Vortexes, Spirals, Tetrads: McLuhan's Hyper-Language as a (Digital) Tool for (Old and New) Storytelling[1]

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> Literature is not a subject but a function – a function inseparable to communal existence.
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> Marshall McLuhan, Letter to W.J. Ong, 1946

Redefining McLuhan and his 'hyper-language' as 'literary subjects'

In the western world, Marshall McLuhan has been defined in many ways, depending on local scholarly traditions, as well as on lasting biases associated to the reception of his provocative 'slogans' (*the medium is the message*; *the global village*). *Wikipedia* is there to prove it. For instance, the English pages of the online "free Encyclopaedia" label him as '*a Canadian Philosopher of communication theory*', while the Italian ones simply frame him as a "*Canadian sociologist*". The too limited synthesis of the Italian introduction is,

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[1] This essay retrieves and further expands some of the ideas expressed in Elena Lamberti, Marshall McLuhan's Mosaic. Probing the Literary Origins of Media, Studies, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012 (Shortlisted, Canada Prize in the Humanities awarded by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2013).

nonetheless, compensated by the generosity of the *Wikipedia* German entry: "Herbert Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian Philosopher, a Humanist [or, better, a *Geisteswissenschaftler*, literally a 'scientist of the human spirit'], a Professor of English Literature, a Rhetorician and a Communication Theorist". The only missing variable is here 'artist', a term for which Marshall McLuhan gave a clear definition in his by now classic book *Understanding Media*:

> The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his action and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness.(McLuhan 2003: 95)

According to McLuhan, *integral awareness*, embedded in the artist image, is an attitude profitable for all scholars, all people, men and women, in any field. Consistently with his passion for language and etymology, each term in the quotation is carefully chosen in order to convey the potentialities embodied by such an image: *Integral*, that is, unifying *forma* and *substancia*, form and substance, ground and figure, at once connecting all things and being all things; but also, at a deeper level, 'integral' means untouched, pure, entire, intact, as to suggest an unbiased, childlike attitude of approaching knowledge, displaying both curiosity and playfulness. *Awareness*, that is, the alert condition which should be shared by anyone engaged in any form of investigation. Finally, the *artist* image, itself the symbol of a new *forma mentis*, based also on the use of imagination as a passe-partout attitude opening all doors leading to the discovery of the new environmental dynamics. All these expressions could, in fact, be employed to introduce McLuhan's poetics; something that might encourage critics in the humanities to overcome the by now biased interpretation of McLuhan merely as a media guru, and study him and his discourse, instead, as literary subjects. By including the reference to McLuhan's interest in rhetoric, literature and humanistic philosophy prior to his interest in communication studies, the Wikipedia German entry not only stands as one among the most articulated, but it also contributes

to fully retrieve the scholarly background that made the writing of all McLuhan's 'media volumes' possible.

In 2014, the world celebrates fifty years from the publication of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. Published two years after another of his media classic, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), that book consolidated McLuhan's fame as a 'media guru' and launched him, as such, on the international scenario. Certainly, *Understanding Media* introduced a new approach to the study of media and changed (or perhaps made) the history of that discipline, at least in North America; promptly, McLuhan's visionary ideas on old and new forms of communication became both popular and controversial among a varied set of international audiences all through the following decade. Then, the 'phenomenon' McLuhan faded from the mid-seventies but it resurrected from the nineties, when the evolving techno-scenarios seemed to turn his 'predictions' into visible realities:[2] new e-tribes materialised through open source media, the world reconfigured in the image of a complex 'global village' and new technological extensions of the human body made the prosthetic of Sci-Fi cyborgs a tangible phenomenon of our everyday lives.

Consistently, in the same period, the emergence of new artistic, creative and literary forms deeply connected to the electronic and the digital world started to make the name of Marshall McLuhan quite popular also among a growing number of literary scholars: references to McLuhan are now easy to be found in literary essays exploring knowledge in relation to digital practices, and his ideas are often used to navigate the uncanny creative psychodynamics of the web 2.0. However, in most cases, the focus remains more on his media explorations and less on himself as a 'literary subject'. Something which is somehow ironic: literary critics still miss the fact that

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[2] In 1991, that resurrection was officialised by *Wired* magazine, that selected McLuhan as its 'Patron Saint'. Once again, he was brought to life as a 'media guru', and his literary studies remained either neglected, or mentioned *en passant*, for at least another decade.

McLuhan's 'media explorations' were but the result of his experience as a Professor of Literature. When studying, in the Thirties, at Cambridge University UK, when teaching literature in American and Canadian Universities from the Forties, when progressing into a media thinker (as well as a media icon), McLuhan's always relied on his literary *heroes*: Edgar Allan Poe, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, J.K. Chesterton, as well as Pre-Socratic Philosophers, English Renaissance writers, Dante, Petrarca, and even the Italian Futurists, to name but a few. The irony is more marked if we consider that McLuhan's life-long passion for literature and literary studies is acknowledged and even celebrated by scholars in other areas of studies, so much so, that, today, it is possible to map out a sort of 'McLuhan's literary rhetorical alphabet'. For instance, most sociologists and media theorists inevitably quote McLuhan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "A Descent into the Maelstrom", or his passion for Joyce when discussing his original approach to either society or media. Certainly, such an appreciation of McLuhan's literary roots outside of literary studies must be treasured; however, it does not necessarily conduce to a full appreciation of McLuhan as a 'literary subject' *per se*. On the contrary, it even risks to frame McLuhan's articulated *discourse* inside some literary interpretive clichés which might prevent further explorations in that direction. Instead, it is time for literary scholars to reclaim Marshall McLuhan and learn from him how to reenergise the role of creative writing and literary heuristics - and the role of storytelling - at a time of technological transformations.

McLuhan's personal library has recently been acquired by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, at the University of Toronto: the McLuhan Library Collection comprises more than 6000 volumes, among which the literary ones are the majority and most of them duly annotated. McLuhan's *marginalia* are a literary treasure and constitute an underpinning text to both McLuhan's ideas on old and new media, as well as a treasure island to fully appreciate the idea of 'literature as a function', so dear to Marshall McLuhan. Accordingly, literature (and especially modernist North American literature) plays a crucial role in

the making of McLuhan's media works, not only in terms of 'exempla', or 'study attitude', or merely as 'decorative, rhetorical' strategy: literature constitutes the epistemological root of McLuhan's discourse, it guides him across the new media and societal wilderness of his time and leads him to develop a form of writing capable to grasp *'the implications of his action and of new knowledge in his own time.'* McLuhan's fragmented and juxtapositive language is, in fact, a powerful tool he consciously developed juxtaposing traditional paratactic forms of writing (he applied Bacon's lesson on aphorism) and modernist avant-garde experiments (he met and corresponded with Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, knew Joyce's work almost by heart, and studied many Modernists in depth). McLuhan's form of writing is therefore to be read as a hyper-text ante litteram or, better, as a hyper-*language*, as convincingly proven by Michael A. Moos in his ground-breaking essay, (Moose 2005) precisely because of its firm humanistic humus; something which should intrigue literary critics exploring new digital creative practices, and something which should explain the controversial reactions that many readers initially had to McLuhan's formal novelty.

As a matter of fact, when first published McLuhan's books puzzled more than one critic who found the content interesting and thought provocative, but the language foggy, uncanny or even nonsensical. Undeniably, those critics were right; yet, what was originally meant as a sharp criticism cannot but be read, instead, as (perhaps unconscious) praise if filtered through more alerted literary ears. Because words matter, it all depends on the meaning critics convey to the word 'nonsense'[3]. McLuhan's language is, in fact, *nonsensical* if approached through the scholarly paradigms of reading and writing consolidated at his time (as well as today), something that would dismiss his witty formal novelty as gibberish; or, at least, as not appropriate for the 'academic discourse' *tout court*, even though accepted within other domain (i.e.: creative writing and artistic

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[3] See: Finkelstein 1968

explorations). Perhaps you would get the same kind of response if you approached Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* assuming it was George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. However, if we read McLuhan's language through his knowledge of literary traditions, the 'nonsense' will immediately appear under a different light: like the Shakespearian Fool, McLuhan speaks 'the truth the next way'[4], as he was "wise enough to play the fool" and could display "a practice / as full of labour as a wise man's act".[5] His formal medium was, in fact, an original message, the core element of McLuhan's poetics clearly stated from his first published book, *The Mechanical Bride*: because McLuhan spent all his life to 'apply the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society.' (McLuhan 2002: 7)

As in the case of many Modernist works, McLuhan's non-linear language requires cooperation and will to *participate in the process of discovery*, not mere *apprehension of concepts*; this is, in fact, the key idea that, in McLuhan's writing, brings together the humanistic tradition, the study of new forms of communication, new technologies/media, as well as a series of avant-garde literary experiments. As Glenn Willmott has rightly pointed out: "McLuhan developed a critical theory in the 1940s and 1950s which negotiated between higher modernism and American consumer society and which found its model in [Eisenstein's] theory of cinema'[6] among others. The underpinning idea is that our artificial (man-made) world can be better perceived through a montage that suggests complex articulations embedded in the formal frame. Henceforth, McLuhan's uncanny prose is his key to *pattern recognition*, a process that starts with a poetic approach – that is with

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[4] W. Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.5.29-33

[5] W. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 3.1.59-679

[6] Glenn Willmott, *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 37

our acceptance of emotive utterances[7] – to be cognitively analysed afterwards. McLuhan's suggested that, as new media-induced environments reshape human beings, affecting their sociological and anthropological constructs, people must, in turn, start to rethink traditional ways of perceiving and rendering linear and sequential categories into simultaneous and discontinuous ones. At the same time, he developed a strategy to recompose bits of information into a complex yet intelligible pattern: McLuhan's *mosaic-like* form of writing aims precisely at that. It is conceived as 'the only practical means of revealing causal operations in history', (McLuhan 2011: lxii) and McLuhan uses it to question preconceived ideas of/on knowledge and to move his readers from a linear (logical, ordered, exclusive) to an acoustic (non-logical, simultaneous, inclusive) perspective. A perspective which, though different, still resounds within digital environments.

McLuhan's mosaic is primarily a tool enhancing our capability to learn and apprehend through the interplay of ancient wisdom and cognitive stimulation; it is not simply a way to convey simultaneity and dress knowledge in a format employing different media models so to offer a more lively, real, and immediate experience. It is not the

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[7] "It will be admitted – by those who distinguish between scientific statements, where truth is ultimately a matter of verification as this is understood in the laboratory, and emotive utterance, where 'truth' is primarily acceptability by some attitude, and more remotely is the acceptability of this attitude itself – that it is not the poet's business to make scientific statements. Yet poetry has constantly the air of making statements, and important ones; which is one reason why some mathematicians cannot read it. They find the alleged statements to be false. It will be agreed that their approach to poetry and their expectations from it are mistaken.", Richards I.A., Science and Poetry, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1970, 56. When at Cambridge, McLuhan took classes on 'practical criticism' with Richards, a method which he always treasured as both a Professor of Literature and a Media 'explorer'.

embodiment of the media *fan*, but rather of the media *grammarian*. [8] The mosaic relies on the witty power of puns and words to perceive analogies between apparently unrelated things. It opens windows to unpack all the compressed learning: quoting Bacon and his nineteenth-century commentators, Michael Moos rightly recalls the founding concept of *portability of thought* based on 'an internal mobility of language through which thought itself advances.' (Moos 2005: 301-11) Such a concept is also assessed in relation to McLuhan's study of H.A. Innis's language,[9] where McLuhan defines each of Innis's sentences as a compressed monograph: 'He includes a small library on each page, and often incorporates a small library of references on the same page in addition.' (McLuhan 1970: ix) Consequently, reading becomes an active process not simply because it enables us to understand what is written in the book and to participate in the creation of meaning, but mostly because it encourages us to continue exploring: if we fully engage in that form, it will further foster knowledge. As Moos insightfully suggests, McLuhan's writing does not anticipate hypertext as a database that we can access, but as 'a mode of thinking that reaches back into your own "headset" and accesses you.' The mosaic taps 'into

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[8] Many (naive) critics assume that Marshall McLuhan was a fan of technology because he discussed new media all through his books. Instead, as his family and his closest friends have often repeated, he was not in love with technology. Also, he was not a media 'geek', he was lost in technological space. Precisely because he was lost, he started to question and explore it; but all his explorations where meant to dig out the hidden grammar. Consistently he acted as a grammarian of the new media environment, pursuing the search for knowledge through his the ancient *paideia*.

[9] Harold Adam Innis (1894 – 1952) was a Canadian Professor of Political Economy at the University of Toronto, author of famous books such as: *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (1923); *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930); *Empire and Communications* (1950). McLuhan, who knew and admired Innis's work, wrote a famous 'Introduction' to the 1970 edition of Innis's *The Bias of Communication*, originally published in 1951, where he praised his aphoristic and condensed prose.

the reader, to access and activate his inner storehouse: The effect is to enable those very functions computer hypertext regards as a constitutive yet still strives to define, namely, integration of the reader into the writing process and real-time access to the archive … Thus [McLuhan, as Innis] expects the reader to make discovery after discovery that he himself had missed.' (Moos 2005: 311) The act of reading the mosaic, then, is envisaged as an experience which enhances the process of construction of knowledge, as well as a process of actualization of a knowledge elaborated through time and space. It is that very process of actualization which awakens readers from the Narcissus-narcosis.[10] The mosaic, as the form which embeds and allows such an experience, is a cold medium or a truly tactile one because it forces the reader to compensate for what is not obvious in the text but which is, nevertheless, present and compressed in a verbal fragment or in a pun. The *portability of thought* so translated is what makes the mosaic a hyper-language more than a hyper-text. After all, language is an oral/acoustic concept and text is a more linear (or at least framed) one, with all it implies in terms of sensorial awareness and active participation.

The hybridization of literacy with other media is fundamental to its own survival; what is fascinating to note is that this hybridization is not only preserved by McLuhan, but he also re-energizes it. He turned his mosaic into a probe while relying on ancient educational dicta. If critics appreciate that, then they cannot but be electrified by the energizing force of the mosaic. And as an *electrifying/electrified* hybrid, McLuhan's mosaic could be provocatively defined as the LSD of post-

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[10] "The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became he servomechanism of his own extended repeated image. […] He was numb. He had adjusted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system". (McLuhan 2003: 63)

secondary-orality readers:[11] it triggers *inner trips* which, in fact, enlighten on cultural and media processes; also, it forces readers to enquire farther, to explore old and new knowledge, old and new books, ideas, visions. To hazard a parallel which might irritate most fans of hypertexts, the mosaic retrieves an encyclopaedic learning, while hypertext relies more on a Reader's Digest approach to knowledge , especially in its fruition. This is not a way to bless one form and blast another, but simply a way to point out that they express a different type of authorship, imply a different type of audience, and, even though they share similar reading techniques, they nevertheless induce a different form of participation and involvement. The way one tends to read hypertext is perhaps more comparable to zapping, whereby one can still acquire a sense of progressing in mapping actuality or a given field of investigation. If readers apply the same zapping technique to McLuhan's mosaic, they can certainly have fun, but they do not have the same sense of accumulating knowledge. In order to fully appreciate what is hidden in McLuhan's verbo-voco-visual language, reader have to act as an interface themselves. They are the effective terminal of the communicative process. An even bolder parallel would be the one between the way data are electronically moved and the way McLuhan's verbal probes move inside the readers' heads. A message sent through the World Wide Web is decomposed into small units and bits which move independently across the various 'channels' of the net, and once at their destination, they are recomposed on the receiver's screen and form a readable message. In a similar way, McLuhan's mosaic is received as a discontinuous and fragmented form whose smaller units or bits of a deeper train of thought continue to move inside the reader's brain; in time, they

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[11] I'm paraphrasing here McLuhan's metaphorical use the word 'LSD', as in one of his famous quote: '*Computers are the LSD of the corporate word*', a probe that he coined to epitomize what stood beyond the new techno-holism of the 'electric era', something that he defined as the *depth-involving newness* of his time.

combine with new ones until they enlighten each other and spark knowledge. It is an effect linked to the traditional idea of *portability of thought* and which, at the same time, recalls the one suggested by T.S. Eliot when discussing the real use or meaning of poetry: while diverting attention through content, the poem works upon readers through form.[12] Reading and writing are therefore juxtaposed in a dynamic interplay, which could be understood as a crucial element capable of overcoming the finiteness of the printed page, of books, because – as many critics have shown – discontinuous writing acquires new meaning with each act of reading, depending on the reader.

Hence, with McLuhan's *mosaic* - that is his *literate* and *literary* form - the *medium* is, at once, the *message*, the *massage*, the *mass-age*, the *mess-age*, as it works on its readers while diverting their attention through its pretty intense content. It is therefore important to re-read McLuhan's explorations in communication in relation to his humanistic and literary knowledge because the latter is both a means and an end to the former; it is even more important to re-read McLuhan as an *experimental writer* who developed a new form of 'digital' writing *ante litteram*, by combining literary and media studies. That change of approach would be particularly worthy for literary scholars and literary studies at large, as it could help to consciously re-energise the humanities, showing new potentialities at a time of change.

Given the above, literary critics should face and overcome what remains as an uncomfortable paradox: instead than investigating *how* humanistic knowledge enabled McLuhan to anticipate and map some evolving media phenomena through the elaboration of a new form of performative writing (McLuhan's mosaic) - and therefore reaffirm the need to invest on humanistic studies at a time of 'chaos' - most literary scholars still focus on *what* he said on technology and society that might be of interest to their more specifically literally framed discourse.

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[12] See: T.S. Eliot 1955

In other words: *when the wise man points to the moon, the fool looks at the finger*. The moon that a different approach to McLuhan's work would makes his readers see, in fact, might become a new shining set of opportunities for the humanities: to apply McLuhan's heuristic to the world of web 2.0 implies to position the humanities at the forefront of new complex, digital explorations, also including new uses of creative practices, the developing of new genres and of new forms of aesthetic convergence. Certainly, McLuhan's ideas on media remain of interest when investigating new digital literary practices, or collateral literary phenomena; but they are not as interesting as his lesson on form and on writing technique. As he used to repeat quoting a renown adagio: *water is unknown to a fish until it discovers air*. Literary scholars lose if they continue to rely upon McLuhan merely as a media guru; it is better to leave that aspect to all those in communication or media studies (or sociology, or cultural studies) who are still quarrelling to resolve if he was right or wrong. Within literary studies, it does not really matter; the '*how*' is more important than the '*what*'. Literary critics would benefit more by approaching him as a Professor of Literature who developed a new form of writing at once 'interactive', 'acoustic' and 'transdisciplinary' – that is potentially digital – through a different understanding of old and new poetics. No matter what he said, it is a fact that his writing technique was meant as a strategy to help his readers adjust to the new 'electric environment'; it was a way to "render not narrate", as per Ford Madox Ford's – a writer that McLuhan discovered thanks to Ezra Pound's mediation – impressionist poetics.

From the Ancient Tradition to Avant-Garde Experiments

Consistently with his humanistic education, McLuhan started and ended his academic career as a Professor of Literature: in the 1930s, while at Cambridge University, he wrote his PhD dissertation on the

English Renaissance, offering a deep analysis of the liberal arts of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectics); in later years, he retrieved that ancient learning as a key to understand the new media grammar of his own actuality, what critics would define as the 'mass society' or even 'the mass-media society'. As a witty grammarian, McLuhan developed an interest in media which derived from the need to fully understand the impact that evolving technological, cultural, and sociological processes were having on humans. Freedom, independence, and free will result from knowledge and understanding of what is really going on around us, as he clearly assumes in the introduction to his first published book, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), where he writes:

> Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. And to generate heat not light is the intention. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike. (McLuhan 2002: v-vi)

As an engaged humanist, McLuhan decided to plunge into the new environmental vortex and navigate change; he wrote his first book to reverse the numbing process and awaken his readers by revealing the uncanny effects of new forms of communication. He combined literary texts with the pop imagery of his time, and especially with images coming from the world of advertisement, to elaborate his original storytelling as a cultural antidote:

> A film expert, speaking of the value of the movie medium for selling North to South America, noted that: "the propaganda value of simultaneous audiovisual impression is very high, for it standardises thought by supplying the spectator with a ready-made visual image before he has time to conjure up an interpretation of his own. […]

> This book reverses that process by providing typical visual imagery of our environment and dislocating it into meaning by inspection. Where visual symbols have been employed in an effort to paralyze the mind, they are here used as a means of energising it. (Ibid.)

The new investigative technique employed by McLuhan in *The Mechanical Bride* originated in his passion and interest for language and especially for literary language. Already at Cambridge, the study of contemporary English and American literature allowed McLuhan to understand and work out the probing potentialities of innovative poetic strategies; it changed once and forever not only his approach to literature and the arts, but also his understanding of his own responsibilities as a man of letters now inhabiting an evolving technological world. In this sense, Cambridge was a shock:

> After a conventional and devoted initiation to poetry as a romantic rebellion against mechanical industry and bureaucratic stupidity, Cambridge was a shock. Richards, Leavis, Eliot and Pound and Joyce in a few weeks opened the doors of perception on the poetic process, and its role in adjusting the reader to the contemporary world.
> My study of media began and remains rooted in the work of these men. (McLuhan 1969: xiii-xiv)

The *poetic process* – literature, the arts, creative thinking – is McLuhan's preferred strategy for 'adjusting the reader to the contemporary world'. It is therefore not by chance that in 1963, he called his new research centre at the University of Toronto 'Centre for Culture *and* Technology', unequivocally linking the *two cultures*, the humanistic and the scientific, into a unique educational project; the 'poetic process' was his *corpus callosum*.

That came about thirty years after Cambridge; it was the fulfilment of McLuhan's life-long project as a new type of scholar. In fact, as a Professor of Literature and a Modernist scholar, he was

among the first to investigate *the link existing between avant-garde explorations and new media environments*, by so doing irritating many high-brow academics. But he could not but be passionate about the Modernists as they were probing change through their works:[13] these artists dismissed the mechanical line for the electric circle, moving from Gutenberg to Marconi, from linear to acoustic space. He realised that their formal experiments mirrored the new *mediascapes* of their time:

> It is strange that the popular press as an art form has often attracted the enthusiastic attention of poets and aesthetes while rousing the gloomiest apprehension in the academic mind. (Ibid. 5)

McLuhan acted in their wake. Since his years at Cambridge, McLuhan was on a mission; by his own admission, he was ready to overthrow his time 'debased scholasticism […] with the maximum amount of noise'. (McLuhan 1987: 187) It was his declaration of war to an old educational dictum, to an old educational environment. From that moment, for McLuhan the whole world and not the classroom was the place where to go to learn what was going on. The jumping off hypothesis was the following: there was much more information and knowledge *outside* the classroom than *inside*, an idea that McLuhan retrieved years later, when writing his most explicit 'educational book', *City As Classroom*, in collaboration with his son Eric and Kathy Hutchon. Consistently, McLuhan, too, went out and challenged the

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[13] In his book of literary criticism, *The Interior Landscape* (McLuhan 1969) McLuhan turns some literary modernist literary masterpieces into cognitive tools to better understand ne environmental processes. Philip Marchand was among the first to opint out that mcLuhan's approach to modernism was, in fact, an original one which anticipated later discussion. In particular, Marchand recalls the role that modernist poetics played in helping McLuhan to start understand the importance of sensorial perception in the rendering of one's own time. (Philip Marchand 1989).

world employing literary studies as his probing tool. Hence, McLuhan's real *revolution* as a scholar came not simply through his observations on media, but mostly through the methodology of investigation that he created through his innovative scholarly form of writing and that, paradoxically, retrieved an ancient tradition to probe the new world of media and high tech. The avant-garde movements helped him to bridge those two realities.

After *The Mechanical Bride*, *Counterblast 1954* was, in fact, McLuhan's war manifesto, blasting and blessing cultural and environmental situations, offering a first rendering of 'Media Log', making use of poetry and art as underpinning texts to critically approach society. *Counterblast 1954* is more than a witty mimicking of Wyndham Lewis's vorticist style; it shows us the making of McLuhan's new form, *the mosaic*, capable to arrest the media vortex and render it visible. A form that became an accomplished fact a few years later, as McLuhan introduces it as the objective correlative to his operative approach at the very beginning of his 1962 volume, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Through that *mosaic*, McLuhan consolidated his form to apply "the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society." As an original form of writing, the mosaic mirrors McLuhan's unique frame of mind as a media explorer. The mosaic is a juxtaposing form merging literature, the arts and media, retrieving Francis Bacon's use of 'aphorisms' and anticipating the (*inclusive* and *juxtaposing*) semantic of the electric age.

Acting at the forefront of new technological revolutions, McLuhan's mosaic develops from a precise metaphor borrowed from the electric world: the *probe*, a flexible object through which people can carry out explorations not only outside but also inside different bodies. 'Probe' is the term he used to define both his method (probing), and the core element of his discourse (also defined as a 'gloss', that is as a condensed *aphorism*, often read and trivialised as a *slogan*). Pages written around *probes* incorporate readers into the text's landscape: readers of the mosaic are no longer external observers; *they are inside the evolving picture*. This means that readers do not have to approach

McLuhan's printed page as *a thing*, but rather as *an event* in which the act of reading is integral to a participation in the process of discovery. From the late 1960s, the hippie movement understood and celebrated McLuhan's form of communication better than other audiences, the idea of *happening* being at the core of its life philosophy. Needless to say, the appreciation coming from the countercultures of the young rebels did not contribute to the appreciation of McLuhan's scholarly work. Yet, the probe is an element which leads to a more complex interaction, as it is through the probe that readers are invited to enter the text: it is the interface between them and the broken knowledge in the text.

McLuhan continued to elaborate on the probe as the core element of his mosaic, as well as of his form of communication all through his life. In some of his books, the probe is formally conceived as a *pun* or a witty *caption* challenging and provoking his readers, as in *The Mechanical Bride*, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* or a less known volume such as *Take Today: The Executive as a Dropout*. In other volumes, the paratactic juxtaposition of the various probes is developed not only through a witty use of language, but also through drawings, images, headlines and photographs; as a matter of fact, McLuhan's mosaic not only combines different *registers*, but also borrows from different *communicative modes*. The multimedia visual effect reminds us of either a cubist or a Dadaist montage which turns the reader on to a simultaneous awareness of various vanishing points; a situation which we can find also in new forms of digital narratives. It was McLuhan's antidote to the 'rear view mirror' syndrome: we look at the present through the past because an environment becomes fully visible only when a new one is already blooming. McLuhan's mosaic aims at awakening our perception so to look *forward* not *backward*.

The *mosaic* is therefore a dynamic form translating McLuhan's *mobile point of view* which shocked the academy but, as it is often the case, pleased the artistic scene. McLuhan's verbal discontinuity and acoustic writing attracted the attention of new artists of his time; in turn, as said, its mosaic owned a great deal to previous artistic

experiments. One could in fact say that the mosaic acted as a shuttle shifting old avant-garde experiments into new artistic, as well as into new scholarly, forms of exploration: from Wyndham Lewis to Quentin Fiore, from Dada to Sorel Etrog, from an academic *linear* discourse to an academic *acoustic* and *digital* one.

From Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism to Sorel Etrog's New Dadaism

Within the visual arts, Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism attracted McLuhan's curiosity during his time at Cambridge; a curiosity that he could further explore in his conversations and correspondence with the Canadian born artist, after they met in 1943. Lewis's linguistic and visual *vortexes*, his spatial philosophy, which considers art as "that experience of arrest in which we pause before a particular thing", (Lewis 1931: 392) offered McLuhan a conceptual form of expression, anticipating his mosaic: it was, in fact, conceived as a juxtaposition of pauses or intervals in turn blasting the numbing acceptance of actuality.

As a matter of fact, in *Time and Western Man*, Lewis introduces his original aesthetic in terms of a new *spatial philosophy*. A 'philosophy of the eye' which 'attaches itself to that concrete and radiant reality of the optic sense' (Ibid.) but which is not conceived as a return to previous mechanical approaches to space; instead it is conceived in an effort to retrieve a lost sensory balance induced by an excessive emphasis over time. Lewis blasted Bergsonism as the main cause for corporate hypnosis. By privileging *intensity* over *extension*, Bergson's time philosophy relied exclusively on the *sensa* world which Lewis defines as the 'world of the Unconscious or automatic in the sense'. (Ibid. 416-7) Therefore, Lewis's *vortex* is not conceived as a *Flux*, but as a dynamic, progressive, *moving image* related to time but also containing a stable point, the spatial element from which its energy spirals originate. In Lewis's aesthetic principle, it is the grotesque

rendering that triggers the revelation simply by overthrowing ground and figure relations; similarly, in McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* it is the distorted perspective that recreates reality and offers new insight on and through '*typical visual imagery of our environment*'.

Vorticist art retrieves extension over intensity and recreates the ground that reassesses all figures. Once he adventured out of the classroom, McLuhan borrowed that concept to explore his own planet that he presented as a man-made artefact. As said, he tested it in his first books, *The Mechanical Bride*, as well as *Counterblasts 1954*; his strategy there is to arrest the numbing flux by pausing before a series of specific mass icons and mass experiences that represent either the "Folklore of Industrial Man" or the "Media Log" of his time, and which McLuhan vivisects and juxtaposes in his mosaic-like form of writing. Contrary to Lewis, though, McLuhan did not wear the mask of the enemy; instead, he considered humor and not bitter sarcasm as a more appropriate strategy to pursue his operative project. He played with his material and did not condemn, nor did he take side, because he resisted putting moral biases on new media situations. In addition, a playful attitude brought him to see more because, as he used to repeat: "at play man uses all his faculties, at work he specializes". (McLuhan 1994: 34)

Following some Modernist avant-garde aesthetic, McLuhan's mosaic is therefore developed as an open and witty form of writing where space and time are collapsed, chronology is obsolete and the whole world can be rendered *at once*. Inevitably, his *mode of exploration* attracted the attention of a series of visual artists of his time. Quentin Fiore (co-author or *The Medium is the Massage*, 1968), Harley Parker (co-author of *Counterblast*, 1969; *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Paining*, 1969) are perhaps the most famous among those who collaborated with him. However, of particular interest is his collaboration with a less known visual artist named Sorel Etrog, a European emigrated to Canada who in 1975 produced his film 'Spiral' where, in McLuhan's words, "the ubiquitous and moving centre intensifies awareness of the fragility and transience of existence. […]

Spiral presents many labyrinths and portrait of the human cognitive processes. […] Everywhere in *Spiral* there is visually portrait the labyrinth of the creative process." (McLuhan 1987: 126-27) As an artist, Etrog grew in the wake of "The Dada Circus" (his definition); his work stands between historical avant-garde of the early 20th century, and the artistic trends of the late 1960s. As Tzara recalled: "The beginning of Dada were not the beginning of art but of disgust". (Rubin 1968: 12) Consistently, Etrog embraced Dada's so called 'anti-art principle' as a key to rebel against "the inconsistency of conventional beliefs". Just like Dada before, Etrog, too, 'assailed the artistic and intellectual habits of mind of the public and in the process altered consciousness". (Ibid.) This is something that also McLuhan did. His task as an 'artist' and an intellectual was to alert his audience to the on-going environmental change, to enlighten on the long term side effects that change could have on the human sensorium: to enlighten on the passage from mechanical to electric age (the latter being the dawn of the digital world, as digital technology relies upon electricity as a source-medium). Therefore, McLuhan found Etrog's explorations interesting for many reasons: they were rooted in the modernist avant-garde he loved so much; they explored different perceptive modes; they investigated form in a Conradian way, that is as a tool to make you *see*, *hear* and *feel* in a renewed way.

The two men met in Toronto, where McLuhan accepted to screen Etrog's film *Spiral* at the Centre of Culture and Technology, in 1975. It was McLuhan who suggested that Etrog selected "stills from the film so that he could provide an annotation to those images – a free form text of quotations from various writers – as well as a commentary". (Etrog 1987: 130) The book was published posthumously, but it stays as a memento to a unique collaboration between two lucid visionaries. In that book, McLuhan embraced Sorel definition of 'spiral' as a key to his own work and as a strategy to dive into a multidimensional perceptive breadth: "The Spiral is a single continuous line that creates within itself the parallel that exists conventionally between two lines. Therefore, you can have on this single line moments in time and space that signify

the past, the present, and the future – and these moments occur in this unique situation as parallel. Time and space are collapsed. Chronology is obsolete." (Ibid. 123)

Also McLuhan's own artistic-like explorations as a man of letter and a humanist made chronology obsolete and merged time and space, as well as past, present and future. By so doing, they became a threshold bridging old and new artistic poetics and images: from vortexes to spirals, but always with the will to set the reader at the centre of the revolving picture created by the mechanical agencies dominating modern times and numbing individual's free will.

Applying McLuhan: Tetrading Storytelling

Given the above, to retrieve the literary roots of McLuhan's discourse becomes important not simply to celebrate his work *tout court*, but to prove that literature matters and that humanistic thinking and practices cannot but play a pivotal role wherein our multimedia environments. At a time of accelerated environmental change, more traditional forms of knowledge can still help us to navigate that very change.

At his core, McLuhan was a humanist who disclosed new cognitive spaces through the retrieval of ancient educational dicta now applied to the magic world of electricity. [14] Therefore, to retrieve McLuhan's *how* legacy – that is *how* he expressed his ideas and *how he came to elaborate* his original form of communication – also means to retrieve the heuristic potentialities embedded in his *Laws of Media: The New Science*, a book posthumously published and co-authored with his son Eric. For some reasons, even though McLuhan often repeated that his laws of media form a navigational tool to approach all media environments, these 'Laws' have not been successful among media theoreticians and sociologists alike. A fact that might not come as a

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[14] See: Granata 2014

surprise to literary critics: *Laws of Media* is more a book about *storytelling* than media studies, or sociological investigations *tout court*. The essence of that book is, in fact, consistent with McLuhan's humanistic origins, so much so, that McLuhan's media studies end where in fact they had begun: with literature, language and the ancient humanistic tradition. It is an *ancient new learning* offered as a *passe-partout* to access old and new media environments *at once*.

The *tetrad* - the operative model discussed in *Laws of Media*, which Marshall and Eric McLuhan elaborated during their lasting collaboration - combines literacy and orality, knowledge and art, turns readers into explorers, and encourages a mode of exploration which is participative and based on the human medium *par excellence*, that is, language. McLuhan's tetrad enhances both *interactivity* and, as said, *storytelling*. Through it readers can get in touch with a sort of space-time knowledge, enacted and experienced through verbal communication and social interplay. McLuhan's 'New Science' is nothing but the retrieval of a much older science, of the original idea of the *logos*: the tetrad considers words as boxes of knowledge and amplifies their metaphorical value through a continuous juxtaposition of old and new meanings, usages, and understanding. No other previously conceived theory is implied; each observer – anyone – can participate in the exploration on the basis of his or her knowledge and experience.

The tetrad is presented as a verbal heuristic device built upon four questions:

> The tetrad was found by asking, 'What general, verifiable, (that is, testable) statements can be made about media?' We were
> surprised to find only four; here posed as questions:
> What does it enhance or intensify?
> What does it render obsolete or displace?
> What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?
> What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?
> (McLuhan & McLuhan 1988: 7)

Bacon's and Vico's names are both mentioned in *Laws of Media*, together with the names of Joyce and other modernist writers: 'Such men are not isolate eccentrics but links in a continuous tradition that extends from the present work back to the schools of manifold interpretation of the preliterate poets, including Homer and Hesiod.' (ibd. 216) Consistently, as an exegetical tool, the tetrad leads to the creation of new *verbo-voco-visual* mosaics which translate various levels of understanding. As a matter of fact, on the written page the tetrad visually leads to a cubist montage, as questions and answers are rendered not through a line, but simultaneously, through a narrative continuum which keeps the tetrad investigative model at its core:

> (…)   (…)
>   ENHANCES   REVERSES TO
>   medium
>   RETRIEVES   OBSOLESCES
> (…)   (…)
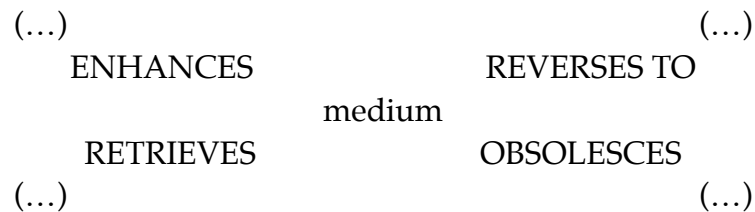
Each reader/observer is asked to fill in the gaps and answer all questions simultaneously; different readers can answer in different ways, therefore introducing different 'stories' and triggering a crossroads of tetradic storytelling. Inevitably, the tetrad confirms that communication is not simply the passage of data from one point to the next one; communication is also a creative process which affects all its actors (senders, receivers, data, and the environment which contains them all). Communication is what creates, through storytelling, a network of correspondences which are all valid at the same time:

> There is no 'right way' to 'read' a tetrad, as the parts are simultaneous. But when 'read' either left-right or top-bottom (Enhance is to Retrieve as Reverse is to Obsolesce, etc.), or the reverse, the proportions and metaphor – or word – structure should appear. (Ibid.129-30)

The tetrad operates like a verbal equation which contributes to map the complexity of a given ground (environment, context) through the interplay of its various figures (actors, texts, media, etc.); it combines physics and metaphysics because language can contain both reality and all human artefacts and artifices. By retrieving the metaphorical structure of words, McLuhan invites his readers to perceive each term as an *arché*, an archetype embedding experience. In *From Cliché to Archetype*, he wrote that the essence of an archetype is its awareness of retrieved knowledge. As such, the archetype is extremely cohesive; it attracts other archetypes. The archetype becomes therefore something more than just a literary concept: it can be employed as a key to read and explore the world. Consistently, the tetrad is modulated upon the search for the archetypes, a cognitive journey which we can share through language and its metaphorical uses.

Inevitably, McLuhan's *laws* of media have not only puzzled but also irritated many scholars - and they still do -, especially among sociologists. As Richards once wrote, 'scientific truth or statement' and 'poetical truth or pseudo-statement' require different attitudes in the listener. To literary ears, the tetrad is a good tool not only for approaching reality, but also for approaching fictional and imaginative renderings of reality. In addition, it is a good pedagogical tool, as it not only trains to be *active players*: it also encourages to *take responsibility* and to participate in the process of discovery. In addition, it stimulates *all listening of other points of view*. It connects situations, experiences, traditions. It contributes to revealing a bigger ground, while probing some of its figures.

Its potentialities are, in fact, already embedded in the provocative title of Marshall and Eric McLuhan's book: *Laws of Media: The New Science*. It sounds like an ambiguous paradox if we recall that McLuhan always claimed he did not have a clear-cut point of view on anything. But a paradox 'makes you see' precisely because it juxtaposes previous knowledge in an unexpected way. In the book, Eric McLuhan's introduction contributes to revealing the paradox and the amusing challenges it postulates: he tells readers that, searching for a

good definition of what constitutes a scientific statement, his father 'found an answer in Sir Karl Popper's Objective Knowledge – that it was something stated in such a manner that it could be disproved.'[15] As Ted Carpenter would confirm a few years later, 'To Marshall, scientific laws, too, worked equally well in reverse.'[16] The paradox frames the use of the term 'laws' in the title as being consistent with McLuhan's idea that he was an *explorer* and not an *explainer*. That paradox playfully embeds his own mobile point of view on the very idea of 'law' as a point of departure for a better understanding of his tetrad; it also suggests how to truly *apply* McLuhan to other fields of study.

There is a reason why Eric and Marshall McLuhan discovered and tested four and not three or more questions. They were acting inside the tradition of the *translatio studii*; they were employing words to investigate the *rerum natura*.

> The tetrad is exegesis on four levels, showing not the mythic, but the logos structure of each artefact, and giving its four parts as metaphor or word. The laws of media in tetrad form belong properly to rhetoric and grammar, not philosophy. Our concern is etymology and exegesis. This is to place the modern study of technology and artefacts on a humanistic and linguistic basis for the first time. (Ibid. 128)

McLuhan's observations are in the wake of Giambattista Vico, the author of *La Scienza Nuova* (The New Science), and of Sir Francis Bacon, two grammarians whose explorations had overcome the epistemological model postulated by coeval modern dialecticians. To the logic of the triad (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), McLuhan too prefers

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[15] Ibidem, viii

[16] Edmund Carpenter, "Remembering *Explorations*", in *Canadian Notes and Queries* 46 (Spring 1992), 7

the rhetoric of the tetrad, which relates to the four levels of interpretation of texts as per the

patristic doctrine: the literal sense (the story); the allegorical interpretation; the moral interpretation; the mystical or anagogical interpretation (eschatology).

Etymology and *Exegesis* stand at the basis of McLuhan's tetrad and of his mosaic; the ancient tradition is there galvanised through Joyce's 'vivisective' prose, Wyndham Lewis's vorticist poetics or Ford Madox Ford's impressionist tenets, among others. McLuhan's 'New Science' encourages to playfully explore chaos through language and offers as objective correlative a tool for storytelling which is, in its essence, digital: it works through data convergence, redefines space/time categories, questions the idea of authorships, linearity, etc. From the mid-twentieth century, Marshall McLuhan worked on a linguistic warning system alerting on changes as society moved from literacy to post-literacy, from mechanical specialization to electric wholeness. Consistently, all investigations that approach McLuhan's world of discovery cannot but start from a renewed consciousness of his interior landscape: at core, McLuhan always remained a Professor of Literature. Through his mosaic and his tetrads, he reminded us that storytelling is a powerful strategy for exploring and rendering a world in progress, that *pen and words are mightier than the sword*.

The above is not a worn-out cliché; it is, instead, the core of a universal archetype because:

> Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered or outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols, the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant. (McLuhan 2003: 85)

That's why literary studies are needed at a time of technological change They can trigger awareness of the accelerated dynamics of complex an inter-connected environments, unveil the making of

subliminal processes and, therefore, preserve our free will. As literary subjects, McLuhan and his discourse confirm that: as a Professor of Literature, McLuhan was a witness to the growing gap between the world of his students were inhabiting, their language and culture, and the scholarly world of his time. He spent his life to bridge that gap through his own scholarly and literary knowledge. He navigated change in spite of his lack of enthusiasm for it; he was convinced that the only way to master change was to *look at it* and to *look through it*. He also knew, as Ford Madox Ford and all his literary masters knew, that 'nothing is more trouble than to look things in the face".[17] Yet, he did not hesitate and pursued his search all through his life. His verbal probes are his way of wittily invading his readers' and listeners' inner sensibilities, and troubling them. After all, Ford's lesson was clear: "The word *author* means someone who adds to your consciousness."[18] If McLuhan's mosaic encourages us to be active readers, his tetradic storytelling encourages us to turn that attitude into a creative act; it encourages everyone to become the author of his/her own narratives, the author of his/her own original and free discourse. All revolutions, even the digital ones, start from that.

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[17] Ford Madox Ford, *The Critical Attitude*, 8

[18] Ford Madox Ford, "Introduction" to, Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms,* in *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, Edited by Frank MacShane, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1964, 134

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The paper

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