
By the end of the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan’s landmark book The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man, originally published in 1962, had been translated into more than twenty languages. His influential study, Understanding Media of 1964, could have been read, by the end of the same period noted above, in Swedish, German, Finnish, Spanish, French, Danish, et cetera. European publishers received McLuhan with open arms, yet the critical reception/literature that each translation spawned, both in public debates and more intimate and specialized academic circles, constitute unique cultures with original features that continue to unfold. In my scholarly work I have focused my attention on the French translations and McLuhan’s diverse readerships in France and Québec, and there are, in addition, robust investigations into the Japanese McLuhan scene by Marc Steinberg. McLuhan has always been transatlantic and indeed, global in reach.

The edited collection McLuhan’s Global Village Today: Transatlantic Perspectives contains a lively record of exchanges, first staged in Marburg, Germany courtesy of the Centre for Canadian Studies in 2011, among Canadian and primarily German scholars under the banner of transatlantic McLuhan studies. So, what the editors mean by transatlantic is limited contextually to a field that is labelled, for better or for worse, as German media theory, including the theoretical contributions of Friedrich Kittler, Wolfgang Ernst, and Siegfried Zielinski and diverse perspectives from the Canadian side (not explicitly Toronto School), but not an exhaustive roster by any means. The spirit is that of international friendship and celebration of the McLuhan centenary year. However, most of the Canadian contributors look elsewhere other than to the German media archaeologists for inspiration.

Richard Cavell considers the question of theorizing bio-mediation in his leading contribution, turning McLuhan toward Eugene Thacker for an insight into the body as medium, neither as machine nor cyborg, but through our technologies as an en-
counter with our othered humanity—not our posthumanity. Although the mythic
version of this—narcissus as narcosis—captures only one dimension of a transfor-
mative encounter with ourselves, it is the transformative that is important for the
contributors to this volume, as both Cavell and Jana Mangold, in her study of metaphor
in McLuhan’s work, insist on it as a decisive shift in communication away from trans-
mission, from transport to transform. Mangold finds the roots of metaphor as transport
in the Greek tradition, but finds rich examples of McLuhan’s metaphorization of trans-
port itself, transforming it into a process of translation: “the wager of media theory is
metaphor” (p. 20). Andreas Beinsteiner regains the Kittlerian counterflow of re-assessing print as
cooler than McLuhan thought, that is, less passive, and not dominated by one sense.
Beinsteiner argues both that McLuhan confused physical interaction with psychological
involvement, and that his distinction between hot and cold was a thoroughly
Gutenberghian dichotomy from which he did not escape. Florian Sprenger raises the crit-
ical stakes by maintaining that McLuhan did not pursue the contradiction at the heart
of the instantaneity thesis of electric, implosive media: that “immediacy means to neg-
lect media—the media McLuhan’s theory wants to describe” (p. 31). For McLuhan, there
can only be immediacy; yet, media cannot be immediate because it requires separate
elements that are mediated. This tension is explored in depth by Sprenger, capturing
some of the historical metaphors of transatlantic communication cables (i.e., in German
Kabelseele or cable soul is the cable’s lining) as exemplary of how separate entities are
thought of as unified. Historicizing McLuhan and acknowledging the “coherence in
contradiction” (p. 31) of his media theory assists in preventing a reduction of it to a
“Catholic utopia” (p. 44) that is self-defeating: “Perhaps a theory of media which is ori-
ented towards unity and immediacy cannot see its own implications and never fully
gasp what media theory is about: that media are differentiators and never unify without
delaying, interrupting and individualizing” (p. 44).

Expanding the field of references to post-1968 French theory, Martin Speer reflects
on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizome diagram in the context of hypermedia
models and suggests that certain aspects of McLuhan’s thought (i.e., electro-acoustic
space) are amenable to schizoanalysis. While the models line up—rhizome, acoustic
space, cyberspace, network society—there is still the spectre of Catholic humanism to
confront, and Speer has recourse to concerns about how extensions of human percept-
tual mechanisms can turn against humankind to outflank the stumbling block of iso-
lating a few of McLuhan’s remarks about the sempiternal glances of angels and the
body of Christ as global village. Human-machine hybrids that are less dangerous than
compelling use Mark McCutcheon’s territory of the dubject: self-recorded, dubbed and
doubled. It is subjectivation for the era of web conferencing. Indeed, McCutcheon ap-
ppeared in Marburg only virtually, but it would be felicitous to say he was not simply
back in Canada either but, rather, at a number of modes and nodes. Whereas David
Staines and Bernhard Dotzler bring it all back home, as it were, reinscribing the literary
critic McLuhan as a Winnipigeon about to take flight for Cambridge before finding a
roost in Toronto and linking poetic processes learned in grad school to the later media
theory, a less rosier history is revisited by Martin Kuester (via Paul Tiessen), recalling
Wilfrid Watson's ungenerous remarks on and disillusionment with McLuhan after the experience of co-authoring From Cliché to Archetype. Watson's subsequent ironic references to McLuhan in his literary works are then coupled with Brian Fawcett's progressively over-the-top parodies of Marshall, these “revisionary literalizations” (p. 102) appearing rather troll-like. Anne Hoyer provides some comic relief from the airing of dirty laundry by meditating on the participatory dynamic of “reader supplementation” (p. 116) of Scottish comic strips.

The collection displays a fairly conservative organizational clustering of chapters around, as just noted, literature, followed by sound, film, television, and, finally, new media. Kerstin Schmidt explains the role of simulation in radio and acoustic space, drawing on Wolfgang Hagen’s study of German and American radio, and Sabine Breitsameter reflects on McLuhan and R. Murray Schafer’s “sonic turns” (p. 142). Paul Tiessen provides a reflective framing through Canadian modernism of McLuhan’s brief incarnation in Woody Allen’s film Annie Hall (1977), a late career playing on himself, that was a too hotly critical encounter in the cinema lobby. Philipp Blum tackles animation’s mediality, blurring form and content. Angela Krewani shows how practitioners of alternative television and video were inspired by McLuhan despite his lack of an agenda for progressive social change, even while neglecting the more explicit political media theory available in Europe, a kind of failed Atlantic crossing.

Finally, the book concludes with Raphael Peter’s essay on new media, a McLuhanesque decoding of smartphones as “an augmented mind,” (p. 196) in the manner of Derrick de Kerckhove and exposing, in the spirit of Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, “McLuhan’s doubt” (p. 199) about the global village as a surveillance society. In a postscript, Peter brings home the impact of the disclosure that the National Security Agency was tapping Angela Merkel’s Handy (cellphone). In this context, McLuhan’s ambivalence about media, Peter thinks, is worth cultivating anew. No general conclusion is provided, which is unfortunate, as it would have presented an opportunity to make connections between the compartmentalized media around which the chapters are structured and find cross-pollinations between the chapters themselves.

While the Canadian scholars of McLuhan in this volume are reluctant to engage in close deep-time archaeologies of media and pursue radically empirical investigations, the German media theorists seem, for their part, to be more than willing to mount critical assessments and launch trial conceptual balloons, while sticking to rich descriptions of media technologies, even if they seem at times bewitched by McLuhan’s Catholicism. Of course, there is no such thing as a unified German media theory; this much is obvious. Likewise, the Canadian perspectives do not often deviate from the canonical, staying with the safe compare and contrast models of scholarly probity. But this hides an important difference: there is always room for the human (extending sense and affecting perception, modifying agency, sketching interactions among friends and enemies) in Canadian media studies and more ambivalence about this in the post-Kittler German milieu. Transatlantic bridges between German media theory and McLuhan’s medium theory cannot be built and maintained around negations, such as the absence of content analysis, or on the basis of identifying barriers, like theological obfuscation, to concrete, material, and technical media analysis. While there
is still a good deal of work to be done, this volume is a useful tool for those committed to such a project.

References

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