# The Mythology of McLuhan

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Mythology occupies a complex position in Marshall McLuhan's theories about communication technologies and their effects in Western society. The first point that comes to mind involves accusations that McLuhan uses mythology as a heuristic for the movement of history. Several scholars, including Paul Grosswiler and Kim Yates, have provocatively but successfully addressed this question of technological determinism in McLuhan's thought. A second relates to the mythology of the ancient Greeks, such as the Gorgon and the Cadmus myths, which McLuhan discusses in "Myth and Mass Media," in which the narrative illustrates current media-related issues.

But it is the third approach to mythology, whereby McLuhan couples mythology and media, that I want to consider. The linear model McLuhan uses to describe the joint evolution of mythology and media presents serious limitations that have become clearer in the age of social media. McLuhan describes an inclined arrow of time, arcing to the right, with media innovations assessed as historical punctuations. This mythology of linear evolution excludes and rules out certain complexities in the variety of human experience. Lines, and also circles, occur as organizing but ultimately limiting mythological patterns in many places in McLuhan's

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writings. Consider *Little Orphan Annie*, a comic popular in the 1920s, which McLuhan discusses in *The Mechanical Bride*. Here the myth of the orphan undermines the idea that *success* in materialist capitalist society is a matter of *succession*. That is, in order to become wealthy one must reject one's parents and strike out on one's own. McLuhan concludes that the comic strip has "portrayed the central success drama of America for millions of youth" (104). The pattern is linear. Although the myth suggests the metaphor of orphanhood, the linear model is revealed in a young generation's hostile orientation to the previous generation. One could imagine success in a material culture also coming from other sources, which invite the individual to explore the many directions possible in a media-rich environment.

The linear model appears even more obviously limited when we consider the evolution of media technology. In "Myth and Mass Media," McLuhan spells out the way that electronic communications devices also become mythologies, concrete forms of what he calls "macro myths." Mythology and media are linked and evolve, according to McLuhan, because electronics perform the same function as mythological narratives. They both relay compressed information in an instant. In fact, the two become synonymous with each other, to the point that McLuhan uses the terms interchangeably: "for such media or macro myths as the phonetic alphabet, printing, photography, the movie, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, and television, the social action of these forms is also in the fullest sense, their message or meaning" (340). For McLuhan, media continues to evolve by following a path first "pre-scribed" by the structure of mythology—in a line, in a circle. He discusses how Western societies progress from the fragmented mode characterized by Gutenberg's printing press. From the epoch of writing, we come full circle to the condition of preliterate tribes that experienced the simultaneity of the senses, which McLuhan evokes by referring to the *sensorium*.

The spatial metaphor has been taken up by some critics to respond to and develop the critique of linearity. MacDonald argues that a spatial metaphor characterizes McLuhan's writing, especially when it is used to develop darker themes involving communications technology and military conflict (2001). McLuhan understood that the "global village has become a theatre of war, a staging area for 'colossal violence'" (508). MacDonald observes that McLuhan sets out to "map new terrain in the sensorium, unearthing a whole geography of perception shaped by the forces and pressures of the media environment" (508). Gow has developed a parallel

argument about the ontological status of the spatial metaphor in McLuhan's writing.

Yet while it is true that McLuhan does employ geographic metaphors to explain the physical space that media occupy and create for themselves, the history of the rise of electronic communications is nevertheless described in a way that excludes much of the deep and diverse involvements with media technology that we can see today. In McLuhan's formulation, each new technological innovation presents a new medium and a new message that radically alters the one it supersedes. One language, he believes, "can be utterly changed by the intrusion of another language, as speech was changed by writing, and radio by television" (341).

We see now that a new medium stimulates pluralities, what Wenger calls "communities of practice." Yes, the *Little Orphan Annie* comic, the Broadway version of *Annie*, and Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Life* may be interpreted as a demonstration that the medium was the message, first in the 1920s, then the 1970s, and finally in the 1990s. We can also observe that the latter expressions of the succession myth suggest layers of meaning covered in turn by new layers, through references to or quotations of the message. So Jay-Z's version ironically samples the voices of Broadway Annie and the orphans as they sing, "It's the hard knock life," even as the artist hangs out beside his expensive Bentley.

William Gibson writes in *Burning Chrome* that, "the street finds its uses for things." The phrase has become a kind of hacker's watchword for the repurposing of yesterday's devices. Such a "mythical structure" extends and enriches McLuhan's model of electronic immersion. It draws out the practices and formations of subcultures of race, economics, gender, and geography. Visual and auditory stimuli are available as never before, courtesy of the communications technologies that network throughout Western society, but the computer has not done away with writing. Previous modes of thinking and expression fold over and layer onto the most advanced electric communications devices. The computer has allowed many more people to become fluently literate writers and readers. It has created unprecedented access to volumes of e-texts.

The Attik Greek word for writing is *graphos.* The word suggests something of the conceptual leakage that can occur between the linguistic and visual modes but which are clearly demarcated in McLuhan's theory of media effects. For the ancients, "to graph" meant to create with a writing tool, resulting in both words and drawings. Current use of the word retains this complexity whenever writing is described as being so vivid as to be "graphic." While the continuing developments of electronic communica-

tions increasingly massage us with the speed and intensity of the macro myth, communications technologies old and new are also creating a new class of writers. These prolific agents create graphic content and then thumb each other messages on the ubiquitous keyboard—a device that has been in continuous use since its invention in 1873.

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