

MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND THE AESTHETICS OF MEDIA

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Marshall McLuhan was an encyclopedic thinker, and as such difficult to categorize. His intellectual roots penetrate transversely the entire Western tradition of the humanities, his insights mock rigid disciplinary specializations. Being indeed intuitive, experiential, explorative, McLuhan's approach to knowledge can embrace different pursuits and combine disciplines that are apparently diverging. In other words, McLuhan's method is essentially holistic, and can only be approached having accepted such peculiarities that made him one of the most brilliant minds of the entire 20th century.

For these reasons, in order to capture the essence of McLuhan's encyclopedism, it is first of all necessary to consider the function the different disciplinary fields perform within his thought system, just like it is necessary to look for the relations or reactions the different disciplines express when they connect with McLuhan. Only in this way could a serious survey be similarly developed about McLuhan's peculiar contribution to enlarge the borders of a specific discipline, or about what might be the effects of *applying* McLuhan.

The case this essay intends to consider is that of aesthetics, and its reinstatement, according to McLuhan's sophisticated interpretation, into the media realm. First of all, it should be recognized that combining aesthetics and media means defining a disciplinary field that in many ways is still untapped. Therefore, new functions emerge when aesthetics is read through McLuhan, just like untapped reactions and relations emerge when aesthetics, and in this a certain primacy should be recognized with regard to McLuhan, is applied in the media field. If one reads his works in the light of this preventive consideration, or of the attempt to survey the relations between media and senses – aesthetics' specific domain – McLuhan clearly appears as the one thinker who first recognized such connection. For this reason, I provocatively propose that this great *belletrist* is awarded yet another label, that of "aesthetician."

To avoid any misunderstanding, an explanation is immediately in order about aesthetics – the key word around which this essay revolves – as, for its very nature, it is not easily defined or categorized. First of all, aesthetics should be recognized as an anomalous discipline due to its constant flexibility and changeability reflecting the incessant transformation typical of all evolutionary processes in culture. Furthermore, it has an inherently liquid nature – as such it flows, sometimes stays still and propagates, thus taking the shape of the cultural vessel it chooses to display its action, seeping through it as an always new construct, almost disavowing itself. McLuhan seems to be aware of this when he writes: "Obsolescence is not the end of anything;

it's the beginning of aesthetics, the cradle of taste, of art, of eloquence and of slang" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 100).

In addition, aesthetics follows like a shadow any society's historical and cultural transformations, which means it is unconnected from any coherent and predetermined design. In other words, whenever its characters are rigidly defined as independent from a specific critical-theoretical context, they only stay true for a limited time, just like any culture and society keeps certain features only for a well-defined time span. For these reasons aesthetics should always be considered in terms of its actuality; in the literal meaning of the term, a practical act, clearly inscribed in a precise horizon.

There is, however, an element of aesthetics that may be defined as hereditary – it can be found in its very etymon and Greek root, *aisth*, that defines it as closely connected to the sphere of feeling and psycho-physical perception controlled by the sensory network. On the other hand, such etymological test reveals a historical adherence to the intuitive label proposed by Baumgarten – who defined aesthetics as a discipline in its own right – in 1750, as well as the relations between the senses and the sensorial network as its hereditary characters. Actually, *scientia cognitionis sensitivae* (science of sensitive knowing, or sensory cognition) remains a fitting definition to describe the full involvement of perceptive faculties that, while primarily connected to the sensorial sphere, also relate to a faculty of the mind – what Baumgarten defined as *ars pulchrae cogitandi*, the art of thinking beautifully, as a kind of sensory knowledge. All in all, such meaning is not so different from its original etymon which places aesthetics in the psycho-physiological realm of perception and learning through the senses, or, precisely, through sensibility.

But there is clearly a missing link between the lower layer of sensory acts, confined by Baumgarten in the *gnoseologia inferior* (inferior cognition), and the higher methodological faculties of the mind and rational knowledge typical of the philosophical context that promoted the discipline's official birth. In the view offered by various historiographic commonplaces that see the 18th century as the age celebrating the mind's liberating power, the apparent absence is such that there would seem to be a real diachronic gap in the interweaving of sensory and intellectual faculties. And yet, one should recognize that in Baumgarten'sgnoseological structure and in the philosophical context of that age, such gap was not exasperated but rather made to disappear in the gradual passage from one phase to the other with neither prevailing in hierarchy. In other words, that gap was treated as a possibility of dialogical, never dialectical, mediation which neutralized the apparent conflict between senses and intellect, intuition and reason, subject and object, within a single critical horizon – a far cry from the misrepresentations or the alleged "cult of reason" that would have dominated philosophy in the 18th century. McLuhan plays with words in describing this interplay: "In fact, this image of a unified ratio among the senses was long held to be the mark of our *rationality*" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 60). *Think with the Senses/Feel with the Mind*, the insightful title chosen by curator Robert Storr for the 52nd Biennial of Visual Arts of Venice, tells us such dialogical approach is still very much actual.

To identify the missing link a sufficiently powerful term is required – a practical principle capable of unifying the field, thus combining the cognitive sphere's "higher" layers with the more direct sensory windows in the name of flexibility. In other words, a fundamentally bipolar approach which would successfully embrace the wide-ranging relation man has with the world – a smooth connection between subjective and objective realms without any breach and, rather, mutual correspondences in an ever changing interplay of layers or stratifications. In man's factual

and pragmatic relation with the world it is the notion of experience, a mainstay of McLuhan's thought, that harmonizes the layers of sensorial perception and those of a properly cognitive nature. More precisely, the particular perceptive condition defined by the aesthetic experience, or the intensification and full display of the entire sensory apparatus really enabling a full and integral relation with the world's physical reality: "Rationality or consciousness is itself a ratio or proportion among the sensuous components of experience, and is not something *added* to such sense experience" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 112). Therefore, far from being detached from sense or common experience, the aesthetic experience formally operates in the awareness of participation, and of man/world interaction. Furthermore, aesthetic experience specifically operates by selecting and abstracting from or symbolizing the world, with the constant goal of producing ever new, unique and intuitively varied assumptions; thus it acquires the traits of a creative experience where creativity is conceived as the ability to recognize in things new connections that create innovations and changes – in other words, new relations between things: "Objects are unobservable, only relationships among objects are observable" (McLuhan, 1967, p. 266).

Having found in the multifaceted notion of experience the missing link that could unify the layers of "low" sensory perception and those of a properly intellectual – ideational, intuitive or even noietic – activity, it is now time to define the aesthetic experience's implemental modes and field of action. Well, the specific goal of aesthetic experience is man's behavior and interaction with the environment – seeking to apprehend the world's material reality and changing it by acting and relying on practical (*prassein* means acting) or ethical (*ethos*: habit, behavior, etc.) nature; it is a condition of complete involvement with the world, and its material, implemental and symbolic dimension. As such it defines a pragmatic horizon made of choices, and reliance on instruments having a precise degree of validity and functionality. Therefore, the ethical (behavioral) dimension also appears to be connected to the forms of aesthetic experience more than it is perhaps to the cognitive sphere. As McLuhan argues: "Everybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behaviour, especially in collective matters of media and technology, where the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effect upon him" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 318). Ultimately, McLuhan's aesthetological approach highlights the media's peculiar function in shaping experience.

The interpretation proposed by McLuhan effortlessly frees the aesthetic discourse from the well-established axiom that considers aesthetic experience as most typically performed in the art world. That is certainly true considering that art – and even more its ancient etymon, *techne* – is the practice that, more than any other, transforms matter through exemplary aesthetic acts provided with a particular sensibility. Yet, according to McLuhan, aesthetics commands a scope that is well beyond the art world (or domain) where it is more and more frequently confined. This view neutralizes the paradox that sees aesthetics emerge first as a science of sensibility *tout court* mainly focused on art's theoretical activity. Pursuing McLuhan's aesthetological approach means surveying the aesthetic experience's wider scope and eventually proving that aesthetics can indeed command a larger field of action, and trying to observe whatever is "aesthetic" in human culture in general, starting from a condition that is as simple as disarming: environment is an artifact *per se*, and in particular, "What we call art would seem to be specialist artefacts for enhancing human perception. Since the Renaissance, the arts have become privileged means of perception for the few, rather than means of participation in a common life, or environment. This phase now seems to be ending, except that we are extending the privileged artefact principally to the environment itself" (McLuhan, 1969, p. 32).

This approach aims at understanding the conditions of that pleasant perception that is aesthetic experience *per se* as the origin of meanings and concepts, already identified by Kant; it is the pursuit of the aesthetic approach closely connected with action, behavior, attitude, the materiality of daily life, which can be seen to have a sort of independent power. It is what differentiates the *aesthetic* of experience, or mundane interest, from contemplation in and for itself, or pure spiritual perception. Therefore, following McLuhan as aesthetician implies a real epistemic passage that brings the aesthetic discourse back from the world of art to its own etymon, the heterogeneous complex of cultural facts that impact on the sensory domain, and touch the aesthetic roots of experience. In other words, reading McLuhan in this light means relocating aesthetics from the field of art philosophy to the field of media philosophy.

The element underlying McLuhan's aesthetic discourse, located within the media philosophy, is closely connected to the culture/technology relation. McLuhan thought that the relation between man and the world was entirely played in the functional correspondence between these two domains. Tools of a material, artifactual nature along with a whole range of intellectual and ideational tools concur to stimulate the aesthetic-perceptive sphere and shape the experiential processes. Therefore, the aesthetic experience is crucially defined by the relation of functional identity between culture and technology.

Following this discourse makes it necessary to combine the concept of medium as it was described by McLuhan with the wider definition of technology justified by the Greek root *techne*, meaning anything intervening *a priori* in any interaction between man and the world. *Techne* is any field of human culture, as man has forever mediated his relation with the world and expanded his sensory and cognitive apparatus by using tools, artifacts or insights of a technical nature, either typically material tools – from prehistoric flint shards to the silicon crystals in modern microprocessors – or purely ideational-cognitive ones – from language to numbers and ideas in the broadest sense. In McLuhan's words, "Things of a tangible 'hardware' nature ..., or things of a 'software' nature" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 3). Any and every aesthetic connection in the world is mediated by *techne*, in the broadest sense, is influenced and happens in some kind of cultural process resulting from man's technological elaboration. McLuhan defines this process as "cultural ecology." In this respect, he suggests that "cultural ecology has a reasonably stable base in the human sensorium, and that any extension of the sensorium by technological dilation has a quite appreciable effect in setting up new ratios or proportions among all the senses" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 35). In this sense culture might be said to be a part of technology; and, in this perspective, human experience can always be read as a technological fact, a cultural and hence instrumental acquisition assimilated as though it were a natural act, with no break between technology and culture.

In his interaction with the world, man is inherently involved in processes of technological nature that are deeply rooted in the sensory and cognitive domain, in corporeity and the structures of behavior, action, or in attitudes, and that redefine his very environment, to the point they create a new one, as "any new technology, any extension or amplification of human faculties, when given material embodiment, tends to create a new environment" (McLuhan & Parker, 1968, p. 243). Therefore, new assumptions of a cultural nature operate along with those acting in the natural sphere, defining a corollary that might read: *technology derives from culture but operates by nature*. In other words, it emerges as figure, but becomes ground: "The new media are not bridges between man and nature: they are nature" (McLuhan, 1969, p. 14).

Indeed, “new media” sounds just like a convenient label, if not a tautology; the concept of novelty is inherent in the media identity. During his evolution, man has always renewed the tools he uses to mediate with the world, transforming the environment and thus generating a feedback of transformation on himself, almost never eliminating the tools in use, but rather acting on them, and letting them act on himself, by crossbreeding and accumulation. Furthermore, media spontaneously aggregate around a system; that clearly shows how any change in a part suddenly engenders a modification of the system’s general evolution, that therefore can be said to experience a constant renewal.

Considering the new media as the result of an integration or crossbreeding of previous media shows them for what they are: *processes* rather than mere *tools*; processes not necessarily as linear and deterministic, as a certain image of modernity and history has tried to convey, but rather the result of an inveterate, sometimes chaotic aspiration of societies to transform themselves, or of the media’s natural vocation to aggregate around a historical-cultural *continuum* that exists as part of the interweaving of relations, functions, practices happening at several separate but connected levels.

Man, in fact, has always “felt” the world through his tools – either *biomorphic*, senses themselves, or *technomorphic*, the technological prostheses expanding his senses – as extra-somatic extensions of the human sensory network with a consequent feedback effect on humans and their worldview, thus the set of historical-cultural factors that 20th-century continental philosophy has defined as *Weltanschauung*. It is in this feedback that, to reread McLuhan’s famous slogan, the alterations induced by any medium on the proportions and conditions of experience finally constitute the message of any medium, thus “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8).

McLuhan should be credited with clearly recognizing that the sensory-intellectual sphere (aesthetics’ field) is continuously stimulated by instrumental assumptions or ideational systems (the media), both the expression of and mediation with the world, both the reflection of choices and processes of technological nature, or medial aestheticizations of experience. McLuhan’s thought, and the technology/culture connection it relies on, is entirely encapsulated in the aesthetological approach. For this reason, if there is a domain around which all the discourse of aesthetic experience seems to revolve, that is precisely the domain of *techne*. In this sense, the aesthetics/*techne* relation interweaves with the man/world relation; and for the same reason, technology and culture are defined as the warp and texture of subjective experience, the *a priori* historicized forms of human evolution underlying its many, and plural, cultural phases.

To summarize McLuhan’s thought, we could say that any human activity or process of social evolution are rooted in the use of some kind of (either material or cultural) tool, or in the improvement of the existing system of tools, to impact on the world, change and adapt it to that age’s vital needs, to the specific *Weltanschauung* that in turn is influenced by the new uses and needs they generate – mediating the world by using technology is inherent in man. *Teks*, the Indo-European root originating all of *techne*’s semantic declinations – *tékton* was the carpenter, *techne* is literally the ability, the craftsmanship of building “artfully” – means fabricating, building, operating by an unlimited creative action, and implies precisely the human ingeniousness displayed in any kind of interaction with the world: “‘We have no art,’ say the Balinese; ‘we do everything as well as possible’” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 66). Therefore, technology can be seen as a kind of reification, a materialization of experience. Man’s history is therefore layered around the history of the tools or ideas used to support his biological deficiencies or

extend his faculties. Such instrumental assumptions almost become Kantian “forms,” just like space and time, used to shape, dominate, absorb the world’s materiality and build a continuously shifting cultural essence.

McLuhan argued that all societies are built on technological and artifactual factors, of either material or ideational nature, used to change the world and adapt it to their needs, and to existing philosophical models; once they are absorbed, they in turn influence human nature, and change experience’s cognitive and ideational conditions as well as its aesthetic-perceptive systems, and in this process generate new social reactions and needs. This view of dynamic reciprocity in the technology/culture relation constantly recurs in McLuhan’s theoretical framework, focused as it was on culture’s historical and material dimension, just like the tools continuously used to shape or change man’s relation with the world, in an interpretation of technological and intellectual innovations within the social contexts that generated them. A view that is constantly found in the postulate to McLuhan’s thought – man shapes the environment but is in turn shaped by it.

The *homo aestheticus* defined by McLuhan is engaged in an eternal two-handed card-game with the material world, a continuously shifting relation within which the terms of aesthetics/*techne* are clearly built one upon the other, according to what can be seen as a principle of mutual causality, the reciprocal and age-old aesthetic mediation that has always existed between man and his world. This is not an easy game, and McLuhan prefers to play it on the ground of *techne*, the media considered as works of art, thus the result of a process of artistic creation – artifacts – that can be captured through the artists’ awareness: “I began to realize that the greatest artists of the 20th Century – Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Eliot – had discovered a totally different approach, based on the identity of the processes of cognition and creation. I realized that artistic creation is the playback of ordinary experience – from trash to treasures” (E. McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 257). And so McLuhan ceased being a moralist and became an aesthete.

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