<u>'The Reality of the Counterculture: Marshall McLuhan, Iconoclasm and the Global Village'</u>

INTRO & SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

- I'll be talking today about the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who rose to fame in the 1960s through his ostentatious, half-ironic defence of the new televisual age.
- Branding himself the go-to academic for the counterculture, McLuhan shocked his peers and thrilled the younger generation by pronouncing the death of the printed word and a return of the moving image as a kind of tribal deity.
- There was a theatrical paganism to McLuhan's narrative; a wide-eyed sense that through television Western Civilisation was rediscovering an original pre-written, pre-Christian state.
- However, McLuhan's worldview was also steeped in a profound Catholic faith at odds with the irreverent idol worship he appeared to take pleasure in.
- I want to explore that religious background today – connected to McLuhan's mentorship under G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc at Cambridge – and to consider a literal iconoclasm at the heart of his media theory.
- Reading his work through his personal writings on religion, I'll point to a quest for alignment with divine truths that contradicts the postmodernist relativism behind his radical slogan, 'the medium is the message'.
- Like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis – modernist figureheads he studied, admired and befriended - McLuhan was convinced of a reality beyond the material world that could be accessed through emerging multi-media aesthetics.
- That faith, I'll argue, reveals an equivalent religious and conservative impulse in the countercultural experiments McLuhan inspired and oversaw.

PG 1 UNPACK 'THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE'.MCLUHAN THE ICONOCLAST.
- 'The Medium is the Message' was one of two defining slogans in McLuhan's career.
- I'll come on to the 2nd, the more straightforward slogan 'The Global Village', in a moment but first I want to unpack 'The Medium is the Message' and outline the aesthetic theory it expressed.
- 'The Medium is The Message' that the written word was rapidly going out of commission, and would eventually lose its function altogether.
- It carried with it a scepticism about the metonymic relationship between written word and the thing it describes. And about the efficacy of realism in print, from its inception to the present day, but particularly in a post-1945 world in which the electric image was on the verge of domination.
- The shift from individual experience of reading towards collective experience of television.

- The shift from the linear thought process encouraged by literature to a mode of existential experience dictated by the moving and flashing signs emanating from the television screen.
- This as a logical extension of the increasing pace of modern life since the turn of the twentieth century; with the kind of simultaneous thought processes inculcated by mass advertising and newspaper consumption that had arisen in response to increased levels of literacy since the end of the 19th century.
- Hot vs. Cold Media. Full engagement of sight, sound (touch, in the sense of that the TV screen gives the allusion that you can reach out and touch the world it transmits).
- M: 'TV is not a pictorial medium but an audial-tactile one'
- A sensory revolution, a shift of emphasis from sight only – which had ben brought about by the print medium at the expense of other senses - to all 5 senses, representing a return of all the senses to their pre-print, pre-literate "tribal balance".

- The new electronic age, McLuhan said, had also set in process a digital 'global village' that was bound to result in everyone experiencing the same things simultaneously regardless of their geographical position in the world.
- To McLuhan, the emergence of a 'global village' was a final closing of temporal and spatial distance between human beings – a revolutionary conclusion to a process begun with the communications advances of the industrial revolution.

PG 2   THE MORAL RELATIVISM THIS IMPLIES
- Part of what fascinated, excited and worried people about McLuhan in the 60s was the ambivalence of his diagnoses and predictions - and the ostentatious moral distance he took from them.
- The global village might bring us together, he announced with a just detectable glint in his eye, but then 'aren't villagers in fact the cruellest people one is likely to encounter'.
- Before thinking very hard, he said, you might imagine that the shrinking of the social world, and the sharing of experience would better our understanding of one another, but surely it was only common sense that smaller societies are more prone to petty resentment and mob judgment than larger ones
- Norman Mailer, debating McLuhan at the height of the media theorist's fame, spoke for a lot of interested but concerned intellectuals when he told him: 'I find much of what you say exhilarating but what worries me is that you seem to take a great kindly pleasure in outlining the lineaments of this appalling electronic world','

- McLuhan's response to Mailer was to calmly quote Edmund Burke on the French Revolution: 'I do not know how to draw up an indictment against a whole people', and to dismiss moral outrage as unhelpful, futile and besides the point.

- The average American was already watching between 6 hours of television a day, and the history of emerging media demonstrated that attempts to cap or suppress it always ended in failure, so what good would it do to argue over its rights or wrongs?

- Much better, he said, to focus non-judgementally on the psychological and social effects, and try to understand them in the larger historical context of previous media developments.
- As well as Burke, McLuhan cited Freud as an influence on this thinking, since – like the father of psychoanalysis - he too was delineating a plane of experience beneath the surface of consciousness – this time beneath the viewer's basic sense of media content they were consuming - and that this was something people knew instinctively but weren't able or willing to express.
- By 'studying [rather than drawing up an indictment] the subliminal life of a whole population', he wrote in a letter to his friend Barbara Rowes, he was uncovering the effects that people 'go to great pains to hide … from themselves' (Letter to Barbara Rowes, *The Medium and the Light*, p. xxiv)

- And yet, as Mailer points out, there was more to this professed neutrality than met the eye.
- His approach was playful, provocative rather than sober and scientific. The warnings *were* delivered with a 'kindly pleasure', the possibilities promised with an air of foreboding; and it was clear in everything he wrote and said that the audience couldn't take his claim on trust.
- As the critics Deborah Holmes and Gabriella Zabriskie pointed out in the late sixties, McLuhan exuded 'an air of hopefulness which had no sounder basis than a total pessimism might' D. Holmes and G. Zabriskie

PG 3 POSTMODERNIST MCLUHAN. OPPOSED TO THOSE 'PRINT-ORIENTED BASTARDS'.
- Occupying a space between Burkean, small c conservatism and the countercultural primitivist zeitgeist, he was a lively, comfortable participant in the emergent postmodernist conversation about pop culture in the early to mid 1960s.
- In his 1967 essay '', John Barth – the best exemplar, if such a thing is possible, of an arch postmodern stylist – refers ironically to McLuhan and his army of 'McLuhanites' who are busy trying to drive 'print-oriented bastards' like himself out of business.
- In Mc's brave new multi-media world, Barth half-seriously observes, there's no place for stuffy 'virtuosos' who specialise in the dying medium of the written word.
- Of course, Mc fell as naturally into that camp as Barth himself, which is the running and enduring joke in his work. Squarer reviewers of *Understanding Media* and *The Guttenberg Galaxy* bristled at the chutzpah of a Cambridge-trained literary professional using a high, refined style to announce its death. Others, like Barth, like Leslie Fiedler, understood the contradiction as a

logical product of and contribution to a wider cultural splicing of high and low thought, expression and ideology.

- Swinging between pithy G.K. Chesterton like epigrams and unadulterated ad-speak,,on the surface McLuhan read not only like a moral relativist but aesthetic one too.

- That easy but careful combination of registers was a draw first for his adoring students at the University of Toronto then for a whole generation of young people grateful to hear complex cultural theories presented in a language that was sophisticated enough to be taken seriously yet in tune with the cadences and neologisms of popular culture.
- McLuhan also applied his moral and aesthetic relativism to the sphere of commerce. With a spin on his own advice to students, that they should 'understand their world and detach from it or be drowned by it' (in some respects a reworking of Timothy Leary's 'Turn on, tune in, drop out'), he detailed the sinister pervasive power that mass marketing wielded over human consciousness, yet marvelled at and used it energetically to promote his unique countercultural brand.
- Equally he was, as Sarah pointed out, an enthusiastic promoter and participant in 'the new experience economy', an active beneficiary of the kind of opportunities to commoditise avant-gardism that his heroes Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis could only have dream of in their time.

- A modernist scholar by training– and a long-time correspondent with Pound particularly – he not only combined the careful referential obscurantism of these authors with an easy-to-read style but developed their interest in new technologies and aesthetics into more inclusive, participatory, and marketable artworks.
- Through projects like his special issue of the Aspen Magazine and, in the early 70s, his audio revamping of 'Understanding the Media', 'The Medium is the Massage' (MassAge Pun), he crossed over from analyst of popular culture to pop cultural artist.
- pieces, as Sarah, said, that 'demanded readers act physically on their subject matter' – McLuhan
- An audience far exceeding the '3000 cultured minds' he quotes T.S. Eliot as estimating were ready for the advanced aesthetics and ideas of early modernism.

PG. 4 PAGAN MCLUHAN
- Though McLuhan was adamant that the new televisual age was affecting hearing and touch rather than vision (vision – as I mentioned earlier – had been privileged and refined in the print epoch), his writing frequently suggests the resurrection of old, forbidden images, the piecing together of statues smashed first by the written word then the onset of monotheistic religion.
- His vision of a world 'retribalised' by electronic media rested on the powerful metaphor of a return to the communal fireside, to the collective rather than

private experience of images, live narratives and deities that were multiple in number but worshipped by all people at once.

- A world connected by television, he said, was a world connected by 'a continually sounding tribal drum' that ceremonially summoned people to share in important events, encouraging a common, aurally and tactilely transmitted mythic bond and discouraging the private contemplation of faith intrinsic to book-bound, Western Christian culture.

- Subsequent media theorists – people like the Czech-Brazilian Villem Flusser - have paid homage to the trail McLuhan blazed by identifying the pre-historic Pagan properties of the late twentieth century televisual revolution.
- For Flusser, he was the first to conceive of television as a lifting of the taboo placed on images by monotheistic theology and its enshrinement of the 'logos' in print.
- 'Ghetoised' for centuries, Flusser wrote drawing on McLuhan, the image – born of and catalytic of the imaginary – had emerged into the light in the twentieth century and shifted patterns of thought and social organisation away from the lineal and towards the simultaneous, the repetitive and the mythical.

- Crucially though, as Flusser and more recently Siegfried Zielinski have pointed out, McLuhan's heretical challenge had at its heart a paradoxical *distrust of images/of icons.*
- He was, Zielinski says, 'an iconoclast fundamentally'- not only in the respect of attacking the cherished beliefs of his time - but in the literal sense of that word, 'a destroyer of idols'.
- What Zielinski means is McLuhan's inability/refusal– for all his talk of the written word 'embalming' or 'freezing' language, rendering memory weaker and imprisoning the individual within himself – to shake his literate biases and embrace the new multisensory media world.
- He was, as he put it 'What is desperately needed is a kind of understanding of the media is to program the whole environment so that say literate values would not be wiped out by new media'

PG 5. CATHOLIC MCLUHAN. A GENUINE ICONOCLAST.
- As well as his background in modernist scholarship, , that undisclosed fixed aesthetic and moral position had its roots in McLuhan's Catholicism – which he did disclose in public but very deliberately played down in his writings about media.
- Religious faith, I think, was a key motivating factor in his belief that the primitive, communal fireside and 'the global village' it symbolised would be sites as much of cruelty, petty judgment and mob violence as cooperation.
- And it was something that Norman Mailer and McLuhan's various other critics in the 60s failed to understand when they called him out for treading a line between optimism and profound pessimism.

- Behind the talk of caves and tribal firesides, behind the playful moral relativism that allowed for multiple truths to co-exist in productive contradiction of one other, there was always a set of seriously held convictions, gleaned from Christianity.

- Though it rarely made its way explicitly into his work, in interviews and personal correspondences McLuhan was clear about both the role of faith in his thinking and the parallels he saw between the 'all encompassing web' that communication technologies were weaving over the world, and an equivalent, unifying metaphysical force exuded by God.
- In a positive sense, he read the televisual age as a metaphor for God's love: 'the Christian concept of the mystical body' he wrote in a letter to, 'of all men as a members of the body of Christ - this becomes technologically a fact under electronic conditions'

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- Again positively – but in contrast to the primitivist imagery of the cave and the tribe – he likened the world united by electronic media to humanity brought under one roof by the 'One [true Catholic] church'.
- Television had, he said, 'engaged [the individual's] whole world', eliminating 'individual freedom' with a kind of kind of 'corporate freedom', again suggestive of the body of Christ. Xxvii
- This is Prelapsarian McLuhan, hopeful – or, rather, certain - somehow that new technologies had a religiously redemptive role to play by bringing us closer not to a pre-Christian existence but a state of being before the Fall, when we knew the grace of God.

- It is also the enthusiastic testimony of a convert.
- Brought up a Baptist, he turned to Catholicism in his thirties, while studying for his second bachelor's degree at Cambridge, and did so under the influence of the religious, conservative thinkers G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc.
- Chesterton and Belloc were fashionable among young literary types when McLuhan was in England in the 1930s, and they were inspirational for W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender in their own conversions.
- As McLuhan's friend and great champion the journalist Tom Wolfe points out, this also happened right at the time when the Canadian was becoming interested – through Wyndham Lewis and F.R. Leavis – in the new "language" of film, radio, adverts, even comic strips.
- So it wasn't a case of having to square ideas about media theory with religion, or vice versa - since the two were intimately connected at their root.

- Intriguingly – as Wolfe has shown – something very like his idea of Christian redemption through media had been tested in the early twentieth century by a little-known priest whose work McLuhan knew well but who receives no mention in *Understanding the Media, The Guttenberg Galaxy* etc.

- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit and geologist, developed a theory of technology that aimed at assimilating Darwinian evolutionary theory into a holistic Christian scheme.
- Well before McLuhan, Teilhard de Chardin envisioned radio, tv and computers – in their early infancy when he was writing – as extensions of the human nervous system and as a communication network 'which already link us all in a sort of "etherized" human consciousness"
- He believed this constituted a "natural, profound" evolution in the 20th century and that it was a part of a Divine plan for the transcendence of humanity beyond its biological limits.
- As Wolfe points out, Teyard pre-empted M on technology as representative and transformative of our thought and feeling, but – more interestingly – on the medium as the non-material, metaphysical message itself.

- If these constituted the religious basis for the optimistic side of his outlook on the new televisual age, McLuhan also sourced Catholicism to warn about the dehumanisation new media would inflict.
- In the tradition of Aldous Huxley, Anthony Burgess and other professorial statesmen of the counterculture, he was both plugged into the futurism of the 1960s and steeped in an awareness of Original Sin that prevented him ever truly buying his own shtick.
- This is the McLuhan who admitted, eventually, to disliking 'innovation' and to acquiring knowledge about it chiefly to limit the damage it could cause; it was also the McLuhan who understood finally that his metaphor of man united by electronics as in the body of Christ would give way to Man 'disincarnate' – sensually engaged on all his levels and physically disembodied.

CONCLUSION

- The underestimated religious impulse behind theories that McLuhan presented as morally, aesthetically neutral, points perhaps to a genuine quest for reality beyond the material world; a reality accessible through emerging media aesthetics themselves; but also an awareness of the processes of media.
- It sheds new light on the consensus view of him as part of a post-WWII Western philosophical shift away from Plato.
- McLuhan's definition of the medium as the bearer of the message (or of the truth) has been read as evidence that he rejects Plato's dominant model of material reality as the shadow on the wall of the cave, weakly imitative of a purer, authentic truth outside, and a clue only as to the truth that awaits.
- To Tom McCarthy – among others – McLuhan's discovery that the Medium is the Message is the discovery of that very truth in the world itself.
- If we take McLuhan's Catholicism seriously though, such a position is difficult to maintain.
- The medium might embody rather than simply carry and transmit 'the message', but – in McLuhan's last analysis – that message could only ever be an imperfect sign of the one true medium and message: Jesus Christ.

'In Christ' he wrote 'there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message. It is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same'

- For all his futurism, for all his whimsical pretence at grownup moral and aesthetic impartiality then, McLuhan was motivated by the ache to be reunited with the divine (akin to the Platonic philosophical ache for the noumenal).
- Referring not to his religion but his refusal to provide evidence for his many outlandish predictions, one early reviewer said of McLuhan: 'the believer, as analyst, is undone by his belief'
- 'Undone' might be a bit strong – McLuhan's approach was well ahead of its time, and his predictions remain astonishingly apposite.
- His belief does, however, suggest a certain amount of self-delusion to the claim to keep personal feeling out of his theories and to 'probe without feeling' in order to 'invert [his] biases'.
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- He frequently answered questions about his motives with reference to freedom through knowledge: 'Failure [to understand the effect of media] has for centuries been typical and total for mankind. Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users.'
- Understanding, rather than docilely accepting media impact, might be the key

- All "irrevocably involved with and responsible" for one another.

- Opposed the 'protestant' relegation of faith to the conceptual realm (dependent on dialectic). McLuhan did "not think of God as a concept, but as an immediate and ever-present fact – an occasion for continuous dialogue" "I don't think concepts have any relevance in religion. Analogy is not concept. It is resonance. It is inclusive. It is the cognitive process itself. That is the analogy of the Divine Logos … the immediate analogical awareness that begins in the senses and is derailed by concepts or ideas' (Letter to editor of Catholic magazine, The United Church Observer) xvi

- Mc's daughter: 'the catechism … gave shorthand answers to incredibly complex questions'

- As McLuhan consistently mentions in his private letters to friends, he was reproached by the Catholic establishment in his time.
- One reason for this, he thought, was the church's panicked incomprehension of the youth speak he engaged in so effectively:

   'they don't understand "drop out" as the necessary mode of dialogue and interface but merely the scrapping of the entire world, and any conceivable world' The Medium and the Light xxv

- According to McLuhan's son Eric, 'shown my father how to operate on the border between idea and metaphor, between concept and percept' xiv, introduction to *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion and Media*

CATHOLIC VISIONARY MCLUHAN
- 'The man in a literate and homogenized society ceases to be sensitive to the diverse and discontinuous life of forms. He acquires the illusion of the third dimension and the "private point of view" as part of his Narcissus fixation, and is quite shut off from Blake's awareness or that of the Psalmist, that we become what we behold' (Counterblast, 22)
- This regret at the collective loss of a 'visionary' third eye has an interesting relation to Thomas Aquinas, McLuhan's guide in much of his thinking about God and the nature of faith.
- For McLuhan, faith in the divine was not something to be conceptualized intellectually but rather a post-revelatory mode of perceiving things which was self-evident to the individual and which shaped his whole perspective.
- The medium of perception as the divine message itself. A sense in itself.
- Indeed, describing his conversion, Mc writes that 'the truth came to me through prayer, the proper way of asking'
- Aquinas' famous conclusion after his final experience of divine revelation: 'There are no more words. After what I have experienced all my words are straw'

PG. 6 CONCLUSION INC. IMPICATIONS FOR THE COUNTERCULTURE & BEYOND
- He claimed, in a letter to the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, to 'deliberately keep Christianity out of all these discussions lest perception be diverted from structural process by doctrinal sectarian passions.' Yet, he went on to claim that 'my own attitude to Christianity is, itself, awareness of process'
- Tom Wolfe – who called him 'our hemisphere's first world famous theorist of everything'.
- unlikely and intriguing crossovers between pre-1945 Anglo-American high modernism and the Romantically inclined American Renaissance that emerged in the 1950s and 60s.
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- Jordan Peterson, another academic raised on the stark Alberta planes, another cranky 'theorist of everything', and the first prof since McLuhan to achieve that kind of pop cultural celebrity,
- **HUMANIST PURPOSE: 'It is too late to be frightened or disgusted, to greet the unseen with a sneer. Ordinary life-work demands that we harness and subordinate the media to human ends'** 13 *Counterblast*
- What about M's prediction that Nationalism (a product of print) would become impossible in the age of the Global Village? Based on the idea that humanity's temporal and spatial synchronization through TV would make it 'no longer …. Possible to artificially separate out the races', to insulate racial groups from one another.

'Money has reorganized the sense life of peoples just because it is an *extension* of our sense lives. This change does not depend upon approval or disapproval of those living in the society' 22
'progress mongers'

SUPPORTIVE QUOTES

'I would not try to theologize on the basis of my understanding of technology. I don't have a background in scholastic thought, never having been raised in any Catholic institution. Indeed, I have been bitterly reproached by my Catholic confreres for my lack of scholastic terminology and concepts'

'Everything that is especially hateful and devilish and inhuman about the conditions and strains of modern industrial society is not only Protestant in origin, but it is their boast (!) to have originated it' (Letter to Mother *The Medium and the Light*)
'dull dead daylight of Protestant rationalism' of Alberta 'beer parlour' and 'gasoline station'

'A trained – and immensely learned – critic and observer, he was able to detach professional observation from personal feeling'

Catholic Humanism. Don Quixote. Chaucer.

"Moral bitterness is a basic technique for endowing the idiot with dignity"