

Marshalling McLuhan for Media Theory

Norm Friesen, February 2011 (nfriesen@tru.ca)

Thirty years after his death, and a century after his birth, the cultural and theoretical contributions of Marshall McLuhan continue to be reinterpreted, reappropriated, and reactivated in a wide range of popular and academic contexts. Impetus for this vital and varying reception has been supplied by transformations in media and technologies, as well as in popular and academic discourse. McLuhan has gone from “a word-of-mouth celebrity” in the 60’s --via a popular nadir in the 80’s-- to enjoy a renaissance in the age of the Internet. Hailed as a prophet of the Internet and as the patron saint of *Wired* magazine, both McLuhan’s style and substance are evident for example in the interdisciplinary work of Genosko (1999), Logan (2004), and Levy (2001).

Despite this influence, a common and justifiable perception exists in North America that McLuhan’s contributions remain outside of mainstream academic research and scholarship. Affirmations of McLuhan’s importance are frequently qualified by reservations about aspects of his life and work. He is more readily remembered as a punner and prognosticator, a maven of Madison Avenue, a cameo in *Annie Hall*, or “A Part of Our [Canadian] Heritage,”¹ than as a rigorous researcher. The sentiments of Joshua Meyrowitz, a self-confessed “McLuhanite” are typical:

McLuhan’s ‘findings’ are in an unusual form and they are, therefore, not easily integrated into other theoretical research frames. [His] observations have a direct, declaratory, and conclusive tone that makes them easy to accept fully or reject fully, but difficult to apply or explore. (Meyrowitz, 1986, p. 21)

Meyrowitz himself has suggested a number of ways for programmatically “Marshalling McLuhan” for the 21st century (2001), such as combining “McLuhanism” with aspects of Marx, Goffman, or Chomsky. Nevertheless, it is clear that these suggestions have yet to be taken up.

However, there *is* a context where McLuhan’s insights have recently been marshalled to good effect. There is a cultural milieu in which his puns are all but excised --and his “direct, declaratory, and conclusive tone” tempered-- via a language less inclined to polysemy, indirection and euphemism than English. There is a setting in which he appears as a man without a popular past, and in which his dalliances with Hollywood and Madison Avenue are largely unknown. It is a context where, in the midst of the doctrinaire 60’s, he was pronounced dead on arrival, and in which he has subsequently experienced a resurrection more miraculous than in dot-com America. Perhaps improbably, this place is the heart of the Eurozone: Germany, Austria, and to a lesser extent, Switzerland.

In Germany alone, over 60 media studies departments have recently appeared at Universities from Bielefeld to Weimar --with more to be found in Austria and German-speaking Switzerland. McLuhan is widely referenced as a *Medienphilosoph*, he is the subject of *Fueilleton* or “cultural feature” articles in newspapers (e.g., Boltz, 2007), of German-language academic conferences

¹ See video available at: <http://nms.tru.ca/marshalling-mcluhan-for-media-theory>

(e.g., Universität Bayreuth, 2007), and his theory “hot” and “cool” media (as one example) is taught in all earnest in the fine arts. He is seen as no less than “the founder and figurehead of modern media theory” (Margreiter, 2007, p. 135):

With the thesis that media are themselves the message, and the implied transition of research interests to mediatic forms, McLuhan himself actually created the terrain for an independent science of the media (*Medienwissenschaft*). (Leschke, 2003, p. 245)

Significantly, McLuhan is generally recognized in this German scholarship not as an isolated intellectual figure, but very much as part of a larger Canadian milieu. In his chapter on McLuhan in his landmark *Medienphilosophie*, Frank Hartmann, for example, devotes considerable attention to Innis and makes significant use of interpretations of McLuhan by Ian Angus and Arthur Kroker. Leschke and Margreiter take a similar approach, introducing Derrick de Kerckhove alongside McLuhan in their respective introductions to *Medientheorie* and *Medienphilosophie*.

German-language interpretations of McLuhan have developed a number of ways of integrating and even marshalling McLuhan’s direct and declaratory “findings” into theoretical frames prominent in continental philosophizing. In German-language accounts of the development of media theory, the Canadian, or “Toronto School” of media theorists is generally viewed as being the first to articulate what has been called a “*mediatic a priori*” (Margreiter, 1999; Winkler, 1999; Winthrop-Young, 2000, p. 394). This refers to “the various ways in which media ‘always already’ make possible and condition the production and circulation of information, knowledge, and experiences in everyday life” (Klöck, 2004). Echoing the Kantian transcendental *a priori*, (i.e., the *form* of all possible experience), this *mediatic a priori* has served as the basis for numerous analyses that trace the way that the media of a given age similarly provide the *form* for all contemporaneous *cultural* possibilities and production of that era. German research has traced this *a priori*, for example, through the establishment of a public postal system as the condition for the possibility of eighteenth-century culture (e.g., Siegert, 1999), or the typewriter as a similar mediatic *a priori* for literary output at the turn of the twentieth century (Kittler, 1999).

A second example of an important “mobilization” of McLuhan’s contributions takes the form of the popular interpretation of McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* (and Vilem Flusser’s essays) as providing a kind of mediatic *Gesamtgeschichte*, “meta-narrative,” or a “cultural history” that can account for the broad sweep of Western history (Margreiter, 2006, p. 145). This is an account that, like an ironic version of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, “for the first time . . . presents the entire [history] of occidental culture from the perspective of the mediatic (Mersch, 2006, p. 14). This particular reinterpretation of McLuhan’s work provides the basis for studies of the prehistory of modern information society (Giesecke, 1998), cultural-comparative media histories (Giesecke, 2007), and other general archaeologies and genealogies of the media (Zielinski, 2006).

McLuhan is also being marshalled in the study of education and media. Undergirded by a social psychology that has long had “mediation” as its “central fact” (Vygotsky, 1997 p. 138), education is seen as having arrived at the end of the book as its “*leit-medium*.” In her *School at the End of Book Culture*, Janette Böhme uses the work of McLuhan, Innis, Goody and others to articulate a “theory of transmedial school-culture,” arguing for a conception of education beyond

the oppositions of orality and literacy, of digital native and immigrant, in which teachers and students alike share a common “trans-medial” capability or nomadicity (Böhme, 2006).

These and other developments in McLuhan’s wake occur, of course, in a global village, but the situation appears closer to the Tower of Babel than a “Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 81). Whatever the circumstances, it is a moment in McLuhan reception that should not pass us by. Evidence of it is available not only in German, but also in texts and events connecting media work on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Hansen & Mitchell, 2010; Heilmann, 2010; Winthrop-Young, 2011). Recognizing and leveraging this opportunity, however, will be easier with less literal and deferential readings of McLuhan, and a recognition of what might be gained through his subsumption to larger theoretical assemblages – whether as sprocket, interface or lynchpin.

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