

THE MCLUHANS AND THE INNER SENSES

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PSYCHOLOGY: CATHOLIC OR “MODERN”?

Let the universities already founded or to be founded by you illustrate and defend this doctrine and use it for the refutation of prevailing errors.

- Pope Leo XIII, Aeterni patris.

The late 1800's saw the industrial revolution and the invention of the telegraph, but there was no scientific development more pervasive and fundamental than experimental psychology. In 1879 Dr. Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) – the first man to ever call himself a psychologist – opened the first Lab of Experimental Psychology in Leipzig. That same year, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Aeterni patris*, calling for Catholic teachers to “restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas [. . .] for the advantage of all the sciences,” to contend with Wundt's developing technological field of “psychophysics”, facilitated by equipment and measurements.

Over the following decades, Pope Leo XIII's attempt to restore St. Thomas to his seat in science was met with overwhelming resistance, and ultimately failure. All across Europe, in England, France, and Germany, the response to Pope Leo's initiative was led by the Jesuit order, and when it came to the crucial psychological topic of the inner senses, where what is “sensed” becomes what is “understood”, the Jesuits turned to their own interpreter of St. Thomas, Fr. Francisco Suarez (1548-1617). Where St. Thomas outlines four distinct inner sensory powers, Suarez and the Jesuits denied any “real” nor “formal” distinction among these faculties, reducing the four powers to just one power. Leo, aware of this general institutional inflexibility, set out to make an institution of his own at great cost and effort: the Higher Institute of Philosophy founded at the University of Leuven. There he hoped would be the “shining beacon of Thomist philosophy”:

“Let the universities already founded or to be founded by you illustrate and defend this doctrine and use it for the refutation of prevailing errors. But, lest the false for the true or the corrupt for the pure be drunk in, be ye watchful that the doctrine of Thomas be drawn from his own fountains, or at least from those rivulets which, derived from the very fount, have thus far flowed, according to the established agreement of learned men, pure

and clear; be careful to guard the minds of youth from those which are said to flow thence, but in reality are gathered from strange and unwholesome streams.”

But even this effort failed. In the school’s psychological manuals, if the inner senses are even mentioned, they are glanced over. Instead, much more attention and money went to the development of the Institute’s own version of Wundt’s psychophysics lab.

This is the ground on which we have chosen to situate Marshall McLuhan. The Priest who facilitated McLuhan’s reception to the Catholic Church, Rev. Gerald B. Phelan (1892-1965), earned his experimental psychology doctorate on “Feeling, Experience, and Its Modalities” at the lab in Leuven just before heading to teach psychology at St. Michael’s at the University of Toronto. Phelan was a Thomist and close friend of both Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. He helped Marshall publish his first essay on G. K. Chesterton in the *Dalhousie Review*, and helped secure teaching jobs at Catholic institutions like St. Louis University and St. Michael’s at Toronto.

Marshall’s debt to Phelan was not just institutional, but intellectual: the “analogy of proper proportionality” as treated by Phelan was Marshall’s first inroad for engaging with St. Thomas. Marshall read Phelan through another ‘unorthodox’ but ardent Thomist, James Joyce (1882-1941) - at the heart of his interest laid a process of “arrest” and “retracing the stages of apprehension” of any form of beauty, as a formal cause.

As part of Joyce’s training in Dublin he read England’s contribution to Pope Leo XIII’s larger Thomist effort: *Psychology*, written by Stonyhurst Jesuit Fr. Michael Maher. Joyce’s copy is annotated in-line throughout, complete with a custom index on the back page. On the chapter where the inner senses are dealt with, next to the paragraph on Suarez’s doctrine “on there being no real nor formal distinction among the internal senses” the young Joyce has written in pencil: “?”.

THOMIST MENTORS

"Now, the public for whom one acts or writes, is necessarily the formal cause, whether in philosophy or theology or in the arts. Does this fact not explain why there is no theory of communication in philosophy since Plato? The study of 'content', is it not the efficient cause?"

- Marshall McLuhan to Fritz Wilhelmsen

With the world of “Thomism” in disarray, McLuhan relied on the help of two friends. In the 1930s, he worked closely with Etienne Gilson’s star-pupil Bernard J. Muller-Thym (1910-1974). Muller-Thym was Marshall’s best man at his wedding, and godfather to Thomas Eric, his first-born. Marshall’s second Thomist collaborator came after his rise and fall from world fame in the 1970’s,

the “last Thomist standing” at the University of Dallas, Fritz Wilhelmsen (1923-1996) - who would help Thomas Eric earn his own doctorate there.

Muller-Thym helped Marshall to interpret Joyce as a faithful and even strict Thomist. Muller-Thym published an essay: *The Common Sense, Perfection of the Order of Pure Sensibility* which distinguishes this “common sense” - the internal sense responsible for the reception of all sensible forms - from the three other internal senses: the imaginative, memorative and cogitative powers, taking care to note that the work of “intelligibility” does not begin until after “sensibility” has been “perfected” (i.e. completed). Marshall’s filed copy is notated at key sections, he was particularly dazzled by the common sense’s seeming power of “sensory translation” - that by one sense “white” can be distinguished from “sweet”. As Muller-Thym affirms: “it is necessary that there be a sense which apprehends in the manner of ‘one’ that which in the external senses is many’.”

For Marshall, Muller-Thym’s description of the *sensus communis*’ “synesthetic” quality was completely bound up with different modes of poetry and had seemingly never explored by anybody, let alone any critic of poetry. The historical neglect of St. Thomas’s common sense would later serve as the basis for his 1960 Report on Project on Understanding Media, and later the books which launched his public career: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: Making of Typographic Man* (1962), and *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* . (1964). The entire field of Media Ecology owes its origin to McLuhan’s application of Muller-Thym’s basic text. So rich was this account that even 70 years later Muller-Thym’s Godson, Eric McLuhan would write:

“For half a century now, it has been a commonplace of media studies that each technology extends one or another sense or faculty, according it a sort of hyperesthesia, which has then the effect of numbing the bodily sense extended and rearranging the interplay between the other senses - what we have been calling the *sensus communis*.”

Marshall once wrote that his life in sharing rich metaphysical conversation with Muller-Thym “was like knowing James Joyce himself.” For Marshall, it was Joyce’s Catholic awareness of these Thomist doctrines which set his sensibility, and prowess for training the sensibility of his audience far above his modernist peers.

“[Joyce] seems to have been the first to notice that the dance of being, the nature imitated by the arts, has its primary analogue in the activity of the exterior and interior senses. Joyce was aware that this doctrine (that sensation is imitation because the exterior forms are already in a new matter) is implicit in Aquinas. He made it explicit in *Stephen Hero* and the *Portrait* , and founded his entire poetic activity on these analogical proportions of the senses” (James Joyce: Trivial and Quadrivial).

Unfortunately, this breakthrough for Marshall coincided with Muller-Thym, the brightest medieval scholar in North America having his academic career cut short. A dispute with Mortimer Adler caused Bernard J. Muller-Thym's abrupt and permanent exile from academia, vowing "never to return to that cyclotron again". Maritain asked Muller-Thym to apologize in public according to Ignatian morals, and Gilson, his teacher, carried regret and sadness over it for the rest of his life. Marshall, however, continued reading Joyce in light of the *sensus communis*. His 1951 "Joyce, Aquinas, and the Poetic Process" cites a key passage in Joyce which inextricably links the sensible world to the world of beauty, through the cognitive faculties of the soul:

"It is almost impossible to reconcile all tradition whereas it is by no means impossible to find the justification of every form of beauty that has ever been adored on earth by an examination of the mechanism of esthetic apprehension whether it be dressed in red, white, yellow, or black. [. . .] The apprehensive faculty must be scrutinized in action."

Marshall did not fail to note that "it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this last phase for an understanding of Joyce's art", but with no one around to fill in the gaps, he was left to rely on Muller-Thym's understanding of the *sensus communis* and Phelan's account of the *analogy of proper proportionality* of the senses.

Over thirty years later, Marshall would revisit these topics explicitly in terms of "formal causality". After Vatican II saw his rise and fall from world fame, Marshall struck up correspondence with St. Thomas scholar Fritz Wilhelmsen at the University of Dallas. They mentioned the topic of internal senses, but never broached it any further.

LAWS OF MEDIA

"Since our reason has been given us to understand natural processes, why have men never considered the consequences of their own artefacts upon their own modes of self-awareness?"

- Marshall McLuhan to Jacques Maritain

Throughout his career, Marshall insisted that all media – speech, writing, telegraph, radio, television etc. – are embedded with certain "sensory biases" which were to be treated as what Aristotle had called "*formal causes*", patterns of action which "shape and re-shape human perceptions." Marshall wrote to Wilhelmsen: "you may recall, Fritz, that it was the phonetic alphabet that first isolated the visual faculty from the other senses," and elsewhere: "classical rhetoric [i. e. the spoken word] includes the whole range of human faculties, especially as embodied in the Verbum and Logos." He refused to reduce the

scope of causality to value judgments about the media being a “good thing” or “bad thing”, and instead asked what do they actually do to the structures of our souls, the shape of our sensory lives? An analogy for formal causality given by Aristotle is the shape of a seal and the shape impressed in wax. We participate in these forms at our own peril, and we become what we behold through our use. This was the persistent ground of his entire career: he wrote a book about the psychological effects of the printed word (*The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*), his dissertation was about how the western world was made and transformed by the spoken & written word (*The Classical Trivium*), and his most well-known book was a catalogue of 33 different ‘media’ from highways, to newsprint, to television (*Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*). He wrote that each of these media or “languages” are “environments which are hidden from the young learner, and to which, like fish to water, he relates synesthetically, using all his faculties at once,” and as the child completes its formative years into puberty “the senses specialize via the channels of dominant technologies and weaponries”.

His mysterious phrase “the medium is the message” is spelled out very clearly in a 1960 report commissioned at the start of the Space Race: “this is what I have meant all along by saying the ‘medium is the message,’ for the medium determines the *modes of perception* and the *matrix of assumptions* within which objectives are set.” It’s not the media alone then that deserve our attention as some have assumed, but specifically their *interplay with the human subconscious*. McLuhan often borrowed the terms “figure” and “ground” from gestalt psychology to describe this opposition, but his language in the report is precise: by “modes of perception” he is again referring to St. Thomas Aquinas’s psychological doctrine of inner sensitive powers. These percepts are the ‘ground’ that both precede and are active in drawing out the ‘figures’ of any conceptual thought.

McLuhan always sought out these “grounds”, hidden only by human ignorance of their existence. He called himself a “grammarian”, concerned with the discovery of valid premises over any logical disputation on top of them. His study of the “training of sensibility” in Modernist & Symbolist poetry is one example of this, just as his depiction of advertising as a “magical institution” whose art is to implicate deeply held and unrecognized assumptions derived from their audience. In both cases, all the real action takes place not in the poem or ad itself but rather subliminally – that is, in the audience’s subconscious – with the ‘content’ serving as whatever bait suitable to ensure that process remains hidden. McLuhan held that none of these technological “environments” are self-evident but rather concealed as givens. They require study in order to reveal their nature. In that same 1960 report, McLuhan reduced all his recommendations to just this: “study the modes of the media, in order to hoick all assumptions out of the subliminal, non-verbal realm for scrutiny and for prediction and control of human purposes” – or put more simply: to literally “understand media” by rendering it intelligible. He encouraged his students to retrace the stages of intellectual apprehension through the senses in order to

recognize the etymologies of our assumptions, instead of mistakenly ascribing the psychological boundaries determined by manmade environments to “the fates” or “the will of God”. He insisted, no, we are doing it to ourselves.

How do these technologies change our behaviors & attitudes beyond our ability to notice and anticipate them? How can a human being maintain their dignity undergoing these jarring shifts to their psyche, let alone keep any semblance of “free will”? The basis of his work was grounded in St. Thomas Aquinas’s doctrines of formal causality and the faculties of perception: through careful examination of our senses we can discover how these various man-made forms reshape our souls. With formal cause as a principle, technologies are not “neutral” but rather active forms that implicate the sensibility of their users as content. Any change in these modes is inevitably bound up with “revolutionary social and political consequences”, as new distinct forms of culture are built up suited to the structure of these new habits. Any “use” of any technology employs our bodies, organs, and senses in different configurations – each configuration producing different worlds valued by different measures.

The wealth of discovery from accounting for the common sense’s reception of sensible forms led Marshall to think in terms of a dichotomy of human sensibility. This, after all, appeared to be what Joyce had lifted from St. Thomas. When he began to pull on this thread, all of his discoveries pointed to behaviors & attitudes as being shaped by patterns concealed within the structures embedded within different forms of human communication. Speech, for instance presented an all-encompassing audile-tactile world that produced men with audile-tactile biases; while the written word contained speech but transformed it - producing a highly visual world that produced men with visual biases in the process. The sensory world of the audile-tactile or “tribal” man was said to be shaped by the properties of “acoustic space”: all-at-once, multi-sensuous, resonant, multi-locational, discontinuous, abrupt, every point becomes its own center; that is, center everywhere, margins nowhere. He lives by the interval. The world of the visual or “literate” man was said to be characterized by properties of “visual space”: sequential, univocal, lineal, planar, connected, orderly, a place for everything and everything in its place; along with it the creation of a wholly private identity. He lives by detachment and abstraction.

Analogy then is etymologically a “re-wording” or “re-verbing” that led Marshall to relate it to the world of acoustic sensation. Logic, however, was only made possible by the alphabet’s production of a highly a ‘visual bias’. In his final interview, he said to Bruce Powers:

“Have you noticed that one cannot visualize geometric figures except in a void [i.e. there are no actual circles or triangles in the world of things]? This characteristic is an essential clue to understanding Euclidean space. It is not the whole of nature, it is an abstraction, an imaginative invention.”

The magnum opus of this effort is the post-humously published book *Laws of Media*, which Marshall co-authored with his son Eric. In this, Marshall uses these “visual” and “acoustic” subconscious modes of being to counter the phenomenologists (like Heidegger) and Jungian psychologists who had been increasingly replacing any understanding of faculties. When it came to the question of how these different sensibilities play out in human neurology, Marshall pointed to the bicameral split of left-brain (which he termed ‘visual’) and right-brain (which he termed ‘acoustic’). There is no treatment of the internal senses here at all.

In 1979, before a stroke rendered Marshall speechless, he authored two “tetrads” in this book, which were heuristics to get at the total structural effect of any human artefact. “Computer”, he writes, retrieves “perfect memory, total and exact” - while Television, flips into the “inner trip”. Marshall himself adopted an “acoustic” mode, and saw it necessary to deal with all the media at once “or else pay the price of irrelevance and unreality.” Further, in terms we may recognize within the scope of his understanding of the common sense:

“He must deal with each medium as it affects all of our senses, not as it makes one impression on one sense. Because any medium which singles out one sense, writing or radio for example, by that very fact causes an exceptional disturbance among the other senses.

[...]

Nothing could be more unrealistic than to suppose that the programming for such media could affect their power to re-pattern the sense ratios of our beings. It is this ratio among our senses which is violently disturbed by media technology. And any upset in our sense-ratios alters the matrix of thought and concept and value. [...] I hope to show how this ratio is altered by various media and why, therefore, the medium is the message or sum-total of effects.

[...]

And just as our individual experiences of our individual senses get processed by some sort of inner common sense which gives unity to the diversity of our senses, so with the media as extensions of our senses. These cooperative technological extensions of ourselves undergo a social or communal processing which gives them unity, and which ensures also that they will always be changing their forms as they continue to inter-penetrate and to ‘translate’ into one another.”

In a word, we can say that Marshall wound up very accurately surveying and cataloguing a history of imagination, audile imagination, visual imagination, by

searching through the writings of poets. Through his discussion of the “interior landscape” and “the training of sensibility” he made himself out to be a fierce advocate for the sensitive faculties of the soul (percepts) as being a necessary condition for the work intellectual faculties (concepts).

The basis of McLuhan’s emphasis on the senses came from St. Thomas Aquinas’s commentaries on Aristotle’s psychological works. But with St. Thomas, in addition to the five exterior senses the “sensible” is drawn to the “intelligible” with the aid of four *inner* senses — with its organ proposed to be three different “ventricles” or “cells” in the front, middle, and back. Marshall’s studies, proposals, and experiments ended at the “common sense” — the first inner sense, and the “term” of the “exterior sensorium”. We hope with a fuller account of the imaginative, cogitative, and memorative powers, more can be done to hoick the effects of media on our subconscious into the verbal realm for study and open discussion.

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