

Empire and communication: the media wars of Marshall McLuhan

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From his first reflections on advertising as a ‘magical institution’ in 1952 to his last writings on ‘The Brain and Media’ in 1978, Marshall McLuhan was reproached for his utopian view of media technologies as the ‘extensions of man’ and for his failure to understand the new, more formidable rhetorical powers of the electric mass media. In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, for example, Friedrich Kittler (1999) dismisses McLuhan’s ideal of ‘understanding media’ as a humanist mirage. The emergence of a total communications system on a digital basis, argues Kittler, marks the vanishing point of ‘mediality’ itself: the dominant media of our time ‘control all understanding’ (not to mention our very ‘schematism of perceptibility’), and for this reason McLuhan’s goal of understanding media remains an ‘impossibility’ (1999: xli). Similarly, in his *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord describes McLuhan as the first ‘apologist’ for the spectacle and for this reason the ‘most convinced imbecile of the century’ (1983: 57). Far from unifying humanity in a network of communication, argues Debord, the global village marks the triumph of capitalism as a ‘global spectacle’ that shatters the ‘unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss’ (1983: 29). And in *The Art of the Motor*, his analysis of the modern mass media and its ‘data coup d’etat’, Paul Virilio criticizes McLuhan for ‘drooling’ over the utopian possibilities of global communication. McLuhan’s retreat into the realm of virtual reality and the ‘false proximity of a world without density or shadow’ renews the quest for religious transcendence by way of the machine: the ‘decorporation’ of the body in cyberspace is a *deus ex machina* (‘machine God’) that opens a new ‘vector of flight’ into the great beyond (1995: 24).

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These criticisms are not entirely unjust. At times McLuhan does seem to view media machines as vehicles of flight into a 'cosmic harmony' that 'transcends space and time' (1995: 238). In his own way, McLuhan understood that the essence of technology, as Heidegger puts it, is 'nothing technological' (1977: 4). McLuhan understood that media – from the gramophone and the camera to the typewriter and the telephone – are not simply mechanical objects but profoundly human responses to sensory impairment, dismemberment, mourning, and death. Thomas Alva Edison, for example, the 'half-deaf' inventor of sound recording, devised his phonograph to preserve the 'last words of dying persons', and in doing so realized one of the deepest ambitions of writers from antiquity to the present: 'speech', blares an early phonograph advertisement, 'has become immortal' (Kittler, 1999: 21).¹ And as Avital Ronell shows in *The Telephone Book: Technology – Schizophrenia – Electric Speech*, her brilliant 'biophany' of Alexander Graham Bell, the telephone also comes into being as a response to death and mourning and thus calls up another, less rigorous history of metaphysics than the Heideggerian tragedy of Being: 'Whoever departed first [Alexander Graham Bell or his brother, Melville] was to contact the survivor through a medium demonstrably superior to the more traditional channel of spiritualism' (1989: 4).² In fact, in his desire to be 'reabsorbed' into the Logos, McLuhan even came to see the advent of electricity as the fulfilment of a religious eschatology: as the Gutenberg galaxy implodes into the Marconi 'constellation', the living spirit of electricity conducts us from the dead letter of typographic culture toward a new marriage of man, machine and cosmos – a 'conubium of a supra-terrestrial nature' (1995: 104). This is why, for McLuhan, Karl Marx arrived too late for the communist revolution. By focusing his critique of capitalism on the mechanical modes of industrial production, Marx missed the revolution of 1844, the year the electric telegraph – the 'first pulsation of the real nervous system of the world' – sealed humanity in a 'global membrane' of instant communication, a global commune or 'global village' (1964: 262). Today the computer, with its instant translation of the babble of data, codes and languages, will at last harmonize the confusion of tongues in a 'Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity' (1964: 266). In a sense, then, McLuhan may indeed be described as a 'metaphysician' of the media, especially since he describes his approach to the media environment as rigorously 'Thomist'.

And yet, for all his 'delirious tribal optimism' (Baudrillard, 1981: 172), McLuhan also understood that the global village or 'global theatre' has become a theatre of war, a staging area for 'colossal violence' and 'maximal conflict'. And for all his faith in the 'integral consciousness' promised by the new media of global communication, McLuhan still managed to write the epigraph to our political present and its new 'vortices of power': 'Every day is Mayday in the Global Nursery . . .' (1995: 123).

In order to shed new light on this darker, more radical vision of the mass media set forth by McLuhan, in what follows I examine his decisive – but largely unacknowledged – contribution to radical media studies today, especially to the work of Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler, Jean Baudrillard and others concerned with the alliance of war, media and information in ‘postmodern’ society. After some reflections on McLuhan’s ‘mosaic’ approach to the media ecology and his view of media as ‘extensions’ of man, I examine three modulations of his most infamous aphorism: the medium is the message; the medium is the massage; and the medium is the mass-age.

Message

If it is true, as Nietzsche contends in *The Will to Power* (1964: 235), that modern European history is the history of its ‘narcotica’, then the emergence of the industrial mass media in the last years of the 19th century – the ‘heroic’ age of media invention – would seem to play a decisive role in the emergence of high modernity and its ‘permanent opium war’ (Debord, 1983: 44) on our hearts, minds and bodies. From the spellbinding words of the sophist Gorgias, who likens the power of words over the soul to the power of ‘drugs’ (*pharmakoi*) over the body, to the ‘exorbitant eloquence’ of television, which induces a kind of Spartan military trance in the collective mind, the history of media is inseparable from the history of narcosis, intoxication and psychedelic experience. ‘Speech is a powerful lord [*megas dynastes*],’ writes Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen*, ‘which by means of the finest and most invisible body accomplishes the most divine of works . . . just as different drugs cause pain, others joy . . . some benumb and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion’ (in Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990: 41).³ In a letter to the political economist Harold Innis, McLuhan observes that the rhetoric of modern advertising conjures up all the ‘magical notions’ and ‘potencies’ of persuasion celebrated by the ancient Greek sophists: advertising mobilizes all the resources of ‘systematic sophistry’ to induce ‘numbness’, ‘hallucination’, ‘hyperaesthesia’ and a general ‘demobilization’ of consciousness (‘psychic *rigor mortis*’) (1987: 46).⁴ To succumb to this rhetorical assault is to be ‘stupefied’ (*medusée*) by the ‘Gorgon’s head of persuasion’ (Plato), to be reduced to a ‘zombie’, a being deprived of will, speech and reason (in other words, the ideal consumer).⁵ For this reason, argues McLuhan, we must view the mass media indirectly, from a critical distance, much as the mythical hero Perseus uses a mirror to gaze upon – and behead – the Medusa. McLuhan’s many allusions to the mirror of Perseus reflect the deeper purpose behind his ‘explorations’ of the media environment, which have been dismissed by some critics as a ‘black mass for dilettantes’ (1995: 233): like the mirror of

Perseus, McLuhan's work enables us to observe the media without being bewitched by 'evil persuasion'. Unlike the reflection that mesmerizes Narcissus, the mirror of Perseus enables us to 'de-mesmerize' ourselves. McLuhan's analysis of advertising as the 'folklore of industrial man' also underscores one of his crucial contributions to the study of media. By interpreting media not simply as machines for 'conjuring worlds of illusion' but as 'new languages with unique powers of expression', McLuhan traces the emergence of a new mode of persuasion that commandeers all the resources of Classical rhetoric – already, for Roland Barthes, a kind of 'cybernetic machine' – into a rhetorical supergenre or *hyper-rhetoric* (1995: 244).

'My friends,' Jacques Lacan once announced to his seminar, 'you have no idea how much you owe to geology!' (1992: 157). Before we dismiss McLuhan's method of 'digging', 'probing' and 'drilling' into the strata of the media environment, we might recall that some of the most radical endeavours of modern philosophy (those of Kant, Nietzsche and Deleuze, to name a few) borrow many of their analytic tools from geography and the earth sciences. Saussure, Marx and Freud also drew concepts from geology to analyse the coexistence of different times in linguistic, economic and psychical formations. When Kant, for example, wasn't lecturing on seismics, geology and physical geography at Königsburg (as he did for over 30 years), he was embarked on a 'voyage of reason' to survey the inner landscape or 'thought-space' (*Gedankesraum*) of the mind, only to discover that reason is but a 'tiny island' immersed in a 'vast ocean of illusion' (1996: B295/A236). Like Kant, McLuhan sets out to 'map new terrain' in the sensorium, unearthing a whole 'geography of perception' shaped by the forces and pressures of the media environment. What is important here is McLuhan's emphasis on the material dimensions of the media, for it enables us to grasp the more radical implications of his most famous aphorism: the 'medium is the message' (the founding 'axiom', for Baudrillard, of our era of simulation and 'hyperreality'). Descending into the 'terra incognita' of the medial mind, McLuhan discovers that the categories of the understanding are not *a priori* forms (as Kant maintains) but, on the contrary, structures imposed on the mind by the technological environment.⁶ The famous thesis of *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), we recall, states that 'all the great cultural forms and innovations' of early modern society issued from the 'physics' of typography and its material effects. The transition from literate to typographic culture produces a 'metaphysical shudder': the printing press is a 'seismic recorder of a global shudder from new environmental technologies' (1970: 6). Abstract systems of tropes and schemata in rhetoric; universal forms of entailment in formal logic; the principle of causality; formulae in mathematics; assembly line production; the public sphere; nationalism – it is 'from a meaningless sign linked to a meaningless sound

[that] we have built the shape and meaning of Western man' (1962: 68). McLuhan thus discovers the 'technological *a priori*' (Kittler): we can reason only as far as the information machines of our time.

McLuhan's explorations of the modern 'mediascape' thus show how the *materiality* of media – their 'physics' and 'chemistry', their 'fission' and 'fusion' – come to dominate our habits of perception, forms of understanding and social institutions. But if media impose a certain 'pace', 'scale' and 'pattern' on society – if the medium is the message – it is because a medium is not a bodiless milieu but a *substance* for the transmission of force, power and energy. For McLuhan, the media environment is a 'vortex' or 'maelstrom' of material and immaterial forces, corporeal and incorporeal effects: a 'whirlwind of violence' (1995: 238). This view of the media ecology as a matrix of forces in 'constant flux' (the Greek word for environment, McLuhan often notes, is *periballo*, or to 'strike from all sides') reveals the rigour of McLuhan's 'mosaic' method of analysis, which is so often dismissed as arbitrary and impressionistic. As mirror images of the media whirlwind (the 'verbi-voco-visual vortex'), McLuhan's books are designed to work like a 'cloud chamber' for the collision of images, aphorisms and photographs, a vortex in Ezra Pound's sense of an 'image from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing' (McLuhan, 1987: 39). McLuhan abandons a fixed point of view – itself the product of print culture – on the media environment and instead creates a more subtle science of mixtures (what Nietzsche would call a 'chemistry of concepts') to deal with the new media ecology and its 'social cyclotron' (not to mention its geometry, which he likens to the strange topology of Lewis Carroll's looking-glass world).⁷ Here the symbolist method of invention, the *sym-ballein* or throwing together of ideas in a textual 'kaleidoscope', becomes a logic of discovery enabling McLuhan to illuminate the secret 'life of forms' – and the 'formalities of power' – at work in the media environment. This symbolist *ars inveniendi* in turn reveals the deeper motives behind McLuhan's use of the aphorism as a 'verbal probe'. As a scholar steeped in the history of rhetoric (his 1948 Cambridge dissertation focused on Thomas Nashe and the *trivium*), McLuhan knew how to exploit the ballistic properties of the aphorism, a genre whose speed of delivery and sudden, decisive impact rivals that of a 'projectile hurled by a vigorous arm' (Seneca). Like Nietzsche, who likens the aphorism to an arrow or explosive charge, McLuhan deploys the aphorism as a war machine. Just as the surrealist 'shock effect' launches the artwork beyond aesthetics and into ballistics, McLuhan's aphorisms – the medium is the message, the medium is the massage, the medium is the mass-age – are verbal missiles (missives) designed to keep pace with information and communication machines running at close to the speed of light.

Massage

In 'The Age of the World-Picture' (1977 [1938]), his classic account of the rise of technoscience, Martin Heidegger identifies the conquest of the world as 'picture' (*Weltbild*) as one of the founding events of modernity. By picture, of course, Heidegger does not mean a mere image but a network of mathematical representations projected onto the world to render it calculable. But the great thinker of Being nevertheless held a remarkable view of television, a medium, he predicted, that would soon come to dominate the 'whole machinery of communication'.⁸ According to Heidegger, the 'abolition' of space and time in the televisual image represents the final phase of this conquest of the world as picture, the last, catastrophic act in the 'tragedy of Being' that begins, suitably enough, in the subterranean cinema of Plato's allegorical cave: 'The limitless domination of modern technology in every corner of this planet is only the late consequence of a very old technical interpretation of the world . . .' (1977: 67).⁹ Heidegger may have been wrong about the confrontation between National Socialism and 'planetary' technology (it was, he concedes, his 'greatest stupidity'), but he was right about the ascendancy of television.¹⁰ Television has indeed come to dominate the machinery of communication, so much so that, according to McLuhan, this 'spectacular electric extension of our nervous system . . . has affected the totality of our lives, personal, social, and political' (1964: 276). As the most 'beautiful' and 'prototypical' technology of our era (Baudrillard, 1988), television helps us grasp the more radical sense of one of McLuhan's most misunderstood theses: the medium is the massage.

Although 'the medium is the massage' is often taken to refer to the aesthetic pleasures of media, to the caressing touch of sight and sound, McLuhan views media – especially television – as rhetorical machines that 'engrave' their images on the 'private and public sensorium' (much as the Gorgianic *logos*, that 'powerful lord' (*megas dynastes*), 'stamps', 'impresses' and 'engraves' its images on the soul). According to McLuhan, television turns the spectator into a surface to be 'tattooed' by waves of light and sound energy that 'paralyze' the eye and irradiate the viewer like an 'x-ray machine'.¹¹ 'The violence of the industrial and mechanical environment', writes McLuhan of television, 'is lived and given meaning and motive in the nerves and viscera of the young' (1995: 117). McLuhan's analysis of the harrowing effects of television (a medium that leaves its effects 'indelibly inscribed on our skins' [1995: 245]) are of central importance to Baudrillard, who argues that television turns our skin into a 'smooth and functional surface of communication' (1988: 19) and our bodies into 'monitoring screens' (1988: 27). It is therefore rather unjust of Virilio to deride McLuhan for being 'completely wrong' in his 'idyllic' view of television. It is doubly unjust because Virilio's most brilliant work

on the logistics of 'military perception' – as well as his dilations on the 'vision machine' (1986) – draws freely from McLuhan's view of media as hidden processes that generate energy through 'fission' and 'fusion'. For example, when Virilio observes that television has finally 'exploded reality itself', he is reiterating McLuhan's account of television as the implosion of time and space in the 'absolute speed' of instant communication. McLuhan was the one of the first to see that the instant transmission of data on a global scale may cause a 'chain reaction' that renders information 'chemically explosive' (or, as one senior Pentagon official puts it, 'radio-active'). Originally designed as a radar system for guiding ballistic missiles, television generates a blast of audio-visual knowledge or 'information bomb' that evaporates space and time with its instant speed of communication. With the advent of television, then, the medium becomes the mass-age. By enabling everyone to see the same event, at the same time, from the same perspective, television ushers in an 'age of fusion and, even psychically, the hydrogen bomb . . . [an age] of interfusion, implosion' (1964: 211). This why McLuhan recommends training in rhetoric, media studies and literature as 'civil defense' against the mass media and its 'fall-out' on the social body.

Long before McLuhan began to measure the effects of new media on our private and public lives, Walter Benjamin had recognized the power of these technologies to transform our habits of perception and forms of understanding. In his widely reproduced essay, the 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1973 [1936]), for example, Benjamin argues that the advent of cinema and photography would soon reconfigure the whole 'apperceptive apparatus'. Just as psychoanalysis brings into focus an 'unconscious optics' at work beneath the surface of conscious thought, so the camera invades the substance of the world like a surgical instrument, cutting deep into the 'web of reality' to expose worlds invisible to the unarmed eye.¹² Anticipating McLuhan's argument that media are prosthetic extensions of the body (mechanical media) and of the nervous system (electric media), Benjamin suggests that the epidemic of war in the 20th century shows that the body politic has yet to 'incorporate' technology as its 'organ': 'instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches . . . and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way' (1973: 244). One of the great merits of Benjamin's essay lies in the way it shows how the ecstasy of negation in the Futurists is itself induced by the mass media and their audio-visual bombardments. In the age of mechanical reproduction, it seems, only the sublime spectacle of industrialized warfare – from the 'fiery orchids' of machine gun fire to the 'shock and awe' of nocturnal missile strikes – can supply the 'artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology' (1973: 247). For all his 'technological idealism' (Baudrillard, 1988), McLuhan offers an even more radical account of this re-engineering of the

human subject (the 'psychic apparatus') that begins in the last years of the 19th century, one that exercises a profound influence over the writings of Kittler, Virilio and Baudrillard. Dilations, extensions, projections, amputations, amplifications, macro-surgeries: McLuhan lays out the anatomy of a body torn up and retooled by technology. In fact, McLuhan even goes beyond the Futurists' 'long dreamt of metalization of the human body' when he envisions an ever more intimate coupling of man, machine and information that would resolve the ancient discord between nature and culture, *physis* and *techné*. In light of the revolution in implants and micromachines under way today, not to mention the trillions of telematic devices sustaining our wired world, we may well indeed wonder if man is becoming the 'sex organs of the machine world' (1995: 262). In the end, McLuhan came to realize that the advent of electric media not only spells the end of 'typographic man' but the end of the human body itself. 'At the speed of light,' McLuhan observes, 'everybody tends to become a nobody' (1995: 168). For while mechanical technology extends the body in space, today, after more than 100 years of electric technology, we have 'extended our nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing space and time' (1964: 24). By transforming the body into a spectre or spectrum, a being composed of light waves, virtual reality 'angelizes' and 'etherealizes' the old hardware of flesh and blood, leaving behind the ghostly figure of 'discarnate man', man as pure 'software': 'we find ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension [and simulation] of consciousness' (1964: 26).

Mass-Age

In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), his sweeping account of the upheaval in the 'media landscape' wrought by the invention of new communications technologies in the last years of the 19th century, Friedrich Kittler sets out to show the modern mass media – despite their humble, even 'animal' origins – have come to 'determine our situation'. Recalling the 'mosaic' method used by McLuhan to define the 'constellation' of events that created the Gutenberg galaxy, Kittler interlaces his dramatic history of these 'ur-media' with a strange anthology of early writings on the gramophone, film projector and typewriter. These 'myths', 'stories' and 'oracles' of technological *inventio* – together with a bizarre archive of maps, images, cartoons, photographs, technical diagrams and mathematical formulae – transform Kittler's book into a curiosity shop of media history and technology. But aside from revealing how the horror and novelty of these machines 'inscribed itself into the old paper of books' during the 'heroic' age of media invention, these fictions of science and their aesthetics of terror also conjure up the 'ghostly image of our present

as future', thus enabling Kittler to unfold another, more disturbing, story about the emergence of our own 'strategic present' (1999: xi). In Kittler's archaeology of media, the passage from writing to these new 'mechanical storage technologies' – in other words, from the Gutenberg galaxy to the Marconi constellation – is not simply a mutation in the history of aesthetics but a revolution in the mass media as 'technologies of power'. The 'energy' unleashed by these new media machines shatters the monopoly of the written word as a medium for storing and transmitting information, thus marking the emergence of a new form of media monopoly: a 'total media link on a digital base' (1999: 18).

As McLuhan (1968) points out in *War and Peace in the Global Village* (and elsewhere), this implosion of the Gutenberg galaxy arms military planners with a new ideal of total war as total mobilization of media. Ever since Thomas Alva Edison displayed his phonograph to an appreciative Chancellor Bismarck in 1887 (who did not hesitate to 'immortalize his voice in wax'), media machines have come to play an ever more decisive role in the conduct of warfare. As early as 1917 the celluloid ghosts of the cinema were pressed into military service when General Ludendorff, his forces overcome by the 'perceptual arsenal' of the British and American media campaigns, mobilized the German film industry as a force of 'persuasion' and 'political and military means of influence' (Kittler, 1999: 135).¹³ According to Ludendorff (founder of the German film industry), the 'use of film is absolutely imperative . . . for a successful conclusion to the war' (in Kittler, 1999: 131). After the First World War the ideal of total mobilization – the total effort that transforms warring states into 'monstrous foundries' and 'Vulcan-like forges' (Ernst Jünger) – will be applied to wars of information and persuasion. In fact, since the Second World War combat has steadily become a contest for mastery of the 'electromagnetic spectrum', an ethereal war of media and information. As the 'embedding' of television reporters in American combat units in Iraq demonstrates, whole sectors of the popular media have already been absorbed into the field of military perception, one phase, it seems, of a drive for 'world mediatization' (or as one hopeful military planner puts it, 'full spectrum dominance').

McLuhan's analysis of this battle of media machines sheds new light on the art of war in our age of 'strategic influence'. Just as the early sophists once laid siege to the inner polity of the soul, the 'city within' (Plato), the electric mass media open a new front in the ancient war on subjectivity – the nervous system itself. 'Now that man has extended his central nervous system by electric technology,' writes McLuhan of this new war of nerves, 'the field of battle has shifted to mental image – making and breaking, both in war and in business' (1964: 102).¹⁴ Victory in this rhetorical war means capturing the 'perceptual fields' of the soldier and civilian masses: to capture the enemy one must first captivate their 'hearts' and 'minds' (the

old *pathos* and *logos* of Aristotelian persuasion). In this sense, rhetoric, as Jünger had realized, is also a 'true steerer of combat' (Kittler, 1999: 235). Here one could trace out a history of rhetoric as spiritual force, beginning with the athletic and military *agon* between the sophists and Plato. Socrates himself learns the hard way that dialectics is not the only sweet science. 'At first I felt as though I had been struck by a skillful boxer,' Socrates confesses after some verbal sparring with Protagoras, 'and was quite blind and dizzy with the effect of his words and the noise of the applause' (in Plato, 1990: 339e). McLuhan was well aware that the rhetoric of multi-media pushes the force of persuasion all the way to the level of violence, a regression, at the heart of modernity, from persuasion to violence, *peitho* to *bia*. The Cold War, for McLuhan, is above all an 'electric battle of information and images that goes far deeper and is more obsessional than the old hot wars of industrial hardware' (1964: 295). This 'battle of the icons' is also a rhetorical battle aimed at 'eroding the collective countenance of one's rivals . . . the pen daily becomes mightier than the sword' (1964: 294). As McLuhan observed over 40 years ago, material war waged by men and machines (the 'outer conquest of space') would be ever more closely allied with immaterial war waged by media and information against the mind, body and nervous system (the 'inner conquest of spirit'). This conquest of the spirit anticipates Virilio's analysis of rhetoric as the exercise of 'spiritual force' that imparts a kinetic energy in the soldier and civilian masses (the old Roman *movere*) that 'impels them toward the battlefield'. 'From the domestication of other species to the rhythmic training of the soldier or servant to the alienation of the production worker,' writes Virilio in *The Art of the Motor*, 'we have never dominated geophysical expanse without controlling, increasingly tightly, the substance, the microphysical core of the subject' (1995: 11). This desire to dominate the innermost nexus of subjectivity takes us to the radical kernel of truth of the medium as massage.

At the heart of the modern spectacle, notes Debord, we rediscover the 'oldest social specialization – the specialization of power . . .' (1983: 49). It is useful to recall, in this context, that to be 'mediatized' (*mediatisée*) (an innovation of the Napoleonic code) originally meant to be stripped of one's immediate rights, to suffer a civil death – to be *ex-communicated*. Perhaps this is the real message of reality television, a genre that exploits all the cruelty and violence of an 'apparatus pressed into the service of ritual values' (Benjamin, 1973: 245). *Dog Eat Dog*, *Survivor*, *Boot Camp*, *Elimidate*, *Celebrity Boot Camp*, *Fear Factor*, *Temptation Island*, *The Apprentice*, *Forever Eden*, *The Weakest Link*: all of these television programmes revive the archaic rituals of ostracism and ex-communication. 'The tribe has spoken', pronounces the host of *Survivor*, snuffing out the symbolic flame as the outcasts take their solitary way off the island and back into the fiery desert of modern life (the daytime talk-show circuit).

For all his delirious tribal optimism, McLuhan knew that this new primitivism or 'retribalization' is designed to 'strip us of our civilized individuality . . . in a programmed harmony of needs and aspirations' (1995: 154). And, like Theodor Adorno, McLuhan grasped the full implications of this reproduction of the archaic in the modern mass media:

The power of radio [and electric media in general] to retribalize mankind, its almost instant reversal of individualism to collectivism, Fascist or Marxist, has gone unnoticed . . . [but] the effect of radio as a reviver of archaism and ancient memories is not limited to Hitler's Germany. (1964: 267)

It is a short step, therefore, from entertainment to psychological warfare, to rhetoric as the art of 'getting people to die for you' (Kittler, 2000: 117). As it turns out, McLuhan also has a great deal to tell us about rhetoric as a weapon of immaterial warfare: in the age of strategic influence, to convince is to conquer (*convaincre*).

In a brilliant reading of the mythology surrounding the brain of Albert Einstein and its most famous brainchild, $E = MC^2$, Roland Barthes shows how this equation conjures up the old alchemists' dream of knowledge reduced to a kind of magical formula. Einstein's formula grants us access to the 'unity of nature, the ideal possibility of a fundamental reduction of the world, the unfastening power of the word, the age-old struggle between a secret and an utterance, and the idea that total knowledge can only be discovered all at once, like a lock which suddenly opens after a thousand unsuccessful attempts' (1972: 69). For all its playfulness, Barthes' (1972: 71) reading of the myth of Einstein as an allegory of the 'infinite power of man over nature' raises a serious question: are we now fulfilling, in our age of 'cybernetic idealism, of blind faith in radiating information', the old alchemists' desire to dominate man and nature by means of system of secret knowledge (Baudrillard, 1983: 67)? If we accept for a moment McLuhan's argument that every epoch is dominated by certain media of communication (clay, papyrus, parchment, paper, celluloid, circuitry, fibre optics – the real *materiality* of media), and that each medium tends to impose its unique 'monopoly of knowledge', then it becomes apparent that the advent of computerization during the Second World War signals a new stage in the old alliance of empire and communication. Whether we call it 'cybernetic domination' (Heidegger), 'cybernetic subjection' (Virilio), a 'neo-capitalist cybernetic world order that aims at total control' (Baudrillard) or, in the plain style of the Pentagon, 'Global Information Dominance' (GID), it seems clear that this alchemy of information has produced a new form of 'domination knowledge' (*Herrschaftswissen*) (Max Scheler). By the mid 1960s McLuhan had already come to realize that the digitization of media and information – the reduction of letters to numbers or, more precisely, a sign (1) and its absence (0) – establishes a new media *imperium* that renders typography the 'ghostly paradigm of former power'.

Like a failed revolution, the collapse of the Gutenberg Galaxy and its 'monarchy' of print prepares the way for an even more despotic 'oligopoly' of information.¹⁵

Long before Virilio began to analyse the alliance of speed and politics (McLuhan's 'principle of acceleration'), McLuhan saw that the 'absolute speed' of electricity alters all the 'configurations of power' in global politics (1995: 83).¹⁶ In fact, as McLuhan points out in *Understanding Media* (and elsewhere), one of the decisive battles of the Second World War was an immaterial battle of numbers, letters and symbols waged between two titanic information machines: the German 'Enigma' machine, which encrypted the secret radio transmissions of the armed forces, and the English 'Colossus' machine, the proto-computer invented by Alan Turing to decipher Enigma's cryptic messages. Here the Heraclitean vision of the cosmos as a fiery war of opposing elements becomes the 'binomial fire movement' of computer networks and intelligent machines, and from this point forward war will be conducted with the spiritual force of data flows, information systems and other species of 'rhetorical machine' (Felix Guattari). Virilio captures the essence of this new lightning war of information and communication when he defines the National Socialist state as a 'dromocracy' founded on a lethal fusion of speed (*dromos*) and power (*kratos*), a state similar, in this respect, to the dromocracies of ancient Athens (with its currency and its naval force) and modern America (with its air force and, more recently, its 'digital force').¹⁷ But if speed is the essence of war, then the fact that military technology has overtaken speed itself, broken through the 'wall of time' (what Innis calls the 'third margin of empire'), would seem to make possible a higher ideal of total war. Even if total war, as Clausewitz is careful to point out, remains an ideal of reason, a regulative fiction that enables one to measure real war against an ideal of 'absolute' war, against the 'black light' of an infinite *polemos*, military planners are nevertheless striving to bring the ideal ever closer to experience. Total war is no longer merely war on armies, cities and civilians but war on the totality of Being, on the space-time of the natural world itself. The dromocratic assault outflanks the world, projecting force (as they say) in a 'space-time no longer of mortals but of a single war machine' (Virilio, 1986: 29). Thus, in a final twist in the dialectic of Enlightenment and its technical domination of man and nature, this *Blitzkrieg* of media machines absorbs the globe in a system of 'total illumination' and thus conquers the world 'as a field, as distance, as matter' (Virilio, 1995: 146). For all his utopian delirium, McLuhan would probably have shared Virilio's apocalyptic vision of the 'end of the world.' In the 17th century Gottlob Leibniz, dreaming of a universal language, saw in the mystic elegance of the binary system the image of divine creation. Today, in the age of Digital Force and Global Information Dominance, McLuhan would probably see the binary system as the image of domination, the great

code to a new media *imperium* that ‘normalizes that state of revolution which is war’ (McLuhan, 1995: 203).

Notes

1. As these examples suggest, Heidegger’s own account of the essence of technology as ‘enframing’ (*Gestell*) obscures one of the ‘authentic’ traits of media technologies: their rootedness in death, anxiety and finitude.

2. Ventriloquism, hypnotism, magic and phantom spirits all attend the debut of the telephone in vaudeville theatres at the end of the 19th century, a performance featuring a ‘prosthesis for a human limb, isolated on a stage, carrying a voice from a place of absence’ (Ronell, 1989: 365). No wonder the telephone proved to be too monstrous even for the Barnum and Bailey freakshow (1989: 366). ‘The Terrors of the Telephone,’ runs a *New York Graphics* newspaper headline from 1877, ‘The Orator of the Future’ (McLuhan, 1964: 236).

3. Perhaps this is why McLuhan seemed pleased to learn that ‘some find my work hallucinogenic’, since his books, like LSD, seem designed to simulate the ‘electric vortex’ of the mass media environment (though the sober Catholic goes on to observe that many of his University of Toronto colleagues find his books a ‘bad trip’). We know, however, that a more hermeneutically inclined reader, namely the Pope, seemed to enjoy the ‘inner trip’ induced by McLuhan’s ‘explorations’ of the new media landscape, for in 1973 McLuhan ascended to the position of ‘Advisor of Social Communications’ to the Vatican. Two decades later Marshall McLuhan would be elevated to the status of ‘patron saint’ – of *Wired* magazine, a publication devoted to digital culture and the ‘wired planet’.

4. Alluding (perhaps) to Marx’s definition of the commodity as a ‘social hieroglyph’, McLuhan claims that ‘cracking the code’ of the advertising industry and its regime of signs will prove to be as important as the deciphering of the hieroglyphics of the Rosetta stone. Noting the ‘remarkable regression’ to the pictographic language of ancient Egypt, the film director Abel Gance observes that our eyes have ‘not yet adjusted’ to the luminous hieroglyphics this new cinematic language. Adorno, too, sought to decode the hieroglyphic rhetoric of mass culture. According to Adorno, the modern mass media belong to the ‘thousand-year empire of an industrial caste system governed by a stream of never-ending dynasties’ (1998: 80). For this reason, the culture industry expresses itself in a ‘priestly hieroglyphic script which addresses its images to those that have been subjugated not in order that they might be enjoyed, but only that they be read’ (1998: 80). Even the neon signs illuminating the urban landscape are so many ‘allegorical seals’ of the end of culture, ‘comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death’ (1998: 83).

5. Marx saw the mass media – like the ‘mist-enveloped’ world of the commodity and its ‘necromancy’ – as the realm of the living dead. Recalling Hegel’s definition of money as the ‘life of what is dead, moving within itself’, Marx likens the extraction of surplus value from the social body to a kind of vampirism: the commodity ‘assumes the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labour power’ (1970: 52). In ‘Myth Today’ Barthes also turns to the image of embalming to describe how ideology transfigures history into nature, dialectics into paralysis. Ideology preserves itself by ‘injecting into reality some purifying essence which will stop its transformation, its flight towards other forms of existence’ (which is why his student, Baudrillard, speaks of

the freezing of the message in a 'vacuous ether' and the 'glaciation of meaning'). For Barthes, as for Marx, ideology is the realm of the undead, and the rhetoric of the commodity a 'language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious, degraded survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve [and] turns them into speaking corpses' (1972: 133). And yet, beneath the 'mystical veil' of ideology that shrouds the commodity in enigmas, riddles and 'theological subtleties', we rediscover the real body of the commodity as the materialization of labour, what Marx calls a 'crystal of social substance'.

6. Nietzsche was one of the first thinkers to recognize the intimate rapport between 'brainwork' (*Kopfarbeit*) and media technologies. 'Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts', he writes in 1882, even as his own style was shifting – thanks to his typewriter – from 'arguments to aphorisms, from thoughts to puns, from rhetoric to telegram style' (Kittler, 1999: 203). Nietzsche even types up a fine little ode to his own Malling Hansen machine: 'The writing ball is a thing like me: made of /iron/yet easily twisted on journeys' (in Kittler, 1999: 207).

7. Before Einstein, Lewis Carroll had mapped out the space-time of this new world of electric media. Once Alice passes through the 'vanishing point of the visual world, breaking the hardware of the looking-glass world, she became involved in a series of rapid metamorphoses' (McLuhan, 1964: 68).

8. Even in his most pessimistic moments ('only a God can save us now . . .'), however, Heidegger could not have imagined that 1.6 billion television sets would be in use by the year 2000.

9. We note in passing that in 1781 de Luthorbouurg, a theatrical scene-painter (much like the sophists or 'shadowplayers' of Plato's underground theatre), had already restored cinema to its Platonic heritage by crafting a *camera obscura* device named, in good Platonic fashion, the '*eidophusikon*'.

10. In a sense, by identifying the 'inner greatness' of the National Socialist movement with the confrontation of global technology and modern man, Heidegger, as *Rektor* (or, as he preferred, *Fuhrer*) of the University of Freiburg, became one of the 'monstrous creatures of technology, assimilated to machines' he so abhorred (Zimmerman, 1990: 48). The final distinction between thinker and 'trench-worker' was levelled in 1945 when Heidegger was ordered to perform the 'work-service' he had demanded of his pupils eleven years earlier in his Rectoral address: deemed one of the most 'expendable' by the Party, he was set to work digging ditches along the Rhine in the last months of the war.

11. We cannot follow McLuhan, however, when he describes television as a Zoroastrian 'fire god'.

12. The analogy between camera and scalpel is instructive. The camera cuts into the flow of time to capture a moment of decision, the *punctum* or '*kairos* of desire', as Barthes calls it in *Camera Lucida*. As Ernst Jünger, war hero and photography buff, puts it, the photographic shot 'holds fast the bird in flight just as much as it does the man in the 'moment of truth [*Augenblick*] in which he gets torn apart in an explosion' (Zimmerman, 1990: 57). In the blink of an eye the instant becomes eternal, which is why early photography – 'spirit photography' – focused on the portrait as a means of communing with the dead.

13. In fact, since Richard Gatling's machine gun furnished the revolving barrel for the film projector, the history of movies may be said to coincide with the 'history of automatic weapons. The transport of pictures only repeats the transport of bullets' (Kittler, 1999: 124). With the lethal synthesis of camera and machine gun in Etienne-Jules Marey's 'chronophotographic gun', the historical collusion between cinema and warfare seemed complete: 'mechanized death was perfected

. . . what the machine gun annihilated the camera made immortal' (1999: 124). Seemed complete. For the cinematic motor also sets in motion a 'whole new cycle of light' that will culminate in a system of global surveillance and 'total illumination' (1999: 74). Of course, today's smart weaponry strikes a new note in the ancient and 'deadly harmony' between eye and weaponry, for the missile guides the spectator's eye into its target in the televisual spectacle of the so-called 'surgical strike'.

14. As McLuhan notes, this war of information creates an 'insubstantial world of pseudo-events' and, with it, a new type of human being, what Albert Speer at the Nuremberg trials called the 'uncritical recipient of orders' (1964: 36).

15. There are many different names for this mutation in the history of media: 'post-industrial society' (Daniel Bell); the 'programmed society' (Claude Lefort); the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord); 'postmodern society' (Lyotard); 'semurgic society' (Baudrillard); the 'network society' (Manuel Castells); and countless others.

16. In a similar fashion, the speed of the railway system during the Civil War – the first war of mass transportation – had raised the pitch of battle to 'unheard of intensity' (McLuhan, 1964: 101).

17. Another connection between speed and politics has recently come to light. Doctors researching the medical archives of the Third Reich have recently determined that from 1941 to 1945 Hitler's physician, Dr Theodor Morell, was injecting Hitler daily with high doses of methamphetamine – 'speed'.

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