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# MARSHALL MCLUHAN



JANINE MARCHESSAULT

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Cosmic Media

Janine Marchessault

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# Abbreviations

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|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| <i>CA</i>   | <i>From Cliché to Archetype</i>                     |
| <i>CC</i>   | <i>City as Classroom</i>                            |
| <i>EM</i>   | <i>Essential McLuhan</i>                            |
| <i>GG</i>   | <i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i>                         |
| <i>IL</i>   | <i>Interior Landscape</i>                           |
| <i>LM</i>   | <i>Laws of Media</i>                                |
| <i>MB</i>   | <i>The Mechanical Bride</i>                         |
| <i>RPUM</i> | <i>Report on Project in Understanding New Media</i> |
| <i>UM</i>   | <i>Understanding Media</i>                          |
| <i>VP</i>   | <i>Through the Vanishing Point</i>                  |

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# Introduction

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## *McLuhan's Project*

I feel that we're standing on the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos. I have a deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depths of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe. We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth.

I expect to see the coming decades transform the planet into an art form; the new man, linked in a cosmic harmony that transcends time and space, will sensuously caress and mold and pattern every facet of the terrestrial artifact as if it were a work of art, and man himself will become an organic art form. There is a long road ahead, and the stars are only way stations, but we have begun the journey. (McLuhan, *Playboy* interview, 1969/1995: 268)

Marshall McLuhan's theories of media, art and culture are being re-examined in the context of new digital cultures and globalization. This book provides a close reading of some of his key texts to discern the contribution his thinking can make to our understanding of the present condition of convergent and yet unstable media cultures. Throughout McLuhan's wide-ranging writings on the media, his central contribution to communication and cultural studies does not consist in any one theoretical insight. Rather, McLuhan's writings over a 40-year period from the 1940s on to his death in 1980 are consistently concerned with

understanding the contemporary media as a problem of method. The key to any analysis of the media, which for McLuhan was always connected to the spaces and temporalities of the lifeworld, is a reflexive field approach. Oriented around the archival, encyclopedic, and artifactual surfaces but also 'haptic harmonies' and ruptures, this method draws out patterns that render ground assumptions and matrices discernible. This was encapsulated in his most famous neologism, 'the medium is the message'. McLuhan drew his insights from philosophers of language and modernity: the Cambridge New Critics (Leavis and Richards especially) who were his teachers, along with Nietzsche, Bergson, and Heidegger – all-important influences on his experimental pedagogy.

McLuhan's career encompasses the multiple meanings of the word project: the process of creating, an oral performance, refracted light, psychological transference, a forward moving action, a community in the making. While this book will seek to situate a number of influences and people that informed this project, it is crucial to place McLuhan's engagement within a Catholic intellectual tradition that encompasses Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. We see this reflected in his belief that human cognition and perception are 'miracles' ('Catholic Humanism': 80) that make possible a shared experience of the everyday. Hence all scholarship is essentially research and exploration, it is a dialogue with others. This belief that our engagement with the world will always be a transformative and creative one will drive McLuhan's inquiry into the fundamental process and value of human communication throughout his career – from his doctoral dissertation on *Thomas Nashe and the Learning of His Time* to his posthumously published *Laws of Media*. The humanist ecumenical tradition highlights the importance McLuhan placed on interdisciplinary models of pedagogy and on the significance of a field of study that engages with contemporary culture.

McLuhan's contribution to the study of communication is distinguished by an approach that is aesthetically based, highly performative and historically grounded. Utilizing formal techniques drawn from the Symbolists and twentieth-century avant-garde forms (James Joyce in particular), McLuhan's experimental

writings and literacy projects presented a cognitive function for art. His many collaborations with graphic artists, along with his belief that we would all be artists by the twenty-first century, anticipated the central place of interactivity and design in the new information environments of our century.

A public intellectual and media commentator, famous for a brief time, McLuhan, along with his long time collaborator, the radical anthropologist, Edmund Carpenter, organized one of the first truly interdisciplinary research projects in North America. This endeavor was accompanied by several interdisciplinary journals (*Explorations* being the most famous) and the establishment of the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. It is this interdisciplinary experience in the early 1950s fuelled by a desire to create a new field of communications study, that would have a decisive impact on the development of McLuhan's most productive and lasting formulations: the medium is the message, centre-without-margins, acoustic space, non-linear space, prosthetic memory, the global village, hot and cool media among others.

Throughout the 1940s, McLuhan's approach to analyzing culture was cinematic. It was based on a theory of aesthetic arrest and retracing drawn from the Symbolist poets and expressed by film artists such as Sergei Eisenstein and Cesare Zavattini. He saw the cinema and certain forms of poetry as the reproduction of human cognition. In these aesthetic techniques, he saw possibilities for new interdisciplinary and aesthetically based methodologies that would stimulate ideas and insights in the present situation which is difficult to discern since we are in it. In the 1950s and with his colleagues in Toronto, McLuhan developed a phenomenological understanding of culture that was inspired by the oral cultural traditions that Carpenter and Harvard anthropologist Dorothy Lee were studying. We can note that McLuhan moves from a notion of culture as landscape to one of environment, from spectatorship to immersion, and from the cinematic as an analogy for human cognition to television as the new reality and a new methodology.

If there is something truly unique and original in McLuhan's inquiry, and I believe there is, it is not only that he brings aesthetics

to communication studies but that his project is marked by the meeting of television and anthropology. McLuhan looked to anthropology for clues to comprehend electric culture in terms of a new construction of space–time relations, new ways of being in the world. McLuhan’s project provides a pedagogical imperative for the interdisciplinary study of living cultures as forms of mediation. This book argues that McLuhan’s experimental writings can help us to formulate new methodologies for a politically conscious and phenomenologically sensitive humanist scholarship. His commitment to historicizing knowledge as an expression of mentalities does so by breaking down the boundaries between disciplines across the arts and sciences, between nations and cultures, between corporealities and technologies while recognizing and juxtaposing differences. Across McLuhan’s explorations of the electric galaxy, he discerns a reconfiguration and increased significance of locality and difference in the face of the globalizing and homogenizing forces of modernity. As national boundaries become more porous and new information technologies enable and create the need for greater collaborations (both economic and culture, both equitable and imperialistic), he discerns a shift in the experience of the margins. He would call this an experience of the ‘centre without margins’. In effect, he develops a methodology that enacts this new consciousness that he believes is a direct consequence of technology.

### **Relations**

McLuhan is concerned with the relations between things, both with how consciousness produces relations in order to make meaning and how seemingly unrelated things – the telegraph and the Civil War, or the chorus line and print culture – when taken as contiguous reveal structural homologies. In his world, everything is related and interconnected as it was in the medieval Cosmos. It is the task of the researcher to materialize the web of human relations. McLuhan is not interested in simple connections, however. For it is not the connection between things that will reveal underlying structures, rather, it is in exploring the intervals, oppositions

and interfaces between things, the historical shifts and breakages that mark the emergence of new civilizations, that will enable us to grasp an underlying unity. What is often not understood about McLuhan's methodology is that it is historical, and inspired by the anonymous histories of Siegfried Gideon, Wyndham Lewis, Erwin Panofsky, Lewis Mumford and Harold Innis – and more fundamentally by Vico. McLuhan's project grows out of a periodization of communication technologies that is not linear but cyclical. Moving from orality to literacy and back to orality again, McLuhan describes the emergence of new tribal cultures produced by electric media. While these are oral, they do not represent a return to older forms but are a new cultural manifestation that we can decipher through older non-western cultural formations.

Thus, McLuhan's periodization resists the interpretation of electric cultures as a simple return to an archaic consciousness. Yet his cyclical view of history is nevertheless teteological and infused by the conjunction of electricity and spirit. This romantic and mystical association, not uncommon among the French artists and intellectuals who so influenced him (from Mallarmé to de Chardin), produces the kabalistic paradox, which is the relatedness of multiplicity and unity, of the one and the many. This simultaneous experience of unity and multiplicity enabled by the electronic media represents a kind of cosmic consciousness that McLuhan never defines but which is akin to Jung's collective unconscious. There is a dialectic at play in McLuhan's work between the historical materiality of language as cultural artifact and the transcendental aspects of his Thomistic views. *Cosmic Media* seeks to highlight this tension by maintaining Catholic humanism as an ever-present framework in his thinking.

### Fame

We can divide McLuhan's career into two periods, essentially before and after fame (the fame itself was short-lived, only about five years from 1966 to 1971). His rise to becoming a clichéd figure in the electric galaxy he sought to analyze was highly orchestrated. It was a marketing experiment carried out by

Howard Gossage and Gerald Feigen and supported by Gossage's San Francisco advertising firm. For McLuhan it was a pedagogical experiment with form (using the media to create awareness of the media) that he believed to have been miraculously successful (Marchand, 1989: 172–3). It was perhaps this success that eventually proved to be his downfall – he was pressed, consumed and forgotten. There is something tragic in McLuhan's absorption and then hostile rejection by the media, which several films have sought to underscore (most recently *McLuhan's Wake* (2003) by Kevin McMahon.) David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) dramatized this tragic end to perfection with Professor Brian Oblivion dying of a brain tumor and immortalizing himself on television as a religious leader. The truth is stranger. Not only did McLuhan have a brain tumor removed on the eve of his rise to global stardom but also the surgery left him with large memory gaps (he had to reread many books), with hypersensitive audition and a new-found love of singing. A decade or so later, he had stroke which left him with aphasia. McLuhan, who had always stressed the haptic aspects of communication, was left with a dramatic incapacity to speak or to write (Marchand, 1989: 270–7).

When I began research for this book in 1995, the McLuhan renaissance was just beginning. I was swept up in an onslaught of new books, newspaper articles, documentaries and intellectual biographies all geared towards juxtaposing McLuhan with the rise of a radically transformed information society in the West that was being created by the Internet, wireless communication, digital technologies, CNN, etc. While McLuhan's writings do provide insights into the networked society, I have all too often found them misquoted or over-simplified. In discussing McLuhan with colleagues who teach communication studies, I have become increasingly suspicious that nobody reads McLuhan. Rather what is left of his ideas are the superficial clichés and neologisms taken out of context that were part of his later collage books. Thus, *Cosmic Media* reads McLuhan closely in order to consider some of his most fruitful methodologies and to situate his intellectual contribution within a history of ideas.

McLuhan produced eight books and over a thousand articles. I have chosen to examine three of his principle works – *Mechanical*



*Bride* (MB), *Gutenberg Galaxy* (GG) and *Understanding Media* (UM). Not only are these his only single authored books but they grew out of collaborative research projects in the 1950s and early 1960s that I believe represent his most complex research. I also examine some of his early literary essays collected in *Interior Landscape* (IL) and other works from the innovative journal *Explorations*. McLuhan's letters are a rich source of information, connecting his overall intellectual and creative life to his deep faith which he chose to keep private but which nevertheless was always present in his thinking. I have found a great deal of value in McLuhan's media guides, *Report on Project in Understanding New Media*, *The City as Classroom* (CC), and *Laws of Media* (LM). These texts are geared towards teaching and exploring the media and they continue to be very productive pedagogical devices. The oral aspects of McLuhan's oeuvre are also a significant part of his project: lectures, thousands of talks and seminars reflect his commitment both to dialogue, and to media studies as performance.

### Cosmic Media

It is sometimes difficult to justify a linear book about an author committed to non-linear, aphoristic modes of thinking. However, I have written this book in the hopes of drawing out and clarifying some of the concepts that could be usefully considered in the present context of global media. Moreover, the oppositions between linearity and non-linearity were exaggerated by McLuhan because these concepts served as schematic tools to make sense of cultural formations. In reality, such oppositions, like the central one in McLuhan's work between orality and literacy, are not mutually exclusive. In oral cultures we find forms of writing, and literacy contains oral dimensions. Moreover, not all linear forms of exposition are simply a straight line, and some forms of collage invite linear interpretations.

Despite his commitment to the rhetorical tradition, McLuhan was a dialectical and an historical thinker. For this reason I have chosen to maintain a chronological form in the presentation of

some of his most important ideas. Although time and space have been transformed by technologies, the arrow of time has not, and this ontological dimension of experience was always a central one for McLuhan. This is why McLuhan's work is distinguished by an interest in the corporeal aspects of communication. He was just as interested in poetry as he was in consciousness, perception and the cognitive sciences. In fact, aesthetics, rhetorical form and perception are inseparable in any examination of the media. For this reason, experimental art as a laboratory of perception was a significant research tool for McLuhan, generating 'anti-environments' through reflexive experiments with technology.

McLuhan proposes a methodology for studying living cultures that is televisual. Inspired by early television's ontology, the methodology McLuhan proposed was process-oriented and open-ended. This aesthetic and experimental approach to media study might explain why McLuhan has had a much stronger influence on artists (Fluxus media and performance artists, sound poets, graphic designers, etc.) than on academics. Régis Debray puts it nicely:

Was McLuhan's name too often in the newspapers for him to be taken seriously by the academy? The proper name's transfiguration into logo, trademark and cliché (a match in acoustic space to the Marlboro man, Chaplin's cane or Marilyn's flared-out skirts) did nothing to facilitate the esteem; and most of us are familiar with the superior tone, somewhere between irritation and playfully mocking, that in the right circles is elicited by this impostor-prophet, this garish and muddled showman, whose buzzwords are every man-in-the-street's common coin – Gutenberg galaxy, 'hot' and 'cold' media, message and massage, etc. – and whom no hard science type grants any seriousness or intellectual dignity. (1996: 69–70)

This lack of 'intellectual dignity' continues to accompany the name of McLuhan but in my experience it seems to be generational. Isabelle Stengers has commented that it is not that academic trends and attitudes change but that people die (2000). I will say no more except that a new generation, which has grown up with television and lives with computers, is more open to McLuhan's experimental techniques and metaphors.

We should never lose sight of the fact that McLuhan was playing a game, writing satire, punning, using rhetorical devices

borrowed from advertising to capture his audience's attention. Media studies, whether written or oral, are always performative because these must engage with living cultures. This lack of seriousness frustrated his critics no end precisely because McLuhan refused to defend his own ideas. His game was an endless and sometimes reckless speculation about the present moment, the one that had just passed. The challenge to deal with the present was the one he posed to the academy.

McLuhan's ideas remain most vivid when connected to an historical and social context. *Cosmic Media* is divided into three parts which seek to situate them spatially: Cambridge, America and the Global Village. These geographies are virtual and part of McLuhan's cosmic consciousness. For a young man living in Manitoba, Canada, Cambridge and America were mythological spaces of great intellectual and imperial power. Later McLuhan came to focus more strictly on the Global Village as a stage (still imperial and American) through which the events of the world were narrated for North American and Western European audiences. Despite the rhetoric of cosmic connections, there is in McLuhan's writings, especially throughout the 1950s, a highly developed awareness of the inequitable distribution of wealth and technology in the world. His writings disclose a sensitivity to multicultural and gender differences which I believe reflects the very important collaborations with Edmund Carpenter.

Although McLuhan wrote much about the electronic media, he was essentially a man of letters. While a great deal of his work was committed to non-linear and experimental forms of writing and thinking, this work grew out of a life that moved forward with tremendous intentionality and energy. It was directed by an ecumenical project that was remarkably consistent from beginning to end, and its goal was to spread the word and raise consciousness.

*Cosmic Media* does not spend much time defending McLuhan against his detractors. The criticisms are many and should be taken seriously: he ignores the content of the media at his peril; his oppositions, while heuristic, are nevertheless too rigid; he has no analysis of the political economy of technologies; there is an underlying mysticism in his thought that accounts for some of his most ahistorical statements; his formalism occludes any account

of power; he romanticizes oral traditions often in overtly Orientalist ways. We cannot ignore these issues. However, I also hope, by focusing on McLuhan's methodology, to highlight what I consider to be some of his most sensible and original contributions.

McLuhan does not answer questions so much as raise them. We can read him as an artist who creates tools that foreground the ethics of reflexive methodologies. Yet to distinguish McLuhan as a Romantic artist as does George Steiner when he compares him to Blake (*McLuhan Hot and Cool*, 1967: 239) is to misrepresent his project. McLuhan is a creative researcher and an interdisciplinary thinker who is deeply connected to the Romantic tradition. He does not make art so much as recognize the value of art as a means to discern the production of mediated forms of consciousness. We should bear in mind that McLuhan never claimed to be anything more than 'a student' immersed in the new interdisciplinary field of Media Studies that his work helped to inaugurate.



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**PART I**  
**Cambridge**

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# I

## Romantic Art

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Marshall McLuhan should be considered to have been first and foremost an English professor. His intellectual formation in English Studies at Cambridge University deeply influenced his methodological approaches to the media. To begin a study on McLuhan it is crucial to understand that his concept of the media, a term he made famous, starts with an awareness of the materiality of language, with language as *techne*. This awareness stems initially from his love of poetry. It is this passion for the beauty and organic existence of language, both written and oral, that sets McLuhan's writings on the media apart from the more empirically driven approaches that came to characterize the North American social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s. McLuhan's distinctive interdisciplinary style of writing aligns him with a post-war generation of cultural theorists – Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and, most especially, with Harold Innis. While these thinkers did not always share McLuhan's views of the media – Williams and Eco were sometimes his staunchest critics – like him, their theories exceed academically defined norms of writing and disciplinary boundaries. All of them addressed the lived context of everyday culture, those things that make up ordinary perceptions and experiences, and always placed their insights within an historical framework. In their writings, culture becomes so familiar that it ceases to be noticed: it is an environment, a whole way of life, a mythos.



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