COUNTER-BLASTING CANADA

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Wilfred Watson

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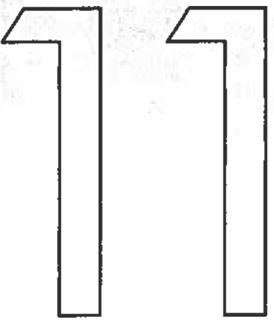

11 Marshall McLuhan as Vanishing Mediator

Darren Wershl

"Come into my parlor," said the computer to the specialist.
—Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point*

"How liberating to be told your field is dying. You can work in the gloaming, away from the glare. You are the ghoul of academia."
—Mark Sample, channeling Don DeLillo on Twitter

I WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST to observe that there are a great many different Marshall McLuhans in circulation at the moment—perhaps even too many, by some influential accounts, such as John Durham Peters's "McLuhan's Grammatical Theology." Nor would it be much help to repeat, as so many others have, that McLuhan's approach is inherently interdisciplinary (Peters 228), and that the scholars that are interested in it study his work in interdisciplinary settings. What I'm curious about is why that traffic rarely circulates back inside the academic fields in which one might expect to find it—namely, the discipline in which McLuhan was trained (English literary studies) and the one he helped to found (communication studies), especially given the professed interest that both disciplines have in interdisciplinarity. Instead of creating yet another mutant reading of McLuhan and sending it shambling off into interdisciplinary space, I'd like to spend some time considering the reasons for the qualified interest in McLuhan's work in Communications and English departments. In the terms of McLuhan's own Laws of Media, I'm

also interested in the implications that the return of his previously obsolesced body of work might have for both fields, but for English departments in particular. The questions this chapter raises are as follows: What would it mean to "do media theory" with the literary text as the object of study? What do we call this work when it takes place in an English department, especially if there are people elsewhere on campus doing similar things? And what would it mean to pursue these questions "in McLuhan's name"?

These questions raise issues that range from the pragmatic to the bureaucratic, but I think that they're all important. It's one thing to get on with the business of research, but doing so within the context of any institution requires significant amounts of civility, collegiality, and respect, if we want the institution to continue to function. This requires the willingness to consider why there are so many conflicting accounts of "McLuhan" in contemporary discourse. What we might perceive as conflicts or distortions in the reception of his work are, as Jerry Aline Flieger puts it, "a sign of the world's inconsistency, of the unthinkable coexistence of perspectives that are irreconcilable with our own" (80). What's necessary at this juncture is to allow our questions about McLuhan's place in contemporary literary studies to be inflected (perhaps even infected) by those other perspectives, in order to recognize that the true answer will be probably not be what we desire, but an inverted version of it, or what McLuhan might deem a "flip" into something else. As Flieger notes, taking such a risk in our perceptions is an opportunity to move away from self-delusion "into a clear-sighted recognition of the limitations of our field" (80). For literary professors interested in media, the truth of an interest in McLuhan is that despite the fact that McLuhan himself worked inside English departments, his work pointed him relentlessly outside of them, and that, in response, the discipline, including his home department, largely ostracized him. The main reason for this is that McLuhan's constant exhortation to focus on the study of media themselves rather than their content poses a direct challenge to the basic activity of literary scholars for at least the last century:

the generation of interpretations of content. Thinking about books and other aesthetic objects in McLuhan's wake means moving away from the interpretive tradition toward considerations of the location of these objects in culture: their materiality and history; the political economy of their production, circulation, and reception; and the way that cultural policy and other networks of power position them, and us in relation to them. However, there are entire fields of scholars that already do these things—communication studies, media studies, film studies, cultural studies—and have been doing so for most of the last century. Many of these fields have historical roots in English departments, but most now make their homes in more-or-less independent departments, programs, or research centres. So the question for English scholars that are interested in such a move, have the support of their home institutions (and make no mistake, there are many that are actively hostile to such an idea), and are willing to reimagine their relationship to their primary object of study, is how to do so without reinventing the wheel.

For individuals, the only problem is diligence. Part of the answer lies in a willingness to begin a deep engagement with the scholarship that has been generated in these fields *after* McLuhan, and in response to him, because there's a lot of it. On the level of departments and institutions, the situation is more complex. Something like Alan Liu's notion of a "critical digital humanities" presents a way forward that, while perhaps unrecognizable to many conservative English scholars, is nevertheless particular to the way that people trained in literary studies think about media, rather than the way that communication studies approaches it. The disciplinary history of digital humanities is still being written, and, though its relative beginnings lie elsewhere than in McLuhan's work, it still takes him into account. But as Liu points out, if digital humanities is going to make a valuable contribution to the discussion of global-cultural issues, it needs to create "a methodological infrastructure in which culturally aware technology complements technologically aware cultural criticism" ("Where Is Cultural Criticism" n. pag.). This will require opening up ongoing

and sometimes difficult conversations with scholars in traditional fields like English. McLuhan, for all his shortcomings—perhaps even because of them—might be a useful catalyst for such an encounter.

Personal Stakes

I have a personal stake in these questions because of my own disciplinary formation. McLuhan's writing was largely absent from the discourse of literary studies in Canada at least for the last two decades—since I entered the field as an undergraduate in 1984. Over that period, in a program that was known for its intense focus on innovative theoretical approaches, the only time that I remember McLuhan's work ever being invoked by a professor or another student was in the context of Raymond Williams's critique of McLuhan.[1] After training in English literary studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s, I left the university to work as a consultant, writer (nonfiction and poetry), and editor, in all cases specializing in the emerging world of digital publishing. When I returned to the university, because of my professional experience, instead of going back into an English department, I went to work in several different communication studies departments, first as contract faculty, then as tenure-track. I forfeited my tenure in communication studies to take a job for the first time in an English department, and was almost immediately assigned a research chair in interdisciplinary work on media and contemporary literature. When I worked in communication studies, I spent a lot of time advocating for the importance of poetics for the study of media and communication. In English, I've spent a great deal of time talking about the necessity of focusing on material media, circulation, and cultural policy as part of the study of literature. As far as I can tell from studying and working in both English and communications departments in Canada over the last two and a half decades, each discipline has a McLuhan-sized blind spot.

Two Sides of McLuhan

In communication studies, McLuhan's early work (*The Mechanical Bride* to *Understanding Media*) is taken more seriously and receives more attention than at any other point in the discipline's history. However, with a few notable exceptions,[2] communications scholars largely abjure the poetic McLuhan, choosing to emphasize his focus on the importance of material media form. McLuhan's small body of literary criticism (most of which is collected in *The Interior Landscape*) and his interest in the modernist avant-gardes redeems him for literary scholars in some way, but this work isn't taught, and isn't what interests people when they think of McLuhan. When literary studies considers McLuhan (at all), it is the ludic, literary McLuhan it favours—this is the "McLuhan as avant-garde poet" position, best exemplified by Donald Theall's work. The present collection, in conjunction with special sections such as the Readers' Forum on "The Age of McLuhan, 100 Years On" in *ESC: English in Canada*, suggests that there is some degree of interest in the topic from literary scholars, if only on momentous occasions. Certainly Richard Cavell, one of Canada's preeminent contemporary McLuhan scholars, is housed in an English department, but as far as I can tell, the majority of researchers interested in McLuhan who are not in communication studies are in film studies, humanities and social sciences, or interdisciplinary programs (and this should come as no surprise, given the interdisciplinary nature of McLuhan's work). But Marco Adria and Catherine Adams conclude their Introduction to the *ESC* feature by noting the "nuanced irony" of dubbing the last century "the Age of McLuhan": "McLuhan has been with us a century, and we are still exploring the depth of his ideas and their potential meanings" (3–4). In other words, McLuhan's legacy in literary studies is the continual posing of the question of what, exactly, that legacy might be, without much in the way of curricular impact. The real irony is that this proliferation of interpretations and opinions is business as usual for the sort of hermeneutics that McLuhan eschewed with his exhortation to focus on medium rather than content.

When McLuhan's emphasis on material media form over content is ignored, it is usually because of the scandal such an approach presents for literary studies' ongoing vested interest in the production of readings and interpretations. Instead, the invocation of McLuhan outside of communication studies is frequently in the service of a call for the study of media without an accompanying study of communication. This happens for professional reasons having to do with institutional histories and institutional formations, and I'm not sure that it's enough.

Vanishing Mediator

In other words, English and communication studies each ignore a different aspect of McLuhan's work, focusing on the parts of his legacy that are the most familiar, rather than the parts that would be most challenging, and therefore most useful to them.

The problem that concerns me here is academic in the most literal sense, because it deals with the ways that knowledge is organized and policed in a university setting. It's a cliché of contemporary academic life that our introductions often begin with a phrase like, "I'm housed in the [X] department, but my research is really about [Y]." For many scholars, the sort of work we produce now has more to do with how able we are to add to the conversation on a given topic in a meaningful way than with what we studied in graduate school, what our transcripts and diplomas say we're qualified to do, or what we were initially hired to teach. While this sort of freedom can be a boon for scholars yearning to make a positive contribution to areas that excite them, it also presents some genuine difficulties. In "Genealogical Notes on 'The Field,'" John Durham Peters observes that "We can no longer assume a homogeneous audience that will understand how we frame questions; many scholars produce communication research without even being aware that they're participating in a larger field" (134). Because we don't read deeply in each others' fields (and that's the charitable take on the subject), we often miss entire bodies of research on subjects that seem fresh to us. My first conference paper as a communication studies scholar was on the way that McLuhan scholars have taken McLuhan's pronouncements on symbolism, Mallarmé, and the newspaper at face value and embedded them without apparently ever bothering to look at what Mallarmé actually wrote on the subject (TL; DNR: it flies in the face of what McLuhan claims) (Wershler "News"). Now that I'm back in an English department after spending eight years in communication studies, I'm curious about how the emergent interest among literary scholars in topics such as McLuhan, cultural policy, and material media studies will manifest itself in disciplinary terms, given that communication studies has had well-developed literatures on them for most of a century. Figuring out a way forward involves identifying and addressing such exclusions and omissions, and, unfortunately, dealing with the inevitable administrative headaches and departmental turf wars that will follow. As Peters notes, "The current arrangement of knowledge fits no grand philosophy of history, but it clearly is shaped by pressures from state, market, society, and professional fashion; this is particularly true for communication studies/research" ("Genealogical" 133). In order to make sense of what a renewed interest in McLuhan's work among literary scholars might mean, it's time to begin to inventory these pressures.

I've recently come to think of McLuhan as a "vanishing mediator." In Fredric Jameson's terms, this is "some central mediatory figure or institution which can account for the passage from one temporal and historical state to another one" ("Vanishing" 75). Once the presence of a vanishing mediator has brokered some sort of institutional reorganization, "it has no further reason for being and disappears from the historical scene. It is thus in the strictest sense of the word a catalytic agent which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms" (78). Of course, things rarely vanish completely; there is usually some sort of residue. Moreover, that residue is often the basis for the emergence of the New, in the form of a dialectical return of something that had previously vanished. As is often the case, the reality of such a return can be much less pleasant than the nostalgic memory of

it. The question is, then, after it had helped to establish communication studies in Canada, did McLuhan's work ever actually vanish from the discourse of the discipline in any measurable way? What did his residual presence look like? Has there been a return, and, if so, how does the revived McLuhan differ from the first iteration?

Obsolescence and Retrieval (Communication Studies)

The answer to the first of these questions is an unqualified yes. McLuhan's production and reputation had both fallen off during the 1970s, the last decade of his life. Posthumously published works began to appear at the end of the 1980s, such as *Laws of Media* and a selected volume of letters. But the decline of interest in McLuhan's work within communication studies was one of the running themes of the 1989 special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication (CJC)* commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Understanding Media*. In his introductory remarks to the issue, guest editor and major McLuhan scholar Donald Theall wrote the following:

> The intervening period [between the *CJC*'s first McLuhan issue in 1969 and the 1989 issue Theall was editing], though, has seen McLuhan's reputation come under increasing criticism. While he probably contributed as much as any single person to making the public aware of communication as an issue of major importance, those professionally interested in communication research today do not as a rule take his work seriously. ("Guest" vii)

In the issue's lead article, Associate Editor Liss Jeffrey, who would shortly become the founding director of the McLuhan Global Research Network, echoes this sentiment: "McLuhan's influence persists in general cultural terms and his contribution is recognized in the work of a minority of serious communications scholars; yet simultaneously his academic reputation is in partial eclipse" (Jeffrey 4). In the issue's second article, Paul Heyer, a major Innis scholar, also uses the metaphor of "eclipse" to describe McLuhan's work, and goes on to state flatly that during the 1970s and early 1980s, McLuhan's work was "almost completely ignored" ("Probing" 31). Philip Marchand, McLuhan's biographer, describes how in McLuhan's last years, his reputation "continued to fade" ("Some Comments" 72). Such sentiments echo throughout later issues of the *CJC* as well; Paul Jones, for example, begins an article in 1998 with the sentence, "The immediate intellectual influence of the projects of Raymond Williams and Marshall McLuhan has long passed but their major works remain in print and each still warrants inclusion in textbooks of 'media theory'" (423).

Hot on the heels of the journal of record for Canadian communication scholars declaring that McLuhan's work was in decline, though, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, McLuhan's work was beginning to re-emerge in print, and to once again take a place on the stage of popular culture, in the context of the beginning of popular interest in networked home computing and the Internet. In 1989, McLuhan's pop collaborations with Jerome Agel and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* and *War and Peace in the Global Village*, both came back into print, and were reprinted again by *Wired* magazine's imprint HardWired, and yet again by Gingko Press in 2001. In the same year, MIT Press published Philip Marchand's biography of McLuhan; a new edition of *Understanding Media* followed in 1994. *Wired* (in)famously declared McLuhan its patron saint in the magazine's first issue in March/April 1993, and its editors continued to name-check "Saint Marshall" over the next few years (Wolf). This uptick of interest in McLuhan in west coast tech circles was prevalent enough that by 1995, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron noted it in *Mute* as a central feature of the stew of "right-wing neo-liberalism, counter-culture radicalism and technological determinism" that they dubbed "The Californian Ideology." In the Introduction to their 2005 edited volume *The Legacy of McLuhan*, Lance Strate and Edward Wachtel provide a concise review of the entire literature around McLuhan's thinking, including the collections of McLuhan's minor works, reappraisals, new critical

editions, and works by scholars with an interest in McLuhan that appeared in the later 1990s and early 2000s, especially among those working in digital media studies (8–11). From their perspective, five years into the new millennium, "The turn of the century has been accompanied by a kind of McLuhan revival or renaissance" (12). Since Strate and Wachtel's collection, we could add to their excellent literature review, at the very least, significant texts on McLuhan and his work by Coupland, Lamberti, Marchessault, Moss and Morra, Schnapp, and Watson and Blondheim. In addition, McLuhan's writing has been a constant touchstone for the German "Materialities of Communication" theorists,[3] whose work constitutes a major branch of contemporary media and communication theory.[4]

Despite this revival in popular culture and media studies at large, since the 1989 *CJC* special issue, McLuhan's ongoing presence in the discourse of Canadian communication studies itself could best be described as "residual" in the sense that Raymond Williams[5] and Charles Acland[6] use the term—a far from dominant but nevertheless stubbornly persistent element of the past that continues to play an active role in contemporary social processes (Williams 122). One of the more common recent approaches to the residual, particularly as enshrined in the subdisciplines of media archaeology and the study of imaginary media, is to treat it as having some sort of oppositional potential, because it not only provides alternatives to hegemonic discourse, but suggests that there always were other alternatives, even when it seems like there are none.[7] Acland, however, suggests that it's not that simple. An encounter with the residual should be the occasion to pose a variety of questions about it: "How do some things...become the background for the introduction of other forms? In what manner do the products of technological change reappear as environmental problems, as the 'new' elsewhere...? What are the qualities of our everyday engagement with the half-life of media forms and practices and with the formerly state of the art?" (Acland, Introduction xx). What characterizes the treatment of McLuhan's work in Canadian communication studies since 1989 is an ongoing interest in qualifying the significance of his thinking for the discipline, particularly in relation to that of Harold Innis.

Another special issue of the *CJC*, *Tracing Innis and McLuhan*, appeared in 2012, a year after the centenary of McLuhan's birth. This time, according to William Buxton, one of the issue's editors and, along with his colleague and frequent collaborator Paul Heyer, one of the leading authorities on Innis, part of the impetus was to "decouple" Innis and McLuhan, producing a "de-McLuhanized Innis" who is distinct from "the McLuhanist-centred Toronto School" (Buxton 577). Here, Buxton is reacting to a trend in the discipline's discourse that extends back to the early 1980s, in which a series of texts have linked McLuhan and Innis closely.[8] There are good reasons for this pairing. Supplementing McLuhan's media theory with Innis's work on empire, bureaucracy, and monopolies of knowledge provides an analysis of power that is largely absent from McLuhan's writing. What McLuhan provides in exchange, in addition to boiling Innis's ponderous volumes and gnomic prose down to a series of catchy and immediately memorable aphorisms, is to take Innis's interest in systems and mediation and transform it into a theory of media as material form. But Buxton's stance in 2012 is symptomatic of McLuhan's current cultural capital in Canadian communication studies; in comparison to the sober, scholarly work of Innis, dense with citations and the other furniture of serious scholarly writing, McLuhan's ludic, breezy prose and penchant for argument by assertion often come up short. The growing preference for Innis over McLuhan in Canada has much to do with Innis's roots in the legitimizing solidity of political economy and history.

In his Introduction to the 1964 edition of Innis's *The Bias of Communication* (first published in 1951), McLuhan claims, "I am pleased to think of my own book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (University of Toronto Press, 1962) as a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the psychic and social consequences, first of writing then of printing" ("Introduction To" 8). Despite this high degree of praise from McLuhan himself, Innis spent the second half of the twentieth century in McLuhan's shadow. In 1998, McLuhan biographer Philip Marchand wrote, "If Innis is read in the future it will be as a footnote to McLuhan and not vice versa" (*Marshall McLuhan* 123). Marchand may have rushed to

judgement. because in McLuhan's own terms. McLuhan and Innis are undergoing a figure-ground reversal. Due to the work of Innis scholars like Heyer, Buxton, and Acland, and Innis's biographer, Alexander John Watson, Innis's cultural capital in communication studies and media studies is waxing and McLuhan's is waning.

This ongoing qualification of McLuhan's legacy within Canadian communication studies occasionally finds its way into popular discourse as well. A few days before the McLuhan centenary, I was interviewed by Peggy Curran of the *Montreal Gazette*, along with my colleagues Charles Acland and Will Straw. Despite the fact that we all work together closely on a regular basis and are of like minds on most issues, including the foundational nature of McLuhan's thought for communication studies in Canada, the structure of the article positions me as the pro-McLuhan scholar ("[Wershler argues that McLuhan] was probably more familiar than anyone else in Canada at the time with what was happening among modernist writers and artists in Europe in the early part of the 20th century"), Acland as the critic ("[Acland] still has trouble with what he sees as McLuhan's shoddy scholarship—a bad habit of making blanket statements that weren't actually proven and didn't hold up under intense scrutiny"), and Straw as the synthesis of the two positions ("Straw said there has been a growing recognition of McLuhan's media musings as 'characteristically [if not uniquely] Canadian. That is, media help us to locate ourselves in the world and in relation to other people and places, and this has been a long-standing concern of other Canadian thinkers like the historian Harold Innis, now considered a key founder of media thinking'" [Curran]). Straw has the last word, once again asserting the growing interest in establishing Innis's reputation as a theorist of media and communications. Where Straw and Acland are diplomatic with their comparisons, John Durham Peters (citing Edmund Carpenter on McLuhan) is much more blunt: "Innis was a rock of integrity, while McLuhan was frankly irresponsible. Probes deserve probity" (Peters, "McLuhan's" 240). So within communication studies, a qualified interest in McLuhan's work certainly remains, but without the hagiographic aura that

surrounds McLuhan in popular culture and technology journalism. But what about the growing interest in media studies broadly construed and McLuhan specifically among literary scholars?

Mediating Literature?

For Toby Miller, the difference between English departments on the one hand and communication studies and media studies on the other has everything to do with class politics. From Miller's perspective, English literary studies, with its celebration of the "life of the mind," is the provenance of elite institutions and the upper classes. Communication studies and media studies, however, are working-class disciplines, because of their perceived practicality (2, passim). Miller is clear that he is describing the situation in the United States, but his argument also has a ring of truth for many Canadian institutions.[9]

There's another factor that complicates the situation: in the current tough economic climate, English literary studies spends an enormous amount of time defending itself from even the possibility that it might be perceived as anything less than relevant—Google "English degree" and "worthless" in the same search string to see for yourself. Alternatively, look at a classic example of the English-degree-disparaging genre, such as Thomas H. Benton's (a.k.a. William Pannapacker) "Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go," which jokes at the expense of English graduates that "No one is impressed by their knowledge of Jane Austen." The turn of English departments toward co-op programs and an interest in media reads, in part, like slumming: an attempt to capture some of communication studies' and media studies' perceived practicality and instrumentality for itself without sacrificing any of its remaining cultural capital. The counternarrative that asserts the ongoing value of an English degree in the workforce is part and parcel of the same attempt to reposition the discipline as instrumental,[10] because, rather than resorting to the traditional narrative that the role of literary studies is to produce good citizens, not workers, it relies instead on a demonstration that literary studies

is, above all, a form of training that will prove useful on the job.

Part of the reason that English literary studies is experiencing a crisis is that, after the so-called "failure" of theory[11] (also really more of a relegation to residual status), options other than a retreat into the canon are scarce. There will always be a central place in the academy for historical work; the chronicling and analysis of the history of literary studies as a discipline remains a large and daunting but necessary task as part of any next step. But in parallel to that project of historical reassessment, branching out into other media will prove to be more of a challenge for literary scholars in professional (if not practical) terms. If we consider literary studies and communication studies as fields of inquiry rather than disciplines, there is very little by way of a problem for established scholars. It's easy to imagine bringing a range of perspectives to bear on the same object of study, and, by virtue of the principle of academic freedom, it's easy to imagine established scholars in any field expanding what they do to include the study of media. Paul Heyer notes that before McLuhan, Innis was "an early proponent of interdisciplinarity. He did not, as some later devotees suggested, advocate the abolishment of conventional disciplinary parameters, but he did insist that there are ocasionally points of focal overlap, or common ground, between disciplines that can provide for cross-fertilization" (*Harold Innis* 18). Institutionalizing that study within an English department, though, in order to attract and retain faculty and students, is another matter. Philip Marchand has carefully documented the resistance to his work on media that McLuhan encountered from his colleagues in English during his lifetime (*Marshall McLuhan* 92–96). The subsequent history of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology is one of a constant struggle for resources and recognition. To this day, the University of Toronto lacks a communication studies program, though its iSchool, which has enfolded the McLuhan Program into its vast bulk, may develop to cover some of the same areas.

Part of the reason that literary scholars interested in media find themselves in a quandary is that many of the disciplines that literary scholars helped to found, which were often (and in some cases still are) housed inside English departments, such as communication studies, cultural studies, and film studies, have achieved enough legitimacy that they now exist as independent departments, schools, and programs in many universities. To some extent, these new disciplines have "eaten the lunch" of literary studies, growing their faculty and student populations as English departments shrink. So when English professors interested in media search for a vocabulary to describe what it is they are doing, the options are limited.

Less Poetics

"Media studies" might seem like an obvious solution, but as various disciplinary histories of the term demonstrate, it raises many difficulties. The term is much more common in the United States than in Canada, where communication studies departments predominate. Updating the classic mid-twentieth-century study of US media and communications research traditions by Paul Lazarsfeld, which instilled a surprisingly resilient binary between an "administrative" empirical tradition and a "critical" ideological tradition, Sheryl N. Hamilton's concise history of the disciplinary formation of communication studies in Canada points out that the dominant US tradition of communication and media studies was administrative until at least the 1980s (11), that is, much closer to what we would describe as public relations (helping private and public institutions communicate their messages to a range of audiences). In Canada, Hamilton writes, in response to both its marginalization by US histories and the specific conditions of the institutionalization of the discipline here, the signature quality of communication studies is to imagine itself as "always already critical" (17), whether justifiably or not. In the United States, histories that focus on the critical side of communication studies (see Peters's "Genealogical") often ignore the difference between Canadian and US traditions entirely, or overwrite (Hamilton 17) what would be termed "communication studies" in Canada with the label "media studies." The history of media studies in the UK

is different again, as Tom O'Malley has begun to chart, following the work of Asa Briggs and Peter Burke. What all of these studies have in common is that they are attempts to establish claims for the legitimacy of a particular perspective against others. I think it's fair comment to observe that in Canada at least, the difference between "communication studies" and "media studies" has as much to do with *realpolitik* as anything else; "media studies" may be simply what academics interested in communication, mediation, and material media call what they do when they can't call it "communication studies" for fear of arousing the ire of another department at the same institution—or to block someone else from studying it. I know of at least one instance in the last decade where a department changed its name to include the terms "media" and "film" precisely to keep the English department at the same university from launching a media studies initiative. What Hamilton calls for instead of this sort of turf warfare is a delicate balancing act, "honouring our ghosts but only and always while encouraging more ferment in the field" (23). For Hamilton, McLuhan is explicitly one of those ghosts. But if the problem with his legacy in communication studies is a need for a more active critical imagination, in English, the obverse is true. Literary studies needs McLuhan to point to a less poetic and a more critical future.

Following the work of Theall's *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan*, I've argued elsewhere that, in the context of communication studies, it makes sense to think of McLuhan as adopting the tactics of the modernist avant-gardes (see Wershler, "News"). My reasoning was that even though "the analogy between a poem and a medium of communication was, according to McLuhan, extremely tight" (Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan* 129), poetics in general and McLuhan in particular is what communication studies has largely disavowed in the interest of establishing itself as a "serious" discipline rooted in the methods of social science and the gravitas of history. Any discipline consists of an assemblage of intersecting systems of production, circulation, and consumption that constantly compete (and occasionally co-operate) with each other in order to produce meaning (Wershler, "Marshall McLuhan"). For communication studies, poetics is one such system. Further, poetics is not something that can be purged from the discipline, but rather a constituitive element of it. Recent contributions that have pushed the discipline of communication studies in productive new directions, such as the rise of the discourse of research-creation (Chapman and Sawchuk), owe much to the ongoing residual influence of poetics.

However, now that I'm housed in an English department rather than a communication studies department, I'm beginning to wonder if a poetic McLuhan does what English literary studies *needs*, or merely what it *desires*. Media poetics is a heterogeneous practice without theory, or, as Charles Bernstein would claim, a "strategy of tactics" (164). As such, it is fully congruent with contemporary poetics and therefore not much of an irritant, and unlikely to push the discipline to do something other than the status quo. From some perspectives, such as Paul Bové's critique (38) of the Practical Criticism that McLuhan practiced and tried to emulate in his media work, it might even be actively deleterious. The assumption that the theoretical tools that have always been useful for the analysis of literature will continue to function when considering media doesn't necessarily hold.

Benjamin Peters gives voice to a common assumption among media scholars with a background in literary studies, namely, that "media behave a lot like words, or syntactical units identifiable to those fluent in the circumstances of their use" (22). I'd argue that that all depends on whose definition of words you happen to be using. I've already mentioned the significant role that the German "Materialities of Communication" scholars have played in contemporary communication studies; other than Friedrich Kittler, though, they aren't widely read in English departments. In both the Afterword to the eponymous *Materialities of Communication* collection (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 396), and its coda, "Materialities/The Nonhermeneutic/Presence" (Gumbrecht 14), which appeared a decade later, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argued that the Saussurean

definition of the sign, which many literary scholars still rely on heavily, should be abandoned. His reasoning is that the Saussurean sign abrogates all concern with materiality in favour of a transcendent meaning that is always located elsewhere; literary studies under the sign of Saussure is effectively a perpetual quest for the signified, endlessly generating interpretations of the same canonical texts from the perspective of every new theory that comes down the pike.

Instead, Gumbrecht advocates for an adoption of Louis Hjelmslev's schema, which imposes "substance" and "expression" on to form and content in order to form a matrix of four fields that would be components of each and every sign. For Gumbrecht, "substance of content" is the field of unstructured impressions, thoughts and memories—in short, the Imaginary; "form of content" would refer to something like Foucauldian discourse, that structures what is possible to say and not say in a given culture at a given historical moment. "Substance of expression" would consist of the physical aspects of signs—the material of media itself; and finally, "form of expression" would refer to organized materiality, or, what communication scholars including McLuhan refer to as media forms and formats. Gumbrecht's point is that none of these fields can produce meaning on its own, which solves the problem of the effacing of the material signifier in favour of the evanescent signified. The job of the critic working with this model becomes the reconstruction of the processes through which articulated meaning can emerge rather than hermeneutic interpretation (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 398). (Franco Moretti arrives at the same conclusions from another direction entirely, advocating "a clear preference for *explanation over interpretation*" ["Graphs...–3" 63].)

Gumbrecht's schema maps approximately onto Lisa Gitelman's influential definition of media as "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation" (7). Throughout her work, Gitelman demonstrates the power and efficacy of beginning from such a position. Gitelman literally occupies a space between English literary studies and communication, being cross-appointed to both departments. What she does in her own practice, though, bears little resemblance to what most literary scholars do. And this is the point: working with media cannot be business as usual for literary scholars. So what if, to use Elena Lamberti's formulation, "applying McLuhan" "to the critical evaluation of society" rather than "engaging with" McLuhan (*McLuhan's Mosaic* 231) should consist of not thinking about literary content poetically at all? In the best-case scenario, McLuhan's return from obsolescence might be the harbinger of another mediation, namely, one that could produce something distinct from an *arriviste* version of communication studies or media history, namely, what we have come to refer to as the digital humanities.

The history of digital humanities is distinct from the complex histories of communication studies and media studies, as field histories like Susan Hockey's "The History of Humanities Computing" delineate. As the title of Matthew Kirschenbaum's key essay "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" suggests, though digital humanities has now gained a foothold in many different disciplines, it is playing a particularly active role in determining the future of literary studies in English. This is due to the way that the term is deployed instrumentally, with what Kirschenbaum's prose suggests is a certain righteous zeal:

> Digital humanities has also, I would propose, lately been galvanized by a group of younger (or not so young) graduate students, faculty members (both tenure line and contingent), and other academic professionals who now wield the label "digital humanities" instrumentally amid an increasingly monstrous institutional terrain defined by declining public support for higher education, rising tuitions, shrinking endowments, the proliferation of distance education and the for-profit university, and underlying it all the conversion of full-time, tenure-track academic labor to a part-time adjunct workforce. ("What is Digital Humanities")

Digital humanities is still very much in an active and productive ferment, as collaborative volumes such as *Debates in the Digital Humanities* and *Digital_Humanities* indicate. It seems to me that digital humanities is even more misunderstood than media studies by many English professors. On the subject of several of the young digital humanities scholars that Kirschenbaum references, comments from my colleagues in English frequently include phrases like "They'd fit better in a communication studies department." These comments are telling, because they misunderstand the present of English departments and the history of communication studies alike. Communication studies has its own epistemology and its own problematics, even on the occasions when it and digital humanities share the same objects (and, sometimes, the same methods). One challenge digital humanities will have to face is finding a way to do what many communication studies have been doing now for decades without reduplicating efforts and erasing intellectual histories.

The core move of the digital humanities—namely, to incorporate techniques rarely used until now in the humanities to study the objects that humanities traditionally engages with—is McLuhanesque in spirit rather than letter. Rather than attempting to *write like* McLuhan, in a poetic style, it *acts like* McLuhan did, launching into a deep engagement with modes of intellectual investigation from outside of its home discipline, such as quantitative analysis, data visualization, and distant reading. As Franco Moretti notes of his own attempts to apply network theory to literature, such experiments are not always successful, and can fail entirely ("Network Theory"). But the point of Moretti's work is not to assert the superiority of quantitative analysis. Over and over, what his writing does is to reveal the blind spots in what literary studies knows about its objects, and about itself. For example, out of his engagement with graphs comes not the suggestion that English professors need to spend all of their time graphing the books that they read, but that between the traditional temporal categories of literary analysis, the event and the *longue durée*, there is a middle level, the cycle, that literary scholars rarely work with and don't fully understand ("Graphs...–1" 76). This is the payoff: an entire category of analysis that has been ignored for the entire history of the novel, a form we thought we knew well. There is a lot of work to be done here for scholars willing to take up the challenge.

Another intriguing aspect of the digital humanities is its investment in the notion of "critical making." McLuhan wrote in 1961 that "The humanities are moving out of their centuries-old consumer and appreciation phase into a depth phase of rigorous producer-orientation" ("The Humanities" 14). Critical making fully occupies this contention with a range of practices and accompanying manifestos whose basic contention is that scholars need to make things as well as write about them, and that making can also be a critical practice (see especially Garnet Herz's 352-page collection of 10 zine-like pamphlets, *Critical Making*[12] for a range of examples; for a different take on the same notion, see the "Carpentry" chapter of Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*.) For Matt Ratto, who coined the term in 2008 (and, like McLuhan, a professor at the University of Toronto), the goal of critical making is to reconnect aspects of the world that are often held separate...as was McLuhan's in 1961, attempting to think past the deadlock of C.P. Snow's two cultures ("The Humanities" 17).

This is, of course, the best-case scenario.

The Grim Stuff: Inoculations and Edupreneurianism

To his credit, McLuhan anticipated the necessity for a shift in what English professors do a long time ago. In 1951, in the only extant letter from McLuhan to Innis, McLuhan wrote that believed that the serious study of the "function and effect of communication on society" was the only thing that would keep English departments from the decline in perceived value that already afflicted the study of the classics in the mid-twentieth century: "As a teacher of literature it has long seemed to me that the *functions* of literature cannot be maintained in present circumstances without radical alteration of the procedures of teaching. Failure in this respect relegated Latin and Greek to the specialist; and

English literature has already become a category rather than an interest in school and college" (*Letters* 222). When the analysis of communication and material media forms in conjunction with literature is limited to a few individuals rather than departments or disciplines, though, it may exacerbate the situation.

In his essay "Operation Margarine," Roland Barthes uses the metaphor of inoculation to describe a strategy that dominant discourses can use to neutralize opposition from residual alternatives. Inoculation proceeds not by direct confrontation, but by allowing a little of its opposition to manifest itself, in the name of diversity and democracy. The net effect is to strengthen the existing system rather than challenging it: "revolt disappears all the more surely since, once at a distance and the object of a gaze, the Established Order is no longer anything but a Manichean compound and therefore inevitable, one which wins on both counts, and is therefore beneficial" (*Mythologies* 42). As Paul Bové pointed out several decades ago, many English departments maintained and continue to maintain a fantasy of equality rooted in professional pluralism. From such a stance, an ideal department would consist of scholars with as many different critical points of view as possible; a concentration in any one area—especially "contemporary" areas like media studies—threatens the notion of pluralism itself. For Bové, though, the implicit assumption that no critical stance can be more timely or desirable than any other is tantamount to the very consumerism it purports to stave off—a sort of boutique liberalism (27–28). So when they can be found at all inside English departments, academics interested in media studies in general and McLuhan in particular often serve as inoculations for their departments against anyone else having to learn anything about media or technology. The source of such resistance, even when significant numbers of literary scholars are seeking a way forward "after" high theory and should be willing to investigate any likely options, are external economic pressures on the university itself.[13]

As a consequence of the ongoing economic crisis and increases in university enrolment (T. Miller 8), the humanities are under attack (Turcato); organizations like 4Humanities (http://4humanities.org) and scholars such as Toby Miller have made an analysis of the situation central to their current work. Miller describes how (as McLuhan anticipated) when the classics were unseated from their role as "a privileged entry point into civilization" (35), English departments assumed that mantle, and are now being challenged for it by competing discourses that advocate for the primacy of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. The re-emergence of interest in McLuhan's work is, I think, a harbinger of that shift. The issue is what form the humanities in general and literary studies in particular will take once the shift is complete.

Alan Liu uses the word "encounter" to describe the relationship between media scholarship (with McLuhan as its figurehead) and literary studies, because an encounter indicates "a thick, unpredictable zone of contact—more borderland than border line—where (mis)understandings of new media are negotiated along twisting, partial, and contradictory vectors" ("Imagining"). The fantasy is that the result of this encounter will be something like the "critical digital humanities" that Liu calls for elsewhere ("Where Is Cultural Criticism"): a marriage of the best of cultural criticism, book history, and materialist media studies. Presumably this would also mean a greater degree of intercourse between the academy and culture at large. In "McLuhan and the Humanities," Richard Cavell points out that McLuhan's championing of interdisciplinarity and process over the traditional model of knowledge production by specialists was in the interest of creating an "involved world" where research was a part of everyday life and even politicians have doctorates. But with the observation that "a process model of knowledge doesn't allow the certainties, or even the satisfactions, of traditional research" (17), Cavell implies that there is a price to be paid for a greater integration of the academy and public life as well.

The truth of this encounter could be quite depressing for the humanities in general and English literary studies in particular. Cavell's take is that "as Google and Wikipedia attest, research is now a full-time activity in which everyone is involved—research is corporate, in this sense, with students increasingly taking on the roles of 'edupreneurs'" ("McLuhan and the Humanities" 17). As

Liu's *The Laws of Cool* and edited collections such as Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco's *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* anticipated. and. as the 2014 panic over the sudden rise and fall of rhetoric around MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) demonstrated all too well, there is a real and present desire to gain access to the academy as a new market, "disrupting" traditional structures like tenure, peer review, departments and faculty unions in the name of market efficiencies and profitability (Bogost, "Educational Hucksterism"). As Liu's "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" and *The Laws of Cool* describe, knowledge work and digital humanities both have an uneasy relationship with the neoliberal and the instrumental. Whether housed in English departments or extradepartmental research centres (Mueller), a McLuhan-inspired approach to media studies brings with it no guarantee of criticality. John Durham Peters, for one, suggests that McLuhan lost his bet that it would be possible to "dispense with facts for the sake of truth" ("McLuhan's" 240). But this is precisely the mode of contemporary politics, from George W. Bush's faith-based presidency to Rob Ford's Toronto. McLuhan's iconoclasm and irreverence for academic institutions have value for those institutions, but play into the hands of their enemies all too easily, which is precisely why it's necessary to consider Hamilton's caveat. The best way to honour the spirit of our ghosts might be to betray the letter of their work.

McLuhan remains a significant figure not simply because of his own writing, but because he represents the truth of what an interdisciplinary approach means: its transformation into something that many professors will not recognize and do not want. Rather than wallpapering over that reality with a fantasy, we—and here I mean those of us that are housed in English departments regardless of our interdisciplinary commitments—need to begin by thinking about McLuhan in terms of his residuality: not just what his work meant in its precise social and historical context, but what has been able to appear because of his work that nevertheless questions and challenges it.

Notes

1. For a summary of Williams's position on McLuhan, see Paul Jones, "The Technology Is Not the Cultural Form?"
2. Exemplary contemporary Canadian communications scholars with a deep investment in an approach that might be called "poetic" include Kim Sawchuk, Peter C. van Wyck, Elena Lamberti, and the late Donald Theall.
3. See especially Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, *Materialities of Communication*; Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*; and Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*.
4. Here again there are a number of oddities that merit further discussion. For example, Kittler's championing of both McLuhan and the mathematical communication theory of Shannon and Weaver, as the way that McLuhan describes the relationship between content and media channels is conflicts with Shannon and Weaver's approach.
5. See Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" in *Marxism and Literature*.
6. See Acland's Introduction to *Residual Media*.
7. See especially Siegfreid Zielinski, "Modelling Media for Ignatius Loyola." Zeilinski writes, "the main purpose of this archaeological work is to counter current tendencies towards standardization and universalization in the interest of a uniform global market with the rich variety of variants offered by bygone eras" (54).
8. See Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*; Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/Mcluhan/Grant*; Paul Heyer, *Communications and History*; James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture*; Graeme H. Patterson, *History and Communications*.
9. For example, the University of Toronto, home to both McLuhan and Innis as well as a world-class English department, still has no communication studies department, though it has recently sprouted a variety of units that conduct media studies. At my former home institution, Wilfrid Laurier University, the traditional role of the English department as the default home of arts undergraduates seeking a general BA has been supplanted by Communication Studies, which boasts a student complement that approaches a tenth of the entire university's student population in size.
10. For example, see Jordan Weismann, "The Best Argument for Studying English? The Employment Numbers."
11. See Paul A. Bové, *In the Wake of Theory*; and Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *What's Left of Theory?*
12. Garnet Herz, ed. *Critical Making*, 2012-11-14-1225 ed., 10 vols. (2012). See http://conceptlab.com/criticalmaking/.
13. For two accounts, see Bové, *In the Wake of Theory*, and John Guillory, *Cultural Capital*.