

THE INTERIOR SENSORIUM IN MEDIA ECOLOGY: JUSTIFICATION FOR STUDY

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Noting the traditional media ecological study of the impact of media environments on sensory perception and consciousness, Cali looks to Eric McLuhan's discussion of the four senses of scripture in medieval exegesis as a potential launching pad for an investigation of the "interior sensorium" informed by mystical philosophy. Cali offers four justifications for a media ecological study of the interior sensorium: he proposes that such a study may (1) enrich our knowledge of human consciousness, (2) combat deterministic theories of media through identifying areas of human sensibility potentially unaffected by external sensation, (3) increase philosophical understanding of the human person as a mind-body unit, and (4) promote a holistic theory of knowledge, beyond such historically foundational dualisms as subject-object, inner-outer, mind-reality.

The human sensorium is fundamental to studies in media ecology. Media ecologists have shown us how the dominant medium of an age exerts particular effects on our sensory apparatus, biasing our consciousness of space and time and reshaping how we perceive our environments. Two examples will suffice. Walter Ong, who indicated that "by sensorium we mean...the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex"¹ demonstrated in his pivotal *Orality and Literacy* text that changes in thought and consciousness were engendered by the transition from an oral culture to a literate one.² Similarly, Marshall McLuhan, in describing how we look upon new media by clinging to the machinations of old media, famously wrote: "We see the world through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future."³

Yet another sensorium – what might be called an "interior" or a "subterranean" sensorium – has occupied the attention of philosophers, theologians and some media ecologists. A list of such scholars who have written about the "spiritual senses" dates back to antiquity and runs up to today: Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Alexander of Hales, Thomas Gallus, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Most recently and in our own field of inquiry, the matter of the interior sensorium was the focus of reflection in the book entitled *The Sensus Communis, Synesthesia, and the Soul: An Odyssey* and the 2017 Media

Ecology Association keynote address of our late esteemed colleague Eric McLuhan. In that address and book, the younger McLuhan posited that religious faith furnishes the human being with another way of knowing. For the most part, however, the field has ignored or even implicitly denied the existence of an interior sensorium. It speaks of “interiorization,” but in its discussion of consciousness and perception relies much more heavily on sight, sound, colour, touch, and taste, which is to say sensory response to external stimuli. Since the interior sensorium potentially plays an even greater role in forming identity of people and might also inform the external sensorium, such neglect misses an opportunity to extend our understanding of human consciousness and the role that media perform in shaping it. Matters such as sub-consciousness; discernment; interpretation; subjectivity and intersubjectivity; unknowing (which really means “knowing” through means other than natural sensory); mystical knowing, and “tacit knowing” are ripe for further exploration.

As a prelude to a book project on this subject, this essay explores the pertinence of this interior sensorium to media ecology and its role in shaping human identity in a technological age. I offer four justifications for directing attention to the interior senses, or “the senses of the soul.” Exploring the senses of the soul, or the interior sensorium, is particularly intriguing in that it investigates “senses” that by their nature are non-corporeal.

A central locus of investigation in all of media ecology is human consciousness. Besides the examples of Ong that address the psychodynamics of orality and McLuhan that includes figure-ground, percept versus concept, and the effects of “hot and cool” media on human consciousness, the list of studies that have investigated the relationship between media and consciousness would include, among countless others, Harold Innis’ 1951 *The Bias of Communication*, Edmund Carpenter’s 2003 documentary “Oh, What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me” and Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in 1985.

Postman explains the effects of media on consciousness taken up by media ecologists:

The printing press, the computer, and television are not therefore simply machines which convey information. They are metaphors through which we conceptualize reality in one way or another. They will classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, argue a case for what it is like. Through these media metaphors, we do not see the world as it is. We see it as our coding systems are. Such is the power of the form of information.⁴

As recently as June of 2018, Eric McLuhan spoke to MEA attendees about that dimension of consciousness that rests beyond the *sensus communis* of the 5 senses. The notion of *sensus communis*, as Aristotle first advanced for us in *De Anima*, holds that human beings don’t perceive objects according to the

sensory input of one organ at a time. We don't perceive a rose, for example, as a composite of shape + size + color+ fragrance but as a synthesis of perceivable qualities. *Communis sensus* refers to the apprehension of objects as a unification of input, a synthesis, of the five senses into a perceptual whole. Directing further study on the interior facets of consciousness would be continuing the prescient observations that Eric McLuhan set forth in his keynote address. *In short, further exploration of the interior sensorium, the sensorium of non-corporeal senses that function as counterparts to but may work in conjunction with the exterior sensorium, stands to extend our understanding of human consciousness*, offering a first justification for undertaking such a study.

Whether describing figure and ground, psychological crystallization, (i.e. the use of images, labels and slogans as the basis of thought) or the psychodynamics of orality, media ecologists have centered their explorations on a concern for the interplay of the influences on culture, technology, and *consciousness*. They have offered various postulates about the interior dimensions of consciousness. Calling the human being the “collector and custodian of consciousness,” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin took the term to include “every kind of psychism, from the most rudimentary forms in interior perception imaginable the human phenomenon of reflective thought.”⁵ In *Philosophy of Man*, he speaks of “radial energy” to describe the “within” of things. The concern for that inner “energy”, the inner dimension of consciousness, is part of the legacy of media ecology. McLuhan spoke of an extension-interiorization interplay in his *Gutenberg Galaxy*: “Every technology contrived and conceived by man has the power to numb human awareness during the period of its first interiorization.”⁶ And yet the nature, form, or function of the interior sensorium remains largely unexamined.

One aspect of the interior aspect of consciousness that stands to shed light on human consciousness and thereby to advance the discovery potentiality of the field is the matter of *what counts* as interior senses. Many mystics write about seeing with the eyes of faith or listening to the inner voice. Eric McLuhan includes the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love as interior senses, with one serving as the ground for the others (personal correspondence). He also includes the four levels of interpretation of Scripture—the historic or literal; the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical.⁷ They are modes of the consciousness that move at the literal and most outward level from awareness of the material reality—the “what” of what Scripture says—to an anagogical level, the most interiorly experienced, acquired directly through supernatural experience. Viewing them in tandem, Eric McLuhan sees the Scriptural set of senses as the interior counterpart to the Aristotelian four causes that he sees as exterior:

I had already noticed that Grammar provided two sets of senses, the fourfold intellectual senses of scripture—de Lubac—and the fourfold interpretation of the physical world—via the four

causes. One inner; one outer. They parallel each other (as mentioned in *Laws of Media*).⁸

In other words, Eric McLuhan sees de Lubac's historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses of spiritual reality and Aristotle's material, formal, final, and efficient causes of physical reality as serving complementary epistemic functions—of “inner” and “outer” worlds, respectively.

Another basic postulate advanced by consciousness scholars regards the “placement” of the interior sensoria vis-à-vis the sensoria with which we are most familiar. Wilber spoke of “shades” or “bands” or “levels of consciousness.”⁹ He cited a Tibetan Buddhistic view about these “levels”: they

are not separate layers...but rather in the nature of mutually penetrating forms of energy, from the finest ‘all-radiating,’ all pervading, luminous consciousness down to the densest form of ‘materialized consciousness,’ which appears before us as our visible, physical body.¹⁰

In his discussion of harmonizing objects in time and space, de Chardin referred to a “chain of succession in nature” and in a footnote within his discussion of “the threshold of reflection,” he spoke of “successive planes of knowledge,” which is to say “successive planes of consciousness.”¹¹ Saint Bonaventure, Teresa of Avila, Richard of St. Victor and other mystical writers speak of “rooms of a castle,” “sets of eyes,” and “three sets of alphabets,” indicating that they understand an interior sensorium as if on a path or continuum or spiral with the exterior sensorium. The “space” or “place” of the interior senses of the soul relative to the sensorium that concerned Marshall McLuhan, Ong and others warrants further study.

Another facet of the interior sensorium that should concern media ecologists is its correlation with evolutionary change. De Chardin submitted that biological changes run parallel to changes in the soul in close collaboration. An “intercentric process,” the “movement of our souls,” he wrote, expresses and measures the very stages of progress of evolution itself.¹² One sees in his explanation of how interior dimensions of consciousness animate and reflect outer developments possible roots of the analyses advanced by McLuhan, Ong, and others:

...the universe, regarded sidereally, is in process of spatial expansion (from the infinitesimal to the immense), in the same way and still more clearly it presents itself to us, physico-chemically, as in process of organic involution upon itself (from the extremely simple to the extremely complex)—and moreover, this particular involution ‘of complexity’ is experimentally bound up with a correlative increase in interiorisation [sic], that is to say in the psyche or consciousness.¹³

Secondly, diving more deeply into the interior sensorium can also yield antidotes to deterministic influences of media and other external stimuli. Relying primarily on the (exterior) sensorium of the five senses participates in an empirical approach to study even though its methodology is speculative and philosophical, not mathematical. “The eye of the flesh,” wrote Wilber, “is empirical.”¹⁴ Thus, if a major concern of media ecology, if not its principal *raison d’être*, is that the introduction of some new medium into a culture shapes how that culture processes information, investigating a sensorium resistant to such influences ought likewise to interest the media ecologist. Indeed, an inward turn to consciousness, soul, spirit, mind, and virtues can unveil insights into human nature impervious to the most pressing effects of media. In other words, it could provide a check to the most pressing forms of hard determinism.

To speak of a sensorium invulnerable to external stimuli is to address the human ability to be guided by pre-Word or percept; it is to acknowledge an aspect of the human experience that is unmediated. It is also supersensory or supernatural. Lonergan expounded:

Before it enters the world mediated by meaning, religion is the prior Word of God [that] speaks to us by flooding our hearts with his love. The prior word pertains, not to the world mediated by meaning, but to the world of immediacy, to the unmediated experience of the mystery of love and awe. The outwardly spoken word is historically conditioned: its meaning depends upon the human context in which it is uttered, and such contexts vary from place to place and from one generation to another. But the prior word in its immediacy, though it differs in intensity, though it resonates differently in different temperaments and in different stages of religious development, withdraws man from the diversity of history by moving out of the world mediated by meaning and toward a world of immediacy in which image and symbol, thought and word, lose their relevance and even disappear.¹⁵

Bonaventure also spoke of “a light that shines upon our mind” and speaks of consciousness in stating that “our mind itself is created by Truth in person without intermediary.”¹⁶ Perhaps that interior dimension—the mind or the soul—is most directly reached by those whose external senses don’t block access. Referring to the members of the L’Arche Daybreak community of people with mental disabilities, Henri Nouwen stated that “The spirit of God seemed to speak directly to them and through them, unmediated by books or intellectual discussion.”¹⁷

At the very least, studying the interior sensorium can help to enlighten our understanding on innate qualities whose capacities are otherwise not fully exercised. It can result in a “showing,” as Richard of St. Victor, in the 12th Century, put it: “it can manifest, unveil things otherwise hidden and of vision, each an important aspect of *divina revelatio*.”¹⁸ De Chardin says of the

inner vision wrought through the interior sensorium that “to see is really to become more.”¹⁹ Incomprehension of the interior sensorium deprives persons of knowledge acquired through extra-sensory or supersensory modes. Gregory the Great described such lack of awareness as a “blindness” and an “ignorance of the light of supernal contemplation.”²⁰ Writing on Augustine’s comprehension of the interior senses, Lootens notes that absence of such awareness and reliance only on the five senses leaves humanity “in a state of sensory exile.”²¹

Analysis of the interior senses exceeds the scholarship of psychology, as valuable as it is. It touches on aspects of being that innately transcend comprehension of material and even mental phenomena. Nouwen explains:

We are bearers of God’s image and spirit. That is the revelation of God within our innermost self. Psychology can give us helpful language for our varied parts of who we are, but we need theology to remind us that we can never be defined by personality or any disorder. We are defined by something deeper and wider than those aspects. That is what is meant when we speak about the soul—that identity where we are most personal and most Godlike.²²

Even in psychological investigations, Western psychotherapies seek to “*patch up*” the individual self, whereas Eastern approaches seek to help a person to *transcend* the individual self.²³ Lonergan suggests that true intersubjectivity and meaningful communication turn on the mutual ability to transcend self.²⁴ Stated differently, better understanding of the senses of the soul could result in better understanding of meaningful communication.

Although media ecology already points to the interior dimension, investigating more intentionally what I have called “the interior sensorium” can also enrich the contribution of media ecology as a response to dualistic philosophy evident in rationalism and other frameworks of disembodiment. *A third warrant for exploring the interior sensorium is thus the philosophical value of doing so.* In its exploration of the human sensorium, media ecologists most typically concern themselves with exterior senses, through which the reach of our faculties or senses themselves are extended by media. They have done so perhaps due to their observation that contemporary people are becoming “discarnate beings.” Said Eric McLuhan “Twentieth-century man—electronic man—has now lived minus a physical body for an entire century.”²⁵ Thus, perhaps in an impulse to “re-carnate” persons, Marshall McLuhan and others showed us, for example, that glasses extend our sight; the wheel extends our feet; clothing extends our skin. The field especially espies the properties, affordances, and linguistic implications of technology.

In taking stock of the *inner* direction—the interiorization of media via the surface sensorium—a number of media ecologists typically adumbrate the nature, function and scope of the interior sensorium: its composition; its role in human consciousness; its collaboration with the “external” sensorium; its

reaction to media. They tend to speak obtusely about a shadowy process of interiorization but tend not to delve into the inner properties that exist when interiorization has occurred. In other words, the sensorium that has primarily interested media ecologists is that of the five senses, presumably because it rests at the nexus of the self and the physical world and thus functions as the medium through which selves are communicated. And yet the very incorporeal nature of the interior sensorium should goad media ecologists to search out alternative means that have been deployed to capture the nature, function, and scope of the spiritual senses. What metaphors and analogies have philosophers, theologians, and others used to characterize it? To what extent have they relied on poetic and other artistic means to depict it? Such questions ought to be the concern of media ecologists.

Nevertheless, in identifying the phenomenon of interiorization, media ecology has disrupted the prevailing inner-outer binary construction. In focusing on the mediation of the external sensorium, the field recognizes that the sensorium not only *communicates* selves, it also *works to shape* selves, and it is the internal shaping of selves that media ecology can help us to understand better and, in doing so, to respond more completely to prevailing dualistic thought. As we learn more about the nature and substance of the interior sensorium vis-à-vis what we have already understood about the “exterior” sensorium, we stand to grow in awareness that the spiritual and the bodily are not separate spheres of existence but collaborate in facilitating the fullness of human experience.

Thus, a major justification of exploring the “interior sensorium” is to advance the field’s concern with the full human experience, which includes not only the natural, corporeal world, the human (exterior) sensorium, which can be altered by media, but also the interior world—the senses of the soul—which, insulated from the media, can restore the natural senses. As a Carmelite hermit and personal friend said, “we need to close the shutters of our natural senses in order to activate the supernatural senses of the soul.”²⁶ Applied to media ecology, the field would, without discounting the operations of the external sensorium but to enlarge our understanding of them, dive interiorly to recover the spiritual senses. Doing so can extend the field’s contribution in overcoming the deleterious effects of Cartesianism, of rationalism, and the lingering effects of other dualisms²⁷ and enlarge our understanding of the joint sensoria and our integrated human experience.

Study of the “senses of the soul” can show us, in fact, how the interior dimensions relate to the exterior. De Chardin was an early proponent of recognizing the concomitant function of internal and external modes of being: “The time has come to realize that an interpretation of the universe—even a positive one—remains unless it covers the interior as well as the exterior of things; mind as well a matter.”²⁸

The interior and exterior sensoria collaborate. Ong has helped us to see that “all exteriority, though utterly real in itself, ultimately faces inward through the human psyche (Hopkins, 144).” De Chardin saw the natural, external world as an outward expression of the interior world:

The number of bones, shape of teeth, ornamentation of the integument—all these ‘visible characters’ form merely the outward garment round something deeper which supports it... To write the natural history of the world, we should need to be able to follow it from within... Right at its base, the living world is constituted by consciousness clothed in flesh and bone.²⁹

Further investigation into the “senses of the soul” promises to shed light on the interior life in such a way that overcomes the bifurcation of mind and body. With Gregory of Nyssa, such study will help us to correct the “discontinuité between corporeal and interior senses and those who urge the possibility of a ‘transfiguration’ of the ‘sens corporels.’”³⁰ *The third justification for dedicating more focused attention on the interior sensorium, therefore, is to aid in overcoming the disjunction between spiritual and carnal senses that persists in intellectual thought.*

A fourth justification, parallel to its contribution to overcoming philosophical dualism, the exploration of the interior sensorium also contributes to overcoming epistemological dualism. In other words, examining the senses of the soul is justified because of its potential epistemological value. An outcome of dualistic philosophy is that in studying the natural, material world, science bifurcated reality. A dualistic epistemology has persisted particularly in Western society for millennia. From the Ancient World’s binaries of appearance vs. reality, truth vs. falsity, and good vs. evil to the vestiges of Gnosticism that regards matter as evil³¹ and to Iranian and later Western Manichaeism that held a spiritual world of light in opposition to a material world of darkness, epistemological dualism has enjoyed virtual hegemony in our intellectual tradition. This mode of knowing separated subject and object; observer and event; knower and the known; thinker and thought.³² As de Chardin stated, scientific inquiry tended to look at matter as a separate sphere from human experience “as though it were permissible for us to break off a fragment and study this sample apart from the rest.”³³ But Ong helped us to see that an epistemology in which a fragment of reality is broken off to study does not accurately reflect the essential ecology of human experience, in which “interior” and “exterior” are understood as existential categories.³⁴ Werner Heisenberg, one of the pioneers of quantum mechanics, sounds the alarm over epistemological dualism: “From the very start we were involved in the argument between nature and man in which science plays only a part, so that the common division of the world into subject and object, inner world and outer world, body and soul, is no longer adequate and leads us into difficulties.”³⁵

Likewise, Albert Einstein helped us to overcome the time-space binary in demonstrating the relativity of one to the other. Wilber has characterized such epistemological binary as “symbolic knowledge.” It is a knowledge that Korzybski indicted in his famous dictum: “the map is not the territory.” In contrast to symbolic knowledge, Wilber borrowed the term “intimate

knowledge” to describe direct or non-dual knowledge.³⁶ Applying the intimate, non-dual epistemology to spiritual pursuits, which relates to a media ecological investigation of the “senses of the soul,” Franciscan Richard Rohr typifies the “intimate knowledge” of the sort that would drive a study of the interior sensorium: “To have a spiritual life is to recognize early on that there is always a similarity and coherence between the seer and the seen, the seekers and what they are capable of finding. You will seek only what you have partially already discovered and seen within yourself as desirable. Spiritual cognition is invariably re-cognition.”³⁷

Eric McLuhan pointed us to a hermeneutic form in which meaning is obtained directly. Of the “anagogical” interpretative lens, he writes:

Unlike the historical, allegorical, and tropological senses of Scripture, the anagogical sense does not consist of ideas: it is constituted as direct experience, one generally regarded as ineffable and beyond words or explanation. The reader puts on, or enters into, the passage of Scripture so completely as to become it. He transcends mere intellectual understanding and attains, through contemplation, a state of knowing through is whole being.³⁸

In short, investigating the senses of the soul can help to repair the excesses of Cartesian, empiricism, rationalism, and other forms of dualism both philosophically and epistemologically. It can also continue media ecology’s long history of exploring the human conscience and in understanding the interplay of media and human sensoria, including those of the senses of the soul.

Notes

1. Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 6.

2. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (New York: Methuen, 1982).

3. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 74-75.

4. Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, (New York: Delacorte, 1979), 39.

5. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 261.

6. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 153.

7. Eric McLuhan, *The Sensus Communis, Synesthesia, and the Soul: An Odyssey*, (New York: BPS Books, 2015).

8. Personal correspondence, May 9, 2018.

9. Ken Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, (Wheaton: The Theological Publishing House, 1985).

10. Lama A. Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), 148.
11. de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 169.
12. de Chardin, 220.
13. de Chardin, 25.
14. Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, 59.
15. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 112.
16. Bonaventure, *The Works of Bonaventure*, (Mansfield Centre : Martino Publishing, 2016), 43.
17. Henri Nouwen, *Discernment*, (New York: Harper One, 2013), 66.
18. Richard of St. Victor. *The Twelve Patriarchs. The Mystical Ark. Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. G. A. Zinn, (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).
19. de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 33.
20. George E. Demacopoulos, "Gregory the Great," in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, eds. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 84.
21. Matthew R. Lootens, "Augustine," in *The Spiritual Senses*, 66.
22. Nouwen, *Discernment*, 118-19.
23. Wilber, *Spectrum of Consciousness*, 20.
24. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 357.
25. Eric McLuhan, *Sensus Communis*, 55.
26. Personal conversation, May 20, 2018.
27. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. M. Waldstein, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 96.
28. de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 35-36.
29. de Chardin, 150.
30. Sarah Coakley, "Gregory of Nyssa," in *The Spiritual Senses*, 43.
31. John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 96.
32. Wilber, *Spectrum of Consciousness*, 29, 37.
33. de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 43.
34. Ong, *Presence of the Word*, 118.
35. Werner Heisenberg, *The Physicist's Conception of Nature*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 24.
36. Wilber, *Spectrum of Consciousness*, 42.
37. Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016), 159.
38. Eric McLuhan, *Sensus Communis*, x.

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