International Journal of Canadian Studies
Revue internationale d'études canadiennes

Sir George R. Parkin & Herbert Marshall McLuhan Making Sense of a ShrinkingWorld

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Cite this note

Article abstract

McLuhan was by no means the first to perceive the shrinking effects ofelectronic technology. Sir George R. Parkin—writing several decades beforeMcLuhan and just eight years after the invention of the telegraph—was wellaware of such effects; however, for various reasons, he failed to comprehend thesignificance of such effects. This paper argues that, unlike Parkin, McLuhan notonly understood the phenomenon of a shrinking world, but he effectively contributedto its realization. It discusses McLuhan's use of clichés in effecting suchphenomenon, as well as his role as a "dative of manifestation", i.e., his being atthe right place at the right time to support the "revealing" of an electronicenvironment that gained momentum in the 1960s and became fully accepted in the1990s, but technically had been in the making since 1880 with the invention of thetelegraph.

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Making Sense of a Shrinking World

Abstract

McLuhan was by no means the first to perceive the shrinking effects of electronic technology. Sir George R. Parkin—writing several decades before McLuhan and just eight years after the invention of the telegraph—was well aware of such effects; however, for various reasons, he failed to comprehend the significance of such effects. This paper argues that, unlike Parkin, McLuhan not only understood the phenomenon of a shrinking world, but he effectively contributed to its realization. It discusses McLuhan's use of clichés in effecting such phenomenon, as well as his role as a "dative of manifestation", i.e., his being at the right place at the right time to support the "revealing" of an electronic environment that gained momentum in the 1960s and became fully accepted in the 1990s, but technically had been in the making since 1880 with the invention of the telegraph.

Résumé

McLuhan est loin d'être le premier à se rendre compte de la diminution des effets de la technologie électronique. Cet article montre que Sir George R. Parkin – dont les écrits remontent à plusieurs décennies avant McLuhan et seulement huit ans après l'invention du télégraphe – était parfaitement au courant de ces effets, mais il ne réussissait pas, pour diverses raisons, à comprendre l'importance de ces effets. Il prétend que, contrairement à Parkin, McLuhan a compris non seulement le phénomène du rétrécissement de monde, mais a aussi contribué effectivement à sa réalisation. Il discute de l'utilisation des clichés par McLuhan dans la concrétisation de ce phénomène, ainsi que de son rôle comme « datif de la manifestation », c'est-à-dire que par son existence au bon endroit et au bon moment il a contribué à révéler un environnement électronique qui a pris de l'ampleur dans les années 1960 et qui est devenu pleinement accepté dans les années 1990, mais qui était techniquement créé depuis 1880 avec l'invention du télégraphe.

Introduction

No longer, it seems, do we speak of the world getting smaller. In McLuhan parlance, the figure of this visible 1990s cliché has now receded into the invisible ground of a new-millennium archetype, effectively solidified within our collective consciousness as the guiding principle and inherent characteristic of what now appears as an unprecedented age. Nevertheless, the notion of a shrinking world is a recurrent rather than an original theme (Brawley). This paper will show that Marshall McLuhan was by no means

the first thinker to comment on the shrinking effects of electronic technology[1]. It will also argue that the phenomenon he "predicted" did not originate in the 1990s, but has technically been in the making for over one hundred years. In comparing and contrasting the sensibilities and awareness of two such seemingly dissimilar Canadian thinkers as Sir George R. Parkin (a product of the telegraph) with Herbert Marshall McLuhan (a product of TV), this paper seeks to demonstrate that, just as the shrinking of the world did not occur lineally overnight, but dialectically over time, and just as evidently, neither did the concomitant subjective completion come into its own.

The history of globalization is probably as old as the history of human civilization. For instance, according to Osterhammel & Petersson, the period from 1750 to 1880—an era characterized by the development of free trade and the long-distance impact of the industrial revolution—represented an important phase in the phenomenon of globalization. Moreover, they demonstrate how globalization in the mid-twentieth century opened up the prospect of global destruction through nuclear war as well as ecological catastrophe. In the end, the authors conclude that today's globalization is part of a long-running transformation and has not ushered in a "global age" radically different from anything that came before.

Arguably, what was new and different about the shrinking world in the 1990s was the apprehension of globalization and its subsequent institutionalization as a new paradigm or world-wide system. Needless to say, such an apprehension did not happen overnight. Rather, it had to be "invited" by the right person at the right time—and because of his charisma, McLuhan had a clear advantage over Parkin in this respect. On the other hand, it had to be articulated in the right manner and mediated by appropriate conceptual and linguistic structures in order to fully materialize. Clichés, in particular, were instrumental in bringing about globalization and its concomitant human realization by acting not just as "make-aware" but as "make-happen" agents as well (McLuhan 48). To declare that clichés are only useful to deal with a given phenomenon *a posteriori*—e.g., to believe that the corresponding clichés of the globalization age (e.g., "Global Village," "The Age of Information") were born, as it is commonly believed, out of the 1990s communications revolution—is to reduce the power of words by underplaying their importance as constitutive agents of change. In other words, it is to conceive them as mere symbols, whose sole function is to stand passively and imperfectly for something else or *solipsistically* within one's own mind. But there is, as we shall see, more to words than representation.

Herbert Marshall McLuhan and the constitutive power of language

Writing about the difference between Orality and Literacy, Ong pointed out that, "oral peoples commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things":

> ...chirographic and typographic folk tend to think of names as labels, written or printed tags imaginatively affixed to an object named. Oral folk have no sense of a name as a tag, for they have no idea of a name as something that can be seen. Written or printed representations of words can be labels; real, spoken words cannot be. (33)

In literate cultures, one of the functions of clichés is to keep alive the residues of the oral tradition. So when in the 1960s McLuhan used the phrase "Global Village" as a metaphor to shed light on the new television environment of his time, he deployed these words as tribal peoples would: not as a label to re-present an event that was already visible and evident, but as a sort of *talisman* held by the *oracle*, to assist the presencing of a phenomenon which was in itself destined to appear.

It is arguably because of this less obvious, *a priori* power of words—their nature as constitutive agents of change, as noted by McLuhan—that the "Global Village" cliché did not immediately create a lasting impression in the imagination of the still predominantly literate generation of the 1960s; many literati were certainly intrigued by the aphorism, but in the end felt threatened by their own inability to apprehend it by visual means. Perhaps for this reason, it has been said that "much of what McLuhan had to say made a good deal more sense in 1994 than it did in 1964" (Lapham xi). Often concerned with events that have not yet become visible, the message of oracles is not meant to be immediately accepted; instead, their function is to pave the way for the future to unfold by challenging the past with the painfully manifested absurdity of the present, often through controversy and eccentricism. It is in this sense that Ezra Pound called the artist "the antennae of the race." McLuhan later borrowed and elaborated on the notion, as the following quotes illustrate:

- *The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception (19)*

- *The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs. (71)*

- *The ability of the artist to sidestep the bully blow of new technology of any age, and to parry such violence with full awareness, is age-old. (72)*

- *And it is here that the artist can show us how to "ride with the punch," instead of "taking it on the chin". (73)*

- *Only the dedicated artist seems to have the power for encountering the present actuality. (77)*

In the context of the artist as a vanguardist, that a cliché such as "global village" can be used as a rhetorical device or talisman to assist in the revealing—*the exegesis*—of that which is destined to appear, is in a sense explicative of the fact that "the world getting smaller" as the notion was upheld by McLuhan and not by others before him.

In light of this, the fact that the term "global village" was not really invented by McLuhan (Theall 26) is of minor importance[2]. Martin Heidegger has already reminded us that innovation is not an act of creation (production) but an act of "revealing" (a way of seeing) whereby man, in answering to the call of Being, is challenged to assist in the presencing of that which presences by bringing it forth from out of concealment and into unconcealment. McLuhan did exactly this by approaching the question of the shrinking world from the epistemological standpoint of words not as mere symbols, but as constitutive agents. In other words, what matters is McLuhan's unique use of words not as a conceptual tool but as a reverberating cliché, and his role as a "dative of manifestation", i.e. his being at the right place at the right time to assist in the revealing of an electronic phenomenon that, although it gained momentum in the 1960s and became fully accepted in the 1990s, had technically been in the making since 1880 with the invention of the electric telegraph.

Sir George R. Parkin: McLuhan's forerunner

Writing in 1888, just eight years after Morse's invention, about the reorganization of the British Empire, Sir George R. Parkin displayed great sensibilities with respect to the effects of the telegraph:

> Already in electric connection with almost every important point in her [the UK's] dominions, her telegraph system only awaits the laying of the proposed cable from British Columbia to Australasia to make that connection complete without touching on foreign soil. Her widely separated provinces and outlying posts of vantage are thus effectively in touch for mutual support, more than the parts of any of the great nations of the past. *She thus unites the comprehensiveness of a world-wide empire with a relative compactness secured by that practical contraction of our planet which has taken place under the combined influences of steam and electricity.* (2-3, emphasis added).

Parkin then goes on to write that,

> Steam and electricity have *recreated the world, and on a more accessible scale.* Canada, or even Australia, *is now much closer* to

the center of the British Empire for all practical purposes than were the Western and Pacific States to Washington forty years ago; nearer even than Scotland was to London one hundred years ago. (3, emphasis added).

In the context of Vico's notion of *corso ricorso*, and given the awareness evidenced by Parkin in these passages, a compelling question arises: What prevented him from presaging McLuhan as "the oracle of the electric age"? After all, although Parkin's agenda as stated in the *Reorganization of the British Empire* seems at first sight radically different from McLuhan's, the passages above clearly show that Parkin was well aware of the effects of electricity upon geography. Simply put, Parkin's ideas hinged on the drive to make an expansive British civilization or "empire" (to use his term—perhaps not so coincidentally, a term also used by Harold Innis) that would *hold societies together* based on an "organic unity"—a notion which at first sight appears consistent with such McLuhanite themes as *implosion, retribalization,* and *global village*. But are they? And if so, what prevented Parkin from becoming Canada's first communication theorist?

Despite his awareness and sensibility about the nascent electronic environment of his time, Parkin was the product of an era and was constrained by the theoretical and philosophical views of his day. Above all, Parkin was an idealist and his thought bears the distinct epistemological seal of 19th century Kantian and Hegelian philosophies, whereby theories of praxis took second consideration to theories of knowledge. In "George R. Parkin and the Concept of Britannic Idealism", Terry Cook defines Idealism:

> Idealism is one of the main branches of modern philosophy [...] Idealists perceived reality to consist not of mere material objects, but rather of ideas and the inter-relation of ideas. They rejected the notion that the ideational and spiritual worlds were, as the utilitarians claimed, mere functions of empiricist sensations and mechanical processes. Idealists asserted instead "that Spirit is more and higher than any material or natural force and has superior rights; and further, that the natural world is itself the symbol or phenomenal manifestation of spirit." Idealism's first principle was this spiritual unity of the world. Meaning was not found in the mechanical responses of individuals to biological and material stimuli, but rather from a recognition "that to be real is to be a member of a 'rational system,' a system so constructed that the nature of its members is intelligible only in so far as the system as a whole is understood." Using a complex set of epistemological and metaphysical arguments, Idealists demonstrated that man was in effect the object of a Supreme Consciousness and as such shared in the spirituality of the united whole of existence. His natural inclination when not impeded by vicious material and fleshly

> temptations was to maximize his interior spiritual qualities and so
> approach as near as possible the Supreme Ideal. (22-23)

He then goes on to declare:

> The influence of Idealism was immense; it was found "from about
> 1880 to about 1910, penetrating and fertilising every part of the
> national life." Prominent adherents of the Idealist creed included
> Alfred Milner, H. H. Asquith, Arthur Balfour, James Bryce, and J.
> C. Smuts, R. B. Haldane, Charles Gore, Scott Holland, L. T.
> Hobhouse, and the senior Arnold Toynbee, A. C. Bradley, Arthur
> Acland, R. L. Morant, J. A. Spender, and R. G. Collingwood. (24)

And he concludes:

> To this influential, dynamic, and popular creed, George R. Parkin
> was attracted at an early stage. When in England in 1873-4, he had
> been personally exposed to the Idealism of Green, Nettleship,
> Jowett, Ruskin, Wescott, and Thring [...] While there is no
> indication that he understood the intricacies of philosophic
> Idealism, he did become a firm devotee to Idealism as a popular
> creed [...] *Parkin was also deeply influenced by the social ethics of*
> *Idealism, and these gave the ultimate 4 meaning to his Britannic*
> *nationalism or imperialism.* (24-25, emphasis added)

By contrast, McLuhan's artistic, analogical and dialectical cast of mind
can be traced back to a subjective, existential philosophical tradition—one
that sought to overcome Descartes' philosophical dichotomy of an ideal vs.
a phenomenal world. This alternative tradition actually began at around the
same time of Parkin's writings and the invention of the telegraph, with Enri
Bergson's distinction between the inner time of the individual and the
cosmic time of the external world, and William James's conception of
multiple realities and sub-universes existing subordinate to the paramount
reality of sensation (Striegel 12). This subjective tradition later evolved into
what Ihde calls the philosophies of praxis: Phenomenology, Existentialism,
Neo-Thomism, and some Branches of North American Pragmatism.

In a sense, then, McLuhan's argument that Marxian thought was obsolete
in the age of the telegraph[3] is equally applicable to Parkinian thought—
though unlike Marx, Parkin seemed quite aware of the new electronic
environments that were being created by the telegraph (like McLuhan,
Parkin was a Canadian.) However, his romantic, idealist cast of mind (i.e.,
his dream of a Pan-Britannic Empire based on a common race) prevented
him from understanding the true nature of the electronic environments
being created by the telegraph. His rationalism led him to adopt an
instrumental conception of technology—the belief that technology is a
means to an end, a mere tool that man can pick up and put down at will.
Instrumentalism was at the time the dominant conception of technology,
challenged only by Marxian determinism—an alternative conception of

technology which nonetheless shares the assumption of an objective reality and a separation between means and ends. It took a Martin Heidegger to show that technology is not neutral and no mere means to an end, but a way of revealing that involves man in a complex configuration (12). McLuhan's general media theory was born within the framework of this alternative philosophical conception: by operating outside of the determinism-instrumentalism dichotomy, he was able to better understand the effects of technological innovation.

Moreover, unlike Parkin, McLuhan understood very clearly that electricity does not discriminate; that it has no centers and no margins, and that it cannot be manipulated to selectively create unity based on race or some other ideological principle. In fact, the type of implosion or convergence McLuhan predicted was not orderly, but often chaotic, as the following quote illustrates:

> Speed up [by electricity] creates what some economists refer to as center-margin structure. When this [the empire] becomes too extensive for the generating and control center, pieces begin to detach themselves and to set up new center-margin systems of their own. The most familiar example is the American colonies of Great Britain. When the thirteen colonies began to develop considerable social and economic life of their own, they felt the need to become centers themselves, with their own margins. (99)

It is this chaotic nature which McLuhan ascribed to implosion and convergence that is often overlooked by those who charge him as an apolitical technological determinist. The advent of the Internet and the coming into being of some of his predictions, however, gave way to a period of vindication and reappraisal. Grosswiler convincingly demonstrates that McLuhan's methodology can be useful for Critical Theory, and Babe questions the idea of a utopian global village, proving that in fact McLuhan grew extremely pessimistic later in his career about the complexities of implosion.

Still, unlike Parkin, McLuhan understood that although everything is political, politics is not everything: in his view, unity was not something organic, but something that must be created and recreated. Electricity causes neither *unity* (a human value) nor *orderly integration*, which can only be achieved after the fact; rather, it causes implosion. Again, *convergence* is the human mechanism (the cliché, the proverb, the talisman) whereby man tries to deal with that implosion. Ultimately, it was by adopting an unprejudiced, phenomenologically consistent, observation-minus-theory approach (an approach not present in Parkin's thought) that McLuhan understood the true nature of electronic media—not as a tool that man can pick up and put down at will, but as a force that must be reckoned with.

Notes

1. Giambattista Vico's notion of *Corso Ricorso*—which refers to the idea of repetition throughout history and relates to the creative, constitutive power of language not only to reflect reality, but also to shape it—can serve to explicate why at different points in time, different ideas tend to resurface in the hands of different authors (what people make of them, however, is both contextual and circumstantial).

2. The notion has long been attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, though Eric McLuhan later rectified this in an article entitled "The Source of the Term, Global Village": "I have often been asked about the origin of the term "global village" in my father's work. I know that it has been variously attributed, to Teilhard de Chardin, for example. He did not get it from Teilhard, however. And on several occasions he specifically remarked that Teilhard was not the source. As far as I have been able to establish, it comes either from James Joyce's Finnegans Wake or else from P. Wyndham Lewis's America and Cosmic Man if it comes from anywhere but his own imagination."

3. In his essay, "Requiem for the Media," included in *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard wrote of McLuhan: "In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which language, signs, and communication in general found themselves excluded. In fact, Marx does not even provide for a genuine theory of railroads as 'media', as modes of communication: they hardly enter into consideration. And he certainly established no theory of technical evolution on general, except from the point of view of production—primary, material, infrastructural production as the almost exclusive determinant of social relations" (164). Baudrillard's reference is to the opening pages of McLuhan's *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968): "By Karl Marx's times, a 'communism' resulting from such services so far surpassed the older private wealth and services contained within the new communal environment that it was quite natural for Marx to use it as a rear-view mirror for his Utopian hopes" (5).

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