McLuhan and Concrete Poetry:
Sound, Language and Retribalization

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Abstract

McLuhan's interest in acoustic space, tribal community, language, sound and orality have strong ties not only to a personal and cultural recognition of art and technology, but to a specific movement of the arts that focused on the senses: concrete poetry. Sound poetry and visual poetry that reached its peak between the 60's and 80's had as its aims some of the very issues with which McLuhan was grappling. Language poetry, sound poetry, visual poetry - what can be called concrete poetry - is an artistic manifestation of McLuhan's expectation and exploration of a re-tribalization or new tribalization based on orality, sound and the visual within the post-print age

Marshall McLuhan's work involving language, sound and the arts permeate much of the cultural theory of the one-time literary critic. According to Donald Theall, "two of his four original collaborators … had a substantial interest in the arts" [1], of which his work with Quentin Fiore is evidence. McLuhan's literary background as well as his very lyrical style of writing in addition to his focus on poets from Joyce to Pope, illustrate his personal affection for poetry, art and sound. His examinations of visual and acoustic spaces are illustrated by the way in which he works with words in interview and print. As Judith Stamps observes of McLuhan's style in *Unthinking Modernity*,

> Through its unique literary style, it contributes to the project of experimenting with non-linear, sound-based epistemologies. And it effectively analyses the visual character of modernity whilst highlighting the aural medium of dialogue.[2]

McLuhan is an'ear man': his cultural analysis is deeply related to an ear-oriented preoccupation. In fact, his analysis of technology in general is richly influenced by his interest in a sensory experience. And while his claims have broader social consequences

the effects of technology on the senses and vice versa, the common sensory and artistic thread is certainly evident.

> We are back in an acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us. [3]

McLuhan's interest in acoustic space, tribal community, language, sound and orality have strong ties not only to a personal and cultural recognition of art and technology, but to a specific movement of the arts that focused on the senses: concrete poetry. Sound poetry and visual poetry that reached its peak between the 60's and 80's had as its aims some of the very issues with which McLuhan was grappling. I argue that language poetry, sound poetry, visual poetry - what for brevity's sake I will call concrete poetry - is an artistic manifestation of McLuhan's expectation and exploration of a re-tribalization or new tribalization based on orality, sound and the visual within the post-print age. The visual and sound poets of the 60's were making and creating work that relates to McLuhan's prediction that in a post-print world (meaning, electric age where all our senses are extended by media) we return to a balanced, simultaneous, tribal space. The non-linear, simultaneous experience of concrete poetry demonstrates McLuhan's descriptions of oral societies in a pre-print culture that did not yet privilege the eye as well as his call for balance and simultaneity such as that within pre-literate cultures within the post-print culture. By exploring oral culture and acoustic space via Walter Ong and McLuhan, the pursuits of poets and artists such as Steve McCaffery and Jackson MacLow, in addition to McLuhan's sensory analysis as well as his writing style, I will illustrate how concrete poetry articulated McLuhan's analyses of orality, language and sound within 'tribal' and electric cultures.

Concrete poetry is essentially poetry that does not privilege meaning above all, but does privilege sound and the visual, using language not as a conduit but as the content itself: thus the medium is the message, to borrow McLuhan's phrase. That is not to deny that there is meaning in form, but that meaning is not presented in a linear or narrative fashion typical of structured sound and language. There seems to be some debate as to whether concrete poetry includes sound poetry because some concrete poetry is more effective read aloud (sound poetry) and some less effective read aloud (visual poetry). For the purpose of this essay, I've included sound poetry in my discussion of concrete poetry.

McLuhan's appreciation of oral cultures and the sensory experience, and thus the thrust of the connection between concrete poetry and the theorist's work is possibly most evident in the *Gutenburg Galaxy*. The eurocentricism of J.C Carothers, the scholar upon whom McLuhan relies heavily in *Galaxy*, casts a shadow on McLuhan's remarks on oral cultures in a current analysis, but the bias not withstanding, this is one text in which McLuhan writes a great deal on the topic of sensory overload and acoustic space. He credits Carothers with recognizing the departure from an ear-based culture to an eye-based culture with the advent of the phonetic alphabet [4] In the introduction to *Galaxy*, McLuhan delineates the differences between traditional, pre-literate oral cultures and a post-print culture as well as the changes occurring at the onset of an overloaded electric culture. He begins with a focus on Elizabethan poets and culture:

> We are today as far into the electric culture as the Elizabethans had advanced into the typographic and mechanical age. And we are experiencing the same confusions and indecisions which they had felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience[5]

He acknowledges Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who observed the cultural effects of technology on poetry – poetry within written and oral cultures, and the differences. McLuhan points to examples of cultural and sensory experiences within many cultures: Elizabethan, Russian, African and Greek. He insists that the some senses are extended and privileged by technologies (speech, writing, print and finally television) at the detriment of other senses [6]. He calls this an 'outering' or 'uttering' of sense, which creates 'closed systems': meaning that a simultaneous experience of senses is knocked off balance [7].

In the case of literacy, the eye became the privileged sense, creating a linear rather than simultaneous sensory experience, canceling out the opportunity of sensory interplay. But while McLuhan laments the onset of an eye-dominance, he still maintains a Western superiority when discussing Carothers' explorations of African tribal, aural cultures. He states: "no other kind of writing save the phonetic has ever translated man out of the possessive world of total interdependence and interrelation that is the auditory network".[8] And further, while acknowledging the 'magic' (which from a Western theoretical standpoint can appear naïve, but may well be another example of McLuhan's liberty with words) of sound and sound-based culture, he offers phonetic literacy as an escape from tribal culture:

> From that magical resonating world of simultaneous relations that is the oral and acoustic space there is only one route to the freedom and independence of detribalized man. That route is via the phonetic alphabet, which lands men at once in varying degrees of dualistic schizophrenia. [9]

While the tribal man experiences sensory simultaneity and community, McLuhan concludes that the phonetic alphabet offered individualism, but at the cost of confusion

and sensory imbalance. He further speculates that the sensory shift towards an eye-based culture has perceptual effects in the organization of thought: "Does the interiorization of the media such as letters alter the ratio among our senses and change mental processes?"[10]. The 'freedom' which literacy offered came with individualism, a product of writing and the mechanization of writing.

The power and mysticism associated with sound is discussed by Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (1982). He suggests that 'oral peoples' 'universally' (Ong also works within the framework of broad generalizations: he too discusses oral communities from Ancient Greece to more contemporary African communities) consider sound to be magical, and thus powerful: "Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. […] In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is dynamic." [11]And like McLuhan, Ong pursues the notion that thought processes differ with the advent of writing: while McLuhan speculates about the effects within print culture, Ong examines the thought processes of the oral culture and dismisses the ability or practicality of forming thoughts as one would in a print culture:

> In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mneumonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would not be abiding knowledge but simply passing thought, however complex [12]

In fact, Ong has an entire section devoted to the characteristics of orally based thought, citing non-expression, organization and redundancy within texts thought to be transcribed from oral cultures (the Bible, Homer's work) [13]. He also approaches poetry within oral cultures, claiming that the formulaic poetic techniques in the ancient world are evidence of a kind of written thought pattern that marks not only poetry "but more or less all

thought and expression in primary oral culture" [14]. The notion of formulaic approaches to language and poetry is interesting when looking at the experimental and highly formulaic concrete poetry of poets like Jackson MacLow and Steve McCaffery, discussed later.

McLuhan's analysis of oral cultures as simultaneous and balanced is the backbone of his optimistic predictions about the electric age: that with the departure from a strictly print-based or eye-based culture, the possibility for a "seamless web of tribal kinship" exists [15]. In an interview with Playboy (1969) he discusses the "revolutionizing agent" [16] that is technology: just as print was for the eye, he reminds, all media have been throughout history. This is naturally related to his *medium is the message* theory, and relates to Ong's ideas about technology or communication technologies changing the way we think and the way our senses react. McLuhan and the concrete poets shared this techno-materialist approach to sensory perception. Both recognized the body's relationship with language and print, and specifically, the binding and linear nature of a society dependant on narratives and meanings put forth by a monopolized medium, its effects on our senses and our lives largely ignored. McLuhan's preoccupation with the medium and our sensory relationship to media (meaning technology: print, type and ink as well as things like TV and radio) as a cultural concern is reflected in the artistic practice of the concrete poets.

> To summarize the several revolutionary capabilities that tape allowed: the transcendence of the limits of the human body. The tape machine, considered as an extension of human vocality allowed the poet to move beyond his own expressivity. The body is no longer the ultimate parameter, and voice becomes a point of departure rather than the point of arrival [17]

In this quote, Steve McCaffery, one of Canada's foremost sound poets and a member of the sound troupe of the 60's, The Four Horsemen, demonstrates McLuhan's notion that technology acts as an extension of the senses. The tape recorder, as McCaffery notes, allowed for a sensory extension hitherto experienced in sound poetry in its historical manifestations – during the rise of what he calls the third phase (1) of sound poetry (1950s onward), when sound poetry was not bound to the word or meaning. It is at this time, conceivably, that sound poetry joins what is known as concrete poetry and gives rise to the sensory perceptions and ambiguities with which McLuhan was wrestling in his exploration of oral and print-based cultures.

McCaffery outlines the history of sound poetry itself: while concrete poetry, he explains, emerged more towards the 1960's, sound poetry as it has been explored by international artists and writers has been the focus of poetic and artistic experimentation for some time. The third phase, as McCaffery notes, was heralded by the tape recorder and offered the possibility of executing experiments in language and sound that were hitherto impossible. While it could be argued that the tape recorder represented a detachment of the senses, I am building on McCaffery's contention and suggesting that it in fact extended them in offering the opportunity for additional experimentation and building on the relationship between senses and technology.

North American, and particularly Canadian artists of concrete poetry such as Steve McCaffery and bpNichol recognized the communal element of sound and visual experimentation. This offers a strong link between concrete poetry and oral tribalization as a departure from the individualist print-based culture, as per McLuhan's analysis. bpNichol's early work was based in chanting. The Four Horsemen, which includes

McCaffery, Nichol, Paul Dutton and Rafael Barreto-Rivera focuses on the communal collective experience of sound and language: "[…] an experiment in collective communication, the sensing of changing biological-emotional states which guide the shifts and structural decisions in their highly improvisatory performances".[18] Groups such as Owen Sound work with a variety of media – sound, spoken word, theater – in a form that mimics McLuhan's call for a simultaneous and balanced sensory experience. Juliana Spahr comments on her first encounter with language poetry (a movement associated with concrete poetry that focused on language alone) in *OEI 7-8 2001: AFTER LANGUAGE POETRY*, a selection of 10 statements by young poets on the future of poetry. She discusses the communal appeal to the form:

> I found value in the retreat from individualism and idiosyncracy and in works that instead pointed to heady and unexpected and yet intimate pluralisms. And in writing that helped me to think of culture as large and connective. And in writing that comments on community and that moves poetry away from individualism to shared, connective spaces [19]

I listened to the poem *Cosmic Piece for Orchestra and Chorus* (1969) by Nichol and McCaffery online. The piece was originally created with a "cheap cassette" (Nichol) but is now downloadable as an mp3. This is an interesting leap in which poems that were created in a collaborative, cross-sensory, communal practice now have been reverted to an individualized experience – or a wider community, depending on how one views the experience, meaning that I know that there are limitless numbers of people downloading and listening to the same poem that I listen to as an individual. How does that change the experience? Do the intentions affect the outcome? What is the effect of the interactive and unseen poetic audience? These are questions that coincide with McLuhan's

optimistic speculation that the electric age would bring about a more balanced and communal sensory experience.

His optimism foreshadowed the early Internet utopian hopes for a kind of wide spread online democracy and community, but what has happened within the concrete poetry movement is a kind of anxiety and over stimulation: there appear to be a number of articles (Bök, Andrews, Doris) about the future of concrete poetry in the electric age. McLuhan's more rounded sensory experience demands artistic redefinition: the individualistic, print-based relationship between the author and audience has changed, but even more than it did with performance concrete poetry of the 60's and 70's which, although it indeed threw out standard sensory dependence and linear creation, also depended on and predicted a kind of readership/audience with which it could interact. The electronic readership is an unknown; the technology – in this case the computer – is again an extension of the senses, a 'revolutionizing agent', but what are the implications within this sensory experience of time and space?

Christian Bök responds to the question posed by OEI (2001) on the future of poetry after language poetry. He expresses the anxiety that the electronic age brings to poetry, as well as evoking McLuhan's expectation of a blurring of boundaries within not only senses but creative expression: artistic and romantic strongholds such as 'inspiration' have been affected by the electronic medium and environment:

> Poets may have to become advanced typesetters and computer programmers - technicians, polyglot in a variety of machinic [sic] dialects: HTML and Quark, PERL and Flash. Poets may have to learn the exotic jargon of scientific discourses just to make use of a socially relevant lexicon, and now that cybernetics has effectively discredited the romantic paradigm of inspiration, poets may have to take refuge in a new set of aesthetic metaphors for the unconscious, adapting themselves to the mechanical procedures of automatic writing, aleatoric

> [sic] writing, and mannerist writing - poetry that no longer expresses our attitudes so much as it processes our databanks. [20]

This posits the question as to whether the electronic age, with its cross-sensory perceptions has allowed for the kind of unity that McLuhan anticipated. In *Counterblast* (1969), McLuhan commented that, "By surpassing writing, we have regained our sensorial WHOLENESS, not on a national or cultural plane, but on a cosmic plane. We have evoked a super-civilized sub-primitive man." [21] I would argue that the concrete poetry between the 60's and 80's offered something close to this goal of sensorial wholeness of the sub-primitive man, but that with the Internet age, for poetry at least, there exists an anxiety - which perhaps is simply characteristic of its newness – with regards to the sensorial simultaneity.

The lack of the linear achieved in hypertext poetry, wherein the poem itself takes many different directions – each line, or each work can be a link to a different poetic direction - by many different users that it forces a simultaneous experience perhaps comes the closest to offering the balance about which McLuhan speculated within the electronic age with regards to poetry. In a hypertext poem, not only can linear meaning and indeed print be superceded by language and technology, but in giving up the direction and experience of the poem to the user executes what performance artists and Happenings artists of the 60's hoped to achieve with their simultaneous audience interactions. However, as poet Loss Pequeño Glazier comments in his *OLE: Open Letter to Lines Online* (2000), hypertext poetry is simply reusing print in another context and isn't revolutionary or making new use of technology:

> Link-node hypertext only constitutes a small part of the range of possibilities before us and may, indeed, be a specific ideology within print technology, as

> Aarseth has commented, rather than an actual digital technology. In this sense, hypertext merely remediates print in the electronic medium and does not, by this fact alone, engage the new technology. For that reason, we should stop assuming that if a work is in hypertext, it is by definition, digitally innovative. [22]

Christopher Horrocks states that McLuhan reaches beyond posthumanism and simultationism because his claims of sensory harmony and immediacy are linked directly to "'a myth of return'" via technology (*McLuhan and Virtuality*, [23]. McLuhan claimed that with the electronic age,

> We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions (from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us) of a culture that preceded the invention of writing and printing [24]

Again, I would argue that the concrete poets writing (and performing, recording, speaking) at the time of McLuhan's writings were exploring a tribalization that exploded the sensory dependence of print and meaning. While poets online are struggling with how to continue with a creative and sensory revolution, they are admittedly dealing with issues of non-linear temporality and spatiality, despite the medium's connection and historical relationship (via language and readership) with print.

But what is the 'acoustic space' and how does it relate to the concrete poets – including in their media sound, visual, language and otherwise? The notion of space, be it acoustic, typographic or virtual, have implications that are deeply tied to McLuhan's sensory perceptions and observations on the oral and literary experience. Visual experimental poetry depended on the very ink and paper as the meanings rather than as a conduit. Steve McCaffery's visual poem *Triple Random Fields:1969* offers an example of the visual poet's relationship with the typographic. But this image poem could just as easily been included in the collaborative work of McLuhan and Quentin Fiore: McLuhan

often worked with the visual in print when working out his theories on language, and *The Medium is the Massage* (1969) is a book that depends on this relationship.

In exploring concrete poetry and McLuhan's notion of both the multi-sensory electric culture and the medium as the message, one might ask, what of the materiality of language? Or put another way, what of the visual nature of language? In order to explore this sticky subject, I will look at notions of meaning as they can be applied to language and structure.

In his atypically structured essay "Artiface and Absorption", poet Charles Bernstein poses the question of whether the structure or content of the poem 'mean' anything, whether they are mutually exclusive and how meaning is 'absorbed' by the viewer/reader. Poems where the structure requires further reading (beyond the structure) to find the meaning, he calls Artiface, opposed to Realism, which involves an unmediated and direct meaning. As I mentioned, his paper is structured using some artiface with many ampersands, experimental spelling and line breaks.

Just as McLuhan demands that the content is not priority and that the medium must be considered, Bernstein states that the structure must be considered, lest all that remains is content and content does not automatically equal meaning. He states that if the structure or materiality is foregrounded, there is a tendency to assume that there is no meaning at all, as though the poem is an experiment in the mechanics of the language. This is interesting in light of the concrete poets for whom the mechanics of the language were often (or often appeared to be) the priority. Bernstein defers to Steve McCaffery,, who in his paper "Writing as a General Economy" states that becoming preoccupied with the materiality can lead to an overload of submeanings (or as he calls them, paragrams),

referring to the philospher Saussure, who allegedly went mad analyzing a Latin verse for submeanings inherent in the materiality.

In describing the submeanings of a poem structured in what Bernstein calls Artiface, McCaffery uses economic terms first outlined by Georges Bataille. Bataille took Marx's notion of a restricted economy based in market value, and applied it to aesthetics, ritual and transgression. General economy, as opposed to the restricted economy according to Bataille, is excess value, or runoff. In McCaffery's paper on writing as a general economy, he takes this notion of excess and applies it to structurally-based poetry. In this model, in a restrictive economy, the content is privileged at the expense of the structure (wherein the structure of the language/poem is ignored); in the general economy, the structure is privileged at the expense of the content: the medium is the message.

Bernstein makes note of a young theorist of the 60s, Veronica Forrest-Thompson, who developed the notion of the total image complex. For Forrest-Thompson, the image-complex is the node that encapsulates the rhythm, structure, sound, materiality and semiotics of a poem outside the critical reading. She felt that the viewer/reader should reserve judgment on the critical reading in order to experience the image-complex. Again, this is a McLuhanesque notion; that the entire –rounded, rather than eye-dominant -sensory experience be observed outside of the content, or the message.

John Cage was an artist who enjoyed mutual respect with McLuhan as he also sought to undermine the linearity of language and sound. Quoted in Alistair Riddell's *Data Culture Generation: After Content, Process as Aesthetic*, James Pritchett states,

> McLuhan saw experimental artists such as Cage as prophets of the new technology, and offered them a new purpose: the instruction of society on "how to

rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties." [25]

Cage's work focuses on changing our understanding of language and sound, 'musicating' language and letting sound 'exist' alone without preconception . Cage sought to make language like music through the destruction or deconstruction of syntax: "Syntax, like government, can only be obeyed. It is therefore of no use except when you have something particular to command such as: Go buy me a bunch of carrots". One of the ways in which he deconstructed syntax, or 'sintalks' as he called it, and linear language was through formulaic poetry. Both Cage and concrete poet Jackson MacLow wrote similar poems in which they isolated particular letters from the poems of other writers to create new, conceptual formulaic explorations of language based on the names of the original creators. Examples below from Cate and Mac Low:

rEmembering a Day i visited you --seems noW

as I write that the weather theN was warm-- i

recall nothing we saiD, nothing wE did; eveN so

(perhaps Because of that) that visit staYs.

("Present", Cage: 1970. A tribute to Edwin Denby.)

En nZe eaRing ory Arms,

Pallor pOn laUghtered lain oureD Ent,

Azure teR

Un-

Tawny Pping come d oUt r wing-

Joints,

PreaD Et aZzle

(Mac Low, Words nd Ends from Ez I. From Cantos I – XXX, tribute to Ezra Pound). These procedures are acrostics or as Cage called them, 'mesostics'. For Cage, whose later work was very sound-based and a kind "musical response to McLuhan's ideas"[26] formulaic and chance operations were a way of total integration into the electronic and sensory environment in an exploration of process and senses within our post-print culture. He explains,

> We are now, McLuhan tells us, no longer separate from this environment. New art and music do not communicate an individual's conceptions of ordered structures, but they implement processes which are, as are our daily lives, opportunities for perception (observation and listening). McLuhan emphasizes this shift from life done for us to life that we do for ourselves. [27]

Furthermore, Cage and McLuhan were both preoccupied by the spiritual – for Cage, his sound experiments and pieces resonated with the esoteric and spiritual, and as Theall states, 'acoustic space' had an appeal of the occult and mystical for McLuhan. [28] This resembles a kind of tribalism as well – an attraction to spirituality through sound and the senses. McLuhan's later attempts to scrutinize quantum physics are related to his interest in the aura of acoustic space and an inability to scientifically understand "the spherical physical properties of its "new paradigm of resonance""[29] There appears to be a link between science and poetic formulae or chance operations as they were executed by artists like Cage, but in addition to the limits of formula, there exists a release of the boundaries of the senses through technology - and so we see again the "revolutionizing agent" of technology as a prosthesis of the sensory order.

On typographic space, Ong dedicates a section in *Orality and Literacy*. He discusses the relationship between words, or more specifically type and the white space

of paper – what artists call 'negative space', meaning the space or shapes defined by what is leftover after a 'real' medium has carved out its shape. Ong makes reference to poetry by e.e.cummings:

> White space is so integral to cumming's poem [Poem No. 276 (1968)] that it is utterly impossible to read the poem aloud. The sounds cued in by the letters have to be present in the imagination but their presence is not simply auditory: it interacts with the visually and kinesthetically perceived space around them.[30]

This demonstrates again that is that sound is an action, or event. The memory and imagination creates an acoustic experience even if the sound is not verbalized. The reader depends on his or her own experience to fulfill the expectations of sound. Ong continues on the topic of concrete poetry claiming that it 'climaxes in a certain way the interaction of sounded words and typographic space."[31] demonstrating an inter-sensory play that does not depend on or privilege a particular sense, but 'via technology' extends the senses.

Richard Cavell discusses space from a McLuhanesque perspective in *McLuhan in Space* (2002). He makes immediate reference in a chapter titled *Visible Speech* to the visual poetry, including ideograms (such as McCaffery's Triple Random Fields), claiming that the ideogram dealt directly with spatiality and spontaneity, as well as sound:

> This was the spatiality of the ideogram, which communicated all at once, simultaneously rather than sequentially – much in the way that electronic media communicated, which in McLuhan's terms, was acoustically.[32]

He claims, however that the concrete poets were moving *away* from orality despite a desire to focus on sound in much of the work. What he describes as a paradox – via comments by Pound - is that the sculptural qualities of ideograms or visual poetry relate to "the synaesthesia of speech." [33] But he continues that the interrelational and cross-

sensory qualities of concrete poetry are in dialogue with space and orality in McLuhan's terms of 'acoustic space'.

McLuhan himself, Cavell points out, tackled the visual poem with the structure of the tetrads that he and Eric McLuhan explored in *Laws of Media*: The initial description of the tetrads had the ideas listed sequentially, but the later incarnation has them making use of space and negative space much like a visual poem or ideogram. Cavell notes that the resulting imagery resembles concrete poem Easter Wings by poet George Herbert, whose work McLuhan had noted as an example of a 'reinvention of language' away from the long accepted linear print. [34]

In fact, the concretists and McLuhan had a mutual affection for one another although the relationship has often been gleaned from the occasional comment or reference (See works by Cage, Ong and McLuhan). The concrete poets' experimentation with language and print reflects a new approach to sound as well as language and space, which McLuhan had observed within the work of Joyce. Cavell quotes Judith Stamps (Unthinking Modernity) on McLuhan and Joyce, stating that McLuhan had observed Joyce's attempt 'to recreate the aural world by using non-standard spellings and run-on words."[35] Indeed McCaffery notes that experimentation with sound and language occurred long before the 'third phase' of the concrete poets in sound and language experimentations explored by the Italian and Russian Futurists (Marietti, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh), stating that the "first decisive break with language's symbolic relationship with an object" came with the Russian Futurist manifesto *Words As Such* of 1910. [36] Also experimenting with sound and language were Lewis Caroll with Jaberwocky (1912) and Kruchenykh with the chant-like zaum poems (ca. 1910). While these earlier poets

dealt with language and sound, the approach to tribalism, simultaneous sensory perception and spontaneity certainly appeared to have arrived with the concrete poets of the 50's and 60's.

The simultaneous nature of poems like that of bpNichol and master sound creator John Cage seemed to deal with acoustic space and time for the first time. Cavell notes that Ong, while illustrating the links between McLuhan and concrete poetry, has a perspective on language, sound and space that is antithetical to McLuhan's. Ong claims that orality cannot be spatial, "McLuhan, on the contrary, argued that the commitment of the spoken word to *visual* space in writing (and yet further in print) was being reversed by electronic media, which, through 'speed-up', produced an *acoustic* space-time."[37] Ong further delineates categories of sound in a very linear fashion: primary, secondary orality. This is also contrary to McLuhan's understanding (as well as that of the sound poets) that sound is simultaneous. For McLuhan, sound and language could both be afforded a simultaneous experience in non-linear space, unbound to meaning and narrative, unbound to time and a dominant sense. He wrote to his mentor Wyndham Lewis in 1954 what sounds as though it could be a sound poet's manifesto,

> Acoustic space is spherical. It is without bounds or vanishing points. It is structured by pitch separation and kinesthesia. It is not a container. It is not hollowed out. It is the space in which men live beore the invention of writing – that translation of the acoustic into the visual. With writing men began to trust their eyes and to structure space visually. Pre-literate man does not trust his eyes very much. The magic is in sound for him, with its powers to evoke the absent. [38]

Similarly, as Cavell states with regard to the ideogram,

> Here, alphabetic letters are turned into ideogrammatical constructions that constitute a rejection of the alphabet and a recovery of the simultaneity and sensory interrelatedness of speech – an interrelatedness that includes the interrelations of the visual and the auditory as spatial constructions. [39]

McLuhan first discovered the notion of acoustic space, which later influenced his poetic treatment of language and the visual as well as his theories on sound and oral cultures, from Carleton Williams, one of his colleagues and co-directors of Culture and Communication seminars in the early 50's. [40] Williams' theories on acoustic space had a psychological imperative but led to McLuhan's inclinations and observations of art and culture, language and rhetoric. Later he designed the tetrads, which as mentioned appeared finally as a kind of concrete poem or 'assemblage'. Theall notes of McLuhan's relationship with acoustic space throughout the years with explorations into poetry, art and culture,

> The initial phrase "acoustic space, " probed and played with through three decades, becomes itself an artifact (or "medium"), suggestively exploring the metamorphoses achieved through the transformations affected by electric technologies of production, reproduction, and dissemination on the pre-electric technologies of print and visual prints, writing, and visual art .[41]

McLuhan's texts and treatments in *The Vanishing Point, The Medium is the Massage* as well as his forays into non-linear visual speech and space (tetrads, typography in *Galaxy*) demonstrate his close link to the concrete poets. What his tetrads in particular in their visual formation recall, as does the work of the concrete poets, is a formulaic approach to language, sound and the visual that in its very process are a technique similar to that used in oral cultures.

Repeated phrases, designs as well I would argue, processes set up to produce chance operations including conceptual formulae reflect the oral culture and are thus arguably another tie to tribalization/retribalization in the post print culture. Due to a relationship to memory and repetition, "formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them

takes pen in hand." [42] Oral cultures depended on repetition of expression as a means of maintaining knowledge and memory within an ear culture. Writing in its early form was a transcription of speech, composition on paper coming much later. [43] Ong states that "formulaic style marks not poetry alone but, more or less, all thought and expression in primary oral culture." [44] In both traditional concrete poetry such as spoken word and visual poems, as well as more electronic and mechanized work such as that of John Cage, an exploration of language, type and sound was achieved often through formula.

McLuhan's appreciation of the arts, poets and artists, and his belief that artists are sensitive individuals, somehow poised to react to or predict cultural change, permeates his work. In the *Playboy* interview he discusses his respect for Yeats, Pound and of course Joyce, stating that they "had discovered a totally different approach, based on the identity of the processes of cognition and creation". He feels strongly about artists and the visual, and his work with Quentin Fiore exemplifies this. However, as Ong acknowledges, "concrete poetry is […] often merely gimmicky – a fact that makes it all the more necessary to explain the drive to produce it." [45] and McLuhan, while he appeared to have an eclectic approach to scholarship and never claimed to be a theorist, recognized the importance of, or our inability to extricate ourselves from meaning. As Steve McCaffery writes in Writing as a General Economy exploring the relationship between ink and words, language and meaning,

> As its material support, sound and ink are separable from the signifying process, but at the same time the process is unsupportable without it. In light of this one could consider language's materiality as meaning's heterological object, as that area inevitably involved within the semantic apparatus that meaning casts out and rejects. [46]

For McLuhan, technological change offers a revolution of the senses. Concrete poetry of the 60's to 80's exemplified an exploration in the ink, the sound and the visual – essentially McLuhan's Medium as the Message. But as even McLuhan stated on this front, "By stressing that the medium is the message rather than the content, I'm not suggesting that the content plays *no* role – merely that it plays a distinctly subordinate role" [47] The sensory overload that McLuhan would have witnessed at the explosion of the Internet doesn't seem to provide the kinship, web, the complete balance and outering that McLuhan had speculated about; it instead harbors a more self-conscious anxiety that McLuhan may say is a good thing. Nevertheless, for a time during the peak of the concrete poets, a recognition of a desire for balanced sensory experience and perception – a self-aware return to the tribal ear culture - was executed alongside McLuhan's work.

ENDNOTES

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[1] Donald Theall The Medium is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan. (Montreal, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971). p. 140

[2] Judith Stamps, Unthinking Modernity. (Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 122

[3] McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects. (NY, London, Toronto: Bantam, 1967)., p. 63

[4] McLuhan, Eric and Frank Zingrone. Essential McLuhan. (Toronto: House of Anasi Press), 1995, p. 117.

[5] McLuhuan "Essential", p. 97

[6] McLuhan, "Essential,", p. 100

[7] McLuhan, "Essential,", p. 101

[8] McLuhan, "Essential,", p. 117

[9] McLuhan, "Essential,", p. 118

[10] McLuhan, "Essential,", p. 119

[11] Ong, Walter J. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982), p. 32

[12] Ong, p. 3

[13] Ong, p. 38

[14] Ong, p. 26

[15] McLuhan, "Essential", p. 239

[16] McLuhan, "Essential", p. 239

[17] McCaffery, Steve. "Sound Poetry – A Survey". From Sound Poetry: A Catalogue, edited by Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, Underwich Editions, (Toronto, 1978), http://www.ubu.com/papers/mccaffery.html, P. 3

[18] McCaffrey, p. 10

[19] OEI 7-8 2001: AFTER LANGUAGE POETRY, 2001 p.1

[20] OEI 7-8 2001: AFTER LANGUAGE POETRY, 2001, p. 2

[21] Marshall McLuhan, CounterBlast (designed by Harley Parker, (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Steward Ltd., 1969), p. 16

[22] Glazier, Loss Pequeño. "Net Losses: From OL3: open letter on lines online (2000)", http://www.ubu.com/papers/ol/glazier.html

[23] Christopher Horrocks, Baurillard and the New Millenium, (Duxford, Cambridge, U.K, 1999), p. 40

[24] McLuhan and Fiore, p. 63

[25] Riddell, Alistair "Data Culture Generation: After Content, Process as Aesthetic" in Leonardo 34.4 (2001) 337-343, p.337

[26] Riddell, p. 337

[27] Riddell, p. 338

[28] Theall, p. 147

[29] Theall, p. 147

[30] Ong, 129

[31] Ong, p. 129

[32] Cavell, Richard. McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography, (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press Inc, 2002), p. 136

[33] Cavell, p. 137

[34] Cavell, p. 140

[35] Cavell, 142

[36] McCaffrey, p. 1

[37] Cavell, p. 138

[38] Theall, "Virtual McLuhan" p. 145.

[39] Cavell, p. 144

[40] Theall, p. 145

[41] Theall, p. 146

[42] Ong, 26

[43] Ong, 26

[44] Ong, 26

[45] Ong, 129

[46] McCaffrey, p. 203

[47] McLuhan, "Essential", p. 247

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