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FIFTY KEY LITERARY THEORISTS

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HERBERT MARSHALL McLUHAN (1911–1980)

Punning that one of his books was a ‘collide-oscope of interfaced situations’,[1] the Canadian literary critic and internationally renowned media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, also hints at how his conceptual terrain needs to be viewed: through multiple lenses that bring different views of his life and work into collision and contrast. McLuhan’s most infamous phrase – ‘the medium is the message’ – is viewed again, from the perspective of the media working ‘us over completely’,[2] to become ‘the medium is the massage’. Technology, which has so often been perceived as a fundamental threat to human existence, is explored from another perspective by McLuhan, as the ‘extensions’ of humanity, prefiguring much current thought concerning cybernetics and robotics. McLuhan’s stock rises and falls with each wave of literary and media theorists who rediscover and critique his work, revealing a process of McLuhanesque eternal return, the point being that McLuhan’s insights into the modern media-based world remain more relevant for a wide range of consumers, than other passing theoretical trends. In other words, McLuhan’s sound-bites remain in circulation and are variously and voraciously recycled. McLuhan’s insights are rooted in what at first appears to be an entirely different world: that of a broad humanist learning and a background of personal Catholic belief. Born in Edmonton, McLuhan studied at The University of Manitoba, where he completed a BA in 1933, and an MA with a thesis
on George Meredith in 1934, before moving to The University of Cambridge, where he studied with F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards, and gained his next BA in 1936. McLuhan began teaching at St Louis University in 1937, the same year that he converted to Catholicism; the significance of this conversion is apparent in the media theorist Arthur Kroeker's assessment that 'McLuhan's mind represents one of the best syntheses yet achieved of the Catholic legacy'. During his time at St. Louis, McLuhan was working on his dissertation on Nashe, called The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time, completed and awarded by the University of Cambridge in 1943. Moving to Windsor, Ontario, in 1944, McLuhan worked at Assumption College before gaining a post at St Michael's College, the University of Toronto, in 1946, where he was to remain for the rest of his academic life.

It may seem bizarre to today's technophiles to learn that McLuhan's thought is rooted in the trivium, the lower division of the medieval liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric and logic (the higher division, the quadrivium, consists of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). 'Trivium' is Latin for a crossroads where three streets intersect: in 1967, over two decades after his doctoral thesis, McLuhan would write of a new type of crossroads, one that transgressed barriers, since: 'Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories — for probing around.' The crossroads can be traced elsewhere in McLuhan's thought: in his interest in the modernism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, as well as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, and in the French symbolists of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Mallarmé and Valéry, which crossed with his interests in New Criticism and Catholic thought. During this time, McLuhan was also reading the Canadian 'technological realist' Harold Innis, and this influence would be felt in McLuhan's first major publication, The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951), a series of pithy analyses of North American advertisements, which 'figure the mechanization and fragmentation of all aspects of intellectual and emotional life, including the libidinal.' It was his publication of The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1962), however, that announced McLuhan's presence on the international cultural scene. Once again, Innis's influence could be perceived, alongside that of J.C. Carothers, in McLuhan's argument that the development of typography led to a visual realm of culture, one where the psychodynamics of print is making way for that of the auditory spaces of the new electronic media. What is revolutionary about this? For McLuhan print culture facilitated the organization of a spatial continuum through linear progression, whereas the new electronic, auditory culture, in effect, abolishes the space-time continuum because of its

instantaneity and simultaneity: 'electric technology is instant and omnipresent and creates multiple centres-without-margins'. In Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964), such a revolutionary mode of thinking is explored in the realms of clothing, housing, money, photography, advertising, games and television, to list just some of the chapters. In his introduction to the MIT Press Edition of Understanding Media, Lewis H. Lapham lists the 'leitmotifs' of McLuhan's book. The items in the left-hand column belong to the world of print-based culture, those in the right-hand column to the electronic world where 'the medium is the message', in other words, McLuhan's prophetic charting of postmodernity:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textbf{Print} & \textbf{Electronic Media} \\
visual & tactile \\
mechanical & organic \\
sequence & simultaneity \\
composition & improvisation \\
eye & ear \\
active & reactive \\
expansion & contraction \\
complete & incomplete \\
soliloquy & chorus \\
classification & pattern recognition \\
center & margin \\
continuous & discontinuous \\
syntax & mosaic \\
self-expression & group therapy \\
Typographic man & Graphic man \\
\end{tabular}

McLuhan developed the terms 'hot' and 'cool' medium to describe these two realms: a hot medium is one that is data rich, a cool one being of low definition and data poor; hot media do most of the work for the audience, whereas cool media demand audience work and what McLuhan calls 'participation'. Contrary to many commentators on television, McLuhan regards TV as a cool medium, whereas print, in its fomenting of nationalism and religious unrest, is a hot medium. McLuhan warns against comparing television with film or photography, since with television, the viewer, bombarded with light, is the screen. Film and photography have exceptionally high-definition images; for McLuhan, the low-definition televised image is not deficient or substandard, rather, it is instead a fundamental difference: that of a mosaic pattern, unconsciously reconfigured by the viewer to
create an abstract, sculptural and iconic form. McLuhan takes this a step further, to argue that there is a difference between visual and mosaic space; the latter involves 'imaginative reorganization' or a paradigm shift:

The nonvisual mosaic structures of modern art, like those of modern physics and electric-information patterns, permit little detachment. The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being, as does the sense of touch.\textsuperscript{11}

The world of literacy extended visual power in terms of information organization but also led to detachment and 'noninvolvement'; visual power is isolating and isolated in its modes of representation, whereas the mosaic is an instantaneous synesthesia of all the senses, and is primarily a non-representational 'extension of the sense of touch'\textsuperscript{12} (in other words, it is a production). McLuhan ponders what this means for the young people in his time who have grown up with the TV image as their primary orienting mode of interacting with the world; again, he rejects the argument that 'low-quality' TV programmes could be replaced with 'high' cultural content to improve the viewer's mind, and instead he argues that, from an existential perspective, TV's mosaic image is a powerful 'total involvement in all-inclusive nowness'\textsuperscript{13} that has transformed the subject's relationship with his or her social environment. No longer wanting specialization, for example, in the professions, the children of television instead want involvement.

As an example of this total involvement, McLuhan uses the example of the televised funeral of the assassinated American President J.F. Kennedy; a more contemporary example is the funeral of the British Princess Diana. In both cases, the argument is that TV has the power to involve an entire population in ritual, but as a cool medium: 'It involves us in moving depth, but it does not excite, agitate or arouse.'\textsuperscript{14} A hot medium, such as radio or print culture, could have agitated or aroused the people following such political and personal tragedies, leading to unrest and possible anarchy, but a cool medium, in its total absorption and involvement of the people in a ritualistic mourning of which they fully partake, also calms the people in an act of catharsis or psychic massaging. Hot media arouse people to perform or at the least desire cathartic acts in the future, such as political insurrection, whereas cool media fulfill people in the here-and-now in a constant succession of immediate occurrences.

One of the side-effects of the simultaneity and instantaneous of electronic modes of being (the extension of the central nervous system into 'a global embrace'),\textsuperscript{15} is that of the 'global village', where all subjects participate in the consequences of every action. For McLuhan, this is also a shift from the concept of the private individual to that of the publicly exposed being, a shift also from control of content, to 'instant sensory awareness of the whole'\textsuperscript{16} where the medium is the message (and the message). Structure and configuration are now key, and in his exploration of these ideas, McLuhan's texts function at the surface level to create a gestalt. The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (1967), is a text where graphic space and design massively disrupt the linearity of print culture, mainly through the techniques of close-up and magnification/blow-up. Other effects abound, including the fact that the original printing of the book was done in two different formats, leading to a doubting that as Richard Cavell points out 'identifies the residual role of tactility within the visual'.\textsuperscript{17} Pages in the book are printed upside down, text is treated as graphic image free from the linearity of type (through rotation, blow-up and so on), advertisements, cartoons and iconic images from popular culture overpower more conventional pictures, image repetitions overpower fragmented phrases and sentences, and quotations become more important than conventional notions of 'primary' text. The text simultaneously has a modernity and a slightly 'sixties' feel about it; it also may have lost much of its shock value due to the multitude of imitations that have since followed. Nonetheless, some of the book's more radical ideas have become gnostic statements: short, pithy truths that most media-savvy people would probably now agree with, recognizing McLuhan as a prophetic voice from the past. The eternal return to McLuhan begins with such a recognition, and various virtual McLuhans repeatedly surface in today's digital domain as different groups reinvent themselves electronically through such leading media gurus. The 'tribalism' that results from the creation of the electronic global village is also an ethical responsibility; as McLuhan argues, minority groups can no longer be ignored, and through the commitment and participation of electronic media 'we have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other'.\textsuperscript{18}

Notes

4 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects, p. 10.


### VLADIMIR IAKOVLEVICH PROPP (1895–1970)

One of the great ironies of Vladimir Propp’s life is the fact that each of his major publications was out-of-sync with the changing political climate of Russia, where he lived and worked: given that in the West he is most famous for a single, groundbreaking work called *Morphology of the Folktales* (1928; trans. 1958) – a work in which time is replaced with timeless permutations of narrative sequences and characters – then it is even more remarkable that history, or epochal transformations, kept intervening so powerfully in his daily existence. Propp was born in St Petersburg, and studied Russian and German philology at the University of St Petersburg, graduating in 1918. After working as a teacher of languages, Propp became a college instructor of German, and then progressed to the faculty of Leningrad University in 1932. After specializing once more in languages, Propp eventually focused on folklore, becoming the Chair of the Department of Folklore. Propp’s first and, for the West, most important study was a morphological account of the Russian fairytale or wondertale, which was published in 1928 with a modified title, *Morphology of the Folktales*. Many people in the West remained unaware of the trials and tribulations that Propp endured in Soviet Russia: *Morphology of the Folktales* was seen by the communist authorities as a ‘deviation from socialist realism’, while Propp’s next book, *Historical Roots of the Wondertale* (1946), was similarly condemned but this time as an example of a failure to be Russian enough:

*Historical Roots* was used as a flagrant example of ‘sycophancy’ (owing to its predominantly foreign bibliographical apparatus), and neither the fact that Propp’s main texts were Russian tales...