

Education of the Senses: The Pedagogy of Marshall McLuhan

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Next to media themselves, pedagogy or education --configured specifically as a "training the senses" (McLuhan & Leonard, 1967) or "sensuous education" (McLuhan, 1964)-- is one of the most prominent themes in McLuhan's corpus. It is the focus of numerous articles published throughout his career and of two significant albeit relatively obscure monographs that effectively book-end his work on electronic media. As Janine Marchessault says, McLuhan articulates "a specifically argued pedagogical enterprise" that is central to his "aesthetically-based, highly performative and historically grounded..contribution to the study of media" (xi, 10, 34). In this paper, I focus on McLuhan's pedagogical enterprise specifically as it develops from his highly original understanding of the senses. In doing so, I also show how McLuhan's contribution to media is indeed aesthetically, historically and performatively charged, and make the case for the ongoing currency of his pedagogical enterprise today.

I. Media and the Senses

The first of McLuhan's two book-length texts on education and the media is his 1960 "Report on Project in Understanding New Media," commissioned by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. This text provides the material for *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* as well as for McLuhan's second and final book on media education. It is also in this text that McLuhan presents some of the frankest formulations of his pedagogical program and also of his media theory. Early in this report, McLuhan makes the important distinction between the sensory *impressions* of media on the one hand, and their sensory *effects*, on the other:

Early in 1960 it dawned on me that the sensory *impression*, proffered by a medium like movie or radio, was not the sensory *effect* obtained. Radio, for example, has an intense visual effect on listeners. But then there is the telephone which also proffers an auditory impression, but has no visual effect. In the same way television is watched but has a very different effect from movies. (McLuhan, 1960, emphasis in original)

The effects of media, according to McLuhan, are registered primarily on the human senses. But this effect is not simply an *impression* on the sense to which they directly appeal. Instead, media have *effects* on different sense altogether, and it is this displaced sensory impact that is important. Thus, for McLuhan, a medium like television is primarily tactile in its effect, rather than being associated with the senses of sight and sound (1960). And a printed image can have its principle effect not on vision, but simultaneously on the registers of hearing and touch.

McLuhan understood the senses as constituting a kind of synaesthetic system, a "five sense sensorium" (1961), in which individual senses are in intricate "interplay." McLuhan often speaks of the impressions on one sense being "translated" readily into another, of "sight translated into sound and sound [translated] into movement, and taste and smell" (UM). So the effects of media on the senses are manifest through the response of an *interdependent group* or an *interconnected system* of the senses:

...any medium which singles out one sense, writing or radio for example, by that very fact causes an exceptional disturbance among the other senses... We may be forced, in the interests of human equilibrium, to suppress various media as radio or movies for long period of time, or until the social organism is in a state to sustain such violent lopsided stimulus. (1960)

Media affect the senses by amplifying some and attenuating others, resulting in the equilibrium or ratio of the senses being upset or made “lopsided.” In addition, this effect tends to be registered with special emphasis on one sense in particular, leading to “stress or ascendancy... on one or another of the sense” as McLuhan says.

For McLuhan, however, this issue of stress or ascendancy, (im)balance or (dis)equilibrium is not simply a question of appearance and apperception. It is aesthetic in character, but it is not *merely* aesthetic; it is also has analytical and epistemological ramifications. For McLuhan, the question of the equilibrium of the senses is ultimately a question of rationality, common sense or even of self-awareness. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he speaks of “the need for a ratio and interplay among the senses as the very constitution of rationality.” “Common sense” as he explains in *Understanding Media*, “was for many centuries held to be the peculiar human power of translating one kind of experience of one sense into all the senses....” Such “a unified ratio among the senses,” he continues, “was long held to be the mark of our rationality...”

In making such counter-intuitive points, McLuhan goes well outside of the mainstream of a philosophical tradition—one in which the senses are regularly subsumed below the synthetic, interpretive powers of the mind. McLuhan instead relies explicitly on the Aristotelian and Scholastic notions of *sensus communis* and *ratio*. Aquinas endows the word “ratio” with an ambiguity that is important for McLuhan. The word refers simultaneously to both proportion and reason. In a passage quoted (in part) in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan defers to Aquinas as follows:

...beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind---because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every cognitive faculty.¹

Let me paraphrase: Beauty for Aquinas is first a matter of due proportion. This is because the senses delight in things which reflect their own proportionality. This, in turn, reflects that which is rational, since senses are as much a kind of reason as is any cognitive faculty. Proportion and balance as aesthetic qualities, in other words, are first transferred by analogy to the senses, and are then associated in a similar way with the mind. This issue of sensuous proportion and balance is seen as constitutive of rationality, intelligence and consciousness. “[R]ationality or consciousness,” as we read in *Understanding Media*, “is itself a ratio or proportion among the sensuous components of experience, and is not something added to such sense experience” (112).

¹ Different translation quoted here, that part of the quote included in the *Gutenberg Galaxy* is italicized.

Sensus communis on the other hand, develops from a distinction made in Aristotle's *De Anima* between perceptions unique to specific senses (colour to sight, sound to hearing, flavor to taste), and perceptions that involve a plurality of senses. These plural or multisensory perceptions include "movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude," which as Aristotle says, "are not peculiar to any one sense, but are common to all." *Sensus communis* also has a second meaning. It refers to the fact that our awareness of a given sense does not occur through the perceptions of that one sense alone, but arises from the *other* senses. Aristotle states: "Since we perceive that we see and hear, it must be either by sight itself or by some other sense." Aristotle has been interpreted here as proposing a kind of "meta sense," a sense -- whether it is sight or something else-- that is itself capable of perceiving perception itself. Such an interpretation is evident in what McLuhan and Powers write in *The Global Village*:

Consciousness... may be thought of as a projection to the outside of an inner synesthesia, correspondingly generally with that ancient definition of common sense [as *sensus communis*]. Common sense is that peculiar human power of translating one kind of experience of one sense into all other senses and presenting that result as a unified image of the mind. Erasmus and More said that a unified ratio among the senses was a mark of *rationality*. (emphasis in original)

In this way, as Marchessault has observed, McLuhan's thought effectively combines the historical with the aesthetic: In effect, McLuhan is tracing a kind of history of aesthetics from Aristotle, through the work of Aquinas, Erasmus, and More, and bringing it into relation with modern media technologies. By articulating the effect of media on the senses in terms of the Aristotelian aesthetic of equilibrium and moderation, McLuhan not only provides a way of understanding different historical configurations of media aesthetically. He also brings aesthetics into connection with epistemology and also with ethics. He reunites, in a sense, the true, the beautiful, and the good. Most of his characterizations on the (dis)equilibrium of the senses brings with them a strong normative appeal. In the example above, McLuhan is lauding a unified ratio among the senses as a time-honored mark of reason. This normative emphasis takes on an existential urgency in a number of passages in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where McLuhan makes more than one reference to an interplay and ratio of the senses being the prerequisite of co-existence itself:

Our technologies, like our private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes rational co-existence possible... A ratio of interplay among these extensions of our human functions is now as necessary collectively as it has always been for our private and personal rationality in terms of our private senses or 'wits' as they were once called. ()

In *Understanding Media*, the imbalance of the senses that would rob us of our "wits" is described in terms of hallucination, with McLuhan warning of the "endless power of men to hypnotize themselves into unawareness in the presence of challenge." The Germany of Spengler and Hitler serves as the McLuhan's ultimate negative example of a hypnotized society.

In this first part of this paper, I recapitulated four basic points from McLuhan related to the senses:

1. A medium has its effects on a sense *other* than those with which it communicates.

2. This effect is registered on all senses as an interdependent *sensorium*, in terms of their equilibrium or ratio.
3. This *ratio* is constitutive of *rationality* or even consciousness.
4. An imbalance of the senses induced by media can deprive one of rationality or consciousness.

In the second part of this paper, I focus on the results for education and training of the normative emphasis implied in the fourth and final point above.

II. Training the Senses

McLuhan's warnings about the dangers of losing our wits, our rationality or even our consciousness ensure that a particularly important place for both pedagogy and praxis in his thought. If the intensification of some media can affect the senses in such a way as to alter "the matrix of thought and concept and value," then it is precisely a vigorous "training" of the senses and of perception that is urgently needed to re-establish sensual interplay and unity. The "educational task," as McLuhan explains, "is to provide... the basic tools of perception." This task, he asserts elsewhere, is the provision of "sensory situations for the training of perception" (McLuhan & Parker '68), resulting in a kind of education that is "more concerned with *training the senses* and perceptions than with stuffing brains" (italics added; McLuhan and Leonard).

But despite this unambiguous emphasis on the urgency of education as a kind of sensory training, McLuhan is unmistakably *ambivalent* about exactly how such a training is to occur. He generally asserts that this kind of training is best undertaken in the interconnected world, the global village, or simply "the city" that is located *outside* of conventional classroom. At other times, though, McLuhan is willing to allow that some aspects of this training of perception might actually "belong in the classroom" (McLuhan, McLuhan, & Huchon, 165) –or at least in variations on the classroom environment (McLuhan & Leonard, 1967). In fact, McLuhan's most detailed outline for pedagogical praxis is provided in a book deliberately designed for use in the classroom --a co-authored textbook developed specifically for highschool students, titled *The City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media*.

This text is almost entirely performative or praxis-oriented. In fact, it can be said to perform, through questions, exercises and imperatives, many aspects of McLuhan's life-long mediatic and pedagogical enterprise. Appropriately, it begins with a direct address to its student readers:

Let us begin by wondering just what you are doing sitting there at your desk. Here [in the pages that follow] are some questions for you to explore... The questions and experiments you will find in this book are all concerned with important, relatively unexplored areas of our social environment. The research you choose to do will be important and original. (1)

The book presents dozens of "questions and experiments," getting students to manipulate and explore a wide range of characteristics of their social environments –focusing specifically on the environments presented by the classroom, the community and also by a wide range of contemporary mediatic forms, from the magazine to video recording technologies.

One of the first sets of research questions and experiments in the book focuses on a relatively simple gestaltist diagram (figure 1 [13]). McLuhan and his co-authors use this particular, diagrammatic, performative “sensory situation for the training of perception” as a way of getting students to work with the interrelationship of figure and ground:

Some curious aspects of *figure/ground* relationships can be seen here. First, note that the outline of the one image [the dogs] is also the outline of the other [the telephone]. This is always true of structural relations: it is just as true of the drawing as *figure* in relation to the page as *ground*. Secondly, because of the shared outline, *figure* and *ground* create and define each other... the parts are reciprocal. Thirdly, contrary to a common misconception, both *figures* can be seen simultaneously and held in the visual field. This simultaneous perception is, at first, easier for some people than for others, because it requires a certain amount of 'un-learning'.

The training of perception that McLuhan and his co-authors are performing involves first of all a recognition of the binary multistability of figure and ground –the apparently zero sum game between one visual configuration with another. But more important is McLuhan’s encouragement for students to engage in what he and his co-authors refer to as the task of “un-learning” that is required for the “simultaneous perception [of] figure and ground.” They actually suggest a number of strategies for students to achieve this simultaneous perception, including “squinting” at the image, looking at it with one eye closed, and even holding the page up to the light. The text justifies its emphasis on this effect by telling their student readers that the “interplay” between figure and ground, when simultaneously perceived, “requires interval or a gap, like the space between the wheel and the axle.” And it asserts provocatively that “the interplay between *figure* and *ground* is 'where the action is'.”

The book never reveals explicitly to its readers exactly *why* the suspension of figure and ground is “where the action is,” and why their “interplay” is of such concern. Nor does it clarify why perception would need to be retrained in order to provide access to this action or play. The answers to these questions lie not in this “highly performative” text, but in the understanding of the senses and their relationship that underlie it.

A gestaltist figure, after all, can be seen as a kind of latter-day, functionalist example of the type of due proportion that Aquinas observed to be characteristic of beauty. It allows the viewer to engage in the performance and maintenance of “a very delicate equilibrium” that is of the utmost importance for McLuhan and his co-authors in this textbook:

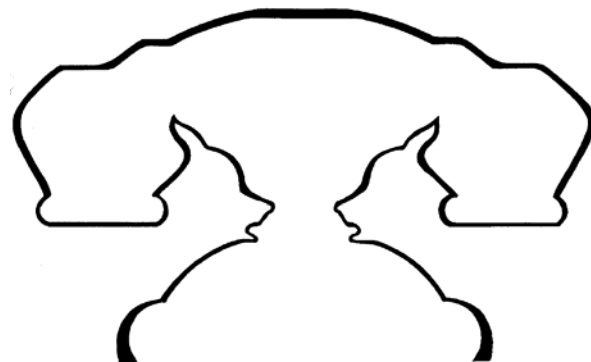


Figure 1

This perception depends on a very delicate equilibrium: the moment one or another *figure* begins to exaggerate itself or to dominate the situation, the balance is destroyed, and the other

elements begin to recede and to form a *ground* for it. Now consider: all figures at once means NO figures—just outlines and interfaces, just structure. In your own experience, you are always the figure, as long as you are conscious. (McLuhan, McLuhan & Huchon, capitals in original)

This moment of simultaneous perception, for McLuhan, is a moment not just of a delicate visual equilibrium, but more generally of an all-encompassing *sensual* equilibrium. Although it is concerned intensively with a *visual impression*, the *effect* of this perception is ultimately registered on a completely different sense. Ultimately, this sensual *effect*—described by McLuhan in terms of “interplay” “interval” and “interface”—can only be one of *touch*. “Touch,” as McLuhan explains, “is not skin but the interplay of the senses.” It is “the resonant interval and frontier of change and process.” It is, furthermore, the site of “a fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement....” And it is through this awakening of the translating, interfacing power of touch that this diagram is intended to have its sensual effect. It is in this way that this “situation for the training of perception” attempts to take the reader and viewer away from the “violent lopsided stimulus” that has developed through the 500-year domination of print. It is also in this way that it can perform attainment of *ratio* and “*sensus communis*” that McLuhan tirelessly sought to restore and sustain.

In concluding, I want to point out one more counter-intuitive insight that McLuhan offers here: Namely, that his training of perception does not occur simply by heightening the student’s self-awareness and self-possession as is the case in various forms of media literacy and critique. Instead, it arises through the *suspension* of this kind of “normal” sensory experience. McLuhan invokes a kind of experience in which there are “NO figures, just outlines and interfaces.” He deliberately contrasts this to common “experience [in which you] are always the figure, as long as you are conscious.” It follows that in the experience in which figure is not foregrounded, neither is an accompanying sense of self-possessed consciousness. What McLuhan is seeking, in other words, is to counteract one form of hypnotism and trance with another: The hypnosis produced by the 500 year hegemony of print is met by one that is more “in touch” with our wits and sensibilities overall. In an age of twitchspeed and twitter, multitasking and multimedia, such a cultivation of alternative sensual orientations in education can appear both current and compelling. One form of particularly witless somnambulism needs to be counteracted by another in closer touch with the world *beyond* the classroom, and only then can we expect to fully awaken from the nightmare of our mediatic history, and become more alive to the multiplicity of our realities, both sensual and multimedial.

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