INFORMATION TO USERS

St. Marshall, Mass and the Media
Catholicism, Media Theory and Marshall McLuhan

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ABSTRACT

St. Marshall, Mass and the Media

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This study sets out to establish the links between Marshall McLuhan's Catholicism and his media theory. It explains how *the medium is the message* and *the user is the content* in both sacred and secular realms, demonstrating how, in order to be relevant, each must ensure continued participation from the 'user'. Drawing on examples from pop culture and the Catholic Church, this paper also demonstrates how the latter, by means of its resistance to new technology, is increasingly unable to resonate with Catholics and is subsequently becoming obsolete. The crux of the paper is how McLuhan himself exemplifies his own theory, suggesting that his importance today lies in the ability of his work to resonate with people twenty-three years after his death. Even posthumously, McLuhan, by means of the inherent perceptual value of his work, transcends boundaries and exists, among many things, as an academic and pop culture guru. Truly understanding McLuhan means understanding him as *homo Cathlolicus* – a universal being whose life was the *content* of his understanding of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

Marshall McLuhan – media guru, seer, sage, professor, visionary, technological

determinist, "tool of the Catholic church", technological humanist, Wired Magazine's

patron saint, prophet, pundit, "applied Catholic", Canada's first "ism", "superior

outsider", "conservative Christian anarchist", husband, father – Catholic convert.

McLuhan converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty-six at a time when little tolerance

was granted to Catholics in Europe and North America. Despite the overt hostility

directed at Catholics, particularly toward those who had converted by choice, McLuhan

entered the church "on [his] knees" in a transformation that was deeply contemplative and

spiritual. As McLuhan's popularity increased, few things remained private for "The High

Priest of Pop Culture".[1] His faith was no exception and remains the subject of much

speculation. McLuhan's insights irritated fellow Catholics, while non-Catholics

dismissed his work as "applied Catholicism".[2] While Tom Wolfe[3] and Liss Jeffrey[4]

consider him to be a "pietistic Catholic", to Arthur Kroker, "McLuhan's work is basically

age-old Christian Humanism in modern dress".[5] Donald Theall and Arthur Kroker also

suggest that McLuhan's Catholicism is metaphysical – that he is primarily a Thomist,[6]

albeit one who would not be accepted by Thomist orthodoxy.[7]

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[1] Ross, Alexander. "The High Priest of Pop Culture." *Maclean's* Magazine, July 3, 1965, 13.
[2] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xix.
[3] Theall, Donald. *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan.* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001) 7.
[4] Jeffrey, Liss. (1989) "The Heat and the Light: Towards a Reassessment of the Contributions of Marshall McLuhan." Special Issue: "The Medium's Messenger: Understanding McLuhan". Canadian Journal of Communication, 7.
[5] Ibid xix
[6] Thomism is a philosophy based on the life and thoughts of St. Thomas Aquinas.
[7] Theall, Donald. *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan.* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001) 58.

Regardless of his spiritual branding, it remains that McLuhan attended mass daily, was actively pro-life, homophobic and supported the banning of books on sexual education for children.[8] Reducing McLuhan's Catholicism to such beliefs however, would be to consider only half the picture. In fact, understanding McLuhan's faith is no different from understanding his media theory – or McLuhan himself. The significance lies not in the content, but the form in which they exist; since, after all, as McLuhan suggests, *the medium is the message*. This paper is an exploration of McLuhan's Catholicism as it relates to his media theory. It will demonstrate how both are lived examples of a system of belief built on pattern recognition and the necessity of participation to understanding.

Pattern recognition is as much a key element in McLuhan's understanding of the world as it is in his own approach to communicating his ideas. He writes in a repetitive, stream-of-consciousness manner that often frustrated many of his readers and fellow academics. His intent is to demonstrate, by example, how life is a pattern and that one can either ignore it and have one's faith be controlled by it, or recognize it and survive its effects. The merits of pattern recognition are explained in Edgar Allan Poe's "A Descent into the Maelstrom", a poem which McLuhan cited at great length in much of his work. It is the story of three brothers – all fishermen, who find an abundance of fish in Maelstrom, a dangerous area off the coast of Norway. After many dangerous voyages to the area, one fateful night, a hurricane capsizes their fishing vessel. The first brother clings to a broken mast and immediately perishes in the black waters. The other two descend into the vast ocean funnel with the boat. One brother recognizes a pattern in the mad swirls and jumps

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[8] Ibid 22.

into the water, unable to explain to his brother what he has discovered. The other, still clinging to the sinking ship, perishes with it.

For McLuhan, the *maelstrom* is new technology; in both sacred and secular societies, people can choose to resist its effects and be controlled by it, or they can try to understand the pattern of its effects and understand how it affects them. To explain pattern recognition would be to reduce it to a concept, which to McLuhan was pedagogically useless. His goal as a teacher was to train the perceptual abilities of his students to recognize patterns. He attempted to engage readers by making them work to recognize the patterns in his own work. True understanding, he believed, could only be facilitated by direct involvement in the learning process. It was through Catholicism that McLuhan himself arrived at this understanding.

This paper is an analysis of McLuhan's writings as primary texts. It is of note that he wrote most directly about Catholicism in his articles and personal letters; however, his books are not devoid of references. In his first book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), McLuhan explains how the printing press altered the way people perceive the world, blaming it for such things as nationalism, individualism and the breakdown of churches.[9] In the sequel, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan explores the psychic and social effects of new technology and how it contributes to the problems between church and state. Finally, McLuhan refers to his book *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* (1977) as "useful...in

teaching the [F]aith.[10] He attempts to train the perception of young learners through a series of interactive learning activities.

Chapter One of this paper is an in-depth biographical examination of the impact of Catholicism on McLuhan's life. It begins with his Baptist roots in Winnipeg, Manitoba and traces his path to Catholicism, with particular emphasis on literary and philosophical influences such as Practical Criticism and G.K. Chesterton. The detail in this chapter reflects the depth and breadth of the spiritual and secular influences which led McLuhan to Catholicism and are integral to understanding his faith.

At Cambridge, as an outsider by nationality, politics and by faith,[11] McLuhan was able to observe situations from a *privileged vantage point*. It was during his studies at Cambridge, most significantly while researching his doctoral thesis, that McLuhan developed his intellectual interest in Catholicism. What began as "a side effect of his studies"[12] quickly transformed into a way of life. After converting in 1937, McLuhan taught at a series of Catholic universities, during which he began to study media and popular culture as a means by which to better understand his students. He soon discovered that he was able to apply the perceptual abilities granted to him as a Catholic

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[9] Kuhns, William. *The Post-Industrial Prophets: Interpretations of Technology*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971) 172.

[10] McLuhan, Marshall "Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 98.

[11] Upon arriving at Cambridge, McLuhan remarked that most of his fellow students were either Catholic or communist. Source : Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House, 1989) 40.

[12] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xix.

to every aspect of his life – a methodology which both amused and frustrated his colleagues and students – and continues to do so today, two decades after his death.

McLuhan's doctoral thesis, *The War Within the Word,* is the foundation for much of his Catholicism. Chapter Two begins with an analysis of this process; in particular, McLuhan's discovery that many contemporary struggles are manifestations of the warring elements of the trivium. The chapter then shifts to a study of language – the "first" technology – to demonstrate McLuhan's interest in relationships between things. It is used to illustrate how *the medium is the message* and *the user is the content.* To explain the perceptual abilities required to discern this philosophy, Chapter Two continues with an explanation of the church as a superhuman institution and the privileged vantage point afforded to Catholics through the Eucharist. Chapter Two concludes with an analysis of the church's ability to survive in the all-at-once electronic environment which is a prelude to the thriving popular culture examples in Chapter Three.

In the secular world, the same perceptual abilities and privileged vantage point afforded to Catholics through their faith is possessed by artists. Chapter Three concludes by suggesting that McLuhan himself is yet another manifestation *of the medium is the message* as his approach is to encourage his readers to develop their own perceptual abilities in order to discern his meaning. The key therefore, to understanding McLuhan's Catholicism, his media theory or McLuhan himself, is not to simply read what he is saying but to participate in understanding how he is saying it; for, *the user is the content.*

Chapter One: Conversion

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."[1]

Family Influences

On July 21, 1911, Elsie Hall and Herbert McLuhan gave birth to their first child –

(Herbert) Marshall McLuhan. For the Halls and the McLuhans, both Baptists, faith in

God was central to the upbringing of children. Thus, in the spirit of religious instruction

which had been passed along both sides of his family for generations, Marshall

McLuhan's spiritual training began at birth.[2]

Marshall McLuhan's[3] earliest spiritual influence came from his father Herbert McLuhan

who was inspired by the committed spirituality of his mother Margaret McLuhan.[4]

Herbert's faith was rooted in the Bible and his belief in God, as he lived by the simple

principle "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all good things will be added unto you".[5]

He persuaded both of his sons to go to different churches, selecting them based on which

could provide the most interesting preaching.[6] He also made Christianity a central part of

their lives by encouraging them to invite their friends to events such as baptisms.[7]

Herbert was highly esteemed in his church, the members of which encouraged him to

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[1] Isaiah 9:6. Quote found on Herbert Marshall McLuhan's birth announcement July 21, 1911. Source: Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 9.
[2] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 24.
[3] Note: It is possible McLuhan could have rejected his father's namesake after losing respect for him
[4] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 6.
[5] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 8.
[6] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) x.

marry well since they believed his sons were destined to be servants of the Lord.[8] Thus, it was of little surprise to Herbert when his youngest son, Maurice was called to the United Church ministry.

Herbert and his eldest son Marshall enjoyed each other's company and had a mutual love of conversation and exchanging ideas.[9] While it was often Marshall inspiring his father to pursue different intellectual vistas (i.e. economics and psychology), which had monetary benefits for his work as an insurance salesman, Herbert was a key influence in his son's spiritual development. Notably, he inspired Marshall "in a scheme to work out the moral and social laws 'governing humanity, using psychology and metaphysics to throw some new light on some of Christ's sayings.'"[10] From a young age, Marshall was aware of what he considered to be his father's limitations, crediting him with ideas but berating him for not carrying them far enough.[11] Regardless, father and son continued their exploration of moral and social laws and were delighted to find their theories echoed in Thomas Babington Macauley and Aldous Huxley.

While Herbert was more present in McLuhan's early years, it was his mother Elsie who was more dominant. As a performer and teacher of elocution, she was often away from home. When at home, her feisty, confrontational temperament disrupted the entire household, often making her absence a relief for her sons and husband. Elsie was

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[7] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 8.
[8] Ibid 10.
[9] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 23.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 24.

skeptical of her husband's faith and searched for more immediate and practical effects

through Christian Science and Rosicrucianism. She valued knowledge over religion and

decided a more effective means of improving the family was through elocution lessons

and the memorization of great English poets.[12]

Despite her sporadic presence and volatile personality, as Marshall grew older, he

became closer to Elsie, sharing her frustrations with his father's indifference. Elsie had

great aspirations for her sons, especially Marshall, whom she hoped one day would

become president of Harvard. Although there is little evidence in the early stages of his

life of his mother's philosophical influence on his religious beliefs, the conflicting

teachings of his parents resulted in his being raised in a "loose Protestantism".[13]

Marshall's brother Maurice tells of a nightmare Marshall had at nineteen years old in

which "he was about to be lynched by a mob of angry churchgoers he had somehow

antagonized".[14] This dream may indicate early signs of the rigour with which McLuhan

would challenge faith in his own spiritual quest.

Despite the turbulence of his parents' marriage, the spiritual seeds that would eventually

blossom into Catholicism were planted into the young McLuhan. A regular attendee at

Sunday morning Bible classes at Winnipeg's Nassau Baptist Church, his consistent

attendance at church continued throughout his university days. At church McLuhan

prayed for friends in need but the infusion of religious phrases into his language

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[12] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 9.
[13] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) ix.
[14] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 13.

(i.e."with God's help...", "May a loving God...," "I pray God that..."),[15] indicates his faith

extended into his daily life. Despite his regular church attendance and faith in God, the

highly critical McLuhan was often disappointed with Bible classes and sermons, which

he supplemented with his own study of the Scriptures.[16]

University of Manitoba

In 1928, McLuhan began a five-year honours programme at the University of Manitoba

where his spiritual confusion fell subject to literary influences. As a specialist in

eighteenth-century English literature, he formed strong opinions of what should be

considered "good literature", declaring that "a busy man could ignore anything written

after 1842 with no hurt to his intellect".[17] Although he found aesthetic pleasure in the

literature of the period, declaring it "food for the soul",[18] he criticized the teaching of

English at the University of Manitoba as "biographical and historical",[19] since much of

the focus was on content.

One of the most significant influences on McLuhan during his undergraduate years was

the British historian and essayist Thomas Babington Macauley.[20] Although initially

impressed by Macauley's high regard for family values and his capacity for work, it was

his "evocation of historical figures and events"[21] which had the most profound effect on

McLuhan. This aspect of Macauley's work, coupled with his mother's Christian Science

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[15] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 25.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 19.
[18] Ibid 15.
[19] Ibid 17.
[20] Ibid 17.

and his courses in astronomy and geology, initiated, and helped develop, his thoughts on

human and divine history, both of which would eventually become central to his

communications theory.[22]

In addition to Macauley, McLuhan was receptive to other influences at the University of

Manitoba, which may have affected his thinking more significantly had he not been

living at home, allowing his parents to maintain their ideological stronghold. Thus,

McLuhan remained confused about religious matters. While he remained committed to

reading the Bible, his discomfort with religion, no doubt caused by conflicting spiritual

messages, resulted in his seeking spiritual gratification through literature rather than

through clergy.[23] It was in Manitoba, however, where McLuhan took the first step

toward discovering the Truth he was looking for. On April 30, 1930, he sought to resolve

this religious conflict metaphysically in a revelation which changed his life:

> ...the realization that all of life – mental, spiritual, and physical – was governed
> by laws that are still largely unknown to human beings. If a person unwittingly
> violates these laws, he is thwarted in his doings. If he obeys them, he prospers.
> 'Death, sickness and sin' might well disappear, in fact, in a world where these
> laws – laws based on a psychological and metaphysical understanding of Christ's
> precepts – were finally elucidated.[24]

McLuhan remained a devout Baptist until 1930 when he adopted a vast metaphysical

view which permitted him to accept his father's fundamentalist Christianity, while also

supporting his mother's authoritative views.

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[21] Ibid 17.
[22] Ibid 16.
[23] Ibid 15.
[24] Ibid 19.

The next stage in McLuhan's spiritual development, which he would later refer to as

agnosticism, led him away from the Baptist Church toward a different kind of

Christianity – one that presented great figures from the past and subsequently impressed

upon McLuhan a sense of his own unworthiness. [25] In his diary on February 14, 1931,

McLuhan wrote: "As long as the example of Jesus Christ stands before us, let everyone

be ashamed of even a moment of self-complacency".[26] This is echoed in McLuhan's high

regard for the Pentecost,[27] which he believed set Christianity apart from all other

religions. He considered it to be the root of the "uniqueness and dynamism of the

Christian faith", claiming that "[t]he thing that raises [Christianity] ineffably above

everything else is Pentecost".[28] He prayed that he might overcome western materialism,

the primary obstacle to the Pentecost and discover the fullness of Christian experience.

G.K. Chesterton

Early in his academic career, McLuhan realized that he developed his thoughts most

effectively through dialogue.[29] Many of his religious views were further elaborated

through conversations with his friend Tom Easterbrook, with whom (upon completing his

studies at the University of Manitoba)[30] he worked his way to England on a cattle boat in

1932.[31] Easterbrook's most significant influence on McLuhan was in the form of a book

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[25] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 54.

[26] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 26.

[27] Note: Pentecost is "a festival day in the Christian calendar, some 50 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus (seven weeks after Easter Sunday), commemorating the event in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit was said to have come upon Jesus' apostles in Jerusalem, enabling them to 'speak in tongues' to those present." Source: Goring, Rosemary, Ed. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Religious Beliefs.* (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992).

[28] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 27. Diary entry, June 21, 1931.

[29] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 16.

[30] Note: McLuhan completed both a B.A. and an M.A. at the University of Manitoba.

[31] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack

exchange which occurred between the two friends. During the transaction, McLuhan

obtained a copy of G.K. Chesterton's *What's Wrong With the World?* (1910), an event

which he claimed changed his life.[32]

There are few thinkers, if any, who had a deeper, more lasting effect on McLuhan than

Chesterton. In fact, McLuhan maintained that his admiration for Chesterton was best

articulated as "hero worship",[33] claiming that: "Few writers, yes I can say, no other

writer, has ever before been able to arouse my enthusiasm for ideas as has G.K."[34]

Almost forty years later he added: "I know every world of him: he's responsible for

bringing me into the church. He writes by paradox – that makes him hard to read (or hard

on the reader)."[35]

Chesterton's influence on McLuhan is extremely complex, but can be explained as three-

fold. At the first level, McLuhan was attracted to Chesterton's ideas; in particular, his

support for personal liberty, sanctities of the family, and the traditions of Christian

Europe.[36] Second, Chesterton introduced McLuhan to a completely new way of thinking

– one which was "analogical" rather than "dialectical, linear or logical".[37] Chesterton

himself argued analogically since his arguments were not built on the methodological

presentation of ideas (concepts) but rather by means of what McLuhan later called

Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xiv.

[32] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 23.

[33] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie McLuhan," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 72.

[34] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 32. Diary entry, July 31, 1931.

[35] Marchand, Philip, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Random House, 1989) 54. Interview with Eric McLuhan

[36] Ibid 23.

[37] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 23.

"percepts".[38] McLuhan believed that "if one [was] not perceptually alert…one was as good as dead"[39] and postulated further that the interpretation of God or Christianity as a concept rather than a percept meant that they were dead.[40] McLuhan himself later adopted this perceptual way of writing, confusing many of his readers "who had no idea he was speaking in analogies, not equations".[41] It was also Chesterton, through his use of paradox, who "showed McLuhan how to operate on the border between idea and metaphor, between concept and percept".[42]

The third and most important element of Chesterton's impact on McLuhan was that he introduced McLuhan to Roman Catholicism. Chesterton was among the group of English-speaking intellectuals who converted to Catholicism during the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century,[43] a time when Britain's Anglican majority strongly opposed Catholicism because it recognized the pope and not the queen as the official head of the Church. Unlike their Catholic contemporaries who wrote primarily for a Catholic audience, the convert intellectuals, in an effort to improve the intellectual standards of the religion, wrote to persuade others to convert.[44] They presented Catholicism as an attractive religious option for the growing middle classes.[45] Chesterton portrayed Catholicism as a gift from God.[46] He appealed to McLuhan's fundamentalist side by deeming that the world and all things in it were good because they were created by

[38] Ibid 24.
[39] Ibid 148.
[40] Sanderson, George and Frank Macdonald, Eds. *Marshall McLuhan: the Man and His Message* (Colorado: Fulcrum, Inc., 1989) 160.
[41] Marchand, Philip, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Random House, 1989) 23.
[42] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xiv.
[43] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 1.
[44] Ibid ix.

God.[47] McLuhan's orthodox inclinations were appeased by Chesterton's confirmation of the Catholic belief "...that the world, although complex and not easily explained [is] real and ultimately reasonable: it [is] not a tangle of deceptive appearances and it is not to be reduced to any intellectual or mathematical formulas."[48] Although Roman Catholicism was the first religion that made sense to him, McLuhan admits that "Chesterton did not convince [him] of religious truth, but he prevented [his] despair from becoming a habit or hardening into misanthropy".[49] At the same time, however, he claims that "had [he] not encountered Chesterton [he] would have remained agnostic for many years".[50]

There is much evidence of Chesterton's continuing influence on McLuhan. He often paid his hero the compliment of emulation. In fact, among McLuhan's first comments about *What's Wrong With the World?* were:

> It seems to me that G.K.'s words are most valuable when he hangs them on some subject that would seem to admit of no extraneous discussion. No matter what, G.K. had [something] to say on any subject however irrelevant in such a manner as to make the connection at once obvious and important.[51]

Eventually, the same could be said of McLuhan himself. Though the two never did meet, McLuhan had hoped that his first published article, "G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic," would provide a means to meet his hero.

McLuhan's spiritual development and growing affection for Catholicism was also indicated by the books he recommended. While he was at Cambridge, for instance, he

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[45] Ibid 161.
[46] Ibid 161.
[47] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.* (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 23.
[48] Ibid 24.
[49] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie McLuhan," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 73.

recommended Chesterton's books and sent copies of his weekly to family and friends in Manitoba. Of particular significance are those about which he wrote his brother Maurice (Red). In addition to promoting Chesterton extensively, including his book on St. Thomas[52] and *The Everlasting Man*, he also referred him to Father Darcy's *Catholicism*, saying that he need go no further to learn about Catholic ideas and doctrine.[53]

In addition to Chesterton, the other person, also a Catholic convert rhetorician, to whom McLuhan attributed his eventual conversion to Catholicism, was St. Thomas Aquinas.[54] After converting to Catholicism, he would refer to himself as "...a Thomist for whom the sensory order (i.e., the world) resonates with the Divine Logos."[55] McLuhan addresses many of the same problems as Aquinas, but whereas Aquinas uses divine examples, those of McLuhan are from the world of contemporary media. For example, while Aquinas "pointed out that all being was by analogy with the font of being, God",[56] McLuhan presented the idea of media as extensions of the human body. Like Aquinas, McLuhan also applied Formal Causality as a method of explanation. In fact, his idea of medium as environment is Formal Causality. In McLuhan's own words:

> ...Aquinas designates his audience, the people he wants to influence and alter, in the Objections of each article. Then I realized that the audience is, in all matters of art and expression, the formal cause, e.g. fallen man is the formal cause of the Incarnation, and Plato's public is the formal cause of his philosophy. Formal cause is concerned with effects and with structural form, and not with value

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[50] Ibid 73.

[51] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 32.

[52] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie, Herbert, and Maurice McLuhan," November 10, 1934, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 39.

[53] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Maurice McLuhan," October 21, 1934, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 29.

[54] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 54.

[55] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xv.

[56] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xx.

> judgements. My own approach to media has been entirely from formal cause. Since formal causes are hidden and environmental, they exert their structural pressure by interval and interface with whatever is in their environmental territory. Formal cause[s are] always hidden, whereas the things upon which they act are visible. The TV generation has been shaped not by TV programs, but by the pervasive and penetrating character of the TV image, or service, itself.[57]

Aquinas, through his "principle of instrumentality as the 'unmoved mover'" was already teaching that *the medium is the message*.[58] His thought aided McLuhan in the development of the percept that the user of a medium is the content.[59] Finally, McLuhan's definition of tactility as the interaction of the senses is derived from "St. Thomas's definition of touch as the meeting place of all the senses".[60]

Cambridge

With both a Bachelor's degree and a Master's from the University of Manitoba, McLuhan began his studies at Cambridge University in 1934 where he encountered other great thinkers who were central to his intellectual development. Among these scholars was Professor I.A. Richards of the English Department at Cambridge. As a product of his mother's teaching, McLuhan was initially intrigued by Richards' ability to read poetry aloud. More significantly, however, Richards, along with his pupil William Empson, introduced McLuhan to New Criticism, an approach to literature which would eventually be considered one of the most significant influences on his work, second only to Catholicism.[61]

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[57] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Fr. John Culkin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xx.
[58] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 174
[59] Ibid 174.
[60] Ibid 211.

F.R. Leavis, a former Richards understudy, extended New Criticism to the environment.

In his book *Culture and Environment*, Leavis demonstrates how "practical literary

criticism could be associated with training in awareness of the environment".[62] It was

Leavis' Practical Criticism, a form of literary criticism based in rhetoric,[63] which later

transformed McLuhan from a literary critic to a critic of society and eventually media.[64]

According to Eric McLuhan:

> Practical Criticism demands that the reader perform texts and so find the voice
> that utters them. In turn, finding the speaker's tone and feeling leads directly to
> analyzing the audience and the effect produced. A great deal of stress is thus
> placed, for the critic, on the training of sensibility and of multisensory critical
> awareness. The experience of performing a poem or passage supplies the basis of
> understanding and of analysis, and is never subordinated to the ideas it contains.
> Consequently the stress is on percepts more than on concepts.[65]

Intrigued by New Criticism and Practical Criticism, McLuhan, who insisted that "all

people tend to misunderstand each other almost totally all the time",[66] was particularly

interested in Richards' view that "a poem is a supreme form of human communication".[67]

Upon encountering poets such as Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and Hopkins, he could not help but

recognize the possibility that Richards was right. That is, these poets supported the

analogical way of thinking he admired in Chesterton's work. Eliot in particular named

the linear, conceptual way of thinking rejected by Chesterton the "dissociation of

sensibility".[68] Moreover, these poets were interested in the auditory quality of poetry

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[61] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) xii.
[62] Ibid. 35.
[63] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) x.
[64] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 35.
[65] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xiv.
[66] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 34.
[67] Ibid 37.
[68] Ibid 37.

which Eliot coined the *auditory imagination*,[69] claiming the content of poetry was no

longer of primary importance; rather, a poem was examined in terms of the balance of the

senses and experiences of each individual reader.[70] McLuhan first expanded this theory

to include machines which no longer had to be examined for what they did, but for their

effects on the lives of their users, and eventually, to all communications technology.[71]

The inclination and ability of the senses to perceive the external environment became a

key element in McLuhan's communication theory.

Despite Richards' influence on McLuhan's work, McLuhan abhorred his atheism,

claiming that:

> Richards is a humanist who regards all experience as relative to certain conditions
> of life. There are no permanent, ultimate, qualities such as Good, Love, Hope, etc.
> and yet he wishes to discover objective, utimate[ly] permanent standards of
> criticism. He wants to discover those standards (what a hope!) in order to
> establish intellectualist culture as the only religion worthy [of] rational
> being...When I see how people swallow such ghastly atheistic nonsense, I could
> join a bomb-hurling society.[72]

Such sentiments are indicative of McLuhan's growing affection for Catholicism.

At Cambridge, he noticed that a majority of his fellow students were either Catholic or

communist.[73] The Great Depression of the 1930s, and eventually World War II, increased

the pressure to commit to one or the other. Communism provided an alternative to

capitalism but the communist state was abhorrent to many converts who, particularly

after the Second World War, united in their fear and hatred for "godless Soviet

communism", maintaining that an atheist state was more of a threat to dignity and

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[69] Ibid 37.
[70] Ibid 37.
[71] Ibid 37.
[72] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 50. Letter to Elsie.

independence than capitalism.[74] The Catholic response to capitalism was *distributism*, a

system of political economy which claimed that "capitalism was a depersonalizing

system that turned men and work into commodities and gave them all an interchangeable

money value".[75] It was developed in England by Chesterton and his fellow intellectual

converts[76] and was based on decentralization, heterogeneity, and the redistribution of

land.[77] Although communism enjoyed more progress than distributism, which was often

associated with utopianism, the conversion narratives for both are remarkably similar.

Upon arriving in England, McLuhan joined the distributists and was known to travel to

London by train to attend some of their meetings.[78] Although still Protestant, like many

Catholics of the 1930s McLuhan was a vehement anticommunist. After attending an open

house at F.R. Leavis' home, McLuhan stated: "I was soon in an argument with a nest of

communists. They have nothing else around here".[79] His contempt for communism would

continued long after he left Cambridge and was evident through statements like "[a]ll

backward countries are communist".[80]

[73] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 40.
[74] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 208.
[75] Ibid 206.
[76] Note: Among Chesterton's contemporaries were: Belloc, Gill, McNab
[77] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 206.
[78] Ibid 313.
[79] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie, Herbert and Maurice McLuhan," May 16, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 67.
[80] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Hubert Humphrey," December 28, 1967, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 350.

Superior Outsider

As both a Canadian studying at a British university and a Protestant anticommunist

fascinated by Catholicism, McLuhan enjoyed a privileged vantage point from which he

could observe social patterns. There is evidence suggesting that McLuhan was aware of

the advantage of being a *superior outsider*,[81] including a letter to his mother where he

acknowledges that his brother Red had never experienced a reaction to the culture in

which he was reared.[82] He also admits to Elsie that:

> An innate distaste for spiritual perversion and incontinence would have kept me
> neutrally agnostic forever unless there had come opportunities for knowledge of
> things utterly alien to the culture – the grim product of life-denying other
> worldliness – that you know I hated from the time I turned from our pavements
> and wheels to boats and sails.[83]

McLuhan also admits that his self-professed "Anglo-mania...was really a recognition of

things missing from [his] life which [he] felt to be indispensable".[84] At Cambridge he

came to believe that "the character of every society...[is] ultimately determined by its

religion".[85] McLuhan revealed that he "wanted a material satisfaction the mind can

perceive"[86] – a quest which first led him from the Baptist faith to literature to Cambridge

to Catholicism. He admits:

> ...my 'religion hunting' began with a rather priggish 'culture hunting'. I simply
> couldn't believe that men had to live in the mean mechanical joyless rootless

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[81] Note: McLuhan later refers to a person with such status as a *dropout*, claiming that: "all Christians are drop-outs. That's what it means to be unworthy. All Christians have to be drop-outs. A drop-out is a person who sets up a gap between him and something else." Source: "McLuhan on Religion." (Christianity Today, February, 1970) 34.

[82] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 73.

[83] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 58.

[84] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 72.

[85] Ibid 73.

[86] Ibid 73.

fashion that I saw in Winnipeg. And when I began to read English Literature I knew that it was quite unnecessary for them so to live.[87]

McLuhan became convinced that most of what he learned and the opinions he formed about literature at the University of Manitoba were useless,[88] claiming that:

> Catholic culture had produced Cervantes and Chaucer and peasants dancing around the Maypole. Protestant culture had produced Milton, Tennyson, and Winnipeg, Manitoba.[89]

For McLuhan, therefore, Protestantism represented his spiritually confused life in North America. It was at Cambridge where he came to regard Catholicism as "the only religion – all sects [being] derivative".[90] This sentiment is reflected in his increasing disdain for Protestantism:

> I scarcely indicate that everything that is especially hateful and evilish and inhuman about the conditions and strain of modern industrial society is not only Protestant in origin, but it is their boast(!) to have originated it.[91]

McLuhan also began to reject other religions which he had once considered comparable to Christianity, expressing for example, that Christianity was different from Buddhism and Hinduism only because of Pentecost.[92] He later revised this to say: "Buddhism and similar oriental philosophies and mythologies are not religions in any sense. They have no covenants and no sacraments and no theology. The very notion of "comparative" religion is ridiculous."[93] McLuhan eventually claimed that Catholicism was the only religion, all others were religions only in the anthropological sense; they were "the games

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[87] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 73.
[88] Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. (Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989) 31.
[89] Ibid 39.
[90] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 73.
[91] Ibid 73.
[92] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 27.
[93] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 73.

people play".[94] In other words, they are, like language, another technology of the cultural world.

At Cambridge, McLuhan eventually came to acknowledge Aristotle as the soundest basis for Christian doctrine.[95] He also realized that "there is a true and eternal pattern for human life which the 'progress mongers [Protestants] wot [sic] not of...It emanates from God himself".[96] This statement is his first mention of pattern recognition, suggesting that Catholicism may have been a precursor to the method which would later form the basis of his media theory.

At Cambridge, McLuhan's increasing intellectual and spiritual interest in Catholicism was fostered by his flourishing relationships with Catholic friends; namely, Guy Turgeon and Ted and Kath Willison.[97] Although aware of her disapproval, McLuhan shared his growing appreciation for Catholicism with his mother, with whom he remained very close. Afraid that he would convert, Elsie tried to give McLuhan subtle warnings of the religious quests of his predecessors; in particular, his grandfather's (James McLuhan) preoccupation with Swedenborgianism and his Uncle Roy's (Herbert's youngest brother) conversion to the Jehovah's Witness.[98] What troubled Elsie most about her son's "religion hunting" was the possibility that conversion to Catholicism would shatter his prospects for success. She also worried that he would lead Red away from pursuing a

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[94] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 87.
[95] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 53.
[96] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 74.
[97] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 52.
[98] Ibid 55.

career as a United Church minister.[99] Mindful of the bias against Catholic intellectuals in

both North America and Europe at the time, McLuhan assured his mother:

> You may be sure that I shall make no inconsiderable step about entering the
> Roman communion - I shall probably take some years, because I am completely
> uneducated for the step. I am not even serious enough to be contemptuous of the
> probable effect on my worldly prospects....However I will not be a Catholic when
> I come to apply for posts...I therefore implore you to put aside your
> apprehensions".[100]

Much to his mother's relief, McLuhan left Cambridge a Baptist.

Elsie McLuhan's fears of her son's pending conversion to Catholicism were not

unfounded. To become a Catholic in England or North America in the mid-nineteenth to

early twentieth century often meant being considered disloyal to the nation and its

protestant heritage and usually prompted a loss of social status.[101] A convert became

> ...an exile in his own land....In addition to the humiliation of social ostracism, the
> pain of severed friendships and the torment of past memories, there was the
> inescapable problem of beginning life again within an alien community [while]
> recognizing that all one's past distinctions and achievements counted for
> nothing.[102]

Given the deterrents to conversion, "genuine religious conviction"[103] was regarded as a

plausible motive for joining the Catholic Church at the time. It is assumed that this state

of being is possibly what convinced a series of English-speaking intellectuals, including

Chesterton, to convert.[104] Since the Reformation, almost no English writers of any

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[99] Note: Red did become a United Church Minister but left the ministry to work with McLuhan at the Centre.
[100] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 72.
[101] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 6.
[102] Ibid. Source: David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends: The Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (1966; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdman's, 1993) 403.
[103] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 6.
[104] Ibid 1.

influence had tried to advance the cause of the Catholic Church.[105] Subsequently, the

Church was unable to resume the central place in Western intellectual life that it had

enjoyed prior to the Reformation.[106] The term "Catholic intellectual" was regarded as a

contradiction by many contemporaries who believed that the repressive Roman church

prohibited freedom of thought.[107] Converts were anxious to prove these skeptics wrong

and the goal of the convert intellectual was to reconcile the "Catholic truth" and

"intellectual respectability".[108] For more than a century, converts dominated Catholic

intellectual life,[109] however, their position both in and outside the church was difficult

given the simultaneous gratitude and disdain they received from the Catholic Church.[110]

While McLuhan began the process of conversion a year after arriving at Cambridge,[111]

his actual conversion did not occur until he began teaching at the University of

Wisconsin. Even before accepting the position, he stated "I would not like to teach

but...here again I place implicit faith in my Maker".[112] From there, Catholicism was such

a persistent presence on his life that he reached a point where he had to decide whether it

was real or not.[113] On November 26, 1936 he wrote Father Gerald Phelan, a friend of

Elsie's, at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto explaining that he had been

leaning toward Catholicism for a few years and would like to be admitted to the Church.

While McLuhan was visiting his mother at Christmas that year, Father Phelan grilled

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[105] Ibid 1.
[106] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 4.
[107] Ibid 1.
[108] Ibid 15.
[109] Ibid x.
[110] Ibid 7.
[111] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 54.
[112] Molinaro, Matie et al. Eds. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 3.

McLuhan about his beliefs and devotion over the course of several meetings.[114] Upon

returning to Wisconsin, McLuhan was a regular at Sunday mass and received religious

instruction from Father Kutchera.[115] He also continued his intellectual conversion

through reading the works of Catholic writers.

While Catholicism remained an intellectual interest for McLuhan for several years, the

months leading up to his actual conversion were extremely spiritual. He reveals the

intensity of his commitment to the faith to Elsie:

> Let me tell you that religion is not a nice comfortable thing that can be scouted by
> cultivated lecturers like the Pidgeons. It is veritably something which, if it could
> be presented in an image, would make your hair stand on end.[116]

Based on the methodology he learned through Practical Criticism, McLuhan used prayer

to test Catholicism. He declared that "the most violent form of violence is prayer"[117] and

"...prayer is petition which consists of banging and slamming gates until they open".[118]

Before he converted, he assured his mother he had spent two years in prayer before

committing to Catholicism. In later years McLuhan realized that his prayers had been for

conversion.[119] According to Eric McLuhan:

> ... the principal prayer that he used was not some long or complex
> formula, but simply 'Lord, please, send me a sign.' He reported that,
> almost immediately, not one but a deluge of signs arrived. And they
> continued to arrive unabated for a long time.[120]

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[113] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xiv.

[114] Molinaro, Matie et al. Eds. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 93.

[115] Ibid 93.

[116] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie," September 5, 1935, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 75.

[117] "McLuhan on Religion" Christianity Today, 14, February 13, 1970, p. 34.

[118] "McLuhan on Religion" Christianity Today, 14, February 13, 1970, p. 34.

[119] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 74.

[120] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xiv.

Eric would not, however, reveal what these signs were, stating simply that some things

must remain private.

In 1937 one of McLuhan's students, who recognized his deep knowledge of Catholicism,

asked him why he was not in the Church. That same day, despite attempts from certain

colleagues to dissuade him, McLuhan was exempted from instruction and catechism and

baptized by the Newman Chaplin. Later that evening he was received into the Church by

Father John Pick. It was Holy Thursday, March 25, 1937, a date McLuhan never failed to

mark for the rest of his life.[121] In McLuhan's own words:

> I had no religious belief at the time I began to study Catholicism. I was brought
> up in the Baptist, Methodist and Anglican churches. We went to all of them. But I
> didn't believe anything. I did set to find out, and literally to research the matter,
> and I discovered fairly soon that a thing has to be tested on its terms. You can't
> test anything in science or in any part of the world except on its own terms or you
> will get the wrong answers.
>
> The church has a very basic requirement or set of terms, namely that you get
> down on your knees and ask for the truth. I was told by one of my friends, 'You
> don't believe in [Our Lord] therefore you can only pray to God the Father; you
> cannot pray to the Trinity.' I prayed to God the Father for two or three years,
> simply saying 'Show me.' I didn't want proof of anything. I didn't know what I
> was going to be shown because I didn't believe in anything.
>
> I was shown very suddenly. It didn't happen in any expected way. It came
> instantly as immediate evidence, and without any question of its being a divine
> intervention. There was no trauma or personal need. I never had any need for
> religion, any personal or emotion crisis. I simply wanted to know what was true
> and I was told...Wham! I became a Catholic the next day.[122]

McLuhan would later declare: "Had I come into contact with the Catholic Thing, the
Faith, 5 years ago, I would have become a priest, I believe".[123]

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[121] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 74. Letter to Elsie.

[122] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xviii.

[123] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 74. Letter to Elsie.

The experience of being a Catholic intellectual in the United States was similar to that of

being one in Britain. There was much collaboration between the converts of both

countries, an improvement from the late nineteenth century when, as a result of relative

poverty, undereducation and minimal intellectual accomplishments, American Catholics

were intellectually dependent on their British contemporaries.[124] This typography shifted

in the first half of the twentieth century when nearly all vivid Catholic characters in the

United States were authority figures whereas in Britain they were lay writers.[125] The

status of American convert intellectuals continued to advance in the twentieth century

with the establishment of a Catholic university system in the United States.[126] These

institutions attracted many British intellectuals but it was quickly criticized for its anti-

intellectualism since many students prioritized their role in the business world and had

little interest in distributism or Catholic cultural studies.[127] Regardless, the social

penalties of conversion had diminished considerably in the early decades of the twentieth

century.[128] It was in this climate of apathy and tolerance that McLuhan began his

teaching career.

In addition to his conversion to Catholicism, it was also at Wisconsin where McLuhan

first became interested in media studies:

> In 1936, when I arrived at Wisconsin, I confronted a class of freshmen and
> suddenly realized that I was incapable of understanding them. I felt an urgent
> need to study their popular culture: advertising, games, movies...To meet them on

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[124] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome.* (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press, 1997) 159.
[125] Ibid 166.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid 162.

their grounds was my strategy in pedagogy: the world of pop culture. Advertising was a very convenient form of approach.[129]

That McLuhan became a Catholic and began to study media at the same time is significant in terms of the training of perception. McLuhan, however, did not make the link until later in his career when he published his first book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1962)*.

In 1937, McLuhan applied for and was granted a teaching position at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution.[130] In 1940, Father Norman Dreyfus replaced Father McCabe as English Department Head. Unlike his predecessor, who had received a doctorate from Cambridge, Father Dreyfus was schooled in the "older German-rooted philological outlook at John Hopkins University".[131] He launched "a campaign of attrition" against McLuhan, "sabotaging [his] work among the students and [creating] general tabus...to keep intelligent people away from [his] contact".[132] Despite this disparaging treatment, McLuhan remained at St. Louis, partly thanks to the protection granted to him through respect from the Jesuits, partly because St. Louis was "the best Catholic school in the country, and the next step must be up".[133] McLuhan was unable to take another position while Dreyfus was department head because he had not yet completed his doctoral thesis, which he eventually did in 1943. Fortunately, Dreyfus' successor, Father Maurice. B. McNamee, enthusiastically supported the New Criticism,

[129] Molinaro, Matie et al. Eds. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 173.
[130] Ibid 93.
[131] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Wyndham Lewis," January 17, 1944, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 147.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

for which McLuhan, thanks to the support of faculty and graduate students, soon became the spokesperson.[134]

Beyond the intellectual barriers McLuhan encountered to his Catholicism, there were personal ones as well. In 1938, Elsie McLuhan introduced her son to Corinne Lewis, a sophisticated Texan woman who was a fellow student of hers at the Pasadena Playhouse School of Theatre. While other young women had struck his fancy, including Marjorie Norris, an agnostic to whom he was nearly engaged, never before had he been so instantly convinced of his affections. In 1938, McLuhan attended a New Year's ball in Fort Worth Texas which several other of Corinne's suitors was attending. The couple were the spectacle of the evening, and it did not take long for the others competing for her hand to step back, much to the frustration of Corinne's Episcopalian parents who were vehemently opposed to the marriage of their daughter to a Catholic.

Catholicism was a constant subject in the correspondance between McLuhan and Corinne. In response to Corinne's questions, he wrote mostly about his own beliefs, however, he also tooks the opportunity to explain the benefits of a Catholic's relationship with God: "The first thought which a Catholic has of God is that which a man has for a real friend...it is easy to see why Catholics speak so freely and naturally of their prayers and devotions."[135] Through his letters, McLuhan also expressed to Corinne the virtues of orthodoxy and the half-truth of Protestantism. He empathized with her confidence in the sufficiency of Protestantism, explaining his own indifference to Catholic dogma until he

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[134] Molinaro, Matie et al. Eds. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 146.

discovered orthodoxy. He also stated that it is the luck of a Protestant to discover

orthodoxy, and while most converts tend to be intellectuals because of their knowledge of

history and philosophy, they lack spirituality because they refuse to pray for it.[136]

McLuhan also acknowledged that theirs may be as unsuccessful as any marriage, and

since it would be a "mixed marriage", Corinne "[was] obliged to receive a certain

minimum instruction about the Church, and to agree that the children, if any, should be

reared as Catholics".[137]

On Friday August 4, 1939, while visiting McLuhan in St. Louis, Corinne sent a telegram

to her parents stating: "getting married in a few minutes".[138] The two were married and

although Corinne received religious instruction from Father Riach, she did not convert

until 1946 in a quiet ceremony in Toronto. Before her conversion, McLuhan wrote to

Walter Ong, S.J. expressing that it was hard to determine if she was in fact moving

toward the Church.[139] The tone of the letter suggests little, if any, pressure from

McLuhan for her to convert, indicating that he regarded conversion as something

intensely spiritual and individual.

[135] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Corinne Lewis," January 21, 1939, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 100.

[136] McLuhan, Marshall "Spiritual Acts: Letter to Corinne Lewis," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 26.

[137] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Corinne Lewis," January 21, 1939, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 100.

[138] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 87.

[139] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Walter J. Ong, S.J.," May 18, 1946, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 186.

In 1943 McLuhan wrote to Wyndham Lewis expressing that:

> St. Louis University is the best Catholic School in the USA, so that means I'm done with Catholic schools. However, I don't say these things carelessly, since my opinions are scarcely pleasing to my employers.[140]

Even though he "[regretted] becoming entangled in Catholic journalism before having properly won [his] spurs in other fields,[141] in 1944, fearing that he would be drafted into the U.S. army, McLuhan wrote a letter to Stanley Murphy C.S.B. requesting a position at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario. Upon being accepted he noted "I need conversation with congenial minds – Catholic minds".[142]

McLuhan's return to Canada, a country he promised to "tear the hide right off...someday and rub salt into...",[143] revived his disdain for his Protestant roots and he noted immediately that he was out of touch with most things there, complaining to Walter Ong,[144] a Jesuit to whom he taught Practical Criticism and Renaissance Literature: "Not merely mediocrity but tepidity of soul, timidity of mind and a horrible rebellion against anything real marks these people".[145] He also expresses to Ong his frustration with Canada: "Assumption is a little bay of silence – a little backwater in a stagnant stream.

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[140] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Wyndham Lewis," September 22, 1943, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 134.

[141] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Wyndham Lewis," November 27, 1943, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 138.

[142] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to J. Stanley Murphy, C.S.B.," March, 1944, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 158.

[143] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Walter J. Ong, S.J.," May 18, 1946, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 186.

[144] Note: Walter Ong, S.J. Ong later went on to become one of McLuhan's most famous students, publishing extensively on Renaissance literary and intellectual history and contemporary culture, and for his studies in the evolution of consciousness. Source: Molinaro, Matie et al. Eds. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 186.

[145] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Walter J. Ong, S.J. and Clement J. McNaspy, S.J.," December 23, 1944, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 166.

Oh the mental vacuum that is Canada".[146] It is of note that McLuhan chose to express such indignation only to fellow Catholics.

What is perhaps more significant about McLuhan's initial frustration with Canada is it brought to life the paradox of conversion; that is, reconciling his Protestant upbringing with his current religion. Converts of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries faced personal, artistic and intellectual tensions which involved them in complex relationships with their past and present communities.[147] In Britain, and even upon going to the United States, McLuhan, by virtue of both his Canadian citizenship and his Catholicism, was a *superior outsider*, a vantage point which constantly reminded him of the propriety of his conversion to Catholicism. Throughout this period, he was vocal about his disdain for Canada, a cultureless Protestant country where, had he remained, may have prevented him from making one of the most important decisions of his life - *conversion*.

Since many Catholics of the time wrote mainly for a non-Catholic audience, most often with the intention of converting them, their work was more likely than that of born Catholics to conform to intellectual standards outside the Church.[148] They were also known to be more intellectually adventurous given the educational advantages they enjoyed before conversion. Even after conversion, their work continued to be imaginative

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[146] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Wyndham Lewis," December 13, 1944, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 165.
[147] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 277.
[148] Ibid ix.

and controversial.[149] It was at Windsor where McLuhan began to explore beyond

Catholicism to understand his faith, claiming that:

> [t]he little self conscious (unearned) area in which we live to-day has nothing to
> do with the problems of our faith. Modern anthropology and psychology are
> more important for the Church than St. Thomas today".[150]

This statement is indicative of McLuhan's continued interest in exploring secular

society, the seeds of which had been planted in the freshman class he taught in

Wisconsin.

McLuhan continued to explore other disciplines in Toronto when he joined the staff at St.

Michael's College at the University of Toronto in 1946. A few years later, The Catholic

University of America in Washington, D.C. made him an offer of appointment. It is

thought that his friend Giovanelli may have influenced his decision not to accept the

position given the disadvantages of identifying his work with the by-line: "By Marshall

McLuhan, Catholic University".[151] McLuhan remained at the University of Toronto for

the rest of his career, save 1967-68 when he spent the year as Schweitzer Chair at

Fordham University in New York.[152] McLuhan developed most of his media theory while

at the University of Toronto, much of it through the Centre for Culture and Technology.

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[149] Ibid ix.

[150] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Walter J. Ong, S.J. and Clement J. McNaspy, S.J.," December 23, 1944, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 166.

[151] Molinaro, Matie et al. Eds. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 210, Footnote 11.

[152] Note: After WWII more Catholics began to influence English literature (in 1850's Newman asserted that the classics of English literature and the English language are Protestant) and convert writers began to tour the US. Among the schools they taught at were: Georgetown, Notre Dame and Fordham. Source: Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 12.

The sixties also marked the eve of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a

"liberalizing moment in Catholic history".[153] As a Catholic writing about popular media,

> McLuhan personified the challenge and threat of the modern world to traditional
> religious life. Pius X had aimed, at the beginning of the century, to protect his
> flock by shutting out entire realms of contemporary intellectual life. The last
> preconciliar generation of Catholic converts saw this kind of denial as an
> inadequate response and added their voices to proposals for change.[154]

McLuhan's challenge to society was his effort to break from the conformism with which

he charged both Canadian and American Catholics, subsequently making his work

available to non-Catholics.

McLuhan enjoyed international success as a result of his media studies. Although he

rarely discussed the Catholic Church in his academic work, it continued to play a central

role in his life. It is alleged that he went to mass every day; in fact, it was not uncommon

for him to invite people waiting to see him at his office to join him. In 1974, he was

appointed to the Papal Commission of Communications, a position of exaggerated

significance according to Eric McLuhan, who claims it meant little more than being

placed on a mailing list and being invited to the occasional meeting in Rome. McLuhan's

attempts to establish a connection with someone in Rome never came to fruition.[155]

On December 30 1980, Father Frank Stroud visited the McLuhan home with great

concern for McLuhan's ailing health. Upon his departure, McLuhan's daughter Teresa

(Teri) asked if she could speak to him.

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[153] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 330.
[154] Ibid 329.
[155] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xxv.

Much to his astonishment, she insisted that they talk about the meaning of a direct experience of God. Had he ever had one, she asked. It was only later, when he learned that McLuhan had died near the time of that startling conversation in the early hours of 31 December, that he could answer yes.[156]

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[156] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 297.

Chapter Two: Catholicism & Media Theory

McLuhan began his intellectual conversion to Catholicism while researching his doctoral

thesis, *The War Within the Word*,[1] which is considered the foundation of his studies in

media and communication.[2] Thus, any understanding of the link between McLuhan's

Catholicism and his media theory must begin with an understanding of his thesis, which

is an analysis of the history of the trivium, the traditional system by which all Western

intellectual activity is organized[3] and which:

> ...compresse[s] all knowledge into three streams: rhetoric (communication),
> dialectic (philosophy and logic) and grammar (literature, both sacred and profane,
> including modes of interpretation).[4]

According to William Kuhns in a summary of McLuhan's thesis: "The arts of the trivium

are the arts whereby one comes to know and express things, the arts of language, or the

Logos:[5] grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric".[6]

McLuhan's research began with a study of Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), a sixteenth-

century dramatist, satirist and pamphleteer and soon extended to include his rival Gabriel

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[1] Note: The only public copy available is at the Trinity College Library at the University of Toronto and is reputed to have been used well beyond its shelf life. Although McGraw-Hill had intended to publish it in 1970, for unknown reasons, the deal was never realized. McLuhan's supervisor at Cambridge said he had learned more from reading McLuhan's doctoral thesis than from anything else he'd read in his lifetime. Source: Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi) McLuhan later said in 1965 "I have learned so much about the entire problem since writing the thesis that I have hesitated to go ahead with publication without complete re-writing". Source: McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Tom Wolfe," October 25, 1965, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 327.
[2] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) ix.
[3] Ibid xi.
[4] Ibid xii.
[5] Note: Also characterized by McLuhan as the counterpart in the ancient world to the Trinity. Source: Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 378.
[6] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

Harvey.[7] The two embodied an ancient quarrel (which began over 1500 years ago and continues today) between dialectic and rhetoric for the control of literary composition.[8] It was a debate which formed the "foundation of schooling and society, the cornerstone of all politics and policy..."[9] Nashe claimed that grammar[10] and rhetoric were the dominant forces of the trivium, indicating the dominance of intellectual and political worlds.[11] Contrarily, Harvey supported the dialectical[12] reformers in literary and theological matters at a time when there was "little or no distinction between literature, theology and politics".[13] Simply stated, as a rhetoritician, Nashe was concerned with connections, while Harvey, a dialectician, was focused on divisions.[14]

Just as McLuhan admired Chesterton's radicalism for going to the root and considering everything in relation to its origins,[15] to contextualize the debate, McLuhan reached back to antiquity to produce "the only anciently rooted history of the trivium".[16] According to Eric McLuhan:

[7] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 102.

[8] Kuhns, William. The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium. www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi

[9] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xi.

[10] Note: "Grammar is not to be understood here in the narrow modern sense of parts of speech and sentence structure but as the art of interpreting phenomena. It takes in all of literature and includes etymology and exegesis". Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 104.

[11] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xi.

[12] Note: "Dialectics is, variously, a way of testing evidence, the study of kinds of proofs for an argument, a method of dialogue, and logic. Grammar was primarily a humanistic activity; dialectics a philosophical one". Source: Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 104.

[13] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xi.

[14] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 111.

[15] McLuhan, Marshall "G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 5.

[16] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

He dug back through our intellectual traditions, beginning with their foundations in the educational systems and techniques bequeathed us by Greece and then Rome, and pursued them on through the Middle ages, the period of Scholasticism, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and ending with some remarks about James Joyce in the twentieth century.[17]

Extensive research soon revealed to McLuhan that the Nashe/Harvey debate reached as

far back as Peter Ramus, Aristotle, Plato and Socrates and was in fact based on control

over the spoken and written word. In other words, the Nashe/Harvey debate was part of

an ongoing narrative characterized by the same conflict at different stages in history.

What began as a dispute between medieval dialecticians and grammarians evolved into

the struggle between Cicero and the philosophers and continues as a quarrel between the

ancients and moderns.[18] McLuhan suggests that 'civilization' began with the Logos,

which contains all knowledge (scientific and humanistic).[19]

There, eloquence and wisdom are identical, and all knowledge is unified in the tangible equations of the spoken and the known. The heart and mind of man[20] had, so to speak, an Eden of one selfsame and encyclopaedic knowledge.[21]

Of the balanced trivium, McLuhan writes:

The ideal orator will be a man of encyclopaedic knowledge because learning precedes eloquence. And because he will be the type of perfect citizen, he will be eloquent about everything which concerns corporate life. But eloquence implies great tact, a sense of the propriety of word and thing as benefits each contingency.[22]

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[17] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) x.

[18] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 108.

[19] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

[20] Note: The use of the masculine tense has been preserved when quoting primary sources.

[21] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

[22] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

With a deep analysis of its extensive history, McLuhan traced the rise and fall of the

trivium, discovering that "[t]wice in history...the arts of analogy have reigned over the

trivium and guaranteed its integrity and balance and wholeness".[23] The trivium was

balanced in the Middle Ages (illuminated in the works and followers of Cicero) and fell

during the Renaissance when Socrates separated the ability of thinking wisely and

speaking gracefully, resulting in "the divorce of the tongue from the heart".[24]

The fall of the trivium was brought on by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and was corrected

a millennium later by Cicero whose "model of the virtuous man of encyclopaedic

learning and eloquent speech, the *doctus orator*, would serve profoundly in shaping the

education of the Middle Ages".[25] McLuhan wrote: "In Cicero's philosophy, knowledge is

virtue and leads to happiness. But that knowledge is worthless if it is not

encyclopaedic..."[26] McLuhan, again drawing from Cicero, claimed that such

encyclopaedic knowledge is attainable because it already resides within us.

McLuhan found two important elements, depicting Cicero's and his own ideal of social

and personal wholeness.

> At the first of them, two great ages intersect. At the second, the internal and
> external capabilities of the whole man, the *doctus orator*, conjoin. In both of these
> interstices McLuhan intimates what would be required to unify the fractured arts
> of the trivium and, by extension, man himself.[27]

[23] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)
[24] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)
[25] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)
[26] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 109.
[27] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

Finally, McLuhan's antipathy to segregation and specialization of the arts, along with the

emphasis on the analogical method and the refusal to compartmentalize knowledge (all of

which became central to his media studies) originated from Cicero.[28]

McLuhan's interest in Catholicism began as an acquaintance with the basic material as

part of his study of the trivium, the history of which he presents as "an analogue of

Christian history".[29] From Eden (Isocrates), there is the fall (Socrates), and then the

redeemer (Cicero) who dies but whose teachings "come to suffuse and undergird the

entire culture".[30] According to Kuhns:

> If McLuhan finds in the history of the trivium an allegory to the history of man's
> relationship to God, he is likewise making a quiet but profound assertion of faith:
> that, with the guidance of the wisest sources that the history of the Logos insures,
> a primordial rupture in man's being-in the word-can be repaired.[31]

The extent to which McLuhan was aware of the underlying Christian narrative of the

trivium is unclear. Of significance, however, is his notion that the trivium was balanced

in the Middle Ages. This interpretation is consistent with Chesterton's claim that "Europe

– 'Christendom' – had reached its apogee in the High Middle ages and since fallen into a

despotic oligarchy".[32]

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[28] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 109.

[29] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

[30] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

[31] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium."
(www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

[32] Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 175.

Before McLuhan, it was only Catholic clergy who engaged in the study of the trivium and the history of the Logos which "also underlay the differences between the Church and the Protestant reformers".[33] McLuhan, however, was the first to construct such a history as it pertained to the discipline of the grammatical arts which were essential to the medieval Church:

> Grammar and classical culture had been preserved by the Church after the fall of the Empire because grammar was then the indispensable mode of theology. The advent of dialectics was, therefore, sheer gain for theology but almost a total overthrow for grammar.[34]

Early Christian theology, therefore, was based on grammatical art until dialectics came to dominate. Today, "while the reception of the doctrine of the Logos into Christianity has always been duly noted, the intermediate stages of that reception through the discipline of the grammatical arts had been largely overlooked".[35]

Following his assertion that a history of the trivium cannot be written without adopting the viewpoint of one of the dominant forces, McLuhan sides with the ancients of the grammatical school.[36] He regards grammar as "the most basic art of all"[37] claiming that "[t]he great alchemists...were grammarians".[38] He also asserts that since the order of nature and the order of speech are related, understanding grammar is a prerequisite for understanding the Book of Nature.[39] McLuhan's doctoral thesis was the first attempt ever

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[33] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xi.
[34] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 110.
[35] Ibid 106.
[36] Ibid 107.
[37] Ibid 110.
[38] Ibid 104.
[39] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 110.

made to explain grammar as "an important basis of scientific method, both during antiquity and continuously throughout medieval times".[40]

Integral to his methodology was McLuhan's preference for the analogical over the logical.[41] "Analogists viewed words and phenomena as interrelated by proportions and etymologies".[42] Like early Christian theology, stoic physics was based on grammatical art. For the stoics, etymology was "a [perfectly natural] source of scientific and philosophic knowledge rather than the notion that words were formed by nature and onomatopoeia".[43] As an analogist McLuhan was interested in the relationship between things, captured in his famous tenet *the medium is the message* in which he suggests the form in which information is presented is more important than the content.

According to McLuhan, *the medium is the message* is the template for all patterns of technological development. To explain how the influence of grammar is overlooked, he returns to the spoken word, which "was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp in a new way".[44] Language, which for McLuhan is: "more than just a conventional means of communicating ideas...it is the encoded form of the collective perceptions and wisdom of many people...."[45] subsequently provides an ideal example of the synonymy of *medium* and *message*. By understanding its evolution, one can begin to recognize the pattern of technological development. For McLuhan,

[40] Ibid 105.
[41] Ibid 107.
[42] Ibid 107.
[43] Ibid 105.
[44] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 157.
[45] McLuhan Marshall. "How to be a Christian in the Electric Age," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 175.

> [l]anguage does for intelligence what the wheel does for the feet and the body. It enables them to move from thing to thing with greater ease and speed and ever less involvement. Language extends and amplifies man but it also divides his faculties.[46]

Learning a language trains one's perceptions to learn in a specific way. This process in turn shapes not only what, but how we learn:

> The pattern by which one learns one's mother tongue is now being extended to all learning whatever. The human dialogue itself becomes not only economic but the political and social, fact.[47]

McLuhan asserted that language separated humans from their unconscious selves, it is the initial 'outering' of the subconscious.[48] He explored this externalization through its transformation resulting from different media; beginning with the shift from the oral tradition to writing. While the oral tradition engaged all of the senses in a holistic equilibrium, literacy separated them, placing primary importance on sight. The key characteristics of the resulting eye culture were individualism and privacy. Culture, therefore has little, if anything, to do with content, and everything to do with the way in which media shape the collective consciousness of a population.

To demonstrate how "the history of human culture and sensibility is embedded in changing structural forms of language",[49] McLuhan cited slang as an example, claiming it is a "frontier of linguistic change and response to the new environments created for our senses by electronic information".[50] The slang of the radio era (1920s) for example is, according to McLuhan, "visual and square", i.e. "cat's pyjamas" – when compared to

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[46] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 83.

[47] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to John I. Snyder, Jr.," August 4, 1963, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 291.

[48] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 83.

[49] McLuhan, Marshall "Robert J. Leuver," July 30, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 384.

"the tactile, haptic, proprioceptive and acoustic spaces and involvement of the slang of the TV age" [51] – i.e. "cool" and "far out". Slang therefore attempts to engage the senses which are being excluded by the media of a given era.

Yet another of McLuhan's central ideas exemplified by language is *figure and ground*, terms created by Edgar Rubin, a Danish psychologist to "assist the study of structure in visible phenomena".[52] *Figure* refers to consciously noted elements of a visible situation, whereas everything else is *ground*.[53] According to McLuhan: "[t]he interplay between *figure* and *ground* is 'where the action is'". This interplay requires an interval or a gap, like the space between the wheel and the axle".[54] In the technology of the phonetic alphabet, the word is the *figure*, but the language, as the "encoded form of the collective perceptions and wisdom of many people" is the *ground*.[55] In order to recognize the impact of language on human sensibility, one must participate, through awareness of both, in bridging the gap between figure and ground – word and language.

McLuhan received his early training in linguistics from I.A. Richards at Cambridge; however, it was not until 1974 while reading the course in General Linguistics that he found much of his own thought echoed in Saussure. In particular, *the medium is the*

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[50] Ibid 385.
[51] Ibid 385.
[52] McLuhan Marshall et al. *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media.* (Agincourt: The Book Society of Canada Limited, 1977) 9.
[53] Ibid 9.
[54] Ibid 9.
[55] Note: It was only years after completing his doctoral thesis that McLuhan was able to explain the significance of linguistics to his own work. Source: Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

message and (visible) *figure* versus (invisible) *ground*.[56] It was not until 1988, eight

years after his death, in *Laws of Media: The New Science*, the sequel to *Understanding*

Media: The Extensions of Man, that McLuhan, together with Eric, puts "the modern study

of technology and artefacts on a humanistic and linguistic basis for the first time".[57] They

argued that:

> ...all artefacts have the metaphorical structure of the word; indeed, their histories
> and effects are moulded by the same structural forces. The shaping duel of the
> trivium is the historic crucible which will forge man's relationship to every
> technology to follow.[58]

The seeds of this discovery had been planted during McLuhan's doctoral thesis, during

which he received his extensive intellectual training in Catholicism. Over the course of

his research, McLuhan "[surveyed] the entire spectrum of Catholic doctrine and

philosophy – an overview such as few Catholic theologians possessed".[59] Not only did he

become intimately familiar with the position of clergy on many matters and the reasons

for which they had taken that position, he also knew exactly where and how to investigate

the Church and its claims.[60] Despite his ever-increasing encyclopaedic knowledge of

Catholicism, Eric McLuhan suggests that his father's learned approach to the Faith was

simply a side-effect of his studies.[61]

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[56] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 330.
[57] McLuhan Eric and Marshall McLuhan. *Laws of Media: The New Science.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) 128.
[58] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)
[59] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xii.
[60] Ibid xii.
[61] Ibid xiii.

In much the same way that Cicero subordinated philosophy to politics but used philosophy to achieve his political goals,[62] McLuhan notes the failure of Western culture to perceive environments,[63] claiming that "the environment is invincibly persuasive when ignored".[64] He asserts that people feel the need to adopt new forms of communication as they arise, without consideration of either aim or consequences.[65] What results is:

> [a]n all-at-once world [which] is structurally like the subconscious. It tends to be mythical and archetypal. Consciousness becomes incidental rather than structural. It is the old environment, not the new one. The individual yields to the tribal man. Electronic man is the first since neolithic times to live in a man-made environment. Preliterate man naturally regarded his world as man-made. An information environment like ours is man-made. Media are, as it were, cultural or corporate masks.[66]

McLuhan claimed that people could recognize the effect of a technology on them only after it had been replaced by a new one. He referred to this phenomenon as *the rearview mirror* effect and remarked that most people were somnambulists who ignored the effects completely, suggesting that "zombieism is a normal mode today for withstanding technological innovation".[67] Using language to demonstrate somnambulism, he claims that "since the world has been used to affect a universal hypnosis...the word is the cheapest and most universal drug".[68] By focusing on the word (the figure), one ignores

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[62] Source: (http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/c/cicero.htm#Cicero's%20thought)

[63] Gordon, Terrance W. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding.* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1997) 109.

[64] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xiii.

[65] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Third Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 144.

[66] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Peter Drucker," October 24, 1966, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 338.

[67] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 62.

[68] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Elsie, Herbert and Maurice McLuhan ," October 19, 1934, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 26.

language (the ground) and how the interplay between the two structures our collective

consciousness. Dennis Johnson explains that:

> part of our calling as people of the Word in this society is to keep our culture in
> dialogue with its past, to prevent it from closing itself off from the truth and depth
> of our western heritage, and particularly our Christian heritage.[69]

This sentiment echoes McLuhan's emphasis on the importance of grammar and further

suggests the importance of understanding visible and invisible environments, their

interaction, and ultimately, their effect on a population. McLuhan, through his work and

teaching, attempted to articulate this in an effort to shake the population from their

complacency but would soon learn, as Freud did, that people resent analyses of their

subliminal lives.[70]

If *the medium is the message, the user is* then -- *the content*. This phrase is easiest to

comprehend when one considers how McLuhan's theory of communication is not one of

transportation, but *transformation*. As a superhuman institution, rather than one that is

merely intellectual, the Catholic Church is the ideal exemplar of this tenet.[71] Although he

recognizes the "immediacy of interrelationships among Christians and non Christians

alike in a world where information moves at the speed of light",[72] McLuhan believed that

Catholics, through faith, have a readiness to undervalue the world altogether.[73] Catholics,

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[69] Johnson, Dennis. "Wood and the Videotape". *Christianity Today* 14, September 25, 1970, p. 11.

[70] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xxiv.

[71] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 64.

[72] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Do Americans Go to Church to be Alone?," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 134.

[73] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Robert J. Leuver," July 30, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 386.

he believed, through faith, are granted a privileged vantage point from which they can

recognize both figure and ground; they are given the *Word* to show them the *world.*

By faith, McLuhan is referring to *lived Christianity.* He believed that the Eucharist[74] was

the supreme sacrament and Christ Himself, the perfect embodiment of both *medium* and

message. This interpretation is most comprehensible when one realizes an understanding

of the Word of God in its entirety necessitates participation for Christians. For Catholics,

in particular, who consider it the supreme sacrament and primary energy source for their

faith, *transubstantiation* is the essence of the Eucharist. It is the process whereby the

bread and wine consumed in the ritual are considered metaphysical, rather than

physical.[75] The sign or substance (the bread) is natural; the signification or meaning is

supernatural. As such, the Eucharist unites heaven and earth to allow Christians to

partake of the divine.[76] If symbols are indeed born of a living encounter and fossilize

when that encounter ceases to exist, the Eucharist is very much alive and of the present.

For McLuhan, "[e]very aspect of the Christian thing is communication and change and

transformation".[77] The Eucharist is not the transfer of information from God to the

Catholic individual; it is the process whereby she/he, through faith, becomes part of the

body of Christ. It is a momentary meeting of *figure and ground, medium and message*;

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[74] Note: The Eucharist is "for most Christian denominations, a sacrament and the central act of worship, sometimes called the mass (Roman Catholic), Holy communion, or Lord's Supper (Protestant). It is based on the example of Jesus at the Last Supper when He identified the bread which He broke and the wine which He poured with His body and blood". Source: Goring, Rosemary, Ed. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Religious Beliefs.* (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992) 165.

[75] Nicolas, Marie-Joseph. *What is the Eucharist?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960) 47.

[76] Gore, Charles. *The Body of Christ: An Enquiry into the Institution and Doctrine of Holy Communion.* (London: John Murray, 1990) 2.

[77] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Barbara Ward," February 9, 1973, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan.* Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 468.

however, it is only at a level of lived Christianity that *the medium is the message*.

McLuhan suggests the same of the Bible:

> ...we often speak of the content of Scripture, all while thinking that this content is the message. It is nothing of the sort. The content is everybody who reads the Bible: so, in reading it, some people 'hear' it, and others don't. All are users of the Word of God, all are its content, but only a small number of them discern its true message. The words are not the message; the message is the effect on us, and that is conversion.[78]

Catholicism, therefore, according to McLuhan, provides the opportunity for transformation; yet the process can only ever be truly realized through faith. There is no quantitative measure for faith, but in terms of the Eucharist, it is the active recognition of both figure (bread and wine) and ground (body and blood of Christ) and participation in their interaction (transubstantiation).[79] McLuhan himself used prayer to test Catholicism, declaring that "you don't come into the Church by ideas and concepts and you cannot leave by mere disagreement. It has to be a loss of faith, a loss of participation".[80] In fact, he suggests that "[t]oday, personal prayer and liturgy…are the only means of tuning into the right wavelength, of listening to Christ, and of involving the whole person".[81]

According to McLuhan, Catholicism is the ideal religion for a generation of people who have lost their bodies through having parts of their physical selves extended by technology. He suggests that "new technology is an extension of man, communications

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[78] McLuhan, Marshall "Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 103.

[79] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 64.

[80] Ibid 64.

[81] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Third Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 141.

technology is an extension of thought and communications media are extensions of the

mind".[82]

> Every new technology is an evolutionary extension of our own bodies. The evolutionary process has shifted from biology to technology in an eminent degree since electricity. Each extension of ourselves creates a new human environment and an entirely new set of interpersonal relationships.[83]

McLuhan claims that as *superior outsiders* or *"drop-outs"*, only the perceptual abilities

of Christians[84] are trained to recognize the subliminal effects of media. However, he did

not see any reason why they should be more inclined to do so.[85] For McLuhan:

> ...the Church is so entirely a matter of communication that like fish who know nothing of water, Christians have no adequate awareness of communication. Perhaps the world has been given to us as an anti-environment to make us aware of the Word.[86]

Considering the environment is the figure, while the anti-environment is the ground,

McLuhan is suggesting that the secular world is the figure and the supernatural world is

the ground. Catholics are imbued with the ability to recognize both as a result of the

supernatural perceptual abilities granted to them by their faith. He suggests their failure to

use these abilities to recognize the effects of new technological environments is the result

of a lacking in Catholic education:

> My increasing awareness has been of the ease with which Catholics can penetrate and dominate secular concerns – thanks to an emotional and spiritual economy denied to the confused secular mind. But this cannot be done by any Catholic group, nor by Catholic individuals trained in the vocabularies and attitudes which make our education the feeble simulacrum of the world which it is.[87]

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[82] Carey, James. "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan": The Antioch Review, Vol. XXVII (Ohio: The Antioch Press, 1967) 37.

[83] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Jacques Maritain," May 6, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 369.

[84] Note: McLuhan uses the terms *Christian* and *Catholic* interchangeably.

[85] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xxiv.

[86] Ibid.

[87] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Clement McNaspy, S.J.," December 15, 1945, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 180.

So, although they are naturally inclined with the potential, the perceptual ability of

Catholics to be aware of the new technological environment is hindered, according to

McLuhan, by a deficiency in training. Despite the capacity of the Catholic mind to

recognize the effect of technology, McLuhan asserts that "[t]he Catholic has never

understood the value of the mystery of ordinary human perception and consciousness.

Nor is he likely to overestimate them today".[88]

Even if Catholicism is indeed the ideal religion for a discarnate generation, it is difficult

to ignore the continuous decline in Church attendance. Understanding the reasons

requires an examination of the institutional and spiritual effects of technology on the

Church. Technology is not new to the Church; in fact, posits McLuhan, the entire book of

Genesis is concerned with the attempt of humanity to build new technologies:

> When Cain, a 'tiller of the ground,' wanted to become more than a simple
> farmer, he slew Abel, the 'keeper of sheep.' When men began to build
> cities or towers, a technology of bricks – as in Babel – fragmented
> mankind. When man worshipped pagan idols, it meant the worshipping of
> tools. Enoch and Methuselah were not so much persons as long-lived
> cultures, tribal kinship groups, or totalities – all of them fallen and
> fragmented. Men lost human respect, living somnambulists hypnotized by
> their own technologies.[89]

Each of these technologies sought to emphasize one of the senses, eventually leading to

specialization and fragmentation which prevented people from understanding the entire

picture, the whole Truth.

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[88] McLuhan, Marshall "Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 158.

[89] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 55.

The early Church was born into Medieval culture, a manuscript society based on communal life and an equal engagement of the senses. According to McLuhan, the Church was dismembered by "a stupid historical blunder, by a technology" – print.[90] The introduction of the printed word liquidated 2000 years of manuscript culture[91] by replacing the fluid, multi-sensory oral tradition with an eye culture based on the notion that all is fixed in the universe.[92] The Church, based on "communication and change and transformation" thus found itself embodied in the only culture that preferred static positions.[93] As a result, McLuhan claimed that:

> ...Greco-Roman culture, which seems to have been imposed on the Church like a shell on a turtle, doesn't allow for any possibility for a supple theory of change and of communication.[94]

He continues:

> Rome was entirely a product of technology – a bureaucracy, a classification system like a dictionary or a phone book.[95]

> Ancient Rome fell when the Egyptians no longer sent papyrus and Roman bureaucracy no longer had a way to communicate. It was not until the Chinese began sending papyrus back to Europe, that Roman bureaucracy became powerful again. McLuhan asserts that since it was born in the middle of literacy, the church is unaware that its fate is tied to literacy...[96] Furthermore, it is not accidentally that Christianity developed in Greco-Roman culture where private identity was made possible for the first time in history by the phonetic alphabet.[97]

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[90] McLuhan, Marshall "Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 46.

[91] McLuhan, Marshall "Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 151.

[92] McLuhan, Marshall "Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 48.

[93] Ibid 48.

[94] Ibid 49.

[95] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 54.

[96] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 63.

[97] McLuhan, Marshall "Electronic Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 80.

The shift from orality to literacy resulted in: the fragmentation of human senses, the split of the eye from the ear, the alternation of the human community, and the division of Christianity into sects.

While the spread of print through the Roman Catholic Church had a significant effect on doctrine, it also gave rise to Protestantism, the first sect to exploit its potential as a mass medium.[98] During the half century preceding the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics alike believed that the printing press was serving their interests. The eventual Protestant insistence on the vernacular prevented the adaptation of liturgy which was eventually considered a threat to the sanctity of the Catholic Church as an institution since rhyming guides for lay sinners and the use of the vernacular in sermons were thought to belittle its message. McLuhan asserts that Luther and the first Protestants were trained in literacy and "used the new discovery of print to dig the trench that separated them from the Roman Church".[99] The shift in emphasis from image to word coincided with Protestant rejection of visual representations and ritual, two fundamental elements of Catholicism. With print, each person saw the same words on which they could reflect individually and subsequently develop a point of view. McLuhan viewed Protestantism as conceptual – claiming that concepts had no relevance in religion. Unlike Protestants, Catholics cannot select doctrines; their faith is a way of knowing and as such is accepted in its entirety, or not at all.[100]

[98] Eisenstein, Elizabeth. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change.*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 303.

[99] McLuhan, Marshall "Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 47.

[100] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack

According to McLuhan, the de-romanization or decentralization of the Church has been occurring ever since its electrification – the telegraph.[101] Humanity initially enjoyed a state of *tribal* life where "hearing is believing", which was transformed or *detribalized* by the alphabet to "seeing is believing".[102] Sight became the primary sense and the fixed position association with print came into being. Faced with the individualizing forces of print, the Church attempted to maintain the communal existence it enjoyed with manuscript culture through bureaucratic centralization and creating a centralized program of educational, liturgical and devotional uniformity, making the book a factor in a collective experience.[103] McLuhan argued that the Church neglected to consider that slow forms of communication centralize, while an increase in the speed of communication decentralizes.[104] The main consequence of this oversight has been the decline in Church attendance.

We are now in the electric age and what results with electricity is an increase in the speed of communication and a return to the holistic engagement of the senses, a *retribalized* state of being where sight is no longer necessarily the primary sense. In fact, according to McLuhan, "[u]nder electric conditions, participation is inevitable. The visual monopoly is over; visual organization is over. Nothing 'visuable' is twentieth century".[105] In the

Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) xv.
McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 61.
[102] Ibid 59.
[103] McLuhan, Marshall "Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 49.
[104] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 54.
[105] Ibid 55.

nineteenth century, the invention of the telegraph was a return to tribal life and resulted in

the creation of the *global village*, a global theatre where the actors and audience are

indecipherable.[106] Recognition of this situation is integral to the survival of the church.

According to McLuhan:

> In the Catholic Church, the new liturgy is an attempt to accommodate to electric
> forms. The Church is the only institution capable of coping with this situation and
> is not very keen on it.[107]

The Church has adopted ignorance as a survival strategy and is criticized by McLuhan for

never being aware of what is going on:

> As a bureaucracy, the Church today is, in a way, a comic set of hang-ups and is no
> more relevant in its strategies than Don Quixote was when confronted with
> Gutenberg. Quixote rode madly off into the middle ages, hoping that it was the
> future.[108]

McLuhan suggests that the flawed leadership of the Catholic Church is the result of the

fact that the Church is wedded to literacy of the west and therefore handicapped by

universality.[109] The inability of the Church to separate itself from literacy is its most

severe impediment to joining the twenty first century. For McLuhan, "...Christianity – in

a centralized, administrative, bureaucratic form is certainly irrelevant".[110] "The Church,"

he says, "is watching its cultural infrastructure crumble beneath its feet".[111]

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[106] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 50.

[107] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 55.

[108] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 83.

[109] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 60.

[110] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 86.

[111] McLuhan, Marshall "Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 49.

The disintegration of the institution of the Catholic Church is linked to its attempt to

resist the very technology that is now victimizing it. This is evident in key elements such

as: language, costume, architecture and the role of the pope, all of which contribute to the

transformation of theology into a game. The visual Church was born in the Greco Roman

era and is goal oriented; it wants bigger collections, bigger missions, bigger everything.

Goals, however, do not facilitate communication and one cannot have goals in an

acoustic, non-visual world. The Church, insists McLuhan, should play a role – and that

role is salvation.[112]

In terms of the first technology, language, the Catholic mass was initially delivered in

Latin, which was declared a *cool* language since it required participation from the

listener. The mystical atmosphere created by Latin requires a congregation to actively

engage with the mass through faith that they are communicating with God. The

introduction of print and subsequently the microphone into the mass resulted in the

replacement of Latin with the vernacular which, given the obstacle it poses to total

involvement, led McLuhan to declare it "a wasteland and a spiritual desert".[113] He

suggests that it allows people "to be hypnotized by content as the most important thing; it

makes them stop at figure, without perceiving ground, the real message".[114] The result is

that people neglect to see the entire Truth and mistake understanding content for total

involvement, subsequently making transubstantiation impossible.

[112] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 61.
[113] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and the Microphone," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 110.
[114] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Third Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 147.

In addition to propagating the vernacular, McLuhan suggests that the introduction of the

microphone into the Church "obsolesced" Church architecture, which was designed

around acoustic concerns.[115] The microphone and loudspeakers allow the priest to be

everywhere simultaneously, "rendering the acoustics and visual layout of the Church

meaningless".[116] Also, the introduction of the microphone to the pulpit turned the priest

around to face the congregation so that, instead of "putting on God", he "puts on" the

congregation as his corporate mask",[117] subsequently depriving him of any power or

charisma.[118] As a solution, McLuhan insists that institutional buildings are not necessary,

that everything can be performed in private places.[119]

Another means by which the Church is being de-romanized is through the disappearance

of traditional religious costuming of clergy. According to McLuhan, "insofar as religious

orders have in the past adopted uniform dress, they tended to present themselves to the

world as an image of corporate and almost military power".[120] In other words, when

wearing a costume, one forgoes her/his private identity to assume a corporate identity[121]

and "like politeness and protocol, corporate costumes and ornaments are essential

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[115] Ibid 142.
[116] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Tony Schwartz," August 30, 1973. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 480.
[117] Ibid 480.
[118] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Do Americans Go to Church to be Alone?," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 135.
[119] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 62.
[120] McLuhan, Marshall "International Motley and Religious Costume," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 78.
[121] Ibid 75.

elements of communication".[122] McLuhan is concerned by the abandonment of

traditional priestly dress; equating it with the disappearance of the Christian message in

secular society:

> [t]he mere fact that many feel the need to abandon the costume of social service
> and corporate ministry in favour of the anonymity of mere dress, may be a token
> of the time when the hidden environment of the Mystical Body may once more
> have to resort to an individual ministry.[123]

He suggests that:

> what can be learned from the international motley of the anti-establishment
> performer in their variegated costumes is that there is no possibility of returning
> to private dress for those who are awake to the need for hostility to the values of
> the world.[124]

"Why", he asks "does the Church have to get rid of traditional roles and costumes at

precisely the moment when these corporate modes of expression are recognized as

essential to human survival in the secular world, and especially by our young?"[125] He

claims that youth of the retribalized holistic present "want the big corporate role"; they

have abandoned all job holding and specialism in favour of corporate costuming and role

playing.[126] Another example of the primacy of roles over goals in electric society is

McLuhan's assertion that the pope is obsolete as a bureaucratic figure but as a role

player, he is more important than ever.[127] If there were only three Catholics in the world,

he claims, one of them would have to be the pope; otherwise, there would be no Church.

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[122] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Third Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 146.

[123] McLuhan, Marshall "International Motley and Religious Costume," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 77.

[124] Ibid 77.

[125] McLuhan, Marshall "Liturgy and Media: Third Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 146.

[126] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 83.

[127] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 61.

By this he is suggesting that the role of the pope as the head of the Catholic Church is critical to its institutional legitimacy. Role-playing lends itself to understanding the Truth in its entirety by establishing one's position in the greater whole, whereas goals, which are concerned only with outcome, are an impediment to such comprehension.

The lack of participation resulting from the Church's fixation on goals and subsequent resistance to technological change, in turn leads to an absence of faith. As a result, theology becomes a theoretical or intellectual construct, "one of the games people play".[128] In order to contribute to the transformative nature of Catholicism "theology should ideally be a study of *thingness* -- the nature of God, since it is a form of contemplation".[129] In order for this contemplation to occur, there has to be participation and faith.

In order for the Church to perform its role of salvation, McLuhan says it must "shake up the present population" and "to do that [it would] have to preach nothing but hellfire".[130] He claims that as the only institution capable of dealing with the new electric environment, the Church has more at stake than anyone. He charges it with being too soft and accommodating, claiming that its strategies of survival are not very well designed and as a result, it can only fail. Although he rarely does so, McLuhan issues a warning – that hierarchies are intended for a visual society and as such are "legalistic, detached and

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[128] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 82.
[129] Ibid 82.
[130] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 62.

restrictive" for an aural culture and must therefore be dismantled.[131] Quite simply, in

order to survive, McLuhan suggests that "the church is going to have to liquidate its

bureaucracy".[132]

Despite its resistance to new technology, McLuhan claims that the potential for teaching

and learning in the Church has never been greater than in the electronic world. At a level

of lived Christianity the mechanisms for participation and the recognition of both *figure*

and *ground* are already in place. However, in order to survive: "...Church authority will

have to work via resonance and involvement, inviting the listeners to vibrate together in

harmony".[133] It attempted to do so with Vatican II, however, McLuhan claims that:

> The nineteenth century bureaucrats who assembled at the Second Vatican Council
> in 1962 were naturally as unaware of the causes of their problems and reforms as
> the representatives of the Church at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth
> century.[134]

> Nobody at Vatican I or II paid any attention to the causes of the new "needs" for
> the church of our time. The 'need' of any period is always the puppet-like
> response to a new hidden service environment that shapes the awareness of all
> occupants of the same environment, whether they are directly involved in it or
> not.[135]

Despite the failure of the Church to respond to the technological environment, McLuhan

has faith in the survival of the Christian community:

> ...nothing is ever going to prevent Christians from congregating. But the forms in
>
> which they will congregate and organize their activities and help one another –

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[131] McLuhan, Marshall "Tomorrow's Church: Fourth Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 205.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid 206.

[134] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 58.

[135] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Robert J. Leuver," July 30, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 385.

those are capable of indefinite transformation... As long as there is the means of

communion, social and divine, there is an indefinite number of forms in which it

can be achieved.[136]

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[136] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 86.

Chapter Three: Advertising the Death of God

Perception and Incarnation

According to McLuhan, all of creation was remade at the incarnation. While the first Adam was an aesthete and labelled things, the Adam of the electronic incarnation that the western world is currently experiencing, is a creator; he requires participation – passivity is intolerable to him.[1] When Nietzsche declared that "God is dead", he meant that thanks to technology, God became visible and as such, participation ceased to be a requirement for faith. According to McLuhan, "[t]he death of Christianity or 'death of God' occurs the moment they become concept[s]. As long as they remain percept[s], directly involving the perceiver, they are alive".[2] Today's youth understand percepts; they want to be creators and producers; they are not interested in pre-packaged goods. Because the Church is failing to provide this, youth are looking elsewhere. DJs, he claims, have all the answers to the questions youth are asking in catechesis. Their acoustic appeal does not demand imitation; rather, they encourage the individual to tune in to the proper frequency.[3]

For the Church, there continues to be a great discrepancy between what youth are learning within it, what they experience and what their needs are.[4] Catechism today neglects to appeal to youth because, as a result of the printing press, it exists as a visual form and is thus reduced to content, rendering it obsolete. The TV generation is unable to relate to

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[1] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 55.

[2] McLuhan, Marshall "Electric Consciousness and the Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 81.

[3] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 55.

[4] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 63.

catechism because its senses are attuned to a multisensory world, making the dominance

of one sense intolerable. McLuhan suggests that the psychiatrist is the new model for the

catechist and in order for catechism to become relevant, it should be reformatted as

individual counselling, instead of attempting to appeal to large groups.[5]

While McLuhan recognized the supernatural ability and advanced perception of

Catholics, Catholicism was never a subject he addressed in the classroom:

> I deliberately keep my Christianity out of all these discussions lest perception be
> diverted from structural processes by doctrinal sectarian passions. My own
> attitude to Christianity is, itself, awareness of process.[6]

McLuhan sought to generate this awareness among his students through pattern

recognition. This juncture is evidence of how McLuhan's study of pop culture echoes his

analysis of Catholicism. For example, he is not claiming that it is only the hierarchy of the

Catholic Church that is unable to survive the current technological environment – but

hierarchies in any institution. To fellow Catholic and then Justice Minister Pierre Elliot

Trudeau he wrote:

> The de-Romanization of the Catholic Church is only one instance of the
> decentralizing effects of electric information on older bureaucracies. By the same
> token the liturgical revival is that kind of involvement and participation that goes
> with the simultaneity and coexistence of electronic experience.[7]

Therefore, while youth may be currently tuning into DJs and psychiatrists, the survival of

such "institutions" will be determined by their continued ability to resonate with youth.

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[5] McLuhan, Marshall "Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 97.
[6] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Edward T. Hall," July 23, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 384.

McLuhan believes that the high speed of technology today will inspire pattern recognition for the first time in history.[8] He suggests that new technology is returning humanity to a state of *natural law*[9] and that since technology is an extension of biology and new media are nature, this indicates that they were created by God and according to McLuhan, there is nothing evil about any of God's creations.[10] Hence his assertion that the transformation afforded by new technology is a religious experience:

> ...and so we live, in the vulgar sense in an extremely religious age. I think that the age we are moving into will probably seem the most religious ever. We are already there.[11]

While the perceptual abilities of Catholics are already attuned, McLuhan suggests that the total sensory involvement and extension of consciousness made accessible by new technology will facilitate the transformation of non-Catholics.

McLuhan claims that in the secular world, artists have the same perceptual abilities afforded to Catholics through faith. As the "antennae of the race":[12]

> [t]he artist is the person who invents the means to bridge between biological inheritance and the environments created by technological innovation...without the artist's intervention man merely adapts to his technologies and becomes their servo- mechanism.[13]

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[7] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Pierre Elliott Trudeau," April 16, 1968, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 351. Note: McLuhan and Trudeau were friends.

[8] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Jacques Maritain," May 6, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 370.

[9] Note: *Natural Law* refers to the Catholic view that "God has encoded in all creatures, including human beings, basic patterns and obligations that reason can discern." Goring, Rosemary, Ed. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Religious Beliefs*. (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992) 363.

[10] Marchand, Philip. *McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. Toronto: Random House Ltd., 1989, p.24.

[11] McLuhan, Marshall "Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 98.

[12] McLuhan Eric and Marshall McLuhan. *Laws of Media: The New Science*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) 47.

[13] Ibid 98.

He claims that artists are granted a privileged vantage point and therefore, like Saints,

they are able to live in the present.[14]

Understanding the role of the artist requires an analysis of the meaning of art. As an

example, painting began as a *thing,* but after the thirteenth century it provided

information about the outside world before it began to speak for itself in the late

nineteenth century.[15] The fundamental role of the artist, suggested McLuhan, is to allow

things to speak for themselves.[16] The artist took up the cause of formal causality – and

had the power to train human sensibility.[17] The meaning of art therefore, is not one's

opinion but its action on a person.[18] McLuhan claimed that advertising is a form of art.[19]

> What the advertisers have discovered is simply that the new media of
> communication are themselves magical art forms. All art is in a sense magical in
> that it produces a change or metamorphosis in the spectator.[20]

For McLuhan, modern pictorial advertising is a derivative of symbolist poetry; poetry

being the purest form of art since poems do not say, they *do.*[21] Like symbolist art,

advertising is created to produce an effect rather than to argue or discuss the merits of a

product.[22] Again, however, the effectiveness of advertising depends on its ability to

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[14] McLuhan, Marshall "The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church," *The Medium and the Light:*
Reflections on Religion ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 54.
[15] McLuhan, Marshall "Communication Media: Makers of the Modern World," *The Medium and the Light:*
Reflections on Religion ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 36.
[16] Ibid 36.
[17] Ibid 36.
[18] Ibid 38.
[19] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric
McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 63.
[20] McLuhan, Marshall "Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*
ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 164.
[21] Ibid 157.
[22] Ibid 163.

resonate with the population. Like lived Catholicism, it necessitates participation. Only

by continually ensuring participation will it be successful and relevant.[23]

Saturn – A Case Study

Saturn, a car company has launched an effective Internet advertising campaign

(www.saturn.com) which invites individuals to participate in a variety of ways. The

brochure for the new *ION Sedan* (APPENDIX I) for example, depicts a woman taking a

photo of, possibly herself, possibly the website visitor/potential *Saturn* buyer, while

leaning out of the passenger side of a car. Her reflection is not visible in the side mirror

and the potential buyer is enjoying exactly the same view as the woman. As a population

with a knowledge base still captured by print, there is a quote, credited to nobody, as

though some piece of divine wisdom:

> snapshots
> Imagine all the places you'll go and all the people you'll see. Now think of
> all those people in all those places staring right back at you.[24]

In case the image was not engaging enough, the potential buyer must likely stop to

position her/himself in the quote in order to discern its meaning. After this experience,

she/he has the option to click to either request information or locate a retailer in her/his

area, both of which require further participation.

From the home page, the potential *Saturn* owner can select the *My Community* icon,

which takes her/him to a page with a banner of children holding hands walking along a

sea wall over the caption:

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[23] Note: Further study could look at advertising in the face of new technology and its ability to be effective.

> We're Building More Than Cars.
> We live here. We work here. And we're committed to making a positive impact here.
>
> The *Saturn* Difference doesn't stop with the delivery of your car – it begins. We believe in being a good neighbour and a strong supporter of the community. That's why you'll see us out in the community building playgrounds, running blood drives and pedaling our bikes to raise funds and awareness on behalf of people with disabilities.[25]

The potential owner is then invited to select one of the events on the left sidebar to view the projects *Saturn* is involved with. She/he is also invited, in very plain, affable language, to join the *Saturn* CarClub which: "…is made of *Saturn* drivers like [the potential buyers] who are working to make a difference in their hometowns – and having a little fun in the process."[26] One of the communities the people at *Saturn* are building are *Saturn* Playgrounds and not only is "Everyone at *Saturn*…part of a team" but "…[they are] also committed parents. Aunts, uncles and grandparents too."[27] The company is therefore personalized through common interests, language and ideas, which are used to create a sense of belonging. Next, the potential buyer has the option to join other committed responsible family-oriented people who just want to make the world a better place, to join the community and become committed *Saturn* owners. There is even a section of the website reserved only for password-wielding *Saturn CarClub* members.

The *Saturn* advertising campaign is successful because it resonates with people on many levels; for example, by providing opportunities for individuals to imagine themselves driving a *Saturn* and engaging them further by captivating their imaginations. It also

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[24] See *Appendix I*
[25] See *Appendix II*
[26] See *Appendix II*

attracts a certain culture and class of people by inviting them to be part of a community of other like-minded individuals. If the slogan "At *Saturn*, we're building more than cars – we're building communities" is indeed accurate; *Saturn* is appealing to peoples' need to find meaning in their extensions and establish a place for themselves in a greater community – the *global village*. This is exactly what McLuhan claimed the Catholic Church in its current form is neglecting to do. The "success" of Saturn's advertising campaign is inextricably linked to its role in creating a community, rather than its goal of selling cars.

Waking the Somnambulist

As a teacher and media theorist, McLuhan was "interested in understanding why the motivated ignorance and somnambulism of Western society is so necessary a part of our human makeup".[28] He sought to aid people in training their perception by "deal[ing] with the environmental directly...To attack the new environment as if it were capable of being molded".[29] He asserted that:

> If we maintain lively dialogue with, and among, the technologies, we can enlist them on the side of traditional values instead of watching those values disappear while we play the helpless bystanders.[30]

If McLuhan was dialoguing with technology to expose its effects, he did not welcome his students into the discussion; he believed that it was the responsibility of each individual

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[27] See *Appendix III*

[28] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Edward T. Hall," July 23, 1969, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 384.

[29] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Harry J. Skornia," October 3, 1964, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 311.

[30] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to the Editor of *Life*," March 1, 1966, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 334.

to engage in this dialogue for her/himself. As a result, in addition to Catholicism,

McLuhan left value judgements out of the classroom, claiming that they "create smog in

our culture and distract attention from processes",[31] and ultimately "[stand] in the way of

human understanding".[32] He elaborates:

> If I have a point of view about the human condition as a result of investigating the effects of media, it is simply that people are somnambulist. They seem to be happily hypnotized by their own extensions of themselves. I suppose the traditional word for this is idolatry: 'They became what they beheld and bowed the knee to themselves.'[33]

As a devout Catholic, McLuhan abhorred such idolatry and expressed a value judgement

to his then fiancée Corinne to whom he wrote: "[a]nd just as there is nothing good or true

which is not Catholic, so there are a great many things which can be had only by the

Catholic."[34] Moreover, McLuhan claims that optimism and pessimism are secular states

of mind impossible for a Christian to attain. He deems himself *apocalyptic*, claiming that

"our only hope is apocalypse".[35] For him, apocalypse, insofar as it restores a holistic

balance of the senses, is salvation.[36]

Consistent with *the medium is the message*, McLuhan's methodology is to demonstrate

the importance of pattern recognition by example. He seeks to make people aware of

process and environment by actually becoming both. The repetitiveness of his work was

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[31] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Jonathan Miller," April 22, 1970, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 406.

[32] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Frank Sheed," February 20, 1970, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 399.

[33] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Frank Kermode," March 4, 1971, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 426.

[34] McLuhan, Marshall "Letter to Maurice McLuhan," October 20, 1934, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Eds. Molinaro, Matie et al. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 29.

[35] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 59.

[36] Ibid 60.

often deemed frustrating and unacademic by his contemporaries and he was often

dismissed as a result. In fact, when criticized, McLuhan would often say things like, "if

you don't like that one, here's another" or "obviously you think my fallacy is all wrong".

This would confuse his critics and demonstrates that his work does not lend itself to

criticism. In fact, McLuhan dismissed anyone who criticized his work "as a victim of

Gutenberg tyranny".[37] However, in his academic work McLuhan portrays the belief that

"[a]ny valuable extension of awareness is directly determined by the rediscovery of

neglected truths...".[38] He attempts to provide an opportunity for readers to discover a truth

but made sure that the reader her/himself did the actual discovering. He invokes this

process by "probing" or provoking them to notice what humans by nature, tend to

overlook – how we are shaped by technology.[39] Through his unapologetic methodological

manifestation of both medium and message, McLuhan exempts himself from the criticism

he inflicted on his hero G.K. Chesterton, that he was "a poor salesman because he did not

wish to persuade without first convincing".[40] McLuhan does not convince by persuading,

he persuades by convincing.

According to Eugene Peterson, "the usefulness of McLuhan is still academic".[41]

However, one has to wonder exactly what this means considering the often hostile

reaction McLuhan received from the Canadian academy. Milton Klonsky, however,

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[37] Miller, Jonathan. *McLuhan*. (London: Wm. Collins & Co. Ltd., 1971) 30.
[38] McLuhan, Marshall "G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 13.
[39] McLuhan, Marshall "Our Only Hope is Apocalypse," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 59.
[40] McLuhan, Marshall "G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 7.
[41] Peterson, Eugene H. "Apocalypse: The Medium is the Message." (*Theology Today*, 24 July 1969) 133.

believes that the academy seems to be producing the newest prophets, and McLuhan is

exactly the prophet today's youth are looking for.[42] McLuhan is the first Canadian to

become an *ism* and *McLuhanism* is a refreshing new trend since "converts come with

everything from angst to Zen."[43] Thus McLuhan's popularity is not surprising considering

that he himself said that Zen is popular with youth since it provides them with the guru

they are looking for.[44] McLuhan himself declared that "religious teachers have to become

mystics and live with the group, otherwise they'll be out of place".[45] His own conversion

and lifelong struggle to understand the world around him made him exactly the type of

guru his students were looking for. According to Alexander Ross,

> McLuhanism is a holy new cult, with intellectual epopis scattered across the
> Western world, preaching a body of made-in-Toronto doctrine that eventually may
> alter much of our thinking about how to cope with the twentieth
> century...McLuhanism is a hopeful creed; instead of despairing at man's fate in a
> machine dominated world, McLuhan sees electronic technology as a Western
> man's salvation – the means by which he will regain his psychic unity."[46]

McLuhan's attempt to "figurize" the effects of the electric media "urged his listeners to

take a stance of awareness and responsibility".[47] However, he complained that "there is a

deep-seated repugnance in the human breast against understanding the processes in which

we are involved...Such understanding involves far too much responsibility for our

actions."[48] The growing number of McLuhanites in the 1990s is either an indication that

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[42] Klonsky, Milton. "McLuhan's message Or: Which Way Did the Second Coming Went?" New American Review, (No. 2, January 1968) 95.
[43] Ibid 96.
[44] McLuhan, Marshall "The Christian in the Electronic Age," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999) 176.
[45] Ibid 176.
[46] Ross, Alexander. "The High Priest of Pop Culture" *Maclean's* Magazine, (July 3, 1965,) 13.
[47] Wolf, Gary. "The Wisdom of Saint Marshall, The Holy Fool." Wired Magazine. (Vol. 4.01, March 1996,) www.wired.com/wired/4.01/saint.marshal.html.
[48] McLuhan, Eric. "Introduction," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jack Szlarek (New York: Stoddard Publishing Company Ltd., 1999).

humanity is finally prepared to take responsibility for its actions, or else, it marks the

emergence of yet another group of content-obsessed discarnate individuals searching for a

saviour. McLuhan asserted that if there were going to be McLuhanites, he was certainly

not going to be one – a necessary sentiment for anyone who truly understands his work.

Conclusion

A true understanding of McLuhan's Catholicism as it relates to his media theory is not grounded in what kind of Catholic he was; rather how the tenets: *the medium is the message* and *the user is the content* are the templates for understanding his Catholicism, his media theory, and McLuhan himself. By emphasizing form over content he was able to recognize patterns and eventually measure the success of a thing, be it spiritual, institutional or personal, based on its ability to resonate with the population.

McLuhan's conversion to Catholicism spanned spiritual, literary and intellectual realms and affected all aspects of his life. His early years were imbued with a sense of spiritual restlessness resulting from his parents' conflicting spiritual views. It was on a cattle boat bound for England in 1932 that he first read the work of G.K. Chesterton – and subsequently discovered Catholicism. He developed his intellectual understanding of the faith during his doctoral studies. While studying the warring elements of the trivium, McLuhan also realized how, as an "outering" of our subconscious, language demonstrates the relationships between things. He discovered that the way we learn our first language is the template by which we learn all other things; it shapes not only *what* but *how* we learn. Extrapolating this theory, McLuhan discovered how all media impose the same kind of learning. He was able to distinguish a pattern of sensory evolution in which humanity began with an oral/*tribal* culture in which all senses were engaged equally. The invention of the printing press *detribalized* oral culture, transforming it into eye culture. With emphasis on the eye, the holistic balance of the senses was interrupted. In today's technological environment, the speed of technology is *retribalizing* human

culture, returning us to an oral culture in which once again, all senses are engaged equally. For the eye culture of the previous generation, this is disorienting and sometimes overwhelming as it obsolesces the culture of print.

It was no accident that McLuhan's actual conversion to Catholicism coincided with his study of media since he regarded the training of perception as central to both. As a grammarian, he was interested in the relationships between things. In particular, he focused on visible and invisible environments and their interaction and effect on culture. He discovered relational elements such as *environment* and *anti-environment*, *figure* and *ground*, suggesting that while one element was more visible, one should not underestimate the power of the less visible (the ground or anti-environment) to have an effect even when it is being ignored. To McLuhan, understanding such ideas as dichotomies was to understand them as *concepts* rather than *percepts*. For him, percepts necessitated understanding through involvement. For, it is only by actively participating in the interplay between elements that the user is transformed and becomes the content.

For McLuhan, communication was not about the transportation of the message but the *transformation* of the user. Upon discovering Catholicism and its potential to animate the inanimate, he was quick to declare it the ideal religion for a generation of people who have lost their bodies by corporal extension through new technology. What fascinated him most was the ritual of the Eucharist – the perfect example of how *the medium is the message*. According to him, faith facilitates the participation which transforms the bread and wine administered by the priest into the blood and body of Christ for the Catholic. He

declared that as concepts, God and Christianity were both dead; for practicing Catholics, however, God is a percept since rituals like the Eucharist acquire their meaning through spiritual involvement. McLuhan claimed that the superior perceptual abilities afforded to Catholics through faith are the result of an awareness of a supernatural anti-environment. As a result, they are granted a unique perspective or privileged vantage point of their worldly environment, allowing them to recognize how they are affected by elements within it.

At Cambridge, McLuhan, both by nationality and by religion, enjoyed an advantage of perspective much like the one he attributed to Catholics. He was also deeply influenced by figures such as McCauley, from whom, among other things, he learned the importance of the historical. Through an historical analysis of Catholicism and the advantage of his perspective, McLuhan was able to recognize patterns the institutional development of the Church. These patterns illustrate the pandemic resistance of the Church to embrace new technologies, resulting in a relational decline in Church attendance.

The Church's reluctant acceptance of technology has burdened individual Catholics with a mass of content. As the technologies of print and the microphone facilitated the spread of the vernacular into the Church at the expense of Latin mass, McLuhan claimed that Catholics became hypnotized by content. With the *figure* so prominent, understanding content is mistaken for total involvement, reducing Catholicism to a concept. The microphone also obsolesced Church architecture and turned the priest around to face the congregation. To McLuhan, this shift gave the appearance that power was being

administered by the clergy, instead of by God. Furthermore, as the clergy began to divest themselves of costume, they donned private identity, an event which McLuhan claimed was equal to the disappearance of the Christian message in secular society.

Through its resistance to technology, the Church has centralized its bureaucracy against the decentralizing forces of faster technology. It has become obsessed with the goal of maintaining its institutional legitimacy at the expense of its role of salvation. Young people today, asserts McLuhan, want roles, not goals, since the former allows one to establish oneself within the greater whole, permitting a sustainable realization of Truth, as opposed to the necessary finality implicit in goal-orientation. McLuhan asserts that the Church must abandon its hierarchy and the pope his role as a bureaucratic figure if it is going to resonate with the holistic sensoria of the electric generation.

Since, according to McLuhan, the Church is increasingly unable to appeal to youth, they are searching elsewhere for meaning; namely, to secular society. Pop culture is appealing to the perceptual needs and the multi-sensory expectations of the current population and is embracing technology to create new forms of belonging. As long as it continues to resonate with the transforming need of the population to participate, it will continue to thrive. Artists, according to McLuhan, are in the most advantageous position to live in the present and forecast the newest technological shifts since, as *the antennae of the race,* they enjoy the same perceptual abilities afforded to Catholics. Instead of being used to attain spiritual growth, many artists have been engaged by secular society in the realm of advertising. For McLuhan, advertising is an art form created to produce an effect. A

successful advertising campaign is perceptual, actively engaging prospective consumers in the present as well as creating the potential for future involvement, as with Saturn's seductive promise of community building.

McLuhan converted to Catholicism at a time when tolerance for Catholic intellectuals in North America was evolving into respect. Regardless, he kept his Catholicism out of the classroom. In the same vein he never expressed an opinion as to whether media and pop culture were good or bad. This was no doubt the influence of Aquinas from whom McLuhan learned about the importance of effects and structural form instead of value judgements. McLuhan instead suggested that technology will ultimately affect the sensory balance of the population and that it is apocalyptic; that is, survival necessitates embracing it and understanding its effects.

McLuhan would accuse this paper of being ruthlessly Protestant in its methodology, since it serves to soothe and comfort the victims of a dismembered Renaissance by explaining McLuhan, his Catholicism and his media theory. In the maelstrom of the new technological environment, he was a loyal crewmember of a disintegrating Catholic bureaucracy, attempting as Poe's sailor did, to communicate a survival strategy. Following what he believed was that of the Church, McLuhan's role is to *shake up the present population* by training our perceptual abilities through deliberate placement of obligatory percepts. As a result, understanding his work necessitates participation from the reader. Understanding McLuhan requires a type of conversion – from reader to "drop out" and content becomes secondary to the training course he has laid out for one's

perceptual abilities. In fact, he has made understanding his ideas as concepts nearly

impossible, frustrating the people who try to do so, ultimately leading some to dismiss his

work altogether.

This study began as an examination of McLuhan's Catholicism as it relates to his media

theory, only to discover that to understand them as relational elements is to understand

them as concepts; as percepts, they are one in the same. In both religious and secular

societies, when a population is hypnotized by content they are unable to recognize the

impact of the environment on sensory balance and communication. Such awareness has a

transformative effect on an individual who in fact becomes the content of the

circumstance. As such, she/he is able to remove social barriers such as that which divides

the sacred and secular, a transubstantiative role which permits an active understanding of

one's place in a greater whole. For McLuhan this was the *global village*.

The value of McLuhan today is not religious or even academic. His importance lies in the

ability of his work to resonate with people twenty-three years after his death. Even

posthumously, McLuhan, by means of the inherent perceptual value of his work,

transcends boundaries and exists, among many things, as an academic and pop culture

guru. Truly understanding McLuhan means understanding him as *homo Catholicus* – a

universal being whose life was the content of the very essence of his understanding of the

world. He claimed that "religious teachers have to become mystics and live with the

group, else they'll be out of touch."[1] Perhaps his continued popularity is the result of the

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[1] McLuhan, Eric and Jacek Szklarek, Eds. *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion.* Toronto: Stoddart, 1999, p. 69.

fact that he did just this. Etched recently in a *Heritage Minute* as the man who declared the medium the message, the true meaning of McLuhan may transcend even his role as the Patron Saint of *Wired Magazine*. It may be a greater subliminal, perhaps even Divine Truth for which he is himself the anti-environment. This notion could form the basis for further ~~research~~ perceptual training.

And so, I interrupt what I hope to be able to conclude another day. It is impossible not to be conscious of the many defects of this study; but it is, likewise, impossible to have surveyed the territory in question without acquiring a vivid sense of its largely unexplored character.[2]

[2] Kuhns, William. "The War Within the Word: McLuhan's History of the Trivium." (www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article6.cgi)

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