to create an anti-environment.
3. He tries to establish a new myth.

It will be the purpose of the next chapter to discover how McLuhan elicits the above-stated effects.

## CHAPTER III

### McLUHAN'S METHODS OF MEANING

The first outstanding characteristic of McLuhan's books is their organization. None of them require sequential reading. Yet the divisions or chapters do not stand alone. His complete theory does not evolve until the whole book has been considered, but the order of reading is not significant to understanding. By simply thumbing through his books one is immediately struck with the typographical set-up. The second organizational idiosyncrasy noted is the lack of scholarly form. Third, one is aware of a sense of randomness in organization and content.

The Mechanical Bride is a collection of ads from various media. The book resembles an art display in that each ad is accompanied with a text written by McLuhan. However, the text may or may not be thematically related to the ad on the adjacent page. "The Mechanical Bride was a kind of early pop art, with a layout like a museum catalogue and with headlines, clips of advertising art, comic strip boxes."<sup>37</sup> The table of contents is merely a list of the texts according to their titles. But the ads and texts are not organized into divisions or chapters. There is no linear progression from a definition to a problem to a solution. There exists no type of organization that suggests climax or the establishment of some kind of conclusion. The reader is simply exposed to a barrage of information from which he may draw conclusions. Irritatingly enough, each of the texts

is accompanied by one or several questions stated, but never answered. The reader is left the job of working through the answer, or in many cases, even figuring out the question (example on p. 78 in Appendix). One is also struck with the lack of footnotes, bibliography, or index. Though McLuhan makes vague and sparse attempts to document his information, one is still presented with the problem of what is his and what is borrowed. Several expressions in current use by McLuhan, Bukminster Fuller, Tom Wolfe, James Joyce and others of this genre are not traceable to their origins. For example, on March 12, 1968, Bukminster Fuller, in an address to students at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, was quoted by the University newspaper, The Collegian, as saying, "We are looking backwards into the future." This is an expression which appears word-for-word in McLuhan's work. Neither documents the sentence. In trying to write a scholarly thesis about McLuhan one of the biggest problems has been the difficulty because of the lack of documentation. Lack of a bibliography makes the solution of this problem almost impossible.

The Gutenberg Galaxy reflects a similar, but more scholarly organization form. The book is divided into five divisions which might loosely be titled chapters: The Prologue, The Gutenberg Galaxy, The Galaxy Reconfigured, Bibliographic Index, and Index of Chapter Glosses. The Gutenberg Galaxy is the largest division of the text, 254 of 293 pages. In the divisions titled Gutenberg Galaxy and Galaxy Reconfigured there are numerous chapter glosses.



These are merely simple declarative statements in bold type. They are supported by one to several pages of text in normal-sized print. Again these sections do not demand sequential reading for comprehension, yet sequential reading is more desirable and profitable than in The Mechanical Bride. McLuhan, in organization of typography, makes no attempt to follow traditional set-up of chapters that develop into a climax or simple thesis statement of the entire work. He presents a galaxy, an array, of ideas in unique typographical order. The book is by far his most scholarly work to date in the area of mass media. It is liberally salted with references. In fact, one is almost left with the impression that McLuhan has simply made a collection of quotations from over the years and assembled them into a museum for examination as anti-environments. The book utilizes footnotes and an extensive bibliography. Yet even with these techniques of documentation, McLuhan's writings still seem to be in many sections a collection of quotations and thoughts from other sources. In the style of Innis, McLuhan's mentor, he does this purposefully. The following could be said of McLuhan as well as of Innis:

Innis presents his insights in a mosaic structure of seemingly unrelated and disproportioned sentences and aphorisms. Anyone who has looked up the reference material that Innis cites so frequently will be struck with the skill with which he has extracted facts from dull expositions. He explored his source material with a 'geiger counter,' as it were. In turn he presents his finds in a pattern of insights that are not packaged for the consumer palate. He expects the reader to make discovery after discovery that he himself had missed. . . . Each sentence is a compressed monograph. He includes a small library on each page, and often incorporates a small library of references on the same page in addition.<sup>38</sup>



In spite of heavy reliance on other sources and an attempt to divide the book into four areas, there still remains a sense of randomness in organization and content. In reality the book contains only one chapter with a minor introduction and conclusion tacked fore and aft. The unconventional typographical set-up and the obvious effort to avoid a sequential process in developing a single thesis suggests that McLuhan may be trying to imply new meanings with new forms.

Understanding Media is less novel than the previous two works in both typography and scholarly documentation. Understanding Media seems to be an effort to appeal to the masses. It gives the first impression of a simple, uncomplicated paperback book. (It has been printed in both hard and paperback form.) Though it is divided into chapters, the chapters are brief and varied and resemble the explanations that accompany the statements in bold print in The Gutenberg Galaxy. Again as in The Mechanical Bride sequential reading is not required. There are no visual gimmicks or illustrations employed. Footnotes and bibliography do not exist; however, he integrates innumerable references and quotations into the text. The visually-oriented person would appreciate its first appearance, but would be appalled at its lack of scholarly form. Again the overall impression is one of a sense of randomness in organization and content. He seems to be concerned with nothing but the transmission of notions that occur to him spontaneously. "Literally, Understanding Media is a kit of tools for analysis and perception.

It is to begin an operation of discovery. It is not the completed work of discovery."<sup>39</sup> Why, then, is he able to communicate to a literate, linear, visual culture? Why, then, has McLuhan been condemned, praised, criticized, and listened to by the most literate of all--the writers and academicians of our culture?

The clue to McLuhan's success may be revealed in analyzing another level of his style. At the level of simple grammar and syntax, McLuhan has developed a kind of statement that defies categorization by previous standards.

Some of his statements could be called puns.

Character is no longer shaped by only two earnest fumbling experts. Now all the world's a sage.<sup>40</sup>

The Medium Is The Message is a look-around at what is happening. It is a collide-oscope of interfaced situations.<sup>41</sup>

Some take on the character of maxims.

There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.<sup>42</sup>

Some are bold metaphors.

In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin.<sup>43</sup>

All are readily identified by anyone who has read McLuhan. He has developed the McLuhanism.

The grammatical and syntactical differences among these McLuhanisms are innumerable and unchartable, banning linguistic analysis. As indicated, they come in all forms and styles. Rather than trying to point out dissimilarities or ways to

stylistically analyze his statements, why not begin in true McLuhan fashion--with points of convergence, synthesis, similarities?

McLuhanisms are attempts to synthesize large amounts of information into memorable generalizations. Therein may be the key to McLuhan. In a world fragmented, specialized, depersonalized, we find a man seeking the generalized truths of our age. We seek one who recognizes patterns and provides a synthesis of those patterns and what they may mean or how they may be dealt with. McLuhan draws conclusions from what he sees in real life--machines, paintings, sports, cars, education, roads--and is able to draw out generalizations that provide the specialists with understanding about how to deal with his total world. "In sum, McLuhan has built a philosophy of history on art criticism, which he has directed not at styles in literature, painting, or architecture, but at the low stuff of everyday life."<sup>44</sup>

His generalizations are compelling aside from their content. Looking strictly at his rhetoric, McLuhan is a phrase-maker. He admits that, "Any yokel can become a world center who thinks up a few phrases."<sup>45</sup> And certainly McLuhan has thought up a few phrases that have made him the center of innumerable controversies. His rhetoric is designed to accomplish the same things as Joyce in Finnigan's Wake. His other major source of information and style is Harold Innis. McLuhan aptly describes Innis in a preface to a new edition to Innis' The Bias of Communication (University of Toronto Press, 1964). (It is interesting to

note that the very comments McLuhan makes about Innis could well be applied to himself. Frequently in coming pages this preface will be quoted as supporting evidence for McLuhan's style since his techniques almost exactly duplicate those of Innis.) These two men seem to have had the greatest effect on McLuhan's intellectual development and writing style. He uses rhetoric to upset sense ratios, to create anti-environments, to call attention to language itself as a shaper of perception and cognition. He devises puns, coins words, rubs strange ideas together, places old values in precarious positions, and uses humor in an effort to make the reader integrally aware of his environment. He uses rhetoric as a probe and frequently the probe does not make a clean wound. His probes have many rhetorical fins and barbs and cause extreme pain for the rigidly Aristotelian writer. His language, like his theory, is not an air-tight, rule-bound style. But this is exactly McLuhan's purpose. "I don't explain, I explore."<sup>46</sup> He doesn't claim to be an oracle. He is only sending out probes and suggestions. For this reason, he makes probes that do not "fit" with other probes he has suggested. His rhetoric is a probe--using new techniques, or old techniques in new ways. While some criticize his lack of style, Aristotelian style, that is--some realize that his style is unique to his message. "He has experimented with form in his own writings; that is, he has tried to function as an artist. . . . McLuhan is trying to imitate in his writing the form of the T.V. image, which he describes as "mosaic."<sup>47</sup> He has made an attempt to

merge form and content as we see in Phaedrus. His style is anything but poor or inadequate if the parallel between his writing style and the style in Phaedrus can be made.

While Plato is talking about the various subjects of love, beauty, and myths in The Phaedrus, he is at the same time presenting a functional example of rhetoric and its potential. Plato shows as well as tells his reader that rhetoric can be base or noble depending on the honesty of the orator. He proves the baseness and then the nobility of love, thus displaying in form what he had said in content: that rhetoric can be used to give the illusion of truth, can be used to prove either side of an issue. Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961) discusses and commends this writing technique of "showing" and "telling" as it is used by many notable writers. In like manner, McLuhan strives to "show" in form what he "tells" in content. In this respect, McLuhan's style parallels the efforts of many great writers.

McLuhan's use of the pun is considered low-level and amateurish by some critics. Yet the pun is the exact form to replicate what he is attempting to say and do. The pun is a single abstraction that takes on several levels of meaning at once. This is the exact type of phenomena that McLuhan is suggesting we experience because of the new media. True experience is multi-leveled and multi-faceted as is the pun. "We must understand that prose is no longer a useful technique for getting ideas across. It's too linear, it's too extended. You have to get



things across by means of puns because puns condense ideas into single images."<sup>48</sup> His play on "sense rationality" implies several levels of meaning that demand filling in or participation on the part of the reader. Sense ratios suggest the ratio of one physical sense to another, or the ratio between common sense and physical sense. Rationality is a play on the word ratio, plus the concept of a new rationale or criterion or reason one uses. In the manner of a myth, a pun provides an image or abstraction of a process that is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Certainly here is an example of an attempt to relate form to content.

Closely related to his use of the pun is his appreciation for and use of humor. "Humor as a system of communication and as a probe of our environment--of what's really going on--affords us our most appealing anti-environmental tool. It does not deal in theory, but in immediate experience, and is often the best guide to changing perceptions."<sup>49</sup> McLuhan strives for humor in his writings. The Mechanical Bride is his most humorous work and perhaps his least criticized. He criticizes education on the grounds that it must necessarily be painful and dull to be effective. He holds that humor is a vital part of education because it is instantaneous, completely involving, and deals with the immediate situation. McLuhan's style and use of humor is most aptly described by the comments he makes concerning the style of Innis, McLuhan's idol and inspiration.

There is one department in which Innis never fails, and in which the flavor of Inniscence is never lost--his humor. Humor is of the essence of his aphoristic association of incongruities. His technique of

discovery by the juxtaposition of forms lends itself everywhere to a series of dramatic surprises.<sup>50</sup>

McLuhan further notes the popularity of humor or jokes which lack the story line or plot. Polack jokes, Tom Swifities, and puns are examples of nonlinear humor. "Don't talk to me of icebergs, said the captain of the Titanic sanctimoniously."<sup>51</sup>

This leads directly to another characteristic--the way he juxtaposes heretofore unrelated or incongruous entities in much the same fashion as Innis. Where we once considered the senses as providing the same information in various ways, McLuhan says, "Where a visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the car world is a world of simultaneous relationships."<sup>52</sup> He deals with the incongruous relationship between the rise of civilization and the destructive forces that it gives life to. Innis recalls that, "Dean Inge has remarked that civilization is a disease almost invariably fatal unless the cause is checked in time."<sup>53</sup> McLuhan parallels this idea by quoting A. N. Whitehead. "The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur."<sup>54</sup> The incongruous aspects of these statements jolt and sensitize the reader into participation and thinking. He juxtaposes "marching backwards into the future" and "looking at the present through a rear-view mirror." He places back-to-back and gives equal importance to previous incongruities and unequals such as baseball and the assembly line, religion and cool media, movies and print, government and linearity, thus causing irritation and friction

and provoking new sensibilities, few of which are pleasing or comfortable.

Note the term McLuhan uses in describing the effect Innis elicits when he uses the technique of juxtaposition; this term is "dramatic surprise." If we analyze this term closely we see even more clearly what and how McLuhan is trying to mean. The dramatic experience on or off stage is that experience which invites deeper meaning, more interpretation, greater involvement than suggested by the code received. Burke suggests the dramatic aspect of all communication that supersedes and intensifies the particular verbal code used in a face-to-face encounter. This dramatic aspect, so far an unmeasurable entity, is based on the following thesis: "The essential distinction between the verbal and the nonverbal is in the fact that language adds the peculiar possibility of the Negative."<sup>55</sup> To further explain the dramatic approach one needs to understand Burke's concept of the development of language. He states that one can look at the sources for development in two quite different ways. First, there could be the scientific source of development. That is, knowledge would be received through the senses by modes of abstraction. Secondly, the dramatic source would consist of tribal experiences, generalizations which would be developed through action.

Dramatistic generalization would yield the 'idea of the negative,' the ability to distinguish between the yes and no of 'right' and 'wrong' in the sense of not just avoidances /such as any animal can be conditioned to/ but of a thou-shalt-not which, though originally directed at someone else, is universalized to

the point where it circles back upon the self--the 'tribal' thus being made total.<sup>56</sup>

Burke further states "If sensation is the realm of motion, idea is the realm of action . . . insofar as his understanding of the world's necessities approaches perfection, he is correspondingly free: he can act, rather than merely being moved, or 'affected.'"<sup>57</sup> These ideas of Burke lend credence to McLuhan's theory of tribalism and dramatic experience, the effects of language on perceiving reality, and the effects of various stimuli on the human sensory system. Particularly, they attest to the effect of dramatic (in Burke's sense) surprise to cause action and development of the generalization.

The term "surprise" used by McLuhan indicates another rhetorical clue to the effects he seeks. He does not want a "dramatic understanding" or a "dramatic knowledge" of his statements. He attempts to create surprise because surprise is an instantaneous, involving experience. Like the new media, surprise provides such sudden information and in such unusual ways that one reacts before he has time to rationalize or linearly organize his response to the stimulus. The term "dramatic surprise" was no casual expression selected to close the sentence. It is a myth, an anti-environment, a poetic compression of language that desires to suit form to content.

Closely related to his technique of juxtapositioning is his concept of interface--an idea he talks about in content and does in form by juxtaposition. Again quoting from his comments about

Innis we see a clear picture of exactly what McLuhan is attempting to do.

He changed his procedure from working with a 'point of view' to that of the generating of insights by the method of 'interface,' as it is named in chemistry. 'Interface' refers to the interaction of substances in a kind of mutual irritation. In art and poetry this is precisely the technique of 'symbolism' with its paratactic procedure of juxtapositioning without connectives. It is the natural form of conversation or dialogue rather than of written discourse. In writing, the tendency is to isolate an aspect of some matter and to direct steady attention upon that aspect. In dialogue there is an equally natural interplay of multiple aspects of any matter. This interplay can generate insights of discovery. By contrast, a point of view is merely a way of looking at something.<sup>58</sup>

This excerpt indicates several things about McLuhan's as well as Innis' style. First, they attempt to interface ideas, to create irritation or new sensibilities. They do this by the juxtaposition of incongruous or unequal ideas as stated earlier. Secondly, the concept of conversation or dialogue is recognized and utilized. McLuhan's insistence on the return to the tribal state, the rejection of rigid written forms, the re-establishment of the audile society would necessitate the use of a similar form in writing. Thus there is further reason for McLuhan's loose style. He is not striving for visible acceptance, but audile acceptance. He can therefore write as one would talk--around and about a subject before discovering the one sentence that distills the whole conversation into a single, memorable generalization. He is less concerned with correct grammar and syntax and more concerned with effective oral coding. Suggested here is the reason behind the change from the utilization of the written



reports and plans in big business to the "brainstorming" technique. This technique utilizes all of McLuhan's concepts-- retribalization, integral awareness, with reliance on the audile sense. These kinds of sessions provide the business world with creative ideas and insight, a word much considered by McLuhan.

But an insight is the sudden awareness of a complex process of interaction. An insight is a contact with the life of forms. Students of computers have had to learn how to approach all knowledge structurally. In order to transfer any kind of knowledge to tapes, it is necessary to understand the form of that knowledge. This has led to the discovery of the basic difference between classified knowledge and pattern recognition. It is a helpful distinction to keep in mind when reading Innis since he is above all a recognizer of patterns.<sup>59</sup>

And this is also good to keep in mind when reading McLuhan. He seeks the insight, the understanding of process, the awareness of the situation, and he tries to provide this insight by using the technique of dialogue, interface, brainstorming, juxtapositioning which we are seeing in religion, education, big business, literature, in all areas that are growing and changing. This change from rigid rules to dialogue is discussed by Innis.

In the fourth century Plato attempted to save the remnants of Greek culture in the style of the Socratic dialogues which in the words of Aristotle stood half way between poetry and prose. In the seventh epistle he wrote, 'no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols.'<sup>60</sup>

The dialogue then and now is considered far more flexible and suitable for true understanding and insight than in print. This technique of dialogue, conversation, seeking for insight is

one of McLuhan's most used stylistic devices that again attempts to join form and content.

To return to McLuhan's concept of myth and metaphor:

McLuhan uses the word 'myth' extensively to refer to the shorthand, almost symbolic 'package understanding' we are continually developing in these days of complex field situations. And of course he himself, probably deliberately, speaks and writes mythically. His shorthand can only become clear as you get familiar with his whole background of writings and study.<sup>61</sup>

McLuhan himself says:

There's a huge gap. People live mythically but they still don't think mythically. They go on thinking fragmentarily and analytically. Our businesses are still conducted on principles that are far removed from their actual needs. That's why the psychiatrist's couch is so filled with clients. There is this huge gap between the way people live and the way they think. . . . It's a legacy of literacy and we get filled up with guilt feelings: 'I'm not living right'; 'I'm not giving'; 'I'm not loving enough.'<sup>62</sup>

McLuhan is attempting to establish a writing technique that will assist people in living and thinking mythically. That is, his statements be they maxims, aphorism, epigrams, or puns are, more importantly, myths or metaphors. They strive to synthesize or compress vast amounts of information into general truths or general patterns. Consider his several statements: "Money is metaphor." "The medium is the message." "All the world's a sage." These are examples of highly compressed, mythic language--his exact intent.

The McLuhan mythic statements He told Executive, for example: 'We're moving out of a world of visual classification of knowledge and the education of individuals into a world of singing commercials and traveling encyclopedias.'<sup>7</sup> are all examples of compression of language, and compressed language is always poetic. The professor is quite happy to be

called a poet. 'If you are given the problem of compressing a whole news story into a six or eight word headline, you are almost forced to write poetically. The content of speech is not speech, but a whole ballet of mental faculties. When you utter a word it immediately begins to pick up things from other people. A word's meaning is infinite and a dictionary is merely a farce. Poets rub words together to hear what happens; they don't care about meanings.'<sup>63</sup>

This quotation indicates a number of things about McLuhan's style. First, it reflects McLuhan's attitude about probing and experimenting (Poets rub words together to hear what happens). He and they merely want to try new things, to juxtapose new forms. Secondly, compression of language involves myth. Compression of language is no simple stylistic device as anyone knows who has tried to write a rhyme or a note on a postcard. McLuhan knows full well that his ideas will be interpreted by a linear society in a linear fashion. To prevent this he must encase his McLuhanisms in a galaxy of writings that embroider, explain, expand the one terse, compressed sentence that drives home his meaning.

Though one might expect McLuhan to be completely non-Aristotelian in an attempt to break away from a linear orientation, the fact is, he is Aristotelian and greatly reflects his background as a professor and teacher of rhetoric. As noted by one critic:

In this book and its successor McLuhan faced an insoluble problem of method. How is it possible to diagnose and attack the distortions caused by phonetic literacy while using the very medium one is deploring? He tried to solve the dilemma by arranging his books in a 'mosaic' of separate chapters. . . . Since he regards the idea of cause and effect as an illusionary

linear abstraction, McLuhan tries to avoid making use of it. . . . Unfortunately, the English language does not lend itself very well to this kind of non-syntactical juxtaposition, so he is forced to fall back on such vague rhetorical flourishes as 'That is why . . . ' or 'In the same way . . . ' His favorite mode of discourse is the enthymeme which bookmen of detached private character like myself may be forgiven for thinking a vice rather than a revolutionary method of appending the universe.<sup>64</sup>

McLuhan, perhaps because of the restrictions of the language, is caught in the trap of setting up cause-effect relationships one after another. His major thesis is a cause-effect relationship: Print fragmented, specialized, detribalized society. This is certainly an Aristotelian characteristic that pervades McLuhan's style. Aristotelian characteristics observed in the McLuhanisms enumerated below are the Common Topics of Definition and Circumstance. Definition by genus exists in the first and second McLuhanism. That is, "medium" is predicated of "message." Circumstance is dominate in the third McLuhanism. His basic philosophy is built around the sub-topic of cause and effect under circumstance. (For an outline of Aristotle's Common Topics as found in Edward Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric* [New York, 1965], see Appendix C).

1. The medium is the message.
2. Schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy.
3. Print multiplied scholars, but it also diminished their social and political importance. And it did the same for books.<sup>65</sup>

Categorization and classification are reflected in his writing, again perhaps because of the restrictions of the language. His elaborate definition of hot and cool media suggest

an either-or situation discussed by Wendell Johnson. His environment-anti-environment distinction again calls for categorization and classification. In the basic technique of his writings--to suit form to content--McLuhan is rigidly Aristotelian. One could hardly consider McLuhan non-Aristotelian when one recognizes that he is tied to certain rhetorical features--cause and effect relationships, categorization, form-content--because of his language and cultural heritage.

McLuhan's use of the enthymeme which offended the bookman is the most reasonable stylistic device for him to select. If McLuhan is attempting a dialogue, a conversation, an audile experience he must of necessity employ the rhetorical, oral equivalent of the more formal, linear syllogism. Though McLuhan attempts a casual, oral style which is characterized by the enthymeme, nonlinear organization, and brainstorming or insight techniques, he fails to establish a total oral or verbal style. Basing this discussion on Rulon Wells' "Nominal and Verbal Style,"<sup>66</sup> he suggests that nominality (use of more nouns than verbs in a selection) is judged bad by some for the following reasons:

1. Nouns are more static than verbs.
2. Longer sentences are less vivid.
3. Basic patterns are monotonous.

He suggests that nominality is judged good by some because:

1. Nominal style is more practiced than preached.
2. It is easier to write.



3. It helps impersonality.
4. It opposes conversational style and set off writing as esoteric, specialized, technical.

After examining these criteria, one would certainly assume that McLuhan would prefer a verbal style. Surely he would oppose the static noun, longer sentences, and rigid monotonous patterns. With equal emphasis, he would desire a style easier to speak than write, a style that emphasizes the person and conversational methods. Yet in practice McLuhan's style is far more nominal than verbal. On examining a page of the index in McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy and a page of the text, one is struck by the very large number of substantives occurring in the chapter glosses and ensuing discussion (see p. 80 in Appendix). Certainly an abundance of nouns and phrases that function as nouns, "to be" verbs, and an impersonal tone dominate this work. By reviewing this thesis and analyzing the McLuhanisms presented one can readily see the prominence of the nominal style. Though his more recent works (Understanding Media and The Medium is the Message) attempt to be written in a more conversational style, the fact remains that they are predominantly written in a nominal style. Again we have evidence of the influences of his training, the restrictions placed on him by his language, the medium he is using, and the supposition that in order to communicate to a literate society, he must use a medium to which they are sensitive. "I'm trying to get my audience involved in perceptions. So I use their language. The language of their environment."<sup>67</sup> However, he must strive to use the medium in new ways to create new sensibilities.

McLuhan's stylistic techniques, like his basic tenets, are not completely novel and original. Archibald MacLeish's Poetry and Experience (Riverside, 1960) discusses many of the same stylistic features McLuhan utilizes. These stylistic features have also been considered by other poets such as Frost, Fryer, and Ciardi. Specifically, MacLeish is concerned with the "means to meaning in poetry." MacLeish says that it is the power of poetry to say what the reader has "known before" but in such a way that "he must feel it, face it, live it." MacLeish is concerned with images, metaphors, and symbols in much the same way as McLuhan. He observes that the Chinese poets use images without the usual tools of syntax. The juxtaposition of images is particularly striking. In unusual relationships they evoke recognition, awareness, a glimpse into experience that the reader had previously known but had not fully realized. This parallels McLuhan's attempt to create recognition and awareness by the juxtaposition of incongruous or unequal ideas. MacLeish's knowledge of instantaneous awareness is reflected in the statement "a poem is not the perfected expression of a predetermined thought, but is itself the process of its thinking moving from perception to perception, sense to sense. . . ." McLuhan parallels this idea with his indulgence in humor and the pun and the other techniques that require participation on the part of the reader. Again we see McLuhan utilizing techniques employed by other creative writers.

This discussion leads to several observations about McLuhan's style. His desire to create an anti-environment and establish a new myth via an old medium is attempted by using rhetorical techniques developed by Joyce and Innis. Like Joyce, he uses language as a probe, an anti-environment, to call attention to itself and the biases it imposes on its users. Like Innis,

He discovered a means of using historical situations as a lab in which to test the character of technology in the shaping of knowledge . . . by directing attention to the bias or distorting power of the dominant imagery of any culture, he showed us how to understand culture.<sup>68</sup>

His creation of a new myth centers around the generalization, the mythical statement (regardless of stylistic form) that provides an image, a compressed recipe, a preferential judgment about man's sense of oughtness. It is these stylistic devices that McLuhan employs to create his anti-environment and new myth.

## CHAPTER IV

### CRITICISMS OF McLUHAN

The criticisms of McLuhan have ranged the continuum from extreme support to extreme rejection. Some support his creative, unique probes. Others oppose him vigorously, particularly those literate persons whose basic philosophies will be shaken if McLuhan proves to be right. McLuhan is striking at, not only academic philosophies, intellectual positions, and traditional concepts, but is also jarring loose personal beliefs, cultural value systems, and whole organizations of certainties and given assumptions upon which Western civilization has built its foundations. It seems natural that a man like this would be praised by those who appreciate the natural or unstructured life style and rejected by those who have a rigid, conservative, value-oriented life style. Very few who fully comprehend McLuhan sit on the middle of the continuum.

All in all, the intensity of the passions McLuhan has lately generated leads one to think that, like it or not, he is on his way to becoming one of those annoying 'seminal' thinkers whose arguments you must adapt, incorporate, or dispose of before you can press ahead in his field or--as McLuhan believes--into areas well beyond it.<sup>69</sup>

By purporting such ideas McLuhan is not apt to win friends.

It's a little like telling a man his fly is open. The situation is awkward, even embarrassing. But the need is obvious . . . and the informant runs the risk of being viewed as an enemy rather than as the public servant he would like to be. . . . Thus it is with telling man that he is no longer living in the 'Gutenberg Era' of print.<sup>70</sup>

But the key idea, to repeat--that of the centrality of form in the media as the determinant of social structure and individual minds--is to most men unfamiliar and abstract. An author who makes it into his dogma would ordinarily be ill-advised to brood overmuch about fame.<sup>71</sup>

He is also placing himself in a precarious professional position. He finds himself much like the graduate student caught between one professor who demands an empirical study and another who demands a descriptive study. Unless he commits himself firmly to one methodology he finds himself caught in the crossfire with no strong support from either side. In like manner, McLuhan

. . . is taking an inordinate risk. He has earned it by a record of substantial scholarly and critical studies of a perfectly conventional sort, and he has taken the risk of leaving such prestigious work behind and plunging into a study of mass culture which all the respected figures in his field believed to be trivial and repugnant. . . . He has adopted a role which places him outside of the community of discourse of scholarship. He uses different methods, different sources, different media to disseminate his findings.<sup>72</sup>

He has alienated himself from his scholarly background by turning to a study of mass media, by striking crushing blows to the sanity and system of literacy, by attempting to break away from tradition and the bias of a literate culture. Freudian analysis might suggest that he is an ego-maniac, has masochistic tendencies, or has an inordinate desire for success and fame. Some would like to consider him a fad, like camp or LSD. McLuhan would hope to be called an artist, simply a man trying to see the present, make us aware of the forces exerted upon us, provide us with new sensibilities.



McLuhan's major critics come from the literary circle.

Eric Hoffer, among others, has pointed out that throughout history literate men have reacted hysterically to each new extension of literacy, seeing its growth as a threat to the favored positions their special knowledge has created for them. Certainly there is evidence of this in their response to McLuhan.<sup>73</sup>

McLuhan's chief threat has been to our 'literate' values, to literacy itself. It is the vested moral interest in literacy and literature, as indispensable to civilization, that is almost always at the center of detractions of his work, crowding out reason and sight, as it crowded them out in the early responses to Freud's propositions and goes on doing still. This is not to say that McLuhan is another Freud or Darwin or Marx, but that the material he offers is new and revolutionary in a way that requires the full exercise of rationality to deal with. And rationality operates only when moral biases--alho not necessarily moral concerns--drop away, which is what gives McLuhan his big edge over his value-minded opponents.<sup>74</sup>

Another critic points out that again McLuhan avoids moral proclamations or negative defeatism. He does not decry the new media as an evil or reject literacy on the basis of a moral charge.

What distinguishes Marshall McLuhan from most other grand theorists of the technological society is his avoidance of the paranoid style. For McLuhan joyously welcomes the technological and cultural changes that other writers fear or criticize, and has succeeded in changing the terms of this era of radical change.<sup>75</sup>

But those of the literary circle find it hard not to misinterpret McLuhan's probes as "put downs," criticisms, rejections of literacy. They tend to take McLuhan's probes as personal affronts.

McLuhan's relevance to art and literature is in fact what his literary detractors have notably failed to come to grips with, so busy they have been deploring

his seeming put-down of the printed word and his ostensible praise of mass media [it may come as a shock to them to hear McLuhan say, as he does here, that he thinks most of these media 'pure poison' and that it would be a good thing if T.V. were simply eliminated from the United States scene].<sup>76</sup>

George P. Elliot readily admits McLuhan's great intellect and erudition. Nonetheless, he criticizes him on several points, all of which are typically literary. He first charges McLuhan as a double agent, a scholar on one hand and a mass media man on the other. In true McLuhan style, he is a man without a country or point of view. Elliot reserves the right to apply moral criteria to McLuhan even if McLuhan chooses to avoid moral issues. He proceeds to point out quite aptly a misinterpretation of Shakespeare that McLuhan uses to support an idea he purports. Here again is evidence of literacy--meanings are in words, not people. The "point-of-view" man prefers just one correct interpretation to a given selection. Elliot goes on to note that McLuhan's logic cannot be outdone because it is self-justifying. That is, if one (like Elliot) chooses to criticize McLuhan he need only say, "Of course, you can't understand because you are print-minded." This idea is most aptly supported by Richard Gilman.

The more McLuhan is decried, either as a noisome presence or an intellectual muddle, the more strength he takes from his identification with the great misunderstood, the light-bringers who were looked on first as heresiarchs or destroyers. . . . He is squarely in the tradition of the classic Marxist debater for whom the non-acceptance of his argument is proof of his opponent's imprisonment in an outmoded form of being--you can't understand me because of what you are.<sup>77</sup>

Another critic, Benjamin DeMott makes numerous rather sharp criticisms of McLuhan, all of which come straight from a print-filled mind.

Here is a case of a late-blooming stylist, somebody who had to turn fifty to turn a slick phrase. In terms of style, this flower has yet to bud. Marshall McLuhan's present reputation rests on two books . . . both are sometimes stimulating, but neither is pretty prose. One problem is that of opacity /McLuhan's pages are dense with stoppers like 'sense ratios,' 'interiorizations of alphabetic technology,' and the like/. Another is that the favored method of organization has a bit too much in common with that of an impresario squirrel. The Gutenberg Galaxy looks gathered, not written: a paste-up from a hundred histories of math, political theology, nationalism, and fur-trading, and from a thousand 'other authorities.'<sup>78</sup>

It is doubtful that McLuhan would object to this criticism for this man has observed the methods McLuhan consciously employs. The "paste-up" is a kind of mosaic, and he has "gathered" in order to synthesize and establish larger patterns. His "stoppers" would certainly be objectionable to the print man who wants to progress along his linear way undisturbed and even anesthetized by the rat-a-tat-tat of the alphabet.

DeMott further points out that McLuhan seems to be a Constant Comfort, a soother of brows, to our society.

The complaint isn't that Professor McLuhan puts together a thoroughly fantastic account of the situation of contemporary man: it is that he sets himself up, speaking bluntly, as the constituted pardoner of this age--a purveyor of perfect absolution for every genuine kind of modern guilt.<sup>79</sup>

Again we see the point of view analysis of print man. He interprets McLuhan as supporting the hippies, the Negro disturbance, education inadequacies, and other forms that reject organization and rigor. He jumps from a McLuhan probe to the assumption that McLuhan has passed a decree about the future perhaps because he feels defensive and protective of his literate

values. Quite ably he notes that McLuhan does tend to indicate an arrogant, self-assured tone in his writings. "Write that the 'real integration of white and Negro was,' and you imply the struggle has already been won."<sup>80</sup> McLuhan himself has said,

The road to understanding media effects begins with arrogant superiority. If one lacked this sense of superiority--this detachment--it would be quite impossible to write about them. It would be like an octopus attacking the great pyramids.<sup>81</sup>

In reality, McLuhan is simply attempting to suggest reasons for these kinds of events without moralizing about them. Certainly a devout Roman Catholic would not challenge the position of Christ. Neither can McLuhan profess to have an air-tight answer to the questions he poses. Such a stand would negate his whole philosophy of integral awareness, insight, total involvement. He could not continue to probe and explore if he established a point of view. McLuhan only seems to have a point of view to those who are offended by his probes and wish to attack someone.

DeMott's whole attitude seems to revolve around the statement "A literary self that amounts to an amalgam of Bogie and Dr. Huer might not seem everybody's dish: but the thing obviously meets a felt need."<sup>82</sup> He implies throughout his critique that though we may not like McLuhan, we cannot ignore him. We may not appreciate his methods, but we cannot deny his meaning. We may not agree with his evidence, but we have to examine his conclusions. DeMott pushes McLuhan's ideas to the extreme and asks a question. "How much can be said for an intellectual vision whose effect is to encourage abdication from all responsibility of mind?

Or: What good is this famous McLuhancy if it makes men drunk as it makes them bold?"<sup>83</sup>

Herein lies one of McLuhan's most basic problems. If one "buys" McLuhan's idea that experience is nonlinear, how can a human being cope with the infinitely large number of bits of information he receives each second? If he were not able to push below consciousness most of the information presented to his nervous system he would be totally unable to respond to any or all messages and function in a coherent manner. The human mind would be drunk with information and the body anesthetized by an overdose of sensitivity. Further, if one were completely aware of everything, that is, if everything existed in the anti-environment, then the selection of objects or events for perpetuation of a cultural heritage as we know heritage would be completely random. That is, randomness in the selection of art objects, symbols, and other cultural features would result in no criteria or system. How would taste in art, tribal values, rituals, and education be transmitted to posterity if randomness dominated? How would children grow up mentally and emotionally if they were given random choice of all alternatives in the anti-environment? How would McLuhan communicate with his culture if our ways of choosing to mean were completely random? Fortunately for McLuhan's sake randomness does not exist in rampant form or he would be without a medium to discuss his ideas, without a language, an alphabet, a heritage that respects mental endeavors, a print culture against which he may revolt.



These are the kinds of ideas that frighten the literate, that create fear and suspicion. These ideas are also extreme mutations of McLuhan's basic thesis. However, the above discussion does suggest another attitude about McLuhan. Without the kind of exaggeration employed by McLuhan, without complete rejection of content analysis, without exaggeration of McLuhan's exaggerations, how can one sensitize a literate culture enmeshed in content, information, environment? Aristotle believed in enticing an audience away from their position and to the speaker's viewpoint by leading them "down the rosy path," further and further, bit by bit. He advocated persuasion away from the original in small degrees. McLuhan seems to be employing the method of the militant Negro, the radical, the revolutionary. Violence and exaggeration may jar the audience away from their position far sooner than gentle persuasion by degrees. "McLuhan is not so much wrong as at the same time excessive and insufficient."<sup>84</sup>

The above seem to be the most frequently cited criticisms--excessive and insufficient. The writer suspects in this discussion that McLuhan could retort that being excessive is a necessity. His intent is to change sense ratios and he chooses to do this, not by gentle persuasion, but by jolts and jars in his style. Hence, he employs unusual typographical organization, unscholarly form, the McLuhanism. However, it is somewhat hard to defend (using his or anyone else's logic) his insufficiency.

Dwight McDonald called it 'impure nonsense, nonsense adulterated by sense' and joined in the complaint that McLuhan has an unfortunate tendency to push his

thesis too far. 'Not that he is careless or untruthful, simply that he's a system-builder and so interested in data only as building stones: if a corner has to be lopped off, a roughness smoothed to fit, he won't hesitate to do it.'<sup>85</sup>

Numerous critics are able to point to inaccuracies, even outright errors, and certainly several over-extended analogies and jumps in reasoning. Some find this kind of scholarship intolerable. The print mind, of course, refuses to accept any concept that will not "follow a line of reasoning," that emphasizes insight over fact, understanding over logic. Again McLuhan's self-justifying logic can be applied. He is not concerned with the details, he looks to the pattern, the form, the whole. An error in the knitting does not require one to discard the garment. A weak or broken thread may limit the uses of a piece of material, but does not negate its existence. Perhaps McLuhan hopes that the significance of the patterns he sees will outweigh the number of insufficiencies in his details.

One of the major criticisms raised against McLuhan is his failure to acknowledge all the senses. He is mostly concerned with the eye and the ear. MacDonald points out that

Sight, hearing, touch was Plato's ranking, and I imagine even in the Electronic Age few would choose blindness over deafness or touch over either of the other two. But McLuhan's 75% of new material includes a rearrangement to touch, hearing, sight which fits his tropism toward the primitive. He seems to have overlooked the even more primitive taste and smell, which is a pity, since a historical-cultural view based on them would have yielded at least 90% new material.<sup>86</sup>

(This comment refers to McLuhan's editor who was hesitant to publish Understanding Media because it contained 75% new

material. Most successful books contain only 10% new information.) This insufficiency or oversight by McLuhan has as yet gone unanswered. Perhaps he is an example of the bias of communication. That is, so far men have capitalized on their eyes and ears as methods of communicating, therefore, McLuhan, as a product of this culture, tends to overlook the possibility of other sensory capacities. Again one could justify McLuhan by suggesting that he is merely trying to get away from the "traditional hierarchy of the senses" and doing so by implying a sensorium, but emphasizing the ear. Linear MacDonald attempts to put McLuhan's terms in a hierarchy as did Plato and as do all literate men, while McLuhan would defy such linear behavior and talk in terms of a sensorium.

Specific criticisms of McLuhan's style revolve largely around the repetitiousness of his writings. Dwight MacDonald finds McLuhan "ultimately boring." McLuhan as usual, refutes his critic by noting the confusion or misunderstanding on the part of the literate man. Again, "you can't understand me because of what you are."

MacDonald's is a kind of confusion that comes to the literary mind when confronted with a drilling operation. Repetition is really drilling. When I'm using a probe, I drill. You repeat naturally when you are drilling. But the levels are changing all the time. MacDonald thinks that's repetition. There is a complete unawareness of what is going on in the book. His remark that the book might have been an article reveals another fallacy of the literary mind--that the purpose of facts is for classification. The idea of using facts for probes--as a means of getting into new territories--is utterly alien to them. They use facts as classified data, as categories, as packages.<sup>87</sup>

Some feel that McLuhan's books are repetitious, vague, circular, and in general revolting.

Unfortunately, despite his insight into form, McLuhan's organization of his own ideas is far from first rate. As a composition Understanding Media is often out of control, circular perspective becomes synonymous with going around in circles. Endlessly repetitious, the book, for all its rain of bright intuitions, creates a total effect of monotony.<sup>88</sup>

The writer admits to this same response upon the first reading of Understanding Media. However, after considering McLuhan's stated purpose of repetition, looking at his rhetoric as conscious effort rather than literary inadequacy, and submitting to his desire for participation, one's response changes to mild or extreme interest depending upon the degree to which one can probe and explore with McLuhan. "One of the discomforting characteristics of Mr. McLuhan's writings is that they require the reader to think for himself."<sup>89</sup> If one is willing to submit to his probing, drilling, circular, repetitious technique, if one is imaginative and aware enough to fill in and submit to new ideas, if one will participate, McLuhan's writings are anything but revolting. The rewards of such participation are not classified knowledge, but insight or recognition. Again, in describing the method of Innis, McLuhan describes his own procedure.

Dr. Kenneth Sayre explains the matter as follows in his The Modelling of Mind (University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. 17: "Classification is a process, something which takes up one's time, which one might do reluctantly, unwillingly, or enthusiastically, which can be done with more or less success, done very well or very poorly. Recognition, in sharp contrast, is not time-consuming. A person may spend a long time looking before recognition occurs, but when it occurs,

it is not an act which would be said to be performed either reluctantly or enthusiastically, compliantly or under protest. Moreover, the notion of recognition being unsuccessful, or having been done very poorly, seems to make no sense at all.<sup>90</sup>

The significant thing to keep in mind is that this participation is the direct result of a change in one's sense rationality resulting from McLuhan's style. In McLuhan fashion, the style need not be judged "good" or "bad" but should be judged according to the effects the form has on the reader. He hopes that effect is one of further exploration and probing. "Any artist would say that he doesn't want people to agree or disagree with him. He just wants them to notice. I expect my audience to participate with me in a common act of exploration. I want observations, not agreement."<sup>91</sup>

Another closely related argument is posed to McLuhan by Raymond Williams. If one follows McLuhan's argument--that print culture conditions our mind--then paradoxically, if the book works, "it to some extent annihilates itself."<sup>92</sup> If McLuhan successfully communicates with his audience the book reinforces and utilizes the print conditioning of our mind. This negates McLuhan's whole intent. McLuhan can quickly refute this argument by referring again to the good-bad concept of print men and his own literary bias.

Today in our society when literate values are being challenged, if one looks at books in a clinical manner one is considered hostile. He reminds us "My own motivation in studying all media began with my commitment to literature as a



profession,"<sup>93</sup> and this offers proof that he is not "anti-book." He is not hoping that his book annihilates itself, he is simply attempting to indicate its effects. A doctor who presents a diagnosis is not supporting or condemning the disease, but merely reporting the facts. In like manner, McLuhan is merely reporting on the effects of print via print and chooses neither to support nor condemn its function, thus making annihilation impossible. "There are only two cases, you see, in classifying one's relation to almost anything in merely literary terms--you are either 'for' or 'against'. . . . So if you write about the book you must be against it because the book is declining in terms of its cultural role."<sup>94</sup>

When asked by Eric Goldman if media change was a "good" or "bad" thing, he replied, "Now, you see, you have slipped into the literary language of the classifier."<sup>95</sup> (Note McLuhan's use of "you see" in the above quotations.) McLuhan vigorously tries to avoid classification and values. He tries only to describe. As long as he maintains this attitude he will defy criticism. When he openly seeks others' observations and ideas, when he does not hold steadfastly to a point of view he cannot be challenged. Like a duck in the shooting gallery, he's hard to hit because he's always on the move. McLuhan responds to criticism in the following way:

When people approached T. S. Eliot and said, 'Mr. Eliot when you were writing "Sweeney Among The Nightingales" in that passage XYZ did you mean . . . ' and he would wait patiently and say, 'Yes, I must have meant that, if that's what you got out of it.' Now Eliot was saying that the reader was co-poet. The reader's job was to

make poems. Not to get his essence, but to make a poem with the ingredients handed to him. This shocked literary people. That a poet would say, as Eliot did, 'I never thought of that but I must have meant it if that's what you got out of it.' Many of the meanings people get--in so far as they are related to media--are not the ones I had in mind but they might serve very well as exploratory devices.<sup>96</sup>

Because all of McLuhan's popular works are circular, repetitious, vague, excessive, and insufficient, some critics may assume he writes in this manner because he knows no other way. One need only turn to the periodical Renaissance where in 1960 alone he wrote seven reviews of works ranging from T. S. Eliot to Shakespeare to Joyce. Here we find the conventional writing style of a literary critic with all the rigors of point of view, concise grammar, and linear organization. McLuhan is first of all a literate man, and only secondarily a mass media prophet. He can write in the manner appreciated by the academicians, but he chooses not to.

I talk it all day long in the classroom. I don't use slang, puns--I use Mandarin prose, the only form of discourse I employ. But when I sit down to write about complicated problems moving on several planes, I deliberately move into multi-level prose. This is an art form. The prose that he's a critic complaining about I consider a serious art form.<sup>97</sup>

This comment assures that McLuhan quite intentionally sets out to achieve the style we see in all of his works.

Looking at McLuhan's work, one is struck with the package of knowledge he has compiled. One could criticize him on the grounds of classifying (hot and cool media), of linear progression (the medium is the message), of specialization (his unique definition of interface and art). From these print-filled eyes, one sees

McLuhan building a linear, specialized philosophy not unlike the ones already in existence. McLuhan seems to be saying something new, but doing something old. McLuhan has already considered these comments.

Without polarities . . . there is no progression, no structure. /talking about hot and cool media/ For a literary person who likes things to move along in one direction on one plane, polarities are distressing. . . . Media, hot and cool are not classifications. They are structural forms. These are slang terms from the musical world where they have high, structural meaning. 'System' means something to look at. You must have a very high visual gradient to have systemization. In philosophy, before Descartes, there was no 'system.' Plato had no 'system.' Aristotle had no 'system.' My own interest in studying media is a 'systems development' approach. 'Systems Development' is a structural analysis of pressures and strains, the exact opposite of everything that has been meant by 'systems' in the past few centuries. 'Systems development' is the opposite of 'systems' in the philosophical sense. It is concerned with the inner dynamics of form.<sup>98</sup>

This reflects McLuhan's reading in architecture and design. Though it may look as though McLuhan is merely giving new names to old concepts, the implication is that there is not too much more he can do with the old medium of print. Until he can demonstrate his new ideas via the new media, we will continue to feel his talent lies in phrase-making, not systems development.

Other connections in which McLuhan seems not so new and original are the concepts of multiordinality, self-reflexiveness, and the self-fulfilling prophecy of language. Though in his style he seems to be doing something new, he is in reality employing multiordinal terms, that is, terms used on several levels of abstraction. His concept of the multi-layered pun and

myth is really a parallel of the concept of multiordinality stemming from general semantics. The self-reflexive function of language, particularly enhanced by written language, is the very aspect of language that McLuhan uses most extensively. Yet he seems unaware or unappreciative of the fact that print has allowed him to be self-reflexive and enabled him to become a "Pop Philosopher" to an extent probably impossible in an oral culture. He fully utilizes the self-fulfilling prophecy of the semanticist, but extends it to the effects of all media, not just language. The frightening aspect of this thought is that if the self-fulfilling prophecy holds true, if "new facts" can be created with speculative language, if McLuhan's notions become widespread, we may become products of his "new facts," that is, tribalized and totally sensitized. In many respects, then, McLuhan has paralleled the semanticist, but changed and extended the terms used to describe the concepts of semantics.

Gilman registers a significant blow to McLuhan's myth.

The widest hole he leaves to our understanding is the result of his confusion between 'form' and 'medium,' his failure to see that medium is a physical designation while form is an aesthetic one. This is to say, for example, that the form of a novel is something crucially different from its physical existence with the medium of print, which enables us to make distinctions among novels, not on the basis of their content, a process to which McLuhan rightly objects, but on that of their formal or aesthetic properties. And this means that what we have to defend against McLuhan is the fact that there are differences that matter not only between media but within them.<sup>99</sup>

This is a concern that McLuhan does not deal with probably because he feels that forms exist, but are not all-powerful as is medium.

Yet he must attribute some power to form, for form is the only variable he has to work with in his writings. If he chooses to use print to communicate, he immediately restricts and biases his efforts. If he succeeds in eliciting the effects he desires, it is solely because of the form he chooses despite the medium. Antithetically, though he refutes the importance of anything except medium, he takes elaborate pains in developing a unique form that reflects the content of his message. This paradox indicates either a gross oversight or an attempt to override the biases of a print culture. "I'm trying to get my audience involved in perceptions. So I use their language. The language of their environment."<sup>100</sup> Surely, as a Professor of Rhetoric holding a \$100,000 a year chair at Fordham University, McLuhan realizes the distinction between form and medium. He has indicated the desire to transmit his message via an ideogram for he realizes the inadequacies of print. But since this is impossible, he must find some technique of varying the old medium, language, to suggest his new ideas. Since in our culture very little randomness has existed, since we are bound to the linear, predictable existence, McLuhan must meet us half way in order to communicate. Though he is forced to use the medium of print, he is not forced to adhere to every rule designed for that print. In fact he has gone so far as to almost contrive a new form. He only vaguely resembles Joyce in form.

While some decry McLuhan on a morals charge of destroying Establishment and criticizing our literate heritage, others see his positive, humanistic side.



Ours is the first society in history, McLuhan believes, to have the opportunity to escape technological determinism. This belief is the major source of his optimism. . . . We can free ourselves from fate, however, for 'we can transcend the limitations of our own assumptions by a critique of them. We can now live, not just amphibiously in divided and distinguished worlds, but pluralistically in many worlds and cultures simultaneously. Our need today is, culturally, the same as the scientist's who seeks to become aware of the bias of the instruments of research in order to correct that bias.'<sup>101</sup>

And McLuhan's style does just that--shows us the bias of print.

The most frightening aspect of McLuhan is that he is real. His ideas have been and continue to be demonstrated daily in our immediate lives. On Monday, April 8, 1968 Mayor Yorty of Los Angeles, California reported on The Joey Bishop Show (ABC-TV) that McLuhan's predictions about mass media were coming true. The murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was made instantaneously known to the world via the media. The reaction was a sense of total involvement, almost as though we had heard the shot ourselves. T.V. viewers cried, radio listeners sat stunned, newspaper readers stared blankly at the headlines. The media provided us with a tribal state. We immediately sensitized all of our faculties in order to absorb more information. We employed the eye for reading, ear for listening, and both of those with tactility for viewing T.V. The nation was immediately synthesized, unified, and retribalized on the social and perpetual level. Without the instantaneous knowledge of this, the ensuing riots in many of our major cities would not have occurred.

Without electronic speed the time taken to transmit the news would have calmed the situation and left the audience with less of a sensation of involvement and outrage.

The current popularity of LSD and psychedelic experience in art, music, clothing, and dance suggests the need for new experience. Recall the comment--". . . obviously meets a felt need." (p.53) The teach-in, dialogue, and work-study programs reek of the involvement and participation McLuhan preaches. The mythic image projected by the toothpaste, car, and deodorant ad smack of McLuhan's myth. The rising number of mental patients suggests a basic conflict in our society, perhaps the difference between a heritage of rigid rules and facts and a present and future of existential decisions and pattern recognition. The mark of our age seems to be rebellion against organization--The Establishment--via the flower people, hippies, wayward priests and nuns, the drop-out, the draft-dodger. McLuhan is criticized by the literate man because he is "far-out," vague, circular, illogical. The fact remains (and this above all should appeal to his literate critics) McLuhan makes sense in the immediate sensory experiences of the world. "The point is that it is extremely difficult to make sense out of much of the contemporary world without McLuhan's perspectives."<sup>102</sup> "For nearly everyone senses the problem that McLuhan has made manifest--that in communications, as in so many other areas, technology has far outreached the development of the critical tools we need to comprehend all its implications, much less control it effectively."<sup>103</sup>

To summarize McLuhan's ideas or make a conclusive statement about his style is impossible. His technique defies such a linear procedure. One can only make implications for the reader to reject or participate in. (Comprehension of McLuhan demands an adoption of his style.) That implication is

Not what McLuhan says but the way he says it proclaims a new way of dealing with social problems, of handling ideas, of stimulating intellectual discourse, of taking a posture toward the future. To come to terms with McLuhan we must come, finally, to his terms--his language, his style.<sup>104</sup>

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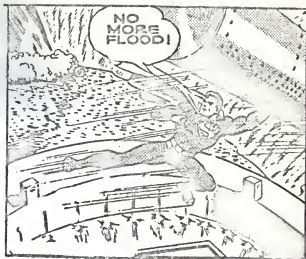
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## APPENDIX A

Superman corresponds to the medieval speculations about the nature of angels. The economist Werner Sombart argued that modern abstract finance and mathematical science was a realization at the material level of the elaborate speculations of medieval philosophy. In the same way it could be argued that Superman is the comic-strip brother of the medieval angels. For the angels, as explained by Thomas Aquinas, are quite superior to time or space, yet can exert a local and material energy of superhuman kind. Like Superman, they require neither education nor experience, but they possess, without effort, flawless intelligence about all things. Men have dreamed of becoming like these beings for quite a while. However, fallen angels are known as devils. And imperfect men, possessing superhuman material power, are not a reassuring prospect.



## Tarzan

JUST as the important fact about Superman is that he is the daydream of the feeble Clark Kent, so the principal feature of Tarzan is that, in civilized life, he is the genteel Lord Greystoke. In fact, pedigrees of the contemporary sleuths, cowboys, toughs, and tycoons intersect at several points. Once the basic postulate of mind-body mechanism went to work in society, curious

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To what collective prayer is this amalgam of noble savage and the aristocratic sleuth an answer?

Is it just an accident that Tarzan, the nature force, is unlogged by family life? Just another cowboy?

The Boy Scout to end Nature Lore?

Is Superman's jungle of criminals nearer to us than Tarzan's jungle of beasts?



**APPENDIX B**



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*Does the interiorization of media such as letters alter the ratio among our senses and change mental processes?*

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❁ What concerned Cicero, the practical Roman, was that the Greeks had put difficulties in the way of his own program for the *doctus orator*. In chapters xv-xxiii of the third book of the *De oratore*, he offers a history of philosophy from the beginning to his own time, trying to explain how it came about that the professional philosophers had made a breach between eloquence and wisdom, between practical knowledge and knowledge which these men professed to follow for its own sake. Before Socrates learning had been the preceptress of living rightly and speaking well. But with Socrates came the division between the tongue and the heart. That the eloquent Socrates should have been of all people the one to initiate a division between thinking wisely and speaking well was inexplicable: ". . . quorum princeps Socrates fuit, is, qui omnium eruditorum testimonio totiusque iudicio Graeciae cum prudentia et acumine et venustate et subtilitate, tum vero eloquentia, varietate, copia, quam se cumque in partem dedisset omnium fuit facile princeps . . ."

But after Socrates things became much worse in Cicero's opinion. The Stoics despite a refusal to cultivate eloquence, have alone of all the philosophers declared eloquence to be a virtue and wisdom. For Cicero, wisdom is eloquence because only by eloquence can knowledge be applied to the minds and hearts of men. It is applied knowledge that obsesses the mind of Cicero the Roman as it did the mind of Francis Bacon. And for Cicero, as for Bacon, the technique of application depends upon the Roman brick procedure of uniform repeatability and homogeneous segments of knowledge.

If a technology is introduced either from within or from without a culture, and if it gives new stress or ascendancy to one or another of our senses, the ratio among all of our senses is altered. We no longer feel the same, nor do our eyes and ears and other senses remain the same. The interplay among our senses is perpetual save in conditions of anesthesia. But any sense when stepped up to high intensity can act as an anesthetic for other senses. The dentist can now use "audiac"—induced noise—to remove tactility. Hypnosis depends on the same principle of isolating one sense in order to anesthetize the others. The result is a break in the ratio among the senses, a kind of loss of identity. Tribal, non-literate man, living under the intense stress on auditory organization of all experience, is, as it were, entranced.

## APPENDIX C

## OUTLINE OF ARISTOTLE'S COMMON TOPICS

## Definition

- A. Genus
- B. Division

## Comparison

- A. Similarity
- B. Difference
- C. Degree

## Relationship

- A. Cause and Effect
- B. Antecedent and Consequence
- C. Contraries
- D. Contradictions

## Circumstance

- A. Possible and Impossible
- B. Past Fact and Future Fact

## Testimony

- A. Authority
- B. Testimonial
- C. Statistics
- D. Maxims
- E. Law
- F. Precedents

HOW DOES McLuhan Mean?

by

MEREDITH MOORE

B. S., Kansas State University, 1965

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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Marshall McLuhan, who in 1967 held the \$100,000 Schweitzer chair at Fordham University, had written several books since 1951 that have made him a popular but controversial figure. This study is concerned with the rhetoric of his books on mass media.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the McLuhan message, myth, and methods of meaning. The controversial aspect of McLuhan's message, myth, and method of meaning is suggested in the McLuhanism, "The medium is the message." McLuhan suggests that the medium structures reality more than does the content of the medium. That is, the message is not in the content, but in the form or structure of the content. This idea has previously been suggested by psychologists, semanticists, linguists, and anthropologists. Though McLuhan's message is not radically new or unusual, he is for some reason being read and considered by many disciplines. Why then has McLuhan suddenly caused such confusion, consternation, and communication among disciplines with these kinds of ideas?

After discussing McLuhan's message and myth, the study concerns itself with the stylistic features of McLuhan's major books on mass media. The study concludes that McLuhan strives for a form or style that compliments the content of his message. His rhetoric is characterized by the use of puns, humor, juxtaposition, interface, compression of language, metaphor, unique organization, audible forms, and the McLuhanism. This study holds that McLuhan's style--his organization and utilization of the McLuhanism--is responsible for his notoriety and popularity.