Magnetic City Alchemy

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To MCLUHAN, CONDITIONS OF MIXING inform the electric ground of the global Magnetic City. In *Take Today*, McLuhan says we live in

the processes of ECO-land, all gaps become prime sources of discovery ... Nothing has its meaning alone.... A note alone is not music.... The "meaning of meaning" is relationship. When young activists harp on "relevance," they are asking for interface or the abrasion of dialogue; they are Eco-sounding to discover where *it's at....* Truth is not matching. It is neither label nor a "mental reflection." It is something we make in the encounter with a world that is making us. (3)

In the electric ground no combination or juncture is stable. *Verum factum* exists in our day-to-day reality through the power of technology to place us everywhere at once. We can recast our identities at high speeds, in every angelic and (or) demonic instant, and we sit entranced in front of PC-TV screens, suddenly transported into euphoric and depressive responses. News of the world-soul is unavoidable. Satellites crisscross the global surface, shooting signals back and forth in an unstoppable array, and no psychic barriers will block the global present out. Thus the electronic media ground becomes the entire message.

In its ideal state the electric condition is one where hybrids and interfaces occur in swift epiphanies. McLuhan says in The Book of Probes, "Interface refers to the interaction of substances in a kind of mutual irritation. In art and poetry this is precisely the technique of symbolism" (482). These processes converge on everyone as he says in these aphorisms: "In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point" (195). An interface is the moment when two seemingly disparate strands interweave, providing enough friction to create the new. The possibility of interface finds an analogue in alchemy, where the chemical stirring of contrary energies yields up another compound entirely. Alchemy is a metaphor for the metamorphosis of being through the combining of apparently unmixable opposites. Synchronicity suggests seeing what happens when two energies meet, suddenly becoming a common ground for one another. It is the moment when texts or narratives do more than meet: they operate in coinciding pattern, reflecting and refracting one another, playing in concord, before splitting off into discrete forms. Differences can never be completely transcended on this plane. Synergies do not synthesize patterns into stasis. But alchemy and synergy may offer a vista opening before morphing into something else.

McLuhan gives us media ecology—"EVERY-WHERE IS NOW HERE IN ECO-LAND" (297), he says in Take Today—essential metaphors for understanding our electronic surround. The source-energy never freezes. But Nature has been obsolesced, and we live in an artificial communications' envelope. Its influence is subliminal but pervasive. Inside our vibrating neon-lit envelope we carom like astonished tribal members obeying the signs and signals, without knowing that an automatic auguring is underway. In three aphorisms McLuhan illuminates, and hyperbolizes, the environmental stunning and processing. In The Book of Probes, McLuhan's rhetoric moves into spheres of deliberate shock:

We are as numb in our electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture.... The age of writing has passed. We must invent a new metaphor, restructure our thoughts and feelings.... Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which humans communicate than by the content of the communication. (8–9)

These aphorisms appear at the beginning of *The Book of Probes*, pages before the author's name, the title page, the publishing information, and the table of contents. The book was edited and arranged by David Carson This article is an excerpt from B.W. Powe's forthcoming book, Apocalypse and Alchemy: Visions of Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. Powe is an author essayist, philosopher, poet, novelist—and an Associate Professor of Literature in the Department of English at York University. He is the author of Outage: A Journey into Electric City (Random House, 1995), Towards a Canada of Light (Thomas Allen, 2006), and Mystic Trudeau: The Fire and The Rose (Thomas Allen, 2007). He teaches with emphasis on visionary literature and in the academic realm of Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. His book of poetry, The Unsaid Passing (Guernica, 2005), was shortlisted for the ReLit Prize, His novella These Shadows Remain will be published in the spring of 2011.

with help from Eric McLuhan and Terrence Gordon. So important are these probes, the editors elected to place them before the author and book information. The aphorisms accentuate McLuhan's concern for our numbing down in the wake of change and his perception of how the avatars of book culture prefer to judge rather than probe: the forms of media, of super-Nature, are more influential than any content could ever be.

McLuhan's transformation from literary scholar to media ecologist was fraught with the dangers of misunderstanding. But relentlessly, in a short period from 1951 until 1980, from *Explorations* on to his last scramble to assemble manuscripts with collaborators (who were often less astute about what he perceived), he spoke, wrote, taught, and taunted to snap the trances of conditioning. That he was one of the first to do so speaks to the obliviousness he strove to expose.

However, McLuhan's theoretical quest was left in probing incompletion. His resistance to the label "theorist" was in part comic, in part a refusal to totalize his thought. No matter how variably alive he was in his shape-shifting, McLuhan left discontinuities. His gaps are intervals in which we may enter with our psychic, intellectual, theoretical, and poetic reconstructions. His pioneering means territories are still open. The open territory is the question of identity: "And who are you?" This is the second last line of *The Medium is the Massage*. It is scrawled across a page showing an image from *Alice in Wonderland*. Tucked in the lower left-hand corner of the back page, we find an A.N. Whitehead quotation, "It is the business of the future to be dangerous" (153, 160).

Who are you?, the Who song says (this chorus line became the herald of the *CSI*—acronym for Criminal Scene Investigations—television series). McLuhan elaborates on the identity issue in *From Cliché to Archetype*:

In *War and Peace in the Global Village* the principal theme is the quest for identity through violence in a world of rapidly shifting technologies. A sudden change of environment through major technological innovations blurs the identity image of generations old and new. They then begin a tragic *agon* of redefinition of their image of identity. (114)

The overwhelming question put to the quester at the Chapel Perilous in the wasteland is in all probability, "Who are you?" Culture and society for McLuhan sometimes seemed a junk pile of old ideas and identities, like a wasteland leading to the Chapel Perilous of the information megalopolis.

The quotations and probes should show how McLuhan knew that the identity question would drive the new century; it is the apocalypse of the postbook phase. The Magnetic City surveyed from outer space is an array of blazing electric light, an Interzone where individual lights often seem extinguished. Terror comes when everything drops from under us. "Our ground," McLuhan says in *Take Today*, "is literally in the sky" (294).

Works Cited

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