

RETOOLING THE FUTURE

The Communication Ecology
Barrington Nevitt
Toronto: Butterworth's, 1982

Reviewed by
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It would be inappropriate to review this book without considering the state of McLuhanism at this time in Canadian intellectual history. Northrup Frye, the other pole in the intellectual field that configured world attention about Toronto during the last twenty years, a man who will certainly avoid the anonymity Canada tends to award her illustrious, has marked out the sequence of inhibitions by which our recognition of genius is averted:

When you begin a book which is something relatively new, you get first of all a 'what nonsense' reaction and then the 'many brilliant insights, but of course all wrong' reaction, then finally the 'we knew it all along' reaction (Globe and Mail, 26 Feb. 1983, 18).

This from a man who has been firmly cemented into the masonry of the Canadian intellectual museum. McLuhan's work has elicited a fourth and more pernicious reaction, the 'we didn't understand and we'll never forgive you for the embarrassment' treatment. Being a Canadian has meant for the post-humous McLuhan a guarantee of evading the indignity of too much popularity. His work, as though trapped in one of his own tetrads, seems to have flipped into its opposite. Yes, we knew it all along. Like hell we did, and less do we now.

His own university has expediently allowed his memory to atrophy by doing as little as possible. Increasingly I meet people expressing an interest in his work who have read nothing. He himself complained of this just before his death.

When McLuhan left us a subseismic tremour of hubris rippled through the underground: who would inherit the mantle? The **Toronto Star** and **Maclean's** tried to dig up claimants. Indeed a few poseurs conspired to hitch up the borrowed robes of fame and summarily fell flat on their marginal assets as acceptable surrogate maestri d'inven-tione.

Barrington Nevitt's credentials as an intellectual heir are impeccable. He truly understands the work and has made substantial contributions to it in the latter years. Most enjoyable, he writes with more than an understudy's style. Authentic reverberations of McLuhan's style are here but Nevitt has his own voice, the one formed in the actual dialectic that developed between these two men at work. The vision and the voice intact, this book has a centre.

The **Communication Ecology** represents something close to the original. Writing in a different context of the influence of Arisosto and Boiardo on Spenser, C. S. Lewis' remark is appropriate: "To fight in another man's armour is something more than to be influenced by his style of fighting" (1958, 304). Nevitt's prose style invokes echoes of McLuhan mainly because they share a rhetorical commitment to the traditional technique of stimulating reader engagement through the use of aphorism. McLuhan, like Joyce, a sort of verbal engineer, meets in Nevitt a man whose actual engineering background brings interesting percepts to the process of assimilating McLuhan's investigations. But Nevitt's is not just an imitation of the original; it is a replay resonant

with archetypal energy.

The effect of electric process is, McLuhan insisted, a retribalization of the structure of psychic and social awareness, a world of increased haptic potentials through electronically enhanced audile-tactile values. Such profound alterations of the perceptual apparatus, along with the more productive relationships between time and space, return us to a condition similar enough that we participate in the sensory ratios that governed the perceptual life of preliterate people. Electricity takes us back.

The metaphor is the 'replay' of the archetypes of deep human experience, the exemplary models with which sacred time is renewed. In this case McLuhan himself, in his vertebral connections with the story of linguistic and rhetorical transformations, is archetypal. Symbols in such a world, have meaning only in so far as they participate in the original mental forms and experience which gave rise to them. But if the language connection is diminished or lost we are left with merely buzz word mysticisms from electronic flirtations with the profound: our Zen - ophobic western spirits irreparably trivialized by the shadowy wall and Faustian goals, seeking vision through sporadic bouts of Sufism, Gnosticism, Evangelism, Jungianism, and every sort of psychic onanism. The call from McLuhan, and now Nevitt, is a call to the few surviving faithful, to keep the hidden agenda for rhetorical awareness alive.

Nevitt is one of the few writers, like Kenner and Carpenter, who has an intimate knowledge of the whole McLuhan. Don Theall, once McLuhan's star pupil, and a member of the inner circle, describes "the quintessence of the McLuhan mode: discontinuous juxtaposition and witty aphoristic statements. This way of handling criticism is an art form itself" (1971, 168 - 169). Crediting

McLuhan with the invention of a new art form the "essai concrete," Theall reinforces Nevitt's judgment that McLuhan is indeed a special sort of artist.

In art the importance of the same principle is illustrated by the value of suggestion. In leaving something unsaid the beholder is given a chance to complete the idea...until you seem to become actually part of it (McLuhan and Parker, 1968, 266).

The objective, going back at least as far as Bacon, is to keep thought alive, out of the embalming process of the institutions. In **The Advancement of Learning** Bacon takes up the cause of aphorism and its paradoxical spirit: "Knowledge, while...in aphorisms and observations (read: percepts?) ...is growth."

W. B. Yeats always declined to explain his poems pointing out that that would tend to limit their suggestibility. Nevitt reminds us of McLuhan's dictum that the reader must become co-producer with the artist, and avoid being merely analytical, in order to enter into the process which results in the art object. The thing is not merely itself but represents a manifold process, as any astute observer of a Picasso, a Klee, or a Mondrian knows.

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 times. He is the man of integral awareness. (McLuhan, 1964, 65)

McLuhan was in many ways closer to them, like a Kandinsky who held that "the environment is the

composition," and that "objects have to be considered in the light of the whole." Whether McLuhan is really Theall's "poet manque" or Nevitt's "'artist' engaged in sharpening percepts rather than concepts," his persistent play in connecting us to Medieval and early Renaissance forms made him appear to be a spectacularly creative modern.

The monomania of contradictory manifestoes by artists against other artists is a positive dynamic. In the war against McLuhanism, that his popularity inspired, we often had the howls of ignorance and fear from the infuriated minions of a previous century's hold on public consciousness. The university still wanted evidence and argument, for the humanists in particular had managed to remain innocent of the implications of Uncertainty, Incompleteness, Probability and Complementarity, that is, the general inheritance from Quantum physics which reinstated the usefulness of paradox for the most serious scholarly views. In the Golden Groves the strident debate produced maniacs of Luddite interpretation, the odd one with blood in his eye. At one point, in the late sixties, the rumour surfaced that a major U. S. magazine had put out a contract on McLuhan and was offering big money for a Name who would 'waste' him in print.

The jealousies gelled in a comic aspic of interpretations, many critics suspended in postures of arrested awareness, mainly gestures of petulance and admonition directed toward saving the civilized world from the neo-barbarianism or Fascism which they took McLuhan to be advocating. McLuhan's desire to be perceived at one level as a satirist could not have been more deliciously realized. A Dunciad of detractors queued up to rail against what they had in most cases mistook him to be. This was the 'What nonsense' stage writ large, each adversary looking for the hook of a factual "mistake" to hang his madhat on.

McLuhan was always making a case for the past, for he understood better than anyone that the future was the assertion of a new style of retrieval. The only rational indictment of his work would be that it relied too much on the past. No one made such a charge. His was the first coherent interpretation of the electric world and it required a rethinking of everything. There was resistance. One might not have expected the dinosaurs to blissfully embrace their own ends. No wonder he was not taken immediately unto the culture's bosom. He was the spokesman for the new technique of probing the hidden grounds of communication. Specialists who had invested everything in figures were confused and irate. He was attacked, particularly wherever his scholarship seemed to serve his vision. With vatic self-assurance he went on his metaphoric way. He stressed environments and the inter-connectedness of things, the ecology of thought, and warned the specialists that they were obsolete.

A literate person ought to have seen him coming for he was squarely in the tradition of literary invention that flowed from Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lewis, et. al., and he had prepared himself for the battle of the new mindset by beginning his studies in that other battle between the ancients and moderns which centered on Harvey and Nashe. In fact, without the full-suited panoply of a Ph.D. in English literature and language, comprehension of McLuhan's work is extremely difficult. A mass of imperceptive readers misunderstood this and took him simply to have been talking about television and films and the obsolescence of books with advocacy, or as merely a media apologist.

He was much more in his intentions a later day Andre Breton twitting the burghers of a shop-weary academe with playful inversions of ideas and downright disasters of instructive wit. Too few

noticed that he was a deeply literate man who gravitated to the point of greatest irritation in the culture. Everywhere he was taken to be a traitor to the cause of clarity by those who feared to wonder about the swiftly changing environment, or who recoiled from such studies, concerned that they could only lead the intellectual paralysis of determinism.

One of the most useful features of Nevitt's book is the opening chapter devoted to the transforming effects of rhetoric. Any attempt to understand McLuhan's work, requires a knowledge of the tradition of rhetorical theory and practice; that is where you start. It is the percept that McLuhan gives precedence to over the concept; that is, rather than engage in arguments based on concepts, too much of which tends to degenerate into statistics, abstractions that violate the Book of Nature, McLuhan adopts the strategy of employing percepts which leave out the details of argument in order to get the reader involved. This strategy has a much more powerful tendency to transform perception and thus lead to discoveries. In fact, McLuhan's work represents a paradigm shift in the traditional ways of talking and thinking about the world and events.

As well, the aphoristic technique allows one to 'put on' the audience, that is to engage them in the event and give them a perception of engaging in the event simultaneously. This Pirandello-like strategy of presenting multiple levels of reality all in an instant is one appropriate to the all-at-onceness tendencies of electronic process. So there is consonance between McLuhan's talk and his observations of the swiftly changing environment.

One has in the rhetoricians, from Cicero and Quintillian to Bacon and Nashe, a full range of theories of communication. All the forms of per-

suasion remain unaltered regardless of how they are embellished technologically by media. Ads and newspapers and television commercials are rooted in the oratorical texts developed by the ancients, as one can see in the Aeolus episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* or a political speech. In addition, Nevitt points out Jacques Ellul's work in *Propaganda* as being evidence for the extreme utility of rhetorical transformations on "truth" for our times. Intended or not, there is always a rhetorical agenda beneath all communication surfaces. It is the hidden ground of everything from the news and its guise of serious objectivity to the slick tricks of advertising: **suggestio veri, suppressio falsi.**

As *The Communication Ecology* makes clear, an understanding of the language bias in the McLuhan background greatly enhances the significance of the Figure/Ground metaphor which in McLuhan's usage is much richer in meaning than its employment in Gestalt psychology. As with other prophetic revelations, many listened but few heard.

Since one of the first principles of rhetoric is to know one's audience, we might consider whether or not McLuhan's audience is also Nevitt's. There will be overlap, of course, but Nevitt's may well be a different audience. McLuhanites will show considerable interest in what Nevitt has done with this particular rendering of the McLuhan hypotheses, but it may also be that he will be talking to that significant periphery of interested readers who just couldn't enter the uncompromisingly erudite world of McLuhan, replete with its analogies drawn from Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lewis (a sort of literary new testament) as well as Havelock, Barfield, Lusseryan and the rest. This audience ought to find more comfort in Nevitt's clarity and the reduced allusiveness in his crisp prose and concise examples.

Nevitt's second chapter, on the distinction between Aphorisms and Methods develops further insights into the aberrations of the reductionist worldview which has prevailed at the expense of the whole resonance of the human condition. In this chapter Nevitt outlines the conditions leading to the cultural transformation in which paradox was degraded in the interests of the growing illusion of clarity demanded by the rational biases of Empiricism. He cites Rosalie Colie:

Degradation of paradox is one result of a revolution in thought which valued clarity and exactness above the tricky duplicities of comprehension induced by paradox. In *The Dialogue Concerning the Two World Systems*, Galileo's Simplicio points to the dangers involved in favoring "words" over "things" as guides to truth: "Once you have denied the principles of sciences and have cast doubt upon the most evident things, everybody knows that you may prove whatever you will, and maintain any paradox" (1966, 508 - 520).

Ours is now a world fraught with new paradoxes: the certitude of the last few centuries has been pressed to the limit of its capability and has flipped into its opposite - Heisenberg's Uncertainty, Goedel's Incompleteness, Bohr's Complementarity. But we do not yet accept paradox reborn through our physics; our's is the paradox of Simplicio "only any arbitrary or haphazard odd notion, true or false, unverifiable by experience" (Colie, 1966, 508 - 520). Nevitt rightly reinstates the older and more comprehensive idea of paradox as "dialectic: therefore it inevitably is a figure of thought. Because most paradoxes are also metaphorical, or figures of speech." This suggests that the preservation of paradox main-

tains awareness of the grounds of events and experience, the clear distinction between what Korzybski would call the world of words and the world of not words. Paradox and ambiguity must exist if the connection between these worlds is to be preserved and the emotional system kept whole.

After they escape from the Chinese boxes of our public schooling should we wonder that we have generations incapable of maintaining a high threshold of ambiguity tolerance? Paradox should be understood as an integrating, ecologizing necessity that it is rather than as the source of annoying obfuscation as so many took McLuhan's prose to be?

This awareness of the process of designing bias in communication has always been part of the shared code among the McLuhan intimates. Nevitt is owed a debt by all those who for the first time in this book discover the rhetorical vestibule into the house that Marshall built.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this book is that Nevitt almost heroically declines to rehash or expropriate the work of others. His third chapter, for instance, is composed of quotations from Shannon, Weaver, Wiener, von Bertalanffy and Rapoport with barely more than thirty lines of his own. This is a true mosaicist at work, in the extreme. But that predilection for composition makes the book feel all the more useful, makes Nevitt all the better guide and almost completely eliminates the insecurity of point of view that is never absent from the critiques of others: it's an illusion of overview perhaps but a very effective one. Nevitt, the communications engineer gives us nice metaphors, for example, rather than say, as McLuhan did, that the content of any medium is another medium. Nevitt uses his knowledge of FM transmission to graphic effect:

McLuhan's approach to the study of any medium, whether hardware product or software information, was to start with the manifold effects, material, mental and social, which are the "message." He then set out to discover the "meaning" by determining what the medium actually does to shape the "interior landscape" of the user who puts it on to become its "content." The "program" is always another medium that modulates the carrier medium (p. 125).

Like a series of Yogic steps to self-awareness, McLuhan's escalating insights are capable of freeing one from "single vision and Newton's sleep" which epitomize the specialist mode of thought. He insists that we develop the skills necessary to expose the hidden grounds of information forms. The essentially Baconian agenda, Nevitt shows us, is for the further advancement of learning, and reveals McLuhan as the PR man for the moderni who makes available to us a way of breaking into the control booth of the reality studio, to perceive ourselves perceiving, to waken.

Many have complained, like Sidney Finkelstein and Jonathan Miller, that there is no logical continuity to McLuhan's work and such critics have had to find arguments where there were none. Too much criticism of McLuhan is this sort of nonsense. Nevitt shows us how McLuhan arranges his materials in broad patterns of interplaying parts thus engaging us in larger thought process whereby we should not be quite so concerned with possible 'errors' on his part but rather we should begin to encounter our own shortcomings in our attempt to expand our awareness. This requires getting more deeply involved with one's actual thought processes than doxa, or ordinary opinion allows.

McLuhan's work is held together, like the work of Eliot or Joyce, by the persistent effects of the underlying theoretical structure of his vision. And here Nevitt gives us what we need, the active processing effects of technology and media on our perception of the real world documented in a form which is appropriate to the message. Nevitt's work is reflective.

McLuhan has been the victim of a rare instance of cultural cannibalism: ingested piecemeal by many who couldn't take him whole. Everywhere there are glints of his insights in the works of others. Borges, in his "Approach to al-Mutasim or the Game of Shifting Mirrors," has a man trace a soul in the impression it has made on others. It is a game, and a serious one, a game of fragmented reflections of a greater reality. The physical process of seeing becomes a metaphor of Vision. We see because objects reflect light. We really seek to see the light. But things usually go badly for those who do not understand the archetypes, they wind up like Pentheus in drag primping before the mirror held up insidiously by Dionysus readying his victim to die transfixed in an act of voyeurism. In Nevitt one gets McLuhan pretty nearly whole.

The Communication Ecology is a primer, not simplified but selected, containing everything of prime importance for understanding McLuhan. Overall, this book is an education. Anyone who reads it and understands it and can talk sensibly about it has a better education than it is possible to get in most universities. So it is not thin in its few pages but demanding and in the same way that McLuhan's work was demanding - he required a revolution in mindset from one modelled on the obsolete metaphor of 19th Century machine process to one capable of surviving the onslaught of effects on inner and outer reality brought in by electric process.

Nevitt graciously assumes all the debts that naturally accrue to anyone who works with genius. It is easy to assume that all the big ideas come from McLuhan and that Nevitt (as Watson, Fiore, Parker before him) should be accorded something like amanuensis status in the process. Nevitt's contribution is much more subtle and complex than that. McLuhan, at once a grammarian and a dialectician required absolutely the collegiality that was the ground for his work. Even as far back as the Explorations group the McLuhan style was one of discussion geared to discovery. He took things, things were brought to him, he carefully anticipated things that ought to be, like any first rate investigator, but most importantly he thrived on the intelligent inputs of the best of those few around him who could play the game at his high level of intensity. Barry Nevitt was one of these, one of the closest of all perhaps even his complement.

Nevitt's honesty and openness is also quite evident in his departure from standard scholarly techniques regarding the use of sources. He quotes at extreme length whole passages from the enchiridion of esteemed investigators that always salted the vein of McLuhan's conversation, authors whom not all hangerson had bothered to read. Here Nevitt makes clear the important uses McLuhan has made of these corroborating scholars. Many writers assimilate materials they have borrowed in ways that enhance their own perspicacity at the expense of the original material. Nevitt humbly avoids such practices and gives us large chunks of that stuff we might miss - the Havelock, the Lusseyrand, the Colie, the Vico, the Ogden and Richards, Bateson, and the rest.

Besides a collaboration on their only book (Take Today: The Executive as Drop-out) they

worked together on several other projects, some as minor as letters to the editor when the furor was high (as in their exchanges with Jonathan Miller in the *Listener* during 1971) to fuller scaled articles, about thirty pieces in all. And Nevitt's own publishing history is extensive.

Nevitt has lived an extremely interesting life. At a very early age he was designing, constructing and operating radio telegraph stations. He was for a short time a bush pilot. In 1932 - 1933 he went to the USSR as a research and development engineer to establish VHF measurement techniques for the Zavod Elektropribor in Leningrad. He later worked for Northern Electric in Montreal as a systems engineer and he has served as a consultant to governments and senior corporation managements all over the globe from France and Sweden to South and Central Americas. It seems as though a long, exciting and distinguished career came to a head in his gelling with McLuhan at the Centre for Culture and Technology in the latter Sixties.

We have in Barrington Nevitt the voice from the hardware side, an engineer, but one who understands the Metaphysical significance of the issues raised by McLuhan's reorganization of the prevailing worldview. Not only was he a collaborator but a corroborator as well.

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