The McLuhan “revival,” announced on the front page of The Globe and Mail in July of 1995, is itself now in need of revivification; both of these volumes suggest that the time has come to ask some new questions about McLuhan and his legacy.

Marchessault positions McLuhan as a theorist of “cosmic media,” where “cosmic” has some of the heft of “global,” as in the title of the book’s third section, “Global Theatre,” which is preceded by “Cambridge” and “America.” The overall focus of Marshall McLuhan: Cosmic Media is on McLuhan’s “methodology,” though there is already a hint in these section titles of the biographical approach to McLuhan that inaugurated the McLuhan revival, via Philip Marchand’s excellent biography, published in 1987. Marchand’s book was so excellent, in fact, that it overshadowed the important (if incomplete) selection of letters published two years earlier, a selection that still rewards serious examination.

Cambridge is the site of McLuhan’s “romanticism,” and Marchessault here identifies an important strand in McLuhan’s intellectual background. What is equally important is that she values the significance of F. R. Leavis over that of I. A. Richards in McLuhan’s Cambridge experience, although her discussion of Leavis and Denys Thompson’s Culture and Environment might profitably have led to a discussion of the importance of the idea of the “environment” to McLuhan’s later work—surely an important research question at the present juncture. The “Cambridge” section concludes with a consideration of McLuhan’s Catholicism,

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always a vexed question (in religion, as in all else, his approach was counterintuitive), but here given its due as part of McLuhan’s intellectual formation.

“America” is marked by the gestation and production of *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), and it is in this section that Marchessault illustrates compellingly McLuhan’s methodological approach to his subject. Quoting Susan Sontag’s comment that, unlike intellectual “virtuosos” such as Karl Kraus, T. W. Adorno, and Kenneth Burke, McLuhan “suggests the risks of radical unevenness of quality and judgement incurred with this magnitude of intellectual appetite and ambition” (p. 49), Marchessault goes on to argue that it was precisely his massive and eclectic range that dictated McLuhan’s methodological focus: “McLuhan is not so attached to ideas as he is to a process of thinking through ideas” (p. 49). It was not the content but the (rhetorical) effect that interested McLuhan, and that focus contributes to his ongoing currency. In *The Mechanical Bride*, bodies themselves constitute such effects, twisted and contorted by the rhetoric of advertising into prosthetic devices of massive grotesquerie, and this “somatic” (p. 66) interest remained with McLuhan for the rest of his career.

McLuhan’s methodological focus was further shaped by his encounter with Harold Innis, and Marchessault stresses the importance of Innis’ Chicago School legacy, particularly the work of Robert Park. About Innis, she makes the important point that “we should read his use of a mosaic approach, his disjointed and sometimes elliptical prose, his tentative lay out of historical causalities, as evidence of his rejection of totalizing theories and views of history” (p. 102). Yet what links these thinkers even more is their insistence on the materiality of media, though in McLuhan’s case the intellectual leap was greater: the materiality of clay tablets is inarguable; the materiality of radio waves requires something more than argument. As Marchessault puts it, “McLuhan’s insights . . . are largely intuitive, deriving less from social scientific research than from his own experiences” (p. 107). This should be qualified, though: even his intuitions were subject to his methodology—he was one of the most consistent of thinkers, often to the peril of his reputation. Thus, “[w]hat is striking to us reading McLuhan’s writing on teenagers of the 1950s is his refusal to pronounce moral judgements on popular culture. . . . In a very Brechtian manner, we find a refusal to maintain an opposition between education and entertainment” (p. 107).

The discussion of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is grounded with a useful comparison of McLuhan and Benjamin, though the link between them—Siegfried Giedion—remains relatively unexplored here. The strongest aspect of Marchessault’s examination of this major work is her insistence on the importance of history to it—both in terms of McLuhan’s insistence that with electronic retrieval (and she is astute in calling *Galaxy* McLuhan’s “television” book), all of history has become manifest as never before, and his assertion that there is a “lack of historical consciousness” in “the humanist tradition” (p. 128). Once again, McLuhan’s methodological brilliance asserts itself: “To attribute the printing press to Gutenberg is as nonsensical as attributing the automobile to Ford. The printing press is a locus of inventions and innovations” (p. 142)—an effect, in other words, rather than a cause. And in this way, as McLuhan liked to say, the effect precedes the cause, as in the “new theories of reality in physics”
(p. 143) on which he drew for the methodological insights in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as well as for the notion of the materiality of the invisible.

*Understanding Media* represents the development of a rhetorical methodology for reading a broad variety of mediations, from clocks to cars, though McLuhan’s preoccupation throughout is with television and the “new consciousness” (p. 186) that it has brought into being. Here we enter fully into the “Global Theatre” and the cognate “global village” whose “simultaneous character is profoundly discontinuous” (p. 212). Television is a ‘Timid Giant’ because it is unsuited to deal with hot issues. It has injected “rigor mortis into the body politic” (p. 186). And McLuhan’s bodily metaphor is significant, because “it is not television as a sign system but television as prosthetic that is his central concern” (p. 186). McLuhan, too, became an embodiment of this mediation; he “very consciously enters into the electric galaxy of events to become an event himself” (p. 199).

From Marchessault’s book, one derives the sense that McLuhan was a profoundly complex thinker; this cannot be said for Gordon, Hamaji, and Albert’s book, *Everyman’s McLuhan*, though its goal is less to engage with McLuhan’s ideas than to provide a paradigm so that others can do so (which tends to support Marchessault’s assertion that McLuhan’s greatest claim to our interest is in having produced a methodology).

It is not clear why Gordon, Hamaji, & Albert would want to address this book to “Everyman,” when “Everybody” would have avoided sexist language and also alluded to Joyce’s “Here Comes Everybody,” which McLuhan often quoted. Gordon carries the burden of being McLuhan’s “official” biographer, and one has to wonder why biography has loomed so large in McLuhan studies before and after the “revival.” Here McLuhan’s biography is represented as a timeline that begins on the inside of the front wrapper and continues to the back one, unfortunately misspelling McLuhan’s name in the process—one has to lament the misprints in both of these books, especially in Gordon, Hamaji, & Albert’s, which is “designed” in homage to such *tours de force* as *The Medium Is the Massage*.

The authors’ goal in this “primer and guide” is to correct the “radical misreading” that continues to plague McLuhan studies, though this goal and the form of the book would appear to be at odds. The first misreading Gordon addresses is that of “the medium is the message,” which, he notes, is not to be taken literally. Rather, this phrase is related to the idea of media as extensions of the body, such that “the user of the medium is the content of the medium” (p. 12). One might explain this by saying that mediation constitutes a massive feedback loop; instead, we are given another paraphrase: “The medium is an environment that produces effects” (pp. 14-15). Again, one might explain this by saying that we inhabit our mediations, but we are given yet another paraphrase: “The medium of language is its own message.” We are told that “the medium is the message” alludes to *The Meaning of Meaning* by I.A. Richards (part of the Cambridge connection) and C.K. Ogden, but we are not told that McLuhan ultimately valorized the work of Leavis over Richards (a point well made by Marchessault).

Gordon’s McLuhan is the student of Richards, the disciple of G.K. Chesterton, and the reader of *Little Orphan Annie* and *Li’l Abner*, which is to say, the McLuhan
handed down to us by a now deeply encrusted set of clichés in McLuhan studies. And in returning to the overworked hot/cool typology of media, which is surely parodic of all such binaristic systems, the book produces a major misreading of its own: we are told that TV is a “hot” medium and the movies a “cool” one, whereas McLuhan writes the opposite in Understanding Media, where the point is the basic principle and not the tabulation: “There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV” (p. 22). Other comments in the book are contradictory, such as the statement that Through the Vanishing Point “brings poems and paintings together to illuminate the world of space created by language” (p. 136). Gordon’s linguistic bias, which first emerged in his biography of McLuhan and has repeated itself many times, as in the concluding comments to his Gingko Press edition of Understanding Media, rears its head here again, such that painting ends up a form of language. However, it is absolutely crucial in situating McLuhan in his intellectual context to recognize that he rejected the linguistic metaphor (and the structural one to which Gordon seeks to adhere him). McLuhan was in fact a poststructuralist thinker; as Marchessault makes clear, he was profoundly concerned with inserting history into the theoretical model of mediation that he was at pains to produce. In theorizing media as prosthetic extensions of the body, his interests were somatic, not linguistic. Here we return to the bios, but in another register.

References