



News That Stays News: Marshall McLuhan and Media Poetics

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Abstract

Beginning from the formative influence of Marshall McLuhan on the discourses of communication studies and media studies, this essay argues for a re-examination of the importance of poetics to these discourses. This re-examination would consist of two projects: an historical assessment of McLuhan's own use of modernist avant-garde poetics (because of the deformations and transfigurations that McLuhan visits on poetic texts); and an investigation into the relevance that contemporary poetry and poetics holds for communication studies and media studies.

The only extant letter from Marshall McLuhan to Harold Innis (dated March 14, 1951) is one of the foundational documents of Communication Studies. [1][#N1] This letter is important because it's not only one of the first clear statements of McLuhan's interest in the importance of "technological form" over "informative purpose" (that is, "content"), [2][#N2] but also of his notion of "organizing an entire school of studies" around the subject of communication. [3][#N3] In terms of their home disciplines, the two were worlds apart; McLuhan was teaching in an English department, and Innis was working as a political economist. So what does McLuhan invoke to entice Innis with the viability of his new idea? The unlikely answer is poetry, specifically, the poetry of the modernist avant-garde: "the symbolists since Rimbaud and Mallarmé," along with "Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lewis and Yeats." [4][#N4] From McLuhan's perspective at the time of this letter, and, arguably, throughout his career, *the* germane discourse for the discussion of media is *poetics*. Or, as Charles Bernstein would have it, media poetics might be "*the continuation of poetry by other means*". [5][#N5] Or in other media.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in "Joyce, Mallarmé and the Press," McLuhan claims that "real understanding of the changes in modern communication should have come mainly from the resourceful technicians among modern poets and painters". [6][#N6] The specific aspect of modernist avant-garde poetics that first attracted McLuhan is its interest in the formal qualities of newspapers. Ezra Pound, a frequent correspondent of McLuhan's during the same period as the Innis letter, provides the most compact and pithy explanation. While explicating the basis of his argument for a material science of poetry [7][#N7] in his *ABC of Reading*, Pound writes that "Literature is news that STAYS news." [8][#N8] Long after its subject matter has lost its immediacy, the material and formal properties of a poetic text, and the manner in which it circulates through

culture, impart crucial information about how it continues to make meaning.

Regardless of McLuhan's enthusiasms for Innis's work on the economic and social consequences of communications media, "In particular his studies of the newspaper as a major branch of the technology of print," [9][#N9] and regardless of Innis's response to McLuhan's letter that he "would like to see [McLuhan's] views elaborated as they could be used as a basis for general discussion," [10][#N10] Paul Heyer notes that "there is no evidence that Innis ever read Pound's poetry, despite McLuhan's efforts to show him its importance." [11][#N11] Innis was not the only one: Outside of McLuhan's own practice, too few scholars have been willing to recognize and tap the potential that the poetics of the modernist avant-garde offered, and still offer, for developing new theoretical and methodological tools for investigating the material and circulatory aspects of communication.

Other Means

The converse of Bernstein's aphorism is also true: An irruption of imaginative writing strategies within a positivist discourse is a form of poetics as well. In "The 'Poetics' of Communication," Bill Schwarz assigns a triumvirate of meanings to contemporary uses of the term. Poetics designates not only a narrative style, but also a method for devising the object of critical inquiry, and a mode of writing "after theory," which takes structuralism and poststructuralism into account but also seeks new ways of engaging with everyday life and the social, in a range of voices and styles.

In terms of narrative style, Schwarz understates the case when he writes that poetics is "self-consciously lively and non-academic." [12][#N12] Poetics frequently makes use of figures and tropes common to poetry proper, along with (or instead of) the methods and devices of conventional forms of academic criticism, in order to frame concepts and issues arising from a particular text, often while self-reflexively and critically drawing attention to the writer's act of framing itself. This troping can result in texts that seem deliberately and willfully perverse to those unfamiliar with their conventions. McLuhan's once-infamously "difficult" poetic stylizations, which *Playboy* described in 1969 as "at once enigmatic, epigrammatic and overgrown with arcane literary and historic allusions", [13][#N13] seem positively readerly when juxtaposed with the work of poet and political scientist Bruce Andrews.

Writing can recognize its social ground by contesting its establishment, its institutionalization.—Radicalism as analytic. And if radical writing implies a self-questioning, a "hermeneusis of itself and its own activity," this needs to reach as far as the workings of the social sphere itself. Not just to contest the linear aggressiveness & overcertainties of 'regular' language by means of symbols & double meanings, but to contest the processes or the vehicles that deliver *both* meanings (of every doubling, & of all those swooning ironies and ambiguities). Not just to take as a given the existing apparatus in order to push for the priority of group interest, or self-expression. Instead, to make as visible as possible the limits & norms & operations of the machinery. To show the *possibilities* of sense & meaning being constructed; to foreground the limits of the possible—& our possible lives; to create impossibility. [14][#N14]

Such stylistic decisions are inevitably inseparable from methodology for the practitioners of

poetics. The differences in the stylistic, methodological, and ideological inflection of individual works of poetics can be drastic: Schwarz, for example, ties poetics to an attempt to recover the “human” [15][#N15] in a way that many contemporary poets and other practitioners of poetics, Andrews included, [16][#N16] might find problematic. The Toronto Research Group (a collective pseudonym for Canadian poets bpNichol and Steve McCaffery) make a point of dubbing their forays into poetics as “research” rather than “theory,” because they associate the latter with a practice “driven by mastery and the desire to curate a work’s meaning,” which always occurs “*after* the fact of writing.” [17][#N17] Poetics is writing as thinking, process as product.

Poetics also devises its objects of inquiry differently than other forms of critical writing. In his *Introduction to Poetics*, Tzvetan Todorov writes that “In contradistinction to the interpretation of particular works, [poetics] does not seek to name meaning, but aims at a knowledge of the general laws that preside over the birth of each work. But in contradistinction to such sciences as psychology, sociology, etc., it seeks these laws within literature itself.” [18][#N18] Like McLuhan, Todorov sees no reason “to confine to literature alone the type of studies crystallized in poetics: we must know ‘as such’ not only literary texts but *all* texts, not only verbal production but *all* symbolism.” [19][#N19] “Interdisciplinary” always falls short of describing poetics, because it constitutes itself at least in part from each new object it encounters rather than strictly according to a set of pre-existing discourses.

Todorov argues that while the work of the last century and a half of poets and novelists is a rich repository of theoretical ideas and strategies, these remain largely unexplored because “their source as well as their form of expression keep these ideas from crossing the academic threshold, and they remain in a state of abstract formulas rather than being embodied in an analytic and descriptive effort.” [20][#N20] This phenomenon is not limited to the realm of French literary theory that Todorov describes; in Schwarz’s terms, poetics is also the unspeakable element within the codified systems of knowledge that constitute Communication Studies in the British and Canadian traditions. [21][#N21] (As Sheryl N. Hamilton has demonstrated, U.S. American traditions of Communication Studies, from the Chicago School to the Functionalism of Paul Lazarfeld, Wilbur Schramm et. al, have very different origins, in market-driven instrumentalism rather than a critical approach. [22][#N22])

The potential for Communication Studies that McLuhan saw in the poetics of the modernist avant-garde has remained exactly that: potential. As Gertrude Robinson has noted, “While the general outlines of Innis’ and McLuhan’s work are known, whether they have inspired a unique kind of Canadian scholarship is difficult to determine.” Citing feminism as an example of a major theoretical field that has important implications for scholarship in the wake of Innis and McLuhan, Robinson asks, “Is there any other theoretical approach which has remained in intellectual limbo for an equivalent period of time?” [23][#N23] Poetics is one possible answer to that question. If media poetics remains in limbo, though, it is not due to a lack of examples, [24][#N24] but because attempts to define the field of Communication Studies in Canada have usually treated McLuhan’s poetics as a *pharmakon*—a constitutive element of a body that nevertheless must be excluded in order to delimit the border between inside and out. [25][#N25] Liss Jeffrey described this paradox in 1989, when Communication Studies was already well established as a discipline, yet McLuhan’s credibility within the academy was at a low ebb: “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”. [26][#N26] For Derrida,

such exclusions constitute the inaugural gesture of logic itself. [27][#N27] It is hardly surprising, then, to encounter the same gesture at moments when a new discipline seeks to claim its legitimacy.

While works such as Robert Babe's canon-making *Canadian Communication Thought* include McLuhan (and Northrop Frye, for that matter) in their lists of founding thinkers, they are more reluctant to actually consider the theoretical and methodological implications that McLuhan's writing style raises—that is, that the “discipline” might well be something much more unruly and disreputable than a social science. Hamilton remarks on a notable lack of “ongoing self-scrutiny” in this discourse: “Canadian communication studies research is assumed to be *already* within a critical paradigm, and the paradigm itself is assumed to be necessarily and essentially politically economic. Unfortunately, such assumptions do not do justice to the diversity of work being produced under the name ‘critical.’” [28][#N28]

Poetics has had a surprising number of engagements with political economy, [29][#N29] but it inclines more toward the dialogic than the dialectic, admitting a polyphony of voices that refuse to resolve synthetically. However, its practice can still be both critical and political. Bernstein adds that the relationship of poetics to conventional criticism and theory is that of “an excess, or, better, a complementarity of explanation” whose task is to make the contemporary aware of itself as “a necessary ground for the political.” [30][#N30] For Bernstein, poetics is also necessarily social, a process of exchange among often conflicting “communities of response.” [31][#N31] Andrews concurs, but plots the route to the social through a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, seeing poetics as “a kind of social denormalizing—at work on the structure of the sign but also on these larger shapes of meaning—that would allow for a revitalizing of the idea of the *public sphere* as more than a cheering section for the effects of capitalism.” [32][#N32] If Andrews is correct, the “enigmatic, epigrammatic and overgrown” qualities of a McLuhanesque poetic style may even provide a degree of political efficacy that the rational prose of political economy—complicit *because of* its very rationality—lacks. This is the argument Jeffrey makes about McLuhan's own style of analysis: While McLuhan condemns the media criticism of thinkers like Schramm and Lazarsfeld for their inadequate social science, the implicit argument is not that the answer is to become a better social scientist. In his introduction to the first edition of Innis's *The Bias of Communication* (1951), McLuhan writes of using avant-garde poetics “to organize the data of the historian and the social scientist,” a direct argument for the value of reading the records and statistics of technology through cultural forms. [33][#N33] But as Jeffery points out, relying entirely on the devices of literary criticism is also insufficient; what's required is holding the two approaches in tension, working “within and against” them both. [34][#N34]

Projects

Two necessary projects derive from all of the above: an historical project that would reassess the role of poetics not only in McLuhan's work, but in the work of other communications thinkers; and a contemporary project that would attempt to assay the potential that innovative poetry and poetics during and since modernism offer for developing theoretical and methodological tools for investigating the materialities of communication.

The first project is necessary because the integrity and intellectual rigor of the discipline as it has historically been practiced is at stake. Though communications scholars rarely work directly with poetry and poetics, they are frequently content to cite them second- or third-hand from critical texts, resulting in the creation and perpetuation of sloppy scholarship. This is a problem that

Todorov underlines: “in a movement that is in itself in accord with the principles of poetics but skips all intermediary stages, increasingly formalized versions of poetics are being proposed, in a discourse that no longer has anything but itself for its object.” [35][#N35]

This over-formalization is due, in part, to a tendency in North America to teach European theory instrumentally, detached from the avant-garde poetry and poetics that often inspired it. Professionalization and the partitioning of disciplines exacerbates this practice; as a graduate student in English, I was frequently told that, for example, we would not study Foucault with Roussel, Derrida with Genet, Kristeva with Artaud, or Cixous with Lispector because the latter, poetic texts constituted “literature in translation,” and were therefore properly the objects of study in Comparative Literature departments. Why the study of theory and philosophy in translation remained acceptable is explicable only in terms of its instrumental deployment, at the expense of valuable contextual information.

In terms of Canadian Communication Studies, McLuhan himself also contributed in no small degree to the problem of increasingly abstract poetics. Nevertheless, I am not interested in denunciation, but in mapping the deployment of poetic signs in the discourse. What’s at stake when terms plucked from poetry and poetics appear in the context of communication theory? Too often “poetry” is deployed as a general sign for the imaginary, without any specificity regarding which poems, produced in the context of which poetics, by which group of writers, at which specific time, in which place. When specific poets or poetic movements are invoked in communications and media theory, it usually occurs without context, and in ways that would be unrecognizable to literary scholars (or often, actual readers of the poets). The details matter, and they should matter more to a discipline that professes to care about material forms. When changes in usage occur, part of the critic’s job is to note and describe those changes.

The second project is necessary because the concerns of modernist avant-garde and contemporary innovative poetics mesh well with current interest in the material and circulatory aspects of communication, especially as delineated by Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli in “Technologies of Public Forms.” Gaonkar and Povinelli champion a mode of study that would engage cultural forms as vectors delineating networks of power. Their intent is to describe the “cultures of circulation” within which texts, events, and practices become palpable and are “transfigured” for different ends, while “disclosing the play of supplementarity that enframes and ruptures the enterprise of public recognition whatever its object”. [36][#N36] McLuhan’s writings on modernist poetry and poetics as early as the 1940s are a noteworthy precursor to this project.

The significant difference between poetics and Gaonkar and Povinelli’s project is that the latter advocate performing it *without* resort to reading methods derived from the book or, at least, to retrofit those methods “to foreground the social life *of* the form rather than reading social life *off* of it.” [37][#N37] As I’ve mentioned, there is nothing in poetics that suggests that its practice must be confined to close reading; Holman and Harmon’s entry on poetics in their venerable *Handbook to Literature* concludes with the sentence, “In a large sense, justified by its supposed etymology, a poetics is the science of any activity that produces a product, whether a set of sonnets or a set of dentures.” [38][#N38] To me, though, the avowal to entirely jettison close reading in favor of diagramming the circulation and transfiguration of forms has the air of a ventriloquist promising to make her dummy sing while she gargles: It is a misdirection away from a supplemental process that is crucial to the success of the stated enterprise.

Here again, Todorov is helpful, with a very Innisian invocation of balance: “A massive imbalance in

favour of interpretation characterizes the history of literary studies: it is this disequilibrium that we must oppose, and not the principle of interpretation.”^[39] Though Foucault reminds us that everything, including errors and the forms that transmit them, should be readable and of interest when studying discursive formations, and it is arguable that there are foundational errors at the root of every discipline that actually usher that discipline into being, it remains in the best interest of scholars to remember the presuppositions and limits of their own toolsets, if only to occasionally remind themselves that they are, in fact, using tools.

I share Gaonkar and Povinelli’s interest in the possibilities that a focus on transfiguration (“the refunctioning of a text as such for different demanding-sites”) rather than translation (which emphasizes the sovereignty and dissemination of meaning-value) affords for the analysis of the circulation of media forms.^[40] However, caring *more* “about the distribution of power than meaning”^[41] is not the same thing as *not* caring about meaning and its dissemination (Gaonkar and Povinelli are careful to position their mandate as moving “away from, without repudiating, virtuoso readings of social texts, archives, and objects”^[42]). At certain crucial points, even the most ardent proponents of form-sensitive analysis will have to sully their hands with a close reading or two.

Front Page Poetics

The remainder of this paper consists of an initial foray into the first project: McLuhan’s early transfigurations of modernist avant-garde poetics (especially Symbolism), with a brief discussion of the implications of this transfiguration for subsequent scholarship. By way of staging these arguments, the interface that I will use to map the flow between the discourses of Communication Studies and those of the modernist avant-garde is the newspaper. Like all interfaces, this one has two sides, one directed toward each network, and, like all interfaces, it transfigures the forms that constitute each network to suit the perspective of the other.

The first page of exhibit one of McLuhan’s first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, is also the front page of the *New York Times*, Thursday, April 20, 1950. Mirroring the headlines are McLuhan’s own “probes,” boldfaced pseudo-headlines posing leading questions: “Can you imagine anything more effective than this front page cubism?” and “You never thought of a page of news as a symbolist landscape?”^[43] By the time he reaches mid-exhibit, he has invoked “the visual technique of a Picasso, the literary technique of James Joyce,”^[44] and then the French Symbolists.^[45] McLuhan is playing fast and loose with a thicket of incommensurable modernisms, treating them as synonyms when they—and their relationships to the newspaper as a cultural form—are all quite specific. . . and, in at least one major case, crucially different.

McLuhan draws this association between newspapers and modernist poetics, especially Symbolist poetics, throughout his oeuvre. In “Men of Distinction,” a probe from *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan writes, “In that work [*Ulysses*] Joyce uses the symbolist techniques which Mallarmé, the great French poetic discoverer, has seen in the daily newspaper of 1890”.^[46] Nearly two decades after *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan’s *Culture Is Our Business* revisits the theme in at least three of its “exhibits.” The longest, titled with Pound’s “Poetry Is News That’s Stays News,” extends the association back through the moderns into late English Romanticism.

Poetry is the means of opening the doors of perception on areas of experience otherwise inaccessible. The press provides the individual with

pap and packaged opinions. In its corporate design of invisible patterns, however the daily press also provides new dimensions that are only revealed in poetry. Byron's *Don Juan* is an early newspaper mock epic. Browning's *Ring and the Book* is explicitly a newspaper poem, as Ezra Pound acknowledged in his *Cantos*. *The Waste Land* is a newspaper epyllion, or little epic, using newspaper discontinuity and mosaic to include East and West, past and present in a single moment. [\[47\]](#) [\[#N47\]](#)

The implication is that poets, who McLuhan refers to in a second exhibit on poets and newspapers, are living “probes”—the personification of the very poetic device McLuhan derives from the newspaper headline to make this announcement.

Poets and artists live on frontiers. They have no feedback, only feedforward. They have no identities. They are probes. [\[48\]](#) [\[#N48\]](#)

Finely tuned to the linguistic environment of mass culture, poets react to the first signs of development of new cultural forms (McLuhan's “design of invisible patterns”), incorporating them into their work in a more visible form before broader culture recognizes the new forms *as* forms (hence the inclusion of the Romantics here). Paraphrasing Pound once more, poets are the antennae of the race. [\[49\]](#) [\[#N49\]](#) In a third exhibit, McLuhan boils it all down to a one-line probe for maximum aphoristic value: “**A newspaper is a corporate symbolist poem, environmental and invisible, as poem.**” [\[50\]](#) [\[#N50\]](#)

For McLuhan, “symbolist” is almost always a synecdoche for the writing of Stéphane Mallarmé, the most renowned of the loosely affiliated French Symbolist poets. Philip Marchand traces McLuhan's interest in Mallarmé and the Symbolists to a key encounter in the late 1940s with a graduate student named Marianna Ryan who was writing a thesis on the subject.

McLuhan, who was too impatient to master the French language, thereafter never ceased citing Mallarmé and the Symbolists as key influences in his thinking. McLuhan had known since Cambridge, in a general way, of the significance of the Symbolists from his readings of Pound and Eliot, but Ryan's work heavily reinforced the basic notions McLuhan associated with them—for example, the notion that the content of a work of art really was its technique or that studying the effects of things on the mind was more important than studying ideas.

This anecdote is unfortunately difficult to verify. The University of Toronto library system has no record of a thesis by a Marianna Ryan. When I contacted him, Marchand was unable to locate his notes on this section of his book, and Ryan herself is dead. It is possible that the thesis was never completed, or was completed at a different university. The only thing that is not open to question is that by the time McLuhan published *The Mechanical Bride*, a putative relationship between Symbolist poetics and newspapers was in the forefront of his imagination.

As newspapers usher in the era of mass media, Mallarmé ushers in the era of experimental modern poetry. As Johanna Drucker describes in *The Visible Word*, Mallarmé's later work, especially “Un

Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" (1897), is "the demarcating point from which modernity, as a radical rethinking of representational strategy within the field of poetics, comes into being". [51] [#N51] It is not surprising, then, that McLuhan sees in Symbolist poetics the potential for a radical rethinking of critical strategy.

Michael MacDonald carefully delineates McLuhan's adoption and transfiguration of Symbolist poetics into what he termed the "mosaic" method. Abandoning the fixed point of view that he so frequently described as an artifact specific to print culture, McLuhan initiates a discourse that handles images, essays, and aphorisms with equal facility. MacDonald elaborates:

Here the symbolist method of invention, the *sym-ballein* or throwing together of ideas in a textual 'kaleidoscope', becomes a logic of discovery enabling McLuhan to illuminate the 'secret life of forms'—and the 'formalities of power'—at work in the media environment. This symbolist *ars vivendi* in turn reveals the deeper motives behind McLuhan's use of the aphorism as a 'verbal probe' [. . .] Like Nietzsche, who likens the aphorism to an arrow or explosive charge, McLuhan deploys the aphorism as a war machine. Just as the surrealist 'shock effect' launches the artwork beyond aesthetics and into ballistics, McLuhan's aphorisms [. . .] are verbal missiles (missives) designed to keep pace with information and communication machines running close to the speed of light. [52] [#N52]

As MacDonald contends, there is a logic to this method. But in the interest of developing "symbolism" as a working term for his own method, McLuhan effaces its aesthetic and historical specificity. This is the downside of the process of "transfiguration" that Gaonkar and Povinelli describe.

Despite his enthusiasm for the subject, McLuhan was less than successful in his description of the relationship between the newspaper and the modernist avant-garde in general, and Symbolism in particular. That the advent of literary modernity and the popularity of the newspaper as mass media form are roughly coterminous does not necessarily mean that the discourse of the newspaper had a direct and salutary influence on Mallarmé's poetics. But in "Joyce, Mallarmé and the Press," McLuhan makes a number of assumptions and embellishments.

[I]t was Mallarmé who formulated the lessons of the press as a guide for the new impersonal poetry of suggestion and implication. He saw that the scale of modern reportage and of the mechanical multiplication of messages made personal rhetoric impossible. Now was the time for the artist to intervene in a new way and to manipulate the new media of communication by a precise and delicate adjustment of the relations of words, things and events. [53] [#N53]

The most apposite term for McLuhan's transfiguration of Mallarmé's poetics is "procrustean." In the interest of creating arguments for his nascent discipline, McLuhan has hacked, bent, and chopped Mallarmé's argument down like *Rolling Stone's* parody of the *New York Times* motto: "All the news that fits."

The problem is that for Mallarmé, the privileged form of print culture is the *book*, not the

newspaper, and emphatically not a book inspired by newspaper layout. The care that Mallarmé took before his death in the preparation of a definitive (unpublished) edition of “Un Coup de dés” demonstrates an artisanal level of commitment to the material form of the book. Henry Winefield, translator of Mallarmé’s *Collected Poems*, writes, “What is most innovative about the poem, from a formal point of view, is the way in which the conception has been *materialized*—in a manner that makes the physical layout, the spacing, . . . and the typography not merely a representation of the poem but an integral aspect of the poem itself.” [54] [N54] Mallarmé specified a particular trim size (approximately 15 1/2 inches high by 11 1/2 inches wide), particular spatial and typographic proportions, and commissioned illustrations from Odilon Redon. Even the gutter held particular importance for Mallarmé, as the sexualized dark “absence” in which the book hid its meaning. [55] [N55] When the poem first appeared whole, albeit in compromised form, in *Cosmopolis* magazine in May 1897, Mallarmé felt compelled to write a prefatory statement to compensate.

Mallarmé’s “The Book: A Spiritual Instrument,” a key essay in his poetics, regards the newspaper in a markedly different manner than a reader of McLuhan might expect. In Mallarmé’s poetics, both poet and reader can use the book as a vehicle for transcendence. But the poet can only imagine this transcendent book if he can rid himself of his “overpowering newspaper,” a “rag” that is useful to him only as the antithesis of what he aspires to produce. [56] [N56] Though Mallarmé concedes that the newspaper has “undeniable advantages for the writer” [57] [N57] and even predicts the eventual overthrow of the book by the newspaper, [58] [N58] he maintains that, “The newspaper with its full sheet on display makes improper use of printing—that is, it makes good packing paper.” [59] [N59]

Nor does Mallarmé see in the newspaper formal qualities that he can salvage for his higher purpose. Rather, the newspaper is “an annoying influence” on the book because “it inflicts the monotonousness of its eternally unbearable columns, which are merely strung down the pages by hundreds.” [60] [N60] When Mallarmé begins to distribute phrases and words of various point sizes across the field of the page, Christine Poggi argues, he does so in an attempt to approximate “the horizontal flow of a musical score, in direct contrast to the tyranny of the newspaper’s vertical columns.” [61] [N61] Where McLuhan celebrates the chance juxtapositions that the newspaper column format creates, Mallarmé (as the title of his most famous work suggests) attempts to produce a poetry that would *prevail* over chance by privileging graphic elements—but emphatically not those in the mode of the newspaper—over signifiatory ones.

Though there was no “party line” or official doctrine to Symbolism, [62] [N62] Poggi observes that Symbolists “associated an excessive concern with the imitation of reality with journalism, casting upon that symbol of modern life all the despised connotations of materialism.” [63] [N63] Good Catholic that he was, McLuhan’s attempts to reconcile the spiritualism of Symbolist poetics with a materialist reading practice ultimately cause him to wax oxymoronic, as when he asserts, “This is a matter of metaphysical fact, that all existence cries out to be raised to the level of scientific or poetic intelligibility.” [64] [N64]

The authority that McLuhan possesses as what Foucault would describe as an “initiator of discursive practices” [65] [N65] ensures that his procrustean reading of Mallarmé and Symbolism’s relationship to the newspaper, and the generic use of “Symbolist” as a synonym for a panoply of modernists and their techniques, continues to circulate largely unchallenged in the discourse of Communication Studies. For example, Janine Marchessault’s recent book, *Marshall McLuhan:*

Cosmic Media, states that, “It is the form of the newspaper layout, the heterogeneous clash of views that the Symbolists recognized as a new art form,” and “The front page of the newspaper with its juxtapositions and simultaneous realities was the model for the Victorian novel, which the Symbolists (Poe and Mallarmé in particular) appropriated.” [66] [#N66] For McLuhan and many of his successors, invoking the poetics of one modernist avant-garde in more or less generic fashion serves as a kind of critical shorthand, providing, via its indexical function, the suggestion that mass culture has left an indelible mark on the leading edge of high culture. In the process, though, this gesture erases specificities that are crucial to understanding the forms and discourses that the critic is attempting to describe. Marchessault’s identification of the American fiction writer Poe as a Symbolist, though the French poets and artists admired him as a predecessor—Poe died about the time Mallarmé turned seven—should raise questions.

It was actually the proponents of modernist avant-gardes *after* Symbolism that seized upon Mallarmé’s methods and secularized them by engaging directly with the newspaper as material for new art forms. Of particular importance are Filippo Marinetti and the Italian Futurists; Wyndham Lewis’ *Blast*; Picasso and the Cubists; Tristan Tzara and the Zurich Dadaists; Kurt Schwitters’s one-man Merz movement; and then, later in the century, Brion Gysin’s and William S. Burroughs’s cut-ups. Marinetti, for example, conceived of all of Italian Futurism in terms of “the great discoveries of science,” especially the mass media: the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the cinema, and “the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world’s life)”. [67] [#N67] Marinetti was all too ready to employ Mallarmé’s tools, but not in the service of the Symbolist aesthetic, which he deemed precious and static. [68] [#N68]

Picasso, an ardent lover of newspaper culture (Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* relates the bitter fights between Picasso and his ex-wife Fernande over who would get the comics supplement from Stein’s U.S. newspapers [69] [#N69]) knew Mallarmé’s poetry and makes an explicit punning reference to it in one of his earliest collages (1912), cropping a newspaper headline from “Un Coup de Théâtre” to “Un Coup de Thé.” While Picasso loved newspaper headlines, though, Mallarmé reserved a special hatred for them. [70] [#N70] While Mallarmé strives to transcend the material world, Picasso’s newspaper collages readmit all of the aspects of materiality to painting that Symbolism had banished, ushering in a discursive shift: The artist begins a dialogue with the mass media instead of previous high art conventions. [71] [#N71]

It is particularly ironic that it is in the context of the deployment of the sign of Picasso that the ongoing importance of close reading to the study of the transfiguration and circulation of media forms should arise. Until Robert Rosenblum’s paradigm-shifting article “Picasso and the Typography of Cubism” (1973), it was a critical commonplace to assume that the use of newspaper in Cubist collage was a device whose sole purpose was to solve a number of formal problems that Cubist painting encountered between 1910 and 1914, such as a need to flatten the picture plane. Critics ignored the content of the newspaper to the extent that, as Rosenblum wryly notes, on several occasions the dates printed on the newspaper fragments in Picasso’s collages overtly contradicted the dates that historians and cataloguers assigned to the creation of those collages. [72] [#N72]

Subsequent critics, notably Christine Poggi and Patricia Leighton, extended Rosenblum’s work, demonstrated via an examination of Picasso’s selection of particular newspaper excerpts that these collages, previously dismissed as apolitical, manifest a strong anarcho-leftist sensibility. “No more concrete way could be imagined of pulling Cubism back from the brink of total abstraction. . . And

no more democratic way could be found for the project of subverting the high art of oil painting than that of introducing such easily readable articles,” writes Leighton. [73][#N73] Yet critics, blinkered by the ideological limitations of their tools, could not read them.

As critical fashion continues its endless drift—this time away from close reading and once more back toward formal concerns—it would be prudent to remember that we have seen these waters before. Charting the networks created by the circulation and transfiguration of the material forms of media can only be aided by a precise understanding of the materiality of those forms, and the manner in which that materiality changes as forms are taken up by another network. Close reading, a key component of poetics, is an elegant and effective tool for tracking some of those changes.

McLuhan recognized the potential in avant-garde modernist poetics to track both macro- and micro-levels of activity around and within media forms and began to do so, even if his own practice was lacking in its attention to detail. In his attempt to document the effect of the newspaper form on various modernist aesthetics in the language of newspapers, he nearly loses track of his objects, and we are still dealing with the double-edged legacy of those attempts. Refinements to the theory of the material and circulatory aspects of communication could build on that heritage by embracing the potential that innovative poetics has to offer. Or, as Gertrude Stein (writing as Alice B. Toklas quoting Picasso—the details matter) wrote, “when you make a thing, it is so complicated making it that it is bound to be ugly, but those that do it after you they don’t have to worry about making it and they can make it pretty, and so everybody can like it when the others make it.” [74]

[#N74]

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Notes

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