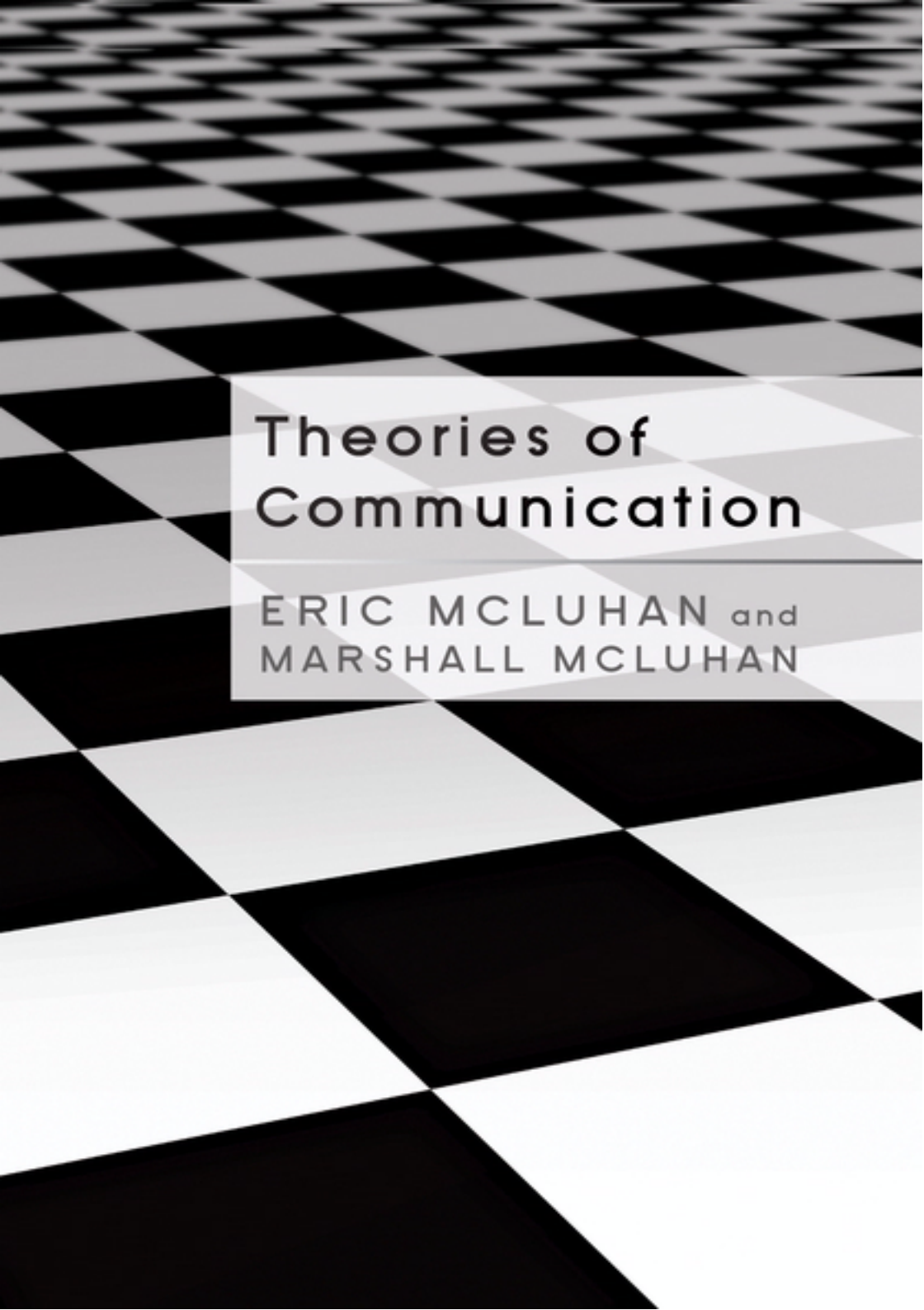
Theories of
Communication
ERIC MCLUHAN and
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Introduction

ERIC MCLUHAN

A fundamental principle of this book is that communication entails change: the *sine qua non* of communication therefore is the matter of effect. If there is no effect, if there is no change in the audience, there is no communication. The approach is rhetoric to the core.

The centerpiece of these essays is the first chapter, which proposes a "World Communication Series" of essays on various people's Theories of Communication. In each case, it suggests, two questions need to be asked: What is the subject's intended audience? and What effect does the subject aim to produce on that audience? Such at any rate is our ideal; as with many another thing, the execution (the essays that follow) often falls short—or a bit to one side of—of the ideal. (The reader may enjoy observing just how often and how widely theory diverges from practice in these pages.) Of the essays in this collection, a few go straight to the topic; others sidle up to it; the rest are included for their contribution to the overall task of understanding culture and communication in our time. "Formal Causality in Chesterton" is one such. While it discusses Chesterton's ideas about his audience and the effect he wanted to produce, it also points out the role of the audience as the formal cause of the writer's labours. Formal causality, so widely misunderstood, is central to our topic and recurs in a number of the other chapters. We have included an appendix on formal cause.

To take another example, we can assume that Aristotle's audience consisted of his students and his colleagues. The effect he wished to achieve is clearly evident in what is taken to be his biggest contribution to logical thought: the syllogism. The syllogism breaks the mimetic thrall in which the poets held their Greek hearers, the same spell against which Plato inveighed in *Republic* and elsewhere. It posed a mortal threat to the new enterprise of reasoning, and so holds the key to Aristotle's theory of communication, as I show in Appendix One.

In 1971, Marshall McLuhan wrote to the anthropologist, Ashley Montagu, as follows:

> There are many things that I wish you were available to discuss. In recent years, I've been working on causation. More and more I feel compelled to consider causation as following from effects. That is, the effects of the telegraph created an environment of information that made the telephone a perfectly natural development. In a certain sense, therefore, the effects of the telephone provided the invention of the actual hardware instrument. This, of course, is non-lineal, non- sequential causality. In fact, it suggests that causes and effects are simultaneous, if anything.
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> I am baffled to know why it is that in the Western world there has been no study of the effects of innovations. There is, of course, much readiness to study the inputs that are called the "content" of our technologies, but insofar as technologies create environments which alter all forms of human perception, there is a hiatus. In merely literary terms, nobody studies what sort of effect Dante or anybody else wanted to have on his time and his public. Instead, they study what they imagined the writer was saying to the public. What a man is saying is far from the effect he may wish to have, or that, in fact, he does have. Personally, I consider the effect that a writer wishes to achieve as his theory of communication. I know of no studies of anybody's theory of communication. For example, quite apart from the concern of anthropologists, and aside from the content of their work, what is the effect that they seek on their time? How do they wish to change it?[1]

"Pound, Eliot and the Rhetoric of *The Waste Land*" examines the contending approaches to communication of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as registered in their work on the poem. Most remarkable is that Eliot enlisted—and submitted to—Pound's editorial surgery on his poem. Never before (or since) have two major poets collaborated on producing a single poem. The result was instantaneous and dramatic: a howl of rage and protest from every quarter. Even today, nearly a century after its appearance, *The Waste Land* puzzles and infuriates readers and critics—adequate testimony to its efficacy. Eliot played the grammarian, the man of letters; Pound, the practical rhetor, pressing always to sharpen the effect. Here, too, we encounter for the first time the uses of the five divisions of the rhetorical word in poetics—Pound's particular contribution to twentieth-century poetics.[2] "Rhetorical Spirals in *Four Quartets,*" a companion piece, pursues most of the same themes in depth

(though not at length) in the structures of the *Four Quartets*. It features a Dantesque layering in the four poems of the traditional four levels of interpretation—plus the four seasons, the four elements, the four causes, and so on, as penetrated by the five divisions of rhetoric—altogether an immensely rich tapestry of meaning and suggestion woven by a master poet. These two essays provide more than adequate matter to assemble a theory of communication for Eliot and for Pound.

"Poetic vs. Rhetorical Exegesis" was written as an early (1944) book review, with no thought of presenting anyone's theory of communication. It situates Practical Criticism as essentially rhetorical inasmuch as it focuses concern on audience and effect, and it discusses its limitations as contrasted with the poetic technique of F. R. Leavis. Practical Criticism can reveal nearly everything about a poem, for example, except whether or not it is a good poem. The approaches of Richards and Leavis exhibit the same complementarity as do those of Pound and Eliot; their roots are easily discerned in the traditions of rhetoric and grammar extending continuously back to Cicero and Quintilian:

> Just as Korzybski offers us a correlation of knowledge by extension of the modes of grammar (and in this respect belongs to an ancient tradition headed by Cratylus and carried on by Pliny, Philo-Judæus, Origen, St. Bonaventura, and the later alchemists) so Mr. Richards, whose *Meaning of Meaning* is a treatise of speculative grammar of curiously scholastic stamp, offers us a method for interpreting and manipulating our lives by an extension of the devices of rhetoric. In this respect Mr. Richards is a true nominalist son of Ockham, Agricola, and Ramus; and it is no accident that Harvard has welcomed this distinguished schoolman.
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> Mr. Richards' rediscovery of the functional rhetorical relationships in speech and prose was timely, indeed, after three centuries of Cartesian contempt for metaphor and rhetoric in all its modes. However, in order to understand how Mr. Empson developed Mr. Richards' method it is worth pointing out that all four relations of "sense," "attitude," "tone," and "intention" designated by Richards are not directly applicable to the work of a poet. A speaker or a writer of prose has an intention related to an audience of some sort, but a poet's intention is entirely absorbed in the nature of the thing he is making. The thing made will stand in relation to an audience but this, while important, is only *per accidens*. Thus the "meaning" of a work of prose or rhetoric, whether pantomime, or speech, or tract is incomplete without the precise audience for which it was intended. For example, Swift's *Modest Proposal* does not have its whole meaning inherent in the internal relationships of the theme of that piece. One main "ingredient" of the composition is the relation in which its ostensible propositions stand to an audience of peculiar mental complexion. The nature of that audience must be inferred from the piece itself, and it is essential to the understanding of the work.
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> Thus rhetoric is essentially an affair of external, as well as internal, relations, while a poem has external relations only accidentally. For example, the speech of Marvell's lover to the beloved in *The Coy Mistress* is a work of rhetoric, full of shifting attitudes to the

> audience and displaying several persuasive arguments. But the audience *is in the poem*. This is equally true for the poetic drama. A poem or play may contain any number of rhetorical and political components needing exegesis, and yet be wholly poetic—that is, be entirely organized with reference to a dramatic structure or movement which is self-contained. A rhetorical work is for the sake of producing action. A poetic work is an action produced for the sake of contemplation. This is an irreducible functional distinction between rhetoric and poetic which it is the business of the critic to manifest point by point in judging the particular work.

The Introduction to *Paradox in Chesterton* not only places G. K. Chesterton in relation to the traditions of rhetoric and grammar, it also situates his work and his approach vis-à-vis his audience. Though not a formal "Theory of Communication" essay, it nevertheless may easily be read as providing an account of Chesterton's Theory. Much the same may be said of the essay on Innis, "The Bias of Communication." While not a formal "Theory" essay, it does provide a more-than-adequate account of the elements: Innis's audience and his effect on that group. Like Marshall McLuhan, Innis wrote for two readers: one of Innis's readers is focused (narrowly) on economics and economic history; the other, a more general reader is interested in his startling and novel revelations about media and modes of culture. Too, as with McLuhan, the academic audience—his colleagues in Economics—despised the non-academic work and regarded it as beneath consideration, a form of intellectual and professional suicide. To this day, the same attitudes persist in departments of Economics (Innis) and English Literature (McLuhan), though perhaps not as strenuously as heretofore. Contributing to the richness of this essay, the reader will discover, is the fact that, in detailing Innis's approach and technique, Marshall McLuhan exposes so much of his own: he can be so incisive about Innis's methods because he knows them well from his own extensive use of the same approaches. This is not to imply that he learned them from Innis, but he found in Innis a kindred spirit.

"Media Ad-Vice" may seem at first blush an odd inclusion, yet it explores, not for the first time, the nature and role of subliminal media effects on audiences. Its significance in this company is not from setting forth the Theory of Communication of one or another individual, but the Theory as it were of a profession, though the professors be unaware they have one. Advertisers for the most part think in terms of transporting messages and content; ironically their every motive and aim is not to move a message but to transform non-buyers into buyers; the ad-man, like the poet, gets most of his effects subliminally. Both ad and poem are masks. The apparent content or message serves just to keep the audience engaged long enough for the ad to produce the intended effect. The entire process is fundamentally rhetorical; that is, it concerns the transformation of an audience.

The complementary chapters, "The Emperor's Old Clothes," and "The Emperor's New Clothes" tackle head-on the theme of the subliminal effects of media. Appearing two years after *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, "The Emperor's Old Clothes" is one of several attempts to clarify the relation between any culture and the transforming power of environments imposed by new technologies. The counter-theme is the role of the artist in such situations. "We can never see the Emperor's new clothes. But we are staunch admirers of his old garb. Only small children and artists are sensuously apt to perceive the new environment. Small children and artists are anti-social beings who are as little impressed by the established mores as they are conditioned by the new. . . . If technological changes create new environments, or new processes of energy organization, what is to be the process of the new satellite environments on our perception and experience?" Here is a Theory of Communication for Art. I include it because it addresses both of our fundamental questions. Here also we find the role of environments, by definition invisible, and therefore also subliminal: present to the perceiver though not consciously present.[3] The tyranny of subliminal environments in the electric age brings up the role of the arts in acting directly on the perceptions to make visible the invisible. "Artists are the antennae of the race" in that they detect things long before the rest of us. The art administers the corrective—so it has been at least since the present renaissance began in mid-nineteenth century. Art becomes a means of survival in a time when the Emperor changes his raiment every year or so: "When the Emperor appeared in his new clothes, his courtiers did not see his nudity, they saw his old clothes. Only the small child and the artist have the immediacy of approach that permits perception of the environmental. The artist provides us with antienvironments that enable us to see the environment. Such antienvironmental means of perception must constantly be renewed in order to be efficacious. That basic aspect of the human condition by which we are rendered incapable of perceiving the environment is one to which psychologists have not even referred. In an age of accelerated change, the need to perceive the environment becomes urgent." I have included with the chapter the two Notes appended to it in *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*.[4]

"Culture and Communication" comes from *Laws of Media: The New Science*: it critiques the reigning Theory of Communication in Western culture, and calls for a new approach to the matter that will come to grips with contemporary conditions. Our conventional (that is, commonsense) Theory of Communication—in all of its familiar variations—is rooted in the notion that communication consists in moving ideas, as if they were chunks of hardware, from place to place or from person to person. This view leaves no room to consider how media (environments) transform the users and impose on their users a new culture. It takes no account of

change. *Laws of Media* called for updating our theories of communication to incorporate some provision for the transformations of person and culture that media bring about. Mid-chapter, we made this suggestion: "If literacy is to survive for another generation in the West, our writing system will soon have to be completely recast in a mould congenial to right-hemisphere sensibility and satisfactions. We might, for example, replace it with a syllabary of fifty to seventy characters." Although we tossed this note off almost casually, we were utterly serious. The present condition of postliteracy in our culture has arrived much more quickly than we had expected. The old alphabet has little to offer the reigning sensibility, offers few or no advantages to the electric world, except as a nostalgia trip. Our literature, encoded in alphabet, will submerge suddenly like an old Betamax format or obsolete computer program, taking with it the content and sensibility of literature and literary culture. The material will still be all there, whole libraries of it, but utterly inaccessible. A syllabary of course will not have the exquisite refinement of the phonetic alphabet, but it would provide a compromise or half-way meeting point for the postliterate crowd to access Western literature.

Many of my own contributions to this collection involve the five divisions of rhetoric, as will be seen in the chapters on Francis Bacon and Thomas Aquinas, and "Pound, Eliot & the Rhetoric of *The Waste Land*." The essence of classical rhetoric is audience: everything a rhetor does begins with the audience and the effect that the speaker wants to have, as Cicero insists at every turn.[5] Marshall McLuhan's debt to the rhetorical tradition is profound, as I have tried to indicate in the essay on "Joyce and McLuhan," below, and in the concluding chapter on McLuhan's own "Theory" of communication—or lack of one. Fortunately, we now have available a cornerstone of his life's work, his doctoral dissertation, published as *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*.[6]