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Message, Medium and Massage in the Global Village according to McLuhan

Abstract

The article revisits Marshall McLuhan's life and most important media books in order to comment upon September 11, 2001 through his "theories". The author tries to clarify the meaning of "medium" as it results from McLuhan's analysis of the passage to the electronic age in The Gutenberg Galaxy *and from his* Understanding Media, *which launched the successful but obscure dictum " the medium is the message". The references to* The Medium Is the Massage *(with its punning title) are meant to offer an insight into the relationship between the medium and the message, while those to* War and Peace in the Global Village, *the most topical of his books, insist upon the importance of the historical moment in shaping McLuhan's vision of the future. The interpretation of the terrorist attack is an illustration of how an apparently contradictory formula from McLuhan's "pop" philosophy can help one to "read" a message that is one with its medium of delivery and produces a "massage", first on a national, and then in an international context.*

Résumé

L'article passe en revue la vie et les livres les plus importants de Marshall McLuhan portant sur les moyens de communication à l'intention de commenter les événements de Septembre 11, 2001 à travers ses théories. L'auteure y tent d'éclercir la signification du mot « medium » au terme de l'analyse que McLuhan fait au passage vers l'époque éléctronique dans ses livres La Galaxie Gutenberg *et* La compréhension des Médias, *ce dernier avant lancé le dicton ambigu, mais à succès «le message est le moyen*

même». Nos références au Moyen en tant que Massage *(titre issue d'un calambour) tenent à aprofondir la compréhension des relations entre moyen et message, tandis que celles* à Guerre et Paix dans le Village Global, *l'un des plus actuels livres de McLuhan, insistent sur l'importance du moment historique qui a façonné la vision de McLuhan sur l'avenir. L'interprétation de l'attaque terroriste illustre comment une formule apparemment contradictoire de la philosophie « pop » de McLuhan peut aider à « lire » un message qui este en même temps son propre moyen de transmission tout en agissant comme un « massage », d'abord à l'échelle nationale, et ensuite, dans un contexte international.*

Like millions of other people in the world, I witnessed the September 11 terrorist attack as presented on different TV channels and, while watching, I remembered Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum "the medium is the message". But only later on did I think of it as a possible starting point in interpreting the events. Even though concepts like *media, global village, age of information, the Gutenberg Galaxy* or his famous dictum are in everyday use and the web links offer plenty of information concerning his life and work, McLuhan is less known than he used to be some decades ago as his place has been taken by other cultural experts or media gurus. Therefore, perhaps, it would not be useless to remember some important data concerning his career.

Marshall McLuhan's life and work

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born in Alberta (1911) and was educated at the University of Manitoba and then in Cambridge, England. An engineer converted to literary studies, for a time he was an obscure professor of English literature at provincial universities in the States and Canada; in 1946 he came to the University of Toronto, where he was made a full professor in 1952. His first books, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of the Industrial Man* (New York, 1950) and *Explorations in Communication* written together with E. S. Carpenter (Boston, 1960), got little attention. He became famous overnight in 1962, due to *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*, a bestseller. In 1963 he was named director of the Centre for Culture and Technology in Toronto; by this time he had become somewhat of a cult figure, and was very much in demand as a lecturer. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) marked the peak of his career. "Within a matter of months" – says Lewis Lapham in his Introduction to the MIT Press Edition – "the book acquired the standing of Holy Scripture and made of its author the foremost oracle of the age" (IX). McLuhan's name began to be mentioned along with those of well-known analysts of culture like T. S. Eliot, Oswald Spengler and Herbert Marcuse. By 1965, the *New York Herald Tribune* proclaimed him "the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov". He became also a media star due to his conferences. Woody Allen placed him on the set of *Annie Hall*, the famous pop artists Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg appointed him "to the office of honorary muse" (Lapham, X). The following books, *The*

Medium is the Massage (1967), *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968), *Through the Vanishing Point* (1968) and *Mutations* (1969), though also successful did not enjoy the same popularity. Marshall McLuhan's contribution to literary theory was not forgotten either. John Fekete included him in the series of most important authors but his "explorations" of the ideology of Anglo-American literature were published only in 1977.

McLuhan's fame crossed the ocean and reached the Soviet-bloc countries as well. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* was translated into Romanian only in 1975, but previous to this, comments had been published in various literary and cultural magazines. *Secolul 20* (*The 20th Century*), the most prestigious cultural review of the time, sent a reporter to interview him in Toronto and one of its 1970 issues (6/116) gave an extensive presentation of the Canadian celebrity.

As usually happens with famous people and theories, there were also those who contested McLuhan's ideas. Frank Zingrone and Eric McLuhan's preface to the *Essential McLuhan* tells of a furious attack against him and his sustainers inside and outside the academy (10). Only later critics have been able to view his work more objectively.

By the time of his death at sixty-nine on New Year's Eve 1980, McLuhan was almost forgotten. As early as 1982, Northrop Frye, the famous Canadian critic and cultural anthropologist, was already suggesting a rereading of McLuhan's work, fully aware of its importance:

> He was caught up in the manic-depressive roller coaster of the mass media, so that he was hysterically celebrated in the sixties and unreasonably neglected thereafter. It is likely that the theory of communication will be the aspect of the great critical pot-pourri of our time which will particularly interest Canadians, and to which they will make most distinctive contribution. So it is perhaps time for a sympathetic reading of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* and a re-absorption of McLuhan's influence, though no adequate treatment of this topic can be attempted here. (Frye, 37)

As many 19th century writers in Canada, especially poets, had spoken in the rhetoric of a "divided voice" (title of a poem by Francis Sparshott), Frye considered that McLuhan had put a similarly split rhetoric into an international context. On top was a "breezy and self-assured butterslide theory of western history, derived probably from a Chestertonian religious orientation," according to which medieval culture had preserved a balanced way of life that depended on personal contact and lived within "tribal" or small community units. Below was a horrifying vision of the global village, at once completely centralized and completely decentralized, in a state of terror and anxiety at once stagnant and chaotic, equally a tyranny and an anarchy. Frye believed that Canada's own involvement with the new media, more particularly film and radio, had been a decisive influence in maturing the culture of the country and giving it a place in the international scene (Frye 37).

As Lewis Lapham duly remarked, much of what McLuhan had to say made a good deal more sense during the nineties than it did in the sixties, and the more profound implications were beginning to make themselves manifest on MTV and in the Internet, in Ronald Reagan's political image and the re-animation of Richard Nixon via television, shopping networks and e-mail - all of them technologies that McLuhan had presupposed but did not live to see. According to Lapham, the revival of McLuhan's reputation among the more visionary promoters of "the information superhighway" and the Internet is due to a kind of "mystical component" of his theories which corresponds to the integralist vision of "cyberspace", "the connectedness of all circuits, all intelligence, all things economic and social", resulting in "sociability and lack of memory" and "emergent wholeness". But it also suits the rhetoric of politicians promoting the New World Order and the unification of the industrial nations of the earth by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Lapham refuses such interpretations and prefers McLuhan in his "secular phases", as an explorer of the media and its effect on communications (XI).

An important contribution to a better understanding of his work and a response to its topicality has been the publication of the *Essential McLuhan* (1995) by his son Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone. It not only gives a comprehensive and systematized vision of his work, but also offers some surprises, such as the chapter dedicated to Marshall McLuhan's "oral" performances, the text of one of his speeches and an interview for *Playboy* magazine.

Only recent commentators of McLuhan's work have the necessary perspective to judge it objectively and in an international context. In an article published in 1998, James W. Carey recognizes that McLuhan's work represented "a genuine and multifaceted intellectual advance that has become part of our inheritance". His interdisciplinary formation, his indebtedness to F. R. Lewis in the field of literary criticism but also in semantics, as well as Harold Innis's influence, to which Leon Surette adds that of Edward Sapir, are at the basis of his theory of communication. His attitude to counterculture is seen as ambiguous, and television is considered a kind of Achilles heel for McLuhan, who in the collaborative *Through the Vanishing Point,* so as to justify his theories, found "tactility" as a label for what previously had been "acoustic". But one of his utmost merits is to have maintained that the technology of linguistic inscription generated profound cultural shifts by altering the sensory balance (Surette).

The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man (1962)

As McLuhan's later books develop in one way or another the ideas stated in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, it is not futile to sum up at least some of them. The starting point of this book in the form of a mosaic is the supposition that the ideal condition for man is one when all the senses are in an ideal harmony, i.e. the state of the pre-alphabetical man. Man changes when one of the senses enjoys a privileged position. The relationship of all the senses changes

due to the fact that the technologies created by man – including the means of communication – are meant to extend one or another of the senses.

Primitive man had lived in a world dominated by the ear and hearing. Man's experience was all summed up in speech and transmitted orally. This was the situation characteristic of the first stage of civilization, the oral stage. Gutenberg's Galaxy marked the passage to a new type of culture. Visual culture starts with the invention of the phonetic alphabet. The acoustic patterns become totally different from the visible signs that record speech and this leads in practice to the destruction of the ear in favour of the eye. From a temporal type of perception that permitted simultaneity, there is the passage to a spatial, linear type of culture. The education of the eye due to writing has produced a break of the perceptible reality into a reality that is seen and another that is heard.

The new type of visual culture had – according to McLuhan – enormous consequences: perspective in painting, the unification of national languages, the unification of Europe's nations, the separation of arts and sciences in the process of education, the appearance of a new social class, the intellectuals. Beginning with the Renaissance, the book was the most important element and means in the development of culture. The visual, linear, sequential, uniform, repetitive character of the printed text gave birth to Western logocentrism and the de-tribalization of man, the result of which was the isolation of the individual. The book contributed to the appearance of the unidimensional man, who became also a concern of Herbert Marcuse's philosophy. The use of the eye in the analysis of information and the printed word as a new means of communication made Western society change its values, behaviours and relationships.

The new electronic era, also called Marconi's Galaxy, marks the end of this civilization of the book. The means of communication in the electronic era are totally different from those of the preceding period. They are simultaneous extensions of the whole nervous system, reinstating a harmonious equilibrium of all the senses. If the visual culture resulted in the fragmentation of the individual – a real cultural schizophrenia – the reunification of humanity through electronic global communication permits an infinite extension of the senses as a unitary network, uniting all people in a global village.

Present-day man, similarly to man at the beginning of Gutenberg's Galaxy, is the witness of change, of the clash between two gigantic cultural systems, and has to acknowledge this situation so as not to become a victim of this transition. The electronic systems of communication awaken a kind of new tribalism, and the solution of integration is not the passive acceptance of being modelled by it.

The installation of this new era is much faster than that of the previous one and its impact is very brutal. Everything seems to change: the individual, family, the environment, education, occupations and relationships between people. All these changes produce perturbations in both understanding and

adaptation to the world. This brings about the need of dialogue at all levels, participation and teamwork.

Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964)

Less "literary" than *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, though writers are still quoted besides the numerous personalities and theories from a great variety of fields, *Understanding Media* shows McLuhan at the height of his multi-disciplinary phase. As is shown in the subtitle of the book, he intends to deal with "the extensions of man" in an evolution culminating with the very extension of the nervous system in the electronic age.

McLuhan's own "Introduction" to the book starts abruptly, with an anecdote from *The New York Times* (July 7, 1957), a parody of absurd sensational news, recalling the Tom and Jerry cartoons: "A health director...reported this week that a small mouse, which presumably had been watching television, attacked a little girl and her full-grown cat.... Both mouse and cat survived, and the incident is recorded here as a reminder that things seem to be changing" (3).

This is followed by McLuhan's deadly serious and extremely courageous general statement, followed by a short formulation of his theory:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as the planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. Whether the extension of consciousness, so long sought by advertisers for specific products, will be "a good thing" is a question that admits of a wide solution. There is little possibility of answering such questions about the extensions of man without considering all of them together. Any extension, whether of skin, hand, foot, affects the whole physical and social complex. (3-4)

To show how little consideration has been given to these matters so evident to him, McLuhan describes the consternation of an editor who noted that, in comparison with the usual ten percent of novelty needed for a book to be successful, in *Understanding Media* seventy-five percent of the material was new and thus it was a risk for the publishers but worth taking as "the need to understand the effects of the extensions of man became more urgent by the hour" (4).

McLuhan's vision of the electronic age is not that of the end of history but that of a world in which the rapid progress in technology will enhance the speed of communications so as to abolish distances and differences and

permit a return, on a higher plane, to a total involvement with whatever happens in the world.

The book is divided into two parts. The title of the first chapter is the magic and by now battered dictum "The medium is the message" and McLuhan will try hard to clarify it by examples. Nevertheless, the reader cannot help being surprised at reading assertions reminiscent of Chinese boxes, such as "The *content* of any medium is always another medium." More explicitly, "the content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and the print is the content of the telegraph." This last example appears least convincing of all. But McLuhan continues: "If it is asked, 'What is the content of speech?', it is necessary to say, 'It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself non-verbal.' An abstract painting represents direct manifestation of creative thought processs as they might appear in computer designs"(8). Some pages further he says: "The message of the movie medium is that of transition from lineal connections to configurations" (12). Some pages even further he says that the content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its programme content. The content of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or speech (18). His conclusion is that the effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as content. But one of the most surprising ideas is that "programme and 'content' analysis offer no clues to the magic of the media and their subliminal charge" (20). Accepting as true his affirmation that "each of the media is a powerful weapon with which to clobber other media and other groups," this would not necessarily lead one to his deduction that "the result is that the present age has been one of multiple civil wars that are not limited to the world of art and entertainment" (21). A further development of these ideas will appear in his *War and Peace in the Global Village.*

McLuhan's favourite instance is the electric light, a medium without message as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal advertisement or name. The activities in which it is used could be considered in a way the *content* of the electric light, since they could not be done without it. But the electric light escapes attention as a communication medium exactly because it seems to have no content.

Notwithstanding his dissatisfaction with the limited competence of the literati to understand the electronic beehive, McLuhan thinks that Shakespeare's work could offer a fairly complete handbook to study the extensions of man. He suggests that some lines, like the quotation he gives from *Romeo and Juliet* – "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? / It speaks, and yet says nothing" – could be read as referring to TV (29). Other fragments seem to reflect manipulation through the media, while *Troilus and Cressida* appears as if almost completely devoted to both psychic and social communication.

McLuhan's literary examples and explanations of abstract art and Cubism are quite convincing. Nevertheless, he feels the need to extend the scope of his investigation to anthropology, psychology, economics, medicine, philosophy

and history. The integration of different sciences and the necessity to include them all in the process of understanding the contemporary world pleads for multidisciplinarity or even transdisciplinarity, which only came into fashion towards the end of the century. He quotes and compares different views but most of the time returns to literature, something that made scientists considers his "interventions" in their special field either ridiculous or amateurish. But his wish for interdisciplinarity allowed him to get a larger perception of the contrasts in the contemporary world.

The title of the second chapter is "Media Hot and Cold" – probably an analogy with jazz styles (Surette) – and the distinction between *hot* and *cool* media will become almost as obsessive as "the medium is the message". According to McLuhan, a hot medium extends "one single sense" in "high definition", that is a *hot medium* is filled with data and the audience is therefore receptive or passive. A *cool medium*, by contrast, has a low definition and provides limited data, so the audience has to participate, to be active, in order to complete the message. A photograph is hot but television is cool (visual definition is higher on the cinema screen than on the television screen). Radio is hot (it uses sound as completely as possible), while the telephone is cool. A lecture is hot while a seminar is cool. Later experts in communications found objections to this classification (O'Sullivan 176-177).

The second part of the book contains references to different means of communication such as the written and spoken word, roads, numbers, clothing, housing, money, clocks, the printed word, the wheel, bicycle, and aeroplane, the photograph, the press, adds, games, the typewriter, the telephone, the telegraph, comics, movies, radio, television, weapons and aviation. He repeats over and over again some of his key phrases, stressing the difference between the linearity of the Gutenberg Galaxy and the circularity of the electronic age. Lewis Lapham gives a list of the "leitmotifs" he discovered in *Understanding Media* and summarizes McLuhan's dialectics in a set of antonyms, one of the columns referring to print, the other to electronic media: *visual > tactile, mechanical > organic, sequence > simultaneity, composition > improvisation, eye > ear, active > reactive, expansion > contraction, complete > incomplete, soliloquy > chorus, centre > margin, continuous > discontinuous, syntax > mosaic, self-expression > group therapy, Typographic man > Graphic man* (XII-XIII). Most of these oppositions coincide with those between the modern and the postmodern as given later by Ihab Hassan.

The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (1967)

Co-authored by Quentin Fiore, this is one of the most concise but also much contested re-formulations of McLuhan's theory. The title is usually misspelled in bibliographies as "message", though probably correctly given by authors but wrongly corrected by proofreaders (as recently happened to myself). According to the *London Observer*, quoted on the cover of his next book, it is "the most prophetic of McLuhan's books". It is very much like an album, reducing the written text in favour of its illustrations – reproductions of photographs, collages, caricatures and newspaper cartoons – which

explains why McLuhan was called a "pop philosopher". According to John M. Culkin there are four possible interpretations of the formula "the medium is the massage":

1. The medium is the thing we miss when we concentrate on the content of communication.

2. The medium of communication not only transforms or alters the message but each form manifests its preference for a certain type of content. This is why the medium deserves full attention and each of the media encodes reality in a new way.

3. The medium changes the receptor's perceptual behaviour. The pun used by McLuhan – message/massage – attracts our attention to the fact that the medium is not neutral but it acts upon man's senses. Television captures man and is a kind of massage of all the senses.

4. The medium massages not only the individual but also the whole society, though the effects are usually not much discussed. Thus, according to McLuhan, more important than the content of its programmes is the mere existence of television (Culkin 115-116).

Another possibility of interpretation would be that the wide appeal of the media, their power to unite a large number of people, transforms the new age into a "mass-age". Later analysts, as seen in the anthology of texts published by Curran and Gurewitch (1996), will insist on the relationship between mass media and society at large.

War and Peace in the Global Village (1968)

Co-ordinated by Jerome Angel, it is the second book produced by McLuhan together with Quentin Fiore. The motto begins with an apparently funny sentence, "Globes make my head spin," that has a very serious continuation: "By the time I locate the place, they've changed boundaries," illustrated with a globe that is connected to electricity by a plug inserted into a socket in a wall. On the following page the book is defined as "an inventory of the current spastic situations that could be eliminated by more forward"... and the sentence does not end, reminding one of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which begins in the middle of a sentence whose beginning is at the end of the book, suggesting the cyclic structure of history according to Vico's philosophy. In form, the book is also a mosaic of images and texts with marginal quotations from *Finnegans Wake* and was advertised as "a marvellously stimulating insight into the dynamics of change... heightening our awareness of the process taking place in the depths below consciousness" (back cover).

McLuhan tries to explain the causes that generate wars. He re-examines Napoleon's military achievements and meditates upon theories concerning war as a means of education and technological progress. He even refers to clothing as weaponry and has a keen eye in observing the Arab world as well as primitive societies and their responses to modern technology.

Even if in his article on Marshall McLuhan's genealogy and legacy James W. Carey remarks that the book does not refer in any detail to the Vietnam

War, "the first war of the Global Village", one cannot assume that McLuhan was unaware of what was happening around him and in the world. *War and Peace in the Global Village* must have been written in response to the turmoil of the sixties with the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, President Kennedy's assassination, Flower Power and the students' movements in Europe, which had shown that the world was changing again. In Canada the FLQ (Front du libération du Québec) performed all kinds of terrorist activities from robbing to bombing. In the mid-1960s, a few militant separatists bombed federal government buildings (Saywell 93-95). The conflict of cultures was visible in McLuhan's own home country as well as around the world and he had a foreboding of what was to come. *War and Peace in the Global Village* was published only two years before the Canadian crisis of 1970, when the British Trade Commissioner in Montreal was kidnapped by the FLQ and for his release they demanded the release of some of their imprisoned members and their passage to Cuba. This was followed by the kidnapping of Pierre Laporte, a Quebec cabinet minister. In answer to the War Measures Act proclaimed by the Trudeau cabinet to seek out the kidnappers, Laporte was strangled. By the spring of 1971 the crisis was over. A political cartoon from the *Ottawa Citizen* with the caption "A man for all seasons" summed up the situation, showing Trudeau with two identical hideous faces, one of them wearing a beret and with a flower between his teeth and the other with an iron helmet and a knife. The badge of the first one read "Flower Power", while the second was: "War Measures Power" (Saywell 97).

It is also true that Joyce's *Finnegans Wake H.C.E.* was an essential prop for McLuhan's demonstration of his ideas and the mysterious and ambiguous marginal quotations from it are used as landmarks. He thought that the title of Joyce's work was referring directly to "the Orientalization of the West by electric technology and to the meeting of the East and the West", and that he was not only the greatest "behavioural engineer" who ever lived (4) but someone who was important because he had been "the only man ever to discover that all social changes are the effect of new technologies on the order of our sensory lives" and that "every major technical innovation will so disturb our inner lives that wars necessarily result as misbegotten efforts to recover the old images" (5).

Medium, message, and massage on September 11, 2001

There are certain events in the history of humankind viewed as points: inventions, discoveries, conquests, battles (won or lost), revolutions, and so on that change the course and direction of future developments. The terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 is supposed to be such a crucial moment for mankind. While following the course of events, those who has read him found it only natural to remember the prophet of the electronic era, Marshall McLuhan. The "implosion" of the WTC towers seemed to illustrate his prediction about the end of the civilization characterised by "explosion". Could he have offered an interpretation of the attack according to his famous phrase "the medium is the message" or according to the Joycean "the medium is the massage" and, reversing a quotation from the Irish author's

"meandertale", say that *The east shall shake awake the west // while we have the morn for night..."?*

The insignificant difference in time between the event itself and the information about the terrorist attack was due to the fact that television enabled most of the people on the globe to become virtual witnesses to what happened. Theorists of the mass-media have amply discussed the capacity of television, utilizing satellite technology, not only to tell the story of an event *as it happens*, but have drawn attention on its capacity to have consequences for the very direction that the event might take. Some of the more memorable examples include the role played by global television in the student uprising in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the events in Eastern Europe in 1989, and the Gulf War. But when television, and the media generally, become active participants in events, it is well known that journalists cannot extricate themselves from their social context and cling to the "norm of apartness" (Gurevitch 216). In the same way it has to be acknowledged that the consumers of the news are biased by their own context.

Although a defiance of communication via words and thus a return to a pre-linguistic phase in history, the terrorist attack was, nevertheless, an act of communication that could be considered a *message* according to its definition as "the means by which the sender affects the receiver", seen as "an embryonic *content* that exists before the *encoding* and after the *decoding*; encoding translates it into a *form* in which it can be transmitted, while decoding translates it back to its original state (provided that encoding, decoding and transmission have all worked at maximum efficiency)" (Fiske 178).

The aim of a terrorist attack resides in the intention of the weaker part to hurt the powerful "other". The general meaning of "terror" according to the *BBC English Dictionary* is "great fear", while its second meaning is "violence or the threat of violence, especially when it is used for political reasons". The example given in the dictionary illustrates and contextualizes the meaning of the word: "He has called the move a surrender to Arab terror, ... a renewed IRA terror campaign" (1168). An act of terrorism is defined not only as means but also as content: "the use of violence for political reasons; used showing disapproval". "Terrorist" is defined as "someone who uses violence, especially murder, kidnapping, and bombing, in order to achieve some political aims or to force a government to do something; used showing disapproval" (1168). The *message* of a terrorist attack would be accordingly not *to say* but to *show* "discontent", "disapproval" or "defiance", to express a "menace", a "warning" or a "claim". The example given includes both the means and the sanctioning of such an act: "the terrorists had planted a powerful car bomb near the town centre...Most of them had served jail sentences for terrorist acts." Thus, the way the message is conveyed, i.e. the *medium*, as well as the concrete effects it produces, determine the gravity of such an attack.

In the dictionary, "hijacking" and "hijacker" are not connected to terrorism. "Highjacking" is defined as "an incident in which a group of people illegally take control of a plane or other vehicle" (530). On September 11 it was evident that hijacking was a medium. The most efficient modern means of transportation had been turned into a kind of Trojan horse, containing – besides the passengers – the terrorists, themselves instruments in conveying the message. The way the terrorists used the aircraft and its passengers to hit the targets reflected their different approach to this means of communication, transforming it and them into a deadly weapon. But the most shocking thing was their disregard for human lives.

One of McLuhan's references to a study of primitive people's behaviour versus modern technology may contribute to an understanding of this as a "total-field" approach. In *War and Peace in the Global Village* (151) McLuhan tells how a Dean of Education at the University of British Columbia had exposed natives from the deepest jungles of the world to sophisticated machinery and situations. The experiment showed that within three or four months, they could not only fly the four engine jet planes, but were also able to repair them. In the same way, during World War II, the American Air Force stationed in Newfoundland learned with surprise that their top technicians were the Eskimo hunters who had seen no machine before. McLuhan's explanation is that primitive people have a so-called "total field approach" to machinery, regarding a machine as a pet animal, integral and alive. In the terrorist attack the aircraft was actually "alive" considering the people in it.

To decide how to characterise, according to McLuhan, the medium used by the terrorists as "hot" or "cool", if "cool" means "ruthless", "tribal", then the attack *was* certainly "cool". But since "cool" in current spoken English is so frequently used to indicate that something is convenient, "OK", it would be wiser to agree with those who say that McLuhan's use of these adjectives is inoperative.

What people saw on September 11 was first of all a visual "effect" whose cause was not at all evident in the beginning. As later investigations proved, the encoding of the message had meant a long and very carefully conducted process so as to find the most efficient means of transmitting it in order to obtain a maximum of effect and the widest audience possible. As a non-verbal message, polysemantic and ambiguous, the process of decoding also had to go through certain phases.

When the first plane collided with one of the towers, this was seen as an "accident". Due to the repetition of the collision, with the second plane hitting the other WTC tower and the relation of this to what was happening at the Pentagon, and then to the failed attempt of hijacking another plane, the "accident" became, beyond any doubt, an example of a "terrorist attack", the "accidental" being supplanted by the "intentional".

In the process of "reading" and "translating" the message of September 11, there was a gradual process of aggrandizing its meaning. From an attack aimed at some concrete targets in the US, it became an "attack on the United

States" and subsequently it has become an attack on civilization and democracy in the world. This can be seen as a "massage" of the meaning, making things appear worse and worse.

Such an interpretation was generated by the symbolic function of the very targets of the attack. As McLuhan has shown, American culture is a predominantly visual one: the highest buildings in the world, huge cities, highways and bridges, aeroplanes and spaceships, as opposed to the invisibility of other cultures. The White House, the Pentagon, the WTC, as targets, represented the most visible symbols of the strongest political, military, commercial and financial power in the world. They could also be considered as *media* of a message. Hence the huge impact of the attack, interpreted not only as an act of "disapproval" but as an act of "defiance" of the highest authority in the international community. In the words of the President, the attack was "an act of war".

It has to be observed that the decoders of the message never cared to give the attack a sentence form or articulate the message from the senders' point of view, as a "preferred reading" (see O'Sullivan 238-39) according to the assumptions of the encoder. The *recipients'* delay in answering the message was not only due to the absence of a signature or the anonymity of the sender. The reply had to be negotiated in a process of finding as wide a community of support as possible to justify the gravity of the answer. The "mandate" for war issues, according to McLuhan, from "endangered identity": "When our identity is in danger, we feel certain that we have a mandate for war. The old image must be recovered at any cost" (*War and Peace*, 97).

The embarrassment caused by the failure of the most sophisticated systems of communications to collect information about the terrorists' intentions, preparations and means of attack so as to prevents its happening was a proof of the vulnerability of the system. Though the following quotation will be used with a different intention from its context in McLuhan's thinking, it could be read as referring to the clash between two types of culture:

> The critical anxiety in which all men now exist is very much
> the result of the interface between a declining mechanical
> culture, fragmented and specialist, and a new integral culture
> that is inclusive and organic and macroscopic. The new culture
> does not depend on words at all. Language and dialogue, in
> fact, have already taken the form of interplay between whole
> areas of the world. (*War and Peace*, 67)

The overwhelming visual effect and immediate consequences of the devastating attack demonstrated that the "sender(s)" of the message had a thorough knowledge of American culture, dominated by individualism and behaviourism. Although not all the proposed targets had been destroyed, the effects were far above the sender's/senders' expectations, as later declarations showed. No verbal message could have had the same impact.

The attack affected instantly the American communication system (with the closing down of airports and the delay of flights) and diminished the

confidence in information technologies. On the one hand, fear, suspicion and insecurity were the negative effects, threatening democratic liberties; on the other hand, the American nation experienced a new sense of unity in grief. In this respect, there was an evident "massaging" effect of the media, especially of television. The obsessive repetition of the images of the attack, "readable" without any comment, the presentation of witnesses, survivors, relatives of the victims, whose facial expression and body language were far more eloquent than words, was the means of achieving this unity. McLuhan's comments on the importance of bad news for the press and television seemed never truer. But for the terrorists the "bad news" was a sign of victory.

It must not be forgotten that there was also a collateral verbal effect of the attack. Texts in Arabic were shown on the TV screen or reproduced as newspaper illustrations in non-Arab countries. To give this effect a more shocking and manipulative character on the screen, the TV channels coloured the letters red and the background black. This might contradict McLuhan's conviction that Oriental culture is mainly oral. But it is also true that Arabic became not only visible, with its different alphabet and direction of writing, but also audible in a global context. Translation from and into Arabic became a priority of the moment.

Since the negotiations concerning the punishment of those responsible for the terrorist attack and the handing over of their leader failed, the reply was also a non-verbal one, the attack on Afghanistan, the country where the terrorists were hiding. Their "invisibility" made the delivery of the "response" quite a long and difficult task. What followed has become a real chain reaction whose end would be difficult to predict.

Conclusion

This rather sketchy analysis of what happened on September 11 with the help of McLuhan's theories serves also to recall the concrete historical circumstances that made him aware of the changes in the world. As a Canadian, he could not but observe that the problem of identity is of capital importance for the contemporary world. War and peace in the Global Village depends on respect for the "other's" cultural identity and the attack on one's cultural identity could cause the end of civilized communication and a relapse into a primitive state. But it would be absurd to believe that McLuhan's theories about the return to oral culture in the Global Village would plead for the destruction of Western culture in favour of Oriental culture. He speaks of "the integral mosaic vision" that allows "the eye as vortex" to scan and include both East and West (War and Peace 187). He ends War and Peace with "A Further Message to the Fish Out of Water", a "footnote" on the "End of Nature" theme, and the last page in it offers the image of a two-headed turtle – a beautiful symbol of unity for two cultures formerly at war.

Acknowledgement

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