

Marshall McLuhan and the Economies of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT *The work of Marshall McLuhan routinely crosses and problematizes boundaries of all sorts. Thinking about his work in terms of knowledge economies, along with their attendant protocols, circulations, and distributions, offers a way to contextualize the many contradictory claims about the relative value of McLuhan's work. Such a strategy situates McLuhan's work with regard to the specific economies in which it has circulated and continues to circulate, taking their various strategies of conferring legitimation and assigning worth into consideration. This article lays out the relationships between economies, circulation theory, and protocol theory, then considers the relationship of McLuhan's work to the economy of artist's research and research-creation, as outlined by the Toronto Research Group (bpNichol and Steve McCaffery), Lysianne Léchoit Hirt, and Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk.*

KEYWORDS *Toronto School; Marshall McLuhan; Knowledge economies; Circulation theory; Protocols*

RÉSUMÉ *Le travail de Marshall McLuhan traverse et problématise fréquemment des frontières de toutes sortes. Le penser en termes d'économies de la connaissance, avec leurs protocoles, leurs circulations et leurs distributions afférentes, offre une manière de contextualiser les nombreuses propositions contradictoires au sujet de sa valeur relative, en le situant par rapport aux économies spécifiques dans lesquelles il a circulé, et continue de circuler, en s'appropriant leurs stratégies de légitimation et leurs manières particulières d'assigner et de considérer la valeur. Le présent article expose les rapports entre économies, les théories de la circulation et des protocoles, avant de considérer les relations que le travail de McLuhan entretient avec les économies de la recherche artistique et de la recherche-création, telles qu'articulées par le Toronto Research Group (bpNichol et Steve McCaffery), Lysianne Léchoit Hirt, et Owen Chapman et Kim Sawchuk.*

MOTS CLÉS *Toronto School; Marshall McLuhan; Économies de la connaissance; Théories de la circulation; Protocoles*

There is a difference between the way scholars mean and the way poets mean. Rather than a difference in the substance of what they produce, or the objects of their writing, this is a difference in economy.

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The work of Marshall McLuhan routinely crosses and problematizes boundaries of all sorts. Thinking about it in terms of knowledge economies, along with their attendant protocols, circulations, and distributions, is a useful strategy. It offers a way to contextualize the many contradictory claims about the relative value of McLuhan's work by situating it in terms of the specific economies in which it has circulated and continues to circulate, taking their various strategies of conferring legitimation and assigning worth into consideration. Of course, as a result of straying across the boundaries between extant knowledge economies, cultural objects (including McLuhan's writing) pick up traces of those economies even as they help to constitute them by virtue of their circulation.

The notion of knowledge economies is useful for several reasons. It emphasizes that any discursive field consists of a set of overlapping systems of production, circulation, and consumption, all of which are constantly competing (and occasionally cooperating) with each other during the making of meaning. It highlights that, like other forms of cultural production, the practices of writing and publishing are managed in a variety of ways (Gibson-Graham, 2005)—that is, the rights and responsibilities bestowed on writers and their texts are subject to a range of possible protocols, legitimation strategies, and sanctions, whether reasonable or unreasonable (Sayer, 2007). The notion of economies of meaning (Gibson-Graham, 2005; Wenger, 1998) helps us to imagine the positions of ourselves and our texts within these economies, and how their various structures of ownership and management influence how we negotiate the significance of a given cultural object.

Why “economy” rather than “structure,” and how does circulation fit into this scheme? As Steve McCaffery (1986) notes, “As an alternative to structure, economy is concerned with the distribution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text. A textual economy would concern itself not with the order of forms and sites but with the order-disorder of circulations and distributions” (p. 201). Greg Urban (2001) concurs, arguing that structures are consequences of the spatial and temporal movement of cultural objects rather than their precedent. Contemporary circulation theory (Gaonkar & Povinelli, 2003; Heiser, 2005; Lee & LiPuma, 2002; Straw, 2009) shares political economy's interest in production and consumption, but adds to it a concern with what happens in between, when objects in circulation are transfigured even as they effect change around them. Rather than fetishizing cultural content, circulation theory invites a consideration of its “edges” as both the interfaces through which objects relate with humans and other cultural forms, and the surfaces that organize its mobility (Straw, 2009).

However, circulation theory has had relatively little to say about exactly how the mobility of cultural objects is organized and regulated. I would like to suggest that circulatory economies are managed through the use of protocols, in the sense that Eugene Thacker, Alexander Galloway, and Lisa Gitelman have adapted the term for media theory. In his foreword to Galloway's book *Protocol* (2004), Thacker delineates the conventional understanding of a protocol as “a set of technical procedures for defining, managing, modulating and distributing information throughout a flexible yet robust delivery infrastructure” (p. xv). Gitelman adds in *Always Already New*

(2006) that as socially realized structures of communication, media come into being only when a given technological form is yoked to a particular protocol that administers its use. In other words, protocol governs circulation. For Galloway (2004), protocol is the very form by which control exists in a decentralized, networked milieu. If the study of protocols is, as Thacker claims, a way of doing political economy (in Galloway, 2004), then any consideration of circulation within contemporary knowledge economies must also take protocols into account.

For example, two of the major types of protocols at work in contemporary knowledge economies are copyright and citation. As Laura Murray (2008) describes in detail, copyright protocols (which are based on the requirement of permission for use) pertain to market economies; citation (which is based on the requirement of acknowledgment of use) pertains to the academy, but also to various types of reputation-based economies in the arts, marketing, software programming, and blogging as well as traditional forms of attribution in storytelling and other aspects of oral cultures. The purpose of both types of protocol is to manage the process of reproduction and police inappropriate use within their respective economies. This, combined with the fact that market economies and citation economies frequently overlap, often leads to confusion between them. However, they are based on entirely different assumptions. Citation assumes the right to copy without authorization, as long as attribution is provided; however, in the context of copyright law, this is an exception (“fair dealing” in Canada or “fair use” in the USA) rather than the foundational assumption. Moreover, in a citation system, the expectation is that everything except “common knowledge” will be cited, whereas because copyright focuses on individual expressions rather than facts or ideas, it does not expect permission for all of the things that would require citation. Copyright and citation also have different durations; copyright expires after a given period, and the copyrighted material returns to the public domain, but in most citation economies, there is never a time when citation is not appropriate (Murray, 2008).

One of the major technical procedures that citation-based economies use is the footnote. As Joseph Bensman (1988) outlines in “The Aesthetics and Politics of Footnoting,” footnotes and other forms of citation fulfill a range of ideological, institutional, and political functions. As tools for the establishment of scholarly legitimacy, they are also capable of being abused according to a variety of strategies, which Bensman dubs “footnote connoisseurship” (the referencing of only the most “tasteful” of sources, such as top-tier academic journals, or exclusive referencing of the members of an academic coterie or school); “conspicuous consumption and display” (excessive footnoting, which is admittedly hard to define); and even “footnote classicism.” Paradoxically, the cumulative effect of a preponderance of classically written, well-balanced essays with exactly the right number of citations from prominent scholars in the field, Bensman (1988) writes, can be “to exorcise from a field the disorder, confusion, conflict and lack of direction that are often intrinsic to the very flow of work in a field, including the transition from one paradigm to another, the absence of a dominant paradigm or the almost anomic appearance of multiple paradigms of the field” (p. 448). In any discipline, there are modes other than the classical for the production, circulation, and reception of knowledge, which can and do make significant contributions.

The internal rules of a given knowledge economy change over time, and their perceived cultural value shifts as a result. Within the academy, authors in various disciplines have openly challenged the merits of the citation economy on a number of grounds. Bioscientists Peter Murray-Rust, John B. O. Mitchell, and Henry S. Rzepa, for example, present a vision of replacing the citation economy (which, in their estimation, still relies too heavily on market perception) with a “re-use economy,” which would value scholarship in terms of how often it is redeployed elsewhere (2005). This, too, is problematic in that, to borrow a phrase from Siva Vaidhyanathan (2011), it represents a kind of Googlization of scholarship, where value would accrue only to writing of interest to a large general audience. Huge parts of scholarly endeavour involve specialized research into forgotten and neglected corners of the cultural archive. Moreover, the importance of much research is not realized until many years after it is conducted and published.

Part of Murray’s larger project involves documenting the ongoing conflicts between academic-citation economies and copyright economies. Over the past decade and a half, the extreme ease of digital copying has provoked a reactionary increase in the demands of corporate copyright holders for expansion of the scope of copyright. The resulting struggles have been well documented (Coombe, 1998; Lessig, 2001, 2004; McLeod, 2001; Vaidhyanathan, 2001). But though the critique of copyright maximalism is strong and has much popular support, Murray (2008) argues that because many of the provisions in copyright law that allow academics to conduct research are disappearing, academics need to spend more time demonstrating and arguing for the merits of citation economies to government institutions and the public at large. This is not always an easy task, particularly for scholars whose work actively transgresses the protocols that define and regulate those economies.

As I suggested at the outset of this article, McLuhan’s work presents particular difficulties for any attempt to locate it comfortably within an academic-citation economy. The kind, extent, and efficacy of the citation apparatuses for his books vary wildly. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed bibliographic study of the citation protocols that McLuhan’s various books utilize, but such a study would be illuminating. As a quick survey of the editions I have on hand of books published during McLuhan’s lifetime, though, four have bibliographies: *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), *From Cliché to Archetype* (McLuhan & Watson, 1970), *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972), and *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* (McLuhan, Hutchon, & McLuhan, 1977). His two mass-market “electric information age books”—to use Jeffrey Schnapp’s term (Schnapp & Michaels, 2012)—*The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1967) and *War and Peace in the Global Village: An Inventory of Some of the Current Spastic Situations That Could Be Eliminated by More Feedforward* (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1968b), have no bibliographies, but, as one might expect from products designed as commodities by someone working in advertising (Agel), they both conclude with brief lists of image credits, which suggests where the priorities are in terms of commercial use. *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964) contains no bibliography but has a list of “Further Readings for Media Study.” None of the following titles—*The Mechanical Bride*

(McLuhan, 2002), *Counterblast* (McLuhan & Parker, 1969), *Through the Vanishing Point* (McLuhan & Parker, 1968), and *Culture Is Our Business* (McLuhan, 1970)—have any bibliography. In terms of internal citations, McLuhan’s standard practice is to cite writers by name, but even when he quotes from them at length, there is almost never a page number or information about particular editions. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is the notable exception to this rule, though the “Notes on Sources” at the back of *From Cliché to Archetype* also provide page numbers. The books McLuhan authored with others, and books that he published with academic presses have a slight tendency toward providing more citational information.

In concrete and demonstrable ways, then, McLuhan writes more like a poet than a scholar, because he is largely uninterested in providing anything like rigorous academic citation. So how do poets write? Well, as T. S. Eliot (1950) put it in his 1920 essay “Philip Massinger,” “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (p. 182). As F. W. Bateson (1968) notes dryly, Eliot’s argument—that plagiarism in the name of improving the plagiarized work is justified—had itself been plagiarized from Gourmont’s *Le problème du style*, which Eliot recommends later in the Massinger essay without making an explicit connection to its connection to his argument (1968). In terms of McLuhan, consider this passage from poet Charles Olson’s famous essay “Projective Verse”:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. (McLuhan, 1950, p. 3)

In chapter 26 of *Understanding Media*, “The Typewriter: Into the Age of the Iron Whim,” McLuhan (1964) writes the following, without quotation marks, indentation, endnotes, footnotes, or other furniture:

Poets like Charles Olson are eloquent in proclaiming the power of the typewriter to help the poet to indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspension, even, of syllables, the juxtaposition, even, of parts of phrases which he intends, observing that, for the first time, the poet has the stave and the bar that the musician has had. (pp. 227–228)

Like many of McLuhan’s essays, this passage would not survive an encounter with Turnitin.com, one of our current arbiters of successful contributions to the citation economy. But more than anything else, this is an example of McLuhan’s consistent inconsistency; within a few paragraphs of this passage, he identifies longer and shorter quotations with the use of indentations and quotation marks (if nothing else). What McLuhan omits, though, is more telling than what he includes, because he does not share Olson’s passion for “rigidity” and “precision.” Even though he is willing to use portions of Olson’s text verbatim, McLuhan never mentions the axiom that informs Olson’s entire manifesto, namely Robert Creeley’s claim that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (which Olson prints in all caps), (McLuhan,

1950, p. 1), even though, as the antithesis of “the medium is the message,” it could have served as fodder for one of McLuhan’s characteristic rhetorical reversals.

Such inconsistencies have consequences that transcend the politics of authorial attribution, affecting entire disciplines. I have written elsewhere about how McLuhan’s idiosyncratic use of the word “Symbolism” and his misreading of the poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé—which largely structures his influential reading of the newspaper as media form, and thus the readings of many Communication Studies and media scholars following him—have remained embedded in the discourse of Communication Studies to this day (Wershler, 2011). Because Communications scholars rarely work directly with poetry and poetics, they are frequently content to cite them second- or third-hand from texts such as McLuhan’s. A greater degree of interdisciplinary reading and crosstalk is clearly necessary in order to locate and track such transfigurations. But that is a long way from suggesting that it is desirable or even possible to purge Communication Studies of its inconsistencies, with McLuhan as their metonym. This is not simply because, as Bensman (1988) notes, there is no final judgment in scholarly polemics over correct citation protocols, and that even the slightest awareness of the endless vicissitudes in academic opinion over the worth of a given scholar’s work should instill a larger degree of modesty in all of us. It is also because, although McLuhan’s writing style might at times seem antithetical to the protocols that govern the citation economy of Communication Studies, it is also constitutive of and inextricable from it.

Murray and Trosow (2007) note that citation economies are sometimes conflated with “gift economies” (p. 193)—or, in Georges Bataille’s terms in *The Accursed Share*, a “general economy” (1988, pp. 19ff). Gift economies are based on the excessive, free circulation of goods, with a general, intangible expectation of reciprocity from the broader community (Wershler-Henry, 2002); higher reputations accrue to those capable of the most generous gifts and the most conspicuous circulation of goods. The general economy is typically opposed to a “restricted economy” of some sort—both capitalism in general and copyright in particular would qualify as examples—“whose operation is based upon valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit accumulation and cautious proceduralities in risk taking” (McCaffery, 1986, p. 203). While Murray and Trosow caution against equating citation economies and gift economies, I would go a step further and argue that while prestige and cultural capital is one possible outcome of participation in a gift economy, the larger category of the general economy to which it belongs is properly the domain of dissemination, expenditure, waste, and total loss (Bataille, 1988). Even so, as I will argue shortly, general economies and restricted economies are not mutually exclusive, and are in fact impossible to separate.

The idea of the general economy was championed by literary and avant-garde writers, as well as artists of the entire twentieth century. Inspired by the work of Marcel Mauss (1954), writers from Bataille to McCaffery have written about the general economy in great detail, tying it explicitly to the poetics of avant-garde writing in the process. It is typified by the gesture of cut-and-paste that Dada provocateur Tristan Tzara (1981) detailed in the infamous “Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love”:

TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM

Take a newspaper. Take some scissors. Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem. Cut out the article. Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag. Shake gently. Next take out each cutting one after the other. Copy in the order in which they left the bag. The poem will resemble you. And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd. (p. 39)

This is the sort of writing that McLuhan himself championed and sought to emulate with his “mosaic” method.

One of the most explicit statements McLuhan makes about his writing “procedure” is in his letter of December 6, 1971, to William Kuhns:

You have not studied Joyce or Baudelaire yet, or you would have no problems in understanding my procedure. I have no theories whatsoever about anything. I make observation by way of discovering contours, lines of force, and pressures. I satirize at all times, and my hyperboles are as nothing compared to the events to which they refer. If you study symbolism you will discover that it is a technique of rip-off by which figures are deliberately deprived of their ground. ... My canvases are surrealist, and to call them “theories” is to miss my satirical intent altogether. As you will find in my literary essays, I can write the ordinary kind of rationalistic prose anytime I choose to do so. You are in great need of some intense training in perception in the arts. (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 448)

In marked contrast, something like Jonathan Lethem’s essay “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism” (2007) is, despite its title, far more conservative than McLuhan’s work. “The Ecstasy of Influence” is the epitome of footnote connoisseurship; the author displays his erudition by providing a “key” for every line that he “plagiarizes” ... “except, alas, those sources I forgot along the way,” he writes (p. 68). Lethem emerges as a kind of slacker version of Philip Massinger, not quite justifying his not quite theft by not quite improving it: “Nearly every sentence I culled I also revised, at least slightly—for necessities of space, in order to produce a more consistent tone, or simply because I felt like it” (p. 68). McLuhan’s aim retains some of the incendiary charge that powered Tzara’s work in particular and Dada in general, while Lethem merely fizzles happily.

What is crucial to recognize is not only that economies as ostensibly different as cut-up and academic citation are not mutually exclusive; they are deeply imbricated. McCaffery’s (1986) major contribution to the theory of general economy is that it is not an alternative to a restricted economy—the two always coexist in an unequal but symbiotic relationship. “In most cases we will find a general economy as a suppressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture within the restricted, putting into question the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value” (p. 203). Derrida’s (1992) discussion of the gift is similar in that it suggests that while gifts circulate through the economy, they maintain a “relation of foreignness” to economic circulation, insisting on their separateness from the

process of circulation and exhaustion that typifies commodities (p. 7). In most instances, the general economy is held in check by the restricted economy, but is still percolating away, and occasionally “ruptures” the restricted economy to manifest itself for a brief period of time before it is once again suppressed, subverted, or rechannelled (Wershler-Henry, 2002).

The circulation of hybrid forms and borderline cases eventually produces its own economies. I will conclude by raising the possibility of using the circulatory trajectory of McLuhan’s work as a way of tracing the genealogy of a specifically and deliberately troubling knowledge economy: research creation. One of the reasons that the work of poet, critic, and scholar Steve McCaffery keeps reappearing in this essay is that McCaffery, and his longtime collaborator, Governor General’s Award-winning poet bpNichol, are the most contemporary poets that McLuhan mentions, in *City as Classroom* (McLuhan, Hutchon, & McLuhan, 1977). After even this brief discussion of McLuhan’s somewhat erratic citation practices, it should come as no surprise that *City as Classroom* refers to them as “b.p. nicol” and “Steve McCaffery” [sic] (p. 19). In any event, one of Nichol and McCaffery’s ongoing collaborative projects, the Toronto Research Group (TRG), distinguished itself by its development of a particular form of knowledge economy that it described with the single word “research.”

In his Introduction to *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine—The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group, 1973–1982* (written after Nichol’s death), McCaffery distinguishes a poet’s research from scholarly research by pointing out that the former “makes no pretence to a professional legitimation or an academic rigour” (McCaffery & Nichol, 1992, p. 12). He further distinguishes poetic research from “theory” (the general descriptor for much academic writing at the time that McCaffery was writing the book’s introduction, in 1991) on the grounds that theory is a reflective practice that occurs after the fact of writing and takes a prescriptive, curatorial approach to a work’s meaning (McCaffery & Nichol, 1992). By contrast, poetic research, for Nichol, is “an articulation of a particular (to this writer) understanding ... which may offer a way in for others if they choose to take it” (quoted in McCaffery & Nichol, 1992, p. 13). In McCaffery’s summation, research like the TRG’s is driven by a belief in “the provisionality of thoughts inevitably subjected to historical forces, socio-cultural change and the fluctuating relations of cultural disciplines” (McCaffery & Nichol, 1992, p. 13).

In *ABC of Reading TRG*, Peter Jaeger’s (1999) analysis of the TRG Manifesto articulates how the specific writing practices of the TRG share an affinity with McLuhan’s approach. Following on McCaffery’s description of the TRG’s research as “annotated booklists” juxtaposed on a “paratactic” (associational and permutational) cultural grid (McCaffery & Nichol, 1992, pp. 12–13), Jaeger (1999) writes: “In other words, the objects of their research are texts which they recycle in order to create new texts, within a new social context. The traditional scholar constructs an authoritative monologue, whereas the TRG constructs a dialogic response” (p. 74). Jaeger also describes how, at different stages, the TRG Manifesto both constructs a symbiotic attachment between writing and research and attempts to maintain a distinction between the two terms. The thrust of Jaeger’s (1999) argument is that “this seemingly marginal contradiction

actually foreshadows the multidirectional and unregulated drift of the future reports” (p. 75). Like Tzara’s writing and McLuhan’s, the TRG’s self-ironizing approach attacks the very economies that it parasitizes, riding off in several directions at once, refusing to do anything with its contradictions other than present them to the reader.

The TRG’s notion of research has strong affinities not just with McLuhan’s work, but with various statements on the subject of research creation from other fields of cultural endeavour. Just as the TRG maintains a distinction between scholarly and poetic research but uses the same word to name both activities, Lysianne Léchoit Hirt’s (2008) “CreaSearch: Methodologies and Models for Creation-Based Research Projects in Design” argues that every creative activity generates its own “feeling of research” that is distinct from that of scientific research (p. 151). As if in support of the TRG’s “multidirectional and unregulated” drift through heterogeneous types of content via different research methods, the designers and artists that Hirt interviewed on the subject of research creation “all insist on a possible ‘patchwork’ of many methodologies” (p. 155), further drawing comparisons with McLuhan’s mosaic method. Just as McLuhan branched out into pop pocketbooks and cut-up LPs—*The Medium Is the Massage*, conceived of by Jerome Agel as an accompaniment to the book of the same name (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1968a)—and the TRG produced performance art as well as text, Hirt’s paper valorizes “non-discursive results” even as it asks how such results might be evaluated within the relatively conservative citation economy of the academy (2008, p. 155).

Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk’s (2012) more recent article, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances,’” makes explicit reference to McLuhan and Parker’s *Counterblast* (1969) as part of its circulatory genealogy. Supporting their argument that research-creation is not so much a new method as an academic practice with growing legitimacy, their claims about the nature of research-creation will be familiar to readers of McLuhan, the TRG, Hirt, and their ilk:

[A]cademics (in the humanities and social sciences) have long-experimented with writing that challenges the logico-deductive or analytic forms of argumentation or presentation. Versions of the scholarly genre are recognizable: essays must have a thesis-statement, research-question, literature review, theory, method, presentation of findings, discussion and conclusion. Research-creation, as a method of inquiry, questions formulaic representations of the academic genre and the production of knowledge in print cultures. (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 6)

A considerable portion of Chapman and Sawchuk’s text concerns the ways in which both academic analysis and academic policy discourse have defined research-creation to date. After presenting their own taxonomy of research-creation—effectively, the protocols for a new knowledge economy, though they are careful to assert that they are not interested in policing the term—they reassert that “research-creation may act as an innovative form of cultural analysis that troubles the book, the written essay, or the thesis, as the only valid means to express ideas, concepts and the results of experiments” (p. 7). Here are the same sorts of paradoxes that Jaeger sees in the TRG’s re-

search, and the same sorts of irresolvable tensions that McCaffery identifies as characteristic of the play between the general and the restricted economy. What is clear is not only that such texts will continue to circulate in the knowledge economy of Communication Studies, but that they are inseparable from it. Borders must remain porous, and all disciplinary economies of knowledge are necessarily constructed around their own particular irritants. As Charles Bernstein (1992) puts it in “Optimism and Critical Excess,” “no method, much less, professionalization of method, has the answers. Art is still our greatest teacher of methodologies, and we risk losing our ground when we forget what art teaches, that art teaches” (p. 174). What matters is the conversation that is only just beginning—that is, the negotiation of our mutual incomprehensibility.

Donald Theall (2001) has remarked that in McLuhan’s case, the process of inserting his writing into a new knowledge economy was always both an explicit and duplicitous exercise in transfiguration. McLuhan loved “putting on the approach of his intended audience, while satirically putting on the audience through the duplicity of his observations” (p. 47). McLuhan’s forays into a range of different knowledge economies (including, but certainly not limited to, North American scholarly publishing, avant-garde poetics, celebrity television and radio culture, business writing, and Catholic theology) result in shifts in style and content in both his own work and the environment around it. The posthumous circulation of his work, as patron saint of the dot-com revolution, as inspiration for Friedrich Kittler and the “materialities of communication” scholars, and as hipster icon results in further shifts. Gaonkar and Povinelli’s (2003) circulation theory refers to such shifts as “transfigurations” (p. 386), a term intended to convey their interest in mapping social configurations rather than focusing on the meaning of a given work, issues of translation, and so on. From this perspective, whether or not McLuhan’s “putting on” other approaches exceeded his control or intent is irrelevant. What is of interest is the project of tracking where and how McLuhan’s thinking circulated, and how it was affected even as it changed the culture around it.

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