ABSTRACT This dialogue is an exercise in probing, which is the modus operandi of McLuhanism. After articulating the rationale behind the practice, the interlocutors Eric McLuhan and Peter Zhang explored the following topics together in an agonistic mode: perception and incarnation, anti-perspectivism, proliferation as a sign of obsolescence, applied poetics, the fusion of strategy and aesthetics, the eye and the ear, music and technology, the acoustic turn, the functional equivalence of electronics and psychochemicals, Einstein's retrieval of Hindu philosophy, and Aristotle and rhetoric. Instead of talking about McLuhanism, the dialogue performs it.

KEYWORDS McLuhan; Perception; Obsolescence; Retrieval; Music; Aristotle

Introduction

This article is made up of a set of McLuhanesque-Deleuzian probes. In a nutshell, a probe is a spurt of nomad thought in the raw. It is about picking up others' darts and relaunching them, often in an oblique direction. It almost always starts in the middle, and ends with the potential to be picked up and relaunched by those with the capacity to be affected by it. As such, a probe is a relay that awaits further relays. Its life

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lies in its afterlife. Its chief interest is to set ideas in movement, augmenting their intensities, modulating their tonalities, redirecting their vectors, remolding their contours, retuning their affinities, releasing and repacking their potentials in the process. A probe is not a thing but a happening, an event. It is the equivalent of a verb in the infinitive form. In the same way the life of an arrow does not lie in sitting there but in being shot into the air, the virtue (i.e., power) of a probe lies in its launching and relaunchability.

The dialogue format is a conscious choice. It allows for the interplay, interfacing, and interanimation of ideas. The productive tension between the two voices serves to save the ideas explored from a premature closure or from collapsing into a thing. What James C. Scott (1998) says about the Socratic method applies here, even if he has the oral medium in mind:

An oral dialogue ... is alive and responsive to the mutuality of the participants, reaching a destination that cannot be specified in advance. Socrates evidently believed that the interaction between teacher and students that we now call the Socratic method, and not the resulting text, is philosophy (p. 323).

To use McLuhan's vocabulary, a dialogue is “cool” compared with a linearly progressive, climactically organized essay, since it is necessarily full of semantic gaps, logical leaps, whimsical associations, unexpected digressions, dangling questions, loose ends, and seemingly superfluous moves. These not only demand productive efforts on the part of the reader to fill in the gaps, but also open up a liminal space for new ideas to emerge. A dialogue is far more extendable than a self-contained essay.

There are no apparent or spelled-out connections between the individual sections. These sections belong together insofar as they all embody a McLuhanesque sensibility. They are intended as vibes resonating with each other. They do not form a linear sequence but a configuration, an open-ended assemblage bearing affinities to other probes or assemblages of probes, authored by McLuhan or the McLuhan minded. Put otherwise, the piece is an experiment in thought montage. The expectation is that the sections will generate the equivalent of a Kuleshov Effect as the reader encounters and deals with the leaps and discontinuities in between. The authors believe the mind-stretching exercise contrived herein is a healthy one. After all, isn't life itself a montage full of picnoleptic interruptions rather than a continuous flow?

**Human perception is literally incarnation**

Peter Zhang (PZ): How would you elaborate on the idea that “human perception is literally incarnation” (McLuhan & Carson, 2003, p. 251)? Paul Virilio (1995) has a similar idea: “... human physiology [is] the beginning and end of our perception of the world ...” (p. 110–111).

Eric McLuhan (EM): Rather cryptic, wouldn't you venture? Trouble is that it is taken out of context, which might have made sense of it.

At first I was baffled. But with a little reflection the following occurred to me. Human perception cannot take place without the body and its senses. St. Thomas avers that there is nothing in the mind that is not first in the senses.
There is a phenomenological overtone to this idea. It calls to mind a line from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s book, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002): “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it Breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (p. 235). I detect a similar sensibility in Jakob von Uexküll (2010). Take this quote:

Nobody can create either a melody or a harmony from airwaves, or write a score with their help. Only the relationships of the airwaves to the human hearing organ, where they are transformed into tones, creates [sic] the possibility to produce melodies and harmonies and to write scores (p. 187).

Here’s a similar point Uexküll makes: “The sky is … a product of the eye … Eye-less living beings know neither a sky nor a sun” (p. 190). Of course, in Uexküll’s work, perception is not limited to human perception.

*The Book of Tea* exhibits a similar understanding: “after all, we see only our own image in the universe, – our particular idiosyncrasies dictate the mode of our perceptions” (Okakura, 1906, p. 114).

In Alan Watts’s works, the idea that “human perception is literally incarnation” is a recurrent motif: “the peculiar structure of our brains translates the sun into light and air vibrations into sound” (Watts, 1968, p. 77). The question is: when a tree falls in the forest but no one is there, what sound does it make?

EM: No sound, because sound is the name we give to the experience, whether by humans or by animals.

PZ: In *The Joyous Cosmology*, Watts points out: “The landscape I am watching is also a state of myself, of the neurons in my head. I feel the rock in my hand in terms of my own fingers” (Watts, 1962, p. 42). In *The Book*, he says:

… we know the world in terms of the body, and in accordance with its structure. Surgical alterations of the nervous system, or, in all probability, sense-organisms of a different structure than ours, give different types of perception …

Apart from your brain, all these vibrations would be like the sound of one hand clapping, or of sticks playing on a skinless drum (Watts, 1966, pp. 92–93).

EM: Very apt.

Trouble with Watts is that he does not recognize that each new technology or app/gadget changes the structure of the body and the mind, and hence changes how we know what we know.

PZ: Here is what I heard: man extended is man modified, man reincarnated. The extended body is a machinic assemblage, which necessarily grasps the world differently than a naked, organic, immediate (unmediated) body. On the other hand, the non-extended (human) body is a myth at best, since we are always
extended, truncated, enabled, disabled, or otherwise modified by language. We encounter the world with a linguistically baptized body.

S.I. Hayakawa (1963) points out that “the so-called ‘objective world’ itself is a relationship between the observer and the observed, so that ultimately we are able to know nothing but that relationship” (pp. 134–135). A rainbow is nothing but a relationship between the sun, moisture in the atmosphere, and an observer. The same world is always grasped differently. The percipient’s body is the difference that makes all the difference.

EM: See? Even Hayakawa misses the point. He does not take into account our media as modifiers of those relationships. The media are, all of them, extensions of various modes of perception: objectivity—detachment—comes from the dissociation of sensibility occasioned by the alphabet. It does not occur with any syllabary, or with Chinese characters, just the alphabet. The alphabet breaks the mimetic habit.

PZ: “Mimetic” is an interesting term here. The term implies a theory of language, according to which language records human perception. More precisely, it mimics the original sense perception with its own texture (this word suggests we are talking about a literate phenomenon after all). Non-alphabetic languages are mimetic in the sense that an encounter with the language leaves the impression of an encounter with the real thing because the one is a mimesis (an imitation) of the other. This is not to say there is no distance between the “map” and the “territory.” In contrast, alphabetic languages tend to be more conceptual than perceptual, precise than ambiguous, analytic than holistic, schizophrenic than organic, legalistic than aesthetic. I am curious whether the rise of phenomenology and the interest in human perception had to do with Western philosophers’ encounters with non-alphabetic languages, or whether it was mainly an effect of perception-heightening psychedelics. Either way, it was a media effect. Either way, it was a right-hemispheric turn, a turn to the Orient, or a “passage to India,” if you like.

EM: Yep! You might say, a re-Orienting of perception …

Have you read Eric Havelock’s wonderful Preface to Plato? He gives the real meaning of mimesis, a Greek word translated into English as imitation. But mimesis is a much deeper thing than aping or imitating. It is the ultimate put-on: the entire craft of oratory is based on it. Mimesis is the key to the power of the poets: hearers put on the words and rhythms and images and speeches. They became the characters, suffered, exulted, or struggled as they did. The poets used words and the harp or lyre to weave the spell; the hearers surrendered themselves to it. We have a pale imitation of that experience in what goes under the heading of fantasy today.

Language does record human perception: that is why words change. Knowing words means knowing something of their histories, their energies.

We discussed phenomenology in Laws of Media, first part. It, and the interest in the perceptions, was a response to new pressures from electric technologies. That is the ground.
Phenomenology was a search for ground, and the famous reductions simply meant kill all the figures and what is left is the ground, the object of the quest. And it ought to have worked except that ground is numbness of all the faculties. Ground is the area of non-attention. Without a figure of some sort, human perception goes off-line, plunges into inattention. (Brainwashers know this and use it regularly. Sensory deprivation and all that.) They wanted to turn this elusive thing into figure, an object of attention—but if they succeeded it would cease to be ground and something else would become ground for the new situation. You can see where this leads.

The Big Dipper

PZ: We see the Big Dipper in the sky because we have ladles and spoons, which inform what we see. On the other hand, if we are not on the Earth, we might see the same stars but perhaps not a big dipper. The Big Dipper is not a thing but a relation, a physiological transaction, between the seven stars and a specifically positioned observer. Kant’s Ding an sich is a fiction. It is dependent on there being language. Language turns an immemorial eventing into objects and things.

Do you see formal cause here? Isn’t final cause (the Ding an sich) being challenged?

EM: The Big Dipper is a fiction. The older designation was Ursa Major. The ancients used the stars as a configuration; the more recent interpretation connects them into a sequence—connects the dots to make a cartoon. These are different modes of the imagination (which might be the formal cause in this case).

A non-perspectival universe

PZ: “This is already a question of perceptual semiotics. It’s not easy to perceive things from the middle, neither from top to bottom or the reverse, nor from left to right or the reverse: try, and you will see that everything changes” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 53). There is an inkling of McLuhanism in this line from Deleuze and Guattari. Agree?

EM: Deleuze is hampered by not having any sense of figure and ground. These thoughts—admittedly out of context—are all figure only. He evidently has no sense of ground. And he will not get anywhere until he does. Sounds like a million bucks, but it is a forged cheque.

PZ: A somewhat parallel scenario would be the gravity-free space cabin, where orientation is lost. What freedom, though? Similarly, he who probes is one who is unhindered by habitual pathways of thought—his mode of thought is what Deleuze calls “nomad thought.” Another parallel scenario is the one described by Edgar Allan Poe in “A Descent into the Maelström,” which McLuhan is fond of mentioning.

The Deleuze line puts me in mind of Edmund Carpenter’s Eskimo Realities, and the kind of world “primitives” inhabit. In such a world, vitality and change are a given, or even a problem, to be managed, say, by a kind of art that provides a sense
of stability. It's not a comfortable world for the eye man. Deleuze's call is for the eye man to venture into an acoustic universe.

Since you disagree, how would you talk about it in a language that is ground aware? For me, a figure orientation implies a visual bias, or at least "glaucoma," e.g., central vision without peripheral vision. (Moving at a high speed engenders a kind of "glaucoma," too.) An acoustic sensibility is inclusive and all encompassing.

Instead of history, the McLuhan-minded Deleuze calls for "Nomadology." I hear more resonance than dissonance between him and McLuhan.

**EM:** One cannot perceive environmental things from the inside: every environment induces paralysis of the sensibilities. So one needs a way out. The parable of Perseus and the Medusa applies directly here. The function of the arts is to provide fresh awareness by a shake-up, a "dérèglement de tous les sens." The deranged man in these situations is the only sane man.

Deleuze calls for the eye man to enter the acoustic universe—where he already resides! We are already there and have been for over a century, all unawares. We are in the midst of a renaissance, an acoustic universe. Nobody realizes it because it is a total environment that numbs perception.

Deleuze calls for a Nomadology? Well, we have been nomads since the telegraph and the telephone. He seems unaware of the facts. And who takes the discarnate condition (or precondition) seriously, or even recognizes it? Deleuze needs better tools if he is going to do the job he has set himself.

**PZ:** Deleuze is addressing a culture lag through his mode of writing. He wants us to embrace an acoustic (e.g., vitalistic, rhizomatic) sensibility since the environment is acoustic. The inferiority of history to Nomadology lies in its perspective. Here is how Deleuze puts it: "History is always written from a sedentary point of view, and in the name of a unitary State apparatus; or at least a possible one, even when written about nomads. What we lack is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 53).

**Google Docs, GIS**

**PZ:** Google Docs facilitates collaborative writing. On the other hand, it renders documents unstable. Sort of like how the blackboard works. What is chalked on it can be erased. That is a radical departure from print. The creepy thing is, when two people work on the interface simultaneously, they can see how each other's minds work. Because at the moment of writing, thought is emergent and memory is short-term and fragile, one may see the other set down half a word way ahead and then come back to fill up the gap in between before picking up the unfinished word again. The Go quality of writing is thus laid bare. The mode of writing Deleuze talks about—working on multiple projects simultaneously, writing a few lines here and a few lines there—is literalized and popularized. Emerging media do not obsolesce writing. The opposite is the case: writing proliferates on an unprecedented scale. The time when writing was a rare commodity is long past. If anything, perhaps
logical prose is gradually becoming a rarity. Or, the sense of “logic” is being pluralized. An unmistakable stylistic shift is in the air.

**EM:** This situation has been developing for some time. Working on multiple projects is a normal mode of operation, at least for me, as it was for my father, and for most writers I know. Though you may concentrate on topic one for a while, say, to finish it or to get down something that has been simmering for a time, you never completely stop thinking about the other topics “on the back burner.” Each stream of thought automatically feeds the others. And that extends to pieces already published as much as to ones still on the workbench.

Your comment that with emerging media “writing proliferates on an unprecedented scale” is a key observation, a sure indication that writing is close to being finished. The classic sign of obsolescence is sudden proliferation of the item in question. Another sign of the same sort comes with “the sense of logic is being pluralized”—a kind of proliferation.

It is not for nothing that working at the computer keyboard was called “word processing” from the first: it certainly is not writing in any traditional sense of the term. For one thing it is much too swift, too close to speech. For another, it closes the distance between composition and editing, turning them into a single process. The sheer experiences of writing and word processing differ so much that they really belong to two different cultures.

*The Globe and Mail* ran an article by Simon Houpt (2012) called “Is Plagiarism the Result of Journalists Being Stretched Thin?” The head on the article had an interesting line in it: “A multitasking, multiplatform persona has replaced ‘the writer.’” Whoever crafted the line did not seem to notice that the groundwork had been laid a generation ago by the obsolescence of copyright. (A theme of *Electric Language*.) Also missed was the collapse of private identity as contributing factor: if there is no strong sense of private identity, there is no sense of private ownership, of private responsibility, or of private anything.

I suggest a couple of experiments to help us see where this disrespect for private ownership leads.

Start with the newspaper: erase or paint over the names of all of the writers. What does the newspaper become? Is the “news” still news? Or is it another kind of fiction? Is every story now an editorial?

Try the same experiment with a bookshop. Remove all names of authors from the books. If a collection, remove the names of the editors as well as those of individual contributors. All you have to go by now is titles and dates. I realize that the test can easily be done with a newspaper and can only be imagined with an entire shop. But the differences are immediately clear.

Ethnographers and anthropologists commonly find works of art that are not signed, so they use the principle that anonymous equals unanimous. An anonymous piece of sculpture, say, is taken to be the expression of an entire group at once. And it is not uncommon today to find a group chipping away at a rock, casually, with no sense of deadline, or even a common idea of what it will become. They just
chip away when they feel like it, a bit here, a bit there, and slowly something identifiable emerges.

So you hold a book of essays, which, like every other book, contains no mention of authors. If every book is anonymous, does it not turn all books toward propaganda? Dogma?

Even at its most benign, the group voice has the power to compel.

PZ: If proliferation is a sign of obsolescence, then the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) can be read as an effort on the part of the superpowers to fight obsolescence.

I have a hunch that the hypertrophy of geographic information systems (GIS) today precisely indicates the obsolescence of geography and geopolitics, and the rise of transpolitics.

EM: What is transpolitics? You are right on the rest.

PZ: Geopolitics is based on geographic continuity, say, between Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. Transpolitics is based on geographic discontinuity or collage—the U.S. and Afghanistan, for example. The point is, with technological acceleration, every country is involved in every other country's business. Natural barriers (e.g., separation by an ocean) and the rotundity of the Earth no longer matter. Put simply, transpolitics is the kind of politics we see in the global village.

EM: The global village has, since the advent of satellites, been replaced by the global theatre. What you are describing is certainly global theatre, in spades. Everybody is on stage and there are no spectators, only actors.

PZ: It certainly works to understand “theatre” as a military term in this context.

Google, Safari, Firefox, Xerox

PZ: I learned from my daughter that Google comes from the mathematical term “googol,” which is a ginormous number \(10^{100}\). Along the same lines, Safari was an actual word (borrowed from Swahili) before its corporate appropriation. There’s a movie about a smart Russian fighter aircraft called Firefox. Now it's the name of a commonly used Web browser. Xerox has long been used as a verb regardless of resistance from many directions. These names all sound good and look good—they address people's repetition compulsion. Formal cause lurks somewhere behind them. Absent their formal allure, they wouldn’t have been picked in the first place.

EM: All names have meanings, however obscure, and the search for those meanings we call etymology, which often reveals a myriad of branches and levels. Etymology is the DNA code of words. But names also affect perception. One’s name becomes a ground for the user. It shapes his awareness; it has a texture and a rhythm that you put on as part of you.
Product names are chosen by the effect they have—a concern usually of poets—for the energies and associations they bring to bear.

English is tremendously fluid. It freely converts nouns into verbs or adjectives: xerox this for me; make me a xerox copy. Xerox is the proper noun, so we also move freely between using a word as a proper noun and as a common noun. Willard Espy (1978) put thousands of examples in his *O Thou Improper, Thou Uncommon Noun: An Etymology of Words That Once Were Names*. Charles Onions (1911) wrote *An Advanced English Syntax Based on the Principles and Requirements of the Grammatical Society* to show how adjectives and prepositions translate back and forth. (The one form always derives from the other form). Forbidding title, easy enough reading: the publisher (which always chooses the title—“it’s a marketing decision”) thought this would focus the market and lend an air of seriousness to the thing.

Names are chosen because they codify experience—translate it from one form into another. The experience is at the root of every name, that is, of every word, in every language. Ever.

**PZ:** On the other hand, the name (such as “Some Pig” in *Charlotte’s Web* or simply “Google”) also creates a semantic environment to shape our experience of the thing.

**Adidas**

**PZ:** It suddenly occurred to me that the logo of Adidas is a trigram made up of three unbroken lines. Two of these make the hexagram, the Creative (乾, ch’ien) ... I’ve been influenced at a subliminal level for many years without realizing it.

**EM:** Congratulations, Peter! The sub has now surfaced!

**Chess**

**PZ:** We tend to think pawns are expendable. We think wrong. The master chess player knows all too well the crucial role played by the pawn structure. One becomes a good player insofar as one realizes that there comes a point where strategy and aesthetics are indistinguishable. Over time, one learns to ask the question: how much air do I have? It’s all about pattern recognition, which is more or less an intuitive exercise. Pattern not just in spatial terms, but also in temporal terms, for example how a game evolves over time, or how games tend to evolve over time. Alan Watts (1966) has a similar line: “Total situations are ... patterns in time as much as patterns in space” (p. 89).

Chess is a violent game. Engagement is immediate. It feels very different than Go. Go is a nomad game. By contrast, chess is a Royal game. It’s organized around the old fool. It’s puzzling why the Queen is coded as having so much fighting power in a male-dominated culture.

Mahjong follows another logic entirely. That’s something I need to write about.
EM: The Queen always holds the power. She is the power behind the throne. When she is relegated to the sidelines, ignored, she assumes absolute power—as the ground. It is a very subtle arrangement in that game, with its own kind of truth.

Erewhon

PZ: “Samuel Butler saw the dilemma in his title Erewhon by spelling his utopia backward” (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 81). What’s your read of this line by Marshall McLuhan?

EM: Erewhon backwards is Nowhere. Utopia is Greek (u-topos), meaning nowhere.

PZ: Deleuze (2004) sees more in the title. As he points out:

Samuel Butler coined a fabulous word to designate those stories that seem to come from elsewhere: EREWHON, it's both 'no-where,' the nowhere of origins, and 'now-here,' the here and now turned upside down, displaced, disguised. This is the genius of empiricism ... (p. 141).

In the eye of the media ecologist, Erewhon is an anti-environment.

EM: The now-here aspect is proverbial, has been noted at least since Thomas More wrote the book Utopia. It captures the irony of the utopian being actually banal, the ideal rooted in the typical.

PZ: An invention, not a creation ex nihilo. At once familiar and strange.

The Book of Tea

PZ: I enjoyed reading The Book of Tea (1906). It’s a Zen book for me. How do you like it?

EM: The Book of Tea is wonderful! My father and I read it while we were composing Laws of Media and it figures in that book. I’d also recommend The Chinese Eye (1971) by Chiang Yee. And Rose Quong’s fine little study Chinese Written Characters: Their Wit and Wisdom (1968), which provided my father and me with rare insights into the character, we being entirely unfamiliar with Chinese writing and the manner of thought and perception that it embodies. Of course we knew Ernest Fenollosa’s (1936) magnificent essay, edited by Ezra Pound, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry”—which I recommend without reservation, though there are serious criticisms of it by various Chinese scholars.

PZ: These remind me of an equally important book: Lin Yutang’s My Country and My People (1939).
The Shallows


EM: I have read The Shallows. I found it full of useful information and references to studies and other writers—quite a resource. But Carr himself does not seem to understand what he is dealing with. Nevertheless, the book is useful.

“Faith comes from hearing”

PZ: There’s something media ecological about this line: “Faith comes from hearing” (Burke, 1968, p. 6).

EM: Of course: it states a figure/ground relation.

PZ: Part of it is the difference between the psychodynamics of reading and that of listening. The difference between sight and hearing is the difference between detachment and sympathy. We tend to maintain a critical distance from what we read. By contrast, we tend to be more susceptible to and sympathetic with what we are listening to. Voice betokens a live happening, the vibes of which necessarily affect us. We cannot close our ears the way we close our eyes. What we see could well be lifeless. To be more precise, sight renders lifeless what is living. It is analytical or anatomical. Vivisection is an operation the eye habitually performs.

Music and technology

How music (the figure) grows out of the technologized sonicscape (the ground) through the “medium” of the musician is evident in the way T.S. Eliot (1921) talks about Stravinsky:

Whether Stravinsky’s [sic] music be permanent or ephemeral I do not know; but it did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music (pp. 452–453).

McLuhan (2003) has a similar line:

The hidden ground of this activity of popular music is the sound of the technology of the city. The function of music is to translate the sounds of the environment through language, to humanize the technology of the metropolis by translating those sounds in all their raucous disorder, translating them through the rhythms of a great language (p. 216).
Experimental musicians today do not seem to do the translation anymore. Raucous disorder remains raucous disorder. Magnetic Stripper’s music, for example, is just static, if you are familiar with it.

**EM:** I think Dad got his thought about modern music from just that observation of Eliot’s. I would add that the major musical discovery of the twentieth century was Muzak—music designed to be ignored, and to have a specific effect when it is ignored. That is, music designed to function as ground, as an object of Inattention. It has served as a pattern for a number of other arts. For example, advertising, which now relies on the audience’s ignoring the ad for it to work. I would also note that the ancient notion of the music of the spheres was exactly a kind of cosmic Muzak: it was ground and not perceptible to human ears.

**PZ:** Could you say a bit more about the music of the spheres? It calls to mind Chuang Tzu’s distinction between the piping of men (人籁), the piping of Earth (地籁), and the piping of Heaven (天籁) (Chuang Tzu, 1968, p. 36).

**EM:** The music of the spheres or musica universalis is an ancient philosophical concept that regards proportions in the movements of celestial bodies as a form of music.

**PZ:** So it’s a metaphor only. There’s something mathematical about it, but no inkling of quantum mechanics. Music is a relation between some vibes and the human ear.

**EM:** You’ve got to wrap your imagination around the ancient’s way of imagining. Music and arithmetic were two sides of the same coin. Check John Hollander’s *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry.*

**Rock ’n roll, Timothy Leary**

**PZ:** Timothy Leary (1968) has a provocative line: “The rock ’n’ roll bands are the philosopher-poets of the new religion. Their beat is the pulse of the future” (p. 166).

**EM:** They process the sounds of the (mostly urban) environment through the language. Note that R&R is made by amateur musicians—that is, they were not conservatory-trained: that sensibility is too foreign. You cannot play R&R conservatory-style.

Now Hip-Hop and rap—there’s another dimension entirely. They put language back into the crucible.

Their verses are for the most part vapid and uninteresting, but the best of them release the rhythmic and textural properties of words with bursts of fresh energy. (The old Poet Laureate, John Skelton wrote rap that sounds exactly like today’s, down to the irregular meter and liberal rhyme.)

They hold poetry contests: contestants must improvise on the spot on selected
themes. That is common enough to oral societies. That we are playing with it at all indicates how far our culture has penetrated into the non-visual, non-literate mode.

**PZ:** I see lots of resonance between McLuhan and Leary. McLuhan talks about the inner trip; Leary talks about the interior journey. McLuhan has a subtitle called “The Executive as Dropout”; Leary has a chapter called “The Buddha as Drop-Out.” Both talk about the seer/see-er. What do you make of these obvious connections?

Also, there is a striking similarity in the way they talk about touch. Take this quote from Leary: “You see, 3,000 or 4,000 years ago, LSD wouldn’t have been necessary. Man was in touch. He was harmoniously dancing along with the change in the planets, the change in the seasons. He was in touch, he was in tune, he was turned on” (Leary, 1968, pp. 295-296).

Leary explicitly points out:

As my friend Marshall McLuhan so eloquently pointed out—you see, whatever I say today about words is just what Marshall McLuhan said in his book, *The Gutenberg Galaxie* [sic]—the misuse of the printing press is one of the greatest catastrophes to happen to the human nervous system. It has forced man to think in the linear subject-predicate fashion, which is what Marshall McLuhan and I are attempting to do something about, and which modern technical advances, like electronics, and psychochemicals such as LSD, will inevitably change (p. 303).

**EM:** The big give-away is that line about “the misuse of the printing press.” Leary doesn’t have a clue about media. His focus, like most folks’, is on the use, the efficient cause area. He has no way to approach the medium or its effects. It was the alphabet that gave us the left-brain bias and created “the West”; the printing press vastly amplified those effects. And clearly, too, he is aiming to disrupt Western culture. McLuhan, of course, had no such objective: he was a devoted conservative in these matters.

**PZ:** What do you make of his juxtaposition of electronics and psychochemicals? Feels like he’s suggesting some kind of functional equivalence between the two.

**EM:** Leary is in the same fix as Teilhard and doesn’t know it.

Leary got zapped by the new electronic environment and is seeking to get a handle on it with psychedelics that mime the environmental effects of new media. But he is not aware of the environment as providing his motivation or validating his enterprise.

**PZ:** So you don't see psychedelics as a philosophical, religious medium, a formal cause for philosophy and religiosity?

**EM:** Absolutely. Although there are a few so-called religions in which psychedelics do play or have played a part, particularly in the latter twentieth century.
Retrieval

**PZ:** Einstein’s equation $E=MC^2$ is a retrieval of Hindu philosophy, as the following passage from Timothy Leary indicates:

> When Einstein first worked out that equation $E=MC^2$, it was a very powerful, psychedelic thing. Literally he had to fall down on his knees at that moment when he realized that all matter was energy just in temporary states of change, that there was no structure. Of course, the Hindu philosophers had pointed that out for a thousand years (Leary, 1968, p. 299).

**EM:** My reading of Einstein’s physics (I am a bit rusty these days) shows me that although energy and matter are convertible into each other, there certainly is structure—masses of it. Both energy and matter have structure, though very different forms of it.

**Aristotle and Rhetoric**

**EM:** You frequently refer to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in your essays on communication (and very properly if I may say so). It is the practice to take as “the authority” in many a field the oldest contributor. In this case, however, there is a problem with Aristotle and the *Rhetoric* that is very seldom admitted.

Aristotle himself was not a rhetorician; he was a dialectician through and through. He had studied with Plato.

He did not WRITE *Rhetoric*: what we have is the result of scholars assembling his students’ class notes. In short, what we have is what he taught his students. They were philosophy students and many wanted to become philosophers themselves. (But not all: Alexander the Great was one of his students.)

So imagine a philosopher teaching a philosophy class about rhetoric. Naturally, the result has a decidedly dialectical spin on it: we call it Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. A real rhetorician would find very little of practical use in this text. Aristotle, he would say, has put a disproportionate stress on logic (argument, classification) as a means of persuasion. Any rhetorician has an arsenal of means of persuasion at his disposal; logic is far from being the most important of them.

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, then, is a dialectician’s *Rhetoric*. It was not composed to train budding rhetoricians. It may be the oldest text, but it is rather skewed. For the goods, go to a rhetorician’s texts for students and for other orators: Cicero’s several books. It is much more useful than Aristotle’s mechanical version, and much keener intellectually. You could say, not without justification, that Aristotle is a footnote to Cicero (who did write).

Please forgive me for asking but my memory is not what it used to be (but then it never was): Have you had occasion to glance through my father’s dissertation, *The Classical Trivium* (2006)? The first part of *Laws of Media* (2011) is a continuation of that study. I ask only because the trivium holds the key to so much of what we are studying.
PZ: The Classical Trivium is the best history of the liberal arts available. It clearly shows how McLuhan’s later thinking about technology was strongly influenced by his knowledge of rhetoric. Familiarity with Laws of Media should give one the incentive to study The Classical Trivium, which I highly recommend to the student of rhetoric and media ecology.

A good rhetorician uses all that is there to use, including Aristotle. It works better if we read Aristotle’s Rhetoric, Poetics, Nicomachean Ethics, and Politics together. I wouldn’t care so much about Organon. One can read resourcefulness out of his definition of rhetoric. And I think his notion of phronēsis is commendable.

There are non-dialectical philosophers out there, such as Nietzsche, Deleuze, Chuang Tzu, and so forth.

Indeed syllogism does not produce new knowledge. The reasoning is self-contained. What “grounds” syllogistic thinking is the selection of the major premise, which is some truth about the culture. That is the rhetorical moment since the culture is never monolithic. Between “Look before you leap” and “He who hesitates is lost,” which cultural truth to invoke is entirely a rhetorical exercise, which involves prudential wisdom. Prudence is a matter of weighing one figure/ground against another. It is synonymous with analogical or tetradic thinking, which involves four terms. Absent such tetradic grounding, syllogism (which is triadic) breeds nothing but tunnel vision, which is hardly better than blindness and deafness.

Put otherwise, the use of syllogism rests on a violent imposition of a major premise. From that point on, it proves nothing but itself. The medium (e.g., syllogism) is the message. Logical demonstration is a trick, just like ocular proof, which proves nothing.

If something can be logically proven, then there is no argument. Argument deals with the uncertain, the unclosed. For every argument there is an equal and weighty counterargument, so says Protagoras of Abdera. Platonists want to keep counterarguments from surfacing. Sophistic has the exact opposite agenda: to disrupt the unitary with the plural, to challenge Order with orders.

To classify is to establish a hierarchy, to trace a lineage, to pigeonhole life, to fit life into a limited number of Procrustean beds. Classification is perspectival (e.g., symptomatic of alphabetic literacy and Gutenberg technology). From the perspective of a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

To see Aristotle as a footnote to Cicero is to commit a serviceable anachronism.

EM: A couple of observations, if you will allow …

First off, all Western philosophy belongs to dialectic, by definition. Dialectic is constituted of logic and philosophy from the outset. These days it includes epistemology and one or two other things. Aristotle is an arch-philosopher. He is also a polymath, as were the Grammarians. So he likes to turn his spotlight on everything in sight. But always his procedure is to render the things he studies into figures without ground. He is a Grammarian of sorts, but a Dialectician first and foremost. He is not a Rhetorician, nor does he pretend to be one.
Nietzsche and Deleuze are also in the Dialectical camp insofar as they are philosophers.

Keep in mind the origin of the syllogism—Aristotle’s answer to the problem of his students’ inability to think in words. Syllogism is figure-without-ground by design. See my essay “Aristotle’s Theory of Communication.” It is the first Appendix in Theories of Communication (2011).

Plato’s modes of argument are substantially different from Aristotle’s. I used “argument” regarding Aristotle’s recasting of traditional rhetoric in his book. Because he is addressing philosophy students, his concern is how rhetorical processes can be useful to Dialecticians—philosophy students and philosophers—whose main resources in this regard are logic and argument, figure-minus-ground style.

Aristotle is a footnote to Cicero (despite the timeline) in that what he offers is that one chunk of rhetoric that he found useful writ large. Rhetoric is rather more complex than he lets on.

The root of dialectic is the *logos hendiathetos*, the word in the mind. Dialectic, consequently, is founded on abstract thought and is concerned with right thinking. The trouble with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is that it lays its emphasis on the inner word; real rhetoric is all about the uttered word. Its roots are in the *logos prophorikos*. Of the three roads (trivium), it alone retains any use of the pre-alphabet word or logos, that is, use of mimesis and transformation.

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**References**


