

HOW TO BE A CONTEMPORARY THOMIST

The Case of Marshall McLuhan¹

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ABSTRACT: The provocative nature of both the form and content, “medium” and “message,” of Marshall McLuhan’s scholarship on technological culture has attracted a wide array of McLuhan interpreters of diverse intentions. It is well known, however, that McLuhan considered himself a follower of the thirteenth century scholastic Thomas Aquinas; as he wrote to his friend Fr. John Mole, “I am a Thomist for whom the sensory order resonates with the divine Logos.” While McLuhan’s intellectual corpus provides enough evidence to justify taking him at his word, it is also clear that McLuhan was a very unusual Thomist, and intentionally so. As early as 1947, at the time of McLuhan’s strategic shift from literary scholar to media exegete, McLuhan was confident enough in his knowledge of the medieval trivium to contend that the “true Thomist” was not the person who “contemplates” Aquinas’ “already achieved intellectual synthesis,” but rather the person who “sustained by that synthesis, plunges into the heart of the chaos” of contemporary “mechanistic society.” This article will explore the ramifications of that belief for McLuhan’s thought as a whole.

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I. Introduction

The media scholar Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was raised in the Canadian Prairies of Winnipeg, after spending the very early years of his childhood in Edmonton. Born to parents Herbert McLuhan and Elsie Hall – an insurance salesman and a dramatic elocutionist – McLuhan’s active and playful childhood was tempered with Bible classes and, later, a passion for English literature. At the University of Manitoba, McLuhan took classes in English, History and Philosophy, obtaining his Bachelor of Arts in 1933. The following year, he received his M.A. in English, writing a thesis on the Victorian novelist and poet George Meredith. From 1934 to 1936, McLuhan completed a second B.A. at Cambridge University, where his lifelong fascination with modernist literature was ignited through the “New Criticism” of his mentors I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis. During this time, McLuhan also intently studied the Thomist philosophy of Jacques Maritain, which, along with the writings of G.K. Chesterton, had a significant impact on McLuhan’s conversion to Catholicism in 1937. After a brief appointment at the University of Wisconsin, McLuhan began teaching English at Saint Louis University, where in 1943 he would complete his Cambridge PhD on the Elizabethan author Thomas Nashe and the Classical Trivium. Avoiding the U.S. military draft, McLuhan joined his friend and mentor Wyndham Lewis at Assumption College in Windsor in 1944, and, in 1946, McLuhan settled in Toronto to join the faculty at St. Michael’s College. It was at the University of Toronto that, through his legendary “Explorations” seminar in culture and communications helmed with the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, McLuhan would develop the insights on technology that would provide the basis for his groundbreaking books *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964). In 1963, McLuhan launched the University of Toronto’s Centre for Culture and Technology, where, amid much contestation of his increasingly popular approach to cultural study, he would serve as director until shortly before the end of his life.

The provocative nature of both the form and content, “medium” and “message,” of Marshall McLuhan’s scholarship on technological culture has attracted a wide array of McLuhan interpreters. These include proponents of literary modernism,² dynamical systems theory,³ object-oriented

² See Lamberti 2012: *Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic: Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies* and Theall 1997: *James Joyce’s Techno-Poetics*.

³ See Logan 2013: *McLuhan Misunderstood: Setting the Record Straight*.

posthumanism,⁴ dialectical materialism,⁵ and, more recently, even critical race theory.⁶ It is well known, however, that McLuhan considered himself a follower of the thirteenth century scholastic Thomas Aquinas, writing to his friend Fr. John Mole that “I am a Thomist for whom the sensory order resonates with the divine Logos.”⁷ While McLuhan’s intellectual corpus provides enough evidence to justify taking him at his word, it is also clear that McLuhan was a very unusual Thomist, and intentionally so. As early as 1947, at the time of McLuhan’s strategic shift from literary scholar to media exegete, McLuhan was confident enough in his knowledge of the medieval trivium – the subject of his PhD thesis – to contend that the “true Thomist” was not the person who “contemplates” Aquinas’ “already achieved intellectual synthesis,” but rather the person who “sustained by that synthesis, plunges into the heart of the chaos” of contemporary “mechanistic society.”⁸ By this plunge, McLuhan meant not the uncritical immersion in technological change, but the implementation of medieval techniques of exegesis in order to make intelligible the manifold action of contemporary media on human psychology and sensibility.

To this end, McLuhan over the course of decades created his own intellectual synthesis between Thomistic metaphysics and a host of other sources such as: Ciceronian humanism, gestalt psychology, the avant-garde aesthetics of Wyndham Lewis and James Joyce, the cultural anthropology of Giambattista Vico, the poetry criticism of F.R. Leavis, and the “anonymous” cultural history of Siegfried Giedion. Considering the breadth of McLuhan’s influences, it is natural to wonder whether the intelligible ‘sensory order’ investigated by Aquinas was just one among many intellectual reference-points for McLuhan’s evolving explorations. Indeed, even while acknowledging McLuhan’s intellectual debt not only to Aquinas but also to the Catholic intellectual tradition in general, commentators on McLuhan often minimize this debt likely on account of the intimidating multitude of influences and references throughout McLuhan’s three decades of work on culture and technology.

⁴ See Harman 2009: “The McLuhans and Metaphysics” in Olsen et al., *New Waves of Philosophy of Technology*: 100-122.

⁵ See Grosswiler 1996: “The Dialectical Methods of Marshall McLuhan, Marxism, and Critical Theory” in *The Canadian Journal of Communication* 21.1: 95-124.

⁶ See Towns 2020: “Toward a Black media philosophy” in *Cultural Studies* 34.6: 851-873.

⁷ McLuhan, Molinaro, C. McLuhan, and Toye 1987: *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 368.

⁸ McLuhan 1948: “Introduction” to Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton*: xvi-xvii.

Conversely, commentators who do emphasize McLuhan's grounding in Thomism and the Catholic tradition often view this grounding from the baffled and somewhat antagonistic perspective of an outsider, leading to such arbitrary characterizations of McLuhan as a Catholic techno-utopian⁹ and an amoral mystical seer.¹⁰

However, when considering McLuhan's work in terms of the authors most formative to his intellectual development, a much more sophisticated portrait emerges. This portrait eludes most critical commentary on McLuhan, precisely because it is so imbued with the values of tradition, so much so, in fact, that it rests largely on McLuhan's discovery within the continuity and universality of the Catholic Church a path toward healing the spiritual malignity of technocratic materialism through the proper proportionality he apprehended in Christian learning. It is, of course, impossible to accurately gauge McLuhan's success or failure in this ambitious endeavor. Indeed, the fact that McLuhan's media theory has been so often employed in ways that directly contradict his Thomist intentions points to a certain degree of failure. At the same time, the inventiveness, erudition, and cohesion of McLuhan's efforts provide an example of Thomist practice that may be emulated in some fundamental ways, even while discerning areas that might require modification. While the potential missteps of McLuhan's approach will be briefly touched upon in the conclusion of this paper, it is the sketching out of McLuhan's novel intellectual synthesis that will be this study's main object. In this way, we can begin to get a clear view of the manner in which McLuhan lived out his conception of the "true Thomist" as an exegete of the sensory reality of human mediation.

If we consider McLuhan's personality as the matter, or, in Aristotelian terms, as a kind of "material cause" of his intellectual project, it is fitting that this personality was molded to a large degree by his mother, the word "matter" being etymologically linked to the word "mother" as the substance from which

⁹ See Kroker 1984: *Technology and the Canadian Mind*. Kroker contends, "In McLuhan's writings, the traditional liberal faith in the *reason* of technological experience, a reason which could be the basis of a rational and universal political community, was all the more ennobled to the extent that the search for the 'reason' in technology was combined with the Catholic quest for a new 'incarnation.'" (78, emphasis in original).

¹⁰ See Peters 2011: "McLuhan's Grammatical Theology" in *The Canadian Journal of Communication* 36.2: 227-242. Peters, with an air of frustration writes, "McLuhan is about immediate intuition – he wants to be Adam on the first morning every darn day after the other" (237).

something is made. In McLuhan's case, his mother Elsie not only fostered his relationship with Fr. Gerald Phelan,¹¹ who in 1936 helped bring McLuhan into the Catholic Church, but Elsie was also a successful dramatic artist and elocutionist, two qualities that, we will see, would be central to McLuhan's public vocation.

It is important to recognize, however, that as "material cause," the eloquent posture of rhetorician adopted by McLuhan throughout his life was subservient to a deep commitment to a philosophy of metaphysical realism, which we might characterize as the form – or "formal cause" – of McLuhan's career. Thus, McLuhan's teenage plunge into the works of English essayists and poets such as Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Johnson, and John Milton were read against the background of years of scriptural study and Christian devotion that was highly critical of the dogmatic abstractions of the Baptist preachers to whom he was regularly exposed.¹² To sermons on predestination and election, McLuhan substituted the writings of Christopher Marlowe and William Thackeray, evidently in support of his commitment to the sensory concreteness of Pentecost, which early on McLuhan regarded as the experience *par excellence* of Christian life.¹³ In fact, in a 1935 letter to his mother Elsie, in which he discusses his intention to convert to Catholicism, he expressed his sense of the sacred carnality of the Catholic church, a sense which was vital not only to his conversion but in providing perhaps the most crucial direction to his subsequent intellectual labors. McLuhan writes:¹⁴

[T]he Catholic religion...is alone in blessing and employing all those merely human faculties which produce games and philosophy, and poetry and music and mirth and fellowship with a very fleshly basis. It alone makes terms with what our sects have hated and called by ugly names – eg carnal which is delightfully near to charnel. The Catholic church does not despise or wantonly mortify those members and faculties which Christ deigned to assume. They are henceforth holy and blessed. Catholic culture produced Chaucer and his merry story-telling Canterbury pilgrims. Licentious enthusiasm produced the

¹¹ President of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (PIMS) at the University of Toronto and a Thomist philosopher himself, Fr. Gerald Phelan was closely linked to Thomist authorities, who were instrumental to McLuhan's thought. These include Etienne Gilson, one of the founders of PIMS, and Jacques Maritain, of whom Phelan was a close friend and translator.

¹² Gordon 1997: *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁴ 1987: *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 72-73.

lonely despair of Christian in Pilgrim's Progress...What I wish to emphasize about them is there [sic] various and rich-hearted humanity. I need scarcely indicate that everything that is especially hateful and devilish and inhuman about the conditions and strain of modern industrial society is not only Protestant in origin, but it is their boast (!) to have originated it.

It is well known to McLuhan scholars that the metaphysical and cultural dichotomy McLuhan draws between Catholicism and Protestantism would heavily inform his later theorization of the distinction between oral and literate media environments. From the time of his 1950s plunge into media study, McLuhan would suggest that, in contrast to the largely oral dimension of medieval Catholic literacy, along with the embodied, communal participation it safeguarded, the extreme literacy fostered by the printing press' mechanization of the word and subsequent intensification of private, individual reading, would fragment the organic bonds of human association and usher in a fundamental estrangement between the human intellect and the sensory world. While this critique of post-Cartesian western sensibility might be seen merely as a derivative of the same critique applied to it by German and French existentialism from Nietzsche to Merleau-Ponty, what is remarkable about McLuhan's approach is his consideration of problems of contemporary perception through his incisive sense of Catholic and specifically Thomist methods of insight.

2. Catholic Realism

It is important, in this light, that in the same letter to Elsie, Marshall reveals his indebtedness to the English writer and Catholic convert G.K. Chesterton, writing that "Chesterton did not convince me of religious truth, but he prevented my despair from becoming a habit or hardening into misanthropy."¹⁵ While McLuhan does not explicitly state the object of his despair which might "harden into misanthropy," he gives his mother an indication of it, when he returns again to the topic of the protestant cultural environment which surrounded his youth. McLuhan refers contemptuously to "Protestant morals and the dull dead day-light of Protestant rationalism which ruinously bathes every object from a beer parlour to a gasoline station," and writes that "I simply couldn't believe that men had to live in the mean mechanical joyless rootless fashion that I saw in Winnipeg." He then confesses that "it was a long time

¹⁵ Ibid, 73.

before I finally perceived that the character of every society, its food, clothing, arts, and amusements are ultimately determined by its religion – it was longer still before I could believe that religion was as great and joyful as these things which it creates – or destroys.”¹⁶

While it may be from the Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc¹⁷ that McLuhan developed his early appreciation of religion as formative of human culture and sensibility, it is likely that McLuhan’s youthful reading of Chesterton – Belloc’s close intellectual ally – was also an important, if not more important, factor. Indeed, when he was 20 years old, McLuhan wrote in his diary that “no other writer...has ever before been able to arouse my enthusiasm for ideas as has G.K.”¹⁸ When reading McLuhan’s two early articles on Chesterton, from 1936 and 1947, it is clear why Chesterton, along with Aquinas himself, is credited by McLuhan as being his biggest influence.¹⁹

Already in a 1934 letter to his brother Maurice – and again in response to what he perceived to be the puritan’s contempt of the senses – McLuhan recommended Chesterton’s 1933 book on St. Thomas Aquinas, particularly with regard to Chesterton’s discussion of the influence of Plato and Aristotle on Christian philosophy. Writing that “it is useful broadly to distinguish Pl. and Arist as tending towards Bhuddism [sic] and Chrstianity [sic] respectively,” McLuhan recalls that it is because “Artistotle [sic] heartily accepts the senses” that “Aquinas accepted Aristotle into Christian theology.”²⁰ Accordingly, it was the perception of transcendental intelligibility in the sensory order of the world – referred to by McLuhan as the “eucharistic passion...at the heart of life”²¹ –

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The influence of Belloc does not, at least explicitly, loom large in McLuhan’s writing. However, De Kerckhove recounts that, after discovering Chesterton’s book *What’s Wrong with the World* in 1931, McLuhan “proceeded to read the book at once, and everything else he could find by Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc and other controversial Catholics.” See de Kerckhove 2014: “Passion and Precision: The Faith of Marshall McLuhan,” *Second Nature*, <https://secondnaturejournal.com/passion-and-precision-the-faith-of-marshall-mcluhan/>.

¹⁸ Gordon 1997: 32.

¹⁹ Ibid, 54.

²⁰ 1987: *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 39.

²¹ McLuhan 1936: “G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, 4. McLuhan quotes the phrase “the Eucharistic passion which

that McLuhan would identify as the defining characteristic of the thought of Aquinas and of Chesterton. At the same time, however, precisely because the order of concrete sensibility was acknowledged by both to be the primary medium for the communication of being to the human mind, McLuhan saw how Aquinas' intellectual project – or, as McLuhan would later call it, his “theory of communication” – was necessarily formed in response to the human sensibilities of Aquinas' time, just as Chesterton's intellectual project was formed in response to those of his time.

Interestingly, therefore, McLuhan seems to suggest that Aquinas' Aristotelian systematization of the Catholic faith was a strategy to confront and “transmute” the heretical biases of the 13th century Albigensians and Averroists.²² In a parallel manner, McLuhan discusses Chesterton's tour-de-force reconstruction of the rational shape of various human attitudes as the paradoxical confrontation between the ordinary and the eternal, the practical and the mystical. The profundity of Chesterton's technique, McLuhan asserts, is due to its being “proportioned to the desperate need for direction and unity in an age that [quoting Chesterton] has ‘smothered man in men.’”²³

In his 1936 article, McLuhan sees Chesterton's approach as analogical to Aquinas', particularly to “the power of St. Thomas to fix even passing things as they pass, and to scorch details under the magnifying lens of his attention.”²⁴ However, it is in McLuhan's 1947 introduction to Hugh Kenner's *Paradox in Chesterton* that the status of Chesterton as a contemporary and, thus, in McLuhan's words, “true Thomist” is explicated.

It is important that McLuhan wrote this piece in the late 1940s, since it was in this period that McLuhan was beginning to apply the understanding of medieval learning he developed in his 1943 doctoral study to an analysis of the existential and psychological significance of the artifacts and technological environments with which humans engage on a daily basis. McLuhan's interest in using the literary tradition to understand the psychic effects of American popular culture dates back to at least the mid-1930s, when he read F.R. Leavis' and Denys Thompson's book *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical*

he finds in the heart of life” from Jacques Maritain's assessment of the symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud.

²² McLuhan 1953: “Maritain on Art” in *Renascence* 6.1 (Fall), 41.

²³ McLuhan 1936: “G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic”, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Awareness. To the genres of movies and advertising, Leavis applied the literary technique of New Criticism. Mastered by McLuhan in his studies at Cambridge, the technique of New Criticism examined works of literature as organizations of rhetorical acts, whose structural potencies generated a particular mode of sensibility and perceptual bias in the reader. Aware of the largely antagonistic perceptual biases of classical literary culture and mechanical popular culture, McLuhan from the late 1930s tried to bridge these two environments with techniques such as inviting his students to adapt novels to film scenarios based on the writings of director Sergei Eisenstein, and, in his personal time, by collecting clippings of advertisements and comics that would form the basis of his classic first book, published in 1951, entitled *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*.

McLuhan's 1934 exposure to the New Criticism of Cambridge professors F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards was accompanied by McLuhan's discovery of the modernist poetics of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and T.S. Eliot, along with the Thomist philosophy of Jacques Maritain. Significantly, in a letter from 1976, McLuhan wrote that Maritain had a special role in this panoply of artistic and intellectual contributions. While each of them, along with those from modernist painting, dance, and film, appeared to enrich each other to form what McLuhan called "the experience of a very rich new culture," Maritain, McLuhan wrote, was a "notable ornament." In McLuhan's words, "Maritain helped to complete the vortex of significant components in a single luminous logos of our time."²⁵

It makes sense that McLuhan credits Maritain with somehow "completing" for him the diverse aesthetic and philosophical experiments of the early 20th century such that they could shine with intelligibility. In a 1944 article attempting to introduce the modernist painter and writer Wyndham Lewis to a Catholic audience, McLuhan suggests that what he calls "Catholicity of mind" requires an in-depth awareness of the major currents in contemporary sensibility as defined by artists such as Joyce and Picasso. Describing the general Catholic ignorance of these developments as prohibiting Catholic thought from being taken seriously in England and America, McLuhan singles out Maritain who, in McLuhan's words, is "perfectly at home amidst modern art and letters" and whose "contemporary sensibility...is therefore a force to be

²⁵ 1987: *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 521.

reckoned with by non-Catholic philosophers.”²⁶ Indeed, writing to Maritain in 1969, McLuhan remembers how encountering Maritain’s book *Art and Scholasticism* in 1934 was a “revelation” to him and hinted that it played a role in his 1937 conversion.²⁷

While Maritain’s complex account of the thought of Aquinas cannot be developed here, it might suffice to observe how Maritain’s notion of the “metaphysical intuition of being” allowed McLuhan to link together contemporary thought, poetics, and eventually technology, as instances of a modern revitalization of the existential and analogical thrust of Aquinas’ doctrine.²⁸ Somewhat controversially, Maritain placed the analogical intuition of being at the height of the three degrees of formal abstraction as presented in the commentaries on Aquinas by Cajetan and John Poinsoot. According to this doctrine, there are three stages of intellectual abstraction which correspond to Aristotle’s hierarchical division of the sciences into physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. To physics corresponds total abstraction – or the abstraction of a unitary essence from a being’s multiple parts. To mathematics corresponds formal abstraction – or the abstraction of a being’s formal properties in terms of quantitative measurement. Finally, to metaphysics corresponds Maritain’s metaphysical intuition of being, which occupies a different plane than total and formal abstraction, because its object – being itself – is understood not just as mentally but as actually separated from the finitude of matter.²⁹

At the same time, since being qua being (or *esse*), according to Thomist doctrine, is understood not as an individual being but as existence itself, being, Maritain asserts, can only be apprehended in an analogical sense that is “trans-objective” and “super-intelligible.”³⁰ Specifying the character of this analogical perception, Maritain writes,³¹

²⁶ McLuhan 1944: “Wyndham Lewis: Lemuel in Lilliput” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, 180.

²⁷ 1987: *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 371.

²⁸ See McLuhan’s 1963 book review on Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism*. The full review can be found in Cameron McEwan, “McLuhan’s 1963 *Dalhousie* book review,” *McLuhan’s New Sciences* (blog), August 27, 2019, <https://mcluhansnewsocieties.com/mcluhan/2019/08/mcluhans-1963-dr-book-review/>.

²⁹ McCool 1989: *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism*, 133-135.

³⁰ Maritain 1947: *Existence and the Existent*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid*, 40.

[i]t proceeds from the eidetic visualization of a transcendental which permeates everything and whose intelligibility involves an irreducible proportionality or analogy—a is to its own act of existing (esse) as b is to its own act of existing (esse)—because this is precisely what judgment discovers, namely, the actuation of a being by the act of existing, grasped as extending beyond the limits and conditions of empirical existence; grasped, therefore, in the limitless amplitude of its intelligibility.

With regard to McLuhan's epistemology, it is near impossible to overestimate the importance of the Aristotelian and Thomist analogy of proportionality, which Maritain references in light of the "metaphysical intuition of being." For, while he does not explicitly frame this analogy in Maritain's existential terms, McLuhan was deeply convinced that the human cognition of being was dependent on metaphor, and that all metaphor was fundamentally a relation among four parts, specified as A is to B as C is to D.³² Accordingly, in introducing his famous tetrad of media effects in the last decade of his life, McLuhan would reference this four-part ratio as being the inspiration behind his theory that all technologies comprise a vortex of effects articulated in the proportion between four perceptual functions of technological action³³: *Enhancement* (the forms of human perception enhanced by a technology), *Obsolescence* (the forms of human perception obsolesced by a technology), *Retrieval* (the forms of human perception from an earlier period in cultural history that are retrieved by a technology), and, finally, *Reversal* (the forms of human perception that emerge when the technology is pushed to the limits of its use).

While the philosophical nuances of McLuhan's tetrad or so-called Laws of Media cannot be explored here, it is important merely to observe how McLuhan's early exposure to the analogy of proportionality laid the ground for his attempted modernization of Aquinas' thought by way of analogizing technological form in proportion to its power to signify (and thus formally cause) particular modes of human knowing and being.

³² McLuhan writes, "Perhaps the most precious possession of man is his abiding awareness of the analogy of proper proportionality, the key to all metaphysical insight and perhaps the very condition of consciousness itself." Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker 1968: *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*, 240.

³³ See McLuhan 1977: "Laws of the Media" in *Et cetera* 34: 173-179.

3. Strategic Reframing of St. Thomas

In his 1947 introduction to *Paradox in Chesterton*, McLuhan is quite explicit in his strategic reframing of Aquinas. In the second paragraph, McLuhan directly invokes Maritain's "metaphysical intuition of being" by suggesting that Chesterton's real importance is not in his skillful contribution to Victorian literature, but rather in his mastery of "analogical perception and argument."³⁴ McLuhan then states two very important precepts. The first is that, as McLuhan writes, Chesterton's "metaphysical intuition of being was always in the service of the search for moral and political order in the current chaos."³⁵ The second is that Chesterton was not a Thomist on account of his reading of Aquinas, but rather on account of what McLuhan, drawing on Aquinas, refers to as "connaturality with being."³⁶ In other words, foreshadowing McLuhan's later adage that the "medium is the message," McLuhan's interest in Chesterton as a contemporary Thomist was not in Chesterton's mastery of the intellectual content of Aquinas' writings, but rather in Chesterton's virtuous habit of apprehending existential reality – retrieving, therefore, Aquinas as a medium as opposed to a message.

The two mutually sustaining virtues McLuhan attributes to Chesterton's "analogical perception" – namely, the promotion of moral and political order and the connaturality with being – play a central role in McLuhan's 1943 PhD Thesis on the Classical Trivium. Influenced by his close friend and Thomist mentor Bernard Muller-Thym along with Muller-Thym's thesis advisor Etienne Gilson, McLuhan devoted much of his thesis to tracing the Ancient Greek Doctrine of the Logos as developed in the medieval liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. From its inception in the writings of Heraclitus, the Doctrine of the Logos, McLuhan explained, is that by which the world in its intricate display of pattern and intelligibility is perceived as an embodiment of the Universal Reason or Divine Word. Through promoting the analogical awareness, whereby proportions among worldly phenomena signify attributes of the Logos, the entire Classical tradition from Ancient Greece to the Cartesian Revolution was able to integrate diverse modes of learning – scientific, moral, political, and theological – in a unified framework of individual virtue and civic participation.

³⁴ McLuhan 1948: "Introduction" to *Paradox in Chesterton*, xi.

³⁵ *Ibid*, xi-xii.

³⁶ *Ibid*, xii.

Most important for McLuhan, however, was the role that rhetoric and, especially, grammar played in sustaining this unity. According to McLuhan, the basis of medieval scribal culture was the art of grammar. By grammar, however, McLuhan meant not just formal rules of syntax but, more fundamentally, the adoption of Classical techniques of allegory and etymology in the interpretation of the so-called “book of nature.” Within this grammatical tradition was the “four levels of interpretation,” itself an instantiation of the four-part structure of analogical proportion. McLuhan thus recounts that, even before the first century philosopher Philo of Alexandria created the basis of patristic theology through applying these modes to biblical exegesis, the interpretative levels of the *literal*, *moral*, *allegorical*, and *mystical* were for centuries “closely connected with the pursuits of physics, ethics, politics and religion.”³⁷

One of the main messages in McLuhan’s thesis – a message that would remain with him in his continued emphasis on “percepts” instead of “concepts” – is that medieval learning maintained its integrity only through ensuring that the art of dialectic – or the method of subjecting percepts to the test of logical consistency and order – was subservient to the art of grammar. This is to say, as demonstrated in the writings of St. Augustine, the rigorous procedures of abstraction and argumentation inherited from Plato and Aristotle were acceptable only as support of the grammatical tradition of symbolic awareness and biblical exegesis.³⁸

According to McLuhan, the same proportion held with respect to rhetoric. While the art of dialectic performed the function of rationally organizing the analogical insights and doctrinal adherence of the medieval grammarian, the art of rhetoric brought the grammarian’s wisdom into the realm of action and political prudence. Noting that, for Roman stoicism, “the bond of the state is the Logos,” and that the Latin translation for Logos was *ratio atque oratio* (or “reason and speech),”³⁹ McLuhan insists that classical rhetoric, even as practiced by the much maligned Sophists, was designed to strengthen the citizen as a virtuous member of his community through practice of the mutually supporting arts of reason and speech. Both “public and private virtue”⁴⁰ were

³⁷ McLuhan 1943: *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*, 28.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 71.

thus attained through the active synthesis of dialectical clarity and rhetorical eloquence, as grounded in the grammarian's encyclopedic wisdom.

This model of public and private virtue, which the Roman orator Cicero defined as the *doctus orator* (or the "learned speaker") provided the ideal for the poets and theologians of medieval and renaissance culture. McLuhan thus refers to Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* as, "in the history of Christian culture the exact counterpart of the *De Oratore* of Cicero."⁴¹ Grounded in the belief that Christ himself was the "perfect orator,"⁴² the treatises of St. Augustine and others simply observed that the Ciceronian arts had to be "transformed by grace."⁴³ As McLuhan writes, "[I]nstead of addressing men to guide them toward the common good of the city, as Brutus, Crassus, Cicero, and others had done, St. Augustine and the Christian orators resorted to eloquence to guide Christians to God and the common good of the City of God."⁴⁴

We can now associate the two virtues which McLuhan finds in Chesterton (that is, the pursuit of moral and political order and the connaturality with being) with the arts of rhetoric and grammar, respectively. With regard to McLuhan's retrieval of Aquinas, it is instructive that McLuhan does not emphasize the virtue of dialectical reasoning. According to McLuhan, Aquinas' use of Aristotelian dialectic to achieve what McLuhan calls a "rational" and "abstract synthesis" of knowledge was effective because it was "sustained" and "nourished" by the grammatical and rhetorical awareness of medieval culture.⁴⁵ Aquinas' "great rational synthesis," McLuhan writes, "represented a maximum degree of abstraction and withdrawal from that psychological plane of symbolic perception."⁴⁶ In contrast, McLuhan explains that, on account of the modern supremacy of Cartesian mathematics, whereby the abstract withdrawal from the world is so extreme that it effectively obsolesces the moral and psychological unity conferred by symbolic awareness, the contemporary Thomist has become faced with a world, which, in its relation to the Trivium, is the exact opposite of the world encountered by Aquinas. In other words, while Aquinas explicated the grammatical and rhetorical order of medieval culture through the logical clarity of dialectic, the modern Thomist

⁴¹ Ibid, 73.

⁴² Ibid, 71.

⁴³ Ibid, 73.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 74.

⁴⁵ McLuhan 1948: "Introduction" to *Paradox in Chesterton*, xiv.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

must *provide* cultural order through rediscovering a grammatical and rhetorical harmony in the abstract fragmentation of mechanistic society itself. McLuhan lays out both the problem and solution offered to the modern Thomist by writing:⁴⁷

[W]hereas St. Thomas was a great abstract synthesizer facing a unified psychological world, the modern Thomist has an abstract synthesis of human knowledge with which to face a psychological chaos. Who then is the true Thomist? The man who contemplates an already achieved intellectual synthesis, or the man who, sustained by that synthesis, plunges into the heart of the chaos?...Let us remember that St. Thomas was sustained by a great psychological and social order in an age of dialectical confusion. We can be similarly sustained and nourished in an organic way by his speculative synthesis while we face the problem of creating a practical moral and social order. The main problem for Thomists today therefore, is not speculation but action. And this necessarily means an action which co-operates in multiple ways with the numerous hopeful features of the contemporary world.

While not yet in the position to apply Canadian scholar Harold Innis' analyses of orality and literacy to the contemporary media landscape, McLuhan was already in the process of learning how to co-operate with mechanistic society through his reading of the Swiss architectural historian Siegfried Giedion, who helped McLuhan find interrelated patterns of perception and sensibility among diverse artifactual environments new and old.⁴⁸ Giedion himself, however, should be placed in the pantheon of modernist artists and thinkers that, as I already recounted, McLuhan saw as forming a "single luminous logos of our time" through the Thomist perspective of Jacques Maritain. This is to say that the diverse array of modernist sources consulted by McLuhan in his own drive to find "moral and political order in the current chaos" appealed to McLuhan precisely because, through Maritain, they seemed both to employ the analogical approach inherited and mastered by Aquinas, while also intimating to McLuhan a way to interpret this approach from a fragmented contemporary culture, in which the unified sensibility of grammar needed to be rediscovered.

⁴⁷ Ibid, xvi-xii.

⁴⁸ McLuhan recalls, "Giedion influenced me profoundly. *Space, Time, and Architecture* was one of the great events of my lifetime. Giedion gave us a language for tackling the structural world of architecture and artifacts of many kinds in the ordinary environment...Giedion began to study the environment as a structural, artistic work – he saw language in streets, buildings, the very texture of form." Marshall McLuhan, "A Dialogue," interview by Stearn 1969: *McLuhan: Hot and Cool*, 263.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that in his 1947 piece on Chesterton, McLuhan rejects philosophy and points to the artist as the only figure who might see through the “abstract mechanical order” bestowed by modern dialectical thought in order to revivify human sensibility through analogical awareness.⁴⁹ In fact, McLuhan was so confident in “the numerous hopeful features of the contemporary world” that in a 1954 letter to Walter Ong he claimed that the precise attention given to perceptual effects in the symbolist poetry of figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Stephane Mallarmé has “freed us for the first time to see St. Thomas.”⁵⁰

While it is difficult and probably inadvisable to take McLuhan literally, here, McLuhan’s observation is crucial to understanding his strategic use of Aquinas in the context of modern technological society. We may characterize this use as a kind of psychologizing of Aquinas’ realist metaphysics. This is not to say that McLuhan *subjectivized* Aquinas’ metaphysics, but rather that he applied Aquinas’ realism to an environment in which the natural world had been largely overridden by mechanical extensions of the human psyche – what McLuhan, and his son Eric, would call “second nature.”⁵¹

While, in his 1947 piece on Chesterton, McLuhan strongly emphasizes the domain of psychology (going so far as to cast Ancient Greek and Medieval cosmologies as moral psychologies rather than abstract philosophies)⁵², it is really in the early 1950s that McLuhan begins to articulate his general method of psychologizing Aquinas through what he saw to be the Thomist thrust of modernist aesthetics. We see this particularly in McLuhan’s 1954 lecture entitled “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters,” wherein the basic intellectual approach McLuhan would pursue for the next 25 years is laid out. The very title of the lecture already indicates the two major cultural currents – Thomist metaphysics and modernist poetics – which would inform this

⁴⁹ McLuhan 1948: “Introduction” to *Paradox in Chesterton*, xv-xvi.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Chrystall 2007: *The New American Vortex: Explorations of McLuhan* (PhD thesis, Massey University), <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/778>, 310.

⁵¹ McLuhan and E. McLuhan 1988: *Laws of Media: The New Science*, 116.

⁵² “From the decline of the briefly achieved Greek order in politics and morals the West was dominated not by rationalism but by psychologism. That is, the cosmologies which were held up for the contemplation of men, whether Stoic or Epicurean, Divine Logos or concourse of atoms, were not philosophies but psychologies. They were strategies of a moral kind evolved as a practical means of bearing up against the universal confusion.” McLuhan 1948: “Introduction” to *Paradox in Chesterton*, xii.

approach. In the lecture itself, however, McLuhan introduces the third cultural current – electric technology. Providing the answer to his search for a contemporary grammar of social and psychic interrelations, McLuhan finds that modernist poetics and electric technology point to the basic mystery of human perception as articulated by Aquinas’ Aristotelianism. This mystery is that by which – as a reflection of the incarnation of the Divine Logos – the human being analogically incarnates the exterior world within oneself. Referring to Thomist faculty psychology, McLuhan observes:⁵³

In ordinary perception men perform the miracle of recreating within themselves – in their interior faculties – the exterior world. This miracle is the work of the *nous poetikos* or of the agent intellect – that is, the poetic or creative process. The exterior world in every instant of perception is interiorized and recreated in a new matter. Ourselves. And in this creative work that is perception and cognition, we experience immediately that dance of Being within our faculties which provides the incessant intuition of Being.

McLuhan’s reference to the process by which one becomes analogically united to external being through the agent intellect’s abstractive activity recalls again Maritain’s metaphysical intuition of Being. In this lecture, however, McLuhan relates how the intuition of Being is itself analogically incarnated in the very technological extension of human faculties. As an indication of his psychologizing of Thomist metaphysics, McLuhan does this by treating the electric and mechanical reconstruction of human experience – in film and television, for instance – as a kind of reversal or retracing of ordinary perception. That is, instead of encountering the sensory world and abstracting its intelligibility, the human being encounters, in the electric communication media of telegraph, radio, cinema, and television, a representation of the cognitive process by which ordinary experience is abstracted and then reconstructed according to a certain modality of sense and apprehension.

4. Symbolist Poetry and St. Thomas

According to McLuhan, it is this highly controlled replay of human cognitive modalities and effects that is the very object of symbolist poetics from Edgar

⁵³ McLuhan 1954: “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters,” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion and Media*, 165.

Allan Poe to James Joyce. Referring to Poe's innovation of the detective story, McLuhan observes:⁵⁴

...Poe saw that poetry should be written backward. One must begin with the effect that is to be achieved and then seek out the means for obtaining that effect and no other effect. Thus the same insight which enabled Poe to be the inventor of symbolist poetry also made him the inventor of detective fiction. For the sleuth works backwards from the effect of the event to reconstruct the circumstances which produced the particular event of murder. In this way the detective...does not produce a theory or a view of a case. He recreates it for your participation. He provides not a view but total communication. In the same way the symbolist poet makes of the poem not a vehicle for views, ideas, feelings, but a situation which involves the reader directly in the poetic process.

It is this analogical action interrelating modernist poetics and modern technology that would inform McLuhan's own career as both a modern "doctus orator," and – according to his own conception – a "true Thomist." For, in revealing the analogical correspondences between the incarnation of being in technological artifacts and the incarnation of being in the human psyche, McLuhan would function as a grammarian and etymologist of the contemporary cultural chaos; he would see each technological artifact as an extension or "utterance" of a particular faculty of the human psyche, an utterance that, he observed, imposes distinct ratios of human apprehension on the collective consciousness. While his task as a grammarian was to reveal the distinct poetic or creative processes of cognition effectuated by various communication technologies, his task as a rhetorician was to adopt the symbolist literary method of sharply juxtaposing the apparently divergent modes of human culture and sensibility engendered by these technologies. The cultural breadth and psychological suggestibility of McLuhan's juxtapositions allowed him to, as he phrased it, "put on"⁵⁵ various publics at once, directly

⁵⁴ Ibid, 157.

⁵⁵ In his commentary on a 1971 issue of *New Literary History*, McLuhan discusses the magazine as a technological environment: "There is a sense in which a magazine is a vortex of energy, a mask which the reader puts on in order to perceive a field of action that would otherwise be outside his ken. If a reader must put on a magazine as a mask or a pattern of energy in order to organize his perceptions, the contributors must also put on the public created by the magazine, creating a reciprocal and complementary action." McLuhan 1971: "Roles, Masks, and Performances" in *Marshall McLuhan Unbound*, 3.

involving them in the search for “moral and political order in the current chaos.” With regard to his earlier commitment, McLuhan’s intrepid foray into contemporary grammar and rhetoric would be sustained by Aquinas’ great dialectical synthesis of classical learning.

We are now in a better position to comprehend McLuhan’s suggestion that symbolist poetry has “freed us for the first time to see St. Thomas.” Indeed, in his 1951 article, “Joyce, Aquinas, and the Poetic Process,” McLuhan invoked cubist aesthetics to characterize the structure of the Thomistic article as a kind of labyrinth of cognition providing “vivisections of the mind in act”.⁵⁶ The “abrupt juxtaposition of diverse views” in the article’s objections, McLuhan wrote, provides a snapshot of intellectual dead-ends on the article’s question. Aquinas’ response and answers to the objections, however, shows the mind an escape-route by leading it through multiple “retracings” of the intellectual labyrinth – an operation, McLuhan writes, which provides “rich esthetic satisfactions by the very dance of [Aquinas’] mind – a dance in which we participate as we follow him.”⁵⁷

While the intentional ahistoricism with which McLuhan characterizes the Thomistic article may serve to obscure the very real distinctions between traditional Thomism and what I have been calling its psychologistic retrieval by McLuhan, the hermeneutic relationship between Aquinas and McLuhan may be more clearly grasped by comparing Aquinas’ doctrine of the Unmoved Mover to McLuhan’s approach to technological action. During his effort in the 1970s to translate his concepts into Thomistic language⁵⁸, McLuhan obscurely suggested that his dictum “the medium is the message” is analogous to Aquinas’ discussion of the First Cause of being as the unmoved mover. In a 1971 letter, McLuhan writes:⁵⁹

I have only just discovered that St. Thomas Aquinas’ idea of instrumentality is that of the “unmoved mover.” All media change us and their surround without in any way being changed themselves. In other words, Aquinas also said “the

⁵⁶ McLuhan 1951: “Joyce, Aquinas, and the Poetic Process” in *Renascence* 4.1 (Fall), 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ McLuhan writes, “I am going to do some further work on translating myself into Thomistic terms. It is a commentary on the Thomists that I should have to tell them how to relate themselves to the contemporary world.” Marshall McLuhan to Frederick Wilhelmsen, March 10, 1971, National Archives of Canada, MG 31, D 156, 41, 38.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Chrystall 2007: *The New American Vortex: Explorations of McLuhan*, 435.

medium is the message,” just as he said the user or the cognitive agent is the content...

By his phrase “the user or the cognitive agent is the content,” McLuhan is using a more recent formulation of his depiction of modernist poetics as the retracing of the perceptual conditions and biases which give rise to a certain posture of intellectual apprehension. According to McLuhan, his phrase that the “user is the content” of any technological medium suggests that, just like the knower becomes the thing known through the abstractive power of the agent intellect, the user of any technology becomes the content of that technology through the agent intellect’s conformation to the technology’s grammar. Mirroring the symbolist technique of the detective story, this means, for McLuhan, that human understanding necessarily perceives effects prior to causes, since cognitive activity must begin with the psychological effect of receiving a particular form, and then go about reconstructing the various causes of that formal reception.

With regard to the unmoved mover as invoked in Aquinas’ first proof of the existence of God, McLuhan’s notion that “effects precede causes” is highly relevant. This is because, in the context of Aquinas’ sensory realism, God as the First Cause of being can only be known through His effects in Creation. Accordingly, in his so-called “argument from motion,” Aquinas retraces God’s creative act by observing that no created thing can be the cause of its own motion. In order to avoid an infinite regress of movers, there must be a mover – God – that puts all subsequent beings into motion, but that is itself unmoved by a prior agent.

McLuhan’s characterization of each technological artifact as an unmoved mover is a strange and likely misleading one. When considered in terms of McLuhan’s psychological retrieval of Aquinas, however, it is instructive. For, just as the world in Aquinas’ time was perceived as an environment of intelligible signs – or effects – of the Divine Intellect’s Creative Act, the world in McLuhan’s and our time is increasingly perceived as an environment of intelligible signs – or effects – of the human intellect’s ‘creative’ activity. It is this transformed grammar of experience that is evidently behind McLuhan’s psychological retrieval of Aquinas; for, if each extension of human knowing becomes an immutable cause of a certain bias or modality of human knowing, it is essential to understand the grammar of such causation if the human intellect is to perpetuate Aquinas’ dialectical synthesis in a world which has “smothered man in men.” That is, if the rationality of Thomism is to be preserved, the grammar

of media effects and the rhetoric of their communication must be acknowledged, acted upon, and ordered, as primary instruments and modifiers of rationality itself.

5. Conclusion

While it has been the goal of this paper to outline McLuhan's strategic retrieval of Aquinas, the question of McLuhan's effectiveness in this endeavor has not been touched upon. By this omission, I do not mean to suggest that McLuhan's use of Aquinas is unproblematic. Indeed, much of McLuhan's continued grappling with Thomism – such as his ambiguous remediation of hylomorphism in his famous binaries of acoustic space/visual space, figure/ground⁶⁰ – requires substantial theoretical development in order to convey a precise and consistent framework for understanding culture and technology.⁶¹ At the same time, McLuhan's own failure to collect and define his insights within the mold of a definitive "theory" was – frustratingly for many of his critics – a failure that McLuhan welcomed. As we have seen, in order to foster a contemporary basis for the grammatical awareness which sustained Aquinas' dialectically organized wisdom, McLuhan self-consciously aimed to avoid an engagement with dialectical argumentation. The place of the dialectical method in McLuhan's metaphysical evaluation of technology demands its own study; it is perhaps sufficient to note, however, that McLuhan's attempted modernization of Thomism through recourse to numerous 20th century sources from anthropology to physiology to literary theory has the tendency to submerge the clarity of Aquinas' distinctions in the generalities of McLuhan's rapid and often ingenious associations. Since McLuhan himself, as we have seen, aimed to treat Aquinas' doctrine as the intellectual environment sustaining his insights – rather than as the actual content of his insights – it is perhaps unfair to expect

⁶⁰ In a 1976 letter, McLuhan writes, "the word *medium* in Aquinas refers to the gap or interval, the emptiness between matter and form as such, i.e., the *hidden ground* of Being, and in every sense, it is the message." Quoted in Gordon 1997: *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*, 308.

⁶¹ In my PhD thesis, I outline a possible course, through which to coherently situate some of McLuhan's terminology in an Aristotelian-Thomist framework. I am currently writing an article that explicates, and expands on, this work. See Pugen 2020: *The Intellectual Touch: A Phenomenology of Digital Modernism* (PhD Thesis, University of Toronto), <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/101177>.

McLuhan's implicit treatment of Thomist themes to lay out an exact indication of their theoretical function. In fact, it is McLuhan's implicit retrieval of Aquinas that may very well prompt contemporary readers enthralled by McLuhan's rhetoric to retrace McLuhan's own Thomist intellectual history. If McLuhan's revolutionary exegesis of the modern technological environment was the effect of a great dialectical synthesis, the formal cause of this synthesis awaits its own rediscovery.

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