

AN ARTISTIC ENTERPRISE, A GRAMMATICAL DEVICE AND
A NEW SCIENCE
IN MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S *THE LAWS OF MEDIA*

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Abstract

The paper aims to interpret a new science of media-culture that was introduced in the 1990s' by Marshall McLuhan. His book *The Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988) was celebrated as key insights of media theory in contemporary society. McLuhan became most discussed and debated theorists of the time. He provides provocative theses on the role of the media and new knowledge in constituting the contemporary world. In this paper, we will illuminate the McLuhan's laws of media theory and how it can be deployed to produce analyses of an artistic attempt of media principles and a grammatical device. While we believe the themes of modernism and the trivium resonate throughout the McLuhan's corpus, for the purposes of this paper we have chosen to investigate them through his last book, *Laws of Media*. The text has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, yet it emerges as creative work in McLuhan's works when it examined in relation to the continuity of McLuhan's thought. We find that McLuhan's work has been a call for a return to a classical education based on the arts of grammar and rhetoric, and that turning to McLuhan's past may be the best way of moving McLuhan's scholarship forward. The laws of media could be applied to all human artefacts, everything humankind makes or does.

Keywords: Culture, Grammar, Laws, Media, Modernism, Rhetoric and Science.

The art of grammar had been privileged in McLuhan's dissertation. It is obvious in his key work *Laws of Media*. Marshall McLuhan's exploration of the arts of rhetoric and grammar is intimately linked and collectively allied against dialectics. It is the art of grammar which he singles out as the art capable of creating an awareness of ground via its dual techniques of multiple interpretations. Eric tells us that when McLuhan and his father started work on the *Laws*

of *Media* project his father asked, “What statements can we make about media that anyone can test—prove or disprove—for himself? What do all media have in common? What do they do?” (McLuhan 7). Expecting to find no less than a dozen factors, they instead discovered four, and only four:

- 1) Every medium *enhances*, amplifies or intensifies some aspect of a situation or extends some organ, sense or faculty of the user (e.g., the computer *enhances* the speeds of calculation and retrieval),
- 2) Every medium *obsolesces* or diminishes an area of experience or displaces a prior situation (the most obvious case being where a new medium replaces an older medium, e.g., the refrigerator *obsolesces* the ice box or root cellar),
- 3) Every medium *retrieves* or recalls something or some aspect of a situation that was previously obsolesced (e.g., the electric light *retrieves* daytime activities such as baseball or reading by facilitating their practice at night) and
- 4) Every medium *reverses* its characteristics when overloaded, overheated or pushed to the extreme (e.g., the car extends mobility until there are too many of them, then it *reverses* into immobility in the inevitable traffic jam). Collectively these four factors form the “laws” of media.

The concepts expressed in the laws are familiar ones. The ideas of enhancement, archaic and reversal were addressed in *Understanding Media* (1964), while the notion of retrieval formed the basis of *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970). They did not, however, appear collectively as a set of laws until 1975 when McLuhan unveiled them to the world in a brief article in *Technology and Culture*. In this article McLuhan provided samples of the laws at work, showing how they could be applied to a variety of “media” from cable television and the microphone to the instant replay and the Copernican revolution, explaining that his sense of the term “media” included conventional communication media as well as the “larger entity of information and perception which forms our thoughts, structures our experience, and determines our views of the world about us (McLuhan, *Technology and Culture* 74)”. In an attempt to develop a dialogue around his new discovery McLuhan solicited feedback from the journal’s readers, openly challenging anyone to disprove his laws. Much to his dismay the sole response was a rambling letter from an engineer and practicing attorney in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—hardly the reception he had imagined for what he would later refer to as his greatest achievement.

The laws were McLuhan’s answer to the Shannon-Weaver model of communication study. While the Shannon-Weaver model restricted itself to the linear, logical and sequential pattern of efficient causality, or left-hemisphere thinking, the laws were thought to embody the principles of multi-level causality and right-hemisphere thinking. Consequently, the McLuhans insist their laws account for *ground*, the side effects of the media that the Shannon-Weaver model ignores. They suggest that all will be revealed if only four simple questions are asked of a given medium: What does it enhance? What does it obsolesce? What does it retrieve? What does it reverse into? They believe that traditional modes of media analysis are theoretical and tend to limit themselves to consideration of the medium in the abstract, while their laws are empirical and facilitate careful observation of the medium in relation to its ground. As they explain:

Media, that is, the ground- configurations of effects, the service environments of technologies, are inaccessible to direct examination since the effects are mainly subliminal . . . Our laws of media are intended to provide a ready means of

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identifying the properties of and actions exerted upon ourselves by our technologies and media and artefacts. (McLuhan, *Laws of Media* 98)

According to the McLuhan, the laws revealed the hidden effects or *ground* of media, technology and artefacts; they were “endeavours of art (109)” and devices of grammar. Simply by asking four simple questions, then, the laws provided the reader a means to approaching *ground*. This was the awareness McLuhan had been striving to achieve throughout his career. No wonder, he considered the laws a profound discovery. When McLuhan first unveiled the laws in the “Technology and Culture” article they were simply listed in sequence (A, B, C, and D). By the time they found expression in *Laws of Media*, however, they were graphically rendered in tetradic form:

ENHANCES	REVERSES
RETRIEVES	OBSOLESCE

In addition to stressing the simultaneous and complementary nature of the laws and offering McLuhan a poetic form of expression, the four part structure of the tetrad served to illustrate the relationship the McLuhan had come to perceive between the four laws and the four part structure of metaphor. McLuhan had long maintained that metaphors were complex ratios among four parts enabling us to see one set of relations through another set. In *Laws of Media*, McLuhan confesses that the four parts of metaphor are actually two figure-ground relationships in opposition. He explains that all metaphors have four components in analogical ratio, but generally only two of these components, the figures, are made explicit—Cats are the crabgrass of life’ presents ‘cats are to (my) life as crabgrass is to an otherwise beautiful lawn. That the ground components tend to remain implicit means they are often ignored. The McLuhan complains that this leads to sane confusion about the *true* nature of metaphor. What should be understood as a right-hemisphere technique of perception or awareness involving two figures and two grounds is often tainted by a left-hemisphere or visual bias. Consequently, the “usual approach to metaphor is purely verbal rather than operational or structural, that is, in left-hemisphere terms of the figures only, minus their grounds (121)”. The conventional treatment of metaphor, then, is as inadequate as the conventional study of media—both omit the elements of ground. The McLuhans maintain that their tetrad, with its four laws in proportion, embodied the four part structure of metaphor—two figures and two grounds.

McLuhan tells us that in playing with the four laws they discovered that the laws were applicable to more than what is traditionally regarded as media. Much to their surprise, the laws could be applied to all human artefacts, everything humankind makes or does. That is, “every procedure, every style, every artefact, every poem, song, painting, theory, technology—every product of human effort—manifested the same four dimensions (ix),” the same four aspects of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal. Equally, significant, they also discovered that the four laws did not apply to non human or natural things. That is, the laws seemed to work for television, Einsteinian space time relativity and cigarettes, but they did not work for spiders’ webs, beaver dams or birds’ nests. That their four laws seemed to apply to all human artefacts and not to anything natural prompted the McLuhans to conclude that the four part structure of metaphor was present in the human realm and notably absent from the natural realm—“testimony to the fact that the mind of man is structurally active in all human artefacts and hypotheses”. (120)

In the preface of book, Eric McLuhan claims that “finding the link to metaphor led to one of the farthest-reaching realizations which itself tied directly back to the subtitle of *Understanding Media*, ‘the extensions of man’. Utterings are outerings (extensions), so media are not *as* words, they actually *are* words, and we had stumbled upon the key to their verbal structure (ix)”. Drawing upon McLuhan’s previous conception of media as *extensions* of limbs, organs or senses as well as the ancient concept of the logos as both *uttering* and *outering*, the McLuhan’s concluded that all media, all human artefacts, were essentially verbal entities. As they explain, “all human artefacts are extensions of man, outerings or utterings of the human body or psyche, private or corporate. That is to say, they are speech, and they are translations of us, the users, from one form into another form: metaphors (116)”. Eric comments upon the importance of such a discovery:

I don’t consider it any exaggeration to say that confirming and detailing this de, between speech and artefacts, constitutes the single biggest intellectual discovery not only of our time, but of at least the last couple of centuries. Yet the four laws are dazzlingly simple . . . As we show (and as anyone can test), the laws apply only to human utterances and artefacts: they reveal nothing about animal products, such as webs or dams or nests, except perhaps thereby confirming the ancient observation that it is chiefly speech that makes us human and distinct from the rest of creation. (x)

In the construct of the tetrad, then, the McLuhans articulated a theory of media which was verbal at its core and which recalled the assumption of the classical rhetoricians that speech was what separated us from the beasts, a concept the McLuhans expand upon through the work of George Steiner. Steiner, a literary critic, had noted that “unlike animal species we are out of balance with and in the world. Speech is the consequence and the maintainer of this disequilibrium (119)”. That is, while speech effectively hoicks us out of servitude to Nature by separating us from it, it also necessarily leaves us slaves to the vagaries of second nature, the artefacts of our own making. Hence, the need to engage our technologies, media and artefacts with a heightened sense of awareness, the sense of awareness created by the arts, the ancient tradition of grammar or the tetrad.

The McLuhans go on to explain that in the tetrad the artefact is not “neutral” or “passive,” but “an active logos or utterance of the human mind or body that transforms the user and his ground (99)”. As utterances, the artefacts are subject to rhetorical or poetic investigation; as words, they are subject to grammatical investigation. Thus, the tetrads are “verbal structures and poetic science in one,” belonging “properly to rhetoric and grammar, not philosophy.” The tetrad, then, like the rest of work of McLuhan, embodied the spirit of his 1943 dissertation. As a communication model this was as far from the Shannon-Weaver model as one could get.

Apparently when McLuhan was working on *Laws of Media* he detected an affinity between his work and the work of Francis Bacon and Giambattista Vico. Eric recalls that his father would “refer to the works of Bacon or Vico, rather as one would consult colleagues . . . realizing that they and other grammarians had been steering courses parallel to his (or vice versa), bringing the tools of literary training to bear on understanding the world and our part in it (x)”. While Bacon and Vico are generally regarded as philosophers (i.e., Modems or dialecticians) the McLuhan’s propose that they were actually “thoroughgoing Ancients” on the side of rhetoric and grammar. Bacon, who like McLuhan, shared a penchant for aphorisms, had

relied on the grammatical method of manifold interpretation in his *The New Organon; or, True Directions concerning the Interpretation of Nature*. Similarly, Vico, whom the McLuhan dubs the last great pre-electric grammarian, was a professor of rhetoric who employed etymology and exegesis—the classic tools of the art of grammar—in his *Scienza Nuova*. Just as McLuhan observed that grammar was once regarded as an important basis of scientific method in his dissertation, we are told that Bacon and Vico “continuously asserted the claims of grammar as true science (220)”. In the McLuhan’s eyes Bacon and Vico were practitioners of Grammar, diligently applying the ancient skills of interpretation to the book of Nature. Evidently with *Laws of Media* McLuhan believed he and his son were doing the same.

The McLuhans maintain that with their respective “New Sciences”—*The New Organon; or, True Directions concerning the Interpretation of Nature* and *Scienza Nuova*—Bacon and Vico were laying down a challenge to the “Old Science.” Whereas “Old Science” was a left hemisphere theoretical science that began with knowledge and concepts and proceeded by figures without ground, the “New Science” put forth by Bacon and Vico was a right-hemisphere empirical science that began with ignorance, bias and precepts and proceeded by figures and grounds. Just as the “Old theoretical Science” could not succeed without an apparatus for locating and remedying flaws in reasoning, the McLuhan explains that the “New empirical Science” of Bacon and Vico could not succeed without an apparatus for detecting and compensating for sensory or perceptual bias. As Bacon had noted:

. . . the mind of man is far from the nature of a clear and equal glass, wherein the beams of things should reflect according to their true incidence; nay, it is rather like an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture. (*Of the Advancement of Learning* 11)

The McLuhan insists that both thinkers account for such bias in their theories—Bacon in his four idols and Vico in his four axioms. Such accounts, the McLuhan’s believe, amount to nothing less than “a foundation for a detailed theory of communication (83).” While the Shannon-Weaver model of communication study belonged to “Old Science,” the McLuhan’s believe their laws of media belonged to the New Science of Bacon and Vico—hence, the subtitle Eric bestowed upon their book:

Bacon called his book the *Novum Organum* (or *Novum Organon*, as a swat at Aristotle’s followers), the *New Science*; Vico called his the *Scienza Nuova*, the *New Science*; I have subtitled ours *The New Science*. On reflection, I am tempted to make that the title and *Laws of Media* the subtitle, for it should stand as volume three of a work begun by Sir Francis Bacon and carried forward a century later by Giambattista Vico. (x)

McLuhan insists that “the key to the whole business is sensibility, as the serious poets and artists (and grammarians) have always maintained” and leave us with the following passage at the end of the book:

The goal of science and the arts and of education for the next generation must be to decipher not the genetic but the perceptual code, hi a global information environment, the old pattern of education in answer-finding is of no avail: one is surrounded by answers, millions of them, moving and mutating at electric speed. Survival and control will depend on the ability to probe and to question in the proper way and place. As the information that constitutes the environment is

perpetually in flux, so the need is not for fixed concepts but rather for the ancient skill of reading that book, for navigating through an ever uncharted and unchartable milieu. Else we will have no more control of this technology and environment than we have of the wind and tides. (239)

Such had been McLuhan's goal throughout his career, from *The Mechanical Bride* where he attempted to arrest the "whirling phantasmagoria" of advertising and popular culture for contemplation and educate against the dominant media environment to *Laws of Media* where he would remind us that "there is no inevitability where there is a willingness to pay attention (v)". McLuhan believed that media determinism could only occur when we were well-adjusted, when we were not paying attention, when we are not aware of the perceptual bias imposed upon us by our own technologies. In *Laws of Media* the perceptual techniques offered by the arts and the techniques of grammar, along with the construct of the tetrad, are identified as potential means of escape—escape through awareness and understanding. In such a manner McLuhan hoped we could control our technology, media and artefacts, preserve our humanity and set our own course.

In *Laws of Media*, the McLuhan provides us with an approach to media that harkens back to McLuhan's brush with modernism and his trivium research. If, media were indeed verbal in nature then it made perfect sense to subject them to an analysis which was grounded in literary studies. Just as the ancient grammarians had recognized nature as a divine text to be understood in much the same manner as scripture, McLuhan came to see all human artefacts as a collection of linguistic entities to which the techniques of grammar could be applied. Hence, the role of the tetrad: "each tetrad gives the etymology of its subject, as an uttering or outerring of the body physical or mental, and provides its anatomy in fourfold exegetical manner (224)". Donald Theall once described McLuhan's method as "an ever-growing extension of *The Mechanical Bride*—an attempt to 'read' (in the Baconian and new critical sense, i.e., the exegetical sense of the word) cultural objects." In *Laws of Media* McLuhan demonstrates that, like Bacon and Vico, he was a "thorough going Ancient" employing the tools of grammar.

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