

Re-reading McLuhan

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(1) What role does McLuhan play for you today, in 2019?

McLuhan introduced a way of thinking about the centrality of media systems to human life that is inventive and playful. There is a certain poetics to his »media determinism«, which portrays the human as deeply embedded in and shaped by media forces and tendencies, as part of an incredibly tight system in which every part is pulling against other parts, so that the whole thing is cross-braced together. He introduced a certain humbleness to the human, while not really – I don't think – generating a gloom of powerlessness, of no human agency. In fact, his weaker human has a colorful life that McLuhan is fascinated by. As a thinker, McLuhan continues to play the role of a humanist post-anthropocentrist.

(2) What are the tasks of media studies today? Is it one coherent field of study? Or should it be addressed only in the plural form?

Media has become fully computational and has taken on new problematics, for instance, that of data analytics which partially comes from fields such as statistics, or the design of training datasets for machine learning – previously not exactly the main focus of media studies, but which have come to define many aspects of socio-political life today. The structuring importance of media shifts into the processes through which systems based on machine learning or artificial intelligence come into being; these require new literacies, perhaps new software audit methods, new legislation and new subjects. Media continue playing central roles in the processes of subjectivation. As we enter a critical time in the history of humanity, with the rise of the extreme right and climate damage, we need new subjects, and new (media) systems working to produce them.

(3) »Which areas of our culture will be spared from the influence of the computer in the coming years?« That was the question in 2007. How does it present itself in 2019?

I think there is very little left in human life which is not, in one or another way, under the influence of computational media. People in the most troubled areas of the world are on the receiving end of calculation as they are evaluated or targeted by drones or the amount and kind of food and medicine that is passed to them is calculated in relation to perpetually maintaining their life on the cusp of the abyss. Even if humans are not personally taking part in socializing, loving, working, communicating with and through networks, data and computers, their life in general is conditioned by algorithms underpinning financial forms or other kinds of delusional use of numbers. The computer plays a central role in the new mutations of capitalism that continue to deface the planet, and one of the biggest challenges of today – the coming climate catastrophe – is inevitably linked to calculation, prediction, trading models and other mechanisms that underlie political brinkmanship, but also science and attempts to re-imagine the progress of human life on earth. Here, the computer is, as always, ambivalent and implicated in both repressing and oppositional forces and will certainly remain central to shaping the unfolding future.