

Being-in-the-Technologically-Mediated-World: The Existential Philosophy of Marshall McLuhan

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McLuhan and Phenomenology: A New Ground for an Old Figure:

A mostly unexplored area of inquiry within McLuhan studies is the connection between the *perceptual model* of experience and Heideggerian-inspired existential/hermeneutic phenomenology.¹ Without intending to dress McLuhan in the robes of an existential thinker *tout court*, this paper proposes to bring some aspects of his general media theory – grounded in the senses, embodiment, and mediation – into contact with aspects of existential/hermeneutic phenomenology – grounded on existence, meaning, and lived-through world experience. Simply put, we believe there is a hidden existential aspect to McLuhan’s thinking that remains virtually unexplored and should be examined for the mutual benefit of media ecology, phenomenology, and the philosophies of technology.

A general affinity between McLuhan and phenomenology has been identified in passing by a number of authors, including Heim, Kornelsen, and Striegel. The aim here is to more thoroughly develop the link we introduced in *McLuhan and Phenomenology* (Ralon and Vieta, 185), particularly the common elements that have also shaped the emergence of a “philosophy of technology.” Indeed, McLuhan’s probe-based approach has been criticized for merely scraping the surface of phenomena, or for being outright incoherent (Genosko 115). For example, Heim declares that “Empedocles fell into the volcano and Marshall McLuhan fell into the random, fragmentary world he was describing” (“Electric language” 11). However, as Roman Onufrijchuk points out, “a significant aspect of McLuhan’s contribution to media theory may also be found in what he did not say [directly] but implied throughout his work” (202). Moreover, as convincingly demonstrated by J.F. Striegel, there *is* a coherent general theory to McLuhan’s project – one consistent with phenomenology. In light of this, it is somewhat ironic that the usual charges

against McLuhan – e.g., that he was a “fragmentary” thinker; that he relied too much on puns for his arguments; that he is a technological determinist – are themselves often based upon equally superficial readings of his texts.

Part of the problem, we think, is that more than three decades have passed since the death of McLuhan, and what seems to have remained most alive about his extensive oeuvre is a simplified take on some of his deepest insights, probes, and aphorisms (i.e., “the medium is the message,” “the global village,” “hot and cool media”). It is troublesome that, to this day, many commentators continue to encounter McLuhan through these and other metaphors without examining the significance within his greater general theory. In his introduction to *The Question Concerning Technology*, translator William Lovitt wrote of Martin Heidegger: “Every philosopher demands to be read in his own terms. This is especially true of Heidegger. One must not come to him with ready-made labels, although these are very often given” (xiii). So too with McLuhan.

We shall rely extensively throughout the remaining pages on McLuhan’s actual words; we believe that he should speak for himself when appropriate by way of direct quotation and paraphrasing drawn not only from his principal books, but also from background knowledge derived from his biographies (Marchand; Gordon), his media appearances, and his posthumously published letters (Molinaro et al.). Taking McLuhan seriously requires a *pressing toward inherent possibilities* that emerge, however tentatively, from background areas of his writings. In fact, the possibilities of a phenomenological McLuhan are latent in his work, as suggested by these and other statements we have identified throughout his work:

“Heidegger surfboards along on the electronic wave as triumphantly as Descartes rode on the mechanical wave.” (“The Gutenberg Galaxy” 248)

“Existentialism offers a philosophy of structures, rather than categories, and of total social involvement instead of the bourgeois spirit of individual separateness or points of view.” (“Understanding Media” 47)

“People now have to encounter themselves in the inner world - Kierkegaard or existential style - in order to know who they are.” (“Private Identity”)

In order to map out McLuhan's phenomenological theory of technologically-mediated life, we first make connections between McLuhan's "perceptual model" and Heidegger's existential phenomenology; Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and perception; and Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenologies. We then draw McLuhan further into the phenomenological paradigm by comparing Don Ihde's existentially-centered, human-technology phenomenology with McLuhan's tetradic model.

McLuhan's Communicational Intentionality

Heideggerian-inspired phenomenologies propose that we come to know ourselves via daily, practical encounters in, with, and through the world. We propose here that McLuhan's program puts forward that we come to know both ourselves and our world (saturated as it is in technological rationality, human artefacts, and electric and digital information) in a general disposition that could be termed being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world – a condition guided by what we understand to be a "communicational intentionality."

The notion of intentionality in phenomenology was introduced by Franz Brentano and further developed by Edmund Husserl to refer to the aboutness or directionality of the mind (Moran 16), i.e., the mental process by virtue of which human beings relate to objects in the world. For Husserl, intentionality meant that all consciousness is consciousness of something (Merleau-Ponty xvii; Dreyfus 50). By "communicational intentionality," however, we mean a primordial orientation toward the world grounded not on conscious awareness, but upon something similar to what Heidegger called being-in-the-world – the fundamental ontological structure whereby Dasein's character is defined existentially.

Being-in-the-world means that things are revealed to human beings when encountered, manipulated, or generally engaged with. In the processes of these practical engagements, human beings themselves are revealed as co-emergent with the world. We term the intentionality of being-in-the-world a "communicational intentionality" because, for Heideggerian-inspired phenomenologies, the notion of intentionality is not based solely or primarily on the mind (i.e., perception, cognition), but rather, is centered upon the lived-body as an existential/gravitational center; it is rooted in the bodily powers to interact

with the things and, thus, communicate with the world. For Heidegger, as such, the intentionality of being-in-the-world is a “practical” encounter with, or directionality toward, our objects of concern; it is a more bodily-based alternative to Husserl’s consciousness-centred intentionality.

This existential way of being-in-the-world, then, is by definition centrally interactional (i.e., communicational). In this “communicational” reading of intentionality, we also draw from Merleau-Ponty’s astute descriptions of this practical way of being-in-the-world. A close reader of Heidegger’s existential phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty describes this communicational, and even dialogical, intentionality as:

The passing of the sense-data before our eyes or under our hands is, as it were, a language, which teaches itself, and in which the meaning is secreted by the very structure of the signs, and this is why it can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.... We understand the thing...by taking up on our own account the mode of existence which the observable signs adumbrate before us.... [I]n the interaction of things each one is characterized by a kind of a priori to which it remains faithful in all its encounters with the outside world.... Thus, the thing is correlative to my body and, in more general terms, to my existence.... It is constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it.... (319-320)

Moreover, both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty point to an implicit form of understanding that Dreyfus calls “skilful coping” – a playful state of absorptive engagement with the world. As Dreyfus and Wrathall colourfully describe Heidegger’s notion of understanding as “I am in the world understandingly when I am doing something purposively (5). Furthermore:

All of these connections between activities and entities and ways of being are constitutive of the understanding of the world I possess. In the process of acting on the basis of that understanding, in turn, I allow things and activities to show up *as* the things and activities that they are (frying pans as frying pans, spatulas as spatulas, etc.) In acting in the world, then, I understand how things relate to each other – that is to say, I understand in the sense of “knowing how” everything in the world hangs together. (5)

There is a striking similarity between the last sentence of this passage and the claim by McLuhan that “the meaning of meaning is relationship” (McLuhan and Nevitt 86). For both McLuhan and Heidegger, not only is the whole larger than the sum of its parts, but things tend to bear on other things and find their way around by virtue of their place in a larger referential totality. Both McLuhan and Heidegger share this relational/ecological orientation toward world and self: we come to understand the world and ourselves by way of our engagement with things within our “manipulatory zone” (Schütz) via the lived body’s intentionality. Following Merleau-Ponty, the body engages with the world four-foldedly – sensually, perceptually, motor-practically, and cognitively – and the objects of the world “answer back” accordingly.

As with existential/hermeneutic phenomenology’s intentionality, for McLuhan reality is “something we make in the encounter with a world that is making us” (McLuhan and Nevitt 3). Accordingly, the world is, for McLuhan, neither directly accessible as it is in-itself nor subjectively constituted by a transcendental ego, but “approachable through several...modes of awareness, each imposing its own biasing influences on understanding” (Striegel 47). Furthermore, there is always more to the world than what we can isolate by way of conscious awareness and selective perception. “Everybody experiences more than he understands,” claimed McLuhan, “[y]et it is experience rather than understanding, that influences behaviour” (“Understanding Media” 277).

Interestingly, this seems to parallel Heideggerian experiential interpretations of the world: “[J]ust as the world exceeds any perspective upon the world...I sense it within and not outside experience” (Ihde, “Experiential Phenomenology” 64). McLuhan also believed that experience comes before consciousness and is a “preconscious, cumulative totality of perception” (Striegel 47).² In short, for both McLuhan and Heideggerian-inspired phenomenologists, the understanding of who we are emerges existentially in an implicit, practical, and situated encounter with a world that is simultaneously making us.

Being-in-the-world, therefore, means that human reality is configured in a lived-through world experience of interactions that co-disclose world and self via “interpretive understandings” (*Verstehen*). Existential phenomenologists understand themselves as simultaneously and situationally contextualized: “*projective*...focused reference to the world” and a “*reflective*...movement from the world” (Ihde “Existential technics” 14). In phenomenological terms,

communicational intentionality for both McLuhan and Heidegger, tends to be an “interactional” form of “human self-conception” that positions the self in a world that is co-constituted by worldly encounters (14). We are made and we understand ourselves mainly in our pre-reflexive, pre-conceptual, and practical worldly encounters.

Phenomenological Conceptions of World and Self as Mediated by Technology

McLuhan and Heidegger’s complementary conceptions of technology and its “environing” nature also contain similar views on *world* and *self* as mediated by technology. McLuhan’s projective/reflective communicational intentionality – what we call his existential phenomenology’s being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world – comes into focus when we tease out three well-known “percepts” he often used to understand how media influence our perceptions of our surrounding world and sense of self: sensory ratios, media as translators, and media extensions and amputations. In this section we examine each of them in turn.

Sensory Ratios

For McLuhan, the lived experience of *being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world* and interpretive recognition involved a perceptual interplay of the senses – visual, aural, touch, smell, taste – oscillating in constantly shifting “sense ratios” (“Gutenberg Galaxy” 314; “Understanding Media” 109). As McLuhan explains, “rationality or consciousness is itself a ratio or proportion among the sensuous components of experience” (“Understanding Media” 109); that is, in McLuhan’s perceptual model, the subjective interpretations of worldly encounters are constituted by the constant relational play between each sense working simultaneously and in tandem in varying degrees of influence at any given time (Striegel 47).

In turn, which sense predominates is influenced by a medium’s selective biases stressing one sense while withdrawing or reducing the others. This relational interplay of the senses influences our field of awareness. As McLuhan

and Powers explain: “technology stresses and emphasizes some one function of man’s senses; at the same time other senses are temporarily dimmed down or obsolesced” (3). This dynamic shapes *how* the things of the world are perceived and is always oscillating between modes of awareness (figure) and modes of unawareness (ground). All the while, our senses perpetually work in *homeostatic ratios* that constantly seek balance between them. In mediated activity, the instruments or tools between the person and the world impose their structures on our modes of sensory reception, biasing our perception of the thing being communicated and, thus, our understanding of the world being mediated. So, for McLuhan, the medium is more important on our perceptions than the content because:

‘media’ in terms of a larger entity of information and perception which forms our thoughts, structures our experience, and determines our views of the world around us...provid[ing] the information upon which we order, or structure, these experiential perceptions. (Striegel 33)

Thus, “the medium” *was* “the message”: it is the very structures of the media of communication that constantly play on our sensory ratios and capacities, as well as perpetually transform our reality as they bend our perceptual capacities according to a medium’s biases.

To McLuhan, this interrelationship between the senses was known as “tactility,” a worldly and bodily encounter that “touched” or “grasped” the world, not only through skin, but also by means of all the senses working together. He writes:

Our very word ‘grasp’ or ‘apprehension’ points to the process of getting at one thing through another [mediation] of handling and sensing many facets at a time through more than one sense at a time. It begins to be evident that ‘touch’ is not skin but the interplay of the senses...of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell. (“Understanding Media” 60)

This multi-sensual process of “apprehension” has clear affinities with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and his bodily and communicational intentionality we described earlier.

Media as translators

The sensorial explanation of how we “grasp” the world via mediated encounters subsequently allowed McLuhan to make an innovative ontological move that redefined the notions of “medium” (noun) and “to mediate” (verb). In a theoretical refining of his notion of technological environments, medium means: “something that goes between” (Gordon 188), bringing entities of the world together, *and*, in a major contribution to technology studies, we feel, anything that “extends” *and* “translates” – or transmits and transforms – human experience (“Understanding Media” 56-61). Again, for McLuhan, this also meant that all technologies had the characteristics of being “media” because all human artefacts, simultaneously, mediate, “store,” and transform human activity, experience, and consciousness:

For man...possesses an apparatus of transmission and transformation based on his power to store experience. And his power to store, as in a language itself, is also a means of transformation of experience. (59)

For example, *language* (one of the earliest media) via speech and writing transmits, translates, stores, and, most importantly, transforms human thought from an individual’s solitary activity to a social function that extends thought and memory outward while compressing space and time. *Writing* specifically makes linear thought and indexing possible, while further extending thought and memory temporally and spatially. Moveable type and the printing press, key technologies that helped shape the modern mind for McLuhan, reduce the opportunity costs of disseminating ideas to broad audiences, eventually transforming illiterate masses into a reading public and creating the capacities for archival innovations.

McLuhan asserted, “For just as a metaphor transforms and transmits experience, “so do the media” (“Understanding Media” 59). Late in his career McLuhan began to draw inspiration for the transformational and translational role of media as a form of language, or text, from hermeneutic phenomenology, such as Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* . Somewhat aligning themselves with Ricoeur’s position regarding the powerful transformational role of language and metaphor, McLuhan and Powers assert that “the media themselves, and the whole

cultural ground, are forms of language. The transforming power of language,” they continue, “is recognized by contemporary phenomenology and linguistics as well” (27).

Drawing heavily on existential phenomenology, Ihde similarly writes of the “transformational” (“Existential technics” 48) and potentially “hermeneutic” (54) nature of all media, again unintentionally paralleling McLuhan with his own existentially-minded phenomenology of human-technology relations.

Using the phone as an illustrative example, Ihde thus defines a medium as a communicational tool or go-between that “withdraws” in a ready-to-hand fashion as the “other” is made present in “space-time” (56). In this sense, the “[the phone] materializes us to each other” (56) in what Ihde calls the “amplificatory dimension” (56). In the act of talking over the phone, then, my communicative space and the site for interaction with another is, in McLuhan’s language, brought together, translated, and transformed as my reach out to the other and the reach of the other to me are extended at the same time that we are brought together via the reduction of spatial distance. “But, at the same time,” continues Ihde in a similar circumspectful tone to McLuhan’s, “the advantage [of the phone via its amplificatory possibilities] is gained at a price” (56).

The telephone presence is a “reduced” presence, Ihde explains, a trade-off innate to interacting on the phone. In this “reductive dimension,” the telephone lacks the perceptual richness of face-to-face encounters. While certain things are gained, as two or more people distanced by geography are able to communicate synchronously and frequently despite geographical separation, other things are, at the same time, lost in a mediational act that allows for faceless and disembodied interactions. We can reach others in an amplification and extension of our voices, but we cannot see the other’s facial reactions to our dialogue, touch them, smell the food being cooked in the kitchen they are talking from, or see the snow falling outside their window. “This amplification/reduction,” Ihde asserts in a McLuhanesque echo, “makes a medium non-neutral or transformative of human experience...and is a feature of every technology,” underscoring McLuhan’s notion of the transformational and translational natures of all media (56).

Media extensions and amputations

Ihde's analysis of the mediation of the phone also links his existential phenomenology of technology to McLuhan's claim that all media not only *extend*, but also *obsolesce* some aspect of our bodies, actions, thoughts, social-cultural dimensions, and environments. For McLuhan, media extensions, as with Heidegger's notions of "disclosing" and "concealment," always come at a cost. Micro-perceptually, for instance, as we already mentioned, since any medium favors one sense over another, that medium extends that particular sense while, at the same time, dimming down or temporarily obsolescing other senses; the gains of media extensions also bring with them inevitable losses, or "obsolescences."

It is true for McLuhan that the extension enabled by any tool of mediation opens up and, in Heideggerian terms, "reveals" the world in new ways that extends our perceptual fields or perhaps, as in the case of prosthetics, replicates and restores a damaged sense or human function. As such, and like Merleau-Ponty's blind man's cane, extensions can "cease to be an object" for the user just like the cane for the blind man, in a mode of readiness-to-hand, is "no longer perceived for itself" as it "[extends] the scope and active radius of touch" (Merleau-Ponty 143) all the while "becoming part of the structure of the body" (Leder 33). Similarly for McLuhan, cars and bicycles, as extensions of the foot and of bodily mobility and speed, open up the world in new ways. For example, the car makes possible living in the country while working in the city, which extends living space. At the same time, however, in a car one's feet are only partially used or not used at all. Certainly, as McLuhan pointed out, the foot cannot perform its basic function of walking when one is riding a bike or in a car. This is a loss. So, while the car allows us to move faster and farther, one's feet and legs are left immobile, metaphorically atrophied. These reductions he more graphically termed "amputations" (obsolescences), the flip side to technological extensions.

McLuhan claimed that this extension/amputation dynamic was present in some way or another with the use of any technology. Given his era, McLuhan found the technological extensions of our minds and thoughts via "electronic media" important. Crucial for McLuhan is the notion that the extension and amputations caused by electronic communication technologies were effectually and subjectively different from those of mechanical technologies because "previous technologies were partial and fragmentary, and the electric is total and inclusive" ("Understanding Media" 57). That is, electronic media are perceptually the most "all-encompassing" of technologies, having the potential to engulf all of

our senses and thus deeply influence the autonomy of our interpretive awareness (or our *Verstehen*, in hermeneutic terms) because electronic communication technologies translate and transform our very cognitive capacities, extending consciousness outward, while requiring us to use less of these capacities such as memory or intuition. He explains:

In this electronic age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness.... By putting our physical bodies inside our extended nervous systems, by means of electric media, we set up a dynamic by which all previous technologies that are mere extensions of hands and feet and teeth and bodily heat-controls – all such extensions of our bodies...will be translated into information systems. (57)

To decipher the transformational powers of all media, especially electronic media, late in his career, McLuhan developed his dynamic and, we claim, existentially phenomenological “tetrad,” which encapsulated his four-fold “laws of media” into a tool for technological assessment. In the next section we briefly describe McLuhan’s tetrad for gauging the effects of technology, sketching out similarities and links between the tetrad and Ihde’s own, and similar, four-part model of human-technology relations.

A Shared Method for Technological Assessment

The affinities between McLuhan and existential phenomenology regarding the embodied nature of the self, technological-mediated reality, and how the world practically unfolds can also be witnessed in a shared *method* – a shared epistemology – for coming to know our being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world. Let us consider the following passage by Ihde, which, purposefully or not, parallels many of McLuhan’s insights enfolded into his tetradic method:

Artists and phenomenologists share a certain practice, the practice of exploring the possible and of doing it in variant ways. Phenomenologists name this practice: it is the exploration of variations in order to discover invariants or structures. It is the purposeful reversal of figure/ground. It is

the extension from figure to field of horizon, and so forth. But artists practice the same arcane path, for they show us reversals and deconstruct our metaphors, and in so doing, construct new ones with new perspectives. (“Experimental phenomenology” 31)

In this section, we will concentrate on the affinities between Ihde’s conceptualization and applications of notions of *reversal*, *extension*, and, most importantly, *figure/ground*, that are central to both his phenomenological tool of technology assessment and McLuhan’s similar tool, the tetrad.³ But to before grasping McLuhan’s tetradic laws of media and Ihde’s four-folded human-technology relation model, one must first understand its underlying figure/ground dynamic.

Figure/Grounds

As with both existential and hermeneutic phenomenologies, McLuhan saw lived experience as being in constant flux; human experience, he believed, is process rather than product. To make sense of this relationship, and borrowing from Gestalt psychology, McLuhan developed the tetrad and the laws of media to show how technological innovation causes change in human perceptions and environments due to constantly changing figures (areas of attention), changing grounds (areas of inattention), the changing relationships between grounds and figures, and the new environments created in the figure/ground oscillations.

As Striegel suggests, for McLuhan “reality is a pragmatic construct, an artefact of the linguistic forms used to communicate it, and only a part of individual consciousness” (47), a consciousness that oscillates between areas of awareness (figure) and unawareness (ground). Similarly, for existential and hermeneutic phenomenologists, that we are in a state of constantly emerging encounters with the world also means that our reality is consistently in the process of being made. To both McLuhan and Heideggerian phenomenologies, then, there is an evolving structure to human experience, which is, as it were, processual, an already-always becoming. And as process, lived experience is a kinesis – a movement, dynamic, evolving, emergent.

By the 1970s, McLuhan claimed that only by understanding the interplay between figure and ground unleashed by the introduction of any media into a

particular social or cultural setting could one anticipate the obscured and unforeseen risks brought by any technology, as well as properly plan for its appropriate applications. McLuhan's writings from the era are preoccupied with the double nature of technological existence from the perspective of the Gestalt-inspired figural areas of awareness (content) and the constantly shifting grounds of unawareness (infrastructures of media and their "environments," as we explained earlier).

The concept of figure/ground in McLuhan's media theory adds yet further phenomenological hues to his two-folded nature of technology:

[a]ll situations are composed of an area of attention (*figure*) and a very much larger area of inattention (*ground*).... *Figures* rise out of, and recede back into, *ground*...; for example, at a lecture the attention will shift from the speaker's words to his gestures, to the hum of the lighting, street sounds, or to the feel of the chair or a memory or association or smell,⁴ each new figure alternately displaces the others into ground.... The ground of any technology is both the situation that gives rise to it as well as the whole environment (medium) of services and disservices that the technology brings with it. (quoted in Molinaro et al. 408)

In everyday life, the connections between the "services" and "disservices" of any technology remained hidden, McLuhan observed. This concealment is the "side-effect" of technological existence as technologies "impose themselves willy-nilly" and create new environments and even new forms of culture ("Laws of Media" 408). For example, cars bring with them both macro-perceptual and micro-perceptual effects, while the relationship between the car and the culture and environment it influences often go unnoticed: Macro-perceptually, the car (figure), apart from extending the mobility of humans, creates environments (grounds) of services (service stations, roads, off-ramps, traffic police, and municipal infrastructure) *and* disservices (traffic jams, increased crime, pollution, and other ecological consequences). The car and its infrastructures, for example, help contribute to crime and urban blight caused by a highway dividing a downtown core, but this is not immediately obvious. Micro-perceptually, in extending areas of private space and the house, the car can be said to also obsolesce aspects of family time and civic involvement due to the time spent commuting.

“Laws of Media” and the Tetrad

McLuhan developed his tetradic-analogic model for measuring “the modality of consciousness” influenced by human-technology relationships (Striegel 109). This analogical tool could gauge the areas of awareness and unawareness constituting each technologically-mediated human experience and was meant to decipher the unforeseen consequences of *any* human-artefact interaction. Rather than approaching the unravelling of media effects from a logical and linear “left-brained” form of cognition and argument favored by Western, visually-focused social science, McLuhan claimed the tetrad to be intuitive and “right-brained,” developed partially in response to the “[m]odern scientific causality [that] abstracted figures from ground” (McLuhan and Powers 3).

With the tetrad, McLuhan proposed that the structures of all human-technology experiences – that is, in Heideggerian terms, the patterns of concealment/unconcealment and presencing/absencing that any and all instrumentally mediated human experience brings with it – consists of a fourfold perceptual or experiential configuration that happens, more or less, simultaneously, as follows: Every artefact or technology put to human use ultimately (1) enhances, amplifies, or extends some human action, capacity, or perception; (2) obsolesces some other related aspect of that action, capacity, or perception; (3) retrieves something from a previous activity or capacity; and (4) when taken to its limit (when pushed too far beyond its initially intended scope), reverses or flips into its opposite.

These were, essentially, McLuhan’s four laws of media. With the tetrad and its “appositional” interplay of figure/ground relationships between each of the four laws, McLuhan contributes two further structures, we propose, to the phenomenology of human-technology relations of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Ihde. Not only does any innovation enhance/reveal/presence and obsolesce/conceal/absence, but it also “retrieves” a past mode of activity or innovation once itself obsolesced *and* “reverses” into its opposite when overextended. These are, we claim, two additional human-technology realities heretofore unexplored before in McLuhan’s work.⁵

For McLuhan, all of us who dwell in technologically-mediate realities, not just trained specialists, need to develop the capacities to gauge for any

innovation's four-fold nature to enhance, obsolesce, reverse, and retrieve. It is with this spirit that he developed his tetrad as a tool to refine our abilities to interpretively recognize the potentially multidimensional roots and consequences of any medium's effects. This means that we need to understand the "resonating interval" (McLuhan and Powers 3-12) that makes up the *relationship between* the ever-present grounds of every technological figure that can create "comprehensive" or "integral awareness" insights or ("Global Village" 180). In other words, to have "integral awareness" of our technologies and their impacts on our lives is to remain consciously aware, or circumspect, of their existential patternings by interpretively recognizing the figures *and* the related grounds of that technological reality.

Ihde's human-technology relations

This notion of pattern recognition – i.e., having "integral awareness" – with our technologies is, we believe, also present in subsequent work inspired by Heidegger's philosophy of technology. Borrowing substantially from Heideggerian-inspired hermeneutics, and also using Gestalt psychology's figure/ground to unravel the subtleties of human-technology relations, Ihde proposes an existentially phenomenological model for understanding the "experiential involvement with our own creation, technology" ("Existential technics" 1). While his model is most directly inspired by Heidegger's equipmentality and Merleau-Ponty's corporeality of perception, it bears close resemblance to McLuhan's four-fold tetradic laws of media.

A culturally contextualized model for helping unravel the interplay of technologies and the self within the life-world, Ihde's program outlines the variants and invariants in human-technology relations and, in strong approximation to McLuhan's tetradic program, turns existentialism to the mediated experiences of the world in order to get a "sense of human action engaged with, through, and among concrete artefacts or material entities" – what Ihde terms "existential technics" ("Existential technics"). Similar to McLuhan's project of recognizing technology's effects, Ihde ultimately asks:

[If t]he problem for the inhabitant of any given 'world' is that it is so familiar to him or her that little distance is to be found, how does [the]

projection, repetition, and ritual renewal of technologized life [alter our self-conceptions and our lifeworlds]? (“Existential technics” 19)

In sum, Ihde’s four-stage spectrum of human-technology relations helps with gauging, in complement to McLuhan’s tetradic method, the *gradations* or *degrees* of amplifications and reductions and perceptual gains and losses inherent in technologically mediated processes.

Ihde calls the first of four possibilities for technological mediation “embodiment relations” with a technology, or “technics embodied” (“Phenomenology of Technics” 504). It is a *relation to the world through* technology as subjectively embodied. The world becomes known by extension via the bodily assimilation of the technology and the technology withdraws from consciousness, absenting itself as other things are simultaneously made present by its mediation (and its absence). Technologies facilitating this type of relation to the world include things such as eyeglasses, hearing aids, or a blind-person’s cane. Technologies that can be embodied are the most subjectively assimilated and have the potential of becoming “quasi-me” technologies (528) (i.e., my eyeglasses not only help me to see the world better, but I am perceived and I perceive myself as a wearer of eyeglasses as the technology infuses itself into my personal identity and sense of self). These relationships, Ihde explains, can be illustrated in the formula “(I-technology)-world” (508).

The second possibility for human-technology interactions are known as “hermeneutic relations” or “hermeneutic technics,” encapsulating technologies that help us in the *interpretation of the world* (512). This is now a more indirect relation to the world than experienced in embodied technological relations; the world is now made known via representation through the interpretation facilitated by the tool. The world becomes known through interpreting a “textual” reading of the technology (512). Metaphor, analogy, linguistic conventions, alphabets, diagrams, charts, maps, and thermometers, Ihde says, are all indirect ways of experiencing something as a form of “referential seeing” (515). In many ways, online interactions via textual communications are also hermeneutic technics. This relation can be viewed thusly: “I-(technology-world)” (515).

The third type of human-technology relation Ihde calls “alterity relations” (522). In alterity relations the world remains in the background and the technology emerges as the focal object. It is about “*relations...with a technology*” (522) or technology as an “other.” As opposed to the embodied relations becoming a quasi-me, these relations turn machines into “quasi-others” (528)

tending to – problematically at times – anthropomorphize a technology in degrees of personification from “serious artefact-human analogues” (527) such as AI to trivial and harmless affectations for artefacts (cars, cell phones, Aibo, iPods). This can be shown as: “I-technology-(world)” (528).

Finally, Ihde proposes that many technologies fall into what he terms “background relations” (p. 528). This can be viewed as the “technological texturing” of our world (“Existential technics” 109); that is, certain technologies “texture the immediate environment” (109). Here we are looking at technologies that remain in the background of our experience *within degrees of transparency and opacity* (degrees of concealment/unconcealment). These technologies include lights, insulation, air circulation mechanisms, imbedded technologies, broadband networks, microchips, etc.

There are striking similarities with McLuhan’s four-folded figure/ground analysis of the tetrad and Ihde’s Heideggerian-inspired phenomenology of “human-technology structure” (“Technology and the lifeworlds” 74). Taken together, Ihde’s four-folded human-technology relationship model could help to bring out the phenomenological potential in McLuhan’s own tetrad. Recall that to McLuhan (as with Heidegger), technology extends some aspect of human activity, while always obsolescing some other possible human activity. To Ihde *what* and *how much* is extended, amplified, disclosed, revealed *and* obsolesced, reduced, undisclosed, and concealed falls within a spectrum of possibilities ranging from the consequences of fully embodied to completely background technologies. Applied to McLuhan’s theories of figure/ground and the laws of media, Ihde’s structures of human-technology relations phenomenologically contour McLuhan’s extensions, amputations, retrievals, and reversals by adding the additional dimensions to technologically-mediated reality that highlight the spectrum between the two poles of the “quasi-me” and the “quasi-other” together with the background textures of human-technology interactions. McLuhan, in turn, layers in the varying oscillations of figure/ground within the spectrum of human-technology relations and, through the four-pronged tetradic tool, the additional two figure/grounds of retrieval and reversal which is absent explicitly in Ihde’s model.

Thus, McLuhan and Ihde move phenomenological inquiry of human-technology interactions beyond the speculative or theoretical and into the realm of the *praxical*. Together they could be used to establish a robust existential phenomenological protocol applied not only social science methods such as

participant interviews and data analysis regarding some aspect of the experience of technological mediation, but also for everyday use by anyone so inclined to know more about how technologies impact their everyday lives. This would provide a more complete picture of the myriad possible typologies of technological mediation by: 1) articulating the figures and grounds of any innovation (i.e., artefact, media, or technology) (that is, what is extended, obsolesced, reversed, and retrieved in the introduction of that innovation); 2) pointing out the *how*, *if*, and *to what degrees* technologies are embodied, hermeneutically assimilated, “othered,” or stay in the background of experience; 3) specifying how much the technology withdraws itself or makes itself known (that is, the degrees of present-at- or ready-to-hand and the figure/ground oscillations unleashed by any technology); and 4) more thoroughly allowing the social scientist and technology user ways to describe how the world is made known through the filter of mediational tools. As such, we feel that drawing McLuhan closer to phenomenologically-centred theories of technology is not only important for pushing forward philosophies of technology, but that there are also pragmatic, methodological, and practical implications for better understanding our technologically-mediated world.

Conclusions

In sum, in close affinity with Heideggerian-influenced phenomenologies, McLuhan’s self and world are hermeneutically and existentially made known (i.e., “disclosed”) in the act of encounter with the world in lived experience as we grapple with the things of the world. McLuhan, however, contributes a crucial dimension to the interpretative and existential ways we come to know ourselves and the world. For McLuhan, technologies as media explicitly interplay with and influence, in varying degrees, how the world is encountered, projected onto, and reflected upon as the medium of interaction shapes us and our world at the same time that we and our world shapes the medium. From our own re-reading of a good portion of McLuhan’s oeuvre, McLuhan’s original – albeit unintended – contribution to Heideggerian-inspired phenomenologies of projective/reflective worldly encounter – being-in-the-world – is to layer in the structures of mediation to the understanding of human experience as we communicate with each other and interact with the things of the world via an environment of human artefacts

and communication technologies. This, we claim, is McLuhan's ontology of being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world, a condition of existence whereby media not only transport ideas and content but, more importantly, interplay with, restructure, and "translate" (i.e., transform) our experiences and understandings ("Understanding Media" 56-61). Brought together in his technology assessment tool of the tetrad, McLuhan's ontology of technologically-mediate reality, we argue, encapsulates McLuhan's major contributions to the philosophy of technology and convinces us that he should be included within the tradition.

What if McLuhan had more explicitly turned to phenomenology?

In these parting passages, we would like to speculate on what McLuhan's general theory of media effects might have been had he explicitly turned to phenomenology. What would his *being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world* have looked like? First, had McLuhan read phenomenology sooner perhaps he would have aligned himself with existentialist phenomenology's methods of assessing the focal, figural, and horizontal aspects of perception, adding further analytical dimensions to his tetradic tool and adding a phenomenologically-strengthened layer to his own figure/ground analysis.

The compatibility of Ihde's and McLuhan's respective models, for example, at least suggests that each theorist's studies of technological mediation can and should be looked at in concert if one seeks to judiciously conjecture on the impacts of innovation on personal, social, cultural and ecological well-being. Had he read existentialist and hermeneutic phenomenologies more deeply, he would have surely noticed that Heideggerian-inspired phenomenologies outright reject the possibility of decontextualizing oneself, as researcher, from the situatedness (the ground or life contexts) that structure all human experience. Indeed, McLuhan could have even found the structures to mediated human experiences he searched for by the early 1960s (quoted in Gordon 319-322). As Dreyfus writes, Heidegger's position in *Being and Time* was that "the commonsense background [of one's daily encounter with the world] has an elaborate structure that it is the job of an existential analytic to lay out" (7). Perhaps McLuhan would have even explored and clarified for us in the context of media studies Heidegger's much discussed, provocative, yet abstruse concepts such as "worldliness,"

“equimentality,” ready-to and presence-at-handness, the enframing essence of technology, and Heidegger’s own notions of “*gründen*” (ground) (58).

Had McLuhan been more open to looking into phenomenological methodologies, we also think he would have approved of phenomenology’s penchant for relying on human experience for disclosing the objects of the world before theorizing about them, finding sympathetic links with his own claim of “percepts” over “concepts” and for intuitional and provisional inquiries (“probes”) over fixed, *a priori* theories. Indeed, the hallmark of all phenomenological inquiry into human experience – and unfortunately overlooked by McLuhan – is to describe things as one experiences them before theoretical explanations. It is our belief that all of these phenomenological tools would have certainly added additional fuel to, if not replaced, McLuhan’s highly metaphorical and still-debated pseudo-positivistic left/right brained explanations of human consciousness.

Finally, we believe that we would have subsequently seen an explicitly articulated communication intentionality to McLuhan’s general theories of media, perhaps resembling Ihde’s Heideggerian-inspired projective/reflective intentionality. We believe McLuhan would also have found, as Ihde does his human-technology phenomenology, that in our technologically-mediated existence we are simultaneously projected to the world, reflected in the world, and contextualized in our socio-biographical, socio-cultural, and environmental realities via the instruments we encounter the world with. In these communicationally intentional encounters, McLuhan might have not only articulated the effects of media on society, culture, history, and individuals (as he did so forcefully), but might also have shown explicitly how others are intersubjectively known to us and we to others via the structures imposed on social settings by communication media – the structures of “mediated intersubjectivity” as it were. Indeed, there seems to be lacking a middle-layer “intersubjective” dimension to McLuhan’s general media theory that exists between the macro- and micro-perceptual areas of everyday life. Tipping his hat to Heideggerian notions of facticity, equipmentality, the self-interpretive nature of humanness, and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intersubjectivity – all latently present in McLuhan’s own perceptual-historical-analogical model, as we have shown in this article -- perhaps the “medium is the message” could have also become “being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world is the message.”

In conclusion, phenomenology, we feel, would have added theoretical and methodological rigour to McLuhan's suggestive work on the human-technology interplay. We are also certain that it would have also brought McLuhan, especially in the last years of his life, much-needed intellectual kinship. Lastly, we think that, if McLuhan has turned more explicitly to phenomenology, he might have become, as we argue he should be, a central theorist in the philosophy of technology tradition.

Notes

- ¹ According to J.F. Striegel, Marshall McLuhan had a general media theory in the sense of an organized, coherent body of research, which consisted of a three-folded program: an analogical model, a historical model, and a perceptual model. He argues that this program was, despite its multi-disciplinarity and breadth of scope, incredibly coherent throughout his 30 years of media studies. Striegel, for instance, claims that McLuhan provided a cogent "general theory" of media effects (4) that could be 1) "described as integral into itself" (5) and that 2) was "based on its utility,...[because of] the relevant relationships it reveals among differing disciplines and the potential for synthesis and integration it offers" (5).
- ² In his perceptual model, and also in tune with existentialist thought, for McLuhan there is an unsettled nature to the meanings behind our experiences that leads Striegel to conclude that there is a "precarious nature of our perception and understanding of our environment" (50).
- ³ Graham Harman has made an important contribution in this area by comparing and contrasting the tetradic method with the phenomenological reduction.
- ⁴ Interestingly, the example of the figure/ground elements of a lecture is also William James' example of the dynamics of the "focal/fringe" of perception and is also used often by Gestalt psychology and existential phenomenologists (see Pollio et al.).
- ⁵ See *The Laws of Media: The New Science* for numerous examples of how McLuhan operationalizes the tetrad.

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THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL**

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CONTENTS

Editorial: What is Popular Culture? 1

Bob Batchelor

ARTICLES

Daniel Amos and Me: The Power of Pop Culture and Autoethnography 6

Andrew F. Herrmann

**When the Abyss Looks Back: Treatments of Human Trafficking in
Superhero Comic Books 18**

Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton

**Being-in-the-Technologically-Mediated-World: The Existential
Philosophy of Marshall McLuhan 36**

Marcelo Vieta and Laureano Ralon

**9/11 Did Not Take Place: Apocalypse and Amnesia in Film and
The Road 61**

Jesse Kavadlo

**“I Did Them Things So You Wouldn’t Have To”: *Secret Window*
and the Characters Who Won’t Stay Dead 84**

Jan Whitt

***Boardwalk Empire*: The Romantic Side of Crime and Capitalism 100**

Ashley M. Donnelly

**Why Engaging with Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick Matters: A
Review Essay 116**

Bob Batchelor

INTERVIEW

Figure/Ground Communication Presents: Arthur Asa Berger **126**
Interviewed by Laureano Ralon

BOOK REVIEWS

New Perspectives on Classics Texts **138**
Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870
Nathan Saunders

Reviews of New Books **142**
Gaga Feminism: Gender, Sexuality, and the End of Normal
Tammie Jenkins

Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation
Veronica Popp

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS **148**

<http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/volume-1/>

Foremost among these, Arnold notes, is the philosophy of "physical naturalism," which "reflective of my discussion of electric discarnation" eliminates the metaphysical distinction between the inner form of the human being and the external matter of physical forces. "Man," according to this view, "is the latest product of an evolutionary process which started from inorganic matter and ended with the human being; thus nature is continuous." Marshall McLuhan (1962). Existentialism offers a philosophy of structures, rather than categories, and of total social involvement instead of the bourgeois spirit of individual separate-ness or points of view. "Marshall McLuhan (1964). Marshall McLuhan's claim that the tools we shape in turn shape us is arguably the common thread running through all of his published books and articles on media and technology. This is McLuhan's technologically mediated reality pervading his entire general media theory, which is his ontology of existence amidst human artifacts. Fundamentally, McLuhan's ontology is a theory of mediated reality grounded in a perceptual model of experience (Striegel, 1978). The theories of Marshall McLuhan are not only valid, but have relevance in today's world more than ever! His figure and ground theory, hot and cold media, media is the message, media as extension of our senses are relevant today to any new technology or medium. Answered 4 years ago · Author has 593 answers and 869K answer views. The theories of Marshall McLuhan are not only valid, but have relevance in today's world more than ever! His figure and ground theory, hot and cold media, media is the message, media as extension of our senses are relevant today to any new technology or medium. Herbert Marshall McLuhan CC (July 21, 1911 – December 31, 1980) was a Canadian philosopher, whose work is among the cornerstones of the study of media theory. Born in Edmonton, Alberta, and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, McLuhan studied at the University of Manitoba and the University of Cambridge. He began his teaching career as a professor of English at several universities in the US and Canada before moving to the University of Toronto in 1946, where he remained for the rest of his life.