

MARSHALL McLuhan: DETERMINIST FETISHISM OF TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

If McLuhan's attempts at synthesis focus the urgent need for a 'communications imagination', their obscurantism functions as a vaccination against truth. In prophesying retribalization, he fabricates an idealist stasis susceptible to religious exegesis and preaches a neo-Thomist morality of submission and passive acceptance. Circumscribed by his biochemical theory of extension and his theory of meaning ('the medium is the message/massage/mass age'), their radical anthropomorphism and formal subjectivism constituting the main features of his idealist ontology and epistemology, the keystone of McLuhan's theory is the determinist fetishism of technology. Media are seen as the cause and ultimate effect of everything; human praxis and development disappear in an Eleatic pseudo-history generated by a pseudo-dialectic. McLuhan's voluntarist reductionism, liquidating all discrepant particulars, is a double fetishism of content and form which impoverishes the rich, ever-totalizing totality of human existence, and serves to legitimate and reinforce stable forms of domination.

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FOREWORD

The internal struggle in the development of Western philosophy, revealing the historical limitations of its system of reason, as well as the efforts to surpass this system, appears according to Herbert Marcuse "in the antagonism between becoming and being, between the ascending curve and the closed circle, progress and eternal return, transcendence and rest in fulfillment."<sup>1</sup> It is the thesis of this paper that the theories of Marshall McLuhan, so constructed as to embrace in each case the second of these opposing perspectives, are eccentric, unfounded, and incorrect in their conclusions.

Every ten years or so North American socio-culturology secretes another grand schema where an analysis cutting diagonally across all civilizations rebounds onto contemporary North American reality as its implicit finality and future model. One finds in McLuhan's work the same grand schema in three points that characterizes all mythical thought. His writings demonstrate a misreading of history--in particular, of the social history of media, which function in his theories like the great moral, economic, or cultural categories of the 'classical' systems. In this context what McLuhan has done, essentially, is to index certain basic truths, often badly formulated or severely distorted, in the new language of a somewhat baroque cyberneticism. If, indeed, facts concerning man always present themselves in a significant pattern, this pattern can be fully understood only through accurate knowledge of its genesis and development. McLuhan offers little help in this regard; the popularity

of his endeavours is not due to their intellectual or scientific merit. On the contrary, a powerful tendency of the formal and cloudy obscurantism of his work is to ensure that we do not learn too much about man, his culture, or his society.

The importance of communications in contemporary social life needs to be recognized; we have to acknowledge, as a matter of experience, that men in societies are not confined to relations of power, property, and production. Raymond Williams correctly stresses that human relations of "describing, learning, persuading, and exchanging experiences"<sup>2</sup> must be considered of fundamental significance. On the other hand, in economic terms, the gross costs of communications and information processing in Canada alone, not counting the communications costs of a multitude of companies engaged in ordinary business but including such organizations as the C.B.C., CN/CP Telecommunications, and the Post Office, now total over six billion dollars annually. On the other hand, in cultural terms, at such discussions as the recent UNESCO Conference on Communications held in Montreal, attention is being focussed with increasing urgency on such problems as the role of media in helping to form attitudes about other peoples and other lands or the American domination of the communications environments of foreign countries.<sup>3</sup> In McLuhan's theories, however, communications is not considered primarily in terms of relations between men and men (social relations) but rather in terms of relations between men and things. A consequence is his failure to discern authentic alternatives within which human freedom can now make history.

It would be irresponsible to lose sight of the world context in which McLuhan's doctrines are to be tested. In advanced industrial countries a false productivity, manipulated wants, and a subtly repressive indoctrination prevail as governments spend hundreds of billions of dollars on the material of control: on armaments, on specialists in violence - the soldiers and the police, and on propaganda. Meanwhile, owing to imperialist exploitation, in underdeveloped countries millions endure short lives of hunger, disease, and ignorance. Imperialism has become the gendarme of the world, systematic promoter of counter-revolution, and protector of the most backward and inhuman social structures and conditions of life.

McLuhan may attempt to internalize the source of conflict and contend that Western youth is alienated "from its own 3000-year heritage of literacy and visual culture."<sup>4</sup> The fact is that this generation, raised in material security and with high sophistication and expectations, comes up against the harsh realities of the socially, economically, culturally, intellectually, sexually, and politically repressive and hierarchical society that monopoly capitalism represents--a society that subordinates human creative praxis to the demands of inert capital. The result is an expanding political and social revolt of youth in all areas and all milieux of society: young workers (white and blue collar), students, hippies, racial minorities, and so forth. McLuhan may choose to argue that the advent of literacy to the Third World accounts for the imminence of "such a release of human power and aggressive violence

as makes the previous history of phonetic alphabet technology seem quite tame."<sup>5</sup> In fact, in the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, tributaries of the industrialized world, no one really has an honest answer, short of revolution, that implies real hope for the hundreds of millions of human beings affected by the drive of monopoly capitalism, especially that of the United States, for domination and enslavement of the world. It is perhaps significant that McLuhan continually stresses a tenuous sort of 'involvement' but never speaks of kinship or brotherhood; yet a genuinely awakened solidarity is developing among people fighting for the same goals around the world. The heroic resistance of the Vietnamese against American aggression has become an example and an inspiration for us all. McLuhan may dismiss with contempt each group--the poor of the Third World, Afro-American blacks, militant young workers, students--taking its place in the ranks of those fighting for liberation as "puny subliminal automatons aping the patterns of the prevailing electric pressures"(UM, p. 275). Still, our times continue to be defined by the intensifying confrontation between imperialism and the international revolution.

It is in this context that we must take note that the ideological meaning of McLuhan's theories tends strongly to legitimate stable forms of domination. As Lucien Goldmann indicates, referring to ultra-formalist rationalism:

il existe . . . un lien étroit entre la naissance du capitalisme technocratique d'organisation et le développement de cette philosophie qui tend à chercher dans la compréhension de l'homme des formes universelles et générales, et à éliminer toute problématique

d'ordre axiologique, toute problématique portant sur le contenu, sur le devenir historique, sur les problèmes concrets et spécifiques qui se trouvent dans telle forme littéraire ou dans telle réalité sociale ou historique.<sup>6</sup>

In the limited 'problématique' that McLuhan's system retains, 'media' function as a kind of 'mana': an indeterminate symbol (as its usage in ethnology suggests) which collects and focusses in itself all the determinations of a social system of domination. In effect, McLuhan envelops technology in a myth, thereby stripping it of its contingent, historical quality, depoliticizing it, and finding reassurance in mere assertion without explanation. As Roland Barthes' penetrating analysis makes clear about the role of myth in bourgeois society:

Le mythe est une parole dé-politisée. Il faut naturellement entendre: politique au sens profond, comme ensembles des rapports humains dans leur structure réelle, sociale, dans leur pouvoir de fabrication du monde; il faut surtout donner une valeur active au suffixe [sic] de-: il représente ici un mouvement opératoire, il actualise sans cesse une défection. . . .Le mythe ne nie pas les choses, sa fonction est au contraire d'en parler; simplement, il les purifie, les innocent, les fonde en nature et en éternité, il leur donne une clarté qui n'est pas celle de l'explication, mais celle du constat. . . . En passant de l'histoire à la nature, le mythe fait une économie: il abolit la complexité des actes humains, leur donne la simplicité des essences, il supprime toute dialectique, toute remontée au delà du visible immédiat, il organise un monde sans contradictions parce que sans profondeur, un monde étalé dans l'évidence, il fonde une clarté heureuse: les choses ont l'air de signifier toutes seules.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the simplifications and distortions in McLuhan's system severely impoverish and reduce the totality which his work attempts to reflect. This voluntarist idealism manifests itself in a double fetishism of content and form. With respect to the former, many structural features of human society, long recognized as fundamental, are omitted from McLuhan's



general theory. With respect to the latter, his formalist perspective makes virtually impossible the clear statement of any problems of substance. In the final analysis, the lack of the social and historical dimensions marks McLuhan's work as little more than a mythology of cultures and their destinies.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO McLUHAN

#### A. His Appeal

Marshall McLuhan is the first original, genuine Canadian ideologue of mass society and he presents an avant-garde image for a country that has not yet had its Whitmans, Sandburgs, or Pounds, a country that has only begun to face the fact that it is urban and industrialized, its best minds straining to break away from an intellectual Establishment which has been singularly obtuse, mandarin-minded, and peculiarly punitive. To many, McLuhan's enthusiasm for media signals a populist realism, his distrust of intellectualism a revolt against dead scholarship and the demands of specialization, his abjuration of the context of values a liberation from petty Philistine censorship. The formula is almost ideal in effectively covering up the fundamental threads which intertwine to constitute the matrix of his theories: formalism, irrationalism, determinism.

It is the task of this paper to show that McLuhan is a false prophet; at this point in the paper, however, the question is academic. His fame and popularity have spread well beyond the Canadian borders; to his disciples--and they are legion--McLuhan is a prophet. Newspapers routinely refer to him as 'communications prophet' or 'media guru' without using the quotation marks. Even serious intellectuals take the time to develop arguments attempting to show that McLuhanism has affinities with

earlier revolutionary beginnings in the social, political, and religious realms, or that "it conforms in a most satisfying manner to the archetypal myth of the hero."<sup>1</sup> The dangers inherent in such approaches, needless to say, are great. As Arnold Rockman notes, "the slogans and arguments of a prophet must appear to his contemporaries the height of absurdity and extremism."<sup>2</sup> Premature elevation to prophet-hood would naturally tend to extend to a false prophet a kind of immunity against criticism, a protective shield against being exposed, a kind of divine right to propagate absurdities without having to account for them. It is entirely plausible that something of this sort has taken place in McLuhan's case. To say this, however, is not yet to explain his popularity. Of course, a full, historical—causal analysis of this intellectual fashion is an important research project in its own right and would have to deal thoroughly with such areas for investigation as the degeneration into sterility of bourgeois social sciences; the scope of this paper will not allow more than a brief, descriptive account of McLuhan's appeal.

McLuhan's supporters appear to be vertically concentrated but horizontally widespread on the social scale, most coming from among a variety of middle and upper middle class technocratic—artistic types. They include "high school and primary school teachers, painters, sculptors, architects, engineers, turned-on business men, advertising agents, museum curators, film makers, television producers, public relations men, newspaper reporters, poets and hippies."<sup>3</sup> McLuhan seems to play five major roles, any one or more of which attract loyal fans: legitimator, dream peddler, pardoner, rebel, and theoretic guru. These roles are fairly

transparent; their positive and negative contours are rapidly revealed.

As legitimator, he comforts those who cannot write and encourages those who never wanted to: the Electric Age signals the end of literacy. The television producer finds a mandate to experiment without worrying about content--TV for TV's sake becomes the electric transformation of the immanent principle of capitalist progress: production for production's sake. McLuhan television is inexpensive television to produce according to the producers: terrible movies that make no sense are appropriate to the medium--'cool', to use the jargon.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, this role overlaps with his role as rebel against orthodoxy. A respectable full professor in the University of Toronto's English Department, McLuhan not only embraced popular culture but attacked the professoriat for its cultural snobbery.<sup>5</sup> Today his name is invoked to guarantee an aura of academic respectability for almost any novel cultural form; he enjoys the adulation of such artists as composer John Cage or architect John M. Johansen. Even businessmen who have been able to buy everything but legitimacy find it in the relativism of McLuhan's books where their businesses are mentioned casually in the company of literature, philosophy, or other elements of high culture.

Part of this stance of the rebel in McLuhan is his apparent unpretentiousness and avant-gardism. Repeatedly he stresses the value of light-hearted humour,<sup>6</sup> and insists that his books constitute "the process rather than the completed product of discovery"; he is ready to "junk any statement" he ever made, feels "no commitment to any theory"--including

his own (Playboy, p. 54). Though in fact the last time McLuhan abandoned a theory was back in 1951, this lack of commitment is particularly significant as it is adopted (at least in principle) and perpetuated by his disciples in the media world, leading to a cynical relativism, a parasitical formalism divorced from all social purpose, or an inhuman professionalism. György Lukács perceptively notes that "l'absence de conviction' des journalistes, la prostitution de leurs expériences et de leurs convictions personnelles ne peut se comprendre que comme le point culminant de la réification capitaliste."<sup>7</sup> As regards the artist-technocrats indoctrinated with McLuhanism, the real social needs of the people tend to be reduced by them to bits of evidence and subordinated to a cold emphasis on the unmediated demands of technology. In a context of community development, for example, often the rationalizations of a skillful technocrat--thinking related to specific, professional concerns--become the standard, public interpretation of an urban issue.<sup>8</sup>

In his stance as avant-garde, McLuhan appeals not only to the alienated who are out of step with the main drift of society, but to everyone as well who feels uncomfortable judged by the criteria of the academic church; McLuhan's fundamental conservatism passes unnoticed. Thus many intelligent students have become McLuhanites because of his critique of education as reactionary (Playboy, p. 62), usually having no idea (and sometimes not caring, or reading McLuhan discontinuously) that he also considers "jaded" the attitudes leading to sexual enjoyment without reproduction (Playboy, p. 65), or that he considers "degraded" and "evil" contemporary youth's experimentation with drugs.<sup>9</sup>

Two other McLuhan roles, as dream-peddler and pardoner, are also complementary, as were legitimation and rebellion. McLuhan holds out the carrot of a harmonious future in the retribalized society of the Electric Age. The ease of attaining this millennium appeals to those seeking easy solutions: one need only participate in depth and let the technology reshape our senses. As Arnold Rockman notes, if there were a King James version of McLuhan's text, it would prophesy the Kingdom of God<sup>10</sup>; the McLuhan version is even easier, in fact, as it requires no act of repentance. Of course, a stick of practical fatalism accompanies the carrot: according to McLuhan, man cannot choose not to be transformed by the electric media; his future is qualitatively determined. It is here that McLuhan's pardoner role makes this easier to bear by absolving all his followers of responsibility: no individual or collective guilt can be assigned if technology shapes our psyches (UM, p. 31). The circle is closed; its fetish character leads away from the concrete totality, which is the reason for its appeal in a world in deep structural antagonism.

Finally, through his role as intellectual guru, we approach the most important feature of McLuhan's work. In the 1950's, the journal Explorations became the vehicle for spreading McLuhan's ideas through an intellectual underground of people disaffected from orthodox, specialized academic enterprise. The Explorations manifesto, envisaging an interdisciplinary investigation cutting across the humanities and social sciences,<sup>11</sup> seemed to be the "magic key which could unlock the gates between the academic empires. . . ." <sup>12</sup> For the first time, a fully enfranchised academic in a fully reputable discipline was advocating the study of popular

culture without apology; those involved in the field could hold their heads high. McLuhan appealed because he argued a view of the world as a related whole; because he called for a shift from divisive to unifying ways of perceiving and organizing experience. The converts and allies McLuhan gained at this time seem to have stayed with him over the years; as the intellectual excitement of a generation of intellectuals susceptible to his postulations, he means a lot to those who grew with him. A later work such as Understanding Media confirms and reinforces this fervent support through its encyclopedic character, its apparent synthesis: it seems to be about everything and seems to make sense out of everything. The fact that it provides the partisans of consensus politics with an ostensibly non-partisan, non-political ideology only at the cost of distracting attention from the structural realities of society is not recognized by McLuhanites, or certainly is not genuinely faced.

The importance of communications in our lives needs to be emphasized; this is the great positive element in McLuhan's work. C. Wright Mills demonstrated the urgency of developing a 'sociological imagination' to bring an awareness of social structures and institutional linkages as they effect changes in our personal milieu; this same urgency applies to the development of a 'communications imagination'. We have no adequate communications theories today, nor does McLuhan provide one for us; he does, however, make us aware of this lack of knowledge. If it may be said that his disciples have, in one way or another, too much at stake to recognize that the Emperor has no clothes, it needs to be added that McLuhan has at least fostered an awareness of our technological environment and has



made it virtually impossible to focus exclusively on the content of media. It is unfortunate that the obscurantism of his work tends to make it difficult to pose certain questions that are integral parts of a study of communications; it is positively harmful and dangerous that his work tends to function for so many as a vaccination against the truth, where a little truth injected into the system immunizes against the effects of greater, more complex, and more complete truths.

#### B. His Critics

The body of professional criticism of McLuhan is, on the whole, a disappointing lot. Gerald E. Stearn is probably right that McLuhan has "more passionate enemies, devoted followers, and enraged critics" than almost any other contemporary theorist. Yet the "extraordinary range of critical response"<sup>13</sup> is not impressive in its depth. Of the only two book-length treatments of McLuhan, the one by the Canadian professor appears as a hasty effort prepared for the new McLelland and Stewart series on Canadian writers: it exhibits a limited scope, negligible critical effort, and virtually no insight<sup>14</sup>; the other, by the American Marxist, is appallingly uneven; equally rich in critical perception and naive argumentation.<sup>15</sup> The book reviews and short articles, many of them collected in Gerald Stearn's McLuhan: Hot & Cool, are little more distinguished. The positive critics tend to stress the importance of communications, and often, like Mark Slade, claim for McLuhan a stature as innovator equal in importance to that of Einstein or Planck.<sup>16</sup> The negative critics, no less willing to grant the value of an encyclopedic, field theory approach, centre their

reservations, as does Malcolm Muggeridge, on the dangers of letting a general idea loose in an empty head incapable of providing the mediations of a genuine knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The redundant, allegedly 'mosaic' character of McLuhan's prose makes good target practice for professionals and amateurs alike. Time judged Understanding Media "fuzzy-minded"<sup>18</sup> while a letter writer to the Toronto Globe and Mail outdid the professionals in tongue-in-cheek ridicule: "Professor McLuhan, in support of his thesis that books are passé, is creating not muddle-headed nonsense, but meaningful and significant non-books. The non-book, of course, has nothing to say about nothing and is written in a language no one uses by a nobody who specializes in doing nothing."<sup>19</sup> Yet McLuhan's work is interlaced with often solid pragmatic observation and a cultural impressionism frequently rich in insights which make his packages of intellectually scandalous and irritating material stimulating reading. Even his harshest critics admit as much, however grudgingly: "Mind you, there are several interesting things in his book. Since the author writes down everything that comes into his head, there could hardly fail to be." A deliciously accurate comment that Lister Sinclair appends to this observation refers to some of McLuhan's material as resembling "the leftovers from James Joyce's wastepaper basket."<sup>20</sup>

It is not possible here to review all the responses to the provocations of McLuhan's ideas. It is sufficient to remark that most focus on the elucidation of the many examples of "contradictions, non-sequiturs, facts that are distorted and facts that are not facts, exaggerations, and

chronic rhetorical vagueness. . . ."21 What we should note briefly in concluding this section are the elements of a potentially more penetrating criticism lost in a sea of superficiality.

Of the four types I want to cite, the first locates McLuhan in a cultural context of Eliot, Spengler, Leavis, Lawrence, Riesman, and Toynbee.<sup>22</sup> Although little is made of it, to place McLuhan in the tradition of idealist thought is already to provide the tools for a deeper understanding of the modalities of his thought. Secondly, we come to the type of ostrich-like, head-in-the-sand-of-times-past perspective represented by such critics as Louis Dudek. His humanist-cum-reactionary approach fears that McLuhan is trying to discard "all that we have been trying to inculcate into the young for centuries," and fights a rear-guard war, defending the proposition that those things that do not change "are far more important than the things that change."<sup>23</sup> It is an indication of the shallowness of this criticism that Dudek fails to realize that fundamentally McLuhan is, for all his simulated avant-gardism, every bit as opposed to real change as he is himself. Still--and this is the reason for citing Dudek--it is a sign of the cultural strength and vitality yet remaining in some of the positive aspects of traditional humanism that Dudek, unlike many of McLuhan's sophisticated disciples, fully recognizes the core of irrationalism and mysticism inside McLuhan's work. In this recognition lie the possibilities of critical resistance.

The third element of a more penetrating critique also derives from the humanist camp: it is the social conscience of such men as

Benjamin DeMott who are still disturbed, old-fashioned as McLuhan has tried to make it appear, that "sores of starvation are the rule for hundreds of millions. . . ." His powerful critique, written, it is true, from a somewhat backward-looking humanist stance, rejects the irrational offer of a virtual "release from consciousness itself" and takes a giant step forward in posing the question squarely: "How much can be said for an intellectual vision whose effect is to encourage abdication from all responsibility of mind?"<sup>24</sup> It remains for a socialist critic such as Raymond Williams to develop the most telling point against McLuhan in exposing the medievalist religious roots of the mockery McLuhan makes of his own call for a "total field approach"<sup>25</sup>:

The pre-Renaissance, or pre-Gutenberg, habits of mind have a good deal of attraction to the literary mind, and there has been a succession of subsequent defenders. But I think those habits are really useless to us, because they are not really field thinking at all, or, rather, they are field thinking only at a secondary level, a prime cause (structurally very similar to the price mechanism or capital or print) being there confidently known and even, as God, capitalized. The principal intellectual effect of any habit of mind depending on an assumed prime cause is that all else is eclecticism. With all my respect for McLuhan, I cannot see that even he has escaped this disintegrating effect, an effect following from too early an integration around a single factor.<sup>26</sup>

This analysis, like the others mentioned above, was lost in the ever-increasing volume of pro/con comments on McLuhan, and the analytical possibilities it anticipates were never actualized. Clearly, it opens up the door to an examination of determinism and the fetishism of technology. It is my intention in this paper, after looking briefly at significant aspects of his development and intellectual position, to consider McLuhan's work in that context.

### C. His Development

In discussing McLuhan's development, it would be a serious error to chart the course through discontinuities at the expense of continuities or vice versa. If there is a major change in his intellectual posture after The Mechanical Bride, there are also various threads and unifying principles that run through his thought from his earliest writings to the most recent. Conversely, if there are certain concepts, positions, and attitudes that have been retained over the years, there are also significant differences of emphasis and focus. To put it more concretely: the fundamental continuities tend to be epistemological; where a major break occurs, as in the fifties, the change appears to be of a basically ethical character. McLuhan's thought has been and remains subjectivist, idealist, Catholic. His ethical position (social-political-cultural) moves from liberal to conservative.

Central to McLuhan's perspective has always been a call for a unifying catholicism. If his mature work was to become a hymn to "a new tribal encyclopedia of auditory incantation,"<sup>27</sup> the roots are already evident in "An Ancient Quarrel in Modern America," where the position favouring encyclopedism that McLuhan adopts is counterposed to specialist notions of human activity. This leaning towards the inclusive, the closed, continues in the attacks against "inhuman specialism"<sup>28</sup> in The Mechanical Bride, in the discussion of the Eastern labyrinth of Bloom, "hermetic, earthly and cloacal"<sup>29</sup> in "James Joyce: Trivial and Quadrivial," and, indeed, in the recurring references to the dissociation of sensibility,

the head/heart split that allegedly occurred in the early seventeenth century.<sup>30</sup> The only change in this respect is that by the time of The Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan attributes this split to the effects of printing on human sensibility. Of course, this theory of a primitive sensibility dissociated by something (in McLuhan's case by the alphabet and, ultimately, print) has been discarded by most intelligent theorists since the late 1950's; if McLuhan retains it, he does so because the theory is perfectly appropriate to his modern primitivism and permits a series of destructive medievalist sorties against the culture of the last three or four hundred years. As Frank Kermode remarks, the doctrine is a pseudo-historical explanation serving as a way "of evading the terrors of actual history."<sup>31</sup>

There are, of course, many other elements of continuity in McLuhan's work. An anti-Cartesian emphasis on discontinuity is clear in "Joyce, Aquinas, and the Poetic Process,"<sup>32</sup> becomes stressed in The Mechanical Bride (pp. 34, 97), and pervasive in the later books. 'Tribal man' makes an appearance already in 1951 (MB, p. 85), as do the concepts of orchestration (MB, pp. 34, 50, 97) and technology's role in producing social revolutions (MB, p. 40) and in ravaging the psyche (MB, p. 33), although these latter do not yet have the kind of formalist stress that they acquire in The Gutenberg Galaxy and more recent works. Finally, liturgical implications are always present in McLuhan's writings--deliberately so, according to Walter Ong.<sup>33</sup> The door into Catholic life is always open, although after 1951 McLuhan deals with the liturgical imperatives of his work in a much more detached way. Explicitly Christian implications and interpretations are introduced in the later books only

rarely, and by way of incidental digression (e.g. WP, p. 59). McLuhan, of course, is always aware of the "profound religious meaning" of his work. But he explains:

I do not think it is my job to point this out. For example, the Christian concept of the mystical body—all men as members of the body of Christ—this becomes technologically a fact under electronic conditions. However, I would not try to theologize on the basis of my understanding of technology.<sup>34</sup>

As suggested earlier, an understanding of the continuity of McLuhan's thought must not come at the expense of a recognition of significant changes of emphasis or major changes of direction. There is a decisive break of this kind during the Explorations period in the fifties, in the years following the publication of The Mechanical Bride. This is the period of the great sellout when all emphasis becomes formalist and the reality reflected in McLuhan's works is impoverished through the exclusion of many structural variables, including the whole 'problématique' of value and of freedom. In the Bride, McLuhan is writing about culture as an instrument of domination; within the limitations of a liberal perspective, his study fits into that area of cultural investigation analysed by Marcuse and documented by Barthes. At this time, McLuhan recognizes that the mechanization of the human personality is related to the questions of control in industry; he is aware of the psychological misery of millions who can not keep up with the advertising image of the Joneses (MB, p. 115); he speaks of the "rigging of the market for the pyramiding of profits" (MB, p. 128). Sports, which later become simply collective dramatizations (extensions) of inner life (UM, p. 210), are at this time seen as rituals "varying with the changing character of the dominant classes" (MB, p. 123).

The whole context of McLuhan's thought at this time revolves around questions of real authority versus the ghost of freedom (MB, p. 16). In an important passage in "What It Takes to Stay In," he develops a critique of the Hearst press:

They talk as if there were no such thing as economic power as a factor in human freedom. In this they are deeply muddled. To talk of freedom but never of power is partly, at least, the result of confusion and timidity of mind. (MB, p. 134)

McLuhan does not write of power in his subsequent books, yet no one can accuse him of 'confusion and timidity of mind' according to his own definition: for McLuhan also gives up talking of freedom and develops instead a theory of total technological determinism on the qualitative level. This is a decisive and fundamental change in outlook; fundamental structural elements of reality have been amputated and discarded. It is naive and inadequate to see in this change, as Dennis Duffy does, simply an abandonment of an attitude colouration--"righteous indignation".<sup>35</sup> Where he once considered "whatever fosters mere passivity and submission" (MB, p. 22) the enemy of freedom, today McLuhan applauds "utter human docility" (UM, p. 64); where he once appealed for the restoration of sanity, to the heritage of rationality, thought, humanism, knowledge, today he derides all of these as 'literacy' with its product, the 'split' man. McLuhan's rush towards reaction continues with each new book. While even in the Galaxy he still expressed a desire to retain the "achieved values" of the "Gutenberg mechanical culture", (GG, p. 135) today he dismisses human culture with appalling arrogance: "Today, in the age of electric circuitry, when information retrieval can be both instant and total, the intervening ages of specialism between us and Paleolithic Man the Hunter



seem quaint and odd."<sup>36</sup>

#### D. His Intellectual Position

McLuhan leaps from the time of St. Thomas Aquinas to the 'Electric Age' as though the intervening centuries were nothing but an unpleasant dream. As Gerald Taafe notes, McLuhan "makes no attempt to hide his medievalist, Catholic, corporatist bias."<sup>37</sup> Conveniently, McLuhan discovers in contemporary trends a revival of medieval and earlier oral values. Wielding the loaded word 'fragmented', he tears up the entire humanist cultural past. Thomist rationalism, however, is no less a rationalism than a Cartesian rationalism; McLuhan's ultra-formalist rationalism has as a characteristic the tendency to negate historical becoming, in fact, to negate the very problem of becoming as a central and indispensable element in the study of all human facts. The transcendent appears at first to be absent from his thought, which actually is haunted by it. In fetishizing technology as the prime mover, McLuhan seeks the basis of phenomena (social, psychological, cultural, or economic) and their links outside their immanent connections. Moreover, what McLuhan seeks is not the total concrete, always totalizing, but the absolute concrete encompassing absolute transcendence.

McLuhan does not admit a logic of totalization, intelligible to man to the ~~degree that he defines~~ himself as a totalizing project (to phrase it in Sartrean terminology). He dissolves the totality concept in a technological system which does not integrate authentic temporality. In

McLuhan's theory, totality, the central dialectical category, is fetishized and, no longer understood starting from the movement of totalization which sustains it, is posited as the absolute.

The idealist stasis thus fabricated is highly susceptible to religious exegesis; and the polemical edge of McLuhan's work is always directed against materialism. And McLuhan is sufficiently aware of his own parameters that he consciously associates the two in his prophecies:

I think we're heading into a profoundly religious age. . . .  
I think that human affairs proceed by a sort of reductio ad absurdum [sic] and I think that materialism will reach its reductio ad absurdum [sic] and in reaching this reductio ad absurdum [sic] in order that the opposite proposition begin to be attractive. There are very clear indications of this, all round, including evil, this sort of business, of these drugs and things, which in my opinion are very degraded.<sup>38</sup>

McLuhan preaches a neo-Thomist morality of submission and passive acceptance; he likes to quote Carlyle saying "of author Margaret Fuller after she remarked, 'I accept the Universe': 'she'd better'" (Playboy, p. 74). As it is not a question of resignation but of acceptance, theoretically there is no evaluative necessity involved. McLuhan's intellectual stance is a refusal to judge; he stresses both the need for description to precede valuation (GG, p. 7), and the need for a suspended judgment (GG, p. 276)--suspended, apparently, indefinitely. McLuhan repeatedly emphasizes the urgent need to understand the technological forces shaping our lives (GG, p. 213; UM, p. 20); and just as strongly contends, referring to Poe's Mariner studying the maelstrom, that understanding comes through contemplation which arrests the action (MB, p. 5; GG, p. 77; MM, p. 150).

Several implications of this position should be noted. Firstly, this is the epistemology of subjective idealism which does not recognize knowledge as the reflection of objective reality by man in the form of concepts, laws, and so forth, through successive approximations. This is why it omits the third term from the path of cognition which leads from living perception to abstract thought to practice. Secondly, it is impossible to separate judgments of fact and judgments of value in the social sciences; indeed, in a class society the value judgments which structure the thought of the social sciences always have, to a certain degree, an ideological character. Certainly McLuhan's own thought has value judgments implicit in it and an ideological character to which I shall return in the last chapter. For the moment, we should simply note Lucien Goldmann's warning that any pretension to a non-ideological, value-free social science is today "une des formes les plus graves du dogmatisme, une prétention qui ferme précisément la possibilité de la recherche, la possibilité du progrès."<sup>39</sup> Thirdly, it is important to perceive that McLuhan's stance of a value-free, neutral attitude, a refusal to judge, is not simply a voluntary, freely-adopted, easily discarded (should one be so inclined) pose. As a concretization of the bourgeois ideal of presuppositionless pure theory, McLuhan's stance of neutrality is a fully integral aspect of his determinist fetishism of technology. By denying that human action is itself responsible for the changes which our social and cultural system is undergoing and will undergo, McLuhan necessarily denies that a critical attitude is morally significant or practically important. Fourthly, it ought to be recognized that the peace and superiority of a purely contemplative attitude can be bought only

at the price of an understanding with the prevailing order.

We can now ask what the point of understanding is--where does it lead? McLuhan's answer should come as no surprise. In Understanding Media he writes: "It is the theme of this book that not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary 'closure' of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented" (p. 286). Ultimately, the answer turns out to be a type of "survival strategy": "It's inevitable that the worldpool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens to us and what we can do about it, we can come through" (Playboy, p. 158). In other words, understanding media leads not to a qualitative control by man of his social and natural environment, but simply to the possibility of relatively painless psychic and social adjustment to the changes going on around us. In effect, the measure of quantitative control gained through understanding in no way counteracts the fetish-like quality or determinist powers which technology assumes in McLuhan's theories.

#### E. His Method

Methodologically, technology serves McLuhan as the point of departure, just as God serves the theologians. In fact, his method is essentially that of the theologian. As Etienne Gilson explains: " . . . the theologian makes use of human reason, not in order to prove the truth of faith, but merely as a method of exposition. Starting from some article

of faith, the theologian argues in order to manifest consequences implied in it and which, therefore, necessarily follow from it."<sup>40</sup> This method leaves McLuhan well protected: since his arguments are not meant to function as proof, in principle he need not feel threatened by their destruction and can, again in principle, easily discard his 'probes'. Accordingly, McLuhan's response to criticism merely reasserts the article of faith without really coming to grips with the criticism. His response, even to the moderate criticism of Arnold Rockman, can be harsh and impatient: "The mechanism of his mind, geared to negotiate the most standardized situations, naturally derails itself in the encounter with new perception."<sup>41</sup>

As far as McLuhan himself is concerned, wherever he looks--from fashions to weapons--he finds corroboration of his technological thesis; or, more precisely, he shuts his eyes to whatever does not tend to corroborate. What is more, he invents history backwards in an attempt to explain and defend present trends of domination; he invents theories to keep the system stable. In an interesting mode of squeeze-play, he can also use the Catholic Middle Ages as a spring-board for the attack on subsequent centuries. The situations which he tends to use as the starting point for extracting the formal conditions of cultural and social reality are, however, generally secondary incidentals of socio-cultural life, and therefore cannot serve to disclose its foundations. On the other hand, such situations have a greater content of indeterminacy, that is, are more susceptible to differing interpretations, so that McLuhan runs a lesser risk of being decisively contradicted.

McLuhan's technology theory is falsely aetiological; he simply invokes media as causes, failing to demonstrate the necessity of media causation. Geoffrey Gorer's analysis of Robert Ardrey (one of McLuhan's recently discovered heroes) as a convert can be so fruitfully applied to post-Mechanical-Bride McLuhan, that perhaps an extended quotation may be permitted:

It is a typical sequel to conversion that the convert feels compelled to share his illumination with the benighted; and Ardrey [read: McLuhan] writes with much the same conviction of having achieved access to deeper truths as do converts to the older established religions or to Marxism or psycho-analysis or "psychodelic" [sic] drugs; it is this feeling of urgency which helps give Ardrey's [read: McLuhan's] books their compulsive readability. But, although the convert feels that he is completely changed, he brings to his new life his old habits and skills. Ardrey [read: McLuhan] was a dramatist [read: professor of English]; and one of the characteristics of dramatists [read: Professors of English] is to put a very great load of significance on to a few symbols or metaphors, a far greater load than they would bear outside the condensation of a play [read: literature].<sup>42</sup>

This overload of symbols is a very basic characteristic of McLuhan's method. One example without comment should be sufficient. McLuhan frequently refers to the Greek myth about King Cadmus who sowed the dragon's teeth which sprang up armed men. Using it as the myth of the phonetic alphabet, McLuhan claims that implied in the myth are the transfer of power from the priestly to the military class, the fall of city states, and the rise of empires and military bureaucracies. To this, he adds the following:

In terms of the extensions of man, the theme of the dragon's teeth in the Cadmus myth is of the utmost importance. Elias Canetti in Crowds and Power reminds us that the teeth are an obvious agent of power in man, and especially in many animals. Languages are filled with testimony to the grasping, devouring power and precision of teeth. That the power of letters as agents of aggressive

order and precision should be expressed as extensions of the dragon's teeth is natural and fitting. Teeth are emphatically visual in their lineal order. Letters are not only like teeth visually, but their power to put teeth into the business of empire-building is manifest in our Western history. (UM, p. 86)

In The Mechanical Bride, McLuhan had criticized George Orwell for projecting into the future what already exists. "Such books," wrote McLuhan, "distract attention from the present actuality" (MB, p. 93). In his later books McLuhan himself increasingly projects into the present a state of affairs that he imagines will come to exist in the future, and thereby distracts attention from the present actuality. Benjamin DeMott points to "the dozen different kinds of stratagem by which this author [McLuhan] empties facts and agonies from the world he thinks of as 'Now'." Futuristic projection is one of these stratagems: "Write that 'the real integrator of the white and Negro was,' and you imply that the struggle has already been won."<sup>43</sup>

For a final note on McLuhan's method, a brief rhetorical comparison with Harold A. Innis is instructive. McLuhan has said that his own Gutenberg Galaxy was merely a footnote to Innis (GG, p. 50), but the differences between the two on every level are considerable. For the moment we are interested only in their language. Innis too has a theory of the causal role of technology, but while Innis's language is intellectual, McLuhan's is marked by a brazen anti-intellectualism. For Innis, technology 'hastened', 'strengthened', 'weakened', 'favoured', 'contributed', 'influenced', or 'facilitated' the growth of vernacular literatures, or trade, and so forth. This is the language of mediation and qualification that invites thought:

there is some space and time between the causal factor and the total effect. When Innis writes that "we can perhaps assume that the use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated . . .,"<sup>44</sup> the rhetoric encourages research into the 'extent' of determination, and into the questions regarding the assumption raised by the word 'perhaps'.

McLuhan's one-dimensional language, on the contrary, is an echo of medieval nominalist thought. No space can intervene between the word and the signified thing, nor between cause and effect. His language is devoid of mediations and contradictions; opposing terms are unified. McLuhan's language deals in highly concentrated slogans and symbols--ritualized concepts which are immunized against contradiction. The role of this language, as vehicle for other elements of McLuhan's methodology, is to mask facts and their historical content.



## CHAPTER II

### THE THEORY: IDEALIST TECHNOLOGISM

#### A. Overview

Sixteen years have passed since the appearance of the first issue of Explorations, seven since the Gutenberg Galaxy; McLuhan's views have undergone only minor modifications in the course of those years so that his books present a fairly consistent body of material for examination. Whatever the conditions may have been that have prevented a thorough examination of what he is really saying and what the implications of his thought are, the period of grace has surely expired. Whatever personal influence he may still exert on those of an earlier generation who are or have been close to him, his appeal, influence, and popularity have become so widespread--democratized, in a sense--that it is high time his views were carefully scrutinized. It is unfortunately not possible within the scope of this paper to provide the kind of complete study of McLuhan that is clearly called for. The investigation here will have to be focussed fairly closely on and around what I take to be the keystone of the theory: the determinist fetishism of technology.

The generic thesis of McLuhan's work is that the Western world is entering the Electric Age, a new era of 'implosion' following on the heels of the Age of Literacy, an era of 'explosion'; this Electric Age is putting an end to centuries of visual culture, of technological specialization, of individualism, and of nationalism, ushering in instantaneous communication and tribal relations (such as prevailed in the oral

cultures that preceded the art of printing). McLuhan is writing a general history of civilizations based on the process of evolution of communications technology. His history is a formal history ordered in a binary typology ('hot' and 'cool' media) and linking three great 'historical' phases: tribal cultures (cool), literacy (hot), and the Electric Age (cool). The whole structure is built on a theory of meaning summarized in the formula: 'the medium is the message.'

#### B. The Extension Mechanism

The central mechanism of the system, its indispensable feature, is the extension mechanism, which defines the media McLuhan studies. His broad definition of media includes "any technology whatever that creates extensions of the human body and senses" (Playboy, p. 56). Essentially, the extension postulate is a biological theory of discomfort, based on the medical research into stress of such scientists as Hans Selye. In effect, McLuhan claims, man extends himself in an attempt to maintain equilibrium or homeostasis. To counteract irritation it cannot avoid, the body resorts to a strategy of self-amputation. In the physical stress of superstimulation of various kinds, the central nervous system acts to protect itself by this strategy of the isolation of the offending organ, sense, or function. Thus, McLuhan explains, "the stimulus to new invention is the stress of acceleration of pace and increase of load." Irritation invites counter-irritation which amplifies human functions and causes a pain that must be anaesthetized. McLuhan gives an example:

. . . in the case of the wheel as an extension of the foot, the pressure of new burdens resulting from the acceleration of

exchange by written and monetary media was the immediate occasion of the extension or "amputation" of this function from our bodies. The wheel as a counter-irritant to increased burdens, in turn, brings about a new intensity of action by its amplification of a separate or isolated function (the feet in rotation). Such amplification is bearable by the nervous system only through numbness or blocking of perception. (UM, p. 52)

This principle of self-amputation as an immediate relief of strain on the central nervous system constitutes, for McLuhan, a satisfactory explanation of the origin of media of communication from speech to computer.

One might expect at least full reciprocity between man and media (self-amputations, extensions) in the course of this endless cycle of irritations leading to extensions (counter-irritants) which in their turn bring about new intensities of action (irritations). On the contrary, for McLuhan the media gain the upper hand. The producer of the extensions (man) is physiologically changed by his technology (the product) and in turn changes the technology. In McLuhan's perspective, man is subordinated to his technology as it assumes autonomous, fetishized powers; he becomes no more than the "sex organs of the machine world", enabling it, as the bee does the plant, "to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms" (UM, p. 56). Technology then creates new stresses and needs "in the human beings who have engendered it" (UM, p. 166). For McLuhan, these media constitute man's environment; ultimately, as in the Electric Age, the media "are not bridges between man and nature: they are nature."<sup>1</sup>

The extension theory reveals the characteristic features of McLuhan's idealist ontology and epistemology: radical anthropomorphism and subjectivism. Schopenhauer claimed 'the world is my idea'; McLuhan

claims 'the world is my body and senses.' To illustrate the proposition that self-amputation forbids self-recognition, he cites the myth of the Greek youth Narcissus who mistook his own reflection in the water for another person and fell in love with his extended image as if it were an autonomous entity. There is, for McLuhan, no objective reality independent of the subject: he emphasizes the disastrous futility of adopting "the Narcissus attitude of regarding the extensions of our own bodies as really out there and really independent of us" (UM, p. 73). The contradictions of this position result in precisely that which McLuhan allegedly wants to avoid: this all-embracing radical subjectivist anthropomorphism leads to a mystification of the real relations between man and technology and, as we shall see later, in the putative necessity of technology as active environment to change man's psychology and to function as motor of his history, attributes fetishist, autonomous powers to this technology.

McLuhan's perspective blinds him to the real character of technological development in history. His conception of the pervasive and powerful operation of technology qua active environment increasingly shaping men's lives in the course of history is simply the highly mystified form of a real relationship. It is the sign of a revolutionary progress in human history that the tools and instruments men create rapidly separate from the anthropological attributes of the producers and are directed exclusively, in an increasingly scientific, de-anthropomorphizing fashion, towards the performance of the task at hand. When McLuhan quotes with approval an anthropologist's observation to the effect that today man "has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with

his body"(GG, p. 4), he fails to distinguish between extensions that have de-anthropomorphizing functions and those that do not. Eye-glasses, for example, do not de-anthropomorphize, whereas the telescope and the microscope do. The former simply readjust, or strengthen, or amplify on the quantitative level a natural capability in every day life; the latter open up a world which without them would be inaccessible to the human senses. The line of demarcation, which is always effaced in practice by the intermediate gradients, can be drawn according to whether the tool (medium) leads back into man's everyday life or makes accessible to observation a qualitatively different world--that of the objective reality existing independently of man. Subjective idealism does not recognize such an objective reality, and therefore McLuhan cannot distinguish qualitative extensions of the human senses and powers which deepen our perceptions of the real world and make possible conscious transformations of it to fit human needs. The loss of this distinction between instrumental modalities which de-anthropomorphize and those which do not leads to the impoverishment of reality in McLuhan's conceptualization.

In fact, McLuhan does not conceive of increasingly closer cognitive approximations to objective reality. Environments are not only invisible (MM, p. 54), but new technologies create entirely new environments that completely "reprocess" the old environment (UM, p. ix). In other words, there is no objective reality to know. Nor do we have reliable powers of cognition. Technologies "automatically" displace our perception and put us in "the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness" (UM, p. 55). This perceptual numbness is explained as a self-protective mechanism.

Technological extension constitutes intense stimulation of a single sense; "the central nervous system rallies a response of general numbness to the challenge of specialized irritation" (UM, pp. 53-54).

It is the stress to single senses reinforced by media at the expense of other senses, or the outerring of all our senses at once, which provides the mechanism for the powerful effects of media on men. A new technology, in giving new stress or ascendancy to one or another of our senses, alters the ratio among all of our senses (GG, p. 24). Likewise, the simultaneous extension of all our senses has the same effect. This fundamental tenet of McLuhan's cultural subjectivism finds its most eloquent formulation in the Gutenberg Galaxy: "My suggestion is that cultural ecology has a reasonably stable base in the human sensorium, and that any extension of the sensorium by technological dilation has a quite appreciable effect in setting up new ratios or proportions among all the senses" (p. 35). This alteration of sense ratios has profound consequences. "When these ratios change, men change" (MM, p. 41). We think differently and act differently. The "slightest shift" in the stress on one of our senses is enough to produce "a subtle modulation in our sense of ourselves, both private and corporate" (VP, p. 238).

As a consequence, McLuhan writes a whole scenario for a war of the senses caused by competing and conflicting technological extensions. This war is usually manifest in minor skirmishes which do not cause too much pain since the central nervous system responds to self-amputations by protective numbing, by raising perceptual thresholds. The clash of two

powerful 'environments' however, as one replaces and reprocesses the other, can be a frightful battle exploding in pain. Today, according to McLuhan, "the clash of old and new environments is anarchic and nihilistic" (WP, p.82). His apocalyptic voice announces that "the ultimate conflict between sight and sound, between written and oral kinds of perception and organization of existence is upon us" (UM, p. 30). Indeed, even if we should survive this battle, we cannot expect to have escaped the pain caused by the old technologies. To quote McLuhan:

The fact that pain is a sensation that "can even survive the disappearance of the initial source" is of the utmost significance to the student of media. This fact points to the central nervous system itself as a key factor in pain, and helps to explain why institutions and technologies which have long been amputated from the social scene can continue to inflict corporate misery. (WP, pp. 75-76)

It must be noted that for McLuhan 'referred pain' is a catch-all category used to explain all discrepancies that confront his theories. To suggest, as a biological theorem, that media "raise . . . wars within and without us" (UM, p. 30) is to advance a basically ideological proposition serving to disguise the elements of monopoly competition and profound social alienation in contemporary society. McLuhan converts real objective chains existing outside us into purely ideal, purely subjective chains existing merely within us, and thus converts all exterior palpable struggles into pure struggles of sense and thought (e.g. MM, pp. 22, 111; Playboy, pp. 66-68; UM, p. 58; WP, p. 117).

McLuhan's posture is not only misleading but pernicious; it annihilates entire dimensions of internal and external life. Sidney

Finkelstein and Jacques Ellul both cast more light on the problem of internal conflict: the former stresses the truth/falsehood dialectic which plays no role in McLuhan's work; the latter focusses on the question of mediation. According to Finkelstein:

. . . the human role of the senses is an active one. When people search for discoveries, they make them, and grow with them. But the assault of the propagandist and the commodity-seller tries to create a passive recipient whose senses can be, so to speak, manipulated. Here we have the elements of an internal conflict being created, but it is not a conflict among the senses and perceptions, or between "sight and sound." It is a conflict between falsehoods and a real grasp of reality. That this conflict can cause nervous storms is an unfortunate fact.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, according to Ellul, the fact that man now interacts with nature and with other men almost entirely through technological intermediaries results in significant mental and psychic transformations. He points to the importance of the individual's need for emotional and intellectual social interactions and suggests the likelihood of neurosis resulting from a suppression of community relations "for which technical relations are substituted."<sup>3</sup> Although Finkelstein tends to be somewhat simplistic in his analyses, and Ellul in certain fundamental respects suffers from the same ideological delusions regarding the role of technology which afflict McLuhan, nevertheless the social concretization of psychic conflicts which both emphasize serves as an important and necessary counterposition or corrective to McLuhan.

As for the conflicts between sight and sound, or among the other senses, these can occur only in the arbitrary world of subjective idealism. In essence, human biological and anthropological development is negligible in relation to the main lines of development which now are basically social



in character, although to some extent they leave their mark as well on the physical or sensory level. What is of fundamental importance, however to those who, unlike McLuhan, accept the existence of an objective reality independent of the senses is that precision in the reflection of that reality through the senses is a condition of survival for any living species. Different senses reflect different aspects of reality, but through mediations a unified synthesis is developed. The condition that exists among the senses is co-operation; war among the senses would have certainly sent the human race rushing headlong to destruction through inability to adapt. What development takes place in the senses is oriented towards facilitation of adaptation to and mastery over man's natural and social environment, and is primarily a matter of changing knowledge of, and relationship to, these environments. As György Lukács notes: "work and language develop man's senses to an extent where these, although unchanged and unimproved in the physiological sense, . . . become, with respect to human ends, much more useful than they had been originally."<sup>4</sup> As we shall see later, the division of labour that has taken place among the senses does not result in their fragmentation and conflict; on the contrary, it enhances their co-operation.

### C. The Medium is the Message

For McLuhan, then, media, as extensions of our physical and nervous systems, constitute "a world of biochemical interactions that must ever seek new equilibrium as new extensions occur" (UM, p. 181). It is not surprising that, consequently, McLuhan's theory of meaning regresses to a presemiological level of communication. What McLuhan means when he

states flatly that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message is that the 'message' of any medium or technology is "the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs"; that the "personal and social consequences" of any medium or extension of ourselves result from this new scale in our affairs (UM, pp. 23-24).

This formula is applied and interpreted on two levels. In the structural analysis of media, it leads to a pure formalism where what is normally taken for the content is distinctly and ruthlessly subordinated to the form, where the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. Thus, "the content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph" (UM, pp.23-24). In the structural analysis of the cultural impact of media, it leads to a determinist essentialism. What McLuhan means is that the print medium or the present day mass media have transformed our civilization not so much by their 'content' (ideological, informational, or scientific) but by the fundamental constraint of systematization which they exert by means of their technological essence--that is, in their capacity as extensions (of the visual sense in the case of print; of the entire central nervous system in the case of electric mass media). What he means is that the book or the television are primarily technological objects, and that the changes of pattern or scale or pace which they introduce into our lives are more determining in the long run than any symbol or information or idea of which they may be the vehicles: "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" (UM, p. 33).

In other words, the key idea is the centrality of form in media as the determinant of individual minds and, hence, of social structures. This rejection of any significant role for content is seen by a number of critics, among them Ben Lieberman, as "the greatest defect of McLuhan's theory."<sup>5</sup> Actually, this formalism is a fully integrated element of McLuhan's thought, consistent with all its other features; it makes little sense to single it out for special scorn. All idealisms make human life into a charade, a dance of shadows; McLuhan's theory is as contemptuous as most of these, but no worse, in reducing to ~~insignificance~~ all that men consider purposive, important, and meaningful in their lives, in postulating that men live somnambulist lives, unaware of real essences--much like Plato's cave dwellers in this respect, and in trapping men in a web of subliminal determinism. (Meanwhile, of course, the everyday living patterns of McLuhanites are no more formalist than those of other people: just as the most fanatical followers of Berkeley will step out of the way of an oncoming car, the McLuhanites, too, are selective about what television programs they watch in the limited time available for it and, in general, respond to the substantial content of life. This is a fundamental split between their theory and their practice).

In McLuhan's theory, as in bourgeois theories of art, content strives to become form. The prototype of the pure medium, therefore, like music in art, is the electric light--"pure information", "a medium without a message" (UM, p. 23). McLuhan argues that the fact that night baseball or brain surgery, for example, could not exist without electric light does not prove that these activities are therefore in some way the 'content'

of electric light (UM, p. 24). In this he is right, but only because he puts the argument the wrong way. Changing the phrasing, we could say that electric light could not exist without, for example, night baseball or brain surgery. In other words, form and content cannot be separated; as Dennis Duffy remarks, form is always "content-ified" and content "arises from the context in which the act takes place."<sup>6</sup> Form is always the form of a content; only an idealist who could write that "consciousness does not postulate consciousness of anything in particular" (UM, p. 247) could posit a medium without a message. In effect, the electric light could not exist except within a specific context. It is true, however, that its content tends to be abstract. In addition, there hides an even more general abstract content in the fact that electric light contains the transformative power of human praxis which turned electricity from destructive lightning into an electric current that could be used as a tool for productive change.

As György Lukács demonstrates in his discussion of Kant's misinterpretation of abstract geometric decorative art, an abstract essence is in no way without content or concept, even if sensory scanning absorbs the concept into itself without leaving any residue.<sup>7</sup> Form, then, does not become the totality; form and content do not completely converge. The fact that electric light has a content which is not concrete and objective but rather merely abstract and generalized is an indication only of the special character of its essential determinations, not of the complete absence of content; there is no justification in reality for formalist essentialism.

There is nothing wrong of course, in principle, with a careful and specific study of forms; such a study does not contradict the necessary

principles of totality. The danger lies, rather, in endowing form with a substance of form--that is, in constituting it, for all practical purposes, as the totality. This is what McLuhan does; ultimately he denies the medium any role as a medium--as a transitive tool or channel for enhanced perception which does not operate on people but is operated by them to penetrate the outer reality independent of our subjective being. There is a certain anti-intellectualism in McLuhan which does not admit distinctions. Roland Barthes, for example, gives a convincing demonstration of the fundamental differences between two kinds of photographs: the apologist iconographies of the Harcourt Studios and the revolutionary pictures of Agnès Varda. This is the kind of valuable cultural or communications study which the sterile formulas of McLuhan would exclude from the start. His one-dimensional formalism flattens out the world, making contradiction impossible.

McLuhan's method omits numerous variables from any situation he studies. He points out, correctly, that one would learn very little about the automobile by looking at it simply as a vehicle that carries people hither and thither. "Without understanding the city changes, suburban creations, service changes--the environment it created--one would learn very little about the motor car. The car then has never really been studied structurally, as a form."<sup>8</sup> McLuhan is right about the importance of the car in the changes for which it was a condition; but he implies that the formal structure necessitates these changes, and fails to look behind the scenes he describes.

Baran and Sweezy, too, recognize the significance of the car; they call it an 'epoch-making' invention. It "produced a radical alteration in economic geography with attendant internal migrations and the building of whole new communities; [it] required or made possible the production of many new goods and services; [it] directly or indirectly enlarged the market for a whole range of industrial products."<sup>9</sup> Its effects have been widely felt: in the process of suburbanization, the building of roads, the dependent petroleum, rubber, and glass industries, and the growth of service industries such as filling stations, repair shops, motels, vacation resorts. In other words, the car has played a significant role in surplus absorption, and McLuhan takes note of most of these effects.

But there is another side to this picture which a formalist empiricism will not be able to take into consideration. According to a book published only a few weeks ago, A.W. Mowbray's The Road to Ruin,<sup>10</sup> the United States has one mile of roads and streets for every square mile of land and is, apparently, only beginning its construction programme: for example, California's master plan calls for an eventual 12,500 miles of freeways where it now has only 2,700 miles. The motor of this process is that four cents from every gallon of gasoline sold in the United States go into a fund to finance the highway construction programme: this fund is thus independent of taxes or legislators. Naturally, therefore, a national fraternity of vested interests has concentrated around it to the extent where the programme is now beyond the control of any responsible people: too many others make enormous profits out of it. Twice the President has attempted, as an anti-inflationary measure, to slow down the

programme of construction; he has had to back down both times.

This is the American reality, but McLuhan accords no weight to these causal variables. He also appears totally oblivious to the destruction of human lives on a huge scale that results from the endless perpetuation of ruthless road building. Dwellings of the poor and the blacks of the United States have frequently 'had to be' razed. Between 1967 and 1970, highways are expected to displace 146,950 households, 16,679 businesses, and 5,000 farms. McLuhan may say with smug comfort in 1964: "the car, in a word, has quite refashioned all of the spaces that unite and separate men, and it will continue to do so for a decade more, by which time the electronic successors to the car will be manifest" (UM, p.201); by that time a great deal of damage will have been done unnecessarily; only a formalist perspective, unconcerned with human suffering, could claim otherwise or ignore the problem altogether.

On a broader plane, we might note another severe limitation of formalism: as Claude Lévi-Strauss perceives, terms which are heterogeneous in relation to content are analogous with respect to form.<sup>11</sup> While history manifests itself in new content, the number of possible forms is restricted to a few which recur in various combinations. McLuhan's methodology, therefore, necessarily impoverishes historical reality. Systematized, the 'medium is the message' formula is the best way to empty out sociology and history. Ultimately, media always bring men into relations with each other; as a result, a concrete analysis of media will have to include a sociological analysis of these relations which men, individually or in

groups, establish with each other through the mediation of technology, as well as a historical and political analysis of the relations between the media and the power structures to which they become attached and of the influence of the latter on the mode of production of the former. McLuhan takes no notice of these dimensions.

D. The Medium is the Message

With the publication in 1967 of The Medium is the Message, McLuhan's thesis of technological causality, now reformulated, gains the decisive edge of increased clarity; its thrust, moreover, is now directed more forcefully into the social and historical arenas. Stressing again that "societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (MM, p. 8), McLuhan makes his fullest statement of all-embracing determinism:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. (MM, p. 26)

Later, in articulating a critique of Marx, who "could assign no causes whatever" to the "descriptive story of changes" which he provided, McLuhan reasserts the operative mechanism of this pervasive 'message': " . . . new technology inevitably creates new environments that act incessantly on the sensorium. Failure to grasp this etiological and ecological fact now makes the work of Marx look as empty as that of Spengler" (WP, p. 136).



The historical consequences of this theory--in general, that "wars, revolutions, civil uprisings are interfaces within the new environments" created by media (MM, p. 9), that war is our response when our identity is "endangered by physical or psychic change" (WP, p. 97); in particular, that the wars of nationalism, for example, were the results of a drastic sensory stress caused by print--bear close resemblance to the now discredited biological reductionism of Robert Ardrey who "argues quite explicitly that India-Chinese border disputes are analogous to squabbles between two varieties of geese sharing the same pool."<sup>12</sup> C. Wright Mills refers to the kind of theory McLuhan expounds as 'psychologism': "the attempt to explain social phenomena in terms of facts and theories about the make-up of individuals." Its adherents set forth "a conception of structure which reduces it, so far as explanations are concerned, to a set of milieux."<sup>13</sup> McLuhan's 'environments' correspond to these 'milieux'.

McLuhan's theory, in other words, involves a fatalistic-mechanistic aprioritization of environment. Genuine dialectic is lacking in McLuhan's worldview and, as with Kierkegaard, formal logic stands in place of dialectical logic: all human praxis disappears from history. Media become the cause and ultimate effect of everything in an endless cycle; man is thrown into pure particularity, cut off from others, as all are individually influenced in their relations with technology--the only bond man is permitted to retain. By continuously embracing technologies, McLuhan explains, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. This concept, borrowed from cybernetics, suggests to McLuhan that we must, in order to use them at all,

"serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions" (UM, p. 55). Ultimately, man is seen as the sex organs of the machine world, enabling technology "to evolve ever new forms" (UM, p. 56). We are unable to resist the impact of technology on our senses; the only media controls we can ever hope for, as servomechanisms, will have to take "the thermostatic form of quantitative rationing" (UM, p. 267). All this means is that if we cannot avoid the qualitative changes in our lives effected by technology, we can at least gain a measure of control over technology (or at least some of us can--a distinction McLuhan fails to make) by harnessing its powers of 'massage' to the conscious manipulation of the sensory lives of whole populations: thus we could "lay on an additional 25 hours of TV in Venezuela to cool down the tribal temperature raised by radio the preceding month" (Playboy, p. 72).

Such control over technology certainly does not threaten its autonomous, fetishized powers over man. Technology is the Prime Mover for McLuhan, and everything, large or small, becomes its consequences. It may be legitimate to regard technology as a causal variable or, rather, the condition for causation, but its weight in relation to other factors in the social matrix is an exceedingly complex problem to which I shall return later.

In the last analysis, the structure of action McLuhan presents is biological, infrahistorical. As Lenin remarked long ago: "Nothing is easier than to tack a . . . 'biologico-sociological' label on to such phenomena as crises, revolutions, the class struggle and so forth; but

neither is there anything more sterile, more scholastic and lifeless than such an occupation."<sup>11</sup> In McLuhan we find a radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the simple generator of successive modes of technological culture, that is, in effect, of media. These media become the sole principle of the universal intelligibility of all the determinations of a historical people. This rigidly metaphysical approach--in the sense of a one-sided, limited, inflexible outlook upon the world with a tendency to exaggerate and make absolute individual aspects of phenomena and to ignore other, no less important aspects--is inadequate for explaining complex processes of development.

McLuhan constructs a subjectivist pseudo-dialectic which generates a pseudo-history. The denial of the dialectical transformation of quantity into quality results, on the level of history, to a denial of any objective development of man to a higher level. The qualitative jump is a necessary moment of change, growth, and decay in nature and in history; its denial is reflected in McLuhan's theory as the admission into history of purely qualitative transfigurations, or replacements of one environment or culture by another. As there is no objective reality for McLuhan, there is likewise no development. He explains: "the psychic and social impact of new technologies and their resulting environment will reverse all the characteristic psychic and social consequences of the old technology and its environments" (WP, p. 82). As earlier idealisms had fought against the bourgeois notion of progress, so today McLuhan is implicitly fighting against Marxism: under the guise of resisting the "forward-motion folly of step-by-step 'progress'" (Playboy, p. 68)--something only the most

vulgarized versions of Marxism would propound--McLuhan is writing an idealist history of recurrence.

#### E. The Search for a New Stasis

The type of historical sequence that exists in duration but is of a recurrent nature exercises no influence on structure. It is only McLuhan's 'environments' that change in different periods, generating discontinuous ups and downs in history. Lenin wrote:

The condition for knowledge of all processes of the world in their self-movement, in their self-development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites. Development is the "struggle" of opposites. The two basic (or two possible? or two historically observable?) conceptions of development (evolution) are: development as decrease and increase, as repetition, and development as a unity of opposites (the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation).<sup>15</sup>

McLuhan's conception of development is non-dialectical, corresponding to the first of Lenin's two alternatives. Basically, for McLuhan history is produced by the increasing or decreasing stress on different elements of the sensorium. In a schematic outline, the two senses primarily involved are hearing and vision: acoustic stress and visual stress create the great historical epochs. World history is the stage for tribalism succeeded by de-tribalization, followed by re-tribalization, with only the middle period characterized by increasing visual stress (although it contains an 'oral' interlude, the scholastic period, which McLuhan has a Catholic medievalist's stake in defending). Vision is the villain of McLuhan's piece, interjecting what McLuhan calls "quaint and odd" (VP, p. 7) ages of specialism ('literacy') between us and tribal man. To quote McLuhan at length:

Any culture is an order of sensory preferences, and in the tribal world, the senses of touch, taste, hearing and smell were developed, for very practical reasons, to a much higher level than the strictly visual. Into this world, the phonetic alphabet fell like a bombshell [apparently ex machina, by divine edict--J.F.], installing sight at the head of the hierarchy of senses. Literacy propelled man from the tribe, gave him an eye for an ear and replaced his integral in-depth communal interplay with visual linear values and fragmented consciousness. As an intensification and amplification of the visual function, the phonetic alphabet diminished the role of the senses of hearing and touch and taste and smell, permeating the discontinuous culture of tribal man and translating its organic harmony and complex synaesthesia into the uniform, connected and visual mode that we still consider the norm of "rational" existence. The whole man became fragmented man; the alphabet shattered the charmed circle and resonating magic of the tribal world, exploding man into an agglomeration of specialized and psychically impoverished "individuals," or units, functioning in a world of linear time and Euclidean space. (Playboy, p. 59)

If the phonetic alphabet fell like a bombshell on tribal man "the printing press hit him like a 100-megaton H-bomb." The ultimate extension of phonetic literacy, the new print medium "of linear, uniform, repeatable type" assured the eye "a position of total dominance in man's sensorium" (Playboy, p. 60). Today in the Electric Age, with television (primarily) and the other electric media having put an end to the visual supremacy that characterized mechanical technology, "we can look back at 3000 years of differing degrees of visualization, atomization and mechanization and at last recognize the mechanical age as an interlude between two great organic eras of culture" (Playboy, p. 60).

A number of points can be made about this grand schema which ends in a re-tribalization of man once vision has lost 'the ultimate conflict between sight and sound'. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore in depth the historical role of vision or the story of its development; yet a few brief remarks seem necessary. Firstly, I have had occasion to suggest that a subjective idealism that does not

recognize the existence of a unified and independent objective reality reflected, in its full movement, in human consciousness, in such a way that different senses respond to different aspects of the same reality, will lead to a false analysis. Thus McLuhan, believing that the ascendancy of vision created a mechanical, specialized civilization, needs to discard vision in order to move toward catholicism. More perceptive theorists such as György Kepes, meanwhile, recognize that our visual sensibilities themselves are undernourished, having been "fed on our deformed and dishonest environment,"<sup>16</sup> and call not for the decline but for the re-education of our vision. A non-fetishist perspective, in other words, can see as a challenge the reintegration of all aspects of our life; it is not tied, as is McLuhan's, to a subliminal automatism.

Secondly, as theorists other than McLuhan understand, not only have all civilizations given "enormous importance to visual communication because of its immediacy, its power of expression, and its lasting quality in time"<sup>17</sup> but, specifically, "the visual tradition goes back to the very roots of tribal societies and religions."<sup>18</sup> Tribal man had skilful hands, sensitive ears and, especially, keen observant eyes. Given his infinitely more immediate (unmediated) relation to the objective environment, tribal primitives had far more acute powers of observation than we do. Each species must utilize its senses for the reflection of reality (reflection taken, of course, as a dialectical process, not a mechanical mirroring) in such combinations and proportions as most favour survival and reproduction. A subjective idealism that does not recognize the existence of objective reality denies the function of reflection and cannot understand the proper

relationship among the senses. Thus McLuhan cannot order the senses according to the real roles they play and must fabricate a completely arbitrary world in which the senses do not reflect real linear or three-dimensional aspects of nature's order but rather, particularly in the case of vision, create linear or three-dimensional illusions. As Heinz von Foerster notes, "in the higher animals the most intricately developed sensory system is that of their visual organs."<sup>19</sup> The human retina, like a huge computer, is the seat of 180 million sensory receptors. As Ernst Fischer explains, while the hand is the essential organ of culture through the work process, what made man evolve from a pre-human being included a number of crucial variables, among which were "the passing of certain biological organisms into the tree stage, favouring as it did the development of vision at the expense of the sense of smell"; and the shrinking of the muzzle, "facilitating a change in the position of the eyes."<sup>20</sup> McLuhan claims to understand that man is a "tool-making animal" (GG, p. 4) but he seems to have no idea of the central importance of vision to man's tool-making ability. According to Gordon Childe:

Men can make tools because their forefeet have turned into hands, because seeing the same object with both eyes they can judge distances very accurately and because a very delicate nervous system and complicated brain enables them to control the movements of hand and arm in precise agreement with and adjustment to what they see with both eyes.<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly, as György Lukács demonstrates in his Aesthetics, the division of labour of the senses resulted in the extensive broadening and intensive refinement of visuality.<sup>22</sup> Although he does not understand them correctly, McLuhan is right in singling out vision and hearing for roles of special importance. They are indeed senses of a higher order

which develop an increasing tendency towards universality in the process of the continuing development of the division of labour of the senses engendered by work and the growing complexity of social interactions. As Lukács notes, the universality of vision and hearing lead to the condition where "we perceive visually and auditively kinds of phenomena which cannot be seen or heard directly."<sup>23</sup> In other words, new sensory capabilities develop in vision and hearing. McLuhan is completely wrong in setting them against each other and in suggesting that they create, or even reflect, different realities.

Where the eye gains a unique role is in the division of labour brought into being by work. The eye assumes the multiple sensory functions of touch, that is, of the hand, so that the hand is fully liberated for work, thereby gaining the possibility of further development and differentiation. The most important result of the co-ordination of visual and tactile perception is that, in the case of man, vision assumes even the very experiences of touch. This has two decisive results: our hands are freed from the burden of experiencing and discovery and can turn to putting complex experiences to use through the work process; and vision, more than any other sense, assumes and performs the function of acting as controller and governor over the world and our actions in it. The eye can only assume this function, Lukács tells us, because it learns to sense, in that part of objective reality which is accessible to sight, characteristic signs which in general, and without mediation, fall outside the domain of 'natural' vision.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, it becomes possible to sense visually such properties as hardness or softness, weight, and so on.



In other words, there is no antagonism between vision and tactility as McLuhan would have us believe; on the contrary, the sense of vision assumes capabilities of the sense of touch, a development whose great importance in the course of social and historical life cannot be examined here. What is to be noted is that, without justification, McLuhan assigns mechanically autonomous and antagonistic roles, functions, and properties to the senses, as he does to the media.

If I have stressed these points about vision and hearing, it was to undermine whatever scientific basis McLuhan might claim through his analysis of the senses for his prophecy of a 'new tribalism'.

Already in 1951, McLuhan praised Joyce as the "artist of the Word" and showed a special regard for the "labyrinth of the ear, organ of the Incarnation."<sup>25</sup> As followers of St. John, McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter write: "In the beginning was the Word," stressing that they are referring to the spoken word "not the visual word of literate man."<sup>26</sup> Of course, as Leon Trotsky accurately points out, this is so only for a religious perspective. In fact, " . . . in the beginning was the deed. The word followed as its phonetic shadow."<sup>27</sup>

McLuhan is entranced by the group cohesion of the tribe and believes that primitive tribal man is more complex and richer in emotional life than literate man (Playboy, p. 59; UM, p. 59). This belief is anthropologically incorrect, but it allows McLuhan to advocate an extreme subjectivism thinly disguised as science by his determinist formulations. By stating that electric media retribalize, McLuhan can then state that

"we are now compelled, à la Kierkegaard, to take this inner trip and encounter the self in its primal, inner state."<sup>28</sup> McLuhan welcomes the retrogression into the heart of tribal darkness, into what Joseph Conrad termed "the Africa within" (Playboy, p. 70), on the grounds that tribal life "is the richest and most highly developed expression of human consciousness" (Playboy, p. 68). In turning the clock back to a religious primitivism, McLuhan claims that modern man, by virtue of the holy powers invested in modern technology, is becoming even more tribal than the tribes. Referring to Mircea Eliade's book The Sacred and the Profane, McLuhan writes:

Eliade is under a gross illusion in supposing that modern man "finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies." Modern man, since the electro-magnetic discoveries of more than a century ago, is investing himself with all the dimensions of archaic man plus. (GG, p. 69)

Lukács notes that the inclination towards primitivism is a general ideological phenomenon of the imperialist period.<sup>29</sup> Ernst Fischer concretizes this observation regarding the return to the archaic, the mythical, the primitive:

The fetish-like character, not only of the commodity but also of a whole world of technical, economic, and social machinery . . . , the infinite specialization and differentiation of the late-bourgeois world, all this creates a nostalgia for the 'source', for a unity complete unto itself.<sup>30</sup>

We might remember, as well, that the 'myth of the noble savage' was invented by the Counter Reformation for use against the Protestants. McLuhan's position, in other words, is rooted in Catholic tradition, in the ideological character of modern bourgeois thought, and in the particular nature of his own fetishist perspective.

Methodologically, the idealization of the primitive, the 'source', and the preaching of a return to it, whether it comes in the form of Hitler's brutal demagogy, in the form of the philosophical arguments of Heidegger, or in the form of McLuhan's own determinist analyses, has the effect of annihilating history. Ultimately, any philosophy of recurrence is ineffectual, in any except an ideological sense of mystification, because only forms may be repeated while totalities are always unique. Indeed we find, in applying Henri Lefebvre's analysis of the new Eleatism,<sup>31</sup> that a distinctly ideological purpose and effect hide behind McLuhan's statement that "electricity has brought back the cool, mosaic world of implosion, equilibrium, and stasis" (UM, p. 257). McLuhan seeks in a return to tribalism "the means of stability far beyond anything possible to a visual or civilized or fragmented world" (WP, p. 23).

Lefebvre explains that the banal evolutionism, progressivism, and economism of dogmatic materialist historians, with their one-sided emphasis on continuity to the point of omitting discontinuities, distinct properties, and relative stabilities, became so much identified with historicity that it brought on an Eleatic counter-offensive. Discontinuities were rediscovered, until the investigation of separable units (such as chromosomes, or atomic particles), and their combination and arrangement by probability theory, engulfed all scientific domains. The modern analysis into stable elements no longer cuts up local time or perceptible movement, as did Zeno; the attack is directed rather against universal time, that of the world, of life, of history--against becoming. "L'opération éléatique reprend vigueur et sens, avec une ampleur nouvelle.

L'analyse réductrice de tout mouvement à des éléments et à un ensemble immobile redevient actuelle, avec des moyens nouveaux."<sup>32</sup> From this is born McLuhan's 'global village', decentralized but thoroughly interdependent, and completely stable: "The new magnetic or world city will be static and iconic or inclusive" (UM, p. 50).

The model of perfection which dominates this theoretical and practical whole defines itself by stability and equilibrium; by System. Change, becoming, development are discredited. The dialectical contradiction 'becoming/stability' elucidated in the Heraclitean line by both Hegel and Marx is no longer distinguished from the formal contradiction, that is, absurdity and impossibility. Transitions, passages, ambiguities lose theoretical and practical interest. McLuhan puts his own preferences clearly: "I would prefer a stable, changeless environment . . ." (Playboy, p. 158).

In this vast ideology it is understood that societies like individuals need an internal principle which keeps them in existence. This principle of cohesion and coherence, of latent or apparent structure, becomes all-important. This unifying principle of intelligibility for McLuhan is technology, particularly electric technology. Science and action are rendered anti-promethean and stabilizing. There is no contradiction: 'harmony' defines the future (Playboy, p. 70). The qualitative becomes the enemy; all pre-occupation with it is labeled old-fashioned; McLuhan is ruthless in labeling those who are still concerned with problems of content and quality as 'somnambulists', or mechanical, linear, visual-oriented survivals from a bygone epoch.

The new Eleatism no longer contests perceptible motion. It contests historical motion. "Il ne se contente plus de nier l'histoire comme science; il contest l'historicité fondamentale conçue par Marx en la considérant comme une idéologie périmée."<sup>33</sup> This refusal constitutes the new ideology. McLuhan announced his position in the first issue of

Explorations:

History has been abolished by our new media. If prehistoric man is simply preliterate man living in a timeless world of seasonal recurrence, may not posthistoric man find himself in a similar situation? May not the upshot of our technology be the awakening from the historically conditioned nightmare of the past into a timeless present? Historic man may turn out to have been literate man. An episode.<sup>34</sup>

In the attempt to escape the risk of world war, or world revolution, Eleatic thought attempts to return to the past to elude time by finding the present in the archaic. Stagnation (called 'stability') is preferred to cataclysm, especially for a religious thinker such as McLuhan for whom electric media not only abolish history, but "conceivably usher in the millennium" (Playboy, p. 158). As McLuhan explains:

The world tribe will be essentially conservative, it's true, like all iconic and inclusive societies; a mythic environment lives beyond time and space and thus generates little radical social change. All technology becomes part of a shared ritual that the tribe desperately strives to keep stabilized and permanent. (Playboy, p. 70)

With the stabilization of technology, all time and space are abolished; this is the ultimate performance of fetishized power.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE IMPLICATIONS: APOCALYPTIC TOTALITARIANISM

##### A. Determinist Fetishism

The kind of stability McLuhan seeks leaves no room for the human praxis. The new tribal society of the Electric Age for which he has become the 'prophet' is a Whole that swallows up all parts and divisions, all tensions and all needs; the integrative, involving effect attributed to electric media is no more than the tendency toward a one-dimensional identification of men with the System. The loss of the dimension of negative thought would be the end of freedom. As Marcuse emphasizes:

To be sure, in dialectical logic, the whole is the truth, but a whole in which all parts and divisions have their place and stage. The relations between them, their specific function, the different levels and modes of reality, its inner development must be demonstrated and defined--only then, in the unending and subverting stream of mediations, appears the true as the bacchanalian whirl: sober drunkenness of the whole; Reason as Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

It is a characteristic of McLuhan's work that it is devoid of a 'stream of mediations'; his is an absolute, not a critical vision; the negation of rationality, not a new rationality.

It must be stressed that McLuhan's conceptual apparatus is so constructed, like all modern bourgeois theories, as to transcend any particular set of social relations. Consequently, the latter enter the picture only incidentally, as it were, and at the level of application; McLuhan might note casually, for example, that the photograph revealed "blatant dimensions of power" (UM, p. 180). To put the matter otherwise,

McLuhan's theorizing is primarily a process of constructing and inter-relating concepts from which all specifically social content has been drained off. Only in actual application is the social element introduced at times by way of ad hoc assumptions specifying the field of application.

Social reality, however, is the process of change inherent in a specified set of relations, that is, the historical process. Social change and development are, of course, not purely mechanical or linear; nor are they entirely discontinuous as McLuhan contends. Social development is continuous, where continuity is seen as the dialectical unity of continuity and discontinuity. It is, moreover, the product of human action, but action which is definitely limited by the kind of society in which it has its roots. "Men make their own history," Marx wrote, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>2</sup>

This kind of determinate freedom is absent from McLuhan's schema. He denies history or admits it as pure form; he introduces a kind of rigid automatism into human affairs which rules out purposive social activity, alternative modes of development, or direct social control over the environment. For McLuhan reverses the roles; man is reified while objects are animated: "electric information systems are live environments in the full organic sense. They alter our feelings and sensibilities, especially when they are not attended to" (WP, p. 36). It should not be thought, however, that attending to this live environment can arrest its movement and change its direction. As far as McLuhan is concerned,

environments are normally invisible. "The groundrules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns of environments elude easy perception" (MM, p. 68). This is not even so much an absolute agnosticism denying the accessibility of reality; it is rather a religious mystical response to objective reality. In a sense, of course, there can be no knowable real world for McLuhan since each medium creates a totally new environment.

There is, in fact, only one man in society who is able to perceive environmental change: the artist. Through an intuitive grasp, the artist can pick up messages of technological change before their full impact is felt, and can serve as an Early Warning System of what is to come (UM, p. xi; VP, p. 244). "To prevent undue wreckage in society, the artist tends to move from the ivory tower to the control tower of society" (UM, p. 70), in order to act as navigator guiding us through the storm (VP, p. 238). There is in this conception no movement away from causal determinism. McLuhan sees in art only a subspecies of cognition serving to make the invisible visible, to make conscious the subconscious in perception (VP, p. 5). But McLuhan's subjective idealism forces him to deny explicitly not only the objectivity of the external world but, consequently, any justification for its artistic reflection. McLuhan empties out, in principle, the substantial richness and lawful connections of both the original reality and its artistic copy. The purpose of art is to grasp formal categories (UM, p. 70); the social basis of art, that artistic synthesis which the work creates of its effective determination, that is, the social character of its effect on the receiver, is lost. All the artist is supposed to do with his work is to "show us how to 'ride with



the punch,' instead of 'taking it on the chin'" (UM, p. 71).

In other words, art does not provide man with a defence from the determinisms that shape his life, nor control over these media; art functions as a psychic defence guide to help us rearrange our psyches "in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties" (UM, p. 71). Its role, like that of everything else in McLuhan's world, as we have seen, is to act as social and psychological stabilizer: it helps us to adjust, to prevent 'undue'wreckage'. This artistic-cognitive intuitive grasp of the essence of our technological environment is the abdication of the critical reason of the artist. As Marcuse shows: "In the epoch of monopoly capitalism, reason is replaced by the acquiescent acknowledgement of 'essential' givens, in whose verification reason initially plays only a derivative role, and subsequently none at all."<sup>3</sup> The type of artistic cognition of which McLuhan speaks culminates in recognition and is frozen there; its transcendent critical freedom has been lost. The function of art is no longer to defetishize, to dissolve the stiffened fetishized facts of life. On the contrary, McLuhan's artist abandons the Arnoldian function of criticism of life and, instead, perpetuates the formal fetishized appearances in society.

It seems, then, McLuhan offers no loopholes through which man can escape the powers of technology over his life--not even in the role of servo-mechanisms; that role, as we have seen, offers only a measure of quantitative, distributive control in the thermostatic form of rationing. The fetish, in other words, is total and closed; the only development is

in the increasing reification of man, as the new electric environments "take over the evolutionary work that Darwin had seen in the spontaneities of biology" (WP, p. 37).

Not only the biological but man's historical world as well becomes a totally autonomous objectified process in which man is either rhetorically invisible or appears only as a completely dependent and determined agent of technology. An example of the first kind relates to the fall of Rome: "When papyrus ceased to be available (imagine the effect of the total disappearance of crude oil on our road system, our traffic and our central heating), the Roman roads fell into disuse and the Roman Empire fell apart" (WP, p. 26). An example of the second kind relates to the effects of "linear, uniform, repeatable type" which was responsible for the rise of such disparate phenomena as:

nationalism, the Reformation, the assembly line and its offspring, the Industrial Revolution, the whole concept of causality, Cartesian and Newtonian concepts of the universe, perspective in art, narrative chronology in literature and a psychological mode of introspection or inner direction that greatly intensified the tendencies toward individualism and specialization engendered 2000 years before by phonetic literacy. (Playboy, p. 60)

McLuhan does not seem to suspect that the breakdown of the Roman Empire was implicit in its socio-economic character; he makes no mention either of the internal social relations in Rome, which accounted for its weakness, or of the forms of communal life to which the German barbarians owed their strength at the time of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. He even forgets the words of Pliny: *latifundia perdidere Italiam* ("latifundia were the undoing of Italy").<sup>4</sup> He does not consider that the aspiration of the rising middle class for economic unity and cultural freedom as against the

separatism and obscurantism of feudal society had anything to do with nationalism. He does not understand that art forms are not only forms of individual consciousness optically or orally conditioned but also expressions of a socially conditioned world view. As a result, he overlooks the fact that the development of perspective in painting began in Italy where capitalism had its earliest development; that the new social reality led to a new undogmatic consciousness; that the appearance of a genuine, self-dependent, autonomous world in Renaissance art, with its greater truth as compared to the art of the Middle Ages, had to do with the liberation of man from the illusion of surrounding transcendence, and with his growing reliance on historical immanence; that the qualitative jump that separates Renaissance art from medieval art occurred with the this-worldliness of Giotto in the beginning of the fourteenth century; that there was a process of development towards naturalist perspective, not a sudden emergence, that began with the continuous space and depth of Giotto (already visible in "Faith" in 1306), whose figures were so related as to indicate the encounter of men with men, and continued with the Sienese art of the fourteenth century, towards Jan van Eyck and Masaccio in the fifteenth, and so on to scientific central perspective.

I have cited these facts merely to draw attention to McLuhan's voluntarist liquidation of all particulars that do not fit into the narrow confines of his theoretical framework; he impoverishes the rich totality of social, historical, psychological, artistic, and cultural life by universalizing technology as a causal absolute. Technology is a moment of the forces of human development, but it is neither simply identical with

them, nor the final or absolute moment of the changes in these forces.

On the one hand, to suggest that technology is bound to natural conditions (as McLuhan alleges with respect to the rise and fall of Rome), that the presence of a certain raw material (papyrus) is decisive for the presence of a certain technology (writing, as a means to administrative organization through an easily transportable material) is to confuse raw materials and the subject of labour, forgetting that there must be a corresponding technology for which wood, ore, fibres, and so forth, could perform the role of raw materials, that is, that the influence of nature in the sense of the material requisites is itself a product of the development of technology. In the case of Rome, the lack of justification for McLuhan's position is easy to demonstrate: as Harold Innis notes, "vellum was fully developed as a writing material by the beginning of the second century B.C. . . .," long before the Mohammedans allegedly cut off the supplies of papyrus (an event McLuhan has occurring at least a hundred years before Mohammed's birth, and two hundred years before there was any large Mohammedan movement). What is more, vellum even had "an advantage over papyrus in that it could be carried without fraying."<sup>5</sup> Under the circumstances, to say that McLuhan's often repeated causal explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire is inadequate and implausible is to make a striking understatement.

On the other hand, the conclusion that the development of society depends on technology is just as much a false 'naturalism' as the former theory, just as much a somewhat refined version of the 'environmental'

theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By and large, McLuhan avoids the crude error of this 'naturalism': the attempt to explain change by a fixed principle. For technology indeed changes in the course of social development. McLuhan's explanation thus has some correct aspects from the point of view of formal logic, in that it explains change by a variable moment. But technology as the self-sufficient basis of development is only the dynamic refinement of this crude 'naturalism'. For if technology is not conceived as a moment of the existing system of infra- and super-structural production (and hence of distribution, consumption, etc.), if its development is not explained by the development of the social forces of production, it is just as much a transcendent principle set over against man as 'nature', 'climate, environment, raw materials, and so forth. Whatever reciprocities may exist between technology and these productive forces, it is altogether incorrect to propose for technology a self-sufficiency from the structures of society.

This is a serious error, for if technology is seen as even only mediately determinate for society, the remarkable changes in the course of its development are completely unexplained. Let us take, for example, the transition from medieval production to modern capitalism. Marx explicitly stresses in Capital that the transition from guild handwork to manufacture involved no change in technology:

With regard to the mode of production itself, manufacture, in its strict meaning, is hardly to be distinguished, in its earliest stages, from the handicraft trades of the guilds, otherwise than by the greater number of workmen simultaneously employed by one and the same individual capital. The workshop of the medieval master handicraftsman is simply enlarged. At first, therefore, the difference is purely quantitative.<sup>6</sup>

It is the capitalist division of labour and its power relations which give rise to the social preconditions for a mass market (dissolution of the natural economy) which produces a qualitative change. The social preconditions of modern mechanized technology thus arose first. The technology is the consummation of modern capitalism, not its initial cause. It only appeared after the establishment of its social prerequisites: when the dialectical contradictions of the primitive forms of manufacture had been resolved, when, to cite again from Capital, "at a given stage in its development, the narrow technical basis on which manufacture rested, came into conflict with requirements of production that were created by manufacture itself."<sup>7</sup> It goes without saying that technological development is thereby extraordinarily accelerated. But this reciprocal interaction by no means surpasses the real historical and methodological primacy of the economy over technology.

A concept of the primacy of the social structure over technology is necessary for any explanation of the genesis or the development of technology and, especially, for any explanation of social development. Indeed, the usefulness of any invention depends on the structure of the society; technology may have considerable effects but only within a compatible social structure. A theory of technological determinism that fetishizes technology, attributing to it autonomous and primary causal powers, is totally unable to explain the periodicity of technological invention. However much technological development can be explained, as a descriptive story of change, from within the sphere of technology itself, its tempo and direction defy such explanation. Jacques Ellul, whose analysis

of technological society bears certain resemblances to McLuhan's fetishism, at least recognizes the problem. "Why did inventions suddenly burst forth in the second half of the eighteenth century? We cannot say. Here we are at the centre of the mystery of invention which strangely came to life for this brief moment,"<sup>8</sup> Obviously, then, technology cannot be the final or ultimate cause unless one is willing to accept 'mystery' as a palatable and satisfactory explanation. Unlike McLuhan, at least Ellul is intelligent or honest enough to recognize that he does not have the answer.

Samuel Lilley, in analysing various periods of technological stagnation and others of intense invention argues correctly that the causes must be sought in the movements of the social structure.<sup>9</sup> For example, in their examination of monopoly capitalism, Baran and Sweezy note that innovations are introduced (or soon taken over) by giant corporations which act not under the compulsion of competitive pressures but in accordance with careful calculations of the profit-maximizing course. This involves calculations of the net effect of the new method on the overall profitability of the firm. "And this means that in general there will be a slower rate of introduction of innovations than under competitive criteria."<sup>10</sup> Examples and demonstrations of the way monopoly capitalism retards technological progress both quantitatively and qualitatively are not difficult to find. Automatic cotton pickers could not be introduced in the United States for a long time, although they reduced picking time by a factor of at least twenty-five and reduced required labour by seventy-five percent, for fear of overproduction with consequent shattering of prices. By 1937 over nine hundred patents had been filed for mechanical cotton

pickers, but cotton was still picked almost entirely by hand, hand-picking labour being very cheap owing to the low standard of living in which the black population of the southern states is forced to exist.<sup>11</sup> In terms of consumer products, as well, it is clear that technological development in terms of profit is different from development in terms of utility. In addition, waste production, of everything from cars to clothes, shoes, or home appliances, becomes a permanent feature of an irrational monopoly capitalism.<sup>12</sup> As André Gorz demonstrates, "even when fundamental needs remain largely unsatisfied, monopoly capital objectively organizes scarcity, wastes natural resources and human labour, and orients production (and consumption) toward objects whose sale is most profitable, regardless of the need for such objects."<sup>13</sup> The point I want to emphasize is that the objective possibilities of technological development are always subordinated to production for maximum profit. Technology is not the autonomous, self-determining entity that McLuhan portrays. Nor does it exert its greatest effects in formal-biological terms. Print, for example, broke down the separation between the practical craftsman and the man with education. This effect, of course, is profoundly dependent on the content of print: the message for which print was the medium. It was not simply contact or communication between the two men that was needed: it was access for the craftsman to the accumulated experience of others--to the education of the other man. Printing democratized the tools of thought.

#### B. The Media in Monopoly Capitalism

If McLuhan provides a formal, empty answer to the question of



the nature and effects of modern media, it is partly because he poses the question in an abstract way. To concretize, one must seek the role of media (function, effect, etc.) in a specified set of relations: monopoly capitalism. This leads to an answer with respect to the crucial role of the media in terms of counteracting, in the sales effort, a chronic tendency to underconsumption; absorbing surplus; and maintaining hegemonic class domination. The modes of utilization of surplus (the difference between what a society produces and the costs of producing it) constitute the indispensable mechanism linking the economic foundation of society with its political, cultural, and ideological superstructure. Since the surplus rises as the system develops, monopoly capitalism must stimulate demand on pain of death. If stimulation of demand through price reduction is impossible within the framework of monopoly capitalism, every giant corporation is driven by the logic of its situation to devote more and more attention and resources to the sales effort. Achieving its success by inner, not external, compulsion, the sales effort dates from antiquity; from being a relatively unimportant feature of the system, however, it has assumed gigantic dimensions under monopoly capitalism, advancing to the status of one of its decisive nerve centres. In the assessment of Baran and Sweezy, "in its impact on the economy, it is outranked only by militarism."<sup>14</sup> In all other aspects of social existence, its all-pervasive influence is second to none.

Advertising, the major weapon of the sales effort, not only creates an attachment to an existing product, it also generates demand for a new, or apparently new, product. Selling methods are not informative;

they are manipulative, with common preferences generated by a kind of brainwashing. Ultimately, the economic importance of advertising lies not primarily in its causing a reallocation of consumers' expenditures among different commodities but in its effect on the magnitude of aggregate effective demand and thus on the level of income and employment. The principal means of carrying out its task of encouraging consumption are to induce changes in fashion, create new wants, set new standards of status, enforce new norms of prosperity. The unquestioned success of advertising in achieving these aims "has greatly strengthened its role as a force counteracting monopoly capitalism's tendency to stagnation and at the same time marked it as the chief architect of the famous 'American Way of Life'." <sup>15</sup>

The sales effort, by counteracting underconsumption, softens the economic contradictions of advanced capitalism, although not by making it possible for capitalism to harness the expanding productive forces, but rather by diverting their use into socially unnecessary and hence wasteful channels. Lilley suggests that today "many lines of approximate calculation converge to suggest that at the very least it would now be possible to double the output of wealth per head every ten years"; <sup>16</sup> a thousand-fold increase would take a century to attain; a million-fold increase, two hundred years. But the artificial restraints imposed by the contradictory and irrational social and economic organization of capitalism stand in the way. In a rationally ordered socialist society, no matter how richly endowed it might be with natural resources and technology and human skills, 'too much' could only be a welcome signal to shift attention to an area of

'too little'. Only under monopoly capitalism does 'too much' appear as a pervasive problem affecting everyone at all times. In fact, the production-consumption cycle must now include everyone in society in a tight net of manipulated wants and alienated labour.

It is very important to note in this connection that the content of media could be provided at lower costs to the consumer than he now pays through the price increases effected by advertising. In other words, media such as television exist solely to serve financial and economic interests: in the struggle to absorb surplus and counteract underconsumption, television contributes by creating a new sector of unproductive labour and thus raising consumption, by the outlays on the materials and equipment necessary and, especially, by its part in the sales effort. It should not surprise us then that television programming includes little controversial material: controversy is anathema to a producer who wants a sure audience based on the lowest common denominator of acceptance or tolerance of an irrational message aimed at irrational consumption in an irrational system. A controversial programme that fosters critical thought might cause some fallout: negative thinking might be applied to commercials as well. Likewise, if there is a low level of intelligence or imagination on television, this has to do with the fact that the intelligence of the viewer tends to be in inverse proportion to his susceptibility to advertising. It is only the low grade material of television that favours the passive mimesis which is ideal for participating in a commercial message. There is nothing to suggest that McLuhan's analysis of scansion is in any way a plausible explanation of this social-economic matrix.

The need to induce non-critical thought to enhance the absorption of irrational messages is the point of contact with a similar need to induce mass consent to irrational class rule. It is interesting to note in this regard the disproportionate amount of violence on television. Apparently, 7065 acts or threats of violence were counted on the television programmes of New York City in one week;<sup>17</sup> and the New York Times has calculated that, between the ages of five and fifteen, the average child witnesses the violent death of close to 13,500 people.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it seems doubtful that the really significant effects of this saturation with violence are manifested in an increase in violent crime; we might perceive, rather, that imperialism carries its wars beyond its own borders (although, now that strong oppositionist forces have appeared, there is internal aggression against people as well) and legitimates them to its own citizens at home in many indirect ways such as, for example, the habituation to violence and to the perception of situations in terms of good-guy/bad-guy conflicts. Ultimately, with all systems go, the reciprocal reinforcement of programmes and advertisements moulds a behaviour response of passive, positive involvement, becoming operational in terms of increased consumption and social docility.

It is against a background of this kind of tendency toward total integration and loss of all ability to think critically that McLuhan prophesies a computer-orchestrated interplay of all media through which "whole cultures could now be programmed in order to improve and stabilize their emotional climate . . ." (Playboy, p. 72). Presumably, the first person invited to push the buttons on some such computer, designed to

'improve and stabilize', would be McLuhan or someone like him. One cannot avoid a non-academic shudder at the thought; yet McLuhan has already begun to peddle his wares. Volunteering to give free advice to Prime Minister Trudeau, "Mr. McLuhan told the Prime Minister and his associates, . . . that if the government would accept his advice on communications, U.S. trends to violence could be headed off in this country."<sup>19</sup> In other words, whatever the social roots of discontent may be, McLuhan is satisfied with manipulating minds and senses through the media in order to effect behavioural therapy.

I remarked earlier that McLuhan's theories constituted a kind of psychologism which substitutes milieux ('environments') for social structure and makes it impossible to understand the true relations of problems of milieux with problems of structure. There is a germ of truth in McLuhan's mystified analysis: it is true that today our technology, as Marcuse notes, tends to circumscribe our entire culture, tends to project a 'world'.<sup>20</sup> But this 'environment' is nonetheless only a moment of the socio-historical totality: it is field not structure, condition not cause. The conditions are those phenomena which are necessary for the occurrence of a given event but do not bring it about of themselves. For example, various conditions are necessary in order that an airplane may rise into the air, such as suitable airfield, favourable weather, and so on. But these conditions of themselves are, of course, insufficient for the take-off, which requires the operation of the plane's motors as an immediate cause.

Thus technology plays an important role in social development but is not the prime mover of it. The passive motor of history, as Sartre tells us, is scarcity; the active general mechanism consists in the following: the formation of social relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of the material forces of production; the periodic development of conflicts between the forces and relation of production; and the epochs of social revolution in which the relations once again adjust themselves to the level of the forces. This forces-of-production/rerelations-of-production contradiction is the primary contradiction. Of course, ~~secondary contradictions are not~~ passive and unilateral reflections of this contradiction; rather, they are the indispensable milieu for the development of the principal contradictions. There are no productive forces without relations of production, and the superstructure (political, legal, ideological) is not the reflection but the condition for the existence of the infrastructure. There are no relations of production, and hence no production, without a system of laws, powers, and so on. In fact, according to Louis Althusser, the superstructure may under certain conditions play the principal role, becoming the strategic variable which orders social evolution.<sup>21</sup> But, in any case, given the relative autonomy and effective attribute of superstructures, (economic) production remains determinant in the last instance.

Man's operation in and (eventually) conscious transformation of nature is and produces social evolution. In the beginning, according to Marx, "the relationship of the worker to the objective conditions of his labour is one of ownership: this is the natural unity of labour with its

material prerequisites."<sup>22</sup> Progress, the objective content of history, is observable in the growing emancipation of man from nature and his growing control over nature. Meanwhile the double relation of labour-property is progressively broken up as man moves further from the spontaneously evolved primitive relation with nature. The progressive separation of free labour from the objective conditions of its realization--from the means of labour and the material of labour--achieves its final clarification under capitalism when the worker is reduced to nothing but labour-power and, conversely, property to a control of the means of production entirely divorced from labour. Capitalism is a social system in which the worker, as seller, and the capitalist, as purchaser, are juridically equal and free contracting parties; it is at the same time a social system of slavery and exploitation. At the beginning and end of the productive process lies the social imperative of exchange-values, yet from beginning to end the productive process must yield surplus-values. The exchange of equivalents is the fundamental social relation of production, yet the extraction of non-equivalents is the fundamental force of production; this is the central contradiction inherent in the process of capitalist production.

### C. Hegemonic Ideology

Of course, as might be expected, the image which the ruling hegemonic class presents as the reality necessarily distorts and masks the real operation of the system. Marxist theory defines ideology as false consciousness, the false consciousness of a class or stratum which distorts reality. It is the individual's or group's or class's

conceptualization of society and itself which results from its position in the class system, or the productive process, or its life activity (largely equivalent terms). Ideology is a certain way of looking at the world, and we must connect such ideological outlooks with objective structures and conditions of life. Ideology is a reflection of a real situation, a real condition, but this reflection is expressed in a distorted and false way.

The portrayal by McLuhan of the system as a 'technological' system, rather than as a specifically capitalist form of technological society, is a fallacy with a strongly ideological character. Universalizing, in an ahistorical manner, bourgeois social-economic-political forms and presenting them as natural or necessary to all societies, McLuhan's argument takes the form of a technological determinism which derives such facts as mass media manipulation, political powerlessness, and so on (all rhetorically disguised) from the technological facts themselves, instead of rooting them in the specific capitalist organization of production, in the political economy of capitalism.

Another of McLuhan's typically neocapitalist mystifications is the painting of modern capitalism as a mass rather than a class society, a global village where all oppositionist tendencies have been retribalized or integrated or co-opted by the system. McLuhan, the End of Ideology school, Ellul, Marcuse at times, all express in a variety of ways this type of view. This vision of society as uncontradictory, in natural and harmonious equilibrium, where all elements in the population are involved,



included in the great liberal, pluralist consensus, is at source a ruling class illusion. The concept of 'class' and 'class struggle' is discarded to be replaced by the concept of a 'mass' society where people have been largely equalized and conceive of themselves in roles of consumers, rather than as producers in their work relations or as a class located in a specifically capitalist process of production. The closest McLuhan comes to seeing men in any kind of active role, in any kind of productive capacity, is in speaking of play: "Real play, like the whodunit, throws the stress on process rather than on product, giving the audience the chance of being a maker rather than a mere consumer." (WP, p. 173). McLuhan concentrates rather on drugs, fashions, and the like, dealing with people in the purely consumptive aspects of their lives.

When speaking of the 'mass' society, it is well to remember that what massification has occurred has not been caused by technology. Technology, as indicated above, is a condition not a cause. As Gorz writes:

Mature capitalist society, therefore, remains profoundly barbaric as a society, to the degree that it aims at no civilization of social existence and of social relationships, no culture of social individuals, but only a civilization of individual consumption. Simultaneously, the homogeneity and the stereotypes of individual consumption created by the oligopolies produce this particular social individual whose social nature appears to him as accidental and alien: the individual in a mass society.

One must not take this to mean--as sentimentalists of the age of artisans imply--that mass production itself induces the "massification" of social individuals. The latter is in no sense an inevitable consequence of assembly line production methods.<sup>23</sup>

McLuhan's fetishism of technology results in stripping man completely of mediations, complexity, and ability to control himself and

his environment. In his responses to the technology that shapes him, "man is not only a robot in his private reflexes but in his civilized behaviour and in all his responses to the extensions of his body, which we call technology" (WP, p. 19). It is important to bear in mind that it is men themselves who impose a system of domination on other men, and that no methodological separation is possible between men in their relation to other men, and the field--the thing-world--through which they act and are acted upon by other men. It needs to be stressed that reification of social relations, in this case technological processes seeming to develop autonomous fetishistic powers, exists only in relation to men seeming to take on the properties of things. This is characteristic of advanced capitalism. In earlier periods of history, when relations of production had a direct personal character, such reification of social relations was obviously impossible.

What ideologues of the new Apocalypse like McLuhan have forgotten, however, is that man alienated, mystified, atomized, and so forth, still remains man, an actor and not a thing, in spite of the metaphysics of liberalism that has continually mystified the human field, portraying the world as subject to 'the invisible hand', 'the hidden spectator', 'the Market', and now 'Technology'. Yet it is not that we are transformed into things but that we are men condemned, as it were, to live humanly the condition of material things; "man in a period of exploitation is at once both the product of his own product and a historical agent who can under no circumstances be taken as a product."<sup>24</sup> Otherwise men would be merely the vehicles of inhuman forces which through them would govern the social

world.

The problem of technologism is more a characterization of the ruling class vision of the operation of the society than it is the objective reality of so-called 'Technological Society'. The ruling class masks the technological operation of the system in terms of its autonomous fetishistic powers, such that men seem to become the objects and property of machines. This thesis of technologism is ambiguous. It is valid only in the sense that the capitalist mode of production is anarchic and that the organization of the economy is not in fact legislated consciously by men in order to fulfill human needs. Human needs are defined only in relation to the demands of capital. On the other hand, it is not valid but a mystification to claim the fetishistic anarchy of technology to be a fact of technology itself. Technologies and their fetishism do not conform to universal laws, or to the arbitrary expression of some Technological Zeitgeist, but to the ideological expression of the class which masks the reality in its own interests.

As Antonio Gramsci points out, the relationship between intellectuals (such as McLuhan) and the world of production is not immediate, as is the case for fundamental social groups; it is 'mediated', in different levels, by the whole social fabric, and by the complex of the superstructure of which intellectuals are the 'officials'. "Intellectuals are the officers of the ruling class"<sup>25</sup> for the exercise of the function of social hegemony. Any determinist philosophy, especially one as powerful and popular as McLuhan's, exerts great influence in the direction of quietism, defeatism,

and docility. Lenin wrote in 1913: "People always have been and they always will be the stupid victims of deceit and self-deception in politics until they learn behind every kind of moral, religious, political, social phrase, declaration and promise to seek out the interests of this or that class or classes."<sup>26</sup> At a time when our new technology (as condition, not cause) makes possible more than ever the radical alternatives of a society of complete class domination and a truly classless society, McLuhan's apocalyptic vision is an exhortation to totalitarianism.

To the degree to which the established society is irrational, the consciousness becomes free for the higher historical rationality only in the struggle against the established society. By glorifying the new technology and disguising the extraordinary irrationality of neo-capitalism, McLuhan makes much more difficult the recognition and seizure of liberating potentiality. The semi-progressive critical consciousness of The Mechanical Bride has in later books become a consciously committed ruling class ideology. There is no room in the framework of McLuhan's theories for the conscious human social act which shall radically transform and overthrow the present society. In fact, McLuhan's determinist fetishism of technology serves to absolve of all guilt an unscrupulous ruling class which continues to commit crimes against humanity, and thus it facilitates and encourages more of the same.

## NOTES

### FOREWORD

<sup>1</sup>Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (New York, 1955), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Communications (Harmondsworth, England, 1962), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Dick MacDonald, "Mass Media Research is Needed," Montreal Star, July 5, 1969, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>"Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," Playboy, March 1969, p. 64. Hereafter cited as Playboy.

<sup>5</sup>Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York, 1964), p. 58. Subsequent references will be to this edition; hereafter cited as UM.

<sup>6</sup>"Structuralisme, marxisme, existentialisme," L'Homme et la société, No. 2 (oct.-déc. 1966), p. 119.

<sup>7</sup>Mythologies (Paris, 1957), p. 252.

### CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Arnold Rockman, "McLuhanism: The Natural History of an Intellectual Fashion," Encounter, Oct. 1968, p. 02ff.

<sup>2</sup>Rockman, p. 03.

<sup>3</sup>Rockman, p. 01.

<sup>4</sup>Herman Keld, cited in Ralph Thomas, "Why Marshall McLuhan Matters to You," Toronto Star, Jan. 21, 1967, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>"Media Log," Explorations in Communication: An Anthology, ed. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (Boston, 1960), p. 181.

<sup>6</sup>Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Massage (New York and Toronto, 1967), pp. 10, 92. Subsequent references will be to this edition; hereafter cited as MM. See also "Media Log," p. 182.

<sup>7</sup>Georg Lukacs, Histoire et conscience de classe: essais de dialectique marxiste, trad. Kostas Axelos et Jacqueline Bois (Paris, 1960), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup>Patrick Barnard, "Letters to the Editor," Montreal Star, July 4, 1969, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup>"Mailer, McLuhan and Muggeridge: On Obscenity," The Realist, No. 83 (Oct. 1968), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Rockman, p. 06.

<sup>11</sup>Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication, No. 1 (Dec. 1953), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>Rockman, p. 05.

<sup>13</sup>Gerald E. Stearn, ed. "Introduction," McLuhan: Hot & Cool, A Critical Symposium (New York, 1967), p. xiii. Hereafter cited as Hot & Cool.

<sup>14</sup>Dennis Duffy, Marshall McLuhan (Toronto, 1969).

<sup>15</sup>Sidney Finkelstein, Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan (New York, 1968).

<sup>16</sup>"McLuhan: Magnetic Man," I.C.E.F. Review, Dec. 1966, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>Malcolm Muggeridge, "The Medium Is McLuhan," New Statesman, Sept. 1, 1967, p. 253.

<sup>18</sup>"Blowing Hot & Cold," Time, July 3, 1964, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup>J. Strebig, "Letters to the Editor," Toronto Globe and Mail, July 21, 1964, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup>"Understanding Media Hard to Understand," Toronto Globe and Mail, July 11, 1964.

<sup>21</sup>Dwight Macdonald, "Running It Up the Totem Pole," Hot & Cool, p. 205. In citing items from the collection Hot & Cool, I have used the authors' original titles rather than the much longer and more elaborate titles which the editor of the collection has substituted.

<sup>22</sup>Harold Rosenberg, "Philosophy in a Pop Key," Hot & Cool, p. 196.

<sup>23</sup>"McLuhanism in a Nutshell--The Dangers of a Theory," Montreal Gazette, April 8, 1967, p. 28.

- 24"King of Popthink," Hot & Cool, pp. 245, 247, 248.
- 25Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, War and Peace in the Global Village (New York and Toronto, 1968), pp. 151-152. Subsequent references will be to this edition; hereafter cited as WP.
- 26Raymond Williams, "A Structure of Insights," Hot & Cool, pp.190-191.
- 27Marshall McLuhan, "Introduction," The Bias of Communication, by Harold A. Innis (Toronto, 1951), p. xi.
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- 29Marshall McLuhan, "James Joyce: Trivial and Quadrivial," Thought, XXVIII (Spring 1953), 79.
- 30Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (Toronto, 1962), p. 170. Subsequent references will be to this edition: hereafter cited as GG. See also MB, p. 107; UM, p. 158.
- 31"Between Two Galaxies," Hot & Cool, p. 181.
- 32Renascence, IV (Autumn 1951), 8-9.
- 33"A Modern Sensibility," Hot & Cool, p. 98.
- 34Marshall McLuhan and Gerald E. Stearn, "A Dialogue: Q & A," Hot & Cool, p. 261.
- 35Duffy, p. 12.
- 36Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting (New York, 1968), p. 7. Subsequent references will be to this edition; hereafter cited as VP.
- 37"Marshall McLuhan--Electronic Medievalist," Parallel, I (July-Aug. 1966), 13.
- 38"Mailer, McLuhan and Muggeridge: On Obscenity," p. 12.
- 39"Structuralisme, marxisme, existentialisme," p. 110.
- 40Elements of Christian Philosophy (New York, 1960), p. 39.

<sup>11</sup>"Letters to the Editor," Toronto Star, June 17, 1964.

<sup>12</sup>"Ardrey on Human Nature: Animals, Nations, Imperatives," Man and Aggression, ed. M.F. Ashley Montagu. (New York, 1968), pp. 75-76.

<sup>13</sup>DeMott, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup>The Bias of Communication, intro. Marshall McLuhan (Toronto, 1951), p. 36.

## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>"Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed the Breath," Explorations in Communication, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup>Finkelstein, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society, trans. John Wilkinson, intro. Robert K. Merton (New York, 1964), p. 334.

<sup>4</sup>Az esztétikum sajátossága (Budapest, 1965), I, 73. My trans. Hereafter cited as Aesthetics.

<sup>5</sup>Ben Lieberman and Jack Behar, "Paradise Regained or McLuhanacy?" Hot & Cool, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup>Duffy, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup>Aesthetics, I, 303.

<sup>8</sup>"A Dialogue," Hot & Cool, p. 274.

<sup>9</sup>Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order (New York, 1966), pp. 219-220.

<sup>10</sup>Cited in Boyce Richardson, "The Mob and the Auto: Two Objects of Terror," Entertainments, Montreal Star, June 14, 1969, pp. 6, 27.

<sup>11</sup>The Savage Mind (Chicago, 1966), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup>Edmund Leach, "Don't Say 'Boo' to a Goose," Man and Aggression, p. 66.



- <sup>13</sup>The Sociological Imagination (New York, 1961), p. 67, n.12.
- <sup>14</sup>V.I. Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy (Moscow, 1917), p. 317.
- <sup>15</sup>Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works (Moscow, 1961), XXXVIII, 360.
- <sup>16</sup>György Kepes, ed. "Introduction," Education of Vision (New York, 1965), p. ii.
- <sup>17</sup>Mirko Basaldella, "Visual Considerations," Education of Vision, ed. György Kepes (New York, 1965), p. 177.
- <sup>18</sup>Julian Beinart, "Visual Education for Emerging Cultures: The African Opportunity," Education of Vision, p. 181.
- <sup>19</sup>"From Stimulus to Symbol: The Economy of Biological Computation," Sign, Image, Symbol, ed. György Kepes (New York, 1966), p. 118.
- <sup>20</sup>The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach, trans. Anna Bostock (Harmondsworth, England, 1963), p. 16.
- <sup>21</sup>Cited in Fischer, The Necessity of Art, p. 17.
- <sup>22</sup>Aesthetics, I, 597, and passim.
- <sup>23</sup>Aesthetics, I, 373.
- <sup>24</sup>Aesthetics, I, 75.
- <sup>25</sup>"Joyce, Aquinas, and the Poetic Process," p. 10.
- <sup>26</sup>Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter, "Acoustic Space," Explorations in Communication, p. 65.
- <sup>27</sup>Literature and Revolution (New York, n.d.), p. 183.
- <sup>28</sup>Marshall McLuhan, "Love," Saturday Night, February 1967, p. 27.
- <sup>29</sup>Aesthetics, I, 251.
- <sup>30</sup>Fischer, p. 166.
- <sup>31</sup>Henri Lefebvre, "Claude Lévi-Strauss et le nouvel éléatisme," L'Homme et la société, No. 1 (juillet-sept. 1966), pp. 21-31.

<sup>32</sup>Lefebvre, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup>Lefebvre, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup>"Culture without Literacy," Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication, No. 1 (Dec. 1953), p. 119.

### CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>Herbert Marcuse, Negations: Essays in Critical Theory, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1968), p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in A Handbook of Marxism, ed. Emile Burns (London, 1935), p. 116.

<sup>3</sup>Marcuse, Negations, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup>Cited in Lenin, Philosophical Notebooks, p. 527.

<sup>5</sup>Innis, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup>Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow, 1965), I, 322.

<sup>7</sup>Capital, I, 368.

<sup>8</sup>Ellul, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup>Men, Machines and History: The Story of Tools and Machines in Relation to Social Progress (New York, 1966), p. 21, and passim.

<sup>10</sup>Baran and Sweezy, pp. 93-94.

<sup>11</sup>Lilley, Men, Machines and History, pp. 168-169.

<sup>12</sup>Ellul, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup>Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal, trans. Martin A. Nicolaus and Victoria Ortiz (Boston, 1967), p. 79.

<sup>14</sup>Baran and Sweezy, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup>Baran and Sweezy, p. 128.

<sup>16</sup>Lilley, p. 333.

<sup>17</sup>Williams, Communications, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup>"Playboy After Hours," Playboy, Aug. 1969, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup>W.A. Wilson, "Marshall McLuhan to Advise Trudeau," Montreal Star, Oct. 22, 1968, p. 55

<sup>20</sup>One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston, 1964), p. 154.

<sup>21</sup>Pour Marx (Paris, 1965), passim.

<sup>22</sup>Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, trans. Jack Cohen, ed. and intro. Eric J. Hobsbawm (New York, 1965), p.67.

<sup>23</sup>Gorz, Strategy for Labor, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Search for a Method, trans. and intro. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1967), p. 87.

<sup>25</sup>The Modern Prince and Other Writings, trans. Louis Marks (New York, 1967), p. 124.

<sup>26</sup>"The Three Sources and Three Constituent Parts of Marxism," in Capital, the Communist Manifesto, and Other Writings, by Karl Marx, ed. and intro. Max Eastman (New York, 1959), p. xxv.

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