McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse

Glenn Willmott

This is a difficult book. The density of the language and ideas makes it hard going for the layperson, or the scholar without a deep understanding of the life and work of Marshall McLuhan. However, for the McLuhan aficionado, or even the curious and persistent, Willmott presents a detailed and closely argued case for re-examining the work of this intriguing and contradictory media theorist.

I was keen to review Modernism in Reverse because of my own interest in the discussion raging in journalism education and communication/cultural studies about the status of "postmodernism" in the academy. I must also confess my almost total ignorance of McLuhan's work and life. For example, I had no idea that he was teaching at Cambridge in the 1930s, or that he was one of the first scholars to take a deep interest in both popular culture and communication. He incorporated a critical assessment of advertising into his teaching and research well before it "took off"' to become the very "representation" of postwar modernity and consumerism during the long economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s.

There is no doubt that, in many ways, McLuhan was ahead of his time, but was he the "first" postmodernist? This is certainly a central thesis of Willmott's work, but personally, I doubt that it can be sustained without some contortions of logic and history.

McLuhan was the media theorist who gave us the cliché of the "Global Village," which I have recently noticed The Sydney Morning Herald using as a frequent page and story marker in its international news section. It is a phrase that has made it into the lexicon of the quotidian; but nevertheless, it is something that is perhaps reinvented and misunderstood whenever it is used in everyday speech.

This then is the heart of the critical contradiction that is "McLuhanism"--on the one hand McLuhan is an important literary, media, and social critic who deserves our attention and on the other hand McLuhan, the cultural artefact, is remembered in popular culture for one or two glib phrases--the "global village" and "the medium is the message"--which may or may not mean what they say.

McLuhan himself of course phrases pre-dates by many decades this loose translation of what is come to be his catch phrase, and his oeuvre stretches well beyond the one, relatively recent work from which it has been borrowed, stolen, or otherwise misappropriated. Modernism in Reverse is a solid work of historical and critical value that attempts to situate McLuhan in his own social and literary milieu while, at the same time, reminding us of the universality of his theoretical insights and interpretations.

The first half of Willmott's book traces McLuhan's early life; teaching, researching, and debating at a number of universities, in England and North America, from the 1930s to the 1950s. Reading such biographical material gives one a sense of McLuhan's longevity. McLuhan's polemics are explained, dissected, and critiqued alongside the major positions

adopted and championed by his contemporaries in the rarefied and somewhat arcane (from the vantage point of the late twentieth century) world of high theory and literary criticism.

At the core of McLuhan's formulation of social criticism is the concept of techne, which I take to mean the important relationship between human life and technology and which is defined by Willmott as including "formal processes exerted upon any material medium basic to the activities of society (such as an economic strategy or an architectural technique)" (p. 54). The techne of a society became for McLuhan, as it was for his early mentors, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, "the mediating hinge between economic forms and relations and social forms and relations--between what Marxism has called 'base' and 'superstructure'" (p. 55). McLuhan's rejection of Marxism and his reformulation of the base-superstructure model in this way is, for me, the key to his liberalism and his ultimate failure to successfully project a means of transcending the problems of modernity. However, it is clear that McLuhan was painfully aware of the anti-social nature of the modernist techne. He was conscious of the horrors of atomic warfare, the alienation of subjectivity, through the construct of advertising and the mind-numbing consumerism, which Marx, 100 years earlier, had prefigured in this concept of commodity fetishism.

If the ultimate aim of The Mechanical Bride (1951) was to explore the idea of techne, McLuhan's next book, The Gutenburg Galaxy (1962), defines his transition to media critic and his formulation of the electronic media as the primary paradigm for the evolution of modernity from one historically and culturally defined techne to the next. Willmott argues it is at this time that McLuhan becomes the postmodernist modernist (p. 112) through his (McLuhan's) redefinition of media as "an inclusive rubric for all human artefacts and human production; not as a special category of technology, but including it" (p. 113). In this sense McLuhan came to argue that media is the medium through which techne and culture can interact--the media becomes the message and the messenger of modernity. In The Gutenburg Galaxy McLuhan argues that humanity has become a prisoner of the linearity of print and the technics of printing, no longer able to effectively communicate with spoken words. The electronic revolution in media, particularly television, can liberate humanity from this jail-- through its technical form, if not content. In his later work, beginning with The Gutenburg Galaxy in 1962, McLuhan forsakes the role of critic and ignores content "in favour of a study of the mechanical structures [the form of television] through which [the message] is transmitted" (Miller 1971, 12).

Modernism in Reverse encapsulates in the title Willmott's view that McLuhan became, by the late 1960s, the very modern model of a modern critic, almost a parody of his former serious self, a hero of corporate proportions, celebrating some of the less savoury and wholesome aspects of late modern commodified social relations.

But was McLuhan the first postmodernist, prefiguring Baudrillard? Certainly this is a central tenet of Modernism in Reverse, but I am not so sure that it is a provable, or necessarily informative point to make.

What Willmott tries to do with this book is argue that the already "postmodern" McLuhan of the 1960s and the "global village" is rooted in the thoroughly modern McLuhan of the 1930s. He suggests that throughout his life McLuhan was a boundary rider along the frontier between literary theory and popular culture. In this view the 1960s McLuhan was playing a giant joke, conducting a "self experiment--in the postmodern powers of criticism, and the search for a historically adequate form or medium for those powers."

Some similar arguments are made for British media theorist Raymond Williams, who, though younger than McLuhan, was active alongside him in the debates over television and new media forms in the 1960s and 1970s. We find in Willmott the wilful separation of past and present, a denial of historicity typical of postmodern criticism, "as if the past were only literary," transposed onto the subject, in this case, McLuhan himself.

For me the most interesting and revealing chapter is "The Art of Politics" which chronicles McLuhan's journey from "southern agrarian socialist intellectual" to liberal-democratic pluralist formalist. McLuhan returned to America at the end of the depression, which coincided with the emergence of Keynesian economics that believed in the efficacy of a self-correcting system of private enterprise and the liberal democratic ideology of a neutral and beneficent welfare state.

According to this ideology the major institutions of society have equal weight and must adapt to each others demands. This is the cornerstone of pluralism in politics and certainly characterizes the politics of many contemporary postmodernists. I have traced this back to English media theorist Raymond Williams whose work and "second wave" popularity mirrors the attention now being paid to McLuhan. If Williams is the godfather of British cultural studies, then McLuhan is perhaps in a similar position in the North American communication theory tradition. What these two great thinkers of the twentieth century share is a view that somehow culture is outside the techne (or relations of production) and can, under the right conditions, exert a transformative influence back onto the technical means of social reproduction. The problem that McLuhan and Williams grapple with in this context is: Under what conditions can reflexive critical cultural work complete this transformation?

In my view this is a mistaken and ideological view grounded in a rejection of the Marxist methods of historical and materialist analysis and instead privileging an idealist (and in McLuhan's case, a formalist) reading of social relations--politics, economics, art, science, and culture.

McLuhan's many critics are quick to gainsay his theoretical work and argue that his most impressive achievement was to create his now legendary reputation on the strength of very few ideas that were incessantly repeated (Miller 1971, 7). Willmott disagrees completely with this view, preferring to revere McLuhan as the critic who reversed modernity onto itself and through "retracing" its historical trajectory via the techne, pushed reflexivity to "the postmodern limits of a self-deconstructing textual event, a critical Happening" (p. 207). McLuhan is the "vital if repressed link" (p. 207) between modernity and its growing legion of postmodern critics.

In Willmott's view McLuhan sacrificed himself in order to serve as an ideal for "postmodern critical practice" (p. 207), which is fine if you believe in the veracity of the postmodernist project, but if you believe that postmodernism represents just another dead-end pluralist and idealist ideology, the later McLuhan becomes a self-parodying figure to be pitied. Indeed the The Sydney Morning Herald's appropriation of "the global village" as a dinkus to promote its international news pages echoes Miller's scathing criticism, made over 25 years ago. "Not only has an impressive academic [McLuhan] cleared [the media] of the humiliating stigma of vulgar and destructive triviality: he has actually promoted them to the helm of cultural progress" (Miller 1971, 12).

Marshall McLuhan is an important figure in twentieth century scholarship and his work deserves critical reappraisal. Glenn Willmott has done a good job of presenting McLuhan in a fresh light, but he is perhaps using too rosy a filter and projecting his own postmodern hindsight onto a figure who is thoroughly grounded in modernity.

McLuhan has left us the cliché of the global village, but unfortunately did not survive long enough to see his vision corrupted by the ever-tightening monopoly grip of the news and entertainment capitalists--Murdoch and others--whose control over both the technical means "the medium" and the content "the message" has created both information gluttony and information poverty at opposite ends of the village square. The medium is the message, and everywhere you look it is still "consume, be silent, die."

References

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