MCLUHAN AND FRYE: WHAT WERE THE SIXTIES ABOUT ANYWAY?

By James Cunningham

McLuhan is the topic of this panel. I am a student of Northrop Frye, a close contemporary of McLuhan's (close, as in McLuhan's office at this university was approximately one hundred yards from Frye's). Of course, Frye and McLuhan also knew each other fairly well. More importantly for this paper, Frye and McLuhan were both critical theorists who thought of culture along the same lines, that is, in terms of myth and of myth in terms described by Vico. Common also, was their interest in what some have called the culture wars that started in the 1960's: specifically of the roles played by technology and education in what seemed at the time to be youth's tumultuous challenge to an American dream transformed into the nightmare of modern consumer society. In this paper, I am going to look briefly at McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* an optimistic explanatory – maybe even a prophetic – account of cultural and political change in the sixties. I will then refer to Frye's 1971 work, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*, in which he attempts among other things to come to terms with McLuhan's views, as expressed in *Understanding Media.* It is in *The Critical Path* that Frye seeks to reflect and give articulate expression to a pessimism about the modern electronic media which is also present in the work of McLuhan BUT which what Frye, in *The Modern Century*, calls "the McLuhan rumor" (39) has largely suppressed.

The McLuhan Rumor

In 1967, when Timothy Leary spoke to 30,000 hippies holding a "human be-in" at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, he encouraged their generation to "turn on, tune in and drop out." Leery attributed this formulaic for a new way of being to Marshall McLuhan. Apparently, McLuhan had riffed the following to Leery a couple of years earlier over lunch, "something like, 'Psychedelics hit the spot / Five hundred micrograms, that's a lot,' to the tune of a Pepsi commercial of the time. Then he started going, 'Tune in, turn on, and drop out'" (Strauss 337-38, from Wikipedia).

So, what did McLuhan mean by turn on, tune in and drop out? Actually, his riff was meant less as a prescription than it was a description of the first television generation. According to McLuhan, TV is a "cool" technology and its effect on viewers is nothing less than the inauguration of a new type of consciousness. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan divides communications technologies into the categories, hot and cool (22). For McLuhan, the first hot technology is print. McLuhan argues that because print is reproduced mechanically and automatically, it encourages texts that are less dependent on illustration than was the case for medieval manuscripts and therefore capable of getting more words on each page. As such, print is what McLuhan calls a "high definition" medium; by contrast, manuscript is "low definition" (22).

 McLuhan concludes that it is print's high definition capacity for data density (more words per page, therefore more data per page) that imposes upon the reader the imperative to follow the line of the text slavishly (no dwelling on the illustrations,

please!) and to get to the next page as quickly as possible: so much to learn, so little time. The result is that the reader is so busy absorbing information that the reflective activity is shut down. Thinking becomes a matter of following the narrative or argument or instructions. In accordance with McLuhan's argument, it is not surprising that David Hume, writing two centuries after the advent of print, equates great intelligence with the ability to follow and absorb the connexions in the many premised argument; simple people being able to follow and absorb only a few (Hume 71, f36, 2).

For McLuhan, "print defined intelligence" prizes concentration and thought that is as prosaic – that is, as linear – as the textual presentations which give rise to it. The result of such thinking is action – linear thinking takes its text as instruction to be followed in life, just as it is followed on the page. This is why McLuhan calls high definition media hot – the effect of hot media on modern human life is extroverted, explosive and imperial (295) as is witnessed in its superheated apotheosis, the atom bomb. Hot media *explode* people out into the world they describe – to act, to attack, to possess, to destroy.

Says McLuhan, if text is the first "hot" medium, film is the ultimate heat. The high resolution of the film image makes it ideal for the presentation of visual details and therefore allows it to achieve a data density surpassing even that of print (288, 291). This makes film, not TV, the last word in consumer control. The audience must want what they see: McLuhan attests that when non-Western audiences see all the consumer goods displayed on film, predictably they come to regard themselves as "deprived of an ordinary man's birthright" (294). Also, for McLuhan, it is film and its hand maiden, the

radio, which have sent people into the streets to follow and consume the political programmes of totalitarian regimes (300). Film, then, is the apotheosis of prosaic thinking.

To the high resolution of film, McLuhan opposes the low definition "mosaic" (313) television image and contrasts the filmic frame, which gives the viewer the image in all of its detail, with the experience of the TV screen, which is pixelated: like the mosaics of mediaeval culture (319), the TV image is "suggested" through a series of discreet pixels, or "dots" (313). Thus McLuhan characterizes the TV image as "a mosaic mesh of light and dark spots which a movie shot never is, even when the quality of the movie image is very poor" (313). The effect of the mosaic television experience is twofold. First, the TV viewer is not simply following and receiving what he is shown, as would be the case with film. With TV, nothing is shown, all is suggested. It is left to the viewer to actively participate in the imaginative construction of what the TV image suggests. Second, as TV must be much less data dense than is film, the TV viewer is allowed the leisure to concentrate on the discreet images in any television presentation. Thus, the TV viewer has a freedom of involvement with the images which the film viewer, who must simply absorb the images as passing instances in the ongoing narrative, lacks. This is not to say that narrative is absent from TV, rather that the imperative to follow the narrative at the expense of reflection upon its parts is absent from the television experience in a way that it isn't from film. One of the things upon which TV encourages reflection is facial reactions by characters to events, as opposed to events themselves. Thus TV allows for exploitation of the facial close-up in the way movies never could (319-20). According to

McLuhan, facial close-ups have always been a problem for film: they showed too much detail for viewer comfort and had to be distracted from by soft-focusing or by giving the character some dialogue. Thus, TV, the "re-action" medium," encourages what film, the "action medium" cannot allow (320) – a reflective critical evaluation of the action presented.

It is TV's allowance of imaginative viewer involvement, its freeing of the viewer from the imperative to follow narrative action, which makes TV what McLuhan calls a cool medium. As a cool medium, TV is introverted, implosive and involving (337). It doesn't cause viewers to explode into action so much as to pause in critical reflection on the action proposed. Exasperated fathers of the sixties accused their teenaged kids of *sitting on their asses and doing nothing*. According to McLuhan's logic, the fathers were wrong. The kids were all right. They were actively rejecting the passive obedience to perform that defined their fathers' consciousness and thus their lives. For the new TV consciousness, turning on, tuning in and dropping out was an intelligent rejection – a rejection of the materialism, the competition, and the unjust wars commanded by hot technologies and an educational system that gave priority to linear thinking. The reason why the be-ins, sit-ins, and love-ins by youth in the sixties so baffled the older generation was that they were not political action in the traditional sense. Instead, they represented a refusal to obey the imperatives of political marketing.

Following Vico, McLuhan describes myths as the story structures we invent to give our environment meaning – that is, to make our environment into a human world. But,

McLuhan adds that the medium through which we tell these stories gives this world its shape. For McLuhan, then, in the sixties, a filmic generation of fathers and a TV generation of their children inhabited the same decade … but different worlds. If the fathers' was linear and prosaic, that of their children was mosaic, oral and poetic.

So What of Frye?
Now, what does Northrop Frye have to say about all of this? Frye's *The Critical Path*, was written and presented as a series of lectures in 1971. In part, *The Critical Path* was an attempt to provide the broadest of explanatory contexts for Frye's own reflections on his experience of student demonstrations at Berkeley in 1968. Given Frye's deep browed humanism, it is probably predictable that he would be appalled by the brutality of the police and the political opportunism of, then governor, Ronald Reagan, less than impressed by the student demonstrators when they postured for the cameras and convinced that the only people actually living the history of their time were the students who quietly went about their studies in spite of the hub-bub around them (On Ed 85-86). For Frye, both the impulses to subscribe to political programmes or to refuse them are hysterical. It's more important to understand what is going on.

And so Frye tries to make sense of what was going on. Along the way, he makes reference to McLuhan, with whom he agrees about the following points. First, Frye acknowledges a link between the rise of a new oral or verbal culture in the sixties and the student demonstrations (Critical Path 146). Second, Frye agrees that the electronic media are at the centre of this nexus (147). Third, Frye also agrees that the distinction between linear and mosaic (what Frye calls) simultaneous thinking is helpful in understanding

what kind of thinking is at play in the electronic media (150). BUT, and this is a huge

but, Frye differs markedly from McLuhan, in his account of the above three points.

Says Frye, linear and simultaneous presentations are NOT specific to different

technologies. Rather, they are both present in every work of art, indeed, in any

communication (150). This is because "the only truly communicating media are words,

images and rhythms, not the electronic gadgets that convey them" (152). So, according

to Frye, every communication has a narrative or linear movement which guides the eye

through time (25). At some point, however, every communication invites the imagination

to collect the elements of that movement into an image that can be apprehended all at

once, like a mosaic (25).

Following Aristotle, Frye calls the linear progression in communication a mythos – a

myth or story. The simultaneous element he calls the dianoia or meaning. For Frye,

dianoia is, if you will, the message of the myth. In non-literary communication, that is, in

what Frye calls direct communication, where I am trying to convey a particular idea to

you, the myth is always part of a larger social myth – what Frye calls a myth of concern

(36). This myth is encyclopedic, articulating and determining what it concerns every

member of a society to know (36).

A free society, argues Frye, is one in which individuals are allowed some critical distance

from their social myths (135): which is why it is assumed that we are not supposed to

take everything advertisers and politicians say seriously (136). However, in even a free

society, it is possible for advertisers and propagandists, by employing the ubiquity of the electronic media in people's lives, to foster their dependency on what the media says, whether they take it seriously or not. James Joyce called the vehicle for this fostering of dependency the *perce-orielle*:

> The steady insinuating of suggested social attitudes and responses that comes pouring from the active mouth of A into the passive ear of B. Wherever we turn, there is the same implacable voice, unctuous, caressing, inhumanly complacent, selling us food, cars, political leaders, ideologies, culture, contemporary issues, and the remedies against the migraine we get from listening to it. … it is not the voice we hear that haunts us, but the voice that goes on echoing in our minds, forming our social attitudes, our habits of speech, our processes of thought. (147)

In North American society, the purpose of the perce-orielle is to turn everyone into a consumer, to be stimulated. Under such a regime, says Frye, all media, whether hot or cool, end up being much the same medium as they all deliver the "same message" (152).

Frye acknowledges that, of course, there is resentment at being reduced to a consumer and panic, as well. Panic is evidenced in the tendency of many to escape into the media's readymade world of fantasy … all the trivial shows designed to convince us that there are people even more miserable than ourselves and to distract us from the fact that we haven't a serious thought in our heads. In the sixties, it was also evidenced in the tendency of rock music to envelop listeners in an "impermeable cloak of noise" (149) – and still is. The problem with both escapes, says Frye, is that they inevitably provoke more of what they attack (148), as media owners respond simply by producing more shitty shows and marketing the very pop music that was meant to drawn the media out.

Resentment, Frye argues, also leads to something more along the lines of what McLuhan argued for, though not as McLuhan describes it. According to Frye, the "power of film to present things in terms of symbol and archetype," the rise of folk music and of science-fiction as a popular genre have all given rise to popular and oral/poetic habits of mind (145). These habits, says Frye, have shown themselves clearly enough in the tendency of student demonstrators from the sixties to cast their events in mythic terms, as, for instance, did student demonstrators at Berkeley, when they described their arrest at a "peace park" as symbolic of the expulsion from Eden (146). The problem with such tendencies for Frye, was that they recast sincerity in terms of putting on a show, as was evidenced in the same demonstration when protestors' outrage seemed to be saved for those times when they were in front of the cameras (149). Fry points out that "a role is usually in someone else's play and much radical idealism wavers between the desire to do one's own thing and the desire to surrender to an externally imposed social programme" (147). Of course, this was the very thing that McLuhan thought that the poetic habit of mind fostered by the cool medium of television was supposed to militate against.

If, as Frye suggests, the poetic habit of mind witnessed in the sixties is one in which identity and role-play became conflated, then it is also one that fostered in individuals the tendency to become actors and change roles as the opportunity for work dictates. That Frye is right about this is born out in the behaviour of a generation of protestors, many of whom graduated to become accountants, ad executives and to vote for Ronald Reagan in an embrace of neo-conservatism that would last the rest of their lives. To exploit this

conflation of identity and changing roles, says Frye, the electronic media have taken on

the task of simply "turning the wheel [of role changes] faster" (151). That is, it has

become "a purely linear experience that can only be repeated and forgotten" (151).

For Frye, there is but one antidote to the problem of identity created by the electronic

media … a critical one that is found in the culture inspired by the text. Says Frye:

> The document is the model of all teaching, because it is infinitely patient, repeating the same words however often one consults it, and the spatial focus it provides makes it possible to return to the experience, a repetition of the kind that underlies any genuine education. (150)

Also, as the text cannot be shouted down, it becomes available as the focus of intelligent

discussion and as the antidote to the uninterrupted voice of the dictator. So it is that the

book has made possible "the conditions of freedom in society: democratic government,

universal education [and] tolerance of dissent" (151). But, most importantly for Frye, the

book allows literature to be read as literature: not as a myth to be followed but as the

language of myth which provides the reader with all the resources out of which myth is

made. It is from habits of familiarity with these resources, habits born of careful study,

that the individual learns to say something important in her own right, even in the face of

an electronic media that is so keen to say it for her (the tendency of all interactive

computer games, tweeting and texting).

But, in the end, how different are McLuhan and Frye? We must allow that McLuhan's

lyricism and his hermeneutic approach to the subject of cultural criticism, both products

of his intensively literary and philosophical education, never ceased to pervade his

teaching style. And, if McLuhan recognized that movies can be rendered television like, to the benefit of film generally, he would concede also that unfortunately TV can be rendered more filmic – a tendency guaranteed to contribute to an ongoing media necrosis. Both allowances suggest McLuhan's acknowledgement, if only in practice, of reservations about the electronic media which Frye gives explicit attention. In this sense, McLuhan may be a "Benjamin-esque" character, noting an emancipatory moment in history as it flickered and was suppressed. This moment was the decade which history calls the sixties.

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