

# journal of visual culture



## Reading for the Noise

My first encounter with Marshall McLuhan's work was through an aunt studying design who told me about Jerome Agel; leafing through *Herman Kabnsciousness* (Agel, 1973), *The Making of Stanley Kubrick's 2001* (Agel, 1970), and of course *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan with Fiore and Agel, 1967), I wondered how these noisy collages could be read? Gradually it became apparent how much information theory and continental cultural theory influence media studies, although neither debt is widely acknowledged. As Poster (2010) admonishes, it is odd how many cultural theorists of the 1970s and 80s – whether one looks at Habermas or Foucault, Lyotard or Deleuze – paid little attention to McLuhan's work on media, often rendering them unable to productively theorize media technology: instead, one tends to point to Benjamin or Baudrillard (Grosswiler, 1998). But I disagree with Poster about Derrida, whom I always read as a media theorist – though it is true that Derrida rejected what he saw as hype in McLuhan:

I think that there is an ideology in McLuhan's discourse that I don't agree with, because he's an optimist as to the possibility of restoring an oral community which would get rid of the writing machines and so on. I think that's a very traditional myth which goes back to ... let's say Plato, Rousseau ... And instead of thinking that we are living at the end of writing, I think that in another sense we are living in the extension – the overwhelming extension-of writing. At least in the new sense ... I don't mean the alphabetic writing down, but in the new sense of those writing machines that we're using now (e.g. the tape recorder). And this is writing too. (Brennan, 1983: 42)

The supposition of progress from chirographic handling via formalizing typesetting to the polymorphous implications of processing gives rise to the assumption that a recurrence of orality means returning to ancient techniques of story and myth. While Derrida objects to McLuhan's vaunted return to orality (with Havelock and Ong), elsewhere he also associates McLuhan with privileging touch as 'the sense of the electronic age' (Derrida, 2005: 354). As new media play back and to an extent reverse the history

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of mechanical development as 'extensions of man', they seem to invert the development of literacy and social organization in the cool metamedium of the connected computer. McLuhan hoped this would engender that shock of unfamiliarity in the familiar that is necessary for the understanding of media culture. But this also invests technology with a disenfranchising agency, opposing the analytic mind-set of logic and literacy with the formulaic state of mind of oral culture, as Havelock and Ong did: in non-literate cultures the task of education could be described as putting the whole community into a formulaic state of mind, and thus lengthy verbal performances in oral cultures are never analytic but formulaic. Along with Flusser and others of their generation, both Derrida and McLuhan juxtapose sequential and discontinuous modes of communication, but Derrida (1982: 329) does not go along with the troubling equation of a 'primitive past' with the electronic present:

... communication, if one insists upon maintaining the word, is not the means of transport of sense, the exchange of intentions and meanings, the discourse and 'communication of consciousnesses.' We are not witnessing an end of writing which, to follow McLuhan's ideological representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations; but indeed a more and more powerful historical unfolding of a general writing of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would only be an effect, to be analyzed as such. It is this questioned effect that I have elsewhere called logocentrism.

Yet McLuhan's observations on media transpositions render traditional distinctions between logic and aesthetics invalid: we are enveloped, he asserts, in environments that would not exist without media technology. As McLuhan knows, game studies and information theory 'have dealt with the information content of systems, and have observed the "noise" and "deception" factors that divert data' (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 242). With reference to Shannon and Weaver, McLuhan asserted that 'what they call noise I call the medium – that is, all the side-effects, all the unintended patterns and changes'. And even earlier, in an essay on 'Culture without literacy' (1953), he writes

of seeing that modern physics and painting and poetry speak a common language and of acquiring that language at once in order that our world may possess consciously the coherence that it really has in latency, and which for lack of our recognition has created not new orchestral harmonies but mere noise.

This does not mean, as Cavell (2003: 5, 153) erroneously alleges, that the Shannon–Weaver model excludes noise – moreover, despite McLuhan relegating it to 'merely a transportation model which has no place for the side-effects of the service environments', he explicitly cites Peirce's

information theory in *Understanding Media*. The task of media studies is to interpret how programs rely on an analytic frame of mind, yet so often tend to succeed by putting users or audiences into a formulaic state of mind – and much the same applies, to be sure, to today's Derridean disciples and McLuhanite messengers.

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