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Marshall McLuhan & Vilém Flusser: The New Model Artists

Marshall McLuhan as an artist

Marshall McLuhan is one of the most multi-faceted thinkers of the last century: the philosopher, the writer, the showman, the satirist, the exploring pioneer of the electronic world (Theall 2000: on-line). However, the most interesting interpretation of his original perceptions, speculations and ambiguous puns occurs when we consider his intellectual activity as an artistic expression - when we see him as an artist in his own way. Generally, McLuhan's theory concerns various aspects of creating and modifying the mass media as well as their impact. This approach is the starting point for his whole scientific and artistic activity and constitutes the basis of all hypotheses formulated by him. According to McLuhan, the origination and impact of ever more advanced and complicated communication techniques entails transformations not only in the reality we live in, but also in our way of perceiving and understanding it. The expansive development of new technologies and means of mass communication and the interconnected coming of the audiovisual era are, above all, referred to here. Furthermore, in a media society, which came into being as a result of these, the traditional status of art had undergone a total change: art had been freed from its confines and limitations. Artistic movements of the second half of the twentieth century, which adopted every new means of mass communication and tapped the opportunities created by modern technologies, played a significant role in the changes mentioned above. Nevertheless, the progressing technologisation of life, which constituted the major inspiration for them, provided not only unlimited possibilities for art but also new challenges requiring great effort. The artists, by introducing new forms and means of expression, took on a special mission in society. They were not only to present novel modes of perceiving and understanding reality, but first and foremost to

warn against the ubiquitous and often pernicious influence of the media. Therefore, the crucial dilemma of the contemporary artist stems from the very essence of modern media: its awe-inspiring, unlimited possibilities for human creation on the one hand coupled with fear of it and the necessity of countering its influence on the other. To understand the importance of this conundrum we have to remember that, in McLuhan's opinion, communication is always a new mode of art, not science (Nevitt, McLuhan 1994: 215). Thus, the artist - not the scientist - is playing the most important role in a media society. In this context, the following assumptions will be of crucial importance: artists easily absorb and make use of different types of media; they are the first to discover how one means can exploit or strengthen the power of another means. Moreover they play an irreplaceable role in analyzing, shaping and explaining forms and structures created by electronic technologies. S/he thus plays an important predictive role: "Whereas the ordinary person seeks security by numbing his perceptions against the impact of new experience, the artist delights in this novelty and instinctively creates situations that both reveal and compensate for it. The artist studies the distortion of sensory life produced by new environmental programming and tends to create artistic situations that correct the sensory bias and derangement brought about by the new form. In social terms the artist can be regarded as a navigator who gives adequate compass bearings in spite of magnetic deflection of the needle by the changing play of forces. So understood, the artist is not a peddler of ideals or lofty experiences. He is rather the indispensable aid to action and reflection alike" (McLuhan, Parker 1968: 238).

Briefly, according to McLuhan, the essential role of the artist in society is to teach people new modes of perception (adequate to the new technologies) and to lead them into the future painlessly. On many occasions McLuhan repeatedly refers this concept to himself, and it is evident in his works. Starting with his first book *Mechanical Bride*, his writings, lectures and extravagant manner were always satirical, intellectual provocations: illogical, difficult to understand, experimental, non-linear, non-dialectical, usually open-ended, and full of metaphors, puns and jokes. He

usually used language and individual words in his own way, with his own meaning. It was clearly visible in numerous collaborations with contemporary artists and designers, and ended with original photo-collages books, (for example, *The Medium is The Message* with Quentin Fiore, or *Through the Vanishing Point* with Harley Parker) (Marchessault 2005: 157-159). To understand these texts properly, they must be approached as a form of poetry. Without doubt McLuhan himself saw his activity as a special art form. In the famous interview conducted by Gerald E. Stearn, he declared: “When I sit down to write about complicated problems moving on several planes, I deliberately move into multi-sensual prose. This in an art form [...] a serious art form” (Stearn 1967: 285).

Nevertheless, we can treat McLuhan as an artist not only because of his “artistic” (or more precisely “poetic”) way of thinking and writing, but also (if not first of all) because of his revealing, prophetic role in the modern world. “In his remarks on common phenomena, McLuhan possesses the most astonishing capacity to perceive what remains hidden from others – literally, to make the invisible visible. ‘As a rule’, he says, ‘I always look for what others ignore’”(Kostelanetz 1969: 91).

This kind of prophetic activity is not a simple prediction of what will or will not happen. Instead it is an interpretation of the present and a prognosis of the future. Who is the artist, then? It is quite easy to define “artist” in McLuhan’s terms, using some of his famous, well known dichotomies, for example: “environments – anti-environments,” “figure – ground” or “cliché – archetype.” In each of these cases, the action mechanism is the same: the main duty of the artist is to create contrasts. McLuhan was certain that “Comparison and contrast have always been a means of sharpening perception in the arts as well as in general experience which can demonstrate true nature of all matters” (McLuhan, Parker 1968: 238). In this context, McLuhan’s thesis (similar to Joseph Beuys’ well-known slogan “every man is an artist”) that any member of the society who perceives the world created by the media and modern technology as it is in reality (and not as is commonly perceived) can be an artist is quite interesting. Of course, we should note that there are skills

which can be possessed only by professional creators. But while speaking about McLuhan as an artist, it is necessary to concentrate above all on his idea of “an artist as a antenna of the society.”

“The power of the arts to anticipate future social and technological developments by a generation and more has long been recognized. In this century Ezra Pound called the artist «the antennae of the race». Art as radar acts as «an early alarm system», as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time in order to prepare to cope with them. This concept of the arts as prophetic contrasts with the popular idea of them as merely a form of self-expression. If art is an «early warning system» to use the phrase from World War II, when radar was new, art has the utmost relevance not only to the study of media but to the development of media controls” (McLuhan 2003: 16). The concept of “society’s antenna” is closely connected with McLuhan’s conviction of art’s exceptional possibilities. Of course, claims that artistic activity can transform the shape of our lives are nothing new – we can observe this through the ages from rock-painting to neo-avant-garde movements. In this respect, McLuhan concentrated on artists’ feeling of mission in society and their critical depiction of reality. Artists should create statements about the present and possible changes in the future, should redirect society’s attention. In his conclusions, McLuhan was a perceptive and responsive observer, according to S. D. Neill: “In any case, it was McLuhan who «saw» the media as a cultural phenomenon and who tried to articulate its effects on the human enterprise, particularly with his theory that structural impact of a medium of communication creates a sensory closure – an alteration in the balance of the senses – and this affects the way we think and act. This was McLuhan as antenna” (Neill 1993: 86).

In his entire work, McLuhan was always interested in all those things that draw attention to the true meaning of common culture. “McLuhan himself became a mythic figure: and myth-making was, as he wrote, the central condition of the electronic media. Yet he also became for many a vulgarizer, a charlatan, an enthusiast of pop trash, an apologist for the new technologies. [...] Everything

McLuhan did, in private, public, or in print was shaped for maximum effect and involvement. ‘The job of the artist’, he said (referring of course to himself), ‘is to command attention!’”(Powe 1984: 21-25).

Vilém Flusser as an artist

Vilém Flusser’s reputation as a media philosopher can on many levels be compared with that of the legendary Marshall McLuhan. As philosopher and media theorist Flusser predicted a culture of glossy appearance and ubiquitous digital technologies, and yet, in a similar vein to McLuhan, he was rather critical about technological developments and the consequences for culture. Despite this fact he is now remembered as a prophet in digital media philosophy and theory.

The second half of this paper focuses primarily on Flusser and his un-academic, personal style of writing, together with his use of diverse languages and the manner in which he conducted his interdisciplinary research.¹

Flusser was fluent in five languages but he wrote his most important texts in German, Portuguese, and French. Flusser’s ability to write in different languages is well known but because some of his key texts had not been translated from their original language, his audience was only aware of those texts that could be read in their own language or country. Anke Finger (Flusser 2003: x) points to the lack of available translations in her introduction to ‘The Freedom of the Migrant’ where she differentiates “these different Flussers” as philosopher, author and migrant.

¹ We will later differentiate Flusser’s +specific methods of research referring to generally accepted definitions of collaborative practices. Inter-disciplinary: A specific form of collaborative research process in which a specific outcome is greater than the sum of its parts and may necessitate a new academic formation. Convergence results from diversity and cross-fertilization through difference. New domains that traverse disciplinary boundaries include gender, the postcolonial, information systems, sexuality, race, etc. Cross-disciplinary: To differentiate from inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary. A cross-disciplinary approach draws methods or techniques from both the natural and the social sciences and must continually take heed of developments in other fields. (2003), *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Deluxe Edition CD-ROM*) Transdisciplinary: Research where different disciplines have been brought together and changed. The trans-disciplinary process can be described as creation through the encounter with difference. Trans-disciplinary processes use traveling concepts: transformations resulting from encounter and extension. Trans-disciplinarity may take place in either disciplinary or interdisciplinary models of practice. (AHRB Research Strategy Seminar, Interdisciplinary/Cross-disciplinary/Trans-disciplinary, London 7 May 2004, (http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cath/ahrc/publishing/papers/2004/gp_ahrb/ahrb.html))

The “different Flussers” manifest themselves not only through the use of the different languages but also through the manner in which Flusser crossed disciplinary boundaries. Without doubt to write in a newly acquired language was challenging and, moreover, it invited Flusser to engage even more thoroughly with his writing. One can compare this with his need to engage with unrelated disciplines. The new language obviously offered new interpretations of and insights into general facts.

To suggest that Flusser had deliberately chosen an un-academic and cross-disciplinary way of working at first seems speculative. Yet Flusser discussed the problem of style when he differentiated a spontaneous thought from a deliberate secondary thought. The latter academic style he proposed is “a translation of a first thought” (Flusser 2002: 193). Flusser further suggested labelling his different writings under “treatises” for the academic texts and “essays” for the subjective texts. This choice, he explained, would determine the kind of dialogue he would have with the topic, namely either to merely explain a topic or, in the more personal essay, to “implicate” himself and attempt to consider the others/ the reader within the topic. The goal was to change or even risk losing the topic eventually.

To offer a comparison, McLuhan adopted the very same style of not providing sufficient references to the material he discussed, except that McLuhan did not need to prove his academic credibility; he had received his PhD from Cambridge and, in addition, had earlier on produced academic papers only to drop their production later in his career. Apparently, this was a choice, a methodology to avoid being drawn into a category or academic discipline where styles of thinking and arguing might prevent the discovery of new knowledge. In a famous interview McLuhan sits on a platform in a swivel chair and when asked by the interviewee he continues to rotate to demonstrate that he indeed had no particular perspective but wanted to speak instead from the various possible points of view.

Flusser's writing had often been criticised as essayistic and un-academic, but one might however label it as poetic and artistic. Again, this is a description that also applies to the many texts McLuhan produced, as mentioned earlier. Both men liked to bring a different perspective to a discipline. What Flusser experimented with can be considered a truly interdisciplinary discourse in which he offers relationships between seemingly unrelated issues. He clearly aimed to produce new organisations and insights into our understanding of the world. Flusser used this multi-faceted thinking to discuss issues such as doubt and scepticism, belief and disbelief. He investigated the collision of interest and doubt and offered a theory that stresses that with this collision of interest and doubt new knowledge will inevitably be produced. But Flusser also investigated banalities and daily routines, such as shaving and other gestures including smoking a pipe, to go along with the above-mentioned rule of "always look for what others ignore."

Flusser's research is that of a reflexive thinker. He offered and built bridges between European and Brazilian cultures, moreover, he related metaphysical theories to the concerns of new media theories. We used in our description of Flusser the distinct word "reflexive" (rather than reflective), referring here to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) who differentiate between mere reflection and being reflexive. The very meaning of reflexivity² demands reflection on many layers, and as such repeated actions of reflection have to be processed. One layer of reflection Flusser demonstrated was his use of the still new and foreign language. Other layers were the different disciplines he investigated to enrich and compare his knowledge. Flusser also encircled his subject areas by speaking from different viewpoints, even allowing contradiction within an essay. Doubts, strangeness and complexity seem part of his methodology, which we believe might have been initiated by his personal history of emigration that was forming his character.

² Reflexivity: The terms reflection and reflexivity are often used synonymously. However Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000) cite a specific meaning of reflexivity which introduces an understanding of reflection with several levels of interpretations. Their paradigm case requests four levels of reflection and interpretation: 1. Contact with empirical material; 2. Awareness of the interpretive act; 3. Clarification of political-ideological contexts; 4. The handling of the question of representation and authority. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000: 238)

Flusser was extremely aware of his position as an immigrant in exile. In his essay from 1984, 'Exile and Creativity' (Flusser 2002: 104-109), Flusser described his exile situation as a challenge to creative activity. He deliberately avoided the word immigrant but chose instead to replace it with the "expelled." Flusser explained that the expelled is surrounded by a flood of information in a chaotic, noisy and edgy environment. The new data that is surrounding the expelled needs processing and, according to Flusser, "[d]ata transformation is a synonym for creation" (Flusser 2002: 104). The person in exile is "the catalyst for the synthesis of new information" (Flusser 2002: 108). Flusser believed that the external and internal dialogues of the expelled would find harmony with each other in order to transform the world in a creative manner. Exile he said "is a breeding ground for creative activity, for the new" (Flusser 2002: 109).

We would like to suggest that a form of deliberate exile can be found in the act of purposely investigating disciplines that are not your own. Both Flusser and McLuhan investigated and collaborated on a theoretical and practical level with people outside their own field of expertise, simply to force communication between the disciplines. This cross-fertilisation would lead to art productions, book projects and films, for example. At the same time the art that was produced would become a method of communication in itself.

Although we find hardly any references in Flusser's writing it is interesting that he mentioned McLuhan in a slightly diminishing way. To produce the essay 'Für eine Phänomenologie des Fernsehens', 'A Phenomenology of Television', that he wrote in 1974 he clearly must have had read McLuhan's works; he even used McLuhan's terms such as "the medium", "the message", "the box", and "the window into the world" (Flusser 1993: 111). 'The TV as Window to Communicate with Others' (the authors' translation), is one of the subheadings in his essay. Flusser also used the term "global village" though he had altered it to "cosmic village," and, in addition, he corrected McLuhan, who, he explained, had anticipated a "discursive Sparta" and not a "dialogical Athens" as Flusser did (Flusser 1993: 121). Flusser, rather, offered a variety of approaches and reflection

on the television. He artfully explained how this box can receive messages, but not send them, and that, therefore, the receiver would become a passive being, reaching an almost religious state (Flusser 1993: 111). Flusser further elaborated on the metaphor of the window as a hole in the wall. He compared wall paintings as a previous form of this artificial window on the wall. He concluded that films (in the TV) are improved wall paintings.

Flusser developed his idea about pictures that we have from this world and images from ourselves in this world. His theory was that society would soon be unable to describe a situation in a discursive language or through any form of writing. However, Flusser thought that our world was now to be digitised and that it could therefore be translated into an algorithm, and it is from this algorithm that a picture of this world would be produced. This new synthetic image would be a pure form, pure aesthetics, growing out of calculation, an analysis, out of a given field of possibilities. This new imagination is, according to Flusser, a final attempt in the human development to reach “pure aesthetics” (*l’art pour l’art*) (Flusser 2002: 115). Flusser encouraged his readers to embrace the challenge of the synthetic realm, as he prognosticated this computational imagination would not deny cross-fertilisation with the previous forms of creation. Provocatively, he suggested that even science and politics had become an art form (Flusser 1993: 182). In a late essay from 1991, *Digitaler Schein* (meaning digital appearance) (Flusser 1993: 202 - 215), Flusser essentially added that in recognising the sciences as an art form, they would become a paradigm example for all other arts, and therefore cannot be degraded.³ Flusser extended this thought further by suggesting that all art forms would evidently become scientific disciplines through digitisation. If science has become a form of art, and if there is no distinction between sciences and the humanities, then all human beings are artists.

As Roy Ascott suggests, artists do not seem to ask questions, but “[...] the terms of the inquiry are transformed” (Ascott 2002: 2). Does this essay’s central

³ “Wenn man erkennt, dass die Wissenschaft eine Art Kunst ist, dann hat man sie damit nicht entwürdigt, denn sie ist dadurch ganz im Gegenteil zu einem Paradigma für alle übrigen Künste geworden.” (Original quote in Flusser 1993: 214).

question remain unanswered or has the question merely been transformed: can McLuhan and Flusser both be considered as artists? Above we discussed prediction and reflection as attitudes of artists, how artists are antennas of the society and how they offer different understandings of realities. Flusser had also recognized through his phenomenological approach that media theory was a social phenomenon, building on Husserl's ideas of a fragmented society where the links between people were more important than the individual.

Flusser and McLuhan obviously did not always fit into their disciplines, and as much as they were celebrated by one group they were also denied by others. The creativity both men presented us with, however, seems to stem from the convergence of the diverse disciplines they were working in. We hope that by juxtaposing these two philosophers/theorists/artists we have been able to show that the borders between art, science, technology and politics are indeed merging. And further, that the meeting points are creative, speculative and open ended in their nature.

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