McLuhan's Unconscious

Alice Rae

Doctoral Dissertation

School of History and Politics, University of Adelaide

May 2008

I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents
– Alma, Dick (in memoriam); Jim (in memoriam), Doris (in memoriam) –
and to Paul Nursey-Bray.

Table of Contents

Abstract

The proof set forward in this thesis is that the method of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), which he came in the 1970's to describe as 'structuralist', 'phenomenological' and even 'metaphysical', owes a heretofore unacknowledged debt to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Critics have thus far neglected the influence of nineteenth and twentieth century psychology in McLuhan's work, although a wealth of biographical material supports the argument that McLuhan's 'metaphysical' method is derived as much from psychoanalysis and analytical psychology (C.G. Jung) as from any of McLuhan's acknowledged predecessors. Returning to the texts from which McLuhan gained his knowledge of psychology, I trace the influence of Freud, Jung and their disciples upon McLuhan, establishing McLuhan's use of Freudian concepts and terminology in his first book *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), and his use of the psychoanalytic concepts of the 'unconscious', 'trauma' and 'repression' in the books that came after it. What McLuhan calls the 'unconscious' is more often named by him as *Logos*, 'acoustic space' or the 'media environment', and I trace the debts that these concepts owe not only to Freud and Jung but to Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, gestalt theory, art theory, Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Wyndham Lewis, Siegfried Giedion, Harold Innis, the French symbolist poets of the late nineteenth century and the British modernists of the early twentieth. Despite his rejection of the Freudian argument, McLuhan, like Freud, conceptualizes pain or trauma as the 'cause' of transformations (i.e. processes) in the unconscious; but while for McLuhan, invoking St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, technologies are 'formal causes' simultaneous with (or 'preceded' by) their effects, for Freud and his modern interpreter Jacques Lacan, trauma is 'paradoxical' in structure, presenting as both its own 'cause' and 'effect'. Situating McLuhan in relation to French structuralism, I contrast McLuhan's concepts of 'figure' (as cause) and 'ground' (as effects), elaborated in his last book *Laws of Media* (1988), to the concepts of the 'signifier' and the 'signified' in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), and critique McLuhan's 'tetrad', the ideograph with which he illustrates media 'effects', in relation to the psychoanalytic concept of the signifier elaborated by Lacan. In reply to McLuhan's maxim that 'the medium is the message', I conclude that technologies, insofar as they function as 'formal causes', are doubly 'hidden': firstly, because, as McLuhan says, they can only be grasped through their effects; and secondly because, as Lacan says, their effects can only be articulated when they manifest as 'disturbances' in the *symbolic* order, i.e., as fantasies of the Other's *jouissance* (enjoyment). There are numerous stories about how McLuhan would frustrate his critics by refusing to take a 'point-of-view', and in fact his (psychoanalytic) technique of 'putting on' the audience as a mask, and his (deconstructivist) manner of changing perspectives as often as necessary, sit oddly with his championing of *Logos*. A comparison with Freud and Lacan finds McLuhan at a 'paradoxical' moment in the history of Western thought, poised between modernism and postmodernism, between structuralism and deconstructivism, and between metaphysics and psychoanalysis.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

ALICE RAE

19 November 2008

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been written if it were not for the encouragement of Professor Paul Nursey-Bray. It was Paul who introduced me to McLuhan, and who supervised my Honours thesis on McLuhan in 1999 and my doctoral research until 2005. I thank him in memoriam.

I thank the staff of the University of Adelaide School of History and Politics for many years of encouragement and support, in particular Dr Greg McCarthy, who saw this work to completion, and those who I have been lucky to learn from over the past decade and more. I thank the University of Adelaide for the provision of a University of Adelaide Scholarship from 2000-2003, acknowledging the many opportunities that this has allowed me.

I thank the University of Melbourne Philosophy Department for permission to take part in the summer school seminar 'Psychoanalysis and German Idealism' in 2002, with Dr Matthew Sharpe.

Thank you to Paula Ritchie at the University of Adelaide Study Abroad Office, for helping to arrange my student exchange program at Ruprecht-Karls Universität, Heidelberg, in 2002. Thank you to Frau Nicole Dorn and the Akademisches Auslandsamt at the University for assistance in the Wintersemester of 2002-2003, and to the Philosophisches Seminar for the hospitality.

I am proud to have been the recipient of the Barbara Crase Bursary, 2002, provided by the Australian Federation of University Women. The bursary paid for my airfare to Germany. I thank all volunteers of the Federation.

I thank the Board of Graduate Studies for the provision of a Research Abroad Scholarship in 2002, for financial assistance to study in Germany.

Thank you to Alexander Dehmel and the Dehmel family, Freiburg, for friendship and kind hospitality at Christmastime in 2002. Thank you to Riikka, Ry, Carolyn, and Udi, for all the adventures in Heidelberg.

Thank you to my colleagues at the ATSIC South Hedland Regional Office in 2003-2004, at Hedland CDEP Aboriginal Corporation and Roebourne Community Justice Services in 2004-2005, and at Darwin City Council from 2006-2008. I learned so much during this time. Thank you to friends and colleagues at the University of Adelaide, especially to David J. Olney, for always welcoming me back.

Thank you to Dr Simone Bignall and Dr Greg McCarthy for reading and commenting on the final drafts, and to David Olney for sharing with me innumerable discussions on McLuhan, Baudrillard, and related subjects. The advice and the comradeship has been invaluable. Thank you to Dr Mary Griffiths for advice on an early draft.

Thank you most of all to my family, to Julia Bignall, Clare Butler, and Alex Carpenter, for being there for me; to my parents Keith and Fiona Bignall for encouraging me throughout as well as providing financial support and assisting with regular trips to the library; and to my grandmother Alma Eagles, who has housed me countless times since 2003, and who has shared with me the highs and lows of this research. Thank you for your love and belief in me. I could not have completed this without it.

Key to References

Works by McLuhan

BP   *The Book of Probes*

CA   *From Cliché to Archetype* (with Wilfred Watson)

CB   *Counterblast* (with Harley Parker)

CT   *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*

EM   *Essential McLuhan* (ed. Frank Zingrone)

GG   *The Gutenberg Galaxy*

GV   *The Global Village* (with Bruce Powers)

HC   *McLuhan Hot and Cool*, ed. Gerard Emanuel Stearn

IL   *The Interior Landscape*

L   *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*

LM   *Laws of Media* (with Eric McLuhan)

MB   *The Mechanical Bride*

ML   *The Medium and the Light*, ed. Eric McLuhan

MM   *The Medium is the Massage*

PC   *McLuhan Pro and Con*, ed. Raymond Rosenthal

TT   *Take Today* (with Barrington Nevitt)

UB   *McLuhan Unbound*, volumes 1-20, ed. W. Terrence Gordon

UM   *Understanding Media* (first edition)

VP   *Through the Vanishing Point* (with Harley Parker)

VVV   *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations*

WP   *War and Peace in the Global Village*

Works by Freud

GPT   *General Psychological Theory* (1963), ed. Philip Rieff

Moses   *Moses and Monotheism*, tr. Katherine Jones

SE   *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey

Note that Katherine Jones' translation of *Moses and Monotheism*, and a number of articles from the collection of Freud's papers published in 1963 as *General Psychological Theory*, edited by Philip Rieff, are used throughout in preference to the Standard Edition, however Standard Edition references are also given.