

journal of visual culture



Marshall McLuhan: The First Cyberpunk Author?

Whenever I re-read *Understanding Media*, I am amazed by its brilliance and by its darkness – and by the fact that so little of the book, that many assume they already know because they have heard the aphorisms ‘the medium is the message’ and ‘the global village’, is actually known or understood (to use McLuhan’s phrase). To many, McLuhan is a prophet of the electronic age who predicted the importance of personal computers and the internet; to others, he is a doomed and dangerous apologist who, like his fictional counterpart in *Videodrome*, Dr O’Blivion, should have died from a TV induced tumor. Neither position catches the deep ambiguity – the hope and the fear – expressed in *Understanding Media*.

The ambiguity even extends to the form of McLuhan’s writing. What does it mean for a man who declares the medium is the message to write? This question was taken up recently in a remarkable exhibit curated by Ellef Prestsæter called *GG*, which draws from Guttorm Guttormsgaard’s remarkable archive of books to interrogate *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962). Framing the table dedicated to McLuhan’s work is a quotation by Nam June Paik: ‘The only problem with McLuhan is that he still writes books.’ Showing how McLuhan’s books – especially the more experimental ones such as *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan with Fiore and Agel, 1967) – played with form, this exhibit reveals that our reading is enabled by what it elides, such as the spacers used by print setters.

Given McLuhan’s emphasis on medium as mess/age, it is perhaps not surprising that *Understanding Media* is cited so widely, but read so little. What can content – words – mean when the medium is the mass/age? In a strange way then, the content has become what is elided as the book lives on. It now perhaps serves the same purpose as those spacers: gaps that make books books.

Perhaps. But let me be perverse and read *Understanding Media*, that is, read McLuhan’s reading of understanding in order to understand his understanding of it. The message is, of course, the new scale, the new

ratio of sense perceptions that every new medium initiates. The Electric Age is the externalization of our Central Nervous System – the whole world becomes one great consciousness.

But this is not necessarily a happy state: it is a mess/age. McLuhan is arguably the first cyberpunk author: offering us dark (in more sense than one) futures that are also enticing in their possibilities for control. ‘The global village’ is not some happy construct, especially for the ‘civilized’ mechanical man. The problem facing the world, McLuhan (1994[1964]: 25) argues, is not population growth, but rather proximity. The Electric Age is the Age of Anxiety in which ‘we wear all mankind as our skin’ (p. 47) for ‘the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups ... can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives’ (p. 5). This promises a time in which we can live mythically and wholly, but also threatens mental breakdown in which mechanical man painfully implodes and amputates himself, victim of the Narcissus / narcosis syndrome.

One of McLuhan’s most evocative yet under discussed ideas is the Narcissus /narcosis syndrome. Because extension also irritates our bodies, we self-amputate that organ in order to produce a ‘generalized numbness or shock that declines self-recognition’ (hence Narcissus’s image as self-amputation and his attendant misrecognition). Each extension, that is, causes a radical shift in the ratio of our sense perceptions, which our whole body reacts to violently. The stakes, though, with the Electric Age are especially high since man

set aside himself ... a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation; as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism. (p. 43)

Further, this self-amputation takes place with ‘complete disregard for antiseptics’, spreading infection in a desperate attempt to produce pleasure, a powerful counter-irritant.

This, however, is where the saving power of ‘understanding’ comes in – a subliminal understanding of human conscious and unconsciousness that actually stems from the extension of the central nervous system. Understanding provides ‘comfort’ and thus the removal of the irritant, rather than the removal of our organs. This ‘understanding’, though, is further bifurcated into the rational / computational and the artistic. Rather than being percussed victims, enslaved to technology, McLuhan argues we can do two things: use computers to ‘control these shifts in sense-ratios of the psychic and social outlook’, or avoid them altogether by becoming immune, that is, having the disease without its symptoms (p. 64). The artist can ‘correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures’ because the ‘artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of

new knowledge in his own time' (p. 65). The artist promises a way toward human autonomy.

Is it any wonder then that the Narcissus / narcosis syndrome and the artist have been forgotten under the mantra of 'the medium is the message' and 'the global village'? Aphorisms that have become ways of numbing ourselves to the impact of McLuhan?

Perhaps. But the reading of vaguely dystopian texts as cyber-celebrations is not limited to fans of McLuhan, nor is McLuhan's celebration of human autonomy (p. 51), computer control and integral understanding, his representation of difference as both promise and threat of the future limited to McLuhan. Again: Marshall McLuhan, the first cyberpunk author?

Let me just end, then, with an observation. McLuhan links literate, mechanical, specialized man to slaves. Drawing from Arnold Toynbee's work, he argues that Greek society, the 'society of active warriors', was destroyed by its reliance on slave labor, which increased production, but also introduced specialization (the tactic of 'the lame and the crippled') (p. 69). Mechanical technology enslaves because it follows the logic of slaves, 'the armies of technologically specialized slaves working the land [which] blighted the social existence of the independent yeomen and small farms, and led to the strange world of the Roman towns and the cities crowded with rootless parasites' (pp. 72-73). To what extent is this vilification of slaves, at the heart (and indeed at the end) of *Understanding Media* reveal what *Understanding Media* cannot understand? As Orlando Patterson (1985[1982]) has so forcefully argued, the notion and value of freedom is inextricably linked to the history of slavery.

References

- McLuhan M (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- McLuhan M (1994 [1964]) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McLuhan M with Fiore Q and Agel J (1967) *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantam.
- Patterson O (1985 [1982]) *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Videodrome* (1983) Dir. David Cronenberg. CFDC, Film.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun
 Modern Culture and Media
 Brown University
 [email: whkchun@brown.edu]