

*a justification for 'myth-history' and defense of
some claims made in The Gutenberg Galaxy
about the effects of print culture*

Marshall McLuhan's Myth of Print History

An Apology

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Often discredited and somewhat notorious, literary scholar and media theorist Marshall McLuhan was an early contributor to the field of book history. In his first work dealing with the history of the book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, McLuhan traces psychological, social, and cultural effects of printing in the Western world. His unique approach to the topic employs what he terms 'probes,' which are provocative statements, often thinly supported and sometimes offered without any accompanying historical evidence. McLuhan inspired a critical backlash from his contemporaries, occasionally echoed in the present day. Sometimes detractors are incited by his more incredible theories, but McLuhan is usually dismissed because of his presentation. His probes, they argue, better suit pop-science than serious scholarship. The fact is, however, that *The Gutenberg Galaxy* astutely observes psychosocial effects of print in the West, and his probes are a necessary complement to a traditional historical approach, which is often debilitated by dates and regional differences, and therefore unable to make useful generalizations about the effects of particular items of historical significance.

Before approaching critical responses, it is necessary to understand the primary arguments of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. His ideas are presented in a manner resembling stream of consciousness, supported by quotations from historians such as Henry Chaytor and Lucien Febvre, but primarily from literature and literary theorists. Many of these quotations are quite long, and in total comprise perhaps a third of the book; his bibliography spans nine pages. It is safe to assume that McLuhan is not plagued by the anxiety of influence.

Despite the heavy sampling of others' work, McLuhan presents original ideas. McLuhan offers support unsystematically with varying levels of intensity. The most effective way of isolating his main points is by tracing the arguments which appear repeatedly throughout the book. His main purpose is to argue that moveable type led to print culture, and shaped the Western psyche. To get to this point, it is necessary to outline McLuhan's concept of the pre-print world.

Before writing, culture was oral. McLuhan's oral man used all his senses at once to interact with the world: "The auditory field is simultaneous."¹ Because all his senses were active, oral man was prone to creativity. A heading proclaims in large, bold font: "The medieval monks' reading carrel was indeed a singing booth."² McLuhan borrows from historian István Hajnal, pointing out that oral dictation in medieval universities allowed the professor to add his own interpretation to the lecture.³ Despite this drive toward invention, oral man's total involvement produced an innocent, childlike state: "To the oral man the literal is inclusive, contains all possible meanings and levels."⁴ Deception through language was inconceivable, every word had a clear meaning, and a man meant exactly what he said. This kind of honesty is a necessary condition for total sensory involvement.

The sun began to set on this kind of honesty with the dawn of the phonetic alphabet. According to McLuhan, "Any phonetic alphabet culture can easily slip into the habit of putting one thing under or in another; since there is constant pressure from the subliminal fact that the written code carries for the reader the experience of the 'content' which is speech."⁵ Although it would be two years until his proclamation that "the content of any medium is always another medium,"⁶ the idea was already present in McLuhan's work. Different media privilege different senses, and using visual signs to represent sounds started to tip the balance: "The interiorization of the technology of the phonetic alphabet transforms man from the magical world of the ear to the neutral world of the eye."⁷ When McLuhan declares that "from the invention of the alphabet there has been a continuous drive in the Western world toward the separation of the senses, of functions, of operations, of states emotional and

¹ *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 111

² *Ibid*, 92

³ *Ibid*, 97

⁴ *Ibid*, 111

⁵ *Ibid*, 72

⁶ *Understanding Media*, 8

⁷ *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 18

political, as well as of tasks,” he is asserting that the psychological effects of printing have roots in the invention of the phonetic alphabet.⁸

The primary argument of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is that print culture is formative to the Western psyche. The sensory split initiating with the phonetic alphabet is exacerbated by the technology of printing: “With print the eye speeded up and the voice quieted down.”⁹ When McLuhan goes on to declare that “It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type, that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses,”¹⁰ he is asserting that as technology progressed, this sensory disproportion became increasingly exaggerated.

The focus on the visual inherent in print culture had direct effects on Western thought. Whereas “The auditory field is simultaneous, the visual mode is successive.”¹¹ The linear nature of the printed page encourages a thought pattern that moves from point to point in a linear fashion. Mixing the literal and the metaphorical, McLuhan observes that “A fixed point of view becomes possible with print.”¹² He argues that the concept of point of view detracted from dialogue and encouraged an individualistic stance.¹³ This culture of individualism was further reinforced by the format of the book.¹⁴ McLuhan goes so far as to declare outright, “Print is the technology of individualism.”¹⁵ The fragmentation of individuals in a society is reflected by larger social divisions. Perforated by differences in sensory involvement, rifts opened between art and science,¹⁶ and between words and music.¹⁷

⁸ Ibid, 42-3

⁹ Ibid, 43

¹⁰ Ibid, 54

¹¹ Ibid, 111

¹² Ibid, 126

¹³ Ibid, 142

¹⁴ Ibid, 206

¹⁵ Ibid, 158

¹⁶ Ibid, 81

¹⁷ Ibid, 96

These social separations are at once confirmed and disputed by the concurrent rise of nationalism, made possible by the capacity for widespread circulation of uniform sets of information and the rise of vernacular language.¹⁸ While nations grew apart in the process of self-definition, printing led to a certain level of cultural homogenization. McLuhan insists that “Print had a levelling function on all verbal and social forms,”¹⁹ in part because of the standardization of language it encouraged, and in part because of the repeatable nature of reproduced text.

Repetition, furthermore, led to an increased demand for quantification, and print “provided a means of quantification in its very technology.”²⁰ Print runs increased as technology improved, and commercial culture developed in conjunction. McLuhan insists that these social phenomena are inextricably linked. Consumer culture could not exist in the world before print, not simply because mass production was not yet technological possible, but because a mass-production mindset was born with print: “as print was the first mass-produced thing, so it was the first uniform and repeatable ‘commodity.’ The assembly line of movable types made possible a product that was uniform and as repeatable as the scientific experiment. Such a character does not belong to the manuscript.”²¹ There lie the roots of some of the quintessential psychological problems of Western man, who often obsessively tries to use consumer goods to define himself, who tends to be torn between selfishness and his need to belong to the group, and who so often prioritizes appearance over substance.

This aim of this paper is not to psychologically profile Western man, however; it is to defend valid and important ideas McLuhan presents in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and his method of delivery. Examining critical responses to the work presents an opportunity to analyze the book’s failures and

¹⁸ Ibid, 236

¹⁹ Ibid, 239

²⁰ Ibid, 176

²¹ Ibid, 125

successes. Objections to his style dominate the din of voices raised against McLuhan's work. It is instructive to first consider critical engagement of McLuhan's central ideas.

For instance, McLuhan's proposition that the phonetic alphabet initiated a division of the senses and printing intensified the resulting visual emphasis is often discredited. Literary critic Sidney Finkelstein argues that this split never took place, noting that auditory activities are still important: "Don't we now, long after we have learned to read, still talk to one another, listen to music, go to lectures or to the theater, turn on the radio?"²² If the division of the senses is questioned, its psychological effects are cast doubt. Kenneth Burke, another literary critic, questions why linear thinking would be credited to print rather than preexisting linear visual forms such as animal tracks or musical notation.²³ Both critics make valid points – the visual has not completely supplanted all other senses and writing is not the only visual, linear form of communication. However, neither acknowledges the repetitive reinforcement of these effects borne of the printed page's cultural saturation.

Elizabeth Eisenstein does, conceding that "McLuhan's suggestion that scanning lines of print affected thought-processes is at first glance somewhat mystifying. But further reflection suggests that the thoughts of readers are guided by the way the contents of books are arranged and presented."²⁴ While Eisenstein stops short of enumerating how print technology guides the thoughts of readers, other scholars agree that print places disproportionate emphasis on the visual. Tom Wolfe declares that "Print led to the habit of categorizing...to the creation of the modern economy," and agrees that it privileges the visual.²⁵ Walter Ong asserts that "print replaced the lingering hearing-dominance in the world of thought and expressions with the sight-dominance which had its beginnings in writing but could not flourish with the support of writing alone."²⁶ McLuhan's theory echoes in present-day historian Richard

²² *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan*, 26

²³ "Medium as 'Message,'" 175-6

²⁴ *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 89

²⁵ "Suppose He is What He Sounds Like," 21

²⁶ *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 121

Cullen Rath's research, which revealed that early American culture "...was so imbued with print that even the illiterate were affected, so much so that it led to complex shifts in habits of perception. ... The shift away from the audible world and toward the visual was intertwined with the rise of mass print culture."²⁷

Eisenstein often finds value in McLuhan's work. While Finkelstein accuses McLuhan of "one-sided" technological determinism,²⁸ Eisenstein points out that technology necessarily influences society. Because hers is a subtle and considered approach, Eisenstein is more effective among scholars than McLuhan in arguing for a print 'revolution.' She underscores the effect of the printing press on the distribution of information: "One cannot treat printing as just one among many elements in a complex causal nexus, for the communications shift transformed the nature of the causal nexus itself. It is of special historical significance because it produced fundamental alterations in prevailing patterns of continuity and change."²⁹ Some technologies have more pervasive effects on social systems than others, and the printing press exemplifies this fact.

McLuhan is unsuccessful in convincing many critics of this partly due to his method of presentation. For all of the areas in which she supports his claims, Eisenstein accuses him of using an unscholarly approach, particularly reprehensible in the case of the history of printing, a field in which "...neglect by conscientious scholars has allowed the topic to go by default into incautious hands. Although Marshall McLuhan's work stimulated my historical curiosity, among many of my colleagues it has been counter-productive, discouraging further investigation of print culture or its effects. Concern with the topic at present is likely to be regarded with suspicion, to be labelled 'McLuhanite' and dismissed out of hand."³⁰ This label arose in part because of McLuhan's popular prominence in the

²⁷ "Hearing American History," 428

²⁸ *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan*, 29

²⁹ *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 703

³⁰ *Ibid*, xvii

1960s, when radio and television appearances made him into a sort of cult figure. Often emulated but rarely treated with scholarly seriousness, his name came to symbolize a smoke-and-mirrors style.

Serious-minded critics who were his contemporaries often leveled this accusation at him. Finkelstein indicts him as mindless, proclaiming that “To McLuhan there is no longer any need for knowledge and study, or for any rational thinking at all. These have gone out with the outmoded ‘Gutenberg’ or ‘print’ age.”³¹ Christopher Ricks slings the same arrows, insisting that McLuhan “has no respect for evidence or history. That he shores up his inability to argue by claiming that arguing and rationality are yesterday’s bric-a-brac, and by always changing the subject.”³² To be labeled McLuhanite, then, is to be labeled not simply wrong but also deceptive and malicious.

Ricks calls McLuhan “an outrageously false historian” and *The Gutenberg Galaxy* “a maddening book.”³³ David Skinner deems it an “impenetrable whirlwind.”³⁴ Eisenstein complains that in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, “Developments that have been unfolding over the course of five hundred years, affecting different regions and penetrating to different social strata at different intervals, are randomly intermingled and treated as a single event.”³⁵ James O’Donnell calls this “magic thinking.”³⁶ Finkelstein blames McLuhan’s agenda to address the effects of the development of electronic media, saying that McLuhan “invents his history backward.”³⁷ Although history has often been lauded for allowing insight into present social conditions, many of McLuhan’s contemporaries found his approach insufficient.

Eisenstein attributes his shortcomings to his background in literature, which she characterizes as “predisposed against chronological narrative.”³⁸ Exposed here is an academic prejudice between historians and literary critics. Perhaps it is reasonable to generalize that historians tend to find that

³¹ *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan*, 12

³² “McLuhanism,” 102

³³ *Ibid*, 101

³⁴ “McLuhan’s World – And Ours,” 53

³⁵ *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 40

³⁶ “The Pragmatics of the New: Trithemius, McLuhan, and Cassiodorus,” 48

³⁷ *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan*, 20

³⁸ *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 40

literary scholars' focus on drawing connections between real and imaginary worlds blinds them to facts and reality. Tom Nairn, a theorist with a historical perspective, considers McLuhan's approach "an attack upon the best achievement of human thought."³⁹ What Nairn will not tolerate is McLuhan's creation of a "myth-history."⁴⁰ Yet this is one of the major strengths of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

None can deny that printing had a strong social influence, yet the regional diffusion and centuries-long evolution of print technology and spread of literacy are roadblocks to providing cohesive factual proof. Eisenstein concedes that "...it is difficult to deal with the advent of typography without skewing perspectives by resorting simultaneously to two incompatible models of change: one gradual and evolutionary; the other, abrupt and revolutionary."⁴¹ The solution she offers is that "one must take a more wide-angled, long-range view."⁴² She indicts as unscholarly McLuhan's treatment of the period between Gutenberg and the Early Modern Period as continuous, yet this technique aligns with her prescribed solution.

The Gutenberg Galaxy does treat a broad swath of time with little differentiation between cultures or technologies. Doing this provides McLuhan with enough perspective to be able to make generalized observations about the psychosocial effects of print. Begrudgingly, Nairn admits that there is an advantage to McLuhan's approach, confessing that "It is more important to see the whole process than deprecate it. That is, to see that McLuhan's odd way of expressing himself and the social form his ideas have assumed amount to a kind of contemporary *mythmaking*..."⁴³ Finkelstein is right, McLuhan is looking at the history of print as through a glass, and with the aim of explaining the print environment so as to prepare for the rising tide of electronic media. This kind of mythmaking is vital to the articulation of new ideas, especially when those ideas pertain to a media environment in which we are immersed.

³⁹ "McLuhanism: The Myth of our Time," 150

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 33

⁴² Ibid, 26

⁴³ "McLuhanism: The Myth of our Time," 141

Joseph Donatelli cites McLuhan's claim that a dominant media "has a narcotic effect on its users," stating because we are now in the hegemony of electronic media, "society is now able to investigate how print technology worked."⁴⁴ The questions McLuhan raised thirty years prior to Donatelli's work can still stimulate new inquiry. This, according to Samuel Becker, is the greatest strength of his work. "Instead of responding to McLuhan's work as though it were scientific research, historical or anthropological observation," advises Becker, we should read McLuhan "for stimulating us to think about communication in fresh and imaginative ways."⁴⁵ This is not to say that we have escaped history, or that we do not need a factual understanding of the past. It is to assert that achieving an overview of a media technology requires perspective.

That perspective certainly includes history. It also includes math and science, economics, sociology, anthropology, art, and yes, literature. The history of a technology affects and is affected by all aspects of the lives of the people it touches. Media technologies are especially pervasive in the environment and in individuals' personal lives. More than a list of dates, inventory lists, or literacy rates are needed to understand the psychosocial and cultural effects of printing. These are necessary; by themselves they tell only part of the story. For a fuller understanding of how Western culture has been shaped by its own media inventions, it is necessary to draw on culture as a whole. McLuhan's probes are useful stimulants, and his mythmaking approach an important framework for a holistic history of print.

⁴⁴ "Why Media Matters: An Introduction"

⁴⁵ "Viewpoint: McLuhan as Rorschach," 236

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