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Editor Frank Kermode

McLuhan

Jonathan Miller

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Contents

1 Introduction

It has sometimes been said that Marshall McLuhan's most impressive achievement is his reputation; but although most people are familiar with his name, and some know his more dramatic mottos, only a small section of the reading public is directly acquainted with the main body of his characteristic ideas.

In an ironic way, this disproportion between McLuhan's fame and his familiarity is central to the endeavour to which he has committed himself; for the very growth of his own reputation seems to bear out his well-known thesis about the way in which modern knowledge is so widely shared within what he calls the global village.

If, as McLuhan claims, the human community is returning to the condition of tribal oneness, the fact that his own name has become one of the most vivid myths within this extended community is surely an impressive piece of evidence in favour of that theory. Needless to say I find this particular argument both tendentious and unconvincing, but I must nevertheless acknowledge the astonishing growth of McLuhan's reputation, since it tells us something else about the way in which intellectual prestige is promoted within the network of modern communications.

Although McLuhan has displayed amazing productivity in recent years, the only book upon which any serious claim to our esteem can rest was published and widely reviewed at the beginning of the sixties. Since then, most of what he has said has been repetition or else

a series of witty glosses upon the themes announced in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*. I feel that I can safely introduce his main ideas by summarising the argument of this book alone, although I recognise that there are striking epigrammatic novelties to be found scattered in almost everything that he has published up to the present time.

In fact it is rather difficult to summarise the sprawling arguments of the *Gutenberg Galaxy*. Not only is the range of its cultural reference wider than anything that can be encompassed by a single critic, but the discussion is organised in strict obedience to the main thesis, in a fashion that actually forbids straightforward linear precis. This is no accident on McLuhan's part. He has deliberately laid out the evidence in what he calls a mosaic fashion, placing ideas and quotations side by side in suggestive juxtaposition, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions as to their mutual significance. In doing this he has unfairly anticipated our consent to his claim that imaginative truth is distorted by explicitly linked arguments.

Since I remain unconvinced by McLuhan's reasons for eschewing a linear arrangement of his ideas I shall try for the sake of the uninitiated reader to reduce his argument to that very form to which he so very violently objects.

To begin with, McLuhan claims, quite justifiably I think, that human experience is both plural and voluminous, and that in the very act of being conscious of ourselves, we are in receipt of a rich manifold of simultaneous sensation. In any one moment of conscious time we are aware of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch all at once. Any attempt to communicate this variegated experience from one mind to another entails simplifications and distortion; but, according to McLuhan, some methods of

communication are better than others, depending on the degree to which the medium employed reproduces the full sensory variety of the original experience. The capacity of any given medium to perform in this way depends upon the number of sensory channels which it calls into action when working properly. The larger the number of senses involved, the better the chance of transmitting a reliable copy of the sender's mental state.

McLuhan believes that the spoken word answers these requirements more faithfully than any other medium. He holds this belief for two distinct reasons, one of which is more immediately acceptable than the other. On the one hand he reminds us that although speech is designed to be heard, it is usually uttered in situations which call the other senses into play as well. That is to say in order to make our spoken meaning clear we automatically use facial expressions and manual gestures; and we even use blows, grips and caresses to emphasise our meaning still further. For this reason, if for no other, the spoken word activates the entire human sensorium and thereby underwrites the accuracy with which the spoken message reproduces the mental state to which it supposedly corresponds.

McLuhan also claims that the channel of hearing itself is intrinsically richer, or as he puts it 'hotter', than that of sight, say. The result is that even if there were no other sensory clues coincident with the use of speech, the listener would still be in receipt of a richer, hotter message than one coming at him through the eye alone.

For both these reasons McLuhan claims that spoken language exerts an irresistible power over the listener's imagination and that words have acquired the status of what the philosopher Usener has called 'momentary deities'. Primitive man, who relies almost entirely on oral exchanges, lives therefore in a condition of rich

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imaginative enchantment, his mentality galvanised throughout the length and breadth of its sensory repertoire. According to McLuhan, the invention of writing violated this sacred manifold and forced men to attend to vision at the expense of all the other sensory channels. To use a metaphor which McLuhan himself does not actually employ, the message transmitted by manuscript is like a symphonic melody picked out on the violin, while the same idea expressed in spoken words projects the condition of the full orchestral score.

The impoverishment brought about by the development of writing was magnified out of all proportion when writing was tidied up and mechanised by the invention of print. The brilliant legibility of type made it possible for the eye to race along the 'macadamised' surface of a text, taking in at a careless glance notions which might be more subtly modulated and qualified when issued as an improvised speech. McLuhan also stresses the linear regularity of the printed page and claims that our long standing exposure to such display has trained us to accept ideas only in so far as they conform to certain strict logical patterns. Gutenberg Man therefore is, by McLuhan's account, explicit, logical and literal; by allowing himself to become overdisciplined by the closely ranked regiments of text, he has closed his mind to wider possibilities of imaginative expression.

McLuhan also points out that the visual uniformity of print constitutes a primitive model of industrial technology, and he asserts that by immersing ourselves in information which has been processed in this way we have inadvertently conditioned ourselves to accept, without knowing that we have done so, the dehumanising tyranny of mechanical life. The man who lives in and through print submits without complaint to timetables, lists of weights and measures, formal instruction, and to

all the other rationalised fiats of modern life. Gutenberg Man is punctual, productive and expedient; and since moreover he now receives so much of his knowledge without ever having to face the individual human source, his sense of spiritual community has dwindled even as his technical mastery has flourished. In other words, McLuhan assumes the stance of a sophisticated Luddite, distinguishing himself from his machine breaking predecessors by the way in which he points out that the discovery of printing was the original sin from which all the subsequent woes of industrial civilisation are derived.

This is not to say that McLuhan views all technical ingenuity with the same suspicion. In fact, he sees the more recent developments in electronic technology as offering a Godsent escape from the slavery exerted by wheels and levers. For in a somewhat confused way he has identified the circuits of the electrical engineer with those of the human nervous system itself, and invites us to acknowledge that through TV and radio we have given ourselves the opportunity of communicating with one another through media that can reproduce the plural simultaneity of thought itself. Through these media images and sounds can be flashed upon the attentive mind with telepathic speed; and, since the various mechanisms can be linked in a vast network, electronic man has reconvened the tribal village on a global scale.

Hence McLuhan's cheerful optimism in the face of cultural developments which have depressed and alarmed most of his other colleagues. It is fair to point out, however, that McLuhan has been able to achieve this state of complacent euphoria only by stressing the immediate mental effect of the various media at the expense of neglecting the messages which they actually carry. This dissociation is made quite explicit by his

notorious motto in which he asserts that the medium *is* the message. In fact, as we shall see later, McLuhan's intellectual career traces a dramatic arc from the position of a conventional literary critic happy to discuss the content of written text, to that of a systems analyst who prefers to neglect the significance of *what* is said in favour of a study of the mechanical structures through which it is transmitted.

This partly accounts for the enthusiasm with which McLuhan has been appropriated by the practitioners of the mass media. Not only has an impressive academic cleared their name of the humiliating stigma of vulgar and destructive triviality: he has actually promoted them to the helm of cultural progress. And it is not just the practitioners of these arts that have been relieved of their cultural guilt; the audience also has been exonerated from the crime of self indulgence. Intelligent spectators who would once have felt furtive about looking at TV can now sit glued to their sets confident in the belief that by doing so they are participating in a new community of human self interest. Not only that. So long as the viewers retain their vigilance and attend to the characters of the media themselves (regardless of what is being said on them) they are actually pursuing the study of epistemology. In other words, McLuhan has convened an open university of the air at which to attend is to graduate; and in a world which is perhaps unduly impressed by academic credentials such an opening seems like a generous offer for every member of the viewing public to think of himself as active.

But in spite of all the objections that can be raised against the motto with which McLuhan's name has become associated, there is no doubt that the ability to detach the medium from the message has allowed him to look

with a fresh eye at almost every other technical innovation by means of which men have extended the scope of mind and body. And although of course it is a gross exaggeration to claim that the medium *is* the message, the medium *does* exert an effect over and above that which is carried in the message itself.

Take print as an example. We have become so familiar with the medium as such that we read the communiqués transmitted through it without pausing to consider the elaborate mental concessions which have to be made before we can accept and understand a message couched in serial phonetic symbols. If McLuhan's irritating motto does no more than render the text opaque for a moment, he has done a major service in making us conscious of the way in which so much of our knowledge is acquired.

The same technique of strategic exaggeration also pays dividends in other areas of technological history. Wheels, clothes, money, movies and photos all embody psychological assumptions which are larger than the acknowledged purpose of the inventions themselves. McLuhan may resort to some maddening tricks of paradox and pun in order to make this point—money for example being the poor man's credit card—but he has at least forced a large audience to recognise the way in which technical innovation creates psychological environments, environments to which we subordinate ourselves without clearly recognising the price we pay in doing so.

It is often assumed that McLuhan's enterprise is unique and that he has emerged fully fledged from an egg which has no parents. In fact his approach to cultural history has well established precedents, and in the discussion which follows I shall try to locate McLuhan's work in the tradition to which they belong. Moreover, it

would be a mistake to imagine that McLuhan arrived at his well known positions all of a sudden. Just as his notions have an ancestry within the history of ideas, so do they have a personal biography; and in the course of what follows I shall try to show the somewhat circuitous path he has followed in order to arrive at such defensive assertions. For the purpose of discussion I have deliberately adopted a hostile tone, partly I must admit because I am in almost complete disagreement with the main body of McLuhan's ideas, but partly too in order to lend a certain rhetorical vigour to the discussion. My medium is part of my message.

2 The Underlying Value

For someone who has made such a spectacular success of dramatising his public work Marshall McLuhan remains unexpectedly quiet on the subject of his personal development. In interviews he tends to dismiss biographical questions and prefers to wrap his intellectual past in deliberate mystery. It would be easy perhaps to ignore this reticence as an irrelevant quirk except that closer examination of his written work reveals that his autobiographical silence is closely related to his central thesis. For according to him the very idea of personal authorship is a dangerous artefact brought about by the invention of printing. When knowledge was communicated by word of mouth, or else by hand-written manuscript, the wisdom which accumulated in the public domain was wholesomely anonymous, and therefore much more comprehensive, than that which was later cut up and distributed among individual named authors who stood to gain substantial royalties by putting their names to texts which could now be reproduced in profitable numbers.

However, it was not just the economic incentive offered by print that helped to split up the written truth into privately owned opinions; the physical medium itself, by virtue of some mysterious influence which it exerted on the human mind, restricted the mental vision to a fixed point of view. 'It is upon this fixed point of view that the triumphs and destructions of the Gutenberg Era will be made.' I continue to find this argument obscure and unconvincing but McLuhan himself is suffi-

ciently moved by it to try to offset the proprietary and therefore restrictive effects of print in his own work, committed though he is to publishing himself in the medium he so deeply suspects. By remaining enigmatic on the subject of his past he has tried to depersonalise his own enterprise and to represent its results, not as privately owned opinions, but as orphan data sent back to earth, as it were, from an unmanned space probe. The metaphor of the probe occurs with increasing frequency in those recent interviews where he attempts to justify his peculiar style and it is apparent that he likes to see himself, not as an author, but as a publicly subsidised payload of sensitive instruments which records information irrespective of personal values. Take for instance these passages from McLuhan's interview with G. E. Stearn.

'I'm perfectly prepared to scrap any statement I ever made about any subject once I find that it isn't getting me into the problem. I have no devotion to any of my probes as if they were sacred opinions. I have no proprietary interest in my ideas and no pride of authorship as such. You have to push any idea to an extreme, you have to probe. . . .

'. . . Now values, insofar as they register a preference for a particular kind of effect or quality, are a highly contentious and debatable area in every field of discourse. Nobody in the twentieth century has ever come up with any meaningful definition or discussion of "value". . . . It is rather fatuous to insist upon values if you are not prepared to understand how they got there and by what they are now being undermined. The mere moralistic expression of approval or disapproval, preference or detestation, is currently being used in our world as a substitute for observation and a substitute for study. People hope that if they scream loudly enough

about "values" then others will mistake them for serious, sensitive souls who have higher and nobler perceptions than ordinary people.' (*McLuhan Hot and Cool*, p. 320)

As I will show later McLuhan justifies the attitude expressed in these quotations by referring to the intellectual success achieved by modern artists who also repudiate, in one way or another, the tyranny of a single point of view. In cubism for instance the painter gains an all-round view of visual reality denied to those who insist upon depicting objects from a privileged viewpoint. Likewise the rich allusive plurality of Symbolism or Surrealism is only achieved by opening the mind to the largest number of simultaneous imaginative options. By analogy with the success of such aesthetic endeavours McLuhan tends to cast suspicions upon any form of investigation which allows 'values' or anything else to limit the lines of enquiry.

Now although these are the terms in which McLuhan overtly seeks to vindicate his peculiar contempt for 'values', I believe that it is possible to make out an additional motive of which he, as an author, is not immediately aware. For one can recognise in McLuhan's words to G. E. Stearn a pastiche of the idiom which is commonly attributed to experimental scientists. It is frequently thought that the impressive weight of scientific truth is gained at the expense of sacrificing commitment to personal opinion and that the good scientist is no more than a sensitive antenna tuned to pick up facts and figures as they occur. If one does conceive of science in this way, and many laymen do, it is quite natural to be suspicious of any attitude or interest which might limit the sensitivity of the antenna or probe.

In yielding to such suspicions, McLuhan has dangerously misconceived the role of so-called detached obser-

vation in science. For the 'unprejudiced' accumulation of hard facts, in the manner suggested by Francis Bacon, plays very little part in the development of what we now recognise as science. Quite apart from the fact that heaps of data can never on their own add up to make a theory, it is unlikely that we would ever know where to begin looking unless a foregoing set of personal preferences gave us a criterion by which to choose the incidents that would be relevant to observe. As Sir Karl Popper observes in *Conjectures and Refutations:*

'The belief that science proceeds from observation to theory is still so widely and so firmly held that my denial of it is often met with incredulity. I have even been suspected of being insincere—of denying what nobody in his senses can doubt.

'But in fact the belief that we can start with pure observations alone, without anything in the nature of a theory, is absurd. . . . Observation is always selective. It needs a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem. And its description presupposes a descriptive language, with property words; it presupposes interests, *points of view*, and problems.' (p. 46, my italics)

Science starts out with heavily charged pre-conceptions and only goes on to demonstrate its impartiality by its willingness to abandon them in the face of acknowledged refutation. While it is true that undue loyalty to certain values may blind the investigator to observations that would otherwise threaten his pre-conceptions, to make a wholesale repudiation of such attitudes in the belief that by so doing one will automatically guarantee the truth of one's theories is to misunderstand the fundamental logic of scientific enquiry.

The same criticism holds for McLuhan's willingness to abandon his probes 'as soon as they fail to get him

further into the problem'. Scientists do not abandon their probes or theories so easily as that. As T. S. Kuhn has recently pointed out, the surrender of an awkward or otherwise unproductive theory is usually preceded by a long period of *ad hoc* intellectual modification in the effort to save the hypothesis. When surrender finally does occur it is only in favour of a new theory which significantly overtakes the explanatory achievements of the previous one. He says:

'Once a first paradigm through which to view nature has been found, there is no such thing as research in the absence of any paradigm. To reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself. That act reflects not on the paradigm but on the man. Inevitably he will be seen by his colleagues as "the carpenter who blames his tools".' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 79)

In other words the abrupt unilateral surrender of a notion—call it a 'probe' or whatever—far from being a proof of scientific integrity, is often just a sign of carelessness, boredom or caprice.

McLuhan's claim to impartiality highlights a peculiar strain in his thought; for although he advertises a superlative freedom from 'values', most of his work is founded upon an ardent wish to see certain very distinct ethical principles prevail. Revolted as he clearly is by the Godless rationalism of science, he is at the same time vastly overawed by its current intellectual prestige. And in order to make his own arguments against it more impressive, he has adopted what he supposes to be the intellectual stance of the scientist in order to defeat his opponents at their own game. Unhappily he has assumed the stance without really understanding the rules with which it is associated, and like his co-religionist Teilhard

de Chardin succeeds thereby in impressing only those whose horror of science is equalled or surpassed by their susceptibility to its special jargon.

To compare McLuhan with Teilhard de Chardin would be unjust, but it is often useful to classify the varieties of intellectual folly and to show that apparently unrelated examples of bad thinking actually belong to certain well-recognised categories. McLuhan and Teilhard do belong to the same category, one which Sir Peter Medawar damned in his famous essay 'The Phenomenon of Chardin':

'*The Phenomenon of Man* is anti-scientific in temper (scientists are shown up as shallow folk skating about on the surface of things), and, as if that were not recommendation enough, it was written by a scientist, a fact which seems to give it particular authority and weight. Laymen firmly believe that scientists are one species of person. They are not to know that the different branches of science require very different aptitudes and degrees of skill for their prosecution. Teilhard practised an intellectually unexacting kind of science in which he achieved a moderate proficiency. He has no grasp of what makes a logical argument or of what makes for proof. He does not even preserve the common decencies of scientific writing, though his book is professedly a scientific treatise.

'It is written in an all but totally unintelligible style, and this is construed as prima facie evidence of profundity. It is because Teilhard has such wonderful *deep* thoughts that he's so difficult to follow—really it's beyond my poor brain but doesn't that just *show* how profound and important it must be?' (*The Art of the Soluble*, pp. 79–80)

Bracketing McLuhan with Teilhard is useful for another reason. It helps to expose an undeclared in-

terest in McLuhan's thought. Like de Chardin McLuhan is a Catholic, and although he makes no specific reference to the fact, it adds a hidden bias to all his famous opinions and thus makes nonsense of his claim to have freed himself from the tyranny of 'values'. As I hope to show later, the bulk of McLuhan's work is strongly animated by Catholic piety and the bid for detachment is partly a tactical stance designed to deceive 'the enemy'.

Strangely enough Catholicism itself offers its adherents an opportunity for assuming the very detachment McLuhan seeks, for one can recognise in the *social* situation of the Anglo-American Catholic a sense of alienation which strongly compensates for any 'point of view', a situation that is summed up by McLuhan in an essay on Hopkins.

'Long accustomed to a defensive position behind a minority culture, English and American Catholics have developed multiple mental squints. Involuntarily their sensibilities have been nourished and ordered by a century or more of an alien literary and artistic activity which, faute de mieux, they still approach askance.' ('Analogical Mirrors', *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 21)

For someone who, like McLuhan, has a vested interest in disclaiming the bias associated with a 'single point of view', any institution that can incidentally set up 'multiple squints' immediately recommends itself for reasons that are distinct from, and even opposed to, the creeds of the institution itself.

The same paradox holds true for McLuhan's Canadian nationality. There are very strong 'points of view' associated with the region of Canada in which McLuhan was raised—Agrarian distributist ideas that form, along with his Catholicism, the main underlying motive in the work that has made him famous. At the same time, however,

there is in the Canadian experience at large such a conflict of cultural and social identities that anyone interested in exploiting them could develop all the 'mental squints' necessary to offset the dangers of a 'single point of view'.

Like his counterpart in the United States, the Canadian intellectual has an equivocal relationship with the mother culture of Europe. While he is relieved of what he sometimes considers to be the dead weight of its effete tradition, he is also envious of its complex living heritage. His spirit may be broadened and invigorated by the wide open spaces but at the same time it is starved of the richer details upon which the mature critical imagination is nourished.

Such a deep split in cultural loyalty would, on its own, protect the Canadian from the tyranny of a 'single point of view'. But he suffers or enjoys an additional squint by virtue of his ambiguous attitude towards the United States. While he cannot fail to identify himself with the flourishing fortunes of North America as a whole, he is proud to distinguish a unique Canadian destiny whose rugged purity, as he sees it, reproves the luxurious materialism of the United States. Add to this the pains of French separatism and one can readily appreciate that in Canada McLuhan might well have found an ideal situation within which to develop the multiple viewpoints which he considers so favourable to critical impartiality.

I don't want to overstress the urge towards detachment. It is more important to identify the 'values' which the carefully assumed detachment conceals, and this requires, in the first instance, an examination of early influences on his thought.

Marshall McLuhan was born and brought up in the

Western Provinces of Canada. As a result he fell quite naturally under the influence of social ideas that have continued to shape both the imagination and the political initiative of the American North West since the early years of the nineteenth century. Loosely speaking one can group these ideas under the single heading of Agrarian Socialism, bearing in mind that this political category covers a wide variety of beliefs some of which are direct contradictions of each other.

From the earliest days of westward migration into the great American prairies, the pioneers had been urged onward by the dream of a garden Utopia within which any man who was willing to mix his labour with the soil could realise the invigorating ideals of sturdy yeoman independence. By the end of the eighteenth century this noble sentiment had found eloquent expression in St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer.*

'We are a people of cultivators . . . united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself. If he travels through our rural district he views not the hostile castle, and the haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabin, where cattle and men help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness, smoke and indigence. A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations. . . . Lawyer or merchant are the fairest titles our towns afford; that of a farmer is the only appellation of the rural inhabitants of our country.' (pp. 40–1)

In spite of the painful practical experience that tended to undermine this joyful belief, the myth of simple yeoman independence continued to animate the Western

imagination; and even today, when the social and demographic circumstances under which it might have been realised have vanished altogether, the myth survives to give colour to the rhetoric of the American Radical Right.

Quite apart from the immediate difficulties associated with the terrain itself, the Agrarian ideal came into serious conflict with reality when, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Eastern capitalism began to extend its influence over the economics of the Western wheat belts. Railroads that were controlled from New York determined the transport facilities for marketing the crop, and distant bankers manipulated the debts that the farmers incurred while purchasing new equipment. Far from being free, the nineteenth-century yeoman farmer was becoming helplessly dependent upon the behaviour of a remote economic system over which he had no direct control.

In an effort to preserve the myth that had first prompted them to move west, the American farmers began to organise programmes of rural protest, by means of which they sought to restore their economic individuality. Independent or Reform parties were founded in the attempt to control both the monopolies of the railroads and the franchises of the various middle-men. Later came the Greenback parties whose main aim was to exempt the farmer from the whimsical credit restrictions of the Eastern banks. Neither these nor subsequent movements ever succeeeded in producing a major change in the political structure of the American West, and in fact it was only in Western Canada that Agrarian radical politics achieved any serious legislative status, and not until the twentieth century. In Saskatchewan the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation did succeed in gaining majority power in the 1930s; and as Martin Lipset points

out, it did so in the same geographical area that had earlier produced the Greenbackers, the Populists and other Agrarian upheavals.

This is not the place to trace the detailed fortunes of Canadian political Agrarianism. The short sketch provided above is enough to indicate the sort of ferment within which the young McLuhan grew up. By the time he arrived in Cambridge as a post-graduate student in English Studies he was thoroughly imbued with distributist ideals which he continued to nurse, finally developing them in a subtly disguised form in such publications as *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which seem on the surface to be no more than dispassionate accounts of the effects of new technologies upon the senses of man. It is easy therefore to understand the sympathy which the young McLuhan felt for the severe Agrarian partialities of the Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis.

'This strength of English', wrote Leavis, 'belongs to the very spirit of the language—the spirit that was formed when the English people who formed it were predominantly rural . . . And how much richer the *life* was in the old, predominantly rural order than in the modern suburban world. . . . When one adds that speech in the old order was a popularly cultivated art, that people talked (so making Shakespeare possible) instead of reading or listening to the wireless, it becomes plain that the promise of regeneration by American slang, popular city idiom, or the invention of *transition*-cosmopolitans is a flimsy consolation for our loss.' (*For Continuity*, p. 217)

A modern reader, unacquainted with McLuhan's prairie background, could be forgiven for failing to see the connection between this sort of rhetoric and the ideas which are expressed in works like *Understanding Media*. Quite apart from its well advertised 'detachment', McLuhan's

later work does not immediately read as if it had been produced by anyone who favoured the robust organic simplicities of village life. The text bristles with 'scientific' terms and the whole enquiry seems to be framed by a general interest in the behaviour of the nervous system. If one were looking for *any* Cambridge antecedents to this later work, one would be tempted to scrutinise not the moral formulations of Leavis, but the positivist work of I. A. Richards. It is therefore essential to make a brief digression in order to map out the intellectual character of Cambridge in the early thirties.

The international reputation of Cambridge in the 1930s rested very largely on scientific achievements, the most spectacular of which were the nuclear investigations of Rutherford and his associates. While the atom was yielding up its secrets in the Cavendish Laboratory, biologists were beginning to secure vast theoretical dividends by subjecting the nervous system to the newly available techniques of electro-physiology. Shortly before the First World War, for example, Keith Lucas had laid the foundations for describing the code in terms of which information was transmitted through the living nervous system. Although Lucas was killed in an air crash before he could complete his work, his student and colleague E. D. Adrian later achieved world fame for describing some of the simpler grammar and punctuation of this code. The neural medium was beginning to reveal its messages.

Meanwhile the school of experimental psychology under the leadership of men like C. S. Myers and W. H. R. Rivers was trying to quantify the subjective aspects of human experience in spite of the fact that when the idea of a psycho-physical laboratory was first suggested at the end of the previous century it had been opposed by the Cambridge Senate on the grounds that it would

insult religion by putting the human soul on a pair of scales! This objection was soon dismissed and I only mention it in this context since it echoes McLuhan's own equivocations on the subject, and reminds us of the way in which his passion for neuro-psychological mottoes goes hand in hand with a hatred for the way in which quantitative science has abused the integrity of the human spirit.

One of the most important incidents in the development of the Cambridge psychology school was the anthropological expedition which the zoologist Haddon led to the Torres Straits in 1898. Both Myers and Rivers were appointed to this excursion and for the first time in history the primitive mind was laid open to the scrutiny of quantitative experimental science. Under the influence of this experience Rivers turned to the study of ethnology and psychiatry, and in the early twenties completed some of the first English work on the manipulations of symbols and myths by the unconscious mind. Under his guidance, the psychologist F. C. Bartlett followed a similar path and, two years before McLuhan arrived in Cambridge, published a book called *Remembering* in which he demonstrated the way in which experiences were edited and re-shaped by the memory.

It seems unlikely that McLuhan ever came into immediate contact with the work of these pioneers; and the mere fact that their joint enterprises were flourishing shortly before he arrived in Cambridge does not on its own prove that he was influenced by them. Nevertheless there is a remarkable coincidence between the scope of their interests and the way in which McLuhan subsequently brought anthropology and neurology into his discussions. One might be tempted to dismiss this as mere coincidence were it not for the fact that I. A. Richards, a particularly eloquent member of the English

school, had yielded to the direct influence of these scientific studies of the human mind not long before McLuhan's arrival in Cambridge.

Richards' work was in fact the culmination of a revolution that took place in English studies just after the First World War. Before then the study of English had been no more than a small section within the Modern Language Tripos. But in 1917 English was recognised as a department on its own and by the middle twenties critics like M. D. Forbes had begun a successful bid to liberalise a province that had previously been divided between philological scholarship and vague laudatory criticism. Of the latter the English critic E. M. W. Tillyard wrote in a memoir that provides a fascinating insight into the history of the Cambridge English school: 'Although it contains better things than people are now likely to allow, the dominant trend was towards gossipy, and often highly metaphorical, description and unspecific praise; un-specific, for, since imaginative writing was an affair of the emotions alone and the emotions do not lend themselves to analysis, you merely evade the issue if you enter into great detail.' (*The Muse Unchained*, p. 84)

Tillyard confesses that by this time he had become impatient of criticism that relied so heavily on emotional metaphor combined with literary gossip, preferring with Forbes to stick closely to the texts, and to find there, by a process of close analysis, the precise reasons for their effects. These ambitions achieved a special cutting edge when Forbes and Tillyard joined forces with I. A. Richards, a young critic who had lately emerged with honours from the school of Moral Science and Philosophy.

Cambridge philosophy was turning away from German idealism and, under the influence of Russell, Moore

and Wittgenstein, was achieving international fame by investigating the logical structure of meaning itself. As Tillyard points out, I. A. Richards was responsible, more than anyone else, for developing in literature the philosophical empiricism of Moore; and in order to do this he never hesitated to include work that was current both in experimental psychology and anthropology.

By the time McLuhan arrived in Cambridge Richards was already famous for promoting the idea that literature could be profitably regarded as a special example of the neural manipulation of artificial signs; and for suggesting moreover that practical criticism would be re-established on a firm footing of positivism if only we could analyse the way in which the nervous system processes and assimilates the information provided for it by the imaginative writer. The promises held out by this programme now seem somewhat innocent and over optimistic, but for all that Richards had undoubtedly made an impressive bid to restore the study of human communication to the larger province of epistemology.

In this respect at least McLuhan's work seems, on the surface, to be a natural outcome of what he had learned as a research student in Cambridge. McLuhan, however, now denies that Richards played any significant part in directing his subsequent interest towards the behaviour of the nervous system. And although the coincidence of interests is rather remarkable, one should not be distracted by it from seeing that McLuhan exploits the data of psychology and anthropology in a very personal manner. For while Richards uses scientific information in order to compile a descriptive grammar of the literary response, McLuhan uses—and in many cases abuses—the same data in order to derive a prescription for a healthy and rounded spiritual life. For McLuhan, in the final reduction, takes a theological view of the human men-

tality, regarding it as the organ through which men achieve or fail to achieve their cognitive communion with God's creation. In other words, he has already decided what the proper function of human knowledge should be; and he judges its various conditions according to whether or not it matches up to this theologically determined ideal.

It would be a mistake then to overstress the affinity between McLuhan and I. A. Richards, for while McLuhan acknowledges the contribution that Richards' method has made to the understanding of literature, he insists that Leavis overtops it by virtue of the integral supremacy of his moral vision. As he wrote in 1944:

'In a word, then, the method of Leavis has superior relevance to that of Richards and Empson because he has more clearly envisaged not only the way in which a poem functions, but the function of poetry as well. A poem in itself functions dramatically, not strategically or persuasively. It is for contemplation, and functions for the spectator or reader as a means of extending and refining moral perception or dramatic awareness. Where Mr. Leavis sees the function of poetry as the education or nourishment of the affections, Richards and Empson tend to regard it pragmatically and rhetorically as a means of impinging on a particular situation. Since the material or vehicle of all art is necessarily social symbol and experience, Richards and Empson have done a great service by insisting on the discriminating perception of the complex implications of this matter. They have made art respectable and redoubtable once more for all intelligent men. So much so that it is tempting to take up permanent residence in their halfway house and to overlook the arduous stage of the journey which remains to be accomplished before winning an overall view, which is plenary critical judgment.' ('Poetic vs.

Rhetorical Exegesis', *Sewanee Review*, 1944. p. 276)

Moreover Leavis's Agrarian opinions coincide very closely with those of other writers on whom McLuhan looked with favour for expressing disgust at the quality of life in the twentieth century. This nostalgic despair is generally associated with a tradition which Stephen Spender has accurately characterised as follows:

'From Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris and Arnold, to T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence and Leavis, there is the search for a nameable boojum or snark that can be held responsible for splitting wide apart the once fused being-created consciousness. The Renaissance, the puritan revolution, the French Revolution, the industrial revolution, have all been named as villains. There runs through modern criticism the fantasy of a Second Fall of Man. The First Fall, it will be remembered, had the result of introducing Original Sin into the world of Man, exiled from the Garden of Eden, and knowing good and evil. The Second Fall seems to result from the introduction of scientific utilitarian values and modes of thinking into the world of personal choice between good and evil, with the result that values cease to be personal and become identified with the usefulness or destructiveness of social systems and material things.' (*The Struggle of the Modern*, p. 26)

Throughout his life, both in essays and in his full length books, McLuhan has continued to promote many of these authors, especially the ones who are associated with what is now recognised as the 'modern' movement—Pound, Eliot, Yeats and Joyce—authors who in Spender's words 'invented their modern idioms and forms in order to express disgust with the modern world'. However when McLuhan first expressed public favour for this tradition he did so by praising an author whose criticisms of modern life were much more bois-

terous and a great deal less sophisticated than those made by the tenants of Axel's Castle. In 1936 he wrote a short essay for the *Dalhousie Review* in which he loudly sponsored G. K. Chesterton for 'being concerned to maintain our endangered institutions' and 'for seeking to re-establish agriculture and small property as the only free basis for a free culture'.

To McLuhan the world of G. K. Chesterton was 'rigid with thought and brilliant with colour ... the very antithesis of the pale-pink lullaby-land of popular science. It is the difference between a cathedral window and blank infinity. That is why modern life, thoughtless and unpoised, has degenerated from a dance into a race, and history is regarded as a toboggan slide. But Mr. Chesterton has exposed the Christless cynicism of the supposedly iron laws of economics, and has shown that history is a road that must often be reconsidered and even retraced. For, if Progress implies a goal, it does not imply that all roads lead to it inevitably. And to-day, when the goal of Progress is no longer clear, the word is simply an excuse for procrastination.'

'The extraordinary extent and variety of his writings and discussions is proportioned to the desperate need for direction and unity in an age that has "smothered man in men". For external complexity has produced an insane simplification of thought, preying upon personal variety and spontaneous social expression.' ('G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic', *Dalhousie Review*, 1936, pp. 457, 461)

But is Chesterton's argument as 'rigid with thought' as McLuhan claims it is? It is certainly colourful and the famous paradoxes resound with all the clangour of newly minted thought. And yet beneath the vituperative surface of the prose there is nothing that could properly be called a political idea. Take for instance these pass-

ages from *What's Wrong with the World*:

'Certainly, it would be far better to go back to village communes, if they really are communes. Certainly, it would be better to do without soap rather than to do without society. Certainly, we would sacrifice all our wires, wheels, systems, specialities, physical science and frenzied finance for one half-hour of happiness such as has often come to us with comrades in a common tavern. I do not say the sacrifice will be necessary; I only say it will be easy.' (p. 109)

'Perhaps the truth can be put most pointedly thus: that democracy has one real enemy, and that is civilisation. Those utilitarian miracles which science has made are anti-democratic, not so much in their perversion, or even in their practical result, as in their primary shape and purpose. The Frame-Breaking Rioters were right; not perhaps in thinking that machines would make fewer men workmen; but certainly in thinking that machines would make fewer men masters. More wheels do mean fewer handles; fewer handles do mean fewer hands. The machinery of science must be individualistic and isolated. A mob can shout round a palace; but a mob cannot shout down a telephone. The specialist appears, and democracy is half spoilt at a stroke.' (pp. 99–100)

Although Chesterton confidently titled the book from which these quotations are taken *What's Wrong with the World*, it is hard to summarise the diagnosis that has supposedly been given. According to McLuhan, however, Chesterton gave his own summary:

> 'We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
> But our hearts we lost—how long ago!'

In other words Chesterton claims that by submitting ourselves to the tyranny of the machine and by putting

our trust in rationalism we have crowned the head, vanquished the heart and thereby lost the habit of perfection. In some ways of course this is an attractive myth —it is in fact a common theme in early twentieth century writing—and it is easy to see why the young Canadian distributist was drawn to it. It is harder however to keep patience with anyone who could continue to sponsor such a primitive fantasy. Yet the head-heart split still features in McLuhan's modern work, and in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* it takes pride of place among the explanations of our modern predicament.

The difficulty is that the distinction between head and heart, as Chesterton and McLuhan recognise it, is so vague and so metaphorical that it has no legitimate place in what can properly be called an explanation. For there is not, and cannot be, a reliable criterion by which to distinguish effects which arise from the 'head' as opposed to those which are prompted by the 'heart'. Even to imagine that there might be is to fall into the same logical error that doomed the phrenologists. For the distinction itself arises from a corrupt psychological theory according to which the human personality is partitioned into discrete faculties, organs or ministries, each separately responsible for a certain class of behaviour or awareness. Such serious inconsistencies appear when one traces this theory back to its logical origin that it would be unwise to base a social explanation upon it. Unfortunately both Chesterton and McLuhan seem unaware of the logical quagmire upon which their proposal is raised.

Even if the distinction between head and heart *had* more respectable foundations, it would be hard to characterise satisfactorily any given historical period in terms of it. Chesterton and McLuhan would presumably maintain that the head was gracefully subordinated to

the heart in the early part of the Middle Ages; in which case it seems odd that so many humane initiatives should have borne fruit in the period when the head, by Chesterton's account, was gaining its deadly precedence over the heart, i.e. in the last hundred years. Both Chesterton and McLuhan however would save their theory by simply refusing to admit that these initiatives were in fact humane.

'Current sociology and social engineering', McLuhan wrote in the *Sewanee Review* in 1946, 'so far from being a source of hope or renewal of impulse must themselves be studied as morbid symptoms.

'The most hopeful developments in social thought have ... been in the direction of exploring modes of thought and feeling rather than in the quarter where mechanical efforts to tinker the good society into existence have prevailed.' ('Footprints in the Sands of Crime,' p. 619)

In other words our only hope is to cultivate the faculty of intuition by whose benevolent workings we shall in Chesterton's words remember 'what we really are'. Rationality is just a snare and a delusion. 'All that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit, art and ecstacy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forget.' (*Orthodoxy*, p. 95)

It is important to realise here that, to a large extent, both McLuhan and Chesterton's hostility to social engineering is prompted by Catholic piety. For if you hold that human nature is blemished by original sin, it is of course idle to suppose that pain and evil will ever be dissipated by simply changing the secular institutions of society in accordance with rational principles. Since the

discontents of civilisation arise from a metaphysical flaw in human nature, men can only hope to obtain relief from their misery and confusion by submitting themselves to the mystery of God's redeeming intervention, and by cultivating those modes of intuition through which they can become aware of such a redemptive opportunity.

Even if they are not conceived to be in direct antagonism to one another, piety and rational philanthropy coexist within the religious imagination in a state of strong reciprocal tension and the Catholic often believes that the condensed symbolic mystery of the Incarnation will be dispersed if one tries to translate its ineffable benevolence into any overt acts of institutionalised good will. McLuhan's rubric expresses this anxiety in a rather brusque and dismissive manner, but the same idea is put, more delicately perhaps, by a Catholic anthropologist who has recently confessed to unease at the way in which pious ritual has been weakened by attempts to alleviate human misery through concrete acts of social welfare, unmediated by sacred ritual. 'There is no person whose life does not need to unfold in a coherent symbolic system. The less organised the way of life, the less articulated the symbolic system may be. But social responsibility is no substitute for symbolic forms and indeed depends upon them. When ritualism is openly despised the philanthropic impulse is in danger of defeating itself. For it is an illusion to suppose that there can be organisation without symbolic expression.' (Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 50)

As I hope to show in a later section, McLuhan has identified the progressive inability of modern man to express his piety through natural symbols with the growth of literal thought as it was encouraged by printing; and as the argument develops I hope to show how

his investigations of the new media are prompted in a very large measure by his eagerness to find a new form of iconic symbolism through which the redemptive mysteries of God can be experienced.

3 North and South

It is hard to say how the influence of Chesterton would have prospered if McLuhan had returned to Canada on leaving Cambridge in 1936. Instead of going straight home he spent the next decade teaching English at the Catholic St. Louis University; and although Missouri is strictly speaking a Mid-Western state, it borders on the South, so that by living and working there McLuhan came into very close contact with a form of Agrarianism which reinforced what he had admired in Chesterton, but which marked at the same time a significant departure from the one he had known in Western Canada.

At the level of sentimental rhetoric there is of course a striking similarity between the Agrarianism of the South and that of the American North-West. Both rejoice in the spiritual dignity of labour. 'Those who labour in the earth', wrote Thomas Jefferson in the well-known *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 'are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which He keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example ... While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff ... The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body.' (pp. 157–8)

Many Southern intellectuals came to suspect this optimistic formula, and did so moreover many years before their Prairie counterparts—George Fitzhugh of Virginia for example saw quite clearly that the Georgic pleasures of the soil could only be enjoyed by those who had been relieved of its necessary toil by their black slaves. The upshot was that although the South and the Prairies entered the nineteenth century in loose political alliance against the industrial North-East, the two regions fell out in the 1850s when the Mid-Western states offended their Southern colleagues by repudiating the use of slavery. Henceforth Southern Agrarianism became distinctively associated not so much with the yeoman ideal as with that of a graceful landed aristocracy. By the time the Civil War broke out Southerners had consolidated a romantic image of their own peculiar virtues, through the contemplation of which they unconsciously sought to vindicate the peculiar institution of slavery.

Modern historians have questioned the reality of this comforting legend. For the old South was never, in fact, the graceful patrician paradise imagined by its more enthusiastic publicists. Most of its people were drawn from lower and middle class stock, many of them Irish and Scots. There were small enclaves of English gentry, but as Eugene Genovese has recently pointed out many of these were relatively uncouth country squires, not to be confused with the cavalier aristocracy of popular myth. When Frederick Olmstead visited the ante bellum South he was appalled by the grasping parvenu vulgarity of its inhabitants.

Nevertheless it would be foolish to disregard the myth simply because it did not square with social reality. Myths can often change behaviour in the direction of the norms which they embody; and even if the image of

corporate chivalry was nothing more than a fantasy, it probably achieved a measure of reality by regularising the conduct of those who felt it to be true.

Whatever foundation in reality the myth may once have had, it was destroyed once and for all by the Civil War and by the social upheavals of the Reconstruction that followed. Crude economic reality forced the Southerners to abandon the attempt to create a society based upon elementary agriculture, with the result that the control of society shifted from the agricultural aristocracy to men of industry and commerce (see for instance Francis B. Simkins, *The South Old and New*). But in spite of economic and social upheaval, or to be more accurate because of it, the myth of ancient noblesse oblige continued to survive in the imagination of the defeated Southerners. Publicists like Henry W. Grady enthusiastically announced the birth of a new South that was to be based upon a modern industry competitive with that of the Yankee North; and hopeful nostalgists consoled themselves for this unwelcome change with the belief that the chivalrous virtues of the old South would revive concurrently with the new lease of life about to be conferred upon their defeated nation.

Not that Southern intellectuals of the early twenties cared much either way. Most of them realised that the culture of the Old South was largely fictional. As for the New South, they realised, no doubt, that the haphazard introduction of industry was unlikely to create a new culture where so little had existed before. So when Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson and others began to assemble what later became famous as the Fugitive Group of Southern writers, their association was founded on nothing more militant than a joint interest in the future of modern poetry. If anything, they

sought to dissociate themselves from the Southern literary tradition, in so far as it existed, and looked to Europe for intellectual and aesthetic inspiration.

Most of these writers, however, underestimated the strength of their unconscious regional attachments; and when the Scopes Monkey trial of 1925 brought down the contempt and ridicule of Yankee journalists such as H. L. Mencken and Westbrook Pegler, they discovered in themselves a Southern loyalty that might otherwise have remained dormant and finally vanished altogether. Moreover Tate, Davidson, Ransom and other writers were so outraged by the coarseness of Mencken's attacks upon the South that they felt moved to collaborate in a joint vindication of their homeland; and this impulse was reinforced by the fact that many of them had already begun to nurse a fear and a suspicion of Eastern industrialism.

In the three years that followed the Monkey trial, discussion of the form that the vindication of the South should take proved somewhat aimless. Tate and his colleagues recognised that the *literary* tradition of the Old South was too weak a structure upon which to base a defence of their region. Both Tate and Ransom turned instead to an advocacy of the regional life itself, and sought to point out the superiority of an existence that owed most of its richness and moral versatility to landed property and fixed social classes. In 1928 Tate published his famous biography *Stonewall Jackson, The Good Soldier*, in which he maintained that the sense of concrete moral obligation which arose quite naturally from direct ownership of land, and even of slaves, was infinitely superior to the abstract notion of right that plagued the politics of the rationalistic North.

Ransom, meanwhile, had completed and published an essay in which he suggested that the best chance for

realising plenary aesthetic fulfilment lay in the relaxed rural life of the Old South, and in 1929 Donald Davidson made an explicit appeal for contributions towards a corporate manifesto on behalf of the rural South. He asked that his friends should prepare a book 'addressed to mature Southerners of the late nineteen twenties, in the so called New South—Southerners who, we trusted, were not so far gone in modern education as to require for the act of comprehension, coloured charts, statistical tables, graphs and journalistic monosyllables.'

Books as well as articles promptly followed Davidson's call to action; and it is startling to recognise how closely this programme of conservative defiance coincides with the pious agrarianism of G. K. Chesterton—above all for the way in which the spiritual destitution of modern life is totally identified with the grammar of science, logic and social statistics.

By recommending the South on account of superior piety and intuition, Davidson and the authors who were encouraged by him inadvertently shifted the emphasis of the debate. Although what followed may have seemed like an American conflict over competing local values, it actually rehearsed a much larger clash of temperaments, one that William James had already identified without referring to political geography. As James wrote in *Pragmatism* (pp. 11–12) in 1907:

'I think you will practically recognise the two types of mental make-up that I mean if I head the columns by the titles "tender-minded" and "tough-minded" respectively [see Table on following page].'

In the books and articles inspired by Davidson's call to action, most of the positions announced in the left hand column of James's check list received polemic development. In 1929 for example Ransom

'The Tender-minded	*The Tough-minded*
Rationalistic (going by "principles"),	Empiricist (going by "facts"),
Intellectualistic,	Sensationalistic,
Idealistic,	Materialistic,
Optimistic,	Pessimistic,
Religious,	Irreligious,
Free-willist,	Fatalistic,
Monistic,	Pluralistic,
Dogmatical,	Sceptical.'

argued in *God Without Thunder* that religion, even Fundamentalist religion, offered the only effective defence against progress, socialism and the evils of the American economic system. By the same year, 'Twelve Southern Writers' had assembled their defiant opinions in the now legendary anthology *I'll Take My Stand.*

Through the clamour of the joint diversity of these twelve writers came the single voice of 'sensibility' and 'intuition' defending itself against the tough-minded abstractions of scientific determinism. Two allied passages from Allen Tate's 'Religion and the Old South' make the point.

'Religion, when it directs its attention to the horse cropping the blue-grass on the lawn, is concerned with the whole horse, and not with that part of him which he has in common with other horses, or that more general part which he shares with other quadrupeds or

with the more general vertebrates; and not with the abstract horse in his capacity of horse-power in general, power that he shares with other machines of making objects move. Religion admits the existence of this horse, but says that he is only half of the horse. Religion offers to place before us the whole horse as he is in himself....

'This modern mind sees only half of the horse—that half which may become a dynamo, or an automobile, or any other horse-powered machine. If this mind had much respect for the full-bodied, grass-eating horse, it would never have invented the engine which represents only half of him. The religious mind, on the other hand, has this respect; it wants the whole horse; and it will be satisfied with nothing less.' (pp. 168–9)

See how closely this passage corresponds with one in Chesterton's *William Blake*, where he praises the mystic for resisting the seductions of rational generalisation:

'There is one element always to be remarked in the true mystic, however disputed his symbolism, and that is its brightness of colour and clearness of shape. I mean that we may be doubtful about the significance of a triangle or the precise lesson conveyed by a crimson cow. But in the work of a real mystic the triangle is a hard mathematical triangle not to be mistaken for a cone or a polygon. The cow is in colour a rich incurable crimson, and in shape unquestionably a cow, not to be mistaken for any of its evolutionary relatives, such as the buffalo or the bison. This can be seen very clearly, for instance, in the Christian art of illumination as practised at its best in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Christian decorators, being true mystics, were chiefly concerned to maintain the reality of objects. For the highest dogma of the spiritual is to affirm the material. By plain outline and positive colour those pious artists

strove chiefly to assert that a cat was truly in the eyes of God a cat and that a dog was pre-eminently doggish.' (pp. 132 ff.)

Significant in this context is the fact that Tate, Chesterton and McLuhan share a deep religious affinity with mediaeval Christianity. In the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, McLuhan sees the last strongholds of primitive piety as it struggled with the profane rationalism encouraged by the invention of written characters; and when, ten years after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, he in turn came to defend the Southern style, he deliberately paraphrased Tate's appeal for the 'whole horse'. 'The chivalric South, it has been said, wanted the whole horse, whereas the North wanted only to abstract the horsepower from the horse.' ('The Southern Quality', *Sewanee Review*, 1947, p. 375)

Although like most sophisticated advocates of the Old South, McLuhan had abandoned the historically unsupportable fiction of Dixie Noblesse, he substituted for it one that was equally wishful, suggesting that the South offered a splendid example of a society that shared its peculiar wisdom equally among all its members: 'the Southern writer shares most of his experience with the majority of Southerners, who never have heard of him—there is not the split between educated and "uneducated" which occurs in an atomized industrial community ... there is not the familiar head-heart split of the North, which became glaring in Europe and England in the Eighteenth Century'. ('The Southern Quality', p. 374)

One cannot help wondering whether or not the Negro is supposed to be included in this exalted peerage. Perhaps not. Perhaps it is only by contrast with the supposed inferiority that prompts the Negro's unmentioned exclusion, that the otherwise gross differences between educated and uneducated Southerners could be so promis-

cuously ignored. From Capetown to Montgomery the theory of unredeemable black inferiority has always been an unmentioned conceptual pre-requisite for upholding the fiction of white equality. 'Before that vast and capacious distinction all others were foreshortened, dwarfed and all but obliterated.' (W. J. Cash. *The Mind of the South*)

I do not mean to suggest that McLuhan is a racist, or even that he exploits a racial theory in order to promote the impudent myth of Southern egalitarianism. I prefer to think that his error is created by a more general ignorance of social reality, and this diagnosis would account for many of the other mistakes in his social speculation. Although, for example, McLuhan in no way opposes the programme of Civil Rights he betrays an almost breathtaking naivete when he comments on its achievements. 'Many people have observed how the real integrator or leveller of White and Negro was the private car and the truck, not the expression of moral points of view.' As Neil Compton exclaims, 'Southern negroes will be astonished to learn that General Motors really deserves the credit usually given to lunch room sit-ins and voter registration drives, and flabbergasted to note the tense in which McLuhan couches his remark.'[1] (*McLuhan Pro and Con*, p. 122)

1. To clinch the diagnosis of political ignorance in general I need only refer to an example taken from another area altogether.

McLuhan has always maintained that the cultural differences in 'sensory emphasis' are one of the most important determinants of political behaviour. In order to support this contention he sets up an unintentionally comic contrast between the espionage techniques employed respectively by the Russians and Americans. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* he suggests that the Soviet preoccupation with 'bugging' arises from the fact that Russia has always been an 'ear' culture. The United States' preference for high-flying spotter planes betrays a characteristic American emphasis

McLuhan is, then, so heavily prejudiced in favour of the Agrarian ideal that he is perfectly willing to advertise the South as an example of it, even if he has to ride rough-shod over contradictory facts. He is also an exponent of a bankrupt form of cultural history, the success of whose peculiar endeavour relies to a great extent on the use of large scale, tendentious generalisations. Even if McLuhan had *not* been an Agrarian, he would have written the sort of history that ignored or else obliterated the otherwise incorrigible facts of economic and political reality. For McLuhan conceives human development on such a grand scale that its component social details are often foreshortened to the point where they become indistinguishable. The unique elements which comprise the living character of communities are either ignored altogether or, where they seem to fit, subordinated to such enormous generalisations that they cease to be usefully recognisable. History becomes a struggle between successive dynasties of synthetic Leviathans.

Writing history in this way encourages a Procrustean tendency whereby societies and the traditions that nour-

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on the eye. In his enthusiasm for a theory that sets the eye against the ear, McLuhan has simply ignored the geo-political facts. For example it's a great deal easier to launch aerial missions around the frontiers of Russia when airstrips can be stationed on friendly territories nearby. The aerial surveillance of the island continent of America is a much riskier proposition altogether, entailing a dramatic violation of airspace from which there is no immediate escape. Anyway, since *The Gutenberg Galaxy* was published, the growth of satellite technology has abolished this strategic inequality, and for all their supposed prejudice against the eye, the Russians have not been slow to pocket their ears in favour of the snapshots they can now obtain from orbiting spacecraft. And as for bugging, it was, after all, the CIA and not NKVD who perfected the microphone concealed in the olive of an executive Gibson.

ish them are identified only in so far as they conform to clear cut and preferably sharply opposed ideological prototypes. Inconvenient exceptions that threaten to blur these neat distinctions are ignored altogether or translated into a form that corroborates the picture given. As a result, social reality loses its shape by being stretched between artificially paired alternatives.

Although this Procrustean tendency only becomes dramatically marked in his recent writings, which embody such tendentious distinctions as hot versus cool, eye versus ear, head against heart, McLuhan betrayed an early affinity for large scale dualisms in an essay which he wrote for the *Classical Journal* in 1946, called 'An Ancient Quarrel in Modern America'. In this article, and in the one already quoted on 'The Southern Quality', McLuhan claimed to have identified an ancient intellectual schism which survived through antiquity and the Renaissance to animate the modern conflict between the head and the heart.

This ideological split took its origin from the well-recognised quarrel between Socrates and the Sophists. Philosophers like Protagoras had always maintained that the human senses were so fickle and unreliable that they could never penetrate the mystery of the physical universe. Absolute truth would always remain a dream and the pursuit of science was therefore a waste of time. Nevertheless, while the Sophists were agreed that all human opinion was relative, they recognised that it was desirable, for the sake of civic harmony at least, that certain opinions should *prevail*. Instead of pursuing specialised knowledge, the Sophist advised the cultivation of prudential wisdom, and by encouraging the arts of persuasion and eloquence he tried to ensure popular obedience to the standards dictated by such wisdom. The Sophist emphasis fell therefore upon eloquence

rather than curiosity; upon oratory as opposed to enquiry.

To Socrates and his followers this attitude represented a contemptible abdication of intellectual responsibility and the Sophist was condemned as a glib shallow publicist. In spite of such formidable opposition, the Sophist tradition survived to inspire the eloquent humanism of the Roman statesman Cicero. For this prudent patrician there seemed to be no contradiction between eloquence and wisdom. Man, after all, was distinguished from the beasts by his capacity to use language—by cultivating eloquence he could scarcely avoid becoming wiser.

For McLuhan, 'the Ciceronian ideal reaches its flower in the scholar-statesman of encyclopaedic knowledge, profound practical experience and voluble social and public eloquence'. ('The Southern Quality', p. 371) So successful was Cicero in promoting the reconciliation between the separate roles of statesman, orator and philosopher, that he naturally became the heroic ideal upon which the humanists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance modelled their own behaviour.

'No more impressive evidence', wrote McLuhan, 'of the continuity of the "Ciceronian" tradition could be given here than that of L. K. Born in his preface of Erasmus' *Education of a Christian Prince*. Discussing the numerous manuals of this class, he says: That there is a continuous line of succession at least from the time of Isocrates with his *Ad Nicoclem* to the twentieth century is beyond question. The *Gargantua* of Rabelais is likewise a treatise on humanistic education for the prince just as much as More's *Utopia*, Castiglione's *Courtier*, Ascham's *Scholemaster*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.' ('An Ancient Quarrel in Modern America', *Classical Journal*, 1946, pp. 149–50)

In the eyes of such humanists there were no rewards for narrow technical specialism. How could there be? The mystery of nature was locked up for ever, so what was the point of cultivating specialised skills that were doomed to failure from the start? By contrast with the delusion of absolute Truth, Prudence, Grace and Civility were the only practical ideals that a man could hope to achieve, and specialism of any sort would seriously jeopardise the chances of success.

This cult of humane integrity was first seriously threatened, according to McLuhan, when the Parisian scholar Peter Abelard revived the dialectical method in the twelfth century. Transmitted to the Renaissance through the work of Ockham and the seventeenth century Huguenot scholar Peter Ramus, Abelard's pre-occupation with logical method re-infected Europe with the Socratic ambition to penetrate the scientific secrets of nature. The intellect achieved a dangerous precedence over the emotions, and men forgot their humanity in the drive to achieve technical mastery over the universe around them. In gaining knowledge, man had forfeited wisdom. Only in the Southern States of America, where the humanistic ideal was 'perfectly adapted to agrarian estate life', did the Sophist tradition survive with any genuine vigour. Elsewhere the head triumphed over the heart. In Calvinist New England, which had unfortunately inherited the specialised logic of Ramus, Harvard became a 'miniature Sorbonne'; and henceforth the Yankees were condemned to fulfill the dreadful destiny of scientific industrialism. Suffering now from 'an elephantiasis of the Will' and a corresponding atrophy of heart-felt civic prudence, the alienated Northerner was detached from the community around him, hell bent on profit and material fulfilment.

'The tool of Ramistic scriptural exegesis proved very

destructive of Scripture, naturally; for it was rationalistic and nominalistic. That is, it *made* all problems logical problems and at the same time destroyed *ontology* and any possibility of metaphysics, a fact which accounts for the notorious anemia, the paralyzing scepticism of New England speculation. Already in the Seventeenth Century Harvard had designated *technologia* as the true successor of metaphysics—an absurdity, with all the practical consequences, which is piously perpetuated at this hour by Dewey and his disciples. For this mind there is nothing which cannot be settled *by method*. It is the mind which weaves the intricacies of efficient production, "scientific" scholarship, and business administration. It doesn't permit itself an inkling of what constitutes a social or political problem (in the Burke or Yeats sense) simply because there is no *method* for tackling such problems. That is also why the very considerable creative political thought of America has come only from the South—from Jefferson to Wilson.' ('The Southern Quality', p. 367)

Since Ramus plays so important a part in McLuhan's historical speculations, and because McLuhan finds in his writings a special relevance to his own typographic theory, I must give some account of his life and work.

Briefly then: Ramus, who was born in Picardy in 1515, opposed the logical method of Aristotle on the grounds that it was too cumbersome and almost impossible to memorise. He suggested that logical argument should be paid out in simple dichotomies, thus relieving the memory of the almost impossible task of fixing Aristotle's long lists of pedantically differentiated categories.

It is hard now for a modern reader to imagine the advantages offered by such reforms. Even the improved

dichotomies seem unnecessarily obscure and it is difficult to see how they could have assisted any important argument. However, the protagonists of the method were fanatically loyal to it; and as Perry Miller has shown, the Calvinist academies of North America adopted it with great enthusiasm.

The problem of training and developing the human memory remained a major issue throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. Authorities vied with each other to produce the ideal mnemonic system, and when Ramus projected his simplified scheme he was simply adding *his* contribution to a well established tradition of mnemotechnics.

Most people are familiar with the fact that the memory is considerably assisted when the items to be recalled are arranged in the mind's eye in significant order, especially when that order is reinforced by vivid visual imagery. 'I have been told of a professor', wrote Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory*, 'who used to amuse his students at parties by asking each of them to name an object; one of them noted down all the objects in the order in which they had been named. Later in the evening the professor would cause general amazement by repeating the list of objects in the right order. He performed his little memory feat by placing the objects, as they were named, on the window sill, on the desk, on the waste-paper basket, and so on. Then he revisited those places in turn and demanded from them their deposits. He had never heard of the classical mnemonic but had discovered his technique quite independently. Had he extended his efforts by attaching notions to the objects remembered on the places he might have caused still greater amazement by delivering his lectures from memory, as the classical orator delivered his speeches.' (pp. 3–4)

This familiar technique was formally sponsored in two important treatises that came down to the Middle Ages from classical antiquity, the anonymous *Ad C. Herennium Libri IV* and the *De Oratore* of Cicero.

'Consequently one must employ a large number of places which must be well lighted, clearly set out in order, at moderate intervals apart; and images which are active, sharply defined, unusual, and which have the power of speedily encountering and penetrating the psyche . . . the ability to use these [images] will be supplied by practice which engenders habit, and [by images] of similar words changed and unchanged in case or drawn [from denoting] the part to denoting the genus, and by using the image of one word to remind of a whole sentence, as a consummate painter distinguishing the position of objects by modifying their shapes.' (*De Oratore* II. lxxxvii, 357)

Methods such as these were earnestly recommended by scholars throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, since Memory was one of the crucial components of the cardinal virtue of Prudence. Ramus was offended by the concrete imagery suggested by Cicero and felt that it was unnecessary to stimulate the faculty of memory with such crude devices. He preferred to develop memory by encouraging the efficiency of rational thought itself. Logical consistency was its own guarantee of memorability. In this respect he was probably influenced by Quintilian, who had earlier criticised the visual method of Cicero, comparing it unfavourably with the advantages of straightforward unillustrated logical thinking (see *Institutio Oratoria* XI. ii, 36).

According to McLuhan, however, it was not just the logical consistency of the arguments that helped them to remain in the memory, but the way in which they were laid out on the page. For although specific imagery had

been banished from the method, the physical arrangement on the paper constituted a visual mnemonic in its own right, especially since it was displayed with the peculiar clarity possessed by print.

There are however some disturbing inconsistencies in this proposal. Some impressive authorities disagree with the suggestion that Ramus' display technique depended upon the invention of printing, and that spatial visualisation for memorisation was a new development introduced by the printed book. For instance, to Frances Yates, drawing on the work of F. Saxl, 'the printed Ramist epitomes are a transfer to the printed book of the visually ordered and schematised lay-outs of manuscripts'. And if, as McLuhan suggests, the visual sense was subordinate to the acoustic one before the invention of typography, the eloquent orator Cicero would surely have been the last person to sponsor the use of strong visual images as an *aide memoire*. And yet, in spite of the fact that Cicero lived long before the invention of type, he took extraordinary pains to acknowledge the primacy of sight among all the other senses.

'It has been sagaciously discerned by Simonides or else discovered by some other person, that the most complete pictures are formed in our minds of the things that have been conveyed to them and imprinted on them by the senses, but that the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight, and that consequently perceptions received by the ears or by reflexion can be most easily retained if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes.' (*De Oratore* II, lxxxvii, 357)

The course of human development is so complex and so confusing that it is often tempting to accept schemes that appear to put the events of the last two thousand years into such orderly and even elegant perspective.

History however is incorrigibly resistant to such large scale simplifications, and although it may be possible to identify *analogies* between the thoughts of one generation and the next, and useful even to draw tentative abstractions about the continuity of certain well recognised traditions, it is dangerous to try to push the process further than the real facts will allow. Conceptual simplicity is not necessarily a guarantee of truth, especially where human affairs are concerned.

How easy it would be to write history on the assumption that human development followed the course of a few relatively catastrophic divisions. Having identified the crucial mutations that were responsible, the entire story of human progress could be redrawn on the plan of a family tree and societies could then be confidently characterised according to whether or not they had inherited the fatal psychic genes. The difficulty is that the genetic model does not apply to social history, for the simple reason that the forces which determine social inheritance do not and cannot correspond to the simple fixed particles which are responsible for biological heredity. It may be an attractive metaphor, but in trying to reconstruct history on the assumption that it is anything more than a metaphor, social details are brutally melted down until they can be poured into the convenient mould provided.

I am not competent to press hard upon all the errors which arise from McLuhan's technique—the dazzling scope of his references makes it difficult for any one person to do so—but one or two critical objections at least make the larger point.

1. It is perverse to suggest that the humanistic tradition—even if one could realistically identify it as a continuous line—'benevolently' discouraged the growth of science. Most historians now agree, I think, that when

experimental science began its substantial development in the seventeenth century, it actually *flourished* under the aegis of the humanism which first allowed men to look at Nature without shuddering in metaphysical dread.

By systematically cultivating their status as human beings, men acquired such confidence in their own prudent nobility that they were no longer overawed by the competing majesty of Nature. Far from *eclipsing* scientific curiosity, the image of civic order celebrated under the humanist regime provided a powerful metaphor through which men could confront nature as an orderly and explicable entity. If human affairs yielded so gracefully to decency and decorum why shouldn't nature conform to the same benevolent plan? It is not an accident that the regularities of the cosmos should have been christened with the title of 'Law'.

I am not suggesting that all humanists incline towards science. Far from. But it is absurd to imply that humanism itself constitutes the polar opposite of the temperament which *did* eventually concern itself with technical knowledge.

2. Although McLuhan sets up the humanistic courtier as the ideal opponent of scientific specialism, this opinion hardly squares with the substantial patronage given to scientific academies by the princes of Renaissance Europe. Moreover, many of the exponents of seventeenth-century science were gentleman of the very type McLuhan would have identified as antagonists of such an enterprise. William Harvey for example, the paragon of experimental biology, was reared from the yeoman-agrarian stock that McLuhan so confidently appropriates to the tradition of anti-scientific humanism. He spent the greater part of his life as a model courtier in the service of an Anglican monarch. And it was the

Catholic Charles II, rather than the Calvinist executioner of his father, who issued the founding charter for the greatest scientific society in Europe. It would be hard to imagine a more humanistic manifesto than that in which the Royal Society announced its own ideals (see Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, pp. 62–3, 427). Conversely, Thomas Jefferson, McLuhan's paragon of Ciceronian humanism, was scarcely inhibited by the identity thus assigned to him from 'extracting the horsepower from the horse'. As he wrote to George Fleming on 29th December, 1815: 'I had a fixed break to be moved by the gate of my saw-mill, which broke and beat at the rate of two hundred pounds a day. But the inconveniences of interrupting that, induced me to try the power of a horse, and I have found it to answer perfectly.... I expect that a single horse will do the breaking and beating of ten men.' (*Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Volume VI p. 504)

3. In opposition to the humanist strain, McLuhan recognises a so-called dialectical tradition initiated by Socrates in his quarrel with the Sophists. Even if one could accept the suggestion that this tradition was continuous, most of the facts contradict the assertion that it was the stream that nourished scientific development. In their separate ways both Plato and Aristotle inhibited the growth of science for more than a thousand years.

The monolithic mysticism of Plato paralysed empirical enquiry by inviting men to neglect the appearance of physical reality in favour of the pristine Ideals that lurked beneath the surface. It would be hard to imagine an attitude that was more patently hostile to the pursuit of experimental science.

As for Aristotle, it is generally agreed that natural knowledge was almost entirely stultified by pedantic adherence to his system of enquiry. In fact when Joseph

Glanvill was about to become a Fellow of the Royal Society he celebrated the joys of being released from the tyrannies of Aristotelian physics.[1]

McLuhan is certainly correct to associate the dialectical tradition with the name of Aristotle: this ancient Greek example was followed with great enthusiasm by the scholars of the Middle Ages, and the tradition of dispute that resulted yielded an extremely narrow form of intellectual specialism. But McLuhan is wrong to suppose that this specialism led to the development of science and technology. It is in fact impossible to imagine how it could have done so. For logic as such is

1. 'The *Aristotelian Hypotheses* give a very dry and *jejeune* account of Nature's *Phaenomena*. For as to its more *mysterious* reserves, *Peripatetick* enquiry hath left them unattempted; and the most forward notional Dictators sit down here in a contented ignorance; and as if nothing were knowable then is already discover'd, they put stop to all endeavours of their Solution. *Qualities*, that were *Occult* to *Aristotle*, must be so to us; and we must not *Philosophize* beyond *Sympathy and Antipathy*: ... Nor is the *Aristotelian Philosophy* guilty of this sloth and Philosophick penury, only in remoter abstrusities: but in solving the most ordinary causalities, it is as defective and unsatisfying. Even the most common productions are here resolv'd into *Celestial influences, Elemental combinations, active* and *passive* principles, and such generalities; while the particular manner of them is as hidden as *sympathies*. And if we follow *manifest qualities* beyond the empty significantion of their Names; we shall find them as *occult*, as those which are professedly so. That heavy Bodies descend by *gravity* ... and again, that *Gravity* is a *quality* whereby an heavy body descends, is an impertinent *Circle*, and teacheth nothing. ... What a *Romance* is the story of those impossible *concamerations, Intersections, Involutions* and feign'd *Rotations* of *solid Orbs*? All substituted to salve the credit of a broken ill-contrived *Systeme* ... That the *Galaxy* is a *Meteor*, was the account of *Aristotle*: but the *Telescope* hath autoptically confuted it; ... and a Comet is no more ground for *Astrological presages* then a *flaming* Chimney.' (*The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, pp. 169–75)

epistemologically neutral. Being a deductive system, it can neither create nor destroy intellectual matter. The conclusions which it yields are already implied in the premises which are submitted to it. All that logic can do is to demonstrate the inevitable entailments of certain given propositions. If these propositions are corrupt, the conclusions based upon them will be corrupt also. If they are sterile the conclusions will be too. Logic in other words is a strictly tautologous enterprise, and it will only deliver new truths when fed with propositions that are based on factual observations. The machinery may be artfully redesigned so that it moves faster, but this will have no effect on the quality of the product which appears at the other end. Ramus' simplification of many of Aristotle's more baroque categories is a case in point, but because he made no practical effort to improve the factual input, his streamlined machinery continued to deliver casuistical verbiage.

So that while McLuhan is perfectly right to point out that the New England universities of the seventeenth century inherited the reforms of Ramus, he is wrong to suggest that in doing so they confirmed an inclination towards scientific specialism. Quite the contrary. Sequestered on the shore of an uncivilised wilderness, the Ramistic academies of Harvard and Yale perpetuated the sterile logic-chopping of the Sorbonne and thereby exempted New England for at least a century from any significant part in the scientific revolution. It was only in the *humanistic* atmosphere of courtly Europe that empirical enquiry could breathe and grow.

The problem of the divergent fates of North and South that play so central a part in McLuhan's early thought must therefore be reformulated. For if slavish adherence to logic, Ramistic or otherwise, inhibits rather than

encourages the growth of science and technology, we must ask ourselves how the American North eventually achieved its vast industrial supremacy *in spite of* such a paralysing inheritance. Conversely, if as seems likely humanism encourages the growth of science, why did the South lag so far behind in technological achievement; seeing that, as McLuhan insists, this region of America inherited the mainstream of such a facilitating tradition?

The answer to these questions lies in the investigation of social, economic and demographic factors—factors that have been conspicuously ignored by McLuhan in his enthusiasm to advertise the continuity of some utterly dubious struggle between the head and the heart.

The specialised patterns of Atlantic trade for example threw peculiar strains upon the economy of the North; coupled with the fact that the vast influx of nineteenth century European immigrants reorganised the social necessities of that region in such a way that technological opportunism was vigorously encouraged.

Conversely, the aristocratic humanism of the Old South, in so far as it existed at all, was never concentrated or coherent enough to overcome the technological inertia that infects any society which depends upon cash crops and slave labour. Far from being the stable civic paradise painted by McLuhan, the Old South was a cauldron of rampant rural individualism. It was restless, plural and above all thinly settled. The volatile expansion of its population prevented that steady consolidation of shared human interests so essential to the growth of organised knowledge. If the South remained technologically backward it was not, as McLuhan implies, because it was *too* civilised, but more direly, because it was not civilised *enough*.

From McLuhan's point of view an awkward contra-

diction arises immediately one turns his thesis upside down like this, thereby identifying the growth of technology with the humanistic tradition. For, in his eyes, it would seem incredible that a tradition which put such an eloquent emphasis on integral civic morality should yield to the dehumanised excesses of modern technology. What possible connection could there be between the encyclopaedic decorum of Cicero, More and Erasmus and the desolate specialised individualism of our modern industrial culture?

The question is not quite so paradoxical as it seems. If the lines of historical transmission were as straight as McLuhan suggests, he would of course be justified in being puzzled. But social development is much more complicated than that. No man can tell how subsequent generations will exploit and transform his ideas. No doubt Robert Boyle would have disowned the satanic mills whose steam engines embodied the functional application of his own gas laws. But simply because the society which grew up around such establishments became corrupt, there is no reason to suppose that Boyle's own vision was infected with the seeds of spiritual decay. The fate of ideas and inventions is determined by the character of social institutions that choose to exploit them, and not by some hypothetical spiritual flaw ingrained in the imagination that produced the original invention.

The point is that McLuhan's historical enterprise is not really a descriptive one at all. It is a system of moral values in accordance with which he has rewritten history so as to make it embody the continuing story of an assault on these values. Far from recognising an ancient quarrel in modern America he has paraphrased history in order to identify a modern quarrel in antiquity. Which might be legitimate if only one were sure that

this modern quarrel had any real existence outside McLuhan's own somewhat schismatic imagination. As it is, however, the modern quarrel is largely created by a Manichean view of the human personality, according to which the profane thrust of rational positivism is forever at odds with the prudent initiatives of heartfelt moral intelligence. In the light of such a clear cut division it is of course easy to go back over the course of history and rearrange its component details until they fit. But in doing so the accumulated records of human development are made to degenerate into a sort of Rorschach blot, into which the writer can project almost any shape he wants. Thus McLuhan, in spite of his contempt for so called linear explanations, has been so hypnotised by his simple dualism that, in searching for its historical origins, he has himself automatically lapsed into a dramatic form if linearity.

4 The Single Point of View

Up to this point in his career (the beginning of the 1940s) McLuhan seems to have stagnated into a well-recognised form of cultural nostalgia. The familiar themes of conservative Agrarianism repeat themselves like a monotonous fugue in the essays he published during the forties. When he was not celebrating the virtues of the Old South he was acting as critical spokesman on behalf of writers like Joyce, Eliot, Pound and Lewis—men who also found themselves painfully at odds with the profane democratic rationalism of modern life. Witness for instance this extract from his long article 'Wyndham Lewis: Lemuel in Lilliput':

'The life of free intelligence has never, in the Western World, encountered such anonymous and universal hostility before. To read the "pamphlets" of Lewis is to become aware not only of the scope of the forces arrayed against reason and art, but it is to have anatomized before one's eyes every segment of the contemporary scene of glamorized commerce and advertising, and, above all, of the bogus science, philosophy, art and literature which has been the main instrument in producing the universal stupefaction.

'Lewis confronts modern society with the trained eye of a painter to whom the cut of every garment, every gesture, every contour is a richly expressive language. However, the modern man has long lost the use of his eyes. He only has ears and those for the Napoleonic and romantic thunder of Beethoven, the turgid and dionysiac megalomania of Wagner, the erotic day-dreaming of

Tschaikowsky, or the tom-tom and African bottom-*wagging* of *swing* called to rut. With Dr. Coué-like repetition we hear on every hand: "This isn't a war, it's a revolution." "We live in an age of transition." "Things will be different after this war." "This won't be the last war." Whether spoken by the responsible or the moronic, these remarks, and countless others like them, have no meaning. They are spoken in a trance of inattention while the reason is in permanent abeyance. They are typical of men who no longer understand the world they have made and which, as robots, they operate day by day.' (p. 60)

From now on McLuhan could easily have retired into the irritable solitude that often awaits nostalgic reactionaries of this sort. However, far from slipping into the obvious forms of splenetic irrelevance, he underwent a large scale change of critical accent during the late forties, and it is now rather hard to reconcile the high patrician anguish of the St. Louis period with the euphoric acceptance that marks his work today.

Yet the change in attitude is more apparent than real. By adopting a stance of artful detachment and by heaping contempt on all those who let their values show, McLuhan has managed to sponsor all his original preferences under the disguise of someone who has achieved a superlative freedom from 'the single point of view'.

He acquired this strategic tranquillity partly as a result of studying the life and work of Edgar Allen Poe. In 1944 he published in the *Sewanee Review* an article whose main purpose was to locate Poe in the Southern tradition of chivalrous humanism:

'I propose', he explained, 'to suggest how Poe's achievements are to be understood in the light of a great tradition of life and letters which he derived from the South of his day. This tradition has been a continuous

force in European law, letters, and politics from the time of the Greek sophists. It is most conveniently referred to as the Ciceronian ideal, since Cicero gave it to St. Augustine and St. Jerome, who in turn saw to it that it has never ceased to influence Western society. The Ciceronian ideal as expressed in the "De Oratore" or in St. Augustine's "De Doctrina Christiana" is the ideal of rational man reaching his noblest attainment in the expression of an eloquent wisdom.' ('Edgar Poe's Tradition', p. 25)

By fixing Poe within this admired tradition it might seem that McLuhan had merely added another name to the ranks of those who found themselves in futile opposition to modern life. But, according to McLuhan, Poe had derived from this embattled tradition a critical strategy that equipped him to *survive*, and not merely to deplore, the assaults of modern vulgarity. For, as Baudelaire recognised, Poe was the prototype of the aristocratic dandy—the original fastidious *flâneur* behind whose mask of ironic indifference the threatened values of old fashioned humanism survived intact. To McLuhan, Poe 'cannot be understood apart from the great Byronic tradition (which extends at least back to Cervantes) of the aristocratic rebel fighting for human values in a sub-human chaos of indiscriminate appetite.' (p. 25)

In addition to the suggestive tactics offered by his life, Poe wrote a famous story that provided McLuhan with a highly specific metaphor of moral survival—a metaphor that emphasised the advantages to be gained from detachment. In 'A Descent into the Maelstrom' Poe tells of a sailor who finds himself swirling to destruction on the walls of a notorious whirlpool. At first he is naturally overcome with panic and despair. Soon however his scientific curiosity gets the better of his fear, and he

notices that by studying the behaviour of the debris floating on the surface of the lethal current he can actually predict the action of the maelstrom. Instead of exhausting himself by fighting the irresistible force of the water he decides to surrender, and before long he is swept from the turmoil unscathed.

This simple story provided McLuhan with a vivid working model for survival. The whirlpool is the social chaos produced by man's technical ingenuity. The power of this artificial maelstrom is by now so enormous that it is hopeless to try to swim against it. If, however, like Poe's sailor, the anguished moralist can suspend his panic and observe rather than deplore the profane swirl, he will conserve his energy and eventually learn to cooperate to his own advantage. McLuhan therefore repudiated indignation in favour of amused vigilance. As he wrote in the Preface of *The Mechanical Bride* in 1951:

'It was this amusement born of his rational detachment as a spectator of his own situation that gave him the thread which led him out of the Labyrinth. And it is in the same spirit that this book is offered as an amusement. Many who are accustomed to the note of moral indignation wil mistake this amusement for mere indifference. But the time for anger and protest is in the early stages of a new process. The present stage is extremely advanced. Moreover, it is full, not only of destructiveness but also of promises of rich new developments to which moral indignation is a very poor guide.' (p. v)

The publication in 1951 of *The Mechanical Bride* marked McLuhan's own descent into the maelstrom. In this remarkable volume, little recognised when it first appeared, he compiled a cyclorama of commercial exhibits taken from the mass media and then 'set the reader at the centre of this revolving picture ... where

he may (like Poe's sailor) observe the action'.

The Mechanical Bride however is not just a merry-go-round of specimens taken from the mass media. There would have been no point in simply re-creating a scale model of the maelstrom, since the modern public had already lived at the centre of the real one for more than sixty years without having availed itself of the opportunity for observing its dire effects. McLuhan therefore wrote a detailed running commentary, in the course of which he tried to release 'the intelligible meaning of the various exhibits', hoping thereby, like a psychoanalyst, to release his readers from their slavery to them. For McLuhan identified the various specimens as synthetic dreams meeting 'a somnambulist public that accepts them uncritically. Otherwise how explain the absence of reaction in the name of the human dignity they destroy?'

The dream, as Freud realised, is a subtly dramatised fulfilment of desires which society forbids the individual to gratify. These appetites however can never be destroyed. Sublimated into fantasy, they retain and even redouble their strength, and are only prevented from disturbing consciousness by discharging themselves in the altered form of dreams.

Freud realised that the manifest content of the dream gave no immediate clue to the motives that created it. The unconscious dramatises its frustrations in code in order that the conscious mind may retain its complacent belief that it has actually abolished the appetites which society has told it to repudiate. When the waking subject recalls his dream, therefore, he is often puzzled by its bizarre irrelevance, unaware that he has just performed, in disguise as it were, a shadow version of the very acts that society has prohibited.

According to McLuhan the ad, the comic strip and the

movie have many important features in common with the dream. They also work their various effects by concealing their correspondence with the secret motives of the unconscious mind.

How, he asks, is this artful correspondence achieved? By systematic research into the dynamics of human motive; and by translating the results into cunningly contrived programmes of entertainment and persuasion. In other words, by kidnapping the products of self-knowledge and putting them to work in the service of deliberate control. This, by McLuhan's account, is where humanity has been betrayed by its own technical ingenuity. Time was when 'the know-how of the twelfth century was dedicated to an all inclusive knowledge of human and divine ends. The secularization of this system has meant the adaption of techniques not for knowledge but control.'

As usual McLuhan is remarkably confident and definitive in dating these supposedly critical events in cultural history. Nevertheless he *is* correct in recognising that psychological knowledge may be exploited in two entirely different ways.

For the pious moralist, self knowledge is an end in itself—'the desire and pursuit of the whole'. And if, as Augustine recognised, the mind is vaster than most of its owners realise, there are within each of us vast tracts of psychic territory awaiting ethical colonisation. The more we know about this region, the better we are able to direct our behaviour towards decent ends. In so far as we are dictated to by unconscious motives, we are to some extent automata. By enlarging the scope of self knowledge we reduce the number of actions that are automatic and increase those that are deliberate. Since ethics only deals with actions that are deliberate, our

moral status is magnified with each increment in self knowledge.

The same knowledge may however be used to subvert rather than assist moral freedom. That is to say our unconscious mind may be commandeered by experts who have specialised knowledge of its susceptibilities, and used by them to dictate our behaviour without our knowing consent.

How could such a thing happen? How could we be prompted to act against our choice without immediately knowing that we had been interfered with? Because, as Freud discovered, a certain proportion of our behaviour is already dictated by urges which we neither recognise nor control. If the unconscious can deliver its motives into unconsciousness in such a form that the individual acts upon them as if they were undertaken of his own free will, it is theoretically possible for someone with expert knowledge of the mind to programme the unconscious in order to influence the behaviour of a given subject without his necessarily feeling that he has been constrained in any way.

This is just what McLuhan believes has happened. By creating an elite class of psychological technicians we have inadvertently sold the franchise to our own unconscious.

'Striving constantly ... to watch, anticipate, and control events on the inner, invisible stage of the collective dream, the ad agencies and Hollywood turn themselves unwittingly into a sort of collective novelist, whose characters, imagery, and situations are an intimate revelation of the passions of the age. But this huge collective novel can be read only by someone trained to use his eyes and ears, and in detachment from the visceral riot that this sensational fare tends to produce. The reader has to be a second Ulysses in order to withstand the

siren onslaught. Or, to vary the image, the uncritical reader of this collective novel is like the person who looked directly at the face of Medusa without the mirror of conscious reflection. He stands in danger of being frozen into a helpless robot. Without the mirror of the mind, nobody can live a human life in the face of our present mechanized dream.' (p. 97)

The function of *The Mechanical Bride* therefore is the restoration of vigilance. By using multiple cross references in literature, anthropology, and social psychology McLuhan forces his audience to recognise the way in which their various desires have been appropriated to commercial ends.

For example he quotes an ad for a diesel engine which creates a persuasive elision between the idea of mechanical power and the virile strength of a prize fighter:

> 'RINGSIDE SEAT FOR A BATTLE ROYAL!
> Correct Lubrication Fights For You Inside Your Diesel and Throughout Your Plant!
> You're in the front row, looking at a terrific battle inside a big Diesel engine . . .
> This battle royal is typical of similar battles going on constantly inside all the machines in your plant.'

And he comments: 'The man who wrote the above copy had a natural feeling for the relations between the prize fight and heavy industry. The century of spectacular prize fighting which lies behind us coincides with the era of the maulers and bruisers of industry. A more subtle age of bureaucratic and monopolistic business enterprise calls for the more complex sport of "push-button football". Modern football would have bored to death

the tycoons of yesteryear, because they would have found in it none of the dramatization of their own lives. Sport is a kind of magic or ritual, varying with the changing character of the dominant classes. And it embodies in a symbolic way the drives and tensions of a society.' (p. 123)

McLuhan employs the same technique when examining the popular heroes of American comics. Dagwood in the Blondie strip, for instance, is ' "the American way of life". But Chick Young's strip seems to be assured of survival into a world which will be as alien to it as it already is to McManus's Jiggs. Those who grew up with Dagwood will, like those who grew up with Jiggs, insist on growing old with him. For many millions on this continent Jiggs and Dagwood are fixed points of geniality, beacons of orientation, amid flux and stress. They represent a new kind of entertainment, a sort of magically recurrent daily ritual which now exerts on the spontaneous popular feelings a rhythmic reassurance that does substitute service, as it were, for the old popular experience of the recurrence of the seasons.' (p. 69)'

McLuhan was not the first to make this sort of analysis of modern mass culture. George Orwell, Wyndham Lewis and other writers had already made distinctive contributions to our understanding of it. Wyndham Lewis had recognised the drowsing automatism of modern man, and in the scorching polemic of *Time and Western Man* he also identified the dismal syntax of the ad.

'In the world of Advertisement, Coué-fashion, everything that happens today (or everything that is being advertised *here and now*) is better, bigger, brighter, more astonishing than anything that has ever existed before. (Dr. Coué actually was embarked upon his teaching, so he said, by noticing, and responding to, an advertisement.)

The psychology that is required of the public to absorb this belief in the marvellous one and only—monist, unique, superlative, *exclusive*—fact (immediately obliterating all other beliefs and shutting the mind to anything that may happen elsewhere or tomorrow) is a very rudimentary one indeed.' (pp. 28–9)

'The world in which Advertisement dwells is a one-day world. It is necessarily a plane universe, without depth. Upon this Time lays down discontinuous entities, side by side; each day, each temporal entity, complete in itself, with no perspectives, no fundamental exterior reference at all. In this way the structure of human life is entirely transformed, where and in so far as this intensive technique gets a psychologic ascendancy. The average man is invited to slice his life into a series of one-day lives, regulated by the clock of fashion. The human being is no longer the unit. He becomes the containing frame for a generation or sequence of ephemerids, roughly organized into what he calls his "personality". Or the highly organized human mind finds its natural organic unity degraded into a worm-like extension, composed of a segmented, equally-distributed, accentless life. Each segment, each *fashion-day* (as the day of this new creature could be called) must be organically self-sufficing.' (p. 28)

George Orwell recognised the elementary psychology that lay underneath the blood and thunder stories in boys' magazines; and in the famous essay on seaside postcards, he benevolently identified the popular expression of what he calls 'the unofficial self'. In the same vein, the American critic Robert Warshow exposed the characteristic appeal of the gangster movie, showing for instance how the gangster's death 'pays for our fantasies, releasing us momentarily both from the content of success which he denies by caricaturing it, and from

the need to succeed, which he shows to be dangerous'. There are many other examples of such cultural 'psychoanalysis'; so that in one respect at least McLuhan was contributing to a well developed form of cultural criticism.

McLuhan distinguishes himself from most of the other critics of mass culture in recognising that 'it is full, not only of destructiveness but also of promises of rich new developments to which moral indignation is a poor guide'. This unexpected switch from resignation to frank optimism was accomplished by making a careful and previously overlooked distinction between the form and the content of the material under consideration. While he loudly denounced the *matter* of ads and newspaper cartoons, he identified certain characteristics of form and structure whereby these otherwise deplorable creations were closely related to all that he thought best and most regenerative in avant garde poetry and painting.

For instance in a Berkshire stocking ad, where an effort has been made to sell the product by appealing to sexual instinct, the copywriter has by-passed the prudish vigilance of the conscious mind by omitting the obvious syntactical connections between the image of a rearing stallion and that of the demure lady drawn alongside.

'Juxtaposition of items permits the advertiser to "say", by methods which *Time* has used to great effect, what could never pass the censor of consciousness. A most necessary contrast to "raging animality" is that a girl should appear gentle, refined, aloof, and innocent. It's her innocence, her obvious "class" that's terrific, because dramatically opposed to the suggestion of brutal violation.' (*The Mechanical Bride*, p. 81)

The unconscious mind, primitive and immediate in its

action, supplies the missing connections and understands, in a way that the conscious mind finds difficult, that there can be 'symbolic unity among the most diverse and externally unconnected facts and situations'. While McLuhan correctly bemoans the fact that human susceptibilities should be callously exploited in this manner, he celebrates the triumph of a technique that is otherwise honourably used by modern poets and painters.

'This ad employs the same technique as Picasso in *The Mirror*. By setting up a conventional day-self over against a tragic night-self, Picasso is able to provide a time capsule of an entire life ... By juxtaposition and contrast he is able to "say" a great deal and provide much intelligibility for daily life.

'The lay-out men of the present ad debased this technique by making it a vehicle for saying a great deal about sex, stallions, and "ritzy dames" who are provided with custom built allure.' (p. 80)

For practitioners of an enterprise that is widely despised by artists and intellectuals, it gave an enormous boost to self-esteem to have their work identified, even at a debased level, with the exalted initiatives of Picasso. It is hardly surprising that Madison Avenue pays such extravagant respect to McLuhan. Copywriters and other exponents of the mass media have grown increasingly sensitive to liberal and radical criticism. Many of these men are university graduates and as such are seriously embarrassed to find themselves practising an art they have been taught as students to suspect. It is easy to imagine their pleasure therefore on discovering a university professor who recognises, in their joint undertaking, not merely a creative element, but a creative element which represents one of the 'most hopeful developments in thought and feeling'.

What McLuhan claimed to have identified in the ad was an idiom which poets and writers of the modern movement had also recognised in the myth, the fairy tale and the dream. That is to say a quality of immediate allusive thought where ideas and images are free to imply one another without formal connections. In the fairy tale, for instance, as Chesterton pointed out, the ordinary laws of cause are suspended in favour of magical imperatives.

'In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone.' (*Orthodoxy*, p. 98)

According to McLuhan, literacy and logic have curtailed this capacity for creating allusive cross reference and, as a result, we have violated the integral simultaneity of primitive experience. Ideas have been gradually shorn of their imaginative 'poly-valence' so that instead of being able to associate with one another in large suggestive clusters they are forced to link up in simple disciplined succession. For all the practical advantages that might have been gained from such a discipline, it has in the long run, says McLuhan, imposed a 'spurious intelligibility' upon our experience and lost us the priceless inheritance of total awareness.

McLuhan himself points out that he was by no means the first to notice that the mass media contained features that usefully reverted to those of pre-logical thought. 'The French symbolists, followed by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, saw that there was a new art form of universal scope present in the technical layout of the modern newspaper. Here is a major instance of how a by-

product of industrial imagination, a genuine agency of contemporary folk-lore, led to radical artistic developments. To the alerted eye, the front page of a newspaper is a superficial chaos which can lead the mind to attend to cosmic harmonies of a very high order. Yet when these harmonies are more sharply stylized by a Picasso or a Joyce, they seem to give offence to the very people who should appreciate them most. But that is a seperate story.' (*The Mechanical Bride*, p. 4)

Moral indignation, as McLuhan himself emphasises, would be a poor guide to arriving at such perceptions. However he has only been able to achieve his own freedom from such indignation by ignoring the content of the mass media and by concentrating on their abstract form instead. In other words, in *The Mechanical Bride* we can see a primitive overture to his subsequent interest in the Medium at the expense of the Message.

One cannot help being disturbed by the abdication of political intelligence implied in such an attitude. It may well be the case that the techniques employed by copywriters have a great deal in common with those used by avant garde artists. However it's one thing to identify such a similarity: it's another thing to celebrate it. By rejoicing in the fact that a Berkshire stocking ad shares structural features with a Picasso, we are distracted from the urgent need to criticise the economic institutions that resort to such techniques in their effort to get us to buy. However, the various procedures that one might use for such criticism are the very ones which McLuhan despises—'morbid symptoms whose impulses are neither social nor rational, but technological derivatives'.

The emphasis upon structural analysis which sets *The Mechanical Bride* apart from most of the other com-

mentaries on the mass media puts McLuhan in line with a critical tradition that found its most eloquent exponent in the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin.

Wölfflin, a student of Jacob Burkhardt, succeeded in creating a method of pictorial analysis that largely ignored the emotional tone and narrative content of the paintings under consideration. He was able to distinguish national and epochal differences simply by looking at the way in which the various artists handled the structure of pictorial space.

For instance, in distinguishing between the 'classic' art of the cinquecento and the 'baroque' art of the seicento Wölfflin suggested a set of criteria all of which are completely independent of narrative or emotional content. Here are two which make the point, taken from Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*.

'1. The development from the linear to the painterly, i.e. the development of line as the path of vision and guide of the eye, and the gradual depreciation of line: in more general terms, the perception of the object by its tangible character—in outline and surfaces—on the one hand, and on the other, a perception which is by way of surrendering itself to the mere visual appearance and can abandon "tangible" design. In the former case the stress is laid on the limits of things; in the other the work tends to look limitless. Seeing by volumes and outlines isolates objects: for the painterly eye, they merge. In the one case interest lies more in the perception of individual material objects as solid, tangible bodies; in the other, in the apprehension of the world as a shifting semblance.

'2. The development from the plane to recession. Classic art reduces the parts of a total form to a sequence of planes, the baroque emphasises depth. Plane is the element of line, extension in one plane the form of the

greatest explicitness; with the discounting of the contour comes the discounting of the plane, and the eye relates objects essentially in the direction of forwards and backwards. This is no qualitative difference: with a greater power of representing spatial depths, the innovation has nothing directly to do: it signifies rather a radically different mode of representation, just as "plane style" in our sense is not the style of primitive art, but makes its appearance only at the moment at which foreshortening and spatial illusion are completely mastered.' (pp. 14–15)

Wölfflin's student Sigfried Giedion developed this tradition of formal analysis. In the influential lectures which he delivered at Harvard in 1941 and later published as *Space, Time and Architecture*, he combined Wölfflin's technique of pictorial analysis with a concern for the destiny of modern culture. In the preface to his book he anticipates, almost word for word, the sense of crisis that prompted McLuhan to write *The Mechanical Bride*. *Space, Time and Architecture* is intended for 'those who are alarmed by the present state of our culture and anxious to find a way out of the apparent chaos of its contradictory tendencies'. Like Poe's sailor, Giedion suggests that although the maelstrom *appears* chaotic, it fundamentally obeys simple laws that will be revealed by calm scrutiny. As he explains in the Preface:

'I have attempted to establish, both by argument and by objective evidence, that in spite of the seeming confusion there is nevertheless a true, if hidden, unity, a secret synthesis, in our present civilisation. To point out *why* this synthesis has *not* become *a conscious and active reality* has been one of my chief aims.' (p. v)

Anticipating the technique of *The Mechanical Bride* by nearly a decade, Giedion repudiates an encyclopaedic

study of art history and chooses to reveal the truth in terms of a few well chosen exhibits. '*History*', he affirms, '*is not a compilation of facts, but an insight into a moving process of life.* Moreover, such insight is obtained not by the exclusive use of the panoramic survey, the bird's-eye view, but by isolating and examining certain specific events intensively, penetrating and exploring them in the manner of the close-up. This procedure makes it possible to evaluate a culture from within as well as from without.' (p. v)

The central thesis of Giedion's intriguing and paradoxical book is that until the start of the twentieth century painters and artists had struggled to resolve the various problems of representation in spatial terms that were dictated by the Renaissance discovery of perspective.

'In linear "perspective"—etymologically "clear-seeing"—objects are depicted upon a plane surface in conformity with the way they are seen, without reference to their absolute shapes or relations. The whole picture or design is calculated to be valid for one station or observation point only. To the fifteenth century the principle of perspective came as a complete revolution, involving an extreme and violent break with the medieval conception of space, and with the flat, floating arrangements which were its artistic expression.

'With the invention of perspective the modern notion of individualism found its artistic counterpart. Every element in a perspective representation is related to the unique point of view of the individual spectator.' (p. 31) The parallel between this statement and McLuhan's own peculiar horror of the 'single point of view' is too obvious to need further elaboration.

According to Giedion the collective discovery of

cubism in 1910 subverted the monotonous decorum of Renaissance perspective, usurped the authority of the 'single point of view' and gave simultaneous expression to all aspects of a given object. 'Cubism', he maintained, 'views objects relatively: that is, from several points of view, no one of which has exclusive authority. And in so dissecting objects it sees them simultaneously from all sides—from above and below, from inside and outside. It goes around and into its objects. Thus, to the three dimensions of the Renaissance which have held good as constituent facts throughout so many centuries, there is added a fourth one—time. . . .

'The presentation of objects from several points of view introduces a principle which is intimately bound up with modern life—simultaneity. It is a temporal coincidence that Einstein should have begun his famous work, *Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper*, in 1905 with a careful definition of simultaneity.' (p. 357)

McLuhan has consistently developed Giedion's theme throughout his later writing, especially in seeing that the same structural revolution has also occurred in literature. In a piece on Tennyson he says:

'The principle innovation was that of *le paysage interieur* or the psychological landscape. This landscape, by means of discontinuity, which was first developed in picturesque painting, effected the apposition of widely diverse objects as a means of establishing what Mr. Eliot has called "an objective correlative" for a state of mind. The openings of "Prufrock", "Gerontion" and *The Waste Land* illustrate Mr. Eliot's growth in the adaptation of this technique, as he passed from the influence of Laforgue to that of Rimbaud, from personal to impersonal manipulation of experience. Whereas in external landscape diverse things lie side by side, so in psychological landscape the juxtaposition of various things and

experiences becomes a precise musical means of orchestrating that which could never be rendered by systematic discourse. Landscape is the means of presenting, without the copula of logical enunciation, experiences which are united in existence but not in conceptual thought. Syntax becomes music, as in Tennyson's "Mariana".' ('Tennyson & Picturesque Poetry', *Essays in Criticism*, 1951, pp. 270–1)

In his studies of European literature McLuhan has consistently favoured those writers who could reproduce the imaginative discontinuities of pre-logical thought. Thomas Nashe for instance—the subject of McLuhan's Cambridge Ph.D. thesis—is praised for the way in which his 'polyphonic prose offends lineal decorum'. The same masterful neglect of 'logical copulae' drew him to James Joyce, especially for the way in which Joyce was able to 'reacquire proprietorship of the human past' by the juxtaposition of more than one period of time within the same frame of literary reference.

'In the same way *Ulysses* is 1904 A.D. but also 800 B.C. And the continuous parallel between ancient and modern provides a "cubist" rather than a linear perspective. It is a world of a "timeless present" such as we meet in the order of objections in a Thomistic article, but also typical of the nonperspective discontinuities of medieval art in general. History is abolished not by being disowned but by becoming present.' ('James Joyce: Trivial & Quadrivial', *Thought*, 1953, p. 95)

According to McLuhan, formal literacy tends to 'shun these nets of analogies' and, by reducing them to linear statements, severs our sacred continuity with human tradition. However, by means of the pun, the paradox and the myth, these nourishing connections can soon be re-established. The puns in *Finnegans Wake* are to

McLuhan 'a technique for revealing this submerged drama of language, and Joyce relied on the quirks, "slips", and freaks of ordinary discourse to evoke the fullness of existence in speech. All his life he played the sleuth with words, shadowing them and waiting confidently for some unexpected situation to reveal their hidden signatures and powers.' (p. 89)

Small wonder then that McLuhan found so much to admire in Chesterton; and it is interesting to note that when in 1947 Hugh Kenner published his short study *Paradox in Chesterton* McLuhan supplied the introduction. This extract from Kenner's essay summarises McLuhan's own views on the matter:

'Verbal paradox is the artist's prerogative, because the artist with a specific aim to accomplish uses it knowingly to persuade, while anyone else may avoid it if he chooses. Its method is to exploit the double senses analogically possessed by single words; the principle, in other words, is always, in some form or other, the pun, and by way of the pun Chesterton is heir to a long tradition; for to perceive puns is ultimately to perceive a totality of words and things and feelings analogically. His use of the verbal paradox is always intricate and multiple, because to use it simply, to correct on one page and to startle on another, is to assume that the reader is sometimes wholly wrong and at other times wholly asleep.' (p. 57)

It is important to recognise at this point that while McLuhan continued to sponsor the spiritual dichotomy which he had already identified in the 'Ancient Quarrel', he was now determined to characterise the two halves of the quarrel with specific reference to the ways in which they each handled the concepts of space and time.

Heartfelt humanistic thought, with its roots in the pre-

literate imagination, ignored the formal constraint of Euclidean space, abolished the conventional intervals between disparate concepts, and reconstructed a timeless space within which ideas were free to associate on the basis of their mutual analogical affinities. Within this psychologically permissive universe the imagination was freed at last to obtain deep spiritual enlightenment from, in the words of Max Ernst, the 'fortuitous encounters upon a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities'.

Formal discourse, on the other hand, inherited from the Socratics and eagerly developed finally by the technical scientific specialists, celebrated the conceptual supremacy of explicit logical connections. Arranging its subject matter within the decorous vistas of three dimensional space, it took care to regulate its descriptions of reality in accordance with the laws of cause and effect. McLuhan clearly favoured the former regime, insisting that the integral moral sense of the ancient humanist could only flourish within the analogical networks of the timeless present. No matter how vast the three dimensional space of modern scientific determinism, there was still no room in it for the unpredictable initiatives of human love and imagination.

Strangely enough Chesterton had foreshadowed this very opinion in a peculiar passage contained in his book *Orthodoxy:*

'The size of this scientific universe gave one no novelty, no relief. The cosmos went on for ever, but not in its wildest constellation could there be anything really interesting; anything, for instance, such as forgiveness or free will. The grandeur or infinity of the secret of its cosmos added nothing to it. It was like telling a prisoner in Reading gaol that he would be glad to hear that the gaol now covered half the county. The warder

would have nothing to show the man except more and more long corridors of stone lit by ghastly lights and empty of all that is human. So these expanders of the universe had nothing to show us except more and more infinite corridors of space lit by ghastly suns and empty of all that is divine.' (p. 110)

To recapitulate. By the early fifties McLuhan's Procrustean enthusiasm had produced a set of spiritual dichotomies all of which are metaphorical counterparts of one another (see Table on following page).

Although McLuhan had identified these various schisms with great historical confidence he had not yet formulated a psychological theory that would explain why they existed in the first place. Just as Darwin had to postpone his theory of natural selection until he had read Malthus's *Essay on Population*, so McLuhan was forced to delay his famous typographic hypothesis until he had come into contact with the Canadian economic historian Harold Adams Innis.

The lesson which McLuhan drew from Innis was utterly deterministic, and its explanation of the cultural schisms which he had already recognised squares rather uneasily with his avowed contempt for arguments based on linear causality. Innis was a graduate of the University of Chicago and an eloquent advocate of the technological determinism he had learnt there from Robert Ezra Park.

Park summarised in 1940 his view in the following words: 'Technological devices have naturally changed men's habits and in doing so, they have necessarily modified the structure and functions of society.... From this point of view it seems that every technical device, from the wheelbarrow to the aeroplane, in so far as it pro-

1. Head	Heart
2. Reason	Imagination
3. Abstract logic	Concrete imaginative intuition
4. Syllogisms and entailments	Puns, paradoxes, metaphors
5. Formal linear arguments with concepts related to one another in terms of explicit logical connections	Imaginative affinities with concepts related to one another in terms of their analogical overlaps
6. 'Exterior' landscape with all objects related to one another according to the laws of perspective	'Interior' landscape with scenes and objects torn out of their spatio-temporal context and re-arranged next to one another without logical copulae
7. Renaissance perspective with a single 'point of view'	Cubist 'perspective' with all aspects depicted within a single frame
8. Linear sequential thought	Condensed metaphorical simultaneity
9. Euclid	Einstein
10. Secular 3-D space within which all change is dictated by laws of cause and effect	Sacred 'time' without tenses. Change is illusory
11. Science with knowledge as control	Religion with knowledge as piety
12. Industry	Agriculture
13. Grammarians	Sophists
14. Specialised logical technology	Eloquent 'encyclopaedic' humanism
15. Secular mercantile bourgeoisie	Pious cavalier gentry
16. American North	American South

vided a new and more effective means of locomotion, has, or should have, marked an epoch in society.'

Innis developed this deterministic theme in a remarkable little volume which he published in 1950. Like Park (and Siegfried Giedion), he believed that the main force of social change—which included alterations in cultural sensibility—was to be found in the various revolutions that had taken place in technology, especially in the technology of communications.

In his opinion, traditional social analysis had somewhat misidentified the sources of cultural differentiation. For while he agrees that the character of society is largely determined by the wisdom and knowledge shared by its individual members, he insists that both the origins, and the social effects, of such knowledge is determined as much by the physical peculiarities of the media through which it is transmitted as by any of the actual propositions of which it is comprised.

In the developing history of communications, Innis identifies certain crucial characteristics of media, paying special attention to their respective permanence and portability. The most dramatic distinction he finds is the one that exists between writing and speaking. Theoretically the human voice will transmit an infinite variety of information, but certain constraints are placed upon this variety by the peculiar physical properties of sound.

1. *Sound can only travel over relatively short distances,* so that although the individual members of an oral society are more or less free to move as they wish, they will naturally tend to gravitate towards a point at which the largest number of oral exchanges can be overheard. Moving outwards from this conversationally dense centre, oral exchanges become thinner and thinner and finally vanish altogether. The sense of social space

therefore is vaguely defined by the fluid contours of collective earshot. Beyond this amoeboid boundary the world at large becomes a silent mysterious void into which the collective imagination tends to project all sorts of magic fantasy.

2. *Sound disperses even more rapidly in time than it does in space*, so that unless an utterance is preserved in the memory of an attentive audience it will be lost forever. Not that it survives in its original form even then; for memory is not a passive receptacle from which experiences may be retrieved just as they went in. It is an editorial ministry which reconstructs its past experience in accordance with the peculiar interests of the imagination. Therefore the past which an oral culture shapes for itself tells us more about the collective mentality of the group than it does about the historical reality to which its constituent memories supposedly refer.

Fictional though such a 'past' may be, it looms larger in the social imagination than does the complementary image of geographical space. This is presumably what Innis means when he refers to oral societies as being 'time-bound'. Grouped around the narrow well head of collective earshot, such communities more or less disregard the geographical territory beyond their conversational centres and affirm their sense of group identity with special reference to the authority of an imaginatively reconstructed normative past.

Moreover without any collateral records against which to check such fictions, myth and history merge into one. The metaphorical idioms which characterise the imagination assume unrivalled supremacy over logico-empirical styles of thought; with the immediate result that the group realises its own identity with more or less

exclusive reference to sacred or religious standards of legitimacy.

Consider now, says Innis, what happens when writing is introduced especially when committed to permanent portable media such as paper. Communications can now survive without distortion over space and time. . . .

1. *Space.* Since orders and instructions can now arrive at remote destinations in exactly the same form that they were despatched, a society which employs writing can maintain relatively complex political identity over wide geographical areas. Far flung bureaucratic control becomes possible, with the result that the secular opportunities of the present begin to overwhelm the importance previously assigned to the normative past. The stage is set for profane acquisitive nationalism.

2. *Time.* The existence of objective historical records introduces the possibility of a critical scrutiny of inherited wisdom. The obedience previously accorded to certain charismatic sources of oral reminiscence gives way to individual judgement with the result that the imaginative integrity of the sacred past no longer exerts such a comprehensive hold upon the individual members of a literate community. Thought becomes piecemeal, empirical, and above all open to objective standards of judgement.

This brief summary of Innis's theory somewhat abuses the subtlety with which he himself approached the problem of the bias of communications. For he was careful not to segregate the effects of media too sharply, and took pains to show that the various tendencies which he identified overlapped and even blurred into one another. McLuhan however recognised a fundamental dualism which corroborated the distinction which he

had already identified independently. Here at last was a concrete technological explanation for the fatal division between the head and the heart.

Innis's theory was all the more attractive for the way in which it reflected a collateral distinction embodied in the linguistic theories of Benjamin Lee Whorf—theories which also placed a peculiar emphasis upon the way in which differences in communication imposed corresponding differences in world outlook. Whorf insisted, for example, as a result of his investigations of the Hopi language, that the subjective image of both physical and social reality was largely determined by the grammatical character of the language which was used to express it. This idea however had already been suggested by the linguist Sapir:

'Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.' (quoted in Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, p. 134)

Whorf noticed that the Hopi were curiously indifferent to mechanistic interpretations of nature, which are in turn so characteristic of modern Western culture. In *Language, Thought and Reality* he went on to show that this divergence could be explained with reference

to the syntactical differences that existed between Hopi and Standard Average European.

'The work began to assume the character of a comparison between Hopi and western European languages. It also became evident that even the grammar of Hopi bore a relation to Hopi culture, and the grammar of European tongues to our own "Western" or "European" culture. And it appeared that the interrelation brought in those large subsummations of experience by language, such as our own terms "time", "space", "substance", and "matter". Since, with respect to the traits compared, there is little difference between English, French, German, or other European languages with the POSSIBLE (but doubtful) exception of Balto-Slavic and non-Indo-European, I have lumped these languages into one group called SAE, or "Standard Average European".' (p. 138)

Nevertheless, as a more recent anthropologist has pointed out, Whorf made no attempt to explain these differences by further reference to the effects of literacy. In, for example, his paper 'A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities', Whorf discusses Lévy-Bruhl's account of the thinking of primitive man 'as characterised by *participation mystique*, and suggests that the differences are related to the structure of language. No mention is made of the role of writing and he seems to see language itself as the independent variable.' (Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody, p. 65, footnote 1)

Now although Innis seemed unaware of Whorf, and while Whorf himself made little or no reference to the effects of literacy, McLuhan sought to establish a theory which would bring both these authorities together and show that the bias of communications recognised by Innis was directly related to the linguistic relativity

identified by Whorf. But to effect this marriage McLuhan found it necessary to elaborate a mediating hypothesis which translated both sets of ideas into the terms of general epistemology. In doing so he ventured well beyond the available facts, and fell into some dangerous logical pitfalls.

5 Language, Literacy and the Media

To accommodate Whorf's and Innis's proposals within the more inclusive framework of the philosophy of mind, McLuhan found it necessary to elaborate a psychological theory which owes considerably more to the unacknowledged authority of St. Thomas Aquinas than it does to any of the scientific sources he openly refers to. McLuhan's theory places at the centre of the human mind a psychic organ within which the five senses collaborate to provide a common ground of conscious experience.

Interpreted in a weak sense, this notion is no more than an inoffensive paraphrase of the self-evident proposition that human consciousness comprises, in Bradley's phrase, an uncounted plural whole. But McLuhan makes a questionable advance upon this simple truism by asserting that the acknowledged plurality of sensory experience is mediated by a psychic structure whose composition is characterised by an arithmetical ratio, and that this ratio governs the quantitative representation in consciousness of each of the five senses. The existence of such a ratio confers a binding numerical reciprocity upon the five respective quanta of physical sensation in such a way that increases in the contribution made by any one of them automatically leads to a proportional shrinkage in each of the other four—and vice versa.

Now according to McLuhan the most effective single method of introducing such shifts in differential emphasis is to reinforce the function of one sense organ

through the aid of an artificial device applied to it. Anything for example which extends the range and sensitivity of the eye will immediately 'step up the intensity of vision' thereby causing a reciprocal extinction in the sense of hearing—not to mention the other three senses. Any individual who has been systematically exposed to such partial assistance will suffer a permanent change in his capacity to comprehend the full variety of the world around him.

To the average layman, who may be unfamiliar with the rules of experimental psychology, this scheme may seem more impressive than it really is. For unfortunately the use of high sounding quantitive terms—ratio, bias and sensory mix—is no guarantee of the scientific credibility of a scheme which makes use of such notions. Before the concepts of 'ratio' and 'bias' can be assigned any substantial meaning, there must be a clear statement which specifies the physical operations in which such terms are grounded. If not, the concepts remain vacuous and any theory which is based upon them falls to the ground.

How does McLuhan's basic assumption stand up in the light of such criticism? Not very well I am afraid. For when he refers to the 'natural ratio' that prevails between the five senses he makes no effort to specify the units which comprise it, and unless such a specification can be made the notion of 'ratio' has no meaning. If, as McLuhan seems to suggest, the sensus communis is a sort of psychic receptacle, and if its sensory composition depends upon the relative intensities of the five streams of sensation which replenish it, it should be possible to specify the physical procedures by which these respective 'intensities' are measured. Otherwise there is no firm ground from which to make the assertion that a given technique has stepped up 'the intensity of vision'.

As it is, McLuhan inadvertently makes it very difficult for himself to satisfy even this preliminary requirement, since he employs the concept of sensory intensity in a way that makes it categorically impossible to imagine the measuring procedures that might be relevant to it. He speaks for instance about print 'stepping up the intensity of vision', which is not wrong exactly but meaningless. For vision is not the sort of 'thing' to which the concept of intensity can be significantly applied. One may talk about the intensity of a visual *stimulus*—but it makes no sense to talk about the intensity of *vision*.

Let me illustrate this by a counter example. The intensity of a spot of light can be immediately defined by giving the number of foot candles in the incident source, or by reading off the figures on the scale of a galvanometer which has been inserted into the electric circuit that activates the light. Increases in the intensity of the *stimulus* can then be formally registered as a multiple of the units which have been chosen. Once this scale has been defined in terms of the measurements that give it meaning, it becomes perfectly reasonable to try and correlate the increase in stimulus intensity with, say, the number of nerve impulses generated at any given intensity. Both sets of measurements are conceptually legitimated by the fact that they are founded upon physical operations that can properly yield numbers. This does not, and indeed cannot, hold for 'vision' as a whole. One might just as well try to measure the force of circumstance or the weight of grief.

Bearing these logical objections in mind it is very hard to attach serious scientific significance to McLuhan's assertion that the sensus communis is compiled in accordance with a ratio which we disturb at our peril.

To be fair, however, there *is* a psychological context

within which it is reasonable to speak of variations in sensory bias—and that of course is the context of human attention. Ordinary introspection tells us that we can sometimes attend to one sensory mode at the expense of all the others. If something captures our visual attention we become relatively inattentive to information coming in through the ear. A severe pain in the belly can often monopolise our attention to the complete exclusion of an otherwise interesting visual scene; but we do not think of such phenomena as constituting an assault upon the primitive ratio of the sensus communis. The act of paying attention, far from being a departure from some hypothetical norm of mental activity, is one of its customary variations, in accordance with which that norm is actually defined. A mind which cannot shift its attention from one area of interest to another is damaged in some way.

Again, to be fair to McLuhan, I am sure that he would *not* regard such 'normal' shifts of attention as being perilous assaults upon the integrity of the sensus communis. According to him, the real danger arises when human beings start to rely upon *artificial* aids to perception; and he insists, for example, that instruments which aid the eye freeze the attention in the visual mode. Now although this claim is considerably more sophisticated than the ones I have already criticised, it is riddled with serious inconsistencies nevertheless. Basically, the same objections apply to this suggestion as apply to the hypothetical claim that shifts in *natural* attention damage the sensory integrity of the mind. Let me take this point in some detail.

Consider the eye for example. There is a limit upon its powers of optical resolution, and the sensitivity of the retina prevents it from working efficiently beyond certain fixed values of light intensity. There are however

a number of simple manoeuvres by which the subject can overcome these limits, to a certain extent at least. Let me take the natural ones first. In excessively bright light for example the hand can be brought up to shade the eyes, and when a distant object is beyond the powers of naked resolution the subject is perfectly free to step up and look closer. In both these cases the scope and the sensitivity of the eye have been functionally extended beyond their normal range, though in neither case has the *quantity of vision* been increased. All that has happened is that the area of the world within which the pre-existing capacity to switch visual attention is exercised has been enlarged; and since this enlargement has taken place in the external world, it is illogical to assert that a given compartment of the mind has thereby been expanded.

The same principle applies to any artificial device which extends the range or sensitivity of a given sense organ. Lenses and electric lights for instance open up new vistas for the naked eye. They extend the number of circumstances within which vision can operate, but multiplying the *options* of vision in this way does not magnify *vision* itself. For in the act of taking up any one of these new options, the eye must, by definition, momentarily neglect all the others. In order to take advantage of the visual opportunities offered by a microscope, for example, it is necessary for a moment to ignore the panorama outside the laboratory window. Looking down a microscope is indeed just another slightly more elaborate way of paying attention. The fact that it is accomplished with the aid of artificial lenses exerts no influence upon the faculty of vision as such.

In all fairness it is important to acknowledge a subtle qualification of this basic principle. If artificial aids to

perception increase the number of circumstances within which the eye can operate, there is always the possibility that the *mental note* taken of such increased visual options may bias the central nervous system in favour of visual attention. Once the mind realises that it has an extended visual field within which to exercise its choice of glance, it could, theoretically at least, bias its cognitive expectancy in such a way that it becomes relatively impervious to events which are trying to reach it through sensory channels not thus privileged.

There is however a logical circularity embedded in this proposal too, associated with the fact that it makes no sense to talk of *imposing* increased sensory options upon a subject. One can impose constraints but one cannot impose options. One can, for instance, rear a subject in the dark or fit him from birth with red goggles, and in doing so impose a serious constraint upon the variety of his visual experience; but if one takes a normal subject and offers him extra optical apparatus through the successive exploitation of which he can multiply the variety of his visual experiences, one has imposed nothing whatsoever; one has merely offered an increased range of visual options. The subject is free to take them up as, when and if he chooses to. If he does take them up, he demonstrates in the act of doing so the very visual interest which McLuhan supposes to be the *consequence* of such artificial opportunities.

Presumably McLuhan would then ask what had led to such a differential interest in vision. To this the answer lies not in some antecedent visual encouragement, but in the total cognitive 'set' which determines an interest in those objects or entities that happen to make themselves apparent through the medium of vision. Thus when an astronomer looks through his telescope he is not doing so because he has an artificially encouraged propensity

for visual experience, but because he has an intellectual interest in those objects called stars. It so happens that the most obvious medium through which these entities make themselves apparent is light. Given the chance to negotiate with the heavenly bodies through some other medium, the astronomer would doubtless take advantage of it. And in fact nowadays he does. For certain stars emit radio waves in addition to light, and the radio-astronomer is perfectly willing to listen rather than look so long as the information that he gets thereby gives extra scientific substance to his cognitive notion of what a star really is.

In other words cognitive interest determines the use to which the various human senses will be put, not vice versa; and this principle applies with equal force to the cultural evidence which McLuhan adduces in order to support his theory that the mind becomes biased by undue emphasis applied to one particular sense.

For example, to support his contention that illiterate Africans have a 'low visual bias' he quotes a series of anecdotes about the misinterpretations of movies by an African audience. Actually, some of these stories are quite interesting, showing for instance that it requires a large measure of psychological training before an audience will accept the elementary cinematic conventions of tracking, panning and close up. Such evidence has no bearing upon so called 'visual bias'. Instead it illustrates the well known fact that before any significance can be attached to certain specimens of formal representation, the rules by which such representations make sense must be learned and understood.

The same objection applies to McLuhan's assertion that primitive tribesmen demonstrate their 'low visual bias' by their failure to 'see' the representation of space on a flat surface. Such a fact demonstrates no more than

the subject's unfamiliarity with the grammar of two-dimensional space representation. One cannot conclude that there is an overall limit upon the visual competence of a subject who fails in such a task, but only that his competence has not been trained to express itself in that particular way.

As it is there is a large body of evidence to show that within the area of their prescribed social interests, illiterate people exhibit a very high degree of visual competence. As Lévi-Strauss says in *The Savage Mind*, 'Their extreme familiarity with their biological environment, the passionate attention which they pay to it and their precise knowledge of it has often struck enquirers as an indication of attitudes and preoccupations which distinguish the natives from their white visitors.' (p. 5) And he quotes the observations made among the Tewa Indians of New Mexico by Robbins, Harrington and Freire-Marreco: 'Small differences are noted ... they have a name for every one of the coniferous trees of the region; in these cases differences are not conspicuous. The ordinary individual among the whites does not distinguish (them) ... Indeed, it would be possible to translate a treatise on botany into Tewa ...' ('Ethnobiology of the Tewa Indians', pp. 9, 12)

Not however that one can assert from such evidence, in contradiction to McLuhan, that tribesmen have a *higher* over-all standard of visual competence than their civilised neighbours. That would be going from one extreme of absurdity to another.

The fact that members of a certain culture score badly when asked to perform a given cognitive task does not mean that their competence within the modality of the set task is comprehensively suspect. It means rather that their characteristic social preoccupations preclude any active cognitive interest in the tasks that

have been set. The visual competence of a Walbiri tribesman, for instance, is demonstrated by the subtlety with which he discriminates between certain conventionally differentiated sand drawings. He is privy to the set of semantic options within which such signs acquire their meaning; and above all he is a member of a culture for which such acts of visual discrimination constitute an important qualification for significant membership.

Conversely it would be rash to conclude that a literate man (who incidentally 'sees' the Muller-Lyer illusion when it is presented to him on paper) was visually incompetent simply because he failed to make allowances for refraction when spearing fish under water. The point is that very little trust can be placed in cross-cultural studies of cognitive competence; and any large scale theory which relies on such methods is immediately suspect.

The same goes I think for some of the conclusions drawn from the study of comparative literature, in spite of the fact that there are often striking differences in the relative emphasis given to visual detail. For example, Eric Auerbach has justifiably drawn attention to the strong visual emphasis in Homer and the relative absence of such imagery in the Old Testament. The story of how Ulysses acquired his scar in a hunting accident is filled with rich visual detail while the tale of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is more or less free from such elaboration. Now although these differences *are* very dramatic one would not be justified in concluding from them that the Greeks had a strong visual bias or that the Jews were particularly acoustic. All that one can say is that these two forms of *literature* are distinguished by this bias. Why are they distinguished in this manner? It is very hard to say for certain, although it seems likely that the answer lies in the different social functions served re-

spectively by each of the stories.

Thus the story of Abraham and Isaac does not survive in Hebrew scripture for the details of its surface narrative but, probably, for certain features whose *structural relationship* carries a social message concerning the legitimacy of Jewish descent. Edmund Leach's concurrent analysis of the myth of Jepthah in 'The Legitimacy of Solomon' tends to bear this out.

'In contrast, structural analysis leads to the recognition of relationships of a more abstract kind which may associate bodies or material which have little or no similarity of content. A good example is provided by a comparison between the Biblical accounts of (*a*) the sacrific of Jepthah's daughter and (*b*) the non-sacrifice of Abraham's son. Except that both stories are about "sacrifice" the similarity of content is very slight.

'The following is a summary of Judges xi, 30–40:
(*a*) Jepthah, the Gileadite, makes a vow to make a burnt offering to God if he is granted victory.
(*b*) God grants Jepthah victory.
(*c*) (By implication Jepthah plans to sacrifice an animal or a slave in fulfilment of his vow.)
(*d*) God, in the form of chance, imposes a substitution whereby Jepthah is made to sacrifice his only child, a virgin daughter.
Outcome Jepthah has no descendants of any kind.

'The following is a corresponding analysis of Genesis xxii, 1–18:
(*d*) God requires Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac as evidence of faith and obedience.
(*c*) As Abraham prepares to obey, God imposes a substitution whereby Abraham in fact sacrifices an animal in fulfilment of his duty.
(*b*) Abraham thus demonstrates his faith and obedience.

(*a*) God makes a vow that Abraham shall have countless descendants.
Outcome All the children of Israel claim descent from Abraham.' (*Genesis as Myth*, p. 37)

Now if it is true that these two Old Testament stories serve as complementary genealogical credentials for Jewish legitimacy, then it is also possible that visual detail is excluded from them for the simple reason that its presence might otherwise obscure their judicial message.

Not that I am insisting that this *is* the correct explanation, but simply that it is a plausible hypothesis, and one which ought to be considered before plunging into theories based upon dubious epistemology. And McLuhan makes the ensuing argument even harder to follow by attributing the rising visual emphasis of Western civilisation to the vicissitudes that language has undergone in passing from speech to script, rather than to the discovery and use of straightforward optical aids. That is to say he invites the reader to accept his suggestion that language should be regarded as an artificial aid to perception, on a par with all the mechanical extensions of the special senses. Language, he argues, allows men to fix and perpetuate their individual experiences in the form of communicable fragments. A native communicant who receives a set of such communiques has his consciousness extended just as effectively as if he had looked at a distant vista through a telescope. Language therefore is a medium, and its effects upon the sensorium should be considered in the same light.

This is seductive analogy, but serious difficulties arise when it is pressed too far. Let me however postpone the objections and develop McLuhan's argument on the assumption that we can think of language in this way.

To begin with, McLuhan emphasises the obvious fact that the natural form of human language is the spoken one. As such it confers, by definition, an unusual emphasis upon the faculty of hearing. Now since according to McLuhan any medium which stresses a single sense in this way upsets the bias of the sensorium, one might expect that undue dependence upon the spoken word would exert dangerous strains in the manner specified. However McLuhan insists that it does not violate the sensus communis for the following reasons:

1. *Because of the synaesthetic properties of sound itself.* McLuhan insists that 'the ear world is hot and hyperaesthetic', by which I take him to mean that any message fortunate enough to be coded in terms of sound carries an intrinsic bonus of collateral sensory experience. Speech therefore starts out with an initial exemption from the restrictions attendant upon stimuli arriving through all the other special senses.

2. *Because the subject matter of spoken speech is more fully representative of the total range of sensory experience than any other type of human communication.* According to this assertion, spoken language makes a wider range of concrete reference than say written language does. The primitive speaker utters his thoughts more or less as they occur to him, thereby bodying forth the full content of his current experience. On such an assumption, if one were to collect an anthology of any given speaker's oral utterances, they would refer more comprehensively to the other senses than would a collection of written statements made by the same person.

3. *Because speech occurs in physical circumstances that call the other senses into play.* This is a much more reasonable suggestion than the previous two, since speech occurs within a context that is not monopolised by sound alone. That is to say the significance of a given

utterance is very incompletely characterised if the description is limited to a translation or a paraphrase of the utterance itself. There are many other parameters within which variations can be introduced in order to modulate the meaning of what is said or heard. The full significance of a given utterance is only fully specified when fixed values have been assigned to the following set of sensory variables:

1. *Acoustic*
a. The lexical string itself. The naked message.
b. Its pitch, volume, timbre, stress and rhythm.
2. *Visual*
a. Facial expression of the speaker.
b. His manual gestures.
c. Visible distance between speakers and other participants.
d. Visual accessories to the scene which help to determine the signficance of what is said, i.e. buildings, rostrums, pulpits, flags, bunting, masks.
3. *Tactile*
a. Bodily contacts between speakers, i.e. prods, caresses, blows, and embraces.
b. Tactile sense of other people. Effects of crowding.
c. Physical temperature of the occasion.
4. *Olfactory*
a. Smells of participating individuals. Use of incense etc.

It is easy to take these complex accessories of speech for granted, and since so many of them vanish when language is committed to paper we are often unaware of the work we have to do before the full meanings can be eked out of a written statement. In fact McLuhan argues that speech is relatively exempt from the sensory risks

which attend all other artificial aids to perception, and his famous distinction between 'hot' and 'cool' media applies with special force to the acknowledged difference between written and spoken language.

McLuhan's term 'hot', as I take it, is a slangy gloss upon the communications engineer's concept of semantic redundancy. This notion brings to our attention the fact that many messages carry more information than is strictly needed to get their implicit ideas across. English for instance is highly redundant; as one can tell from the fact that it is usually possible to eliminate a considerable number of words from a sentence and still compile an understandable telegram. The more words one eliminates, however, the more equivocal the meaning becomes, with the obvious result that the reader has to do more and more work inferring what is meant. In this sense spoken language is more redundant than the written form. Since semantic clues get lost in the act of transferring the message to paper, the reader is obliged to infer what was originally signified by filling in the gaps in accordance with rules derived from his previous experience. The term 'cool' then applies to those that have gaps in their information structure, requiring an act of positive inference from the recipient. This is a useful concept but, as we shall see later, McLuhan himself makes dubious and often unreliable use of it.

Having argued the cybernetic superiority of speech McLuhan goes on to describe the particular dangers associated with the invention of writing. By his account, the discovery of the phonetic alphabet constituted a fatal lurch towards the over-employment of one isolated sense—vision. For language would now be transcribed into a form that excluded the multiple sensory overtones associated with the spoken word. That is to say it worked independently of:

1. The synaesthetic overtones of sound itself,
2. The orchestration of all the other sensations that attend the delivery of speech,
3. The improvisational variety of direct speech.

In addition however to the sensory impoverishment associated with such *negative* features of written langauge, McLuhan claims to have identified certain *positive* blemishes inherent in the substance of visible text.

According to McLuhan a fatal psychological decorum descends upon the scribe, with the immediate result that his thought is laid out in long lines of disciplined symbols. In place of the hesitant creativity of speech, we meet the dull regimentation of written language. Script thus encourages a formal sense of strict logical entailment which imposes, in McLuhan's own words, 'a spurious intelligibility' upon our experience of the world. The innocent victim of literacy therefore falls prey to a stultified form of thought and loses the capacity to conceive the world in a rounded plenary style. Not only that. In learning to scan the orderly lines of text the reader unwittingly assumes a single point of view thereby conferring upon himself an unnatural bias in favour of 3 D perspective.

Suffering all these effects together, the skilled reader becomes a sort of psychological cripple, confined to the wheelchair of logical thought, incapable of venturing over the rough ground of intuition and imagination. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan quotes Yeats:

> 'Locke sank into a swoon
> The garden died
> God took the spinning jenny
> Out of his side.'

and comments: 'The Lockean swoon was the hypnotic trance induced by stepping up the visual component in experience until it filled the field of attention. Psychologists define hypnosis as the filling of the field of attention by one sense only. At such moment "the garden" dies. That is, the garden indicates the interplay of all the senses in haptic harmony. With the instressed concern with one sense only, the mechanical principle of abstraction and repetition emerges into explicit form. Technology is explicitness, as Lyman Bryson said. And explicitness means the spelling out of one thing at a time, one sense at a time, one mental or physical operation at a time.' (pp. 17–18)

Since so much is balanced upon this statement it is unfortunate that McLuhan should have mis-described hypnosis in such a careless way. For the fact is that psychologists do not define hypnosis in the fashion McLuhan suggests. If they did, biologists would go into a trance every time they looked down their microscopes and blind men would become suggestible immediately they began to run their hands over a page of braille. For each of these episodes involves the filling of the field of attention by one sense at the expense of all the others. Indeed, as I have already indicated, that is what we mean by paying attention. Hypnosis is something very different altogether. The monopoly of the subject's attention may be a necessary condition for hypnosis but it is by no means a sufficient one. It is the peculiar *quality* of the field which induces the trance—a calculated monotony accompanied by certain insistent suggestions. By no stretch of the imagination can such a phenomenon be likened to what happens when someone becomes accustomed to print.

This apart, most of the characteristic errors in McLuhan's seductive hypothesis arise from the fact that

he has slipped past our guard with the spurious assumption that one can consider language as a technical medium which exists independently of the mind which uses it. In this way it becomes easy to compare it with any of the other physical artifacts through which the range of perception is increased. Such an opinion however embodies a category mistake; for language is not just an optional appendage of the human mind, but a constituent feature of its ongoing activity. Language in fact bears the same relationship to the concept of mind that legislation bears to the concept of parliament: it is a competence forever bodying itself forth in a series of concrete performances.

Seeing language in this way, as a relationship between competence and performance, one can begin to appreciate that the substance through which language is expressed is a matter of relative indifference. Let me amplify this point a little. The English neurologist Hughlings Jackson realised more than a hundred years ago that language is simply the expression of an underlying capacity to make propositions. In order to utter or 'outer' such mental assertions, the subject has at his disposal a wide variety of discriminable substances—visual, acoustic and even tactile—any one of which can be organised into patterns of communicable assertion. But as the Swiss linguist De Saussure recognised, linguistic signs bear an arbitrary, though consistent, relationship to the concepts they signify. All that is required of them is that they shall consistently stand for what they do and that they shall not be confused with any similar sign which stands for something different. In other words, the structure of language is determined not by the material from which it is made, but by the internal relationships which prevail among its component parts. It is characterised, therefore, by the generative

rules that constitute its ongoing practices, not by the physical peculiarities of the matter which passes between speaker and listener (or between writer and reader).

De Saussure illustrates this important distinction with reference to the game of chess. The pieces can be made of any material one chooses. The pawns and bishops, kings and rooks can be fashioned in any style that catches the manufacturer's fancy and the board can be no larger than a pocket handkerchief or as big as a cricket pitch. All these variables are irrelevant to the conduct of chess itself, which is characterised by the rules in accordance with which certain strategies are initiated. The game can be played by two people facing each other over the same board, but nothing is lost when the contest is conducted over the telephone, using pieces of paper to record the successive moves. The moves are made, and their significance is understood, with reference to a set of constitutive rules which are systematised in such a way that any tactical novelty can be accommodated so long as it is embodied in accordance with the given constitution.

This concept of languages as a set of generative rules has been recently developed by linguists like Noam Chomsky, who maintain, moreover, that in addition to the acknowledged constraints upon the structure of linguistic behaviour, there is an underlying system of universal rules, in accordance with which the surface regulations of all conventional grammars are selected in the first place. In *Language and Mind*, Chomsky writes:

'The principles that determine the form of grammar and that select a grammar of the appropriate form on the basis of certain data constitute a subject that might, following a traditional usage, be termed "universal gram-

mar". The study of universal grammar, so understood, is a study of the nature of human intellectual capacities. It tries to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions that a system must meet to qualify as a potential human language, conditions that are not accidentally true of the existing human languages, but that are rather rooted in the human "language capacity", and thus constitute the innate organization that determines what counts as linguistic experience and what knowledge of language arises on the basis of this experience. Universal grammar, then, constitutes an explanatory theory of a much deeper sort than particular grammar, although the particular grammar of a language can also be regarded as an explanatory theory.' (p. 24)

The reader will immediately recognise that this assertion more or less contradicts the linguistic relativity which McLuhan extracted and exploited from Whorf. Without wishing to disparage Whorf's achievement in the area of anthropological linguistics, I would suggest that Chomsky's notion of deep universal grammar may actually include and explain the various differences noted by Whorf. If this turns out to be the case, we would be forced to account for the special peculiarities of the Hopi world picture with reference to psychological principles that lie outside the study of communications as such, especially when we bear in mind that Eric Lenneberg has pointed out that Whorf may have seriously over-stressed these epistemological differences in the first place.

This is not the place to debate the Whorf–Chomsky controversy in more detail. It is sufficient to say that McLuhan seems unaware that the controversy exists; and that any theory of human communication which does not take its implied differences into consideration has very little right to be taken seriously.

In addition to the difficulties which arise when language is regarded as a medium rather than as a dynamic relationship between competence and performance, there are many factual flaws in McLuhan's famous proposal.

1. *In connection with assertions about the sensory richness of speech.*

a. There is no reliable evidence to support his claim that the sense of hearing is hotter or more redundant than any of the other sense modalities. The well known phenomenon of synaesthesia, whereby a stimulus applied in one sensory department excites sensation in the others, is not peculiar to hearing. It is true of course that a note struck on the piano will often excite collateral sensations of colour and that a deep acoustic tone will sometimes excite a feeling of tactile 'presence'. But these effects work reciprocally as well. Subjects will frequently report that certain colours are associated in their minds with fixed acoustic pitches and so on. There is nothing therefore to suggest that sound has a privileged status with regard to synaesthesia.

b. The delivery of the spoken word is certainly faster and more direct than anything written down, but one cannot conclude from this alone that the range of its sensory reference is thereby wider and more comprehensive. Certain specimens of written language may be loaded with rich sensory references, while spoken utterances may be confined to relatively abstract announcements. To say this is not to deny that various channels of communication tend to impose characteristic features upon the messages that are passing through them. Written prose is undoubtedly more formal in general than ordinary speech. But on the other hand there are enormous differences within the oral mode. The grammar of

a political address is far more conventional than that of a political argument, and telephone conversations sound quite different from a chat over the garden wall. These however are well acknowledged distinctions and have no bearing whatsoever upon sensory emphasis as McLuhan understands the term.

c. The sensory context within which speech occurs may be very rich but there is no evidence to show that literacy has usurped the advantages to be gained from such effects. People continue to face each other when they talk. They still avail themselves of subtle clues derived from facial expression and manual gesture. In fact it could be argued that the sensitivity to such accessory variations has become even greater in literate communities, and that civilised men take much closer note of the fleeting nuances of facial expression than savages do. Certainly it is true to say that literature has created an unprecedented interest in the minute variables of individual temperament, with the result that a public which has been exposed to such a training is likely to pay very close attention to the physiognomic clues which bear witness to such variety. I am not saying that this is necessarily true, but it is at least a plausible hypothesis, and one that any investigator of the subject would do well to acknowledge even if he were in a position to refute it later.

By the same token it seems unlikely that literacy would, by its very nature, have impoverished the richness of spoken language. Quite the reverse. The expressive possibilities offered by being able to write thoughts down after mature consideration would seem, on first principles at least, to be a friendly condition for linguistic innovation. In fact the advent of literacy, far from extinguishing the imagination, has vastly increased the number of its expressive options. Indeed it is hard to

overestimate the subtle reflexive effects of literacy upon the creative imagination, providing as it does a cumulative deposit of ideas, images and idioms upon whose rich and appreciating funds every artist enjoys an unlimited right of withdrawal.

2. *Difficulties arising in connection with McLuhan's assertions about the peculiarly visual properties of print.*

a. McLuhan asserts that there is an exclusive linearity about script, so that the rich manifold of subjective experience becomes distorted by having to be issued in the form of a symbolic strip. Speech, by contrast, has a plural simultaneity which allows human thought to be deployed in a much more commodious form. Even on first principles this suggestion seems wrong. Speech is just as linear as script—more so in fact. Only one sound, after all, can be issued at a time, with the result that an oral utterance can only pay itself out in the form of a long string. This is vividly—and (to McLuhan) very damagingly—brought out by the fact that it is possible to reproduce human speech on a narrow ribbon of magnetised tape; how linear can one get?

To be fair, there *is* a sense in which it is true to assert that speech is 'simultaneous'. It is this. In order to understand the meaning of a sentence it is necessary for the listener to hold in his memory at least a temporary record of all the words that have just been uttered, so that each *new* word can then take its place in a context which gives it significance. If the sounds were erased concurrently with the development of the speech, we would hear only one word at a time and no meaning would accumulate. In this sense a speech must be grasped in its simultaneous entirety, otherwise it would fail in its function *as a speech*. And the same holds true for written sentences. If we simply read one word at a time, and erased the traces of all preceding script, the

written display would enter our minds in unrelated fragments and never accumulate its assigned implication.

In so far as there is any difference between the 'simultaneity' of speech and that of script, the bias is somewhat in favour of script. Reading experiments have shown that the eye does not advance along the written line in smooth succession; nor does it move forward in small equal jerks. Instead it seems to 'take in' large irregular chunks of text, whose boundaries are determined more by the various quanta of meaning which they contain than by any visible breaks in the contours of the display itself.

Not only that. The reader tends to flick his eyes all over the page, backwards from the central reading point to remind himself of what has gone before, forwards in an effort to confirm premature guesses about the meaning of half-read sentences. Taking all these effects together, the page assembles itself before the reader's eye not as a linear string of visible symbols, but as a panorama of overlapping *instantanées*.

b. McLuhan claims that script (and a fortiori print) influences the reader as a visual medium, over-employing his eye at the expense of the ear. This assertion depends upon a wilful confusion between visibility and legibility. For the visibility of script is only a necessary condition of our being able to read it. Sufficient conditions for legibility are provided by the fact that the various symbols which comprise it are clearly distinguishable from one another—a condition, incidentally, which is also satisfied by braille. In fact it is characteristic of reading that the better we are at it, the more unconscious we become of having to use our eyes. We only 'see' the written page when it bears a foreign text, or when slip-shod handwriting makes it hard to distin-

guish the various letters. The accomplished native reader, confronted by a clear page of script in his own tongue, 'gets' the meaning without 'seeing' the display that embodies it. This, in fact, is part of the definition of reading.

McLuhan would probably file a counter claim to this objection to the effect that, in the process of becoming so familiar with written symbols that they effectively disappear, the eye had become concurrently over-active; and that even if the accomplished reader no longer 'sees' the text which he reads, his sensorium has nevertheless been irreversibly biased in favour of vision in the process. There is however no evidence to show that children become more visually accomplished with the achievement of literacy.

McLuhan claims incidentally that although manuscript has many important features in common with print, it is nonetheless only half way towards the glaring visibility of type. According to him handwriting preserves a saving remnant of the original audio-tactility of speech. Taking his cue from the work of Henry Chaytor, he insists that the mediaeval reader mumbled the text out loud and that silent reading only became the fashion when the improved legibility of print eliminated such a necessity.

There are several weak points in this argument too. To start with, there is no consistent evidence to show that reading out loud was associated exclusively with manuscript—the occasional anecdotes frequently quoted on this subject are not enough to base a theory on. And even if it were true, there is little to indicate that the murmuring scholar was thereby investing the visual text with the warm tones of spoken language. As for the so called tactility of manuscript, it is little more than a figure of speech anyway, and whatever substance it does

have depends on the visual features of the script.

c. Even if it were true that print over-developed the visual sense, it would be false to conclude that the subject thereby falls prey to three dimensional interpretations of space. There are no intrinsic 3 D clues provided by sight. Spatial significance is only conferred upon the retinal information through the collateral experience provided by the other senses; and even then it is only acquired as a hard won cognitive construct whose constitutive features comprise a set of rules. In obedience to these rules, the subject learns to apply 'spatial' significance to such clues as convergent sight lines, texture gradients, overlapping contours and so on. These clues stand for nothing in their own right, they await a cognitive equation to relate them all in the manner prescribed.

As for the suggestion that central perspective arose as a result of print, it seems rather surprising that the work of Masaccio should have anticipated that of Gutenberg. It is true of course that perspective drawing only began to predominate after the sixteenth century, but there is no evidence to show that the development of print was responsible. The whole point about inventions of this sort is that they have an intrinsic momentum of their own. Once discovered they tend to monopolise the pictorial imagination and eventually become the prevailing mode.

The same principle holds for the discovery of oil painting. When Van Eyck found that thin glazes of oil allowed him to depict surface details with an unprecedented accuracy, he thereby opened up new vistas of pictorial possibility which other painters hurried to exploit not, as McLuhan would have it, through some obscure encouragement offered by print, but because of the implicit creative excitement of the thing itself. If

there is any point in asking why such developments took hold, the question should take the form of enquiring why print, perspective and oil painting *all* emerged within the same century. Few art historians would be prepared to give a definitive answer. It is in fact notoriously hard to account for changes in aesthetic style and no advantage is to be gained from simplifying the issue by attributing the developments to unique incidents in the history of technology.

d. We come now to McLuhan's assertion that the peculiar idiom of atomic determinism was inextricably associated with the segmented linearity of alphabetic script. To support this claim McLuhan emphasises the well established fact that the Chinese, who wrote in ideograms, gave no place to atomic entities and organised their characteristic world picture in accordance with principles that closely resemble those of modern field theory. This description of Chinese science is borne out by a well accredited expert on the subject.

'Summarising therefore, the Chinese physical universe in ancient and medieval times was a perfectly continuous whole. *Chhi* condensed in palpable matter was not particulate in any important sense, but individual objects acted and reacted with all other objects in the world. Such mutual influences could be effective over very great distances, and operated in a wave-like or vibratory manner dependent in the last resort on the rhythmic alternation at all levels of the two fundamental forces, the Yin and the Yang. Individual objects thus had their intrinsic rhythms. And these were integrated like the sounds of individual instruments in an orchestra, but spontaneously, into the general pattern of the harmony of the world.' (Joseph Needham, *Science & Civilisation in China*, Volume 4, Section I, pp. 8 and 9)

However, although Needham acknowledges the fact

that alphabetic writing is found in all those cultures which favoured atomic causality, he is reluctant to assume that this is more than a coincidence.

'Now it is a striking, and perhaps significant, fact that the languages of all those civilisations which developed atomic theories were alphabetic. Just as an almost infinite variety of words may be formed by different combinations of the relatively small number of letters in an alphabet, so the idea was natural enough that a large number of bodies with different properties might be composed by the association in different ways of a very small number of constituent elementary particles. . . . On the other hand, the Chinese written character is an organic whole, a Gestalt, and minds accustomed to an ideographic language would perhaps hardly have been so open to the idea of an atomic constitution of matter. Nevertheless, the argument is weakened by the fact that the 214 radicals into which the Chinese lexicographers eventually reduced what they considered the fundamental elements of the written characters were essentially atomic, and an immense variety of words ("molecules") were formed by their combinations. Moreover, the combinations of the components of the Symbolic Correlation groups of five were understood from very early times to produce all natural phenomena. . . . While there is a certain plausibility in the correlation between alphabetism and atomism, the argument cannot be pressed too strongly.' (Volume 4, Section 1, pp. 13 and 14)

In so far as Needham is prepared to hazard a guess as to the forces responsible for such differences in world picture he favours, in contrast to McLuhan, a somewhat more sociological interpretation.

'In making the obvious comparison between Taoist organicism and Democritean-Epicurean atomism can we

consider it a mere coincidence that the former arose in a highly organised society where conservancy-dictated bureaucratism was dominant while the latter arose in a world of city-states and individual merchant-adventurers? I believe that we cannot, but the deep contrasts between European and Chinese society must be held over for the latter part of this book.' (Volume 2, p. 338)

On a somewhat different tack McLuhan also suggests that the techniques of formal logic could never have emerged without the discovery of alphabetic writing. In this he is backed up by more recent authority on the effects of alphabetic literacy. In their paper on the 'Consequences of Literacy', published in 1968, Jack Goody and Ian Watt wrote:

'The kinds of analysis involved in the syllogism, and in the other forms of logical procedure, are clearly dependent upon writing, indeed upon a form of writing sufficiently simple and cursive to make possible widespread and habitual recourse both to the recording of verbal statements and then to the dissecting of them. It is probable that it is only the analytic process that writing itself entails, the written formalization of sounds and syntax, which make possible the habitual separating out into formally distinct units of the various cultural elements whose indivisible wholeness is the essential basis of the "mystical participation" which Lévy-Bruhl regards as characteristic of the thinking of non-literate peoples.' (*Literacy in Traditional Societies*, p. 68)

Nevertheless, as Goody himself goes on to say, 'neither Lévy-Bruhl nor any other advocate of a radical dichotomy between primitive and civilised thought, have been able to account for the considerable persistence of non-logical thought in modern literate societies'. If, as McLuhan suggests, the experience of print overwhelms the power of metaphoric thought, it seems rather odd

that Newton—who was, by McLuhan's account the arch victim (and villain) of the Gutenberg tyranny—should have spent at least half his intellectual effort in constructing a magical system which even now proves a serious embarrassment to historians who would like to appropriate him to the pure scientific tradition. Rather it would seem that print, as a medium, gave Newton's genius room to manoeuvre in both idioms.

The fact is that the forces at work in determining the preferred modes of human thought are far more plural and obscure than McLuhan would allow. Doubtless the various media *have* had their characteristic effects, but in acknowledging such influences there is no need to emphasise them to the exclusion of everything else—especially not with reference to an epistemological theory which has no foundation in neuro-psychological reality.

As a summary, I prefer the more modest proposal advanced by Kathleen Gough, another contributor to Goody's volume:

'Literacy appears to be, above all, an *enabling* factor, permitting large-scale organization, the critical accumulation, storage and retrieval of knowledge, the systematic use of logic, the pursuit of science and the elaboration of the arts. Whether, or with what emphases, these developments will occur seems to depend less on the intrinsic knowledge of writing than on the overall development of the society's technology and social structure, and perhaps, also, on the character of its relations with other societies. *If* they occur, however, there seems little doubt of Goody and Watt's contention that the use of writing as a dominant communications medium will impose certain broad forms on their emergence, of which syllogistic reasoning and linear codifications of reality may be examples. The partial supersession of writing by new communications media

will no doubt throw into relief more and more of the specific implications of literacy.' (p. 84)

Which brings us in conclusion to television, the correct analysis of which might, as Kathleen Gough implies, throw the effects of literacy into sharp and informative relief. Unfortunately McLuhan fails to take any disciplined advantage of this opportunity: his descriptions of television are vitiated by the same eccentricities which infect his speculations about typography.

To start with he makes a groundless assertion about the inherent qualities of the medium, to the effect that they go some way towards reversing the damage inflicted by the structural peculiarities of print. According to him TV is not really a visual medium at all, but an audio-tactile one, which restores to the viewer some of the haptic richness associated with manuscript. How does he arrive at these bizarre conclusions?

The auditory aspect is quite straightforward. The image is accompanied by sound. No argument. What about the tactility then?

'The TV image is not a *still* shot. It is not photo in any sense, but a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light *through*, not light *on*, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture.' (*Understanding Media*, p. 313)

Once again we have a vivid example of a metaphor illicitly conjured into a concrete reality. For although the TV picture *is* assembled by a rapidly scanning electronic beam, there is only a metaphorical similarity between this mechanism and the behaviour of a finger following a tactile contour. For the process takes place so fast that the spectator couldn't possibly know that it had happened. Even if the 'scan' were slow enough for

the spectator to appreciate it, the experience itself would still be visual. As for the distinction between 'light on' and 'light through', I fail to understand what he means. The source of the beam which carries the information has nothing to do with the picture as seen by the viewer. A movie projected from behind the screen looks exactly the same as one projected from the front. TV is simply another form of rear projection, and the fact that it is makes no difference to the quality of the viewer's experience.

McLuhan's next assertion is even more nonsensical than the first. The TV image, he says, is poorly defined. Compared to the images on a movie screen those on television invariably seem murky and blurred. No one could deny this. But far from seeing it as a drawback, McLuhan conceives it as the essential psychological advantage offered by TV. Because the image is low in information, it is relatively 'cold', demanding active inference by the viewer before its full meaning can be appreciated. Through having his intellectual activity thus recruited, the viewer is, by McLuhan's account, deeply involved in the picture which he helps to build. Like the mediaeval scholar who eked out the meaning of his illegible manuscript by reading it out loud, the modern viewer ekes out the meaning of the blurred images upon his screen, and thereby invests them with a peculiar vitality.

This is an absurd suggestion and it deserves to be destroyed forthwith. The type of psychological transaction which takes place while 'filling in' the information gaps contained in a poor image has no bearing upon the sense of conscious involvement. The picture gets 'completed' in accordance with purely automatic rules of visual inference; and if this activity ever reaches consciousness, it does not do so in the form of participant pleasure, but

as a subliminal exhaustion which actually undermines attention. There is in fact an *inverse* relationship between the quality of the picture and the degree of conscious psychological involvement. The poorer the image the more alienated the viewer becomes from it. He starts to adjust the brightness controls and finally switches stations in disgust.

What I think McLuhan has done is to confuse the low information content of TV with the artful simplification of sketches and cartoons. The pattern of a drawing is carefully conceived on the understanding that certain key lines will stand for all those which have been omitted. The picture so formed is strategically simplified in order to achieve a certain pictorial effect. In contrast the TV picture is *haphazardly* incomplete so that the viewer has no formal clues to guide his psychological participation.

The same holds true for the conventions of painting. When Corot blurred the foliage of his trees he did so in order to represent its slight movement. The blurring of TV represents nothing, but is instead an adventitious nuisance interposed between the viewer and the picture he is meant to receive. What is remarkable about TV is the fact that such a large audience *tolerates* its inadequacy. In order to explain this, one must resort to social explanations rather than to dubious derivatives of gestalt psychology. People tolerate the poor image of TV not because they get so much pleasure out of filling in its gaps, but because it is relatively cheap, enormously convenient, and because its messages fill certain long felt wants (which, incidentally the various commercial companies do everything to exploit and shape to their own advantage).

Apart from these dubious interpretations of the quality of the medium itself, McLuhan rightly draws our

attention to the effects of the presence of TV in every home. Just as the telegraph and the railroad brought people of the world closer together—with all the diverse and equivocal effects that such propinquity breeds—so TV introduces the inhabitants of one nation to those of another, thereby establishing a certain measure of common experience.

As usual, however, McLuhan exaggerates and distorts the details of this fickle communion. According to him the electronic network has re-tribalised modern man, overcome the fissiparous influence of print and restored the human race to its rightful place in the 'global village'. A stirring slogan, but is it anything more?

Not much. The so called community called into existence by television has very little more than a metaphorical affinity with a village, whose distinctive character is significantly defined by the face to face collaboration of the people who form its enduring nucleus. A genuine village community exists only through the local institutions which embody the shared interests of its inhabitants. Such institutions more or less effectively exclude the participation of outsiders who do not contribute directly to their upkeep.

It is true of course that TV allows us to share the experiences of those who live at a great distance. But the whole point about such 'shared' experiences is that they are essentially vicarious, and have little or nothing in common with the experiences that define the characteristic collectivism of village life. For example, when American viewers became involved in the TV pictures of the Vietnam war—especially the live transmissions—their concern and interest was expressed mainly for the condition of 'our boys out there'. That is to say TV illustrated the fate of *American* 'villagers'. In so far as TV excited concern on behalf of the *Vietnamese*, it did not

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In fact it is characteristic of the outcries such programmes produced that an appeal to *general principle* formed an essential part of their rhetoric. Not that this is a bad thing, but it is important to distinguish such abstract principles from the concrete scruples which control the way in which tribal villagers behave towards one another. For the essential feature of tribal or village morality is that it is *not* realised with reference to general principles—or at least not to principles that can be articulated independently of the contexts to which they immediately apply. The moral imperatives that shape the collective conduct of village life are inseparable from the immediate circumstances which they control. They are embedded in the social context which gives them meaning, and it is very doubtful whether the people who behave in accordance with them would ever recognise their existence as an independent body of moral regulations.

What is more, the principles with reference to which American liberals both initiated and justified their concern were created by the very traditions of literacy which McLuhan suspects. Without such a printed menu of acknowledged human rights it is unlikely that the TV experience of distant atrocity would have provoked anything more than a voyeur's interest. In other words any 'village' sentiment that TV creates is almost entirely parasitic upon the printed arguments which gave them priority in the first place.

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McLuhan has also underestimated the destructive features of TV, and he has overlooked those which actually undermine the sense of global community.

For a start there are now so many documentary and current affairs programmes that in so far as TV *has* enlarged the family of man, it has done so beyond the point where genuine sentiment can be expressed for all its constituent members. There is after all a limit upon the number of moral obligations that any individual can feel himself capable of discharging. Confronted as he is now by the image of so many human predicaments the spectator becomes confused, frustrated and finally, in self-protection, isolationist. He almost deliberately exempts himself from the concern which these programmes would otherwise seem to solicit.

This sense of alienation is reinforced by certain sensory features of the medium. Contrary to what McLuhan asserts, TV is strikingly visual and the images which it presents are curiously dissociated from all the other senses. The viewer sits watching them all in the drab comfort of his own home, cut off from the pain, heat and smell of what is actually going on. Even the sound is artificial. (McLuhan ignores the fact that nearly all newsreels are accompanied by the commentator's 'voice over' and not by the natural din of the scene itself.) All these effects serve to distance the viewer from the scenes which he is watching, and eventually he falls into the unconscious belief that the events which happen on TV are going on in some unbelievably remote theatre of human activity.

The alienating effect is magnified by the fact that the TV screen reduces all images to the same visual quality. Atrocity and entertainment alternate with one another on the same rectangle of bulging glass. Comedy and politics merge into one continous ribbon of transmission. It is hard to see how ordinary village life can survive under such conditions, let alone that of a global village.

McLuhan has more or less overlooked these considerations, distracted as he is by the idea that modern electronics has externalised the nervous system of man. According to him, the vast network of electrical communications which now links the distant corners of the earth has created a collective cosmic analogue of the individual brain. Instead of cogitating in the solitude which they once created for themselves under the influence of print, men can now think together through the permissive medium of a synthetic nervous system that surrounds the globe. This of course is an exciting and vivid metaphor and it certainly serves to emphasise the ease with which distant people can come into some sort of contact with one another. Taken too literally it obscures all these conditions which determine the *breaches* in human cooperation.

McLuhan's notion of the global nervous system and the almost identical idea of the noosphere as formulated by Teilhard de Chardin have a strange poetic affinity. Thus Teilhard in *The Phenomenon of Man*: 'The recognition and isolation of a new era in evolution, the era of noogenesis, obliges us to distinguish correlatively a support proportionate to the operation—that is to say, yet another membrane in the majestic assembly of telluric layers. A glow ripples outward from the first spark of conscious reflection. The point of ignition grows larger. The fire spreads in ever widening circles till finally the whole planet is covered with incandescence. Only one interpretation, only one name can be found worthy of this grand phenomenon. Much more coherent and just as extensive as any preceding layer, it is really a new layer, the "thinking layer", which, since its germination at the end of the Tertiary period, has spread over and above the world of planets and animals. In other words,

outside and above the biosphere there is the noosphere.' (p. 182)

Apart from the social reality which Teilhard's noosphere and McLuhan's global nervous system somewhat incoherently embody, it is important to realise the strong element of wish fulfilment which they express. Both men, as I have already indicated, are Catholics and as such give enormous and understandable priority to the fundamental spiritual unity of man. Any institution, natural or artificial, which gives *secular* thought world-wide expression would seem, on first principles at least, to be a congenial circumstance within which to establish a consensus of *piety* too.

Catholics who once looked to the Roman church as an institution that might have realised such aspirations were obviously disappointed by the events that followed the Reformation. But while men like Chesterton retreated into the dubious consolations of nostalgia, McLuhan mounted a much more adventurous crusade on behalf of the lost consensus, seeking aids to its recovery in the very culture which usurped it. This paradoxical enterprise relies upon the optimistic identification of certain unexpectedly hopeful features in the structure of an otherwise corrupt regime. In other words, while deploring the secular individualism supposedly characteristic of societies based upon print, he claimed to have recognised certain technical developments—such as TV and radio—which could, if exploited intelligently, do much to reverse the profane tendencies of a society which invented such devices.

The devil defeated by his own ingenuity! Notice the cyclical justice enacted by such a process. It cannot be an accident that McLuhan, through the medium of Joyce, laid such friendly emphasis upon the work of Giambattista Vico, a historian who also liked to imagine

that human destiny revolved through circles of regenerative repetition. Certainly some of the criticisms levelled at Vico apply with peculiar force to McLuhan too.

'Vico', wrote Benedetto Croce, 'was in a state similar to that of drunkenness; confusing categories with facts, he felt absolutely certain a priori of what the facts would say; instead of letting them speak for themselves he put his own words into their mouth. A common illusion with him was to seem to see connexions between things where there were really none. This made him turn every hypothetical conjunction into a certainty, and read in other writers instead of their actual words things that they had never written, but which were internally spoken by himself unawares and projected into the writings of others. Exactitude was for him an impossibility, and in his mental excitement and exaltation he almost despised it; what harm can ten, twenty, a hundred errors do to what is substantially true? Exactitude, "diligence", as he says, "must lose itself in arguments of any size because it is a minute, and because minute also a slow-footed virtue." Fanciful etymologies, daring and groundless mythological interpretations, changes of name and date, exaggerations of fact, false quotations are met with throughout his pages.' (*Giambattista Vico*, p. 152)

The point is that when history is conceived on such a gigantic scale it is almost impossible not to misuse facts and quotations in the way that both Vico and McLuhan do. The tide of human events becomes so vast that, as McLuhan himself suggests, conventional intellectual etiquette seems irrelevant and tangential. The sheer size of the panorama reduces all formal argument to triviality. On such a broad background, even factual details lose their concrete individuality and, like iridescent oil

patches on the surface of a wet road, stretch, swim and glimmer with vague equivocal significance.'

Impressed as he obviously is by this Heraclitean flux, McLuhan, like Vico, has adapted his whole literary style to fit it. Linear exposition is abandoned in favour of what he calls the 'mosaic approach'; and by means of techniques which are closely copied from those of the Dada movement he assembles a collage of slogans, facts, and quotations through whose artful juxtaposition he hopes to reproduce the simultaneous present of historical reality, as did Joyce in *Finnegans Wake:*

> 'riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.'

Unfortunately this stream of historical consciousness offers no fixed point from which the reader can take his critical bearings. Before he has time to object to any single fact or assertion it has changed its shape on the surface of the current or swept out of view altogether. Anyone who complains is simply dismissed as a victim of the Gutenberg tyranny.

By writing in this way McLuhan has also cunningly appropriated all the standards of criticism and protected himself from the very possibility of rebuttal. He has, according to his disciples, redefined the entire notion of enquiry and in doing so has established exclusive rights for choosing the principles by which any criticism of his own thesis might be made.

Far from being overawed by this critical impermeability, McLuhan's opponents regard it as the characteristic flaw in the whole enterprise. For theories deserve attention in direct proportion to their capacity to with-

stand judgement in accordance with independent standards. A descriptive hypothesis which can only survive by disqualifying even the relevance of valid counter-assertions is little short of myth.

Not that McLuhan would be in the least dismayed by having his work described in this way, for he believes that 'in myth this fusion and telescoping of phases of process becomes a kind of explanation or mode of intelligibility'. This assertion leaves no room for distinguishing between competing myths. One is as good as any other. The whole point about genuine explanations is that they must have a certain degree of acknowledged brittleness. That is to say any proposition which purports to explain something must, in order to qualify as an explanation, remain open to contradiction. Otherwise it becomes impossible to choose between competing assertions, and the whole notion of understanding gives way to caprice.

In spite of all these objections one is left with the disturbing suspicion that McLuhan is 'on to something'. Not with respect to any of his grand theories, most of which are too generalised and incoherent to be of much value—nor indeed on account of any of his specific insights, few of which bear close scrutiny—but because he has successfully convened a debate on a subject which has been neglected too long. For all the maddening slogans, paradoxes and puns; for all the gross breaches of intellectual etiquette—or perhaps even because of them all—McLunan has forced us to attend to the various media through which we gain our knowledge of the world. On the basis of *The Mechanical Bride* alone he deserves an important place in the history of cultural criticism; and he will always be remembered for the part he played in launching the magazine *Ex-*

ploration, through whose pages many critics first became aware of the fact that they had never before intelligently used their physical senses. The medium may not be the message exactly, but it certainly imposes subtle constraints which we are constantly apt to overlook. Staring at the view beyond the window we have become unconscious of the fact that glass, for all its transparency, confers optical peculiarities upon the various scenes at which we like to think we are gazing directly.

I can still recall the intense excitement with which I first read McLuhan in 1960. Not that I remember a single observation which I now hold to be true, nor indeed a single theory which even begins to hold water. And yet, as a result of reading him, I first began to look at print as a thing in itself; I became aware of the peculiar idioms associated with using the telephone. I began to see photographs, not just as pictures of the world around, but as peculiar objects existing in their own right, often usurping the reality which they supposedly represented. The special idioms associated with radio became glaringly apparent; and as someone who has subsequently spent much time trying to devise and shape programmes for TV I am grateful for the way in which McLuhan alerted me to the odd properties of the medium itself. And yet I can rehabilitate no actual truth from what I read. Perhaps McLuhan has accomplished the greatest paradox of all, creating the possibility of truth by shocking us all with a gigantic system of lies.

. . . . .

The special rhetorical purpose of Chesterton is to overcome the mental inertia of human beings, which mental inertia is constantly landing them in

the strange predicament of both seeing a thing and not seeing it. When people's perceptions are in this condition, they must, in the strictest sense of the words, be made to renew their acquaintance with things. They must be made to see them anew, as if for the first time. (*Hugh Kenner,* Paradox in Chesterton, *p. 43*)

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6 Booklist

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However modern the master, he must build on the thought of the past; and the most modern of masters can usually be shown to belong to some well-defined tradition. This, Jonathan Miller believes, is particularly true of Marshall McLuhan. Tunnelling through McLuhan's medium into his message, he finds . . . But the reader must be free to follow Miller's intellectual detective story to its appropriate, paradoxical end. 'I can still recall', he concludes, 'the intense excitement with which I first read McLuhan in 1960. Not that I remember a single observation which I now hold to be true, nor indeed a single theory which even begins to hold water. And yet, as a result of reading him . . .'

As well as writing about McLuhan, Jonathan Miller has recently directed several plays (including The Merchant of Venice and The Tempest) and a film. He is also well known for his part in the famous review Beyond the Fringe; for his film of Alice in Wonderland; and as a TV director and editor. He has contributed to a wide variety of periodicals including the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. But all Miller's many activities (he was trained as a doctor and is a member of the Royal Society study group in non-verbal communication) are guided by one – a passion for ideas and their ancestry, as his book clearly shows.

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