

**McLuhan's Method:
the Mad Hatter at Tea
with Austin and Wittgenstein**

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[Presented under the title "McLuhan, Wittgenstein & the Method of Examples" to the 1989 Conference of the Film Studies Association of Canada, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, 20 May 1989. Revised 1993 and later.]

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He is the Rubens of philosophy. Richness, abundance, boldness, color, but a sharp contour never, and never any *perfection*. But isn't fertility better than perfection?

William James¹

But there is a certain danger in not having to reach final conclusions: it's all too easy to be satisfied with glimmers of intuition, rather than sound, coherent reasoning.

Andrey Tarkovsky²

A Cautionary Introduction

To speak of how Marshall McLuhan did what he did, when he did it and why, might seem to guarantee misunderstanding of him, for if only the medium is important, then, as he would gleefully have insisted, any such message must be trivial. To speak of what can only be *shown* is doubly suspect when, as here, I shall confound how McLuhan, Austin and Wittgenstein behaved, despite Wittgenstein having admonished us to avoid generalizing. And the danger will be trice compounded, for I shall generalize without citing examples of how they worked, writing for readers able to provide their own examples against which to measure the aptness of what I say.³

¹ William James, speaking of his colleague, Josiah Royce, in a letter to Dickinson Miller of 31 January 1899, as quoted in Gerald E. Myers, *William James: his Life and Thought* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), page 17.

² From Andre Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair (London: the Bodley Head, 1986), page 15.

³ I shall presume, tongue firmly in cheek, that readers have pondered the life and works of McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in particular, the principal papers of Austin and the core compilations early and late of Wittgenstein, trying to fit them within the patterns that biographers have uncovered within their performances and the cultures encompassing them, and I shall do so without citing sources, save cursorily. Like McLuhan, that is, I shall speak facetiously – perhaps!

Niceties aside, however, I have long been intrigued by philosophical ideas that were generated in western Europe and North America from about 1890 to the beginning of the second world war, the half-century during which the cinema found its roots, and especially those propounded by a group of thinkers (male every one) who have by now been relegated to the margins of our cultural world, among them Nietzsche, Peirce, Bergson, Spengler, Collingwood, Austin, Wittgenstein, Innis and more recently McLuhan – a group of men who, without exception and by common consent, had difficulty 'getting their act together' intellectually as they became marginalized. The obstacles confronting them were diverse, idiosyncratic, sometimes physical and occasionally pathological, but even after causes are balanced against effects, a gaping question persists.

Why were these thinkers unable late in life to summarise neatly how they were thinking, rendering it easy thereafter for others to disregard what they said? Or, reversing gear, why have so many commentators thereafter, shouting from within the centres of contemporary philosophical debate (whether male or female and whether writing in ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, logic, philosophy of science, philosophy of culture) found it so difficult to integrate the later work of these thinkers into the core of their discussions?

I find this of particular importance as a teacher, for, as I teach within an environment dominated increasingly by a 'scientific' model of academic endeavour, I am convinced that I must strive especially to extend the franchise to thinkers who lived before me, simply to contravene the prevailing pseudo-scientific presumption that any text published more than a few minutes ago must be irrelevant. I, as a teacher, must unceasingly remind my students that other human beings, long since gone from this earth, may have been more right about many things than we are and occasionally more right than we could be (for success within the ahistorical conversation pervading the academy requires, for most participants, a preparatory act of historical blindness ensuring the perpetual reinvention of intellectual wheels that Wittgenstein aptly described as 'idling').

Which brings me to Marshall McLuhan who, whatever else may be said of him, surely extended the franchise to the past – to a medieval Catholic past of remarkable complexity.

Part 1:

The Classic-Comic Construal of McLuhan

Let me sketch firstly a caricature of what McLuhan did and said shared by almost everyone of my acquaintance who has bothered to read in passing *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan's finest book and assuredly the most provocative good book ever written on the subjects addressed therein, whether they respect or deny his achievement, and that in itself is remarkable.

The Historical Argument:

McLuhan tried to explain two shifts in the cultural evolution of western Europe and North America: the transition from literacy to print, and thereafter from print to the electronic media.

His conjectures fit therefore within a standard model of historical explanation. His conclusions have formal precedents in the explanations offered by others for the earlier transitions within the culture from orality to literacy and encompass broad but derivative mappings of the historical periods under consideration that are at times accurate and penetrating. And since every step of his argument had been advanced earlier by other scholars, its content, although more contentious than its competitors, is comparably open to further historical investigation and refinement.⁴

1. The driving force of cultural change is technological (echoing Mumford, Giedion, Innis).
2. The nature of the technologies determine the shape of a culture, not the nature of the products that are generated by them (Mumford, Giedion, Innis again).
3. The technologies of communication are uniquely powerful modifiers of a culture, for they constrain how its members may *think* about it (after Innis in particular – the technologies of communication are staples just like codfish, beaver pelts, or timber – but Mumford as well).

⁴ My source for all matters relating to the life and works of Marshall McLuhan is the uniquely informative book by Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto, Ontario: Random House, 1989). As noted in footnote 3 above, I shall almost always use what he says without referring to the pages on which he says it.

4. Technologies extend the biological capacities of human beings, and the communication technologies extend, in particular, their *sensory* capacities (after Butler, Emerson, Ernst Kapp, Bergson, van Loon, Freud, Mumford, Fuller, Innis, Hall)
5. Humans living within western Europe and North America are being compelled increasingly to perceive the events of the world only as mediated by the technologies of communication, and, as our compulsions spread across the world, we and its other inhabitants find ourselves reverting increasingly to a village-like sharing of a common sensory experience of it on a near-global scale (after Mumford).
6. The effects of the technologies of communication upon the political, economic, and social institutions of nations will be pervasive, integrative, and remarkable, and if we are to prepare to work within them, we must come to understand their nature and their roots. (again after Mumford)

The Puzzle:

But if McLuhan was simply echoing others who had spoken before him, why did he cause such a fuss? Why have so many commentators, among them some of the most open-minded, innovative, radical, careful and curious scholars in the world, dismissed him as a panderer, charlatan or worse? Three reasons are commonly given.

Reason 1:

McLuhan contaminated his reconstruction of the standard historical explanation, summarised above, by including within it a sub-category of claims resting upon an outmoded medieval conjecture about how our sensory modalities are integrated, and how the various technologies of communication are biased with respect to them. The conjecture, derived from Aquinas and Bacon (and later Hildebrand), is so obviously incorrect that McLuhan's allegiance to it, disregarding counterexamples at every hand, has led many to conclude that he must have been everywhere untrustworthy.

The corrupting conjecture may be broadly sketched as follows:

- a. The sensory modalities of human beings living within the preliterate periods of our culture were seamlessly integrated (as they are for those living within any pre-literate culture).

b. Every preliterate encounter with the things of the world, therefore, involved all of the senses in integration. The ultimate sensory jury, however, were the auditory-tactile organs rather than, as now, the organs of sight.

Literacy, until the advent of printing, was a visual-aid to an integrated auditory/tactile experience.

c. The advent of printing destroyed the integrated auditory-tactile bias of our culture, reshaping it to a bias dominated by the single sense of sight.

d. Dominated by the bias of the single sense of sight, our experience of the world became irrational, for we lacked the integration of the senses required to recognise it coherently.

e. With the advent of the electronic technologies of communication, however, we depend no longer upon reading for most of our information about the world. We, with the others in our world, are increasingly less by the biases of the sense of sight; and as we learn again to encounter things through senses newly integrated, we shall find our culture returning to the integrated audio-tactile social patterns common to preliterate cultures.

Had McLuhan avoided entrapment in this medieval sensory morass, he would never have affirmed (or "outered", as he put it) such monstrosities as the claim that television is a "tactile" medium, or that reading a newspaper is an "auditory" experience. In the opinion of almost every commentator known to me, he would then have been far better off had he done so.⁵

Reason 2:

Although McLuhan advanced broad historical conjectures about cultural change, his writings were ill-designed to facilitate *historical* comprehension of them. Indeed, he acted as if the common constraints upon historical writing, facilitating the testing of the conjectures being advanced, were somehow irrelevant to his goals. (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, for example, was designed to appear as much like a medieval manuscript as possible: neither the argument nor the glosses are logically ordered; no indices are available to facilitate cross-referencing; contrary views are never mentioned; etc..)

In the opinion of some (Marchand included), this exemplified a profound personality trait: McLuhan was simply too interested in new ideas and too fertile in generating

⁵ Marchand, his biographer, among them. See Marchand, op. cit., page 146.,

them, to take note of older ones. He was too busy looking ahead to look sideways, much less backwards, had little interest in established truth and hence refused to engage in the laborious business of checking facts, annotating and integrating sources, testing conclusions, structuring valid inferences, etc..⁶ Many angry observers, however, simply dumped this into the dirt of the wash water, supplementing their collections of *ad hominem* hearsay suggesting that McLuhan was at best a radically inconsistent and untrustworthy personality, at worst a dandy and dilettante.

How otherwise, they asked rhetorically and recurringly, could McLuhan be disinterested if not contemptuous of commonplace facts and established standards, disregarding counterexamples and disciplinary boundaries and insisting that colleagues follow his lead in "connecting things", despite his knowing little of the things being connected – as if, as an acquaintance remarked, "he were simply telling a story or recounting a dream"? How could a teacher of integrity, it was said, consistently grade the papers of graduate students solely in proportion to the number of "new ideas" they broached? How could a viable scholar use puns, witticisms, raw humour and even ridicule in trying to change the world rather than describe it, becoming famous in the process and, scandalously and openly, liking it – while it lasted? (This was, after all, a man reputed to have told others that black masses were being held at Casa Loma, surgery was terrifying, all great artists were Catholic and the devil was conspiring to prevent publication of his writings.)

Reason 3:

The third reason is related to the second. McLuhan not only violated the precedents of scholarly presentation. He *refused* to follow them. He claimed recurringly, that is, to be doing something *other* than writing history, philosophy or science.

By all accounts, McLuhan acted as if his historical conjectures were true and justified. Nevertheless, he acted almost always as if any attempt on his part to establish their truth would have been a waste of his time – as if he thought that one could perceive them to be true without argument or evidence, much as one saw that a chair was red, if one only opened one's mind wide enough – and *hence* considered the structures commonly supposed by others to assist the comprehension and testing of historical claims to be foreign to his purposes.

⁶ Few have even tried to reconcile this with the obvious, consistent and long-term evidence that McLuhan was a devout Catholic, a political conservative, a near-worshipper of tradition and a man infatuated with medieval literature and philosophy and their sources.

He seemed, in short, to be using historical conjectures for a purpose *other* than achieving historical illumination.

To many observers, especially those who never met him and hence knew of him only through his writings rather than through conversations, this simply confirmed their suspicions: McLuhan was speaking nonsense because he hadn't taken the time to understand what he was doing.

This opinion deserves respect, for there is no doubt that had McLuhan tested his conjectures cautiously, he would have found the academic world a more amenable place in which to live. (Reading Popper late in life almost convinced him of this, but not quite.) Had he done so, he would have recognised, critics remarked, that, by his own account, one could not possibly encompass "non-linear" ideas within a "linear" medium (he would have realized, in short, that all attempts to subvert the constraints of a linear medium were subverting its capacity to convey *sense*, for linearity is how sense is created within linear media). He would therefore have solved the biggest problem of his intellectual career, "the problem of how best to translate his thinking into the medium of the printed word", and would have deflected the aim of those critics who quite rightly saw his books as manifesting the very confusion between medium and message of which he so often accused others.⁷

He would have avoided a host of diversionary confusions as well, as when he suggested, for example, that mathematics is auditory while logic is visual, even though the history of the subjects in the 20th-century has shown the substantial equivalence of the two.

He might even have sensitized himself to the sensory arts, though that might be asking too much. (It is odd, after all, that a man so concerned with "sensory ratios" could be completely oblivious to every one of the sensory arts of western civilization! One looks in vain in McLuhan for any appreciation of painting, music, sculpture, architecture or even the non-ideational aspects of poetry or Joycean prose, his own specialities. Best keep in mind, however, that Kant, originator of the most riveting aesthetic theory of the 18th century and even after, possessed no aesthetic sense whatsoever.)

But these are superficial matters. The crucial point is that McLuhan, rightly or wrongly, *thought* he was engaged in a task within which his conjectures were means to other ends rather than ends in themselves. Two questions are therefore unavoidable.

⁷ The summation is Marchand's. See Marchand, *op. cit.*, page 235.

Methodologically, what was McLuhan doing? and was he right to do it?

The answer, I suggest, is that McLuhan was engaged in a *therapeutic* endeavour similar to that of the later Wittgenstein. If so, the classic-comic construal of his achievement, however well-intentioned, is a caricature gone awry.

Let me, then, open two windows onto the method of McLuhan that may shed some light upon it.

Part 2: Two Windows on McLuhan

McLuhan tried recurringly to say, or to hint at, what he thought he was doing. None of these remarks were developed, all were barely suggestive and yet there is a haunting consistency about the metaphors he used upon which it would be wise to mediate:

- *. He was, like Sherlock Holmes, a sleuth, playing the rôle even to the point of agreeing to be photographed in costume and admonishing children, when interrogating their world, to do so as Holmes had done.
- *. He was searching for the "patterns" by which things related in atypical ways to one another.
- *. He was compelled to report the results of his investigations in a "mosaic", "associative" or "conversational" manner akin to the "analogical" or metaphoric method of Aquinas, the "aprioristic" method of Bacon or the "Ideogrammic" method of Ezra Pound, rather than a literary one.
- *. He was 'probing' as surgeon's probe, or as 'probes' are sent by scientists into distant regions of space around Mars or Venus.

He gave other hints, equally elliptical, that were even more striking:

- *. He was attempting to combat the "somnambulism" of his culture pervaded by beings walking in their sleep.
- *. He was seeking insight with "emotional equanimity".

- *. He was trying to invert the way in which we perceive the figure/ground relationship of things, diverting our attention from the "figure" to the "ground".
- *. He was seeking to divert our attention to the unintended rather than the intended *effects* of technology (to the 'back-ground' connections) rather than the intended effects (the figure connections).
- *. He was attempting, as it were, to peering through a microscope, engaged in a process of "observation minus ideas".

We may conclude from McLuhan's metaphors that he thought that he was acting consistently and in a manner uniquely appropriate to his purposes, however uncommon it might be.

But what method, if any, could McLuhan have had in mind? Or, better put, what method would accord with what he did *regardless* of what he had in mind? What method, in particular, could account for that uncommon combination of traits, universally attested by friends and enemies who knew him, of the utmost seriousness about what he was doing combined with an almost child-like carelessness and disregard, indeed flippantly so, for the possible truth of what he was saying? What method could account both for McLuhan's consistency and persistence and yet for his delight in treating ideas as "music" (echoing T. S. Eliot) to the scandal of academics?⁸

I think I now know what McLuhan was doing, albeit unwittingly, and shall soon tell you what I believe about it (see 'Window 2' below); but I wish firstly to say something about his notion of sensory ratios, for that, too, deserves reconsideration.

Window 1: the Sensory Ratios:

The medieval notion of the ratio of the senses is nowhere near as self-evidentially nonsensical as McLuhan's critics would have one believe.

The medieval conjecture was largely phenomenological, and, for all we know, those who advanced it may have gotten it more rightly within their simpler intellectual environment than we can now reconstruct it within our cluttered one. (To Bacon we

⁸ When presenting this lecture, I summarised at this point McLuhan's notorious and exemplary encounter with the distinguished sociologist, Robert Merton, as recounted by Marchand, *op. cit.*, pages 132 and 133. See the Appendix to this essay. [Note added 30 April 2019]

also owe the metaphor of time being a river that carries the shit along while dropping the good things to bottom, contrary to our 19th-century progressivism.)

One encounters objects by multifaceted patterns of stimulation impressing themselves primarily upon a single sense (we are, as we say, seeing *or* hearing *or* touching it, etc.). As they do so, however, imaginative expectations of possible future impressions are generated simultaneously and in complex ways for all of the senses.⁹

To McLuhan, one was never to categorize a technology by the predominant sense that it impressed, but rather by the senses terminally impressed (and perhaps even imaginatively so – though he was far from consistent about this). Seeing a photograph could therefore be a more 'tactile' experience than sensing of the temperature of the room in which one sits, or radio might be a more 'visual' medium than television with newspapers more 'auditory' than either.

I am not claiming here that they are as McLuhan thought they were, nor that it is even worth wondering about. I am suggesting simply that the medieval conception may quite possibly be articulatable, perhaps even formalizable and maybe even useful, and that McLuhan, however muddled his conception of it may have been, need not have apologized for failing to find a refutation of it in his critics.

Window 2: the Logical Pun:

We use words in many ways, registering how diversely when we encounter them within uncommon contexts from which multiple meanings may emerge – within poetry, for example, or, as McLuhan recurrently showed, within advertisements, puns or jokes.

McLuhan was particularly of puns, and his fondness for puns, I suggest, is the key to understanding his method – that is, his peculiarly "aphoristic" use of discrete and oft-inconsistent bundles of theory-like *sentences*.

Sentences consist of words, and the meaning of a word, as Peirce insisted, is a bundle of theories. The meaning of the word 'heavy', for example, is the set of sentences that we believe would be true if and only if anything were heavy. When we assert a sentence, therefore, we assert not only the message encompassed explicitly by its words but implicitly the entire range of theories that constitute their meanings. We thus project

⁹ When asked for examples, males in my classes responded routinely with 'Playboy centerfolds', black net stockings, etc.. The females remained silent.

implicitly the local logic of the language being used – a tiny part of the presupposed pattern of the *medium*.

A pun is a word that sounds like the word whose place it usurps in a sentence, bringing simultaneously to consciousness the diverse meanings of both words and thus both sentences (the one articulated, the other implied). When punning, our attention shifts, as McLuhan put it, from the "foreground" to the "ground."

A pun, therefore, both expresses a dual message and draws attention to the medium being used. It thus *manifests* the logical presuppositions that we bring to the use of the local words of the language – presuppositions of which we were previously unaware.

I have been speaking of punning with words. Sentences, however, like words, can be used in many ways, though few before Wittgenstein thought much about it. The sentence 'The King is dead', for example, is used differently when encountered by the reader of a novel than when read as a headline in the morning newspaper, or when used by a teacher of English to illustrate sentence structure. An intriguing question arises.

If we can pun with words, can we pun with sentences as well?

Yes! and by pondering the answer, we can begin to understand what McLuhan was doing, and why so many have misconstrued the seriousness of his achievement.

McLuhan managed to construct puns out of whole sentences describing *media* and thus exposed the logical presuppositions of entire technological world-views.

Theories are general sentences uttered with the intention of making assertions about the world. Conversely, general sentences are generally used to assert theories. McLuhan recurrently uttered general sentences and *appeared* thereby to be articulating theories. (Sometimes, indeed, he mistook them for theories, and insofar as he did so, deserves the censure he received.) Most of the time, however, and often articulately so, he denied that he was offering theories about the world. Most of the time, indeed, he claimed to be doing something *other* despite his use of general sentences.

What could he have been doing? Or, generally construed, to what other use could the utterance of a theory-like generalizations be put?

Suppose that the members of a society were to believe that a certain sentence were true (call it the 'target'). Suppose secondly that they were also to believe, albeit unaware, that a family of logically-related propositions were true. (I assume here, with Bains and William James, that one 'believes' whatever one is prepared to act upon, whether or not one knows it.)

Suppose then, thirdly, that someone were to enter the society and articulate both the target sentence and an alternative family of them, logically related in the same way to the target sentence as those presupposed, the effect of which was to throw the contingent character of first set into sharp and unaccustomed focus. Suppose, that is, that the provocateur were to surround the target sentence with a bundle of logically-supportive but weird proto-theoretical sentences.

The target sentence would now convey at once two meanings, the old and the new! It would have become a sentential pun drawing attention from itself to the contingency of the medium – to the precariousness, that is, of the *Weltanschauung* previously presupposed by unattended.

The provocateur need not believe that she is uttering truths, or may be uninterested in the truth-value of her proto-theoretical utterances, if true. She need only have noticed that the set is a logical alternative to the first, and that the society requires the articulation of such an alternative *if the members are again to become self-reflective about the propositions they unreflectively believe.*

What, then, did McLuhan do? McLuhan, like Innis, believed that the members of a society remain unaware of both the media pervading it (its technologies of communication, including its languages) and their effects. We, in particular, have become "numbed" to the media that pervade our culture, both to our spoken language, to the other language of print, and to the newer electronic media that are supplanting them, and to their effects upon us. We are, like Hitler, "somnambulists" – sleepwalkers drugged by the pervading technologies of our culture.

McLuhan wished to dispel the numbness, and his method was to turn ordinary sentences describing the media and their effects into *sentential puns* by surrounding them with alternative theory-like logically-related sentences – thereby throwing the background presuppositions into relief.

But now the *necessity* of McLuhan's method ought also to be clear. Why didn't McLuhan simply describe the background and thereby draw our attention to it? For the same reason that Wittgenstein insisted that some things – among them the essential logical form of a language – can only be shown, never said.

McLuhan was convinced that it would be useless to attempt to *describe* a new ground against which to measure our commonplace assumptions concerning radio, television, film, newspapers, politics, economics, etc.. No one articulate a novel theoretical background from alternative premises believed to be more secure, for the premises themselves would necessarily embody the entire implicit theoretical baggage of the language. If, as McLuhan believed, what a medium *does* depends simply on it being used, regardless of what is being used for, then using the language logically to construct a new *message* would simply reaffirm the very ground that one wanted to throw into disrepute.

The only method available to McLuhan, therefore, was to push us into confronting the pattern of presuppositions through which we habitually encounter the objects and events about us – not by constructing an alternative articulated world-view for us but rather by forcing us implicitly to reconstruct our own, for, in his view, one cannot articulate alternative world-views. One can only prod people into re-constructing them for themselves from disconnected bundles of theory-like sentences – from clues, analogies, probes, aphorisms, etc..

One cannot *logically* do otherwise.

Derrick De Kerckhove, McLuhan's successor as director of the Centre for Media and Technology, once remarked that McLuhan was like "an adult playing in a garden of delightful ideas".¹⁰ (p. 261). The analogy of a garden was apt and the description of McLuhan's joy exact, but McLuhan wasn't playing. He was having fun, but he wasn't playing!

Conclusion

As the more curious of you will have noted, I have unabashedly assimilated McLuhan's method of sentential punning with Austin and Wittgenstein's method of examples, for the three of them, it seems to me, were attempting to teach us how to get at things that can only be shown but never said – even though one must say other things for the show to go on. Wittgenstein believed, of course, that anything sayable could be said clearly, while McLuhan held that "clear prose indicates the absence of thought".¹¹ But that, as they say, is show business.

¹⁰ See Marchand, op. cit., page 261. From an undated interview with De Kerckhove by Marchand..

¹¹ Marchand, op. cit., page 154. Marchand's source for this quotation is unclear. It seems to have been taken either from an interview with McLuhan conducted by Richard

A pertinent question, however, remains. Metaphorically speaking, how ought we then to think of the design of "The Gutenberg Galaxy" as a text? To what can we compare it? To what else in our experience is it most alike?

I suggest the following. Imagine that you are attending the opening of a gallery exhibit of recent paintings by a friend. The paintings are arranged along the walls, and thoughtfully so, but the arrangement fails to constitute a "mosaic", a "collage" or any other articulatable pattern, and neither the paintings nor the exhibit, of course, are true or false. Yet the exhibit relates to the world, is somehow about the world to which it relates, and each painting within it is about the world to which it relates as well. But how so?

Suppose your friend, the painter, were to enquire of you what you thought of a particular painting, and you were to respond without enthusiasm. Suppose, consequently, she wished to change your mind. What *ought* she to say?

If she has sense, she will refrain from arguing with you, for your reply to her question, conveying how you *saw* the painting and how upon hearing the question you were compelled to register your *seeing* of it, may well have been occasioned without your having entertained within yourself any 'defense' of it. She ought wisely, that is, to refrain from acting as if you are thinking incoherently, or your view of art is old-fashioned or your knowledge of contemporary technique faulty. Rather, she ought to say whatever she can say to get you to *look* and *look* and *look* again at the painting, harder each time!

If she can do *that*, she will have won the game regardless of whether she spoke truly or otherwise, for you will have learned how to *see* it differently.

The Gutenberg Galaxy, I suggest, ought to be construed as a linguistic analogue to a gallery of paintings or to the collected musical compositions of a composer (McLuhan once referred to T. S. Eliot's "music of ideas"). Each bundle of sentences hangs within the book as a discrete package, ordered and thoughtfully so, but one can turn in various directions. Some packages relate to others, some do not, but all relate to the world, and some, if conjectures, may indeed be true.

Kostelanetz as published within his "Marshall McLuhan: High Priest of the Electronic Village" in *Master Minds* (New York, New York: MacMillan, 1967) or from a letter of McLuhan to Gerald Dunne of 24 July 1970.

Rather than compelling you to see the world anew and more truly, however, the point of the exhibit is to get you to *think* and *think* and *think* again of the commonplace assumptions that one makes, daily and unwittingly, about the media.

If one does so, McLuhan has won the game! For he will have hung his ideas within a gallery of your mind, and you will thereafter have been immunized from the unintended effects of the media within which technologically we live, move and have our being.

Appendix¹²

McLuhan contra Merton

Readers unfamiliar with the life and legend of Marshall McLuhan may well underestimate how odd a figure he cut within the academic world and how difficult it was for friends and foes to reckon what to make of him. No better introduction to the puzzle can be given, I think, than to ponder Philip Marchand's report of McLuhan's notorious encounter of 1955 with the distinguished sociologist, Robert Merton.

McLuhan's first important opportunity, after the close of the seminar, to articulate the possibilities of the new era before an American audience came in November 1955. Louis Forsdale, a young instructor at Columbia University Teachers College and a reader of [McLuhan's] *Explorations*, invited McLuhan to speak on the topic of communications at a seminar at Columbia. Forsdale felt rather daring inviting this relatively unknown professor to speak at a gathering that included academic heavyweights such as Robert Merton, perhaps the most distinguished American sociologist at that time. His feeling of risk-taking was fully justified by the event.

The first paragraph of McLuhan's paper stunned the audience. It began with a reference to Freud, included a complex analogy between psychoanalysis and X-ray photography, and ended with a capsule history of the effects of the ancient Roman road. McLuhan then launched into a précis of his recent media discoveries, citing Innis's insight that any changes the media of communication are inevitably followed by enormous social change and elaborating on the effects of print, the telegraph, newspapers, radio, and television. He ended by warning his listeners that they were living in an "age of paratroopers" and that any attempt to counteract the effects of the new media in the classroom by a chaste concentration on the good old monuments of literature or culture was entirely futile.¹³

When McLuhan finished, Forsdale asked if there were any questions. Robert Merton, his face flushed with emotion, was the first to speak. "Well, Professor McLuhan," he said, "there were many things about your paper that need cross-examination. Uh, I don't know where to begin . . . with your title or your first

¹² See Marchand, *op. cit.*, pages 132-133. [Appended to this revision of the essay on 30 April 2019. See footnote 8, page 9, above.]

¹³ Here, within a footnote, Marchand cites the paper by McLuhan that he has summarised, despite it being seemingly 'no longer available': "'Educational Effects of the Mass Media of Communications", paper delivered at Columbia University, November 1955, unpublished, NA.'

paragraph." A light glimmered in McLuhan's eye. "Let's begin with the first paragraph," Merton continued, vibrant with the resolution of an umpire about to eject a manager who'd gone too far. "You don't like those ideas?" McLuhan interrupted with a shrug. "I got others."

Forsdale is not sure anybody laughed at McLuhan's remark. "You don't laugh at Robert Merton," he points out. McLuhan, in any case, could hardly have done more to win forever the label of "unsound" not only at the University of Toronto but in the highest circles of American university life. It is the kind of remark that is repeated and relished for a long afterward in faculty lounges. "McLuhan's response was really outside the academic pale," Forsdale comments.

What you do in academia is debate. You go over points and you describe things carefully, you define and you come to an agreement or you lock horns and you talk about the research that you can bring to bear on this point of view or the research that you can bring to bear on that point of view, and McLuhan wasn't doing it. He was just saying, "This is my idea."¹⁴

At that point, McLuhan was not deliberately trying to violate the rules of academic debate. His particular response was the one that happened to occur to him. Later, of course, he cultivated the technique of the outrageous brush-off in encounters of this sort. He could not bear to have his thought cross-examined.

¹⁴ The quotation is from an undated interview with Louis Forsdale by Marchand.