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McLuhan, Flusser and the Mediatic Approach to Mind

All the alphabets in use in the Western world, from that of Russia to that of the Basques, from that of Portugal to that of Peru, are derivatives of the Graeco-Roman letters. Their unique separation of sight and sound from semantic and verbal content made them a most radical technology for the translation and homogenization of cultures. All other forms of writing had served merely one culture, and *had served to separate that culture from others.*

Marshall McLuhan

Nowadays there are at least three main theoretical paradigms about mind. One is traditional philosophy about the mind-body problem, which is increasingly influenced by cognitive science. This paradigm presupposes the mind as trans-historical entity. Another paradigm lies implicit in semiotics and narratology: mind becomes dissolved in symbolic systems; accordingly, mind is not trans-historical, but it neither changes historically, it changes as symbolic systems do – and they do not change following some historical thread but in a merely contingent way. For the semiotic paradigm, thus, mind is as contingent as are the different semiotic systems. Finally, mediatic theory is rapidly becoming a new paradigm for the humanities in general, as semiotics was before it. Mediatic theory historicizes mind to the extent in which it is possible to reach an historical *explanation* of technological change and development, for this change is somehow mirrored by the structure of mind. Furthermore, technology is not clearly linked to any ethnical ground, on the contrary, it possesses structures that permeate any ethnical community, thus, mind structures related to technology structures can be both historical and more or less universal. This leads us to the work of two paramount representatives of mediatic studies.

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) and Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) each advanced a theory of media taking a very different point of departure. McLuhan tends to stress *media in general*, whereas Flusser specifically stresses the *codes of communication*. In spite of that, their theories show striking similarities. The deeper coincidence between McLuhan and Flusser lies in conceiving of existence and consciousness as formed or determined by the media, whereas the most salient similarity their theories of communication bear lies in distinguishing three great ages of human history based on great transformations in communication. The aim of this paper is to briefly examine the main similarities and differences between their theories, including a brief reference to the new media.

The mediatic turn

Kant's Copernican turn proposes that the structure of consciousness determines the experience, namely, reality as it is for us, as it appears to us. The next step was the so-called linguistic turn, which amounts to the idea that the structure of consciousness itself is determined by language, and in the end it dissolves into a multitude of semiotic systems. This leads directly to Babel as the biblical curse of lack of communication. But both McLuhan and Flusser proposed a way out of this problem. Their idea is to avoid the relativity of language by focusing on the media as determinants of consciousness. In fact, it is possible to consider media, including languages and other symbolic systems, as possessing *general structures* determining consciousness beyond and above particular languages.¹ This can be seen as the common starting point both for McLuhan and Flusser. In this sense we could speak of a *mediatic turn* in the philosophy of mind: consciousness is not absolute, but changing and historical; yet, its history depends on the history of the human media *as communication devices*.² This implies a very reasonable interpretation of McLuhan's slogan "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1998: 7). We can, in fact, paraphrase the slogan resorting to Flusser as follows: Messages – imperatives, wishes, propositions, questions – program us to act and think in a certain way. Media – cars, telephones, images, texts – program us and determine the way we live. Therefore, media are messages. Media are messages, because media condition our existence – including our consciousness.

In contrast, Flusser links the theory of communication with the theory of information and conceives of information in a very wide sense, concerning "the essence of man (his form-giving essence)" (Flusser 2002a: 20). Flusser thinks of information as related to the action of *in-forming*, of shaping something. Nevertheless, Flusser understands the word 'message' in a much more restricted sense. For him, the term media means codes as symbolic systems proper (compare Flusser 2002a: 9), and, on this basis, he explicitly refers to the structure of a message, for such a structure "[...] reflects the physical character of its symbols more than the structure of the universe it communicates [it refers to]. This explains the famous sentence "The medium is the

¹ See the quotation heading this text.

² The pioneering insights of Harold Innis must be pointed out here: "We can perhaps assume that the use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the *character of knowledge* to be communicated and suggest that its pervasive influence will eventually create a civilization [...] and that the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization" (1999: 34). In general, Innis is concerned with "the implications of the media of communication for the *character of knowledge*" (1999: 3). In this way, Innis looks for the effects of an "oral tradition," a "complex system of writing," a "simple, flexible system of writing" (4), of parchment, paper, print, radio (c. 3) etc. For instance, "[t]he oral tradition emphasized memory and training" (Innis 9), whereas "[a] simplified and flexible alphabet and the spread of writing and reading emphasized logic and consequently general agreement" (Innis 1999: 9). For the abbreviations see the works cited at the end of this text. The abbreviation c. means *compare*. Italics within a quotation are always my own, unless otherwise indicated. Brackets inside a quotation are always my own.

message” (Flusser 2002a: 15). The transformation of a Kantian heritage is apparent here. A symbolic system symbolizes or means some kind of universe, and the naïve idea about this lies in believing that the message merely re-presents, that is, somehow mirrors the fact or situation it refers to. But Flusser stresses the *in-formative* character of the medium in terms of the fact or situation it refers to: “[...] the *structure* of the text *imprints itself* on the situation, exactly as the *structure* of the image imprints itself on it. Both text and image are ‘*mediations*’ [...]” (Flusser 2000a: 14). Consequently, we could paraphrase Kant’s Copernican turn by saying that the structure of consciousness imprints itself on the phenomena, that is, that consciousness is *mediation*.

In a much more general sense McLuhan holds that “[...] ‘the medium is the message’ because it is the medium that *shapes* and controls the scale and form of human association and action [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 9); it informs them. For McLuhan technologies “[...] are media of communication [...] in the sense that they *shape* and rearrange the patterns of human association and community” (McLuhan 1998: 127). In other words, “[...] the *formative* power in the media are the media themselves [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 21). They are in-formative “in [their] patterning of human relationships” (McLuhan 1998: 8). Broadly speaking, we could say that, for Flusser, the universe we conceive (through texts) or imagine (through images) is structured (in-formed) through the codes, whereas for McLuhan “our relations to one another and to ourselves” (McLuhan 1998: 8) are structured, shaped, configured by technologies (hardware and software). Following Flusser, we could say that the essence of humanity lies, in general, in its form-giving capability, but besides that, different code structures – which are nothing but something formed by the human – inform messages differently, imprint their structure on the messages, and, on their part, the messages themselves form our consciousness and, thus, our existence. On the other hand, following McLuhan, we could say that the forming or shape-giving capability is transferred from humanity inventing and creating media to the media, for they are the *message*, that which in a kind of feedback in-forms humanity shaping its consciousness and its life. Both in Flusser and in McLuhan we find a kind of form-giving feedback: from the human to codes, from codes to the human (Flusser), from the human to media, from media to the human.³ Nevertheless, a noticeable difference between Flusser and McLuhan as to such form-giving capability is that whereas McLuhan stresses the formative power of media, Flusser stresses the

³ See Innis: “A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and time and it becomes necessary to study *its characteristics* [Flusser: “structure of a message”] in order to appraise its influence in the cultural setting”(33). With “characteristics” of the medium Innis refers to, for instance, the heaviness or to the durability of it, which, in some sense, precedes Flusser’s preoccupation with the “physical property of the symbols.” Flusser for his part says that “[...] the product strikes back on man” (Flusser 2002b: 165).

other term, the in-formative capability of humanity, which he identifies in the end with human freedom (compare Flusser 2002a: 7n.).⁴

Media and a threefold human history

The next step for McLuhan is to look for key media in human history, for instance, language, city, alphabet, car or computer. He discusses a variety of media, but picks out oral language, the alphabet, and electricity (in fact, electric media in general) as especially important ones. McLuhan attributes to them the greatest shaping power for human relations. Correspondingly, he differentiates between the preliterate and post-literate cultures, and on the other hand, literate culture. The phonetic alphabet becomes for McLuhan the key to distinguishing between the three designated cultures. The preliterate one is the oral culture or the acoustic culture, for it is oral/aural in character. Another term for it is simply orality.⁵ The post-literate culture corresponds to the electric age, whereas the literate culture corresponds to the mechanical age or industrial age. In this way, according to McLuhan, the history of humankind is constituted by the preliterate or oral stage, the literate or mechanical one, and, finally, the post-literate or electric age.

For his part, Flusser focuses on codes proper, and depending on the *dominant* communication codes,⁶ he distinguishes between pre-historical, historical, and post-historical existence.⁷ He differentiates such forms of existence by explicitly adopting a structural point of view that leads him to look for the structure of a message as the structure of the medium. This leads him to the “physical properties of symbols” (Flusser 2002a: 15), according to which he distinguishes as the three dominant codes traditional images, writing or written lines, and technical images. Interesting is the fact that McLuhan’s literate cultures coincide completely with Flusser’s historical being. As a result, and what appears, at first glance, somewhat surprising, McLuhan’s tribal or *oral* cultures seem to coincide with Flusser’s mythical being governed by traditional

⁴ Flusser identifies producing both pure things and symbolic things as producing something artificial, non-natural, and as such considers it an act of freedom. So he speaks of “human communication as a phenomenon of freedom” (Flusser 2002a: 7). In this paper we are focused more on the similarities than on the differences between McLuhan and Flusser; discussing Flusser’s ideas about communication and freedom would go beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ As W. J. Ong uses it. See, for instance, *Orality and Literacy*, Routledge, New York, 1982.

⁶ In spite of his book *Medienkultur* and the text “Bilder in den neuen Medien” therein, Flusser does not use the term media as a technical term. Nevertheless, he very rarely refers to “imaginal media,” “surface media,” and “conceptual media” (Flusser 2002a: 28, 30) as synonyms for images and writing. On the other hand, Flusser addresses the general usage of the term “mass media” when he speaks of TV and cinema, for example (compare Flusser 2002a: 18n.).

⁷ Occasionally, Flusser refers to two other, previous ages of humankind: the first one was the age of primitive man, who was characterized by “concrete experience”; the second one was between 2 000 000 and 40 000 B. C., a period in which the human became a subject against objects, say, stone knives and carved figures (Flusser 2000a: 10). Nevertheless, such original ages of humankind do not play a relevant role in Flusser’s theory about codes and consciousness.

images. One may wonder, in fact, why McLuhan's tribal cultures, with "a dominant *auditory* sense-life" (McLuhan 1998: 86), which McLuhan also considers mythic, coincide with Flusser's mythical existence or pre-historical world dominated by *images*. Setting this aside for the moment we also have McLuhan's post-literate cultures of the electrical age coincide with Flusser's post-historical being" dominated by techno-images. At this point it must be stressed that McLuhan's and Flusser's theories about these stages of humankind distinguish corresponding kinds of mind or consciousness.

For Flusser there is a sequence of modes of consciousness, namely, magic-mythical consciousness or imagination, historical consciousness or conceptualization, and, finally, technical imagination or techno-imagination, each corresponding to the dominant codes. For McLuhan there is a sequence of modes of awareness constituted by non-literate awareness, which is an "acoustic [...] awareness" (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 15); the critical awareness trained by alphabetical writing; and, finally, the new awareness corresponding to the electric media. The awareness corresponding to both orality and the electric age seems to be very similar for McLuhan, in fact, structurally, it seems to be the same, for he holds that "the forms of awareness imposed on the twentieth century by electronic technology" are mythic in mode (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 7). At any rate, the awareness corresponding to both oral societies and to the electric age is, according to McLuhan, an integral awareness or inclusive awareness.

Speech, images and writing

As mentioned above, McLuhan divides the history of humankind into the *preliterate* or oral stage, the *literate or mechanical* age, and, finally, the *post-literate* or electric age. In fact, McLuhan considers *literacy* as the paramount case of mechanization. Mechanization "[...] is achieved by fragmentation of any process and by putting the fragmented parts in a series [...]" (McLuhan 1998: 11n.). Furthermore, "[...] the technique of fragmentation [...] is the essence of machine technology" (McLuhan 1998: 8). The alphabet is not a machine in the normal sense of the word; nevertheless, it embodies the essence of machine technology. Obviously, what the alphabet mechanizes, that is, *fragments* und *puts in a series*, is *speech*. On the other hand, concerning not only the alphabet but the linear codes in general, Flusser stresses not speech but *images*. Linear codes "[...] *rip* the images [...]" (Flusser, 1999: 10) and unroll them into rows: "The *invention* of writing consisted *not so very much* in the invention of new symbols, but rather in the unrolling of the image into rows ('lines'). We can say that with this event *prehistory* ends and *history* in the true sense begins." By "unrolling the image into rows," writing "[...] rolls the scene out and transforms it

into a *story*. It ‘explains’ the scene in that it enumerates each individual symbol clearly and distinctly [...]’ (Flusser 2002a: 38).

For McLuhan the phonetic alphabet is a very basic mechanization or fragmentation, for it carries “the *analysis* of the various sounds of speech to the level of complete abstraction” of any meaning: “The basis of alphabetic abstraction is the phoneme, the irreducible meaningless ‘bit’ of sound, which is ‘translated’ by a meaningless sign. The phoneme is the smallest ‘sound unit’ of speech, and it has no relation to concept or semantic meaning” (McLuhan and McLuhan 1999: 14). Being bare of any meaning, the phoneme is *outside of any context* whatsoever. At this point there is both a deep coincidence with and an important difference between Flusser and McLuhan. For Flusser, linear writing is based on “[...] the act of *tearing things* [in this case representations] *out of their context*, to arrange them in rows” (Flusser 2002a: 42), and this resembles in some sense the creation of phonemes.⁸ However, for McLuhan, the phoneme is something absolutely new; for this reason, alphabetic writing is something completely different from all other linear codes or writings.⁹ The alphabet achieves a “one-to-one matching of sign and sound [...] rendering the signs themselves inherently meaningless,” (McLuhan and McLuhan 1999: 14), for already the phoneme, the sounds, are completely meaningless: “[...] meaningless letters are used to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds” (McLuhan 1998: 83). Both the phoneme and the letter imply abstraction to the point of a total lack of meaning. Flusser stresses the act of ripping the images and putting their elements into a row, that is, of telling a *story* through whatever writing, whereas McLuhan stresses the radical fragmentation of speech achieved just through the alphabet. Flusser focuses on the origin of historical consciousness, whereas McLuhan focuses on the psychological training for fragmenting and, thus, mechanizing. This difference leads Flusser to stress the consciousness of *time* and McLuhan to stress the consciousness of *space*.¹⁰ In fact, to tear things out of their context is, according to McLuhan, the main psychic, theoretical and practical attitude of Western human beings, fostered by the phonetic alphabet. McLuhan refers to this as the creation of “[...] a figure minus a ground, floating around devoid of its original context” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 79). Mechanization is

⁸ In fact, to tear things out of their context is, according to McLuhan, the main psychic, theoretical and practical attitude of Western humanity, fostered by the phonetic alphabet. McLuhan refers to this as the creation of “[...] a figure minus a ground, floating around devoid of its original context” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 79). Mechanization is just this kind of fragmentation plus setting the fragments “in a series,” as we saw above. To put in a series is, simultaneously, to create homogeneous space, even though it is the visual representation of historical time.

⁹ See the quotation heading this text, and furthermore: “[...] pictographic and hieroglyphic writing as used in Babylonian, Mayan, and Chinese cultures [...] give[s] pictorial expression to oral meanings. As such, they approximate the animated cartoon and are extremely unwieldy, requiring many signs for the infinity of data and operations of social action. In contrast, the phonetic alphabet, by a few letters only, was able to encompass all languages. Such an achievement [...] involved the separation of both signs and sounds from their semantic and dramatic meaning. No other system of writing had accomplished this feat” (McLuhan 1998: 87).

¹⁰ McLuhan considers that “[...] visual space structure is an *artifact* of Western civilization created by Greek *phonetic literacy* [...]” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 45).

just this kind of fragmentation plus the act of setting the fragments in a series, as we saw above. To put in a series is, at once, to create the homogeneous space of Western humanity,¹¹ even though it is the *visual* representation of historical time. In analyzing literate societies McLuhan follows the lead of Harold Innis, who refers to “the increasing pressure of the written and printed tradition toward the organization of space” (1999: 131), and according to whom “[a] decline of the oral tradition meant an emphasis on writing (and hence on the eye rather than the ear) and on visual arts, architecture, sculpture, and painting (and hence on *space* rather than time)” (1999: 131). McLuhan, thus, stresses the link between writing and the rise of homogeneous space, whereas Flusser insists on a new, linear, and historical, consciousness of time emerging with writing.¹² In the end, it is tempting to conflate both approaches in a Kantian way by stressing time and space as forms of experience and stressing their dependence on codes.¹³

Returning to McLuhan, I summarized that the richness and complexity of ancient oral communication becomes fragmented and reduced to less than thirty uniform phonemes and the corresponding standardized letters, which leads to the possibility of transposing basic *visual* uniformity into a mental organization of *experience in general*. The consequences are enormous: “Only alphabetic cultures have ever mastered connected lineal sequences as pervasive forms of psychic and social organization” (McLuhan 1998: 85). This fact *informs* experience in general: “The breaking up of *every kind of experience* into uniform units [...] has been the secret of Western power over man and nature alike” (McLuhan 1998: 85). That is, the alphabet becomes a *form of experience* in a quasi Kantian sense. McLuhan adds: “That is the reason why our Western industrial programs have quite involuntarily been so militant, and our military programs have been so

¹¹ For McLuhan’s analysis about space in preliterate and literate societies, see my article *El carácter tecnológico de la percepción espacial*, A Parte Rei 41, September 2005. <http://serbal.pntic.mec.es/AParteRei/>; <http://serbal.pntic.mec.es/~cmunoz11/carrillo41.pdf>

¹² Referring to Flusser’s conceiving of space we could say that he thinks of it in temporal terms. Space is for him either surface or line, and the “the difference between the one-dimensional line and the two-dimensional surface [...] is one of temporality [...]” (Flusser 2002a: 23), that is, we are dealing here with “two types of temporality” (Flusser 2002a: 23). As we have seen, Flusser means by that the difference between the circular or cyclical time of mythical consciousness and the linear time inherent to historical consciousness. On his part, McLuhan does not reduce space to time or vice versa. He thinks of the whole mechanical age in spatial terms, he associates it with what he calls the *visual bias* brought about by alphabetical writing and stressed by print. On the other hand, he conceives both of preliterate and post-literate societies as characterized by things occurring or being experienced not successively but simultaneously. So, McLuhan writes “[...] for tribal man [...] there is no history: all is present [...]” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 13). Similarly, “[...] the ground of the latest Western technology is electronic and simultaneous [...]” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 68). Nevertheless, he also thinks – as does Flusser – of the synchronic as circular (compare McLuhan and Powers 1992: 10), and so he argues that “[t]he order of ancient or prehistoric time was circular, not progressive” (McLuhan and Powers 1992, 36). For McLuhan, too, the progressive time is, of course, the historical time. It is, thus, unsurprising that both McLuhan and Flusser consider pre-historical humanity as mythical and they both also find strong mythical elements in the post-historical (Flusser) or post-literate age (McLuhan). Finally, it should be noted that Flusser also occasionally refers to four dimensions (space plus time) and to three dimensions (compare Flusser 2000a: 10); in the case of technical images, which are generated starting from “points,” he refers to zero-dimensionality.

¹³ It should be mentioned here that it was also Innis who first stressed the relationship between the “characteristics” of a medium and space and time. He explicitly discussed the “bias of significance” of a medium for a culture according to the “relative emphasis on time or space” of such a medium (c. Innis 1999: 33n.).

industrial. Both are *shaped* by the alphabet in their technique of transformation and control by making all situations *uniform* and *continuous*. This procedure, manifest even in the Greco-Roman phase, became more intense with the uniformity and repeatability of the Gutenberg development” (McLuhan 1998: 85n). Furthermore, “Western man,” that is literate cultures, “acquired from the technology of literacy the power to act without reacting. [...] We acquire the art of carrying out the most dangerous social operations with complete detachment” (McLuhan 1998: 4). Western “man” can separate action from feeling—this is a fragmenting—and this can be seen as the mental training provided by the alphabet that enables analyzing and fragmenting every experience. The analytical fragmentation of speech and experience through the “[...] uniformity of codes [is] the prime mark of literate and civilized societies [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 84). And let’s remember the aforementioned idea of Flusser’s about the structure of the text imprinting itself on the situation. In the same vein, McLuhan states that “[c]ivilization is built on literacy because literacy is a uniform processing of a culture by a visual sense extended in space and time by the alphabet” (McLuhan 1998: 86). It is in this way that the phonetic alphabet, as a unique technology, produced, informed or shaped, thus, the mechanical and industrial human. Equally explicitly, McLuhan suggests that “[...] the written alphabet with its lineal structure was able to create the conditions conducive to the development of the Western *mental ethos*, especially, science, technology, and rationality” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 73).

For his examination of the relationship between traditional images and texts, Flusser starts with pictorial writings. He interprets the wedge-shaped Mesopotamian tiles as rows of *figures* rearranging an image, or scene. He says that “[t]he line [...] rips the things from the scene to arrange them anew [...]” (Flusser 2002a: 38), that is, in rows.¹⁴ An important point here is, for Flusser, that *scenes* are rearranged, resulting in *processes*. Linear codes “[...] demand progressive reception. And the result is a new experience of time, this is, linear time, a stream of unstoppable progress, of dramatic unrepeatability [...], in short, *history*. With the invention of writing, history begins, not because writing keeps a firm hold on processes, but because it transforms scenes into *processes*: it generates historical consciousness” (Flusser 2002a: 39). The step from imagining the world through scenes to thinking of it as processes is the step from circular or magical to lineal or historical consciousness of time.

¹⁴ But elsewhere, Flusser refers to “certain Mesopotamian tiles” (Flusser 2002a: 63) accompanied by “cuneiform symbols form[ing] lines, and they obviously mean the image they accompany. They ‘explain,’ ‘recount,’ ‘tell’ it. They do so [...] by rendering ‘explicit’ what was ‘implicit’ within the image” (Flusser 2002a: 64).

Orality and images

For McLuhan the oral cultures are shaped by speech as something not yet fragmented, and, thus, still multilayered. According to him, “[o]nly the phonetic alphabet makes [...] a sharp division in experience [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 84), whereas “[t]he spoken word involves all of the senses *dramatically* [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 77n).¹⁵ This means a sensual involvement that refers to “[t]he variety of senses involved in oral discourse, the gestures and tonalities” accompanying it (McLuhan and Watson 1997: 30). In contrast, the visual stress produced by alphabet eliminates such sensual involvement, the dramatic character of speech. It is in this way that “[a]s an intensification and extension of the visual function, the phonetic alphabet diminishes the role of the other senses of sound and touch and taste in any literate culture” (McLuhan 1998: 84). But the oral world of archaic cultures is governed by the “iconic principle of simultaneous touch and interplay” (McLuhan 1998: 185) between all things and events, which is the opposite to the breaking up of every kind of experience into uniform units, or the principle of fragmentation brought about by alphabetic technology. For the members of an oral society every element of a configuration necessarily refers to the meaningful whole, namely, to the cosmos of the culture. And this holds true for all the codes of any preliterate cultures. The elements of such codes, be they actions, gesticulations, colors, memory aids, tri-dimensional figures, words, chains of words, images proper or non-alphabetic written symbols possess this holistic character, too. For this “[...] reason we find myths difficult to grasp [...] they do not exclude any facet of experience as literate cultures do. *All the levels of meaning are simultaneous*” (McLuhan 2000: 72). This is what McLuhan terms the “iconic principle,” for “[t]he *flat* icon has multitudinous layers of significance [...]” (McLuhan and Watson 1997: 89). In other words, the *inclusive* form of the icon implies a *simultaneous* order and is at once an *inclusive* order. Myths, purely oral narratives, function, therefore, *like images*, for on the *surface* of any image “[a]ll levels of meaning are simultaneous [...]” since images are the icons proper (McLuhan 2000: 72).

Interestingly, the simultaneity of meaning in oral cultures stressed by McLuhan resembles very closely two notions of Flusser’s about images in mythical societies. The first one is the connotative character of images. Flusser says that “[...] images are [...] ‘connotative’ (ambiguous) arrays of symbols: they allow for interpretation” (Flusser 1999: 89). Simultaneity of meaning is ambiguity, as Flusser stresses it: In deciphering an image the “[...] grasping eye has to wander around the image *analyzing* it in order to get the meaning” (Flusser 2002b: 24). But the image is necessarily a closed surface; for this reason the hovering eye *must* “[...] always *return* to every

¹⁵ The last paragraph above contains the word “dramatic.” For Flusser it means the unrepeatability of historical processes and events. For McLuhan it means “multi-sensorial.”

given element of the image [...]” (Flusser 1999: 9). This leads to “[...] arrays of meaning in which one element endows another element with meaning and gets its meaning from that other element [...]” (Flusser 1999: 9), creating a reciprocal meaning based on reciprocal relations. It is precisely this fact that generates ambiguity. “The eye that deciphers an image scans the surface, and it thus establishes *reversible* relations between the elements of the image. It may go back and forth while deciphering the image” (Flusser 2002a: 64). And the point is that “[t]he reversibility of relations that prevails within the image characterizes the world for those who use images for the understanding of the world, who ‘imagine’ it. For them, all things in the world are related to each other in such a reversible way [...]. It is just as true to say that night follows day as that day follows night [...]” (Flusser 2002a: 64). That is, the night means the day as well as the day means the night, both of them endow each other with meaning. On the other hand, the circularity in scanning the figures or elements on the closed surface implies a kind of synchrony or, in McLuhan’s terms, simultaneity. This is the second parallelism between McLuhan’s idea of the simultaneity of meaning and the way Flusser conceives of images.¹⁶ As we shall see below, in the end McLuhan conceives of oral language or speech as “iconic,” that is, as if it were an image.

In spite of the broadness implied in McLuhan’s approach to the media as messages, he really stresses – as Flusser does – the communicative codes proper. We have, thus, two extremes: oral and alphabetic codes. Between these two extremes, in McLuhan’s analysis, lie the images proper, every kind of pictographic codes, and syllabaries as the last development of writing systems before alphabetic writing. Furthermore, both purely oral communication, in its necessarily poetic, that is, rhythmic and formulaic structure, and images proper are configurations endowed with multileveled meaning; both are “graphic or iconic.” By the same token, “[...] the ideogram is an *inclusive gestalt*, not an analytic dissociation of senses and functions like phonetic writing” (McLuhan 1998: 84). Conversely, “[t]he phonetically written word sacrifices worlds of meaning and perception” (McLuhan 1998: 83). Both oral and pictorial codes – as well as alphabetic codes – shape existence, perception and consciousness. This conclusion expresses actually what might be called the mediatic turn in the theory of consciousness.

¹⁶ It should be noted that McLuhan’s simultaneous meaning and multiple meaning layers imply something structurally very close to Flusser’s reversible meaning relations. At any rate, there is here a kind of ambiguity concerning each element in a configuration (McLuhan) or element on the surface of any image (Flusser): everything relates to everything else. Possibly, such relationship could also be thought of as the feedback between elements in changing structures.

The electric age and techno-images

Finally, the electric age or the post-literate cultures (McLuhan), as well as the post-historical existence (Flusser) mean a revolutionary new situation in which alphabetical writing loses its importance. For McLuhan, the electric media are retrieving old forms of oral, archaic cultures. They are retrieving mythic forms of being. In fact, simultaneous order characterizes not only the mythic proper, but, according to McLuhan, it should also be the main trait of the current electric age, in which “[w]e live mythically [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 25). No wonder, then, that McLuhan illustrates the simultaneous order as a kind of linkage of elements when he refers to our relations to the press. In newspaper “multiple information items are arranged in a *mosaic* on one sheet.” By the same token, “[...] news magazines are preeminently *mosaic* in form [...]” That is, both in newspaper and in news magazines all the news is *simultaneously* present and the only link between them is the date of the issue. Actually, there is no previously determined order with regard to how to read the news. Furthermore, a single piece of the mosaic is in itself nearly meaningless; its meaning arises in the interplay with the whole, namely the corporate image presented in such media: the mosaic form does not offer “[...] windows on the world like the old picture magazines [...]. Whereas the spectator of a picture magazine is passive, the reader of a news magazine becomes much involved in *the making of meanings* for the corporate image” (McLuhan 1998: 204). McLuhan conceives of such use of eyes in reading even as acoustic. Other instances are radio and TV: “[...] radio and TV [...] have the [...] power of imposing an *inclusive* order [...]” (McLuhan 1998: 255), for both radio and TV have the *inclusive* form of an icon. Inclusive amounts here to simultaneous, and McLuhan uses also the term ‘mosaic’. In fact, “[t]he *mosaic* approach is not only ‘much the easier’ in the study of the *simultaneous*, which is the *auditory field*; it is the only relevant approach. In the *iconic* and *mosaic form* there is no attempt to reduce *space* to a single uniform, and connected character such as was done with perspective: it is a *simultaneous field of relations*. *Mosaic, iconic form* is discontinuous, abrupt, and *multileveled*, as is iconic art” (McLuhan and McLuhan 1999: 55).¹⁷ Now, it is understandable why McLuhan speaks of the mosaic of the TV image and sustains Tony Schwartz’s thesis that “[i]n watching television, our eyes function like our ears.” McLuhan almost repeats this by saying that in watching TV we “[...] use the eye as an ear [...]” (McLuhan and Powers 1992: 63). In general, it should hold true that “[i]n the electronic age [...] we encounter new shapes and structures of human interdependence and of

¹⁷ Interestingly, McLuhan speaks also of the mosaic image, which is different from many images. The difference is a picture by Michelangelo and a cubist painting by Picasso. The first one would be, using McLuhan’s terminology, a spatial, visual image, whereas the Picasso would be configurational, “acoustic.” In short, iconic art is for McLuhan the art of rejecting perspective and a defined point of view image (compare McLuhan 1998: 5, 12n, 19).

expression which are 'oral' in form even when the components of the situation may be non-verbal" (McLuhan 2000: 3).

But just as the electric based media, like newspaper, radio, TV, hypertext, etc., retrieve the iconic form, the question arises for McLuhan as to whether we are at the limit of civilization and at the onset of retribalization in the global village. The questions makes sense, for the electric technologies not only compress the world into a global village but retrieve the multileveled meaning inherent to oral or mythic cultures. McLuhan, in fact, says that "[t]he implosive (compressional) character of the electric technology plays the disk or film of Western man backward, into the heart of tribal darkness or into [...] 'the Africa within.' The instant character of electric information movement does not enlarge, but involves, the family of man in the cohesive state of village living" (McLuhan 1998: 111).

Flusser, too, points out that "[...] we are approaching a new type of magico-mythical age, a post-historical image culture" (Flusser 2002a: 66). Yet, the reason does not lie in electronic technology, but in an exhaustion of the alphabetical code, for it led to scientific texts as knowledge lacking any sense for the life-world. Techno-images were invented, according to Flusser, in order to devolve meaning to life.¹⁸ The alphabetical writing was "iconoclastic" (Flusser 2002a: 68), but in a kind of retrieval or reversal we are developing now the "techno-imagination," and it may be that "[...] history in the strict sense of that term will come to an end, and we may easily imagine what will follow: the *eternal return* of life in an apparatus that progresses by its own inertia" (Flusser 2002a: 69). The core of such an apparatus would be the mass media functioning by making writing subservient to image making, and reason to the imagination.

Conclusive global similarities

In order to point out conclusive similarities between McLuhan's and Flusser's theories about the relationship between media and consciousness, it must be noted that there is a strong link between Flusser's idea of the exhaustion of the alphabetical code and McLuhan's idea of the actual dominance of electric technology. Flusser thinks that writing is being displaced not simply by images but by technical images, that is, by the numerical code of computing used to generate technical images. On the other hand, it is clear that the last consequence of the electric technology as McLuhan conceives of it is nothing but computing techniques based on formal codes: it is the set of formal codes and algorithms of computer science that raises simultaneity to a global scale; it is first the global interlinking through electrically working formal codes of

¹⁸ See my article on "Deception and the 'Magic' of 'Technical Images' According to Flusser," in *Flusser Studies* 04, 2006.

computation that seems to make writing dispensable. Furthermore, Flusser considers the exhaustion of writing just as the consequence of writing itself: writing in its highest expression is nothing but scientific texts or theories, and such texts make techno-images possible. For its part, McLuhan's general theory of media development refers to the "reversal of the overheated medium," which is nothing but a given medium pushed to its extreme and, as such, is negating itself. McLuhan could, therefore, paraphrase Flusser's idea of the exhaustion of writing as the overheating of writing. Moreover, according to McLuhan, a medium pushed to its extreme retrieves some older mediatic form. In this sense, linear codes as Flusser conceives of them, pushed to their extreme, retrieve just the imaginal codes, but now displaying a dominance of technical images over writing. And vice versa, Flusser thinks of codes as negating themselves in the very end. So, Flusser's dialectic of the codes' development could be thought of as an alternate form of expressing McLuhan's idea of the reversal of the overheated medium, its effect lying in retrieving an old technological form: writing retrieving images.

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