

The Fifth Law of Media

Barrington Nevitt and Maurice McLuhan ask, “Who was Marshall McLuhan?” (Nevitt & McLuhan, 1995) and in a series of interviews and reminiscences with colleagues, collaborators and students, attempt to answer that question. Throughout their book, Nevitt and Maurice McLuhan explore aspects of Marshall McLuhan’s life, work and method in order to provide the reader a vicarious experience of the late professor’s unusual and often controversial approach to observing the world. But rather than exploring the man by asking “who?” perhaps a more revealing approach might be to explore his work by asking “what?” – *what* was Marshall McLuhan? By taking an uncommon standpoint, and considering his body of work refracted through an admittedly unconventional analytic prism, we have the opportunity to re-evaluate his unique style, turn his own method back on himself, and in doing so, perhaps reveal new insight and observational tools for our world.

McLuhan as Satirist

Marshall McLuhan was, to the naïve observer, merely an English Professor at University of Toronto’s St. Michael’s College from 1946 until his death in December, 1980. He is often called a media theorist – although in personal communication to Derrick de Kerckhove, he maintained that, “I have no theories, only observations.” Various, he has been accused of being a prophet, a philosopher, a futurist and a “culturologist” (Federman & de Kerckhove, 2003, p. xii). Novelist Tom Wolfe crowned McLuhan “the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Pavlov” (Wolfe, 1968, p. 138).

How did McLuhan regard himself? In 1976, Michael Hornyansky wrote an essay in which he describes a “McLuhanite fringe” that advocates the demise of the printed book. In

response, McLuhan wrote, “Those people who think that I am an enemy of the book have simply not read my work, nor thought about the problem. Most of my writing is *Menippean satire, presenting the actual surface of the world we live in as a ludicrous image*” (Molinaro, McLuhan & Toye, 1987, p. 517; emphasis added). Three years prior, McLuhan, responding to a request to publish a selection of his writings on education wrote, “So far I have not had anything to say to educators directly. *The gist of my approach is satirical* – in so far as the satirical wrenching of the dormant perceptual life is educational, I might be squeezed into that category” (McLuhan, 1973; emphasis added).

McLuhan assumed a thoughtful posture with respect to satirists. Consider the great respect he demonstrated for the work of cartoonist Al Capp, whose *Li'l Abner* comic strip figured prominently in several of McLuhan's books. In *Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan observes,

Capp looks at the disordered world around him not as a social reformer who imagines that much good would result from a few changes in external features of business and political administration; he sees these situations refracted through the deeply willed deceptions every person practices upon himself. The criticism which is embedded in his highly parabolic entertainment, therefore, has a complexity which is the mark of wisdom. He moves in a world of many dimensions, each of which includes and reflects upon the other (McLuhan, 1951, p. 64).

In this reflection on Capp's contribution to the critical landscape of the time, McLuhan directs our attention to an important foundation of his own work – “the deeply willed deceptions every person practices upon himself.” The idea that we deliberately and willingly ignore reality in favour of a comforting fantasy becomes a pervasive theme throughout McLuhan's subsequent books and frequent public appearances. After publishing *Mechanical Bride*, his lifelong project was one of finding new ways to observe interpersonal and intra-societal dynamics that are non-obvious and therefore, not readily observed. In other

words, McLuhan sought methods that would allow him to reveal the hidden ground, or context of human interactions, despite the distraction of the figure – that which we obviously notice, and to which we pay attention.

McLuhan's quest – and question – could be considered thus: How can one create conditions so that the “deeply willed deceptions” that prevent accurate observation are eliminated? Is there a corrective lens that reverses the prism of self-deception?

Material Cause – The Tetrad of Four Media Laws

Eric McLuhan suggests an almost simplistic approach: Know what is going to happen, and where it is going to happen, before it happens. “Simply knowing in advance which transformations to expect, knowing where and how to look, lets you predict the effects of any new device or technique before they actually appear in time and experience” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 8). For more than a decade, Marshall McLuhan, in collaboration with his son, Eric, sought the desired predictive framework, consisting of a set of heuristics that could be tested against any, and all, human artefacts. Their objective was “to draw attention to situations that are still in process, situations that are structuring new perception and shaping new environments, even while they are restructuring old ones...” (p. 116). What they discovered became known as the laws of media, articulated as four questions:

- What does it extend, enhance, accelerate, intensify or enable?
- When pushed beyond the limit of its potential, it will reverse what were its original characteristics; into what does it reverse?
- What does it displace or obsolesce, that is, render relatively without dominant power or influence?

- What does it retrieve from the past that had been formerly obsolesced? (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 98-99)

These four questions, or probes, are arranged in appositional form as a tetrad of four quadrants. The tetrad structure is meant to suggest that these four aspects occur simultaneously, and are inherent properties of the artefact under consideration. As well, the specific arrangement – extension, reversal, obsolescence, and retrieval, beginning at the upper left corner and moving clockwise – illustrates relationships among pairs of aspects: the upper pair relative to the lower pair; the left column pair relative to the right.

The McLuhans insisted that there were precisely four laws, and claimed that, in “over twelve years of constant investigation ... we have been unable to find a fifth question that applies to all media or to locate a single instance in which one of the four is clearly absent or irrelevant” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1998, p. 7). Indeed, the introduction to *Laws of Media* contains a *challenge* to the readers to find a fifth law, or to discover an instance in which one of the specified four laws does not apply. A reader might be excused for concluding that such a pompous claim of completeness, and the almost belligerent challenge, were merely expressions of McLuhan arrogance. But, interpreting these rather bold statements through the prism of satire – envisioning, for instance, the challenge being issued with a broad, knowing wink – might suggest something else. If interpreted using the devices of satire, and specifically Menippean satire, a hypothetical fifth law may well be revealed through the course of the book. That path of exploration begins by considering the derivation of the four media laws.

**Efficient Cause –
Derivation from Previous Works, and the Linguistic Nature of the Tetrad**

Three of the four laws – extension, reversal and obsolescence – are mentioned in *Understanding Media*. (McLuhan, 1964) Indeed, the subtitle and major theme of that book, “the extensions of man,” clearly illustrates the first law. Chapter 3 of *Understanding Media* is entitled, “Reversal of the Overheated Medium,” and deals with the “break boundary at which the system suddenly changes into another ... in its dynamic processes” (p. 38). Throughout that chapter, and elsewhere in the book, McLuhan highlights the paradoxes of technologies and human innovations throughout the ages that, upon extreme intensification, reverse their original characteristics. Additionally, McLuhan introduces the idea of obsolescence when he discusses the diminishment of one sense in favour of the intensification of another, as well as the “autoamputation” of those parts of ourselves that become extensions in new media.

Other of McLuhan’s work illustrate one or more of the four media laws. *From Cliché to Archetype* (McLuhan & Watson, 1970) concerns itself with obsolescence, reversal and retrieval. “Our theme in *From Cliché to Archetype* is simply the scrapping of all poetic innovation and cliché when it has reached a certain stage of use ... cast aside to become ‘the rag-and-bone shop of the heart’ – that is, the world of the archetype” (p. 127). The phrase, “rag-and-bone shop of the heart” is a reference to W.B. Yeats’s poem, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” from which McLuhan derives the inspiration of renewal “to elicit creativity from these middenheaps ... of modern culture” (p. 184), the retrieval of an outmoded and worn cliché as an archetype. Similarly, *Take Today: The executive as dropout* (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972) primarily concerns itself with reversals in the economic and business realm: from centralized control to decentralization; from hardware to software orientation (manufacturing to services); and from jobs into roles.

What is characteristic of McLuhan's nine major works that span from *Understanding Media* through to the posthumously published *Laws of Media* is their semantic style. The style, and McLuhan's objective in using this style, is made particularly clear in the book, *Culture is Our Business* (McLuhan, 1970). This book is constructed of matched pairs of pages: on the right-hand page is a reproduction of a print advertisement of the time; on the left are several short paragraphs of text that obliquely – and often non-obviously – relate to each other and to the advertisement. The book acts as a set of puzzles, leaving the reader to determine the contextual dynamics that connect the elements on each pair of pages. McLuhan never explains the meaning. The reader must discover the hidden ground from the interaction among the presented artefacts.

McLuhan's other books behave similarly. They *challenge* their readers by juxtaposing various thematic artefacts – partially developed ideas, text fragments, quotations from Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, graphics, photographs, short essays – to discover the hidden dynamics of the restructuring of human affairs by modern technologies. Rather than being explicative, McLuhan, ever the explorer, leaves it to the reader to follow his partially trodden path through the jungle of his often dense prose. What the reader specifically discovers at the end of the journey is not McLuhan's concern. As he says, "I don't want them to believe me. I just want them to think" (Turner, 1966).

The process of exploration, revelation, and possibly even discovery from amongst the juxtaposition of various disparate elements is precisely the process of the laws of media tetrad. Through the act of constructing the tetrad, four apparently unrelated aspects that are, according to McLuhan, intrinsic qualities of a medium are placed in direct cognitive proximity to one another. From these, and their relative positions to one another, the would-

be media-explorer is to discover a hidden ground whose dynamics are “structuring new perception and shaping new environments, even while they are restructuring old ones” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 116). Derived and refined from the style and technique of McLuhan’s earlier works, the laws of media themselves are structured to find what is hidden from amongst juxtaposed elements.

Writing to Edward T. Hall in 1975, McLuhan reveals another, salient discovery: “I have recently done another book on *The Laws of the Media* [sic] (not yet published), explaining the *linguistic character* of all human artefacts, hardware or software” (Molinaro, McLuhan & Toye, 1987, p. 515; emphasis added). What is this linguistic character of which McLuhan writes? Marshall and Eric McLuhan observed a connection between the media they were investigating and the linguistic construct of metaphor. Eric McLuhan explains, “Finding the link to metaphor led to one of the farthest-reaching realizations, which itself tied directly back to the subtitle of *UM*, ‘the extensions of man.’ Utterings are outerings (extensions), so media are not *as* words, they actually *are* words, and we had stumbled upon the key to their verbal structure” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. ix; emphasis in original).

The offered explanation is, of course, flawed logic in a strictly syllogistic sense: all words are utterings; all utterings are ‘outerings,’ or extensions of man; all extensions of man are media; therefore all words are media. However, according to the rules of deductive reasoning, this would suggest that all media are not necessarily words. Fortunately, Marshall McLuhan did not seemingly feel the need to be constrained by the doctrine of formal logic that he considered to be merely an artefact of a literate ground. (McLuhan, 1962) Instead, this (albeit slightly flawed) realization allowed the McLuhans to broaden the applicability of their methods.

We learned that they applied to more than what is conventionally called media: they were applicable to the products of all human endeavour, and also to the endeavour itself! ... we extended the application of the laws to the arts and sciences. We found that everything man makes and does, every procedure, every style, every artefact, every poem, song, painting, gimmick, gadget, theory, technology – every product of human effort – manifested the same four dimensions (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. ix).

Formal Cause – The Medium is the Message

McLuhan originally defined a medium as any extension of ourselves, and the message of the medium as “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8). As I have written elsewhere,

McLuhan always thought of a medium in the sense of a growing medium, like the fertile potting soil into which a seed is planted, or the agar in a Petri dish. In other words, a medium – this extension of our body or senses or mind – is anything from which a change emerges. And since some sort of change emerges from everything we conceive or create, all of our inventions, innovations, ideas and ideals are McLuhan media. Thus we have the meaning of “the medium is the message”: We can know the nature and characteristics of anything we conceive or create (medium) by virtue of the changes – often unnoticed and non-obvious changes – that they effect (message) (Federman, 2003, ¶ 8).

From Formal Cause to Final Cause – The Narrative Arc

By extending the applicability of the media laws – and in doing so, extending the definition of medium to include all creations and conceptions of humankind – McLuhan defined and completed his narrative arc from *Understanding Media* to *Laws of Media*. This arc of nine works, considered *in toto*, is particularly interesting, not for what they include, but more for what they do not. Throughout the intermediary seven books – from *The Medium is the Message* in 1967 through *Take Today* in 1972 – McLuhan introduces almost no new concepts that were not already present in *Understanding Media*. In fact, there is a considerable amount of thematic repetition among these books. A reader, sequentially traversing McLuhan’s literature, could be excused for experiencing a certain degree of *déjà vu* by the

time s/he completed *War and Peace in the Global Village* (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968), the fourth of the arc of nine. For a scholar of McLuhan's calibre, this seems rather unusual. Given the relatively prolific flow of ideas among his first three books – *Mechanical Bride*, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and *Understanding Media* – not to mention a large portfolio of essays and articles of literary criticism, and his lauded dissertation on the Trivium and *The Role of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*, the lack of new ideas is surprising, to say the least. We are moved to ask, why?

Scholars of oral tradition would recognize the role of repetition and progressive refinement of idea presentation that it represents. As Albert Lord reports,

There came a time in Homeric scholarship when it was not sufficient to speak of the “repetitions” in Homer, of the “stock epithets,” of the “epic clichés” and “stereotyped phrases.” ... The result was a definition of the “formula” as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.” By this definition the ambiguity of “repetitions” was eliminated; we were henceforth to deal with repeated word groups... Furthermore, the opprobrium attached to “clichés” and “stereotyped” has been removed (Lord, 2000, p. 30).

Lord goes on to observe that,

Surely the formula has not the same value to the mature singer that it has to the young apprentice; it also has different values to the highly skilled and to the unskilled, less imaginative bard. We may otherwise think of the formula as being ever the same no matter from whose lips it proceeds. Such uniformity is scarcely true of any element of language; for language always bears the stamp of its speaker. ... For the singing we hear today ... goes back in a direct and long series of singings to a beginning which, no matter how difficult it may be to conceive, *we must attempt to grasp, because otherwise we shall miss an integral part of the meaning* of the traditional formula (Lord, 2000, p. 31; emphasis added).

In *The Singer of Tales*, Lord describes how these formulae that appear as repetitive “clichés” and “epithets” have been refined through generations of experience. A particular phrasing evolves to express very precise ideas in a particular manner, so as to fit the poetic

form of expression during performance. In a manner that is a striking retrieval of the epic bard, McLuhan, academically a “mature singer,” repeats certain formulations of ideas that have repeatedly proven their effectiveness in achieving his almost mythic task: revealing the hidden dynamics of an unseen societal ground under conditions of pervasive technological change.

Rather than using subsequent books to further demonstrate his erudition, McLuhan chooses instead to hone his thinking tools, taking considerable time to “explore contours” of ideas, all the while refining his methods of observation and analysis against various aspects of his contemporary times. In doing so, McLuhan embodies his admonition that “the medium is the message.” The books’ content will not assist McLuhan’s readers to understand the world – it is the underlying effects of the tools used to construct the content that will. Indeed, early in his writing, McLuhan warns his readers that, “it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8).

If we consider McLuhan’s corpus from *Understanding Media* through *Laws of Media* as a medium itself, we can measure the repetition of ideas against Lord’s contention that such repetition serves the objective of refinement for a purpose. This allows us to observe the distillation process of McLuhan’s essential thinking tools with which he was able to perceive hidden grounds and anticipate future outcomes. What emerges are constructs that are now considered McLuhan’s fundamental thinking tools (Gordon, 1997; Theall, 2001; Federman & de Kerckhove, 2003). These constructs include the four media laws – extension, reversal, obsolescence, retrieval – meaning derived from figure relative to ground, metaphor as a transformative agent, and the use of humour to reveal hidden ground.

There are, of course, elements introduced in McLuhan's earlier works that are dropped along the line. The concept of "light-on" versus "light-through," an idea first introduced in *Understanding Media* as an incorrectly-interpreted empirical result¹, reappears only in the second chapter of *Laws of Media*, having been absent from the intervening books. The notions of sensory imbalance and autoamputation become less prominent through McLuhan's narrative arc. Admittedly, these are less-useful observational tools than are those mentioned earlier. However, there is an anomaly in this line of reasoning. One element that seems to consistently appear throughout all of McLuhan's latter nine works is notably absent from explicit articulation in *Laws of Media*. That element is satire.

From Formal Cause to Final Cause – The Satiric Arc

McLuhan's use of satire is evident from the beginning of *Understanding Media*. Eric McLuhan observes,

The style of *UM* had been deliberately chosen for its abrasive and discontinuous character, and was forged over many redraftings. It was designed deliberately to provoke the reader, to jar the sensibilities into a form of awareness that better complemented the subject-matter. This is a poetic technique ... of a high sort – ***satirizing the reader directly as a means of training him*** (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. viii; emphasis added).

The title of the 1967 work, *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967), is itself a satire of McLuhan's by-then famous aphorism, "the medium is the message." However, it is the closing pages of the book that, once again, satirizes the reader. The last several pages show an illustration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, in which the hookah-smoking Caterpillar speaks to Alice, amidst a superimposed crowd of silhouetted figures, each with a number in place of its face. It is captioned with a dialogue excerpt from *Alice*, with the Caterpillar asking, "...and who are you?" "I – I hardly know, sir, just at present

– at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (p. 152-155). McLuhan is once again satirizing his readers – depicted as anonymous numbers in a crowd – whom he has “changed several times” since the beginning of the book.

The title of McLuhan’s 1968 work, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968) suggests an attempt at constructing a literary epic. However, its subtitle – “an inventory of some of the current spastic situations that could be eliminated by more feedforward” – is itself an “epic,” or at least an *epyllion*, satire of the pithy subtitle that was typical of the time. The choice of subtitle was deliberate, not capricious: Donald Theall comments that he “collaborated with him [McLuhan], co-discovering the importance of the brief epic or *epyllion*, particularly the brief comic epic” (Theall, 2001, p. 28).

From Cliché to Archetype (McLuhan & Watson, 1970) satirizes both readers and the effects of the phonetic alphabet – and hence the book form itself – in yet a new way. The book’s chapters are arranged in alphabetical order according to the chapter title. As a broad signal indicating what should be expected, the book commences with “Absurd, Theatre of the” and positions the “Introduction” and “Table of Contents” deep within. The last chapter, fittingly, is “Theatre,” a reminder that the entire opus, from beginning to end, is a staged put-on.

His last major published work prior to his death, *Take Today: The executive as dropout* (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972) “is full of original and useful ideas mired in wordplay, sidetracks and happenstance gibberish” (Federman & de Kerckhove, 2003, p. 10). This is a decidedly odd way to speak to managers and executives, but, upon reflection, seems to be a parody of convoluted and obfuscating business language itself.

Taken together, it is clear that McLuhan was not joking when he responded to Hornyansky that most of his writing – not to mention his approach – was satirical. It is therefore curious to observe that, of all the recurrent themes and methodological devices – if indeed McLuhan’s most effective thinking tools can be collectively classified as a methodology – the one that is missing from explicit discussion in *Laws of Media* is satire – and specifically, Menippean satire.

Menippean Satire

Menippus was a slave in Asia Minor in the 3rd c. B.C.E. who, upon buying his freedom, moved to Thebes and became a cynic philosopher satirist. According to Carter Kaplan, Marcus Aurelius called Menippus “a mocker of man’s ephemeral existence” (Kaplan, 2000, p. 45). Menippus directed his satirical critique against philosophers, their learned systems of epistemology and knowledge, and what he perceived as the corrupt institutions that supported them. He is credited for being the first to deal with serious philosophical matters in a comical fashion, and for introducing the combination of both prose and verse in the same monologue, effectively creating ancient “multimedia.”

The satirical tradition passed to Roman satirist Lucian who often included a fictional hero called Menippus in his stories. For instance, in his *Icaromenippus*, Lucian sends Menippus to Hades where he is literally bored to tears by dead philosophers. (Kaplan, 2000) Menippus flies up to Heaven to complain to the gods, who, also moved to tears, vow to destroy the philosophers. Menippus returns to gleefully inform the doomed, dead philosophers. As this tale is related in *Icaromenippus*, an almost modern satirical style – one that would not be out of place on the satirical television program, *Saturday Night Live* – begins to emerge.

Eric McLuhan cites Eugene Kirk's characterization of Menippean satire to describe the style and rhetorical devices of his father's works:

The chief mark of Menippean style was unconventional diction. Neologisms, portmanteau words, macaronics, preciosity, coarse vulgarity, catalogues, bombast, mixed languages, and protracted sentences were typical of the genre, sometimes appearing all together in the same work. In outward structure, Menippean satire was a medley – usually a medley of alternative prose and verse, sometimes a jumble of flagrantly digressive narrative, or again a potpourri of tales, songs, dialogues, orations, letters, lists, and other brief forms, mixed together. Menippean topical elements included outlandish fictions (i.e. fantastic voyages, dreams, visions, talking beasts) and extreme distortions of argument (often 'paradoxes.')

(Kirk, 1980, p. xi; in McLuhan, 1997, p. 8)

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist and critic, identified fourteen distinct characteristics that are typical of Menippean satire throughout the ages. These include a comic or “carnival” element; freedom from accuracy with inventive plots and philosophical approaches; absurd situations used to seek, reveal, and test the truth of ideas rather than the human character; altered observational standpoints or states of consciousness that enable new perspectives on situations and life; deliberate violations of social conventions to create new awareness of old forms; mixed media forms and genres in which the medium itself assumes a significance beyond its content; and a heightened concern for contemporary issues and salient topics of the day. (Bakhtin, 1984)

Menippean satiric style has been adopted by many writers, including Rabelais, Erasmus, Pope, Voltaire, Swift, Cervantes, Carroll, and Joyce. Today, comedian Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* demonstrates both the form and intent of Menippean satire. All of these writers share a common purpose. “Menippean satire mirrors a world that is in ceaseless motion and where nothing is certain... [I]ts authors' intentions seem, in nearly every case, to demonstrate the disabling and limiting conditions under which the human

intellect operates” (Blanchard, 1995, p. 11). Eric McLuhan is more specific about the role Menippean satire plays in creating awareness among an otherwise oblivious public.

As an active form, a Menippean satire goes to any extreme necessary in order to frustrate objectivity or detachment on the part of the reader. ... Cynics, and Diogenes in particular ... were often referred to as ‘laughing philosophers,’ for they refused to take seriously any political, private, social, intellectual, or other kind of pretentiousness” (McLuhan, 1997, p. 5).

Instead they create what Eric McLuhan calls the “cynic effect” – a satirical response that creates new awareness by awakening the dulled perception of the reader. Thus, Menippean satire is not merely humour or irony, but humour or irony with a specific intentionality.

It is, according to Northrop Frye, the intentionality that distinguishes satire from mere irony, that is a component of many humorous – and even tragic – forms. “Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack” (Frye, 1957, p. 224). Irony itself is the “humor founded on ... a sense of the grotesque or absurd,” as Frye describes. Irony is the delivery vehicle; it is the attack that transforms irony into satire. As Frye observes, “The chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony” (p. 223).

Eric McLuhan points out that in each age of an advance in technology, the Menippeans are there to reveal “the readers’ ignorance of and assumptions about that culture, and on the technology of language as an up-to-date storehouse of the culture’s experience and perception” (McLuhan, 1997, p. 12). For example, he associates Rabelais with the printing press and Flaubert with the newspaper. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* satirize the five divisions of classical rhetoric as an attack on “the prevailing abuses of religion and of learning” (*ibid.*). He concludes that today,

a Cynic would promptly stand you on your head and force you to see your world aright; your ground, anew, and long enough for the fresh awareness to settle into habit. In so doing, the Cynic writers simply bring up-to-date centuries- or millennia-old techniques for reading the Book of the World (McLuhan, 1997, p. 13).

The specifically Menippean forms of satire are not merely reactions to the absurdity of the modern condition, but rather create the *consciousness* of that absurdity. It is the consciousness and intentionality that gives these forms of satire their force and effect to heighten awareness, particularly of the underlying context, or ground, of the situation.

The Tetrad as a Menippean Form – Revealing the Fifth Law

Carter Kaplan draws on the empiricists who maintain that “words are connected to the world by the mediation of ideas derived from experience” (Kaplan, 2000, p. 21). In this observation, Kaplan makes a connection between sensory-based epistemology and “common sense epistemology” (p. 22) – understanding via connections between actions or words, and the context in which either one exists and has effect. Here, Kaplan agrees with Marshall McLuhan who expresses the same emergence of meaning as the relationship between figure and ground. Kaplan continues by identifying the specific intent of Menippean satire relative to deriving meaning from reality:

It is important to understand that these forms are rooted in and are an expression of the genre’s analytical purpose. ... Menippean satire relies upon fictive verisimilitude to properly and comprehensively critique (or anatomize) its topic and promote an accurate vision of a manifold reality (Kaplan, 2000, p. 52).

Laws of Media: The new science precisely adopts the stance of the Menippean satirist – it takes conventional, deterministic and causal scientific method, and stands it on its head. The tetrads challenge conventional dichotomous notions, and traditional sequential causality “long enough for the fresh awareness to settle into habit,” as Eric McLuhan (1997, p.13)

says. The media laws do not work without the method of the Menippean satirist and a Cynical worldview.

For example, the tetradic elements are intended to be considered simultaneously, despite the fact that the various effects may occur at very different times. Such a consideration introduces a characteristically oxymoronic paradox of Menippean satire. Further, considering simultaneous effects suggests that the tetrad necessitates an unusual observational stance – not necessarily a changed physical point of view, but rather an unfamiliar vantage point in time that introduces the requisite satirical new perception of scale. Its intention is indeed motivated by a desire to seek, reveal, and test the truth in a way that will restructure the reader's perception of the world, thereby revealing the dynamics of an otherwise hidden ground. Given these characteristically satirical elements, and the fact that *Laws of Media* draws from every persistent cognitive device in McLuhan's repertoire, it is then surprising that the tetrads do not explicitly probe the cynical and satirical aspects of the world they are meant to observe.

It is surprising, but only until one realizes that McLuhan's intent is to reveal hidden grounds. Just as the laws of media are structured to find what is hidden from amongst juxtaposed elements, *Laws of Media*, the book, might also be structured so that an astute reader would be able to find what is hidden from amongst its juxtaposed elements. Thus, we must examine its structure relative to McLuhan's own cognitive ground at the time.

Laws of Media is comprised of five chapters. According to biographer Terrence Gordon, in the 1970s, Marshall McLuhan was reconsidering his analytical world in relation to groupings of threes – corresponding to Catholicism's Holy Trinity – and especially groupings of fives – the divisions of classical rhetoric.

It had been with him since he wrote his dissertation on Thomas Nashe. After more than thirty years, it seemed to have a new urgency. McLuhan plunged afresh into the study of the five divisions of classical rhetoric: *inventio* (discovery), *dispositio* (arrangement), *memoria* (memory), *elocutio* (embellishment), and *pronunciatio* (delivery)...

The floodgates were open. The five-part division was everywhere: the Lord's Prayer, the Decades of the Rosary (three times five), Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, Voltaire, Cervantes, Rabelais, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Eliot, Dante, Shakespeare...

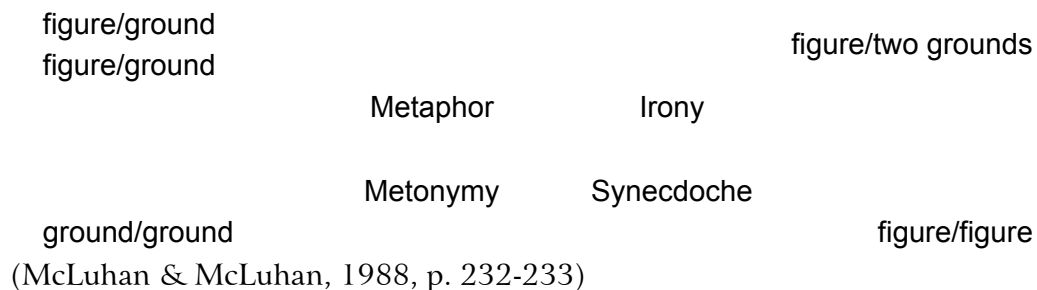
Approached in this way, the parts of rhetoric constituted a hidden ground. They were rhetorical *logos*, not seen because analyzed as content instead of as relation. This was the link for McLuhan with the huge analytic framework he had set out in his Nashe dissertation: "For centuries these parts were considered as inherent in the *Logos*, or the *Verbum*, as resonating simultaneously. Hence Horace's remark that 'every play must have five acts' has been misconstrued since the Renaissance [i.e., Gutenberg] as if it were referring to something sequential or *seriatim* [like type]." Here was not only the appeal of the study for McLuhan but its link with his media analysis: "[*elocutio*] is *mimesis mode – that of put-on*, i.e. its concern is with ground..." (Gordon, 1997, pp. 272-273; emphasis added).

It is therefore not surprising that *Laws of Media* has five chapters, and that the five chapters correspond to Horace's "five acts," comprising McLuhan's "play," that tells the story of his later-life intellectual and creative output.

The first chapter that examines visual and acoustic space retrieves the subject matter and themes of McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). The second chapter, entitled "Culture and Communication" covers the ground of *Understanding Media*. The third chapter, calling itself "Laws of Media" actually describes the process of deriving the four media laws, and roughly corresponds to the narrative arc of the seven works between *Understanding Media* and *Laws of Media*. The fourth chapter provides numerous examples of completed tetrads, representing the end of that narrative arc. Then, there is the fifth chapter, a chapter called "Media Poetics."

“Media poetics” analyzes the tetrad itself as a rhetorical form, considering its linguistic transformational properties in terms of the various forms of metaphor. The McLuhans identify four specific forms: metaphor, “a means of perceiving one thing in terms of another” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 231), synecdoche that “presents the part for the whole or the whole for the part” (p. 231), metonymy that “presents of the thing either its quality or attribute or something closely related to it” (p. 232), and irony as playing with “double signification” working by the process of reversal to convey the opposite meaning to what is actually said. They then relate these various forms of renaming or resignifying in terms of the action of pairs of figure-ground combinations:

Metaphor uses two figures and two grounds; metonymy uses qualities, which do not admit of fragmenting or measurement but are pervasive, aspects of [two] ground[s], as it were. ... Synecdoche is part-whole [figure-figure] quantifiable, irony “splits” in another way. Irony splits figure from ground and splits the consciousness of the knowers. On the stage, for example, an irony will have one meaning (restricted) for the characters, another and fuller one for the audience ... though the words – figures – are identical. Thus:



In light of McLuhan’s near-obsession with finding, or creating correspondences with, the five divisions of rhetoric, what *is* surprising is that only four laws are identified, especially when the tetrad is considered as a rhetorical form. But McLuhan’s use of a rhetorical structure is indeed opportune: Quintillian reminds us “that nothing can be omitted or inserted without the fact of the omission or insertion being obvious...” (*Quintillian XI. ii. p. 38-39*).

Among the various permutations of two figures and two grounds, one is clearly missing: two figures with one ground. This could be considered as one artefact or idea (figure) relative to a given context (ground) that is then replaced by another artefact or idea such that a ridiculous circumstance is created. The “comic or ‘carnival’ element,” with its “inventive plot and philosophical approach,” uses an “absurd situation to seek, reveal and test the truth” of the ground so revealed. Recalling these specific aspects of Bakhtin’s fourteen characteristics of Menippean satire, this, of course, is the action of Menippean satire.

This revelation can be tested by attempting to map each of the rhetorical divisions against a corresponding identified form of metaphor. In the fifth chapter of *Laws of Media*, the McLuhans emphasize that conventional metaphor involves arrangements of pairs of figures and ground in relation to each other, clearly corresponding to *dispositio* (arrangement). Metonymy, that works via connotation of previously experienced attributes can correspond to *memoria* (memory). Similarly, synecdoche creates its linguistic effect through figure or denotation that can correspond to discovery or *inventio*. Finally, irony, as discussed previously, concerns itself with delivery – *pronunciatio*.

That leaves *elocutio*. The missing part of the puzzle is answered by McLuhan himself who wrote, “[*elocutio*] is mimesis mode – that of put-on...” (McLuhan in Gordon, 1997, p. 273). McLuhan’s deliberate choice of the term, “put-on,” clearly recalls his frequent use of that popular idiom to refer to satire. And indeed, mimesis is a crucial element of Menippean satire. Carter Kaplan observes that, “Menippean satire relies on fictive verisimilitude to properly and comprehensively critique (or anatomize) its topic” (Kaplan, 2000, p. 52) Blanchard Scott concurs: “Menippean satire mirrors a world that is in ceaseless motion...” (Scott, 1995, p. 11).

In the fifth and last chapter of *Laws of Media*, the McLuhans very carefully and meticulously dissect the tetrad as transformational metaphor by revealing the mechanisms of interactions among figures and grounds, related directly to the tetrad's "linguistic character" and, more specifically, its rhetorical form:

This new science of language and forms [i.e., the tetrad of media laws] gives renewed salience to the accumulated knowledge of rhetoric and grammar. Tetrads reunite both of these sciences with dialectic ... and point towards the development of a rhetoric of grammar as well as towards a grammar of rhetoric... (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 229).

The connection among the tetrad elements, forms of metaphor, and figure-ground permutations is McLuhan's own retrieval of the Trivium – his personal intellectual foundation from his Ph.D. dissertation. The key figure-ground interaction, however, is omitted – and I contend, deliberately so. As Quintillian reminds us, the tetradic element of satire is available only to those sufficiently skilled and knowledgeable in McLuhan's unique technique and "process of discovery from amongst the juxtaposition of various disparate elements," as I mentioned earlier.

This realization allows us to posit the hidden ground of the tetrad as the fifth law of media: What current medium does the new medium "put on" or satirize, thereby revealing previously unperceived processes or ground effects?

Scott Blanchard unknowingly characterizes McLuhan as a Menippean satirist when he observes that the "Menippean form ... both celebrates the playfulness of the amateur and the seriousness of the scholar. Menippean satire is a scholar's literature, replete with the sort of inside jokes that can only be understood within a community of shared knowledge" (Blanchard, 1995, p. 43). In his final work, Marshall McLuhan creates an "inside joke" for the scholars who would later retrace his steps. The re-examination of McLuhan's impressive

corpus through the lens of Menippean satire, and the revelation of satire as a fifth law of media, does not negate other approaches or diminish their validity. Rather, it helps to further clarify and elucidate an often elusive understanding of Marshall McLuhan.

As a satirist *par excellence*, McLuhan would often put-on his many doubters with a glib, “if you don’t like those ideas, I have others.” In creating *Laws of Media* with a hidden ground of satire, McLuhan offers the persistent scholar one of those “others.”

Notes

¹An experiment was designed to determine the perceptual difference, if any, between viewing a film “light-on” – the typical cinematic fashion, and viewing it “light-through” via rear-screen projection. A translucent screen was set up in the middle of a room, with one half of the audience on either side. The film was projected from one side, so that half viewed it “light-on” and the other half, “light-through.”

The ‘light-on’ group ... reported ‘how the movie looked,’ by contrast, the ‘light-through’ group was mainly concerned with ‘how the movie felt.’ The differences between the ... situations ... were sufficiently potent to cause one group to have a right-hemisphere experience and the other to have a left-hemisphere experience (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 72).

What the McLuhans failed to realize was that, in the physical setup of the experiment, one group saw the mirror image of what the other group saw. Occam’s razor prevails.

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