COMS600 – McLuhan Short Presentation

Medium Specificity: Marshall McLuhan’s “McLuhan’s Laws of Media” (1975)

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\*no hard copy submitted, therefore no citations

Introduction:

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born in 1911 and died in 1980, on December 31st. He was Canadian and remains a seminal figure in media studies. He was educated at the University of Manitoba and then Cambridge University. His teaching career culminated in a long tenure with the University of Toronto. McLuhan coined the term “global village” in anticipation of the influence of the World Wide Web almost thirty years before it was invented.

McLuhan had a conflicted relationship with religion early on and used his academic work to pursue “training in perception” that he hoped would provide him with clearer insight. He studied under I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis at Cambridge and was influenced by the formalist movement known as New Criticism. He studied the *trivium* (grammar, logic and rhetoric) at graduate school and eventually converted to Roman Catholicism in 1937.

Fun Fact: McLuhan cameos in Woody Allen’s Annie Hall

Theories:

So, The Medium is the Message… (let’s get a grounding in McLuhan’s theories)

Media is a mediation inter- and intra- ourselves where an entirely new network of connections is formed through the medium. As an example, if you have red, blue and yellow then the network involves three nodes and the edges that link them (let’s call them “nomads”). You get red-blue, red-yellow, blue-yellow and red-blue-yellow as nomads. Then mediate that network with green and it doesn’t just add green-red, green-blue, green-yellow but actually mediates all of the connections already existing within the network - this is what McLuhan refers to as a “new scale” as he understands media to shape and control the scale and form of human association and action.

“for any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary” – and this statement is very telling of McLuhan’s roots in structuralism and semiotics

The general principle is that there is a tabula rasa with new media whereby the new network imposes its structure on us before we can adapt and reform that structure through heuristic or hermeneutic devices.

“the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance”

McLuhan writes of the “serious artist” as the only one able to encounter technology with impunity. Serious artist here could be interpreted as one who is both an expert **creatively** and has expertise in **engineering** their work. They have an understanding of the architecture and the inner working of machinery, materials and technology associated with their labour, their perceptions and the work produced. This is an important point to consider because it can put McLuhan into conversation with more contemporary theorists such as Andreas Huyssen and Umberto Eco.

Huyssen theorizes around the concept of technological amnesia whereby we disavow our apprenticeship to technology and fetishize mastery. Moore’s Law dictates that the power of computers doubles every year. Where people use to notice technological obsolescence inter-generationally they now have to face it intra-generationally. To avoid considering oneself to be living in the past while in the present, the actual past must be disavowed, reconstructing spatiotemporal consciousness. This leads to a condition known as tech amnesia which is really a subset within a broader phenomenon known as cultural amnesia that manifests and operates similarly.

So, Huyssen’s work on tech amnesia speaks to McLuhan’s warnings against the unwary who do not appreciate the impact of the mediation of technology on human lives.

Umberto Eco building off of Stuart Hall’s concept of encoding/decoding forwards the intuitive concept of “aberrant decoding”. Although, Eco is trained as a semiotician and is a clear proponent of the poststructuralist turn to hermeneutics heralded by Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author/Birth of the Reader”. McLuhan’s notion that media imposes its structure onto pre-existing networks of human association and action, is challenged by Eco’s concept of “aberrant decoding” whereby the individual will decode the message using the structure of already established networks of association and meaning.

It is important to keep in mind however that McLuhan’s project has a grandeur that transcends the individual, community or even the human race. He sees technology as being capable of mediating a fundamental reconfiguration of meaning. He uses cinema as an example where he claims that prior to cinema conceptions of speed and time were lineal connections, but with the advent of the cinematic apparatus they became configurations.

(side-note: example of political spectrum… then Foucauldian discourse… so the technology facilitates our perception of the z-value that was actually always there)

For McLuhan, electronic communication technology integrates human perception into a ‘field’. Through that field we can interpret forms (structure). Technology can institute a wholesale alteration to the spatiotemporal design of a field (fundamental reconfiguration of meaning… accretion of z-value). So, the medium is the message because the medium is actively causing human perception to operate through brand new fields. This is also why the content is relatively unimportant as conceived by McLuhan.

A news story about murder is important for news being a medium for information about crime. The content more-or-less serves as a distraction.

Analysis:

The Analogical Mirrors (The Kenyon Review, Vol. 6; No. 3; Summer, 1944)

- Gerard Manley Hopkins, religious poet

- double mirror image of Christ

- so content can become transfixing because of its epic implications for the self and society

- but the nature of the mirror as a medium that produces images and reflection is paramount

\*sense a friction or tension with this structuralist philosophy for those with poststructuralist sensibilities

\*Quote 1 (so language mediates humanity… serious ontological implications that grind against the tenets of poststructuralist movement and postmodern philosophy)

Language gives evidence of its reality through three categories of human experience. The first may be considered as the meaning of words; the second, as those meanings enshrined in grammatical forms; and the third and, in the view of this author, the most significant, as those meanings which lies beyond grammatical forms, with those meanings mysteriously and miraculously revealed to man. It is with this last category that this chapter will endeavor to deal, for its thesis is that thought itself must be accompanied by a critical understanding of the relations of linguistic expression to the deepest and most persistent intuitions of man. An effort will further be made to show that language becomes imperfect and inadequate when it depends exclusively upon mere words & forms and when there is an uncritical trust in the adequacy of these words and forms as constituting the ultimate content and extent of language. For man is that being on earth who does not have language. Man is language.

…from The Gutenberg Galaxy (230-1)

Rhetoric:

So now, up to speed.

Now, a little on his writing style as I hadn’t previously read McLuhan’s work. When I was researching on television studies I actually ended up using work by his long-time UofT colleague, Harold Innis. But after reading several essays by McLuhan some important points can be noted. He tends to burn out, rather than fade away. McLuhan ends many of his essays with analysis instead of recapitulations on his thesis or drawing out conclusions. With the last few paragraphs or pages, he often peppers-in invocations of the works of giants in their field, thus constructing or identifying a discourse. It is what I would refer to as “holistic rhetoric”.

In his essay “Footprints in the Sands of Crime” he invokes EAP and Swift at the very end

And as you know invokes Carl Jung in the piece we read for class.

Not an aside, but a means for constructing a discourse and to produce a historical framework.

\*Quote #3

Stranger… taxi cab driver as philosopher

Charges against his structuralism consider inherent bias through being subject to media when commenting on their structure. How can you theorize their independence or influence fairly when dependent on them to consider them.

But the stranger incites global thinking… dialectical approach… side-steps

So… McLuhan is complex and it isn’t obvious where he fits into structuralist and poststructuralist as movements in modernist and postmodernist philosophy

There is a sense in which a magazine is a vortex of energy, a mask which the reader puts on in order to perceive a field of action that would otherwise be outside his ken. If a reader must put on a magazine as a mask or a pattern of energy in order to organize his perceptions, the contributors must also put on the public created by the magazine, creating a reciprocal and complementary action. It is especially difficult for me as an outside commentator to focus both aspects of this process simultaneously. Perhaps I will be permitted the role of "the stranger" used by Plato to promote the ends of dialogue and to avoid the specialist exchanges of an "in-group."

…from Roles, Masks and Performance (New Literary History, Vol 2. No.3 (Spring 1971))

From “Instructional Media – Is Book Dead? The Clearing House, Vol 42, No 7 (Mar 1968)

Literacy is “visual space”. Tribal concepts of space are determined through the ear more than eyes… they are discrete and discontinuous

“with literacy comes detribalizing of the individual. By the same token, with circuitry comes retribalizing, the end of the individual”

Electronic tech renders fragmented specialist forms of work into roles

The typewriter makes the writer also a publisher

Changes forms of writing

In ancient times… the scribe was publisher, author and reader… functions merged… they weren’t specialized

Transformation of book into service… not for general public but for the private person

The Mass created by electronic circuitry is a “happening” where everything happens at once and everybody is involved in everybody. “responsibility becomes so diffused and so pervasive that a completely new concept of human relationship is introduced. The mass is a product of not numbers, but speed”

Optimism though… new patterns in old forms discovered (recalls Benjamin) “could be an incredibly rich source of new insight”

An idea from “The Invisible Environment: The Future of an Erosion” published in 1967 is that generations born into the electronic age do not want to pursue fragmentary goals because the electric world is organized integrally and totally. Today, goals are rejected in place of roles because roles denote involvement. They want total involvement… not fragmented, specialized goals or jobs

*McLuhan, Or Modernism in Reverse* by Glenn Willmott argues that McLuhan is the first postmodernist figure in the philosophical movement… and that his postmodern character (from the 60s) is rooted in his modernist sensibilities (of the 30s). Martin Hirst in reviewing the book states, “he was a boundary rider along the frontier between literary theory and popular culture”. There are similar thoughts on Raymond Williams whereas Jean Baudrillard is more of a consensus builder on founding postmodernist philosophy. The contention is that by straddling the two movements, McLuhan’s contribution to postmodernism was somewhat disingenuous and he was crafting an introspective dialogue with the end goal to refine his genuine modernist character.

The popular verdict about the intellectual as an irresponsible person engaged in expressing petty spites with unintelligible solemnity is not without some foundation. In England and America, for example, intellectuals have been engaged in recent decades in supporting the abstract political slogans which are themselves the slavish reflex of abstract technology. They have been, however unwittingly, on the side of hate, as Benda explained in La Trahison des Clercs. It had never occurred to them to observe that from Frankenstein to Buck Rogers both the popular and esoteric imagination was unanimous in putting technology, too, on the side of hate and chaos. Owing to the particular circumstances from which technology emerged, it was developed by a reason which was enslaved to appetite. The appetite for unlimited power over man and nature. And this blind appetite was bred from pride, fear, and hate as the popular symbols of Tamburlaine and Dr. Faustus testify.

…from Footprints in the Sands of Crime (The Sewanee Review, Vol. 54, No.4 (Oct-Dec., 1946))

Laws of the Media 1975

Purpose is stated to invite criticism… not at McLuhan or his rhetoric, but at the substance and contents of the ideas

Encouraging readers to work at disproving the laws

Plays with the paradox that scientific hypothesis can be disproved and writes his theoretical prolegomenon as “Laws of the Media”… in a disprovable form

Disproving should generate new discoveries

The Laws are derived through a structuralist approach (De Saussure and Levi-Strauss) understanding form through diachrony and synchrony

Diachrony has a historical context or framework… so, segmented

Synchrony is abstracted from a historical context or framework… so, synecdochal

Both constitute an ontological approach to understanding the form of things through their linguistic constitution

He renders synchrony and diachrony into his pre-existing framework of acoustic and visual epistemology… so synchronic is acoustic and the diachronic is visual in its analytical pattern

The laws aren’t just dealing with communications media.. but “media in terms of a larger entity of information and perception which forms our thoughts, structures our experience, and determines our views of the world about us”

Media as information flow

“the law of a medium is a figure interplaying with a ground” (from Gestalt psychology… medium is figure and context is ground)

The laws are derived from their synchronous form… and McLuhan asks, does historical data provide a vantage on technological development that proves or disproves the laws

Synchronous and inviting others to explore or discover the historical framework… rousing. A rustling of language in its own right… much like Bordwell’s Historical Poetics

Explanation and not explication…

So, it is an invitation really to understand the merits of structuralism over poststructuralism in linguistics for ontological proofs of meaning in media

McLuhan’s Laws of Media – Tetrad of Media Effects (the effects on society of any medium)

\*intended as a pedagogical tool

\*\*Synchronic form allows an exploration of the “language” of media