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The Philosophical Topicality of Marshall McLuhan Carmine Di Martino

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ABSTRACT

Despite the flourishing literature on these matters in the past century, McLuhan's work stands out as one of the most pioneering and original attempts to understand *media*: not just because he considered media with an unprecedented and 'omni-inclusive' level of breadth, but rather because he brought to light their inherently productive, performative, and 'poietic' character. McLuhan's theory of *media*, which emerged from the great ferment characterizing the Toronto School, influences and inspires the philosophical reflection on the transformations in the most diverse areas. The present paper identifies the particularly interesting and fruitful connection between McLuhan's perspective and the research on technology and its formative and transformative effects on the human being. It's not a matter of thinking exclusively of issues pertaining to the post-human, the cyborg, and alike, but rather of the philosophical, anthropological and sociological scholarship on anthropogenesis that came to prominence in the past decades. This kind of study emphasizes the 'technical life' of humans or, to put it in more significant terms, the technical genesis of homination and the role of material culture for humanization. The McLuhanist theory of media is then explored from an eminently philosophico-genealogical perspective, in order to reveal the way in which human experience can receive a new significance by the action of technological prostheses.

KEYWORDS : *medium; technique; language; feedback; prostheses; writing; McLuhan*

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Over a century has passed since Marshall McLuhan's birth and over a half-century since the publication of the book that won him fame, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*; however, it is only now that we are in a position to appreciate its authentic philosophical depth. McLuhan's work had, in fact, a peculiar destiny. Somehow it came onto the scene too early and it presented itself with the casual style of a maxim and a slogan, a style that is too little 'visual', to use one of McLuhan's own categories. The most famous slogan is undoubtedly: 'the medium is the message'. Subsequently, one could say that McLuhan's work has been rapidly 'understood', consumed, and metabolized by a vast cohort of commentators, but it was not adequately 'thought through'. It had to start becoming passé in order to be able to call our attention to it afresh and in order to be understood in its radical and largely revolutionary nature.

Marshall McLuhan's theory of media, which emerged from the great ferment characterizing the Toronto School, influences and inspires anew our philosophical reflection in the most diverse areas. As far as I am concerned, I consider particularly interesting the fruitful connection between McLuhan's perspective and the research on technology and its formative and transformative effects on the human being. I am not thinking exclusively of issues pertaining to the post-human, the cyborg, and alike, but rather of the philosophical, anthropological and sociological scholarship on anthropogenesis that came to prominence in the past decades. This kind of scholarship emphasizes the 'technical life' of humans or, to put it in more significant terms, the technical genesis of homination and the role of material culture for humanization. This is the issue I would like to explore in this paper from an eminently philosophico-genealogical perspective.

1. 'The technological idiot'

Despite the flourishing literature on these matters in the past century, McLuhan's work stands out as one of the most pioneering and original attempts to understand media. This is not just because he considered media with an unprecedented and 'omni-inclusive' level of breadth, as I will argue in a moment, but rather because he brought to light their inherently productive, performative, and 'poietic' character. The Canadian media philosopher questioned effectively (and much earlier than contemporaneous philosophers) the 'sleepwalking' attitude characterizing our attitude toward media and technology: "Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot" (McLuhan 1964, 19).

McLuhan questions the traditional instrumentalist and conventionalist conception of media, according to which they would be mere 'means' or neutral vehicles. Discussing the current problems of technology in terms of intentions and modes of employment of an instrument, or in terms of the selection of expressive forms for pre-constituted

contents, amounts to a form of sleepwalking. As another pioneer of the Toronto School had realized, in order to grasp the processes and changes in society, one has to look at the 'forms of media' (McLuhan 1962, 55).

As heirs of an expressivist and instrumentalist conception of media, which counterpoises expressive means and contents by subordinating the former to the latter, we are inclined to ignore their intrinsic productivity. We believe that media are neutral and insignificant per se, i.e. that as instruments they are neither good, nor bad, and it all depends on how we use them. Hence, our attention wanders over to the contents that we wish to convey or to the practical aims that we intend to achieve, thereby ignoring the work that media carry out by virtue of their very form. Plato had an inkling into this state of affairs when he warned against the use of writing due to the effects it would have on memory and the quality of knowledge. The discussion of contents and aims is obviously linked (today more than ever before) to the discussion of the ethical and political implications of the instruments that techno-science has made available to us. We cannot downplay the importance of such a discussion, however, it does not exempt us from an interrogation of the nature of media, in order to prevent any ethical-political consideration of intentions and aims from becoming naïve and useless. According to McLuhan it is precisely the lack of understanding, or rather, the blindness to the intrinsic performativity of media that characterizes the obtuse "stance of the technological idiot."

2. Like King Midas

In order to redirect our gaze, McLuhan puts forward the example of a peculiar medium: electrical light. Unlike other media, electrical light appears to be lacking a specific message (unless it is employed to illuminate, say, an inscription) and an established use associated with it. "Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference" (McLuhan 1964, 10). By preventing us from turning our attention to specific uses and contents usually associated with media, electrical light makes visible the intrinsically 'poietic' nature of all media, which normally remains hidden. McLuhan writes: "The electric light ended the regime of night and day, of indoors and out-of-doors" (McLuhan 1964, 63). In this way electrical light inaugurated a new array of activities, operations, perceptions and it introduced a deep transformation in pre-existing patterns of experience. The contents – in this case, the multifarious and previously unheard-of activities that electrical light made possible – do not stand here in a dominant, but rather in a subordinate position. They are, so to speak, dependent upon the medium, and not the other way around, since without the medium they could not exist in the first place. For this reason, McLuhan continues his analysis as follows:

If the student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to

the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives that they touch. (McLuhan 1964, 63).

What is, then, the power common to all media? It is the ability to 'transform' and 'forge' everything they come into contact with, like King Midas of Greek mythology. This is the power that we must recognize and interrogate in order to wake up from the slumber that characterizes our habitual attitude toward technology. As McLuhan often points out, be it clothing or computers, the function of media is not that of being the simple instruments of more or less commendable intentions, or simple vehicles for whatever contents. Rather, media have a specific formative and transformative power which resides in the media themselves and is not governed from the outside by intentions and contents. By contrast, one ought to revert the order of influences: the media govern that which allegedly should govern them. Every medium, with its characteristic level of radicality, exerts a formative and transformative power. In the next section I will try to elucidate this point more extensively.

3. The power of media

Media are a kind of power that has "little to do with content" (McLuhan 1964, 64). It is imperative to understand correctly this guiding thread of McLuhan's research. For this purpose, we have to take very seriously McLuhan's dictum, which we could easily dismiss as a mere maxim or a catchy slogan: 'the medium is the message'. The prioritization of the contents of media and the understandable emphasis on their uses (which, in turn, will be considered either acceptable or unacceptable, desirable or scary, etc., as is currently the case with the technologies scientists use in order to intervene on the genetic code) conceals something and somehow misleads us about the power of media. What is this about? The power of media coincides with the action that instruments, i.e. media – technique and technology – carry out by themselves and that does not coincide with their specific utilizations, i.e. with their immediate instrumentality as the service offered with respect to a goal or a content. In other words: the medium does not simply possess a message to convey or a task to accomplish. The medium itself is the true message. In order to begin to understand McLuhan's famous formula, we have to recognize that the actual message of a medium is the action that it performs beyond the service that it immediately offers and that seemingly exhausts its function. It is by reference to this action that we can state: 'the medium is the message'. In other words, and this is precisely what I intend to illuminate anew in the present paper, the media's authentic message is the action they carry out on their users, it is the transformation of the individuals using them, i.e. the non-communicative and non-instrumental operativeness that produces effects on the proportions, the rhythms and the form of experience of those who 'use' the media.

In order to grasp the message of a medium, we have to ask: what is the effect that the medium realizes on the user? How does the medium shape the user and what kind of reconfiguration of the user's experience does the medium make possible? The message of a medium, the message that does not appear at first sight, consists precisely in the answer to such questions. McLuhan writes:

most people [are still] unaware that because of their pervasive effects on man, it is the medium itself that is the message, *not* the content, and unaware that the medium is also the *massage* – that, all puns aside, it literally works over and saturates and molds and transforms every sense ratio. (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 227).

He goes on to say: 'The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb' (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 227). This does not mean that contents, goals, intentions play no role at all. From a certain point of view, the medium is certainly the vehicle of a message and the instrument of an intention and a goal (consider the spoken word or the wheel, for example). This fact, however, is only the most visible, the most immediate and superficial side, since the medium is also something else: it bears on the constitution of its users.

4. Extension and prosthesis

Let me try to unpack the meaning of McLuhan's argument. Consider his answer to the interviewer who asked him about the meaning of his notion of medium: 'You've got to remember that my definition of media is broad: it includes any technology whatever that creates extensions of the human body and senses, from clothing to the computer' (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 228). This broad and inclusive definition encapsulates the core of McLuhan's idea of medium as extension (which is symmetrically correlated to amputation). This is an idea McLuhan takes from the American anthropologist Edward Hall, who is quoted in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*:

Occasionally organisms have developed specialized extensions of their bodies to take the place of what the body itself might do and thereby free the body for other things. Among these ingenious natural developments are the web of the spider, cocoons, nest of birds and fish. When humans appeared with their specialized bodies, such extension activities came into their own as a means of exploiting the environment. Today man has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body. The evolution of weapons begins with the teeth and the fist and ends with the atom bomb. Clothes and houses are extensions of man's biological temperature-

control mechanisms. Furniture takes the place of squatting and sitting on the ground. Power tools, glasses, TV, telephones, and books which carry the voice across both time and space are examples of material extensions. Money is a way of extending and storing labor. Our transportation networks now do what we used to do with our feet and backs. In fact, all man-made material things can be treated as extensions of what man once did with his body or some specialized part of his body. (T. Hall 1990, 55, partially quoted in McLuhan 1962, 9)

Here we find all the ingredients of McLuhan's concept of medium. What do all media have in common, be they choppers, plows, or software? What do they all structurally do? Without exception and despite all differences, all media, all artificial devices, all extra-organic instruments born out of *techne* and made of materials other than our bodies' organic matter, *extend* our senses, our organs, our activities, our functions, i.e., as Hall pointed out, they provide an extension to something humans hitherto experienced or did with their body or some specialized part of their body. McLuhan's examples recall the ones proposed by Hall: the wheel as an extension of the foot, the clothes as an extension of the skin, houses as an extension of our mechanism to control body temperature, phonetic alphabet as an extension of the eye, print as an extension of the already extended alphabetic visibility, and so forth, up to the electrical media that extend and exteriorize 'our entire central nervous systems, thus transforming all aspects of our social and psychic existence' (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 245).

As I mentioned, the notion of extension is key to McLuhan's conception of media. All the media that have accompanied and enhanced the human adventure on the planet – starting with the piece of flint collected and chipped by the *homo erectus*, which was thrown to hit at a distance or used as an instrument to cut and make incisions – extend our responses to the prompts of the world: they intensify functions and processes, they prolong and specialize body parts or actions, they replace what the body used to do or could do with one of its organs, thereby making it available for some other task. Organs and bodily activities are thus extended and amplified; they are transposed and replaced with instruments that are external to the body, with genuine prostheses. Media present themselves as extensions, prolongations and prostheses of the acting body, of physiological and neuro-psychic processes, i.e., ultimately, of our selves. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan offers an analytic description of the multifarious and interconnected extensional and prosthetic modalities connected with the various media under consideration.

5. The feedback

Each medium or technology extends the body and its senses. But how should we

interpret the meaning of such extension? This is the most interesting point for the development of the present analysis. First, let us quote McLuhan directly: media are “extensions of limbs and organs and senses (a kind of enhancement) with profound reciprocal effects on the user” (McLuhan 1988, 8). And again: “All media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment” (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 237). These short statements, which I chose from among many possible others, encapsulate the focus of McLuhan’s entire research: rethinking the relationship between technology and humanity, which is customarily interpreted in terms of exteriority and opposition, by bringing to light the ‘constituting’ sense of every technical extension. According to McLuhan, only along this path shall we be in a position to face the present: “As long as we adopt the Narcissus attitude of regarding the extensions of our own bodies as really out there and really independent of us, we will meet all technological challenges with the same sort of banana-skin pirouette and collapse” (McLuhan 1964, 86).

McLuhan wishes to awaken his contemporaries – both scholars and common folk – to shed the illusion that it is ‘how a medium is used that counts, rather than what it does to us and with us’ (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 228). What matters is overcoming the position of the zombie assumed by the technological idiot, who is trapped by his own narcissism and is as unaware of the psychological and social effects of his own extensions as the fish is unaware of the water in which it swims. What do we need to recognize, then? Once we accept not to orient our look exclusively toward the use of a medium, we start realizing that which every technical extension *makes of us*, i.e., we start realizing the deep-seated reciprocal effect that technology exerts on its user (both individuals and societies). This is what I would call ‘feedback’, thereby departing from McLuhan’s language. The media – from the chopper of the *homo erectus* to the computer of the *homo sapiens* – ‘bounce back’ and shape the user. The technical prosthesis, i.e., the extensional development, bounces back on the body, on the ‘extended’ agent, thereby transforming the agent and operating deep and lasting mutations, as well as transforming the agent’s environment. The user is modified by the extensional action of the medium: this is precisely the point McLuhan wants to bring to the fore in his entire *opus*. This is an omni-pervasive retroactive effect, which pertains to all levels of the human being, from ‘physiological mechanisms’ to ‘models of awareness’, to use McLuhanistic terms. ‘Physiologically, man in the normal use of technology (or his variously extended body) is perpetually modified by it and in turn finds ever new ways of modifying his technology’ (McLuhan 1964, 57). Therefore, ‘the transformations of technology gave the character of organic evolution’ (McLuhan 1964, 204) and ‘technology is part of our bodies’ (McLuhan 1964, 80). The same goes for the psychological, mental, and cultural dimensions, both at the individual and the social level.

6. The evolution of the body while becoming-human

Let me attempt to bring out the relevance of these last remarks. We should not imagine the situation as if we had a ready-made human body or an already pre-constituted individual, which, in a second moment, would make use of pure and extrinsic instruments in order to better navigate its environment, and thereby mutate. The very becoming-human of the body bears an intrinsic and constitutive connection with technology. The media (the instruments) have a bearing on the path of hominization, which, starting with the assumption of the upright position and with the first specimens of *homo*, leads all the way to the appearance of *homo sapiens*. The media, however, have an equal and even a more radical bearing on the path of humanization, which happens always anew for each member of the species *homo sapiens*. Whether we focus on anthropogenesis or refer exclusively to *homo sapiens*, and only consider the action of media after hominization has taken place, things are ultimately identical: in the same way in which in anthropogenesis the direction toward the human is marked by the emergence of technology, the adventure of humanization for each *homo sapiens* includes a relationship between individual and media which is not additive (the human plus technology), but rather 'co-constitutive'. The extensions, the media, the instruments (from material utensils to words) are essentially inherent in the path of hominization and in the process of humanization.

In order to better grasp the meaning of these remarks, I propose to connect Edward Hall's perspective appropriated by McLuhan ('all man-made material things can be treated as extensions of what man once did with his body or some specialized part of his body') with that of Paul Alsberg, a thinker who is almost unknown today but had a significant impact on early twentieth century anthropology and beyond (Alsberg's influence can be found, for instance, in the work of a thinker such as Peter Sloterdijk).

In *Das Menschheitsrätsel*, published in 1922, Alsberg distinguishes the evolutionary scheme that underlies the physical constitution of humans from the one characterizing non-human animals. A novel principle intervened in humans, a principle that differs from the one operative in the evolution of animals. This principle of human evolution would have provoked a simultaneous and correlative effect, i.e., an extra-organic evolution and a corresponding organic involution. This would explain, in inversed terms vis-à-vis the Bolk-Gehlen line of interpretation, the relationship between organic poverty and technical-cultural development. Alsber writes: 'The evolutionary principle of animals is that of 'bodily adaptation' [Körperanpassung]; the evolutionary principle of humans is that of bodily disengagement [Körperausschaltung] through artificial instruments' ('Das Entwicklungsprinzip des Tiers ist das Prinzip der "Körperanpassung"; das Entwicklungsprinzip des Menschen ist das der "Körperausschaltung mittels künstlicher Werkzeuge"; Alsberg 1975, 49).

The basis of human bodily constitution is thus the principle of bodily disengagement, i.e., the de-activation and de-involvement of the body. The body would move toward a human form thanks to the bodily disengagement made possible by the use of instruments, which allow transfer of the problems of adaptation to a technico-instrumental (i.e. extra-bodily or extra-organic) dimension. Such transfer de-activates bodily parts, activities, processes – which are replaced by the intervention of instruments – and opens up the organism to developments that are not connected to the environment in a purely biological way. According to this evolutionary principle, for instance, in pre-*sapiens* we see a shortening of the face, which sets the physiological premises for an increment of the brain mass and the ensuing consequences. Thanks to the refinement of handling skills and the correlative development of technicality the mouth is progressively relieved from its efforts of traction, laceration and mastication. This leads to a progressive reduction of frontal teeth and in particular of the canine teeth, which brings about a progressive re-structuration of the face.

The principle of *Körperausschaltung* helps us to focus on the nature of artificial instruments (the media) from a different point of view, by emphasizing their prosthetic character. Alsberg considers the example of the hammer. When we use a hammer, we can believe that it merely extends and strengthens the action of the hand. On closer inspection, however, we have to concede that the hammer does not extend and strengthen the hand in continuity with the organism but, as Alsberg points out, it 'replaces' the hand ('an Stelle der Hand', Alsberg 1975, 52). The hammer does the job in place of the fist, thereby replacing and not extending the organism. Hence, the substitution ends up producing a deactivation of the replaced performance. This is the meaning of the instrument as prosthesis. The substitutive, prosthetic character of the hammer remains hidden because in this case it directly presupposes the activity of the hand, of which it appears to be a mere amplification.

If we consider a different kind of instrument, such as a calculator, it is clear that it does not extend or strengthen the calculating power of the brain, but rather it replaces it. The deactivation ensuing from each substitution leads concurrently to a 'weakening' of the organ and to a liberation of the organism, which is now available to do something else (for higher-level performances, as we usually say). According to Alsberg, this is the process that leads to the humanization of the individual and once it has become human, the individual continues to walk from liberation to liberation toward that technical, extra-organic externalization of bodily and cognitive functions which characterizes life in the technological West.

Therefore, with respect to hominization we should speak of an extra-organic evolution made possible by technology. The emergence of the utensil inaugurates an

unprecedented path within the sphere of living beings, which does not follow the evolutionary principle of other animal species and leads to *homo sapiens*:

With the utensil the human being goes beyond the narrow confines of his body, it frees himself in his development and in his life from the natural limits of the body. In this sense, the principle of human evolution can be designated as a principle of liberation from the limits of the body or, in short, as a principle of liberation from nature.

Mit dem Werkzeug setzt sich der Mensch über die dem Körper gezogenen engen Grenzen hinweg, befreit er sich in seiner Entwicklung und in seinem Leben von der Naturbeschränktheit des Körpers. In diesem Sinne kann das menschliche Entwicklungsprinzip als ein „Prinzip der Befreiung von der der Naturbeschränktheit des Körpers“ oder kürzer als ein „Prinzip der Naturbefreiung“ bezeichnet werden. (Alsberg 1922, 116-117)

For Alsberg, the disengagement of the body and, together with it, the liberation from the natural limits of the body through instruments is the key to anthropogenesis. The appearance of utensils, starting with the specific emergence and activation of the hand which is made possible by the upright position, the pre-hominid becomes emancipated from the necessity of an organic adaptation to the environment and of a direct contact with it. Like McLuhan's media, Alberg's instruments are a strongly inclusive category. This includes anything, which can determine the deactivation-liberation of the organism, starting from the stone used to throw, hit, and cut, which enables humans to avoid undesired physical contact with the surroundings and to transcend the natural limits of their body, up to the birth of language, writing, institutions, morals, etc. Between McLuhan's principle of extension and Alberg's principle of *Körperausschaltung* and *Körperbefreiung* there are affinities as well as differences. Perhaps they are even complementary, but in both cases the constitutive role of the medium or utensil is adequately grasped.

7. The manipulated manipulator

Let us now return to McLuhan and try to draw the consequences from the concept of extension at issue. As we emphasized, the feedback effect that every technological extension exerts on the user (the 'deep reciprocal effects on the user') is not a mere addition to a pre-constituted human body or a ready-made human individual. Rather, the technological feedback contributes to the constitution of the human individual, i.e., to it becoming human, both in the sense of homination and of humanization.

Therefore, there is 'technological' genesis of hominization, which cannot be separated from the bio-evolutionary dimension. The human individual constitutes itself as such

along a path which is also extra-organic, i.e., it constitutes itself on the basis of its technological extensions and the retroactive action that media exert on it.

Anthropogenesis goes through technology: the body and the patterns of behavior become human along a path that is not merely biological, but rather techno-biological (and, in this sense, cultural).

Moreover, the constant and essential shaping action of media continues in the process of humanization. Being human does not mean merely being a member of the species *homo sapiens*. The biological makeup is not enough. In order to become human, a process of humanization has to occur. A newborn who is not immediately received in a human community will not develop the capabilities that distinguish humans from the rest of the animal world (ability to speak, to plan, to foresee the far future, to form memories, to identify oneself with the other's state of mind, etc.) and will not even survive in the first place. There is no such thing as a human being as the mere result of a biological program. The members of the species *homo sapiens* become human solely through a long process of humanization, in which the specific dispositions pertaining to the genotype must be activated through culture, i.e., they have to be shaped according to the characteristic trajectories and media of each human culture. These trajectories and media may vary radically across different societies and ethnicities.

As we recalled above, the process of humanization does not happen as an add-on to a pre-constituted human organism. It does not 'enhance' an individual whose physiological, psychological, and sensory apparatus is already self-enclosed and established once and for all. In the process that each culture enacts in order to humanize its members, what is at stake are the very 'biological' parameters: the culture, i.e. the complex of media that identifies a community, pervades the bodies, then shapes the physiological reactions, establishes a certain sensory orchestration, exalts certain senses and inhibits others, enables a determinate perception of the world in its difference from other forms of perception that hold for other cultures. As McLuhan observed:

Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body... As an extension and expeditor of the sense life, any medium at once affects the entire field of the senses. (McLuhan 1964, 55).

For instance, by extending the activity of the foot and by accelerating exchanges, the invention of the wheel brings about a new orchestration of sensory life as a whole; however, all media amplify (or amputate) bodily reactions, activities, and functions in their proper manner and according to a certain economy. The intensification of a function alters the overall equilibrium of the sensorium and produces new perceptual

orientations. For McLuhan there is an inextricable link between sensory and cultural typology. This is why he talks about 'sensory preference of a culture' (McLuhan, 1989, 37) and proposes a general difference between cultures of the ear (oral cultures) and cultures of the eye (literary cultures).

My purpose here is not to develop further these well-known (and undoubtedly fecund) directions of McLuhan's work. Rather, I wish to spell out the implications of the above considerations. If the remarks above, developed in keeping with McLuhan, are correct, then we must say that the deepest result of technology (i.e. of media) are the users themselves. That is: the media's message is their shaping action, which brings about determined human physiognomies. Media are extensions that are capable of feedback on their users; they transform their users into entities that they were not before and that, lacking such feedback, would have never become.

Now we have to spell out in a philosophically more careful manner the point we reached. It is not the media in and of themselves, abstractly isolated in their mere extra-organic existence that exerts a shaping action on human bodies and individuals. The 'reciprocal effect on the user', the feedback I mentioned following McLuhan, is not of the same kind as a dental prosthesis or a hip replacement prosthesis which is inserted in the body. That is, it is not the medium considered in its mere and isolable materiality that generates those hominizng and humanizing transformations. Rather, it is the specific *doing* which is structurally connected to each medium, i.e., the exercise, the relations, or the actions, of which the media are the occasion. The actions associated with the various media (from throwing the stone to hit the prey among the *pre-sapiens*, to Internet browsing in contemporary *sapiens*), the feedback on the agents, they have repercussions on those who act, thereby generating physical, psychological, and cognitive changes, i.e., triggering auto-plastic processes of human formation.

What I mean by that, following McLuhan, but also beyond McLuhan, is that human beings make themselves, they become human through the actions and technological relations (i.e. extra-organic relations), which the media themselves operate. This means that human beings make themselves through that technologically extended doing that we can also call, considered in its entirety, culture.

In a sense, the human being is both the premise and the consequence of its technological activity. This activity feeds back on and transforms the beings that initiated it into 'subjects' that they were not before. Therefore, one should not say that human beings invent the media without adding immediately the reciprocal state of affairs: the media (the actions correlated to media) invent, i.e., bring into the world, configure a body and a human individual that are not there yet. The technical manipulation of the world (from the throwing of the stone to the invention of computers) feeds back on the manipulator: the manipulator is being manipulated, transformed by its very doing. We

could also speak of self-manipulation, thereby emphasizing, however, that this is not a kind of manipulated guided by the self. It is thoroughly unintentional. The activity produces a feedback on the agent that nobody has planned in advance. It is a preintentional or unintentional consequence of an activity that aims at different goals, i.e., an activity that is oriented toward other objectives, such as catching the prey, building shelter, traveling distances, communicating instructions, calculating the revenues, etc.

8. The visual man

The alphabetic technology, as McLuhan calls it, offers a clear example of the feedback and unintentional transformation of the user created by a specific techno-cultural doing. Following Eric Havelock, another leading exponent of the Toronto School, a large group of scholars highlighted both the structural distinction between syllabic and alphabetic forms of writing and the genetic connection between the invention of the alphabet and the birth of the civilization of writing. There is no need to quote the countless passages where McLuhan posited, with his characteristically pyrotechnical style, that the advent of the alphabetic medium had the effect of a nuclear explosion in the oral culture in which it arose. The alphabet literally brought about the 'rational' Western man, i.e., a previously unheard-of hyper-visual man, who works in a linear, sequential, logical way. The alphabet gave human beings an eye for an ear in the formation and transmission of knowledge. This is because the alphabet provided for the first time a full graphical (and hence visual) transcription of spoken discourse. This was not possible with the earlier syllabic written annotations.

For the first time, the line of writing was exhaustive and self-sufficient. It did not require prior knowledge and memorization of the discourse that had to be written down. Thanks to the invention of the consonant and the ensuing decomposition of the sound in 'first elements', the alphabetic transcription entails all the necessary information for its use. There is nothing to add or remove, as is the case with syllabic forms of writing. It suffices to visually go through the linear sequence of signs to reconstitute the linguistic sound and from there go back to its meaning.

This operation rapidly became mechanical and unreflective. Three important consequences follow from this innovation:

First, the discourse has turned into 'something to be seen' and becomes available for autonomous ocular control, i.e., for a proper reading. The readers can go back as they wish to the 'body' of discourse. They can subject it to unprecedented operations of articulation and schematization that can only be visual.

Second, the becoming autonomous of transcription and reading from a foregoing knowledge of the oral discourse emancipated humans from the style of oral culture. The

body of knowledge to be transcribed no longer has to be memorized. Therefore, it does not need to be produced according to a musicality, a rhythm or as a narration of actions.

Third, since the alphabet constitutes a code for exhaustive and self-sufficient visual translation of whatever linguistic sound, it is possible to register any kind of statement and without limitation.

The combination of these three consequences (through several stages that we cannot account for in the present paper) gave rise to the logical-definitional discourse, which narrates no actions, nor sings the deeds of some heroes, but connects subjects and predicates through a copula and links together parts of speech according to a linear scheme of inclusion and exclusion. Definition and syllogism can only emerge in an exercise of discourse, which is subjected to the eye of a reader and disconnected from the ear's need for memorization. As these brief remarks already indicate, outside the alphabetic horizon there can be countless forms of 'wisdom', but no 'science'. Science requires a work on the body of discourse; a work, which makes it possible to proceed in a logical and definitional fashion, thereby producing a limitless number of statements that are literally unheard-of, novel, unusual. On such statements one can build the edifice of knowledge as potentially infinite accumulation. To the extent that it transforms the exercise of the word, i.e., of thinking and self-consciousness, of the formation of transmission of public knowledge, alphabetic writing gives rise to a novel type of human being, which nowadays tends to spread all over the planet. This kind of human being, namely 'the Westerner' in a non-geographical sense, but rather a cultural or spiritual sense, as Husserl would say, speaks the language of philosophy, of science, of techno-science. The Westerner tends to spread all over the planet through the diffusion of media created by techno-science and their message, in the sense defined above.

Let us now focus on the most interesting point for the purpose of this paper. There is no intentional and 'subjective' deliberation in the transformation that leads to the 'logical mind'. Moreover, there is no need to appeal to some kind of ethnologically motivated intellectual superiority. Things are not the way one would be inclined to interpret them. Some thinkers regard the Greeks – creators of our culture – as having a special kind of intelligence that allowed them to create instruments such as alphabetic writing. It is actually the other way around. The Greeks were made intelligent in the 'logical-visual' sense by the use of an instrument, a medium, which was not designed by a pre-existing rational and visual identity. Rather, the Greeks became intelligent in the philosophical sense; they acquired a logical mind through the feedback of a certain kind of activity. At first, the Greeks attempted to transcribe their poems using the Semitic syllabary, in the same way in which the Semites wrote down their public knowledge. They did not have the project of inventing the alphabet (how could they?). In the attempt to adapt the syllabic writing received from the Phoenicians to the metrical and musical characteristics of their poetic discourse, the Greeks started to use systematically the

method of *scriptio plena*, which the Semites used only occasionally. Thus, they unintentionally ended up isolating the consonant and 'discovered' the alphabet. In the same way, the use of alphabet transformed the Greeks' relation to written discourse in visual terms, thereby inaugurating a kind of schematization that could only come from the eye. The becoming 'visual', that is 'logical' in the treatment of discourse is an unintentional consequence of the activity of writing alphabetically (obviously, an activity that was interlinked with innumerable other actions and relations). The use of the alphabetic medium and the technical activity correlated to it, i.e., the exercise of writing, restructures the experience; it reorganizes the sensory system and modifies linguistic habits. This revolutionizes the way in which public knowledge is formulated and transmitted to future generations. The activity bounces back and shapes the agent. It unintentionally transformed the human identity of those who created the alphabet with other purposes in mind. The birth of the West is not due to the genius of two extravagant Greeks, as Husserl puts it with reference to Plato and Aristotle, or to an inscrutable destiny of being, as Heidegger thought. According to McLuhan, the answer is not to be sought in some proper name, i.e., in the intentional planning or project of some individual or group, but rather in a specific doing, which feeds back on its users and modifies them. Alphabetic writing is a good example to understand that the message of media is what they make of us.

9. Toward a General 'Mediology'

Writing and reading are, in other words, 'anthropotechniques', to use a controversial phrase by Peter Sloterdijk, meaning they are techniques for the formation of humans; they are exercises that shape the psycho-physiology of the users. How is the transmission of the Western man and of the logical mind secured? The answer is: through anthropic techniques. This is what happens, for example, in elementary school. If children do not learn to read and write alphabetically, they cannot have access to the visual, rational, and critical identity of the Westerner. First of all, then, what matters is not so much the contents, the 'messages', but rather the immersion in the shaping power of the medium, of that specific activity. Individuals who do not learn how to read and write within a certain amount of time will not be able to incarnate the scientific habit, i.e., to appropriate logic as a specific visual rationality. Obviously, this does not mean that an illiterate individual cannot be deeply knowledgeable, intelligent, savvy, etc. Being an 'oral' human being does not mean being less knowledgeable. It could even mean the opposite.

The vicissitudes of media are the vicissitudes of anthropic techniques. First, they come onto the scene as anthropogenetic techniques that accompany the path of hominization, and then they emerge as techniques of human formation starting from the affirmation of the species *homo sapiens*. To conclude, let me put forward the following proposal: the anthropogenetic and anthropotechnical character of media could become the guiding

thread of a McLuhanist 'mediology'. Such mediology would rethink the analyses that McLuhan carried out and take it upon itself to carry forward his lifework.

Obviously, a McLuhan-inspired mediology that endeavors to carry forward his legacy in new directions should include the analysis of contemporary technological media and question the validity of available categories. For example, can we interpret a radically innovative medium such as the Internet in keeping with McLuhan's distinction between hot and cold media? According to McLuhan, hot media lead to fragmentation and specialization and do not prompt the user to participate actively. The alphabet would be an example of hot medium. By contrast, cool media such as telephone and television are binding and inclusive, they imply a high degree of individual and collective participation. What is the new perspective that we have to develop in order to understand the performative force of a medium like the Internet, which seems hardly categorizable under McLuhan's distinction between hot and cold media? The Internet seems to be characterized by a peculiar syncretism. Browsing the Web, we are alone with ourselves, and yet we are surrounded by a phantasmatic multitude of selves. We delve deeper in alphabetic individualism, and yet we mimic a thoroughly shared form of existence, which resembles that of oral cultures. Incidentally, this is why McLuhan argued that electronic media is causing a return to oral culture.

The exercise of the medium 'Internet' combines the effects of both hot and cold media, their respective capacities to exclude and include, to bind and un-bind, to fragment (i.e. isolate and segregate) and connect (to relate and involve), to make passive and prompt to join the game, to homologate (i.e. level out and standardize) and at the same time give voice, to make visible, to make one's contribution stand out.

As with every medium, the Internet does not merely replace other media. Rather, it rewrites the entire universe of experiences that such media made possible, in a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung*. What kind of anthropic technique does the use of Internet represent? Are we in a position to say something about it that comes at least close to what McLuhan taught us with respect to the alphabet and print? Are we capable of posing the questions that he used to pose with regard to every medium, that is: 'What does it enhance or intensify? What does it render obsolete or displace? What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced? What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?' (McLuhan 1988, 7). Let us leave these inevitably aporetic questions aside for the time being and conclude by emphasizing one last time (with a remark that may sound a bit convoluted) the specific contribution of a mediology that carries forward and recasts McLuhan's legacy. If, as we pointed out, the media are occasions for an activity that transforms its agents into entities that they were not before along a path that transcends the biology/culture opposition, a reflection on the media like the one sketched in this paper should dispose us to think philosophically through the genesis and transformations beyond traditional and established dualisms (nature

and culture, life and technology, material and spiritual processes), thereby granting a primacy to experience, and hence to relation and action.

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