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INTEGRAL AWARENESS AND THE FORMAL CAUSE IN MARSHALL MCLUHAN

Abstract

This essay aims to shed some light on formal cause as a unifying element in McLuhan's work, namely as the 'ground' against which the forefront of his main ideas on media and society do emerge. Formal cause, as a totality anticipating the effects and the single parts, lies at the core of McLuhan's holistic approach, which appears to be intimately rooted in his Catholicism.

Keywords

McLuhan; formal cause; figure/ground; critical realism; totality; Catholicism.

My own approach to the media had been entirely from formal cause.
(McLuhan letter to Fr. J. Culkin)

*Perhaps now, when things happen at very high speeds, a formal causality
or pattern recognition may appear for the first time in human history.*
(McLuhan letter to J. Maritain).

Formal cause is concerned with effects and structural form, and not value judgements.
(McLuhan letter to J. Mole)

1. FOREWORD: UNDERSTANDING MCLUHAN

Understanding McLuhan has always been highly problematic. The interpretation of his work has often been twisted in the attempt at closing what in fact was purposely left open, given the "cold", mosaic-like style of presentation, which engages the reader in a challenging and involving relationship "from within" like in Picasso's paintings (where the spectator is situated in the centre of the scene¹ rather than in front of it, as was the case in Renaissance perspective).

On the one hand, McLuhan equally and paradoxically faces charges of both technological determinism and/or underestimation of structural factors; on the other, many scholars were puzzled by his unusual approach traversing many disparate fields (from popular culture and advertising to classical poetry), being located in unconventional

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¹ E. McNamara, ed., *The Interior Landscape. The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan 1943/1962*, New York-Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1969, 155.

places (like “The Playboy Interview” in 1969²) and using a non linear, unconventional style.

Non linearity is exactly what is at stake in his idea of formal causality, which distinguishes it from Aristotle’s sequence of four causes, the latter being summarized in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as follows³:

- The material cause: “that out of which”, e.g., the bronze of a statue.
- The formal cause: “the form”, “the account of what-it-is-to-be”, e.g., the shape of a statue (The bronze is melted and poured in order to acquire a new shape, the shape of the statue. This shape enters in the explanation of the production of the statue as the formal cause).
- The efficient cause: “the primary source of the change or rest”, e.g., the artisan, the art of bronze-casting the statue, the man who gives advice, the father of the child.
- The final cause: “the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done”, e.g., health is the end of walking, losing weight, purging, drugs, and surgical tools.

Formal causality is for McLuhan “the cause of causes”, a sort of meta-cause offering a privileged point of access to the understanding of change (either cultural, technological, social) as well as to his whole approach to media. Formal cause is the “hidden dimension” and the pattern according to which things develop, change, reach dynamic as well as temporary equilibrium *and* the key for understanding such a change. In other words, it has both an ontological and an epistemological value as, in McLuhan’s Thomistic perspective, being is intelligible and the way we know corresponds to, and is driven by, the way things are (when we are able to see them).

It is because of formal cause that it is possible to understand media, world, ourselves and the dynamic structure of the universe, including its theological dimension (“I am a Thomist for whom the sensory order resonates with the divine Logos”⁴).

Formal cause allows us to understand how the world remains one while changing and how we can make sense of all this, as “cognition provides that dance of the intellect which is the analogical sense of Being”⁵ and there is an analogy between the different external scapes and our interiority (our *inscape*, in Hopkins’ term).

In this paper I will first argue that formal cause is the synthetic umbrella-name under which all the main processes indicated by McLuhan, such as the figure/ground relations, the laws of the media, the medium as a message, the role of analogy, of resonance and many others may be understood, as well as forming a unitary “constellation of understanding”.

Second, formal cause relates to a fundamental idea of being as a complex unity, as a whole in which everything is connected with anything else. This was the “magic” approach to cosmos in the tribal era of “participation mystique”⁶ where “sympathy” (in Frazer’s terms) was the way in which things changed, and change could be affected.

While the typographic era destroyed such a unity through separation and sequentiality, the electric (which now we can call “digital”) era⁷ re-created a planetarian reso-

² “The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan”, *Playboy Magazine*, March 1969.

³ Aristotle on Causality, First published Wed Jan 11, 2006; substantive revision Fri Sep 2, 2011, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/aristotle-casuality/>.

⁴ In E. McLuhan, J. Szlarek, eds., *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, Berkeley: Ginkgo Press, 2003, 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶ H.M. McLuhan, H. Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point. Space in Poetry and Painting*, New York: Harper and Row, 1968, 28.

⁷ Paul Levinson rightly argued that many of McLuhan’s “prophecies” found a better realization in the

nance, where connections are meaningful (in force of analogy), forming patterns which have to be detected, but also implemented against the dominant figures: awareness is in fact the condition for agency, like in the artistic attitude (which is also evidence against allegations of technological determinism).

This is a neo-tribal perspective, where a critical realistic attitude and a religious understanding of the world take the place of magic: a meaningful totality we experience from within, for which we bear a responsibility (unlike in magic).

From less quoted McLuhan texts (as the letters and essays now collected in *The Medium and the Light*⁸) it clearly appears that in McLuhan's view the whole is not only a complex and self regulating, ecological environment, but also a complexity that can become conscious of itself. For instance he also maintains that the ontological and the epistemological are strictly interconnected, as was also claimed by other (Jesuit) authors who influenced him. For instance, in Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*⁹, knowledge accumulates and is transmitted in increasing levels of depth and complexity, giving rise to that thinking layer that envelops the earth, called the "noosphere": the collective consciousness of humanity, the networks of thought and emotion in which we all are immersed. Which becomes the "central nervous system", in McLuhan's words.

Also, Lonergan's view of knowledge, as expressed in *Insight*¹⁰, certainly contributed to McLuhan's "inward turn", as recognized by McLuhan himself: "Find much sense in Bern Lonergan's Insight"¹¹.

No doubt that any of McLuhan's statements, including those on formal causality, can be read and stand perfectly without any reference to the religious dimension. Nevertheless I believe that in order to understand the genesis and the methodological force of formal causality in McLuhan, his conversion to Catholicism and his familiarity both with the Bible (which he read in different languages) and with several innovative interpreters of the religious tradition as well as with Catholic artists (from Teilhard de Chardin to Ong and Lonergan, from Hopkins to Chesterton) is essential for a deep understanding of his original perspective on media and culture. A very unconventional Catholicism his own, bothered by the central, "visually biased" apparatus of the Roman Catholic Church: he wrote, "We must get rid of the hierarchy if we want participation. But we don't have to wish for it. It's happening"¹². And too cutting-edge even for the Vatican II Council. In his view, in fact, "the Church is always out of place. Culturally as well. Sometimes way ahead, sometimes way behind"¹³.

As he admitted: "I would prefer that most questions [...] be dealt with by theologians, but they do not seem to be interested. I do not think that the powerful forces imposed on us by electricity have been considered at all by theologians and liturgists"¹⁴.

Why should they, if reality were purely material? In other words, McLuhan's re-

web era rather than in the televisual one: P. Levinson, *Digital McLuhan*, New York: Routledge, 1999. See also C. Giaccardi, "From Tactile to Magic: McLuhan, Changing Sensorium and Contemporary Culture", *International Journal of McLuhan Studies*, 1 (2011): 111-123.

⁸ See note 4.

⁹ P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), New York: Harper Perennial, 1976.

¹⁰ B. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (1957), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

¹¹ In his letter of September 21, 1957, to his former student and friend, the jesuit Walter J. Ong: in M. Molinaro, C. McLuhan, W. Toye, eds., *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987, 251.

¹² McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

ligious attitude may be better understood as the “ground” against which the “figure” of formal causality developed.

2. AGAINST EXPLOITATION

In presenting my argument I intend to avoid a double risk, which is one of the main reasons, in my view, for McLuhan’s controversial fortune. On the one hand, McLuhan’s Catholicism has been overtly disregarded, acting as the tacit ground of an entire series of criticisms, lack of rigour and scientificity, underestimation of the material, structural and political aspects of communication, reliance on “invisible”, indemonstrable dynamics and so on.

On the other hand, McLuhan’s religious attitude, even when unspoken, and mainly referred to in his private correspondence, caused him the same destiny he recognizes for Hopkins, who is “full of pitfalls for the unwary”¹⁵. While the “non-Catholic reader is timid or hostile”¹⁶, “Catholics were caught off-guard. They hastened to enshrine, but not to understand him”¹⁷. Otherwise, they use him as a “flag”, by assuming a kind of “proprietary manner on the strength of doctrinal affinity alone”¹⁸.

What McLuhan stated about Hopkins’ fortune, is also perfectly true of McLuhan’s critical assessment:

Before there can be any basis for Catholic complacency, in the presence of Hopkins we must explain our tardy recognition of him. Again, if Catholic doctrine made Hopkins a major poet, why aren’t there more like him? All, I think, that need be said of this peculiarly Catholic pitfall is that some knowledge (the more the better) of Catholic doctrine and Scholastic philosophy is needed for the full elucidation, though not for the immediate enjoyment, of Hopkins. Such knowledge, however, will never reveal his poetic excellence¹⁹.

McLuhan can certainly be read and enjoyed as though his Catholicism were an exclusively “private” matter. But I believe that for the elucidation of his thought, especially as far as formal cause is concerned, his Catholicism is essential, also because, in the original and authentic meaning, “Catholic” means “relating to the whole”, *katà ôlos*²⁰.

Unity is both ontological (everything is meaningfully related to everything else, and is part of a whole) and epistemological: that is why McLuhan refused specialization, watching media through the lens of poetry and choosing metaphor, that is “transitivity” (*meta-pherein*) among different disciplines and domains of experience, as a key methodological tool²¹.

Probably to those who disregarded his “Catholic” outlook on reality he would have replied, like he did in Woody Allen’s cameo, “You know nothing about my work!”.

¹⁵ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Alongside with “for all”, that is “universal” in the sense for “each individual and concrete human being”, rather than “in an abstract way”.

²¹ “When we look at any situation through another situation we are using metaphor” (*The Medium and the Light*, 154).

3. A MEANINGFUL TOTALITY

“The great difficulty about truth is that it is not simple except to those who can attain to see it whole²²”.

The misreadings of McLuhan’s work is due to his holistic approach, intimately rooted in his Catholicism, which also seems crucial for understanding his use of formal cause.

In his terms, formal cause is indeed a totality anticipating the effects and the single parts.

What McLuhan used to say about the artist, that is “the person of integral awareness”, was true for him also of the genuine Catholic attitude, when he stated for instance that “saints are artists, too”²³. However he does not consider religious orthodoxy as a value; on the contrary, as any real artist, he is rather “indifferent to the winds of doctrine”²⁴.

The whole is dynamic, is more than the sum of its parts, is in a sense present in each of them (what McLuhan referred to as Chesterton’s “sacramental sense of life”²⁵). Again, the idea of a religious and poetic unity is very close to Lonergan’s:

The parts of a [structured] whole may be things, bricks, timbers, glass, rubber, chrome. But the parts may also be activities, as in a song, a dance, a chorus, a symphony, a drama. Such a whole is dynamic materially. But dynamism may not be restricted to the parts. The whole itself may be self-assembling, self-constituting; then it is formally dynamic. It is a dynamic structure²⁶.

But it also recalls Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of complexity:

We only have to look around us to see how complexity and psychic temperature are still rising: and rising no longer on the scale of the individual but now on that of the planet. This indication is so familiar to us that we cannot but recognize the objective, experiential reality of a transformation of the planet as a whole²⁷.

A great revolution had taken place: consciousness was now leaping and boiling in a space of super-sensory relationships and representations²⁸.

In Teilhard’s view, evolution will culminate in the Omega Point, a sort of super-consciousness towards which different layers of consciousness will finally converge. The concentration of a conscious universe will reassemble in itself all consciousnesses without erasing each individual facet of consciousness. As in McLuhan, totality does not fade differences and singularities, but rather exalt them while connecting them to the whole.

This process takes place after the fragmentation and separation brought about by the visual era: “A stepping up of visual values makes a new dichotomy between the spiritual and the material”²⁹.

Print culture boosted the cultural predominance of the visual over the aural/oral.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁴ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 119.

²⁵ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 4.

²⁶ B. Lonergan, *Collection* (1967), edited by F.E. Crowe and R.M. Doran, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, 206.

²⁷ P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of the Matter* (1965), New York, Harvest Books, 1978, 38.

²⁸ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 168.

²⁹ McLuhan, *Through the Vanishing Point*, 95.

Quoting with approval an observation on the nature of the printed word by William Ivins, McLuhan remarked:

In this passage [Ivins] not only notes the ingraining of lineal, sequential habits, but, even more important, points out the visual homogenizing of experience of print culture, and the relegation of auditory and other sensuous complexity to the background. [...] The technology and social effects of typography incline us to abstain from noting interplay and, as it were, “formal” causality, both in our inner and external lives. Print exists by virtue of the static separation of functions and fosters a mentality that gradually resists any but a separative and compartmentalizing or specialist outlook³⁰.

Print technology changes our perceptual habits, which in turn impacts social interactions. According to McLuhan, the advent of print technology contributed to and made possible most of the salient trends in the Modern period in the West: individualism, democracy, Protestantism, capitalism and nationalism. For McLuhan, these trends all reverberate with print technology’s principle of “segmentation of actions and functions and principle of visual quantification”³¹.

The “laws of media” apply any time a new technology interferes with the previous eco-system, and this happened with print as well:

If a new technology extends one or more of our senses outside us into the social world, then new ratios among all of our senses will occur in that particular culture. It is comparable to what happens when a new note is added to a melody. And when the sense ratios alter in any culture then what had appeared lucid before may suddenly become opaque, and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent³².

In fact, according to the visual stress of the typographic era, “the modern spirit is vivisectionive. Vivisection itself is the most modern process we can conceive”³³.

But now we can see again the unity on the ground of multiplicity, and formal cause is the pattern of its intelligibility: “The formal cause of something is the *ground* that gives rise to it”³⁴, “the intelligible expression of its quiddity”³⁵.

4. CRITICAL REALISM AND THE METHOD OF UNDERSTANDING

McLuhan’s thomistic epistemology is close to that of Cardinal Henry Newman and Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan. Two aspects of Newman’s thought resonate in particular with McLuhan’s formal cause, namely the “illative sense” and the idea of “anticipatory probability”.

The first relates to the ability of the mind, using memories, probabilities, associations, testimonies and impressions, to reason and grasp things spontaneously with success, without the aid of explicit analysis. The illative sense, then, is the “power of judging about truth and error in concrete matters”, the faculty of the human mind that

³⁰ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962, 124-126.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

³² *Ibid.*, 41.

³³ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 17.

³⁴ M. McLuhan, E. McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause*, Houston: NeoPoiesis Press, 2011, 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

closes the logic gap in concrete situations and thus allowing for assent. “There is no ultimate test of truth besides the testimony born to truth by the mind itself”³⁶.

For Newman, in fact, developments do not occur by “a conscious reasoning from premises to conclusion”; rather, an “idea under one or other of its aspects grows in the mind by remaining there”, and its growth can afterwards be traced and recognized as true. And most of all, it is grasped at once.

In McLuhan’s words, “in this creative work that is perception and cognition, we experience immediately that dance of Being within our faculties which provides the incessant intuition of Being”³⁷.

Anticipatory probability is an idea stemming from the recognition of such early or recurring tendencies which afterwards are fully realized: a sort of evidence that successive accomplishments are in accordance with the original idea. As if to say, in McLuhan’s terms, that “effects precede causes”.

Moreover, in his “Birmingham lectures” Cardinal Newman insisted on the kind of truth that can be heard, as opposed to the kind of truth that can be seen: the latter is based on direct and complete information, reinforced by logical proofs, while the former is grasped in a comprehensive perception, and substantiated by immediate evidences, even if the truth itself is not immediately evident.

Bernard Lonergan’s “self-appropriation” is close to McLuhan’s awareness, as the personal discovery and personal embrace of the dynamic structure of inquiry, insight, judgment, and decision. While perceiving the object, also one’s own knowledge become conscious, as well as the cognitive structure of experiencing (in McLuhan the figure/ground relations, formal cause, net of analogies...). And Lonergan’s four biases (unconscious or dramatic; individual; group; and general, commonsense bias), dramatically affecting our capacity for understanding and engendering blindness and deformation, parallel the inversion of figure/ground, and the dynamic perception/imperception in McLuhan’s work.

Moreover, Lonergan’s critical realism (we can know reality, but we have to make a critique of consciousness, as truth is not immediately evident) expresses a concern very similar to McLuhan’s.

Indeed, McLuhan himself can be considered a “critical realist”, as this philosophical stance, developed later by Bhaskar, Archer, Ekström and many others, considers reality as a multilayered totality, in which the real is not coterminous with the empirical, the whole is more than the sum of parts, and not everything that is real is immediately observable.

By offering a “third way” between positivistic empiricism and postmodernistic constructionism, critical realism’s main traits can be summarized as follows:

Much of reality exists independently of human consciousness of it; reality itself is complex, open, and stratified in multiple dimensions or levels, some of which come to exist through the crucial process of emergence; humans can acquire a truthful, though fallible knowledge and understanding of reality through various forms of disciplined conceptualization, inquiry and theoretical reflection; [...] knowledge and understanding of the truth about reality position knowers to critically engage the world in normative, prescriptive and even moral terms

³⁶ H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1874), University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, 350.

³⁷ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 155.

in ways that may overcome the traditional fact-value divide and intentionally try to shape the world for better³⁸.

In Lonergan, not only reality is a complex totality, but it includes understanding and judging, namely epistemological as well as moral dimensions. Hence the three steps that provide his framework to Critical Realism are attentive experience, intelligent inquiry and reasonable judgment. According to Lonergan, cultural change demands “the development of a new theological method and style, [...] meeting all the genuine exigencies both of the Christian religion and of up-to-date philosophy, science, and scholarship [...]”³⁹.

In fact there is an analogy between Lonergan’s epistemic exigency of the search for a complete explanation and McLuhan holistic attitude. As Lonergan wrote: “Development is through specialization but it must end in integration”⁴⁰, and I think McLuhan would have agreed.

In Chapter 1 of *Method in Theology*, Lonergan formulates the notion of method as follows: “a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results”⁴¹. Critical realism “is principled on question of ontology, pragmatic on questions of methods”⁴²; hence “if method is essential for the development of understanding, it is no less true that method is a mere superstition when the aim of understanding is excluded”⁴³. As he himself wrote with regard to St. Thomas, “performance must precede reflection on performance, and method is the fruit of that reflection”⁴⁴.

The problem of method in Lonergan thus becomes the problem of finding the pattern of recurrent and related operations that give the cumulative and progressive result called theology. In fact God is for him the final cause implicitly operative in our intentionality, the dynamism that makes us move from pure experience to understanding, to judging rationally, to choosing responsibly.

In his view, first come the premises and second the execution or, in the image he used in *Method in Theology*, which impressively echoes McLuhan, first the *Background* and then the *Foreground*. As in McLuhan, understanding is finding patterns under the figures, bringing the (hidden, non immediately evident) ground into the foreground. The effort one has to put into discovering and devising the scheme might profitably be duplicated by others through the process of self-appropriation (that is understanding from within; engaging in a process rather than receiving a product). And the implications are larger than epistemological, as awareness calls for responsibility. In McLuhan’s words: “There is a deep-seated repugnance in the human breast against understanding the processes in which we are involved. Such understanding involves far too much responsibility for our action”⁴⁵.

This process of understanding is always a combination of the inner and the outer.

³⁸ C. Smith, *What is a Person?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 92-93.

³⁹ B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (1971), University of Toronto Press, 1979, 140. See also B. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1971; Id., *Philosophy of God and Theology*, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1973; Id., *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, edited by D. Burrell, Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² Smith, *What is a Person?*, 98.

⁴³ B. Lonergan, “Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas”, in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, 223.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 72.

5. INSCAPES AND NETS OF ANALOGIES

“The literate man insists on visual connections where being insist on resonance”⁴⁶.

The relations between parts and whole, subject and environment, background and foreground, are elucidated by McLuhan through the Gestalt approach as well as by the notion of ‘inscape’.

The role of the former is explained as follows:

In Gestalt, reality presents itself to the mind as a *figure* detaching itself from a *ground*. We notice the *figure* first and most often it dominates our whole field of consciousness. However, the ground is at least as important and often is even more important, especially in the areas that concern us [...]. The figure, the Gestalt, is visible, while the ground remains invisible. Human perception encourages us to pay attention to the figure and to ignore the ground⁴⁷.

The latter (inscape) brings into light the analogic relation between details and whole and between outside and inside, finite and infinite, visible and invisible, connections and intervals, nature and God, as in G.M. Hopkins poetry, which he especially appreciated through the interpretation of Walter Ong. Inscap is, according to McLuhan, “the crux of Hopkin’s sensibility”⁴⁸.

Hopkin is an analogist⁴⁹, and in its view external nature is a Scripture⁵⁰. And in the external reality, especially in nature, he sees the divine in all the strange, irregular, unexpected things, where something exceeding the expected forms “peeps” from the chaos of matter⁵¹, revealing the inscape, the real “thingness” of things⁵². McLuhan’s inward turn, and his prioritizing the percept over the concept, was certainly affected by Hopkins’ inscape as well as Lonergan’s Insight.

In the manner of poems and myth, his analogical reasoning is the more suitable way to seize the cosmological, unified vision of the world.

Analogical reasoning is the mode of thought better suited to grasp the cosmological, unitary worldview expressed by myth and poetry. Grammar, as interpretation of texts in their fullness, and analogy are the main ways of apprehension of the complexity of the real. Analogy is more than a connection and a similitude: it implies a “proportion”, that is a “*proper* connection”, among relations. A proportion that can be a far cry from what we are used to. “It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal/ of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ears”⁵³. Also in accordance with the critical realistic view, it is neither empirically detectable, nor purely constructed, but is found, often unexpectedly: it has an evidence for those who can exert their “illative sense”, as Newman would have said.

Analogy is both a mode of thought and a pattern of cosmos. It is a meaningful, as well as sometimes paradoxical correspondence: the same that we find in St. Thomas’ analogy (proportion) between divine grace and human freedom⁵⁴. In other words, there

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁸ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵² McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 35.

⁵³ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 65.

⁵⁴ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

is an isomorphism among the dynamic structure of proportionate being, the heuristic structure of proportionate knowing and the possibility of eventually building a universe of “proportionate doing”; namely among the ontological, epistemological and existential level. Analogy allows for fine-tuning between them:

Analogy is not a concept. It is community. It is resonance. It is inclusive. It is the cognitive process itself. That is the analogy of the divine Logos. I think of Jaspers, Bergson and Buber as very inferior conceptualist types, quite out of touch with the immediate analogical awareness that begins in the senses and is derailed by concepts and ideas⁵⁵.

Printing effaces the dynamic figure/ground and all become figure. Thus “analogy or proper proportionality is a mode of awareness destroyed by literacy, since the literate man insists on visual connections where being insists on resonance”⁵⁶. But the audio-tactile space of electric age is capable of simultaneity, superimposition, and nonlinearity; it resonates again.

“Resonance” can certainly be seen as a form of causality, but very different from that associated with visual space, because it allows things to respond to each other in a nonlinear fashion.

Resonance is one quality of acoustic space; another is simultaneity. But while visual space emphasizes linearity, acoustic space emphasizes simultaneity – the possibility that many events occur in the same space-time. And the rise of electronic media is awakening more acoustic sensibilities in the ways we experience the world. The visual primacy is dethroned by tactility, as interplay among all senses. Even formal cause is “tactile”, rather than “visual”, as Eric McLuhan puts it: “The modality of formal cause is that of abrasive interface, an exchange of pressures and textures between situations: consequently, it belongs to touch, kinesis, and proprioception”⁵⁷.

Art, “the civilized substitute for magic”, in Wyndham Lewis’ words⁵⁸ has the task of training perception in this direction: “There had never been any doubt in my mind that art and poetry were an indictment of human insentience past and present”⁵⁹. Not only “the artist had come to be the only critical spectator of society”⁶⁰. He is also able to adopt the appropriate posture toward reality: in fact, “the artist’s role is not to stress himself or his own point of view, but to let things sing and talk, to release the form within them”⁶¹.

This is how formal cause works at the cognitive level:

The meaning of a work of art [...] had nothing to do with what you think about it. It has to do with its action upon you. It invades your senses. It re-structures your outlook. It completely changes your attitudes, your wave-lengths. So our attitudes, our sensibilities, are completely altered by new forms, regardless of what we think about them. This is not an irrational statement, or a philosophical notion. It is a simple fact of experience⁶².

⁵⁵ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 69.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁷ McLuhan, *McLuhan, Media and Formal Cause*, 127.

⁵⁸ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 83.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, XXII.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶¹ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 35.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 38.

Even media are forms: “not simple ones, but complex forms [...]. And that effect upon us is that of forms, not ideas or concepts”⁶³ This is another way to say that the medium is the message.

The artist is not isolated genius, who draws inspiration from within himself, but is rather one that can see the ground as well as the figure. To reveal, rather than to create: “the job of the artist is not to sign, but to read signatures. Existence must speak for itself. It is already richly and radiantly signed. The artist has merely to reveal, not to forge the signatures of existence. But he can only put these in order by *discovering the orchestral analogies in things themselves*”⁶⁴.

And also: “the artist cannot properly speak with his own voice. The ultimate artist can have no style of his own, but must be an ‘outlex’ through which the multiple aspects of reality can utter themselves”⁶⁵.

By training our perception (figure/ground) the artist shows us the “essence” (formal cause) of reality. The artist is then in the true sense a “realist”. And reality, in this perspective, is truly “augmented”: “there is a great heightening of every moment of experience, since every moment is played against a supernatural backdrop”⁶⁶.

6. CONCLUSION: COUNTER ENVIRONMENTS, CRITICAL REALISM AND PROPHECIES

To grasp the structure of being as well as the structure of knowledge, and to recognize the figure/ground pattern it is essential to adopt a “multi-situated” stance towards reality, both immersed and external, environmental and counterenvironmental. The founding principle of the laws of the media (enhancement, reversal, retrieval and obsolescence) are but different configurations of the figure/ground relation.

Counterenvironment is crucial both for perception (truth) and freedom: only when we see the ground as well as the figure, we can reach the hidden patterns that analogically connect many different layers of reality. Then we can escape the zombie-like attitude of the (technological) idiot: who is not, like in ancient Greece, the one too outside to understand, but the one who is made blind by his extreme “insideness”.

On this respect, all the arts can pave the way to formal cause:

All the arts might be considered to act as counterevironments or countergradients. Any environmental form whatsoever saturates perception so that its own character is imperceptible; it has the power to distort or deflect human awareness, at least until they become entirely environmental and unperceived⁶⁷.

Under this respect, art is a way for a “realistic” view of the world, as it allows to reach the more profound level of formal causality.

But also religion can provide a counterenvironment in McLuhan’s view:

What is needed is a readiness to undervalue the world altogether. This is only possible for a Christian... It is these changes that only the Christian can afford to laugh at. People who take them seriously are prepared to wipe out one another in order to impose them as ideals⁶⁸.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 15, my emphasis.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁶ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 28.

⁶⁷ McLuhan, *Trough the Vanishing Point*, 2.

⁶⁸ McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 92.

And, in my opinion, this relates to the “prophetic” character of McLuhan’s work, which has not to do with divining and foretelling the future, but rather with his strong (critical) realistic attitude. In fact, in Flannery O’Connor’s words, “The prophet is a realist of distances”⁶⁹.

More than thirty years after his death, we can certainly see that his “past is a dimension of our present”, that he is undoubtedly a coeval of us, and that formal cause did precede so many of the effects we are surrounded by today.

⁶⁹ As stated in her essay “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, in F. O’Connor, S. Fitzgerald, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1969.