

INTRODUCTION

Initiated and directed by Baruch Gottlieb as a special series of events during the McLuhan Centennial Year 2011, McLuminations aims to extend and expand the new electronic media experience. According to McLuhan, people are now subjected to tremendous new influences of instantaneous media. Without any time for reflection or reaction, people get accustomed to a more inclusive, comprehensive and totally sensuous commitment. Through total involvement of their whole beings, people get out of the habit of establishing an individual critical approach. McLuminations hooks into this phenomena to grapple with and open out this in depth participation through reference to rare McLuhan video material.

Visual vs. Acoustic World

McLuhan had a special approach, his own kind of study in communication as a study of transformation. For McLuhan these transformations structured our cultural history into three major ages: First the "old acoustic age" with tribal culture, where people, as McLuhan says, were "flipped out of" by the phonetic alphabet into the visual age of the script being "stepped up" by the advent of the press. Then followed by the "tremendous shift" into the post-literate acoustic age of the "Global Village" which "is created by instant electronic information movement"¹ of "simultaneous information"² by the new electric media.

"with a shift from oral memory to the use of a written alphabet to transmit and preserve information" [Kim Yates (2005): Gutenberg]

„Yet McLuhan had introduced a notion (...) the idea that new media such as television have the power to alter the human mind and thereby history itself." [Tom Wolfe (2004): McLuhan's New World]

„For the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs." „weil eben das Medium Ausmaß und Form des menschlichen Zusammenlebens gestaltet“ [UM, 18]

For McLuhan this is "one of the big flips that's taking place in our time [...] the changeover from the eye to the ear"³. He points out a shift from the eye to the ear. So what does this mean? McLuhan describes the electric world as a "world of simultaneity, [...] [with] no continuity, [...] no connections, and no stasis. Everything is changing."⁴ And what the phonetic alphabet did to the people was that "the visual part [...] was cut off"⁵ from the senses ("the kinetic, acoustic and tactile parts"). And this connects to McLuhan's structure of our cultural history: In the old acoustic world our senses had been in balance and then the visual world cut off all the other senses by focusing on the visual sense. For McLuhan this was only an interlude and we are now reverting back to this balance of the five senses. So to understand McLuhan's "flip from the eye to the ear": there is no focusing on the sense of the ear, but on a balance of all senses. For McLuhan the TV as a new media raises an "interplay of the senses"⁶. He says TV is a "wrap-around medium" and "totally participant, it uses the eye as an ear not as an eye. Television is not a visual medium, it's an acoustic medium, enhance the participation is like music, not like vision. Vision is detached, you stand back and watch. But you don't stand back and watch television. You're in it."⁷

¹Marshall McLuhan, Global village, 1968. In: Marshall McLuhan Speaks

²Marshall McLuhan, Living at the Speed of Light, 1974. In: The Video McLuhan 5, 1996

³Marshall McLuhan, Living at the Speed of Light, 1974. In: The Video McLuhan 5, 1996

⁴Marshall McLuhan, Living at the Speed of Light, 1974. In: The Video McLuhan 5, 1996

⁵Marshall McLuhan, Living at the Speed of Light, 1974. In: The Video McLuhan 5, 1996

⁶Marshall McLuhan, The Playboy Interview, 1969, S. 6

⁷Marshall McLuhan, TV as an acoustic medium, 1978. In: The Video McLuhan 3, 1996, 0:00:19-0:00:37

“To have all sides simultaneously is not visual. It is acoustic and tactile.”⁸

“At the speed of light there is no sequence. Everything happens at the same instant. That's acoustic and everything happens at once. There's no continuity, there's no connection, there's no follow through. It's just all now. [...] It's just all like a surprise, unexpectedness and total involvement.”⁹

„today we are moving in the reverse direction, away from the printed language to the reinvention of visual language.“ [McLuhan (published 1988 posthumously by his son Eric McLuhan): *Laws of Media*]

Private vs. Tribal Identity

Within McLuhan's lecture at Florida State University from 1970 he tells us, what the stakes are: Literacy is going to be “phaced out”¹⁰ by the new electronic world. Connected to the literate and visual world he says: “Everything that we prize in our western world in matters of individualism, separatism and of unique point of view and private judgment - all those factors are highly favoured by the printed word, and not really favoured by other forms of culture like radio [...] the private, the individual, the private judgement, the point of view [...] underwent huge change with the arrival of such technology.”¹¹

“One of the strange implications of the phonetic alphabet is private identity. Before literacy, before phonetic literacy, there had been no private identity. There had only been the tribal group. Homer knows nothing about private identity, Homer's world of the acoustic epic, the tribal encyclopedia of memorized wisdom, which Eric Havelock has reported so ably in his Preface to Plato, the Homeric epics were part of this acoustic wisdom that preceded literacy and which were phased out by literacy. [...] If Homer was wiped out by literacy, literacy can be wiped out by rock.”¹²

McLuhan warns us what the stakes are: “The stakes are civilization versus tribalism and groupism, private identity versus corporate identity, and private responsibility versus the group or tribal mandate.”¹³

There is another interesting element McLuhan mentions: “We're playing playing the old story backwards”¹⁴ as for him the visual age is only an interlude and we are reverting back to the acoustic world. In *Understanding Media* he suggests: “Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man” [UM, 3] and therefore have come to the “end of the road” and have to turn backwards.

„The Gutenberg galaxy, or technology, favors all forms of segmental, fragmental statics rather than dynamic and organic forms.”¹⁵

„As much as nationalism and individualism, perspective, both psychic and physical, is immediately the child of print technology. Perspective, with arbitrarily fixed point of view and its vanishing point, is natural to the reader of uniform lines of repeatable type.”¹⁶

“[H. A. Innis] notion that any change in handling information, communication is bound to cause a great readjustment of all the social patterns, the educational patterns, the sources and conditions of political power, public opinion patterns will change. But he got into that track rather interestingly, you see as an economic historian - he had been studying railways and the cod fisheries, the fur trade and the pulp and paper and he moved then from staples as forms of shaping economic life, to media as staples,

⁸Marshall McLuhan, *Living at the Speed of Light*, 1974. In: *The Video McLuhan* 5, 1996

⁹Marshall McLuhan, NBC „Tomorrow Show“ with Tom Snyder, 1976. In: *The Video McLuhan* 3, 1996, 00:10:26-00:11:05

¹⁰Marshall McLuhan, *Living at the Speed of Light*, 1974. In: *The Video McLuhan* 5, 1996

¹¹Marshall McLuhan, *The Future of Man in the Electric Age*, 1965. In: *The Video McLuhan* 1, 1996, 00:33:03-00:40:42

¹²Marshall McLuhan, *Living at the Speed of Light*, 1974. In: *The Video McLuhan* 5, 1996, 00:04:15-00:12:52

¹³Marshall McLuhan, *Living at the Speed of Light*, 1974. In: *The Video McLuhan* 5, 1996, 00:04:15-00:12:52

¹⁴Marshall McLuhan, *Living at the Speed of Light*, 1974. In: *The Video McLuhan* 5, 1996, 00:04:15-00:12:52

¹⁵McLuhan, *Effects of the Improvements of Communication Media*, 1960, S. 574

¹⁶McLuhan, *Effects of the Improvements of Communication Media*, 1960, S. 572

and he began to study the new media as really basic economic resources, and much as for example cotton in the south has shaped a whole culture, now radio is shaping a global culture. It's global in the extent of its resource availability. So what would appear to be in the offing is a global culture conformable to a staple like radio as the southern culture was conformable to cotton. [...] The tremendous developments that we made in individual private habits of study, isolated effort, inner direction and so on - these are likely to take the rap from media that are so inclusive of the whole of society and at all levels.¹⁷

“every technology has its own ground rules, as it were. It decides all sorts of arrangements in other spheres. The effect of script and the ability to make inventories and collect data and store data changed many social habits and processes back as early as three thousand BC. However, that's about as early as scripts began. The effects of rearranging one's experience, organizing one's experience by these new extensions of our powers are quite unexpected. Perhaps one way of putting it is to say that writing represents a high degree of specializing of our powers. Compared to pre-literate societies, there's a considerable concentration on one faculty when you develop a skill like scripting. [...] [the visual sense] is a highly specialized stress, compared to anything in ordinary oral societies. There've been many studies made of this in various ways, but in our own western world the rise of the phonetic alphabet seems to have had much to do with platonic culture and the ordering of experience in the terms of ideas - classifying of data and experience by ideas. [...] Printing stepped it up to a considerable pitch [...]. It created, almost overnight it created what we call a nationalism, what in effect was a public. The old manuscript forms were not sufficiently powerful instruments of technology to create publics in the sense that print was able to do - unified, homogeneous, reading publics. Everything that we prize in our western world in matters of individualism, separatism and of unique point of view and private judgment - all those factors are highly favoured by the printed word, and not really favoured by other forms of culture like radio or...and...or earlier by the...manuscript. But this stepping up of the fragmented, the private, the individual, the private judgment, the point of view, in fact our whole vocabularies underwent huge change with the arrival of such technology.”¹⁸

„Here, then, is a brief indication of the new patterns that entered teaching and learning as a result of printing. There was first, repeatability and uniformity which conferred the power of speed and silence on the reader. The manuscript was read slowly and aloud. The speed, uniformity, and repeatability of the printed book entirely altered patterns of study. It was then possible for the first time to read widely. [...] The portability of the book, shared with its repeatability and low cost, created on the one hand the habit of privacy and silence [...] print at once gathered another group of changes, namely, the related habits of self-expression and self-investigation. Print as a mass medium offered a sort of launching pad for the projection of the private person into the role of public institution. [...] Ego enlargement via print at the same time created a sense of fame and self-perpetuation through, as it were, the repeatability and indestructibility of the private self. [...] Self-expression, self-portraiture, and self-analysis swiftly merged in the sixteenth century in the great figure of Montaigne. He revealed another feature inherent in the segmental analytic patterns of print, namely "systematic doubt." After Montaigne, print laid few further patterns on the private self and began, as the newspaper developed, to release its powers in the reshaping of society and politics. “¹⁹

UM = Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. New York 1964

¹⁷Marshall McLuhan, *The Communications Revolution*, 1960. In: *The Video McLuhan 1*, 1996, 00:23:57-00:28:29

¹⁸Marshall McLuhan, *The Future of Man in the Electric Age*, 1965. In: *The Video McLuhan 1*, 1996, 00:34:35-00:37:16

¹⁹McLuhan, *Electronics and the Changing Role of Print*, 1960, S. 76-77