

## After the Global Village

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### Abstract:

This paper offers a retrospective of the images McLuhan used after the global village to characterize and illuminate the evolution of late-twentieth century media landscapes.

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The McLuhan revival of the 1990s saw the retrieval of Marshall McLuhan and his transformation from post-pop-icon into the “spin doctor for the digital revolution, the ghostly booster for virtual communities and the prophet and patron saint of business on the internet” (Ostrow xvii). Despite Kroker’s earlier assessment, that McLuhan’s works are obsolesced by the new digital environment, McLuhan’s famous phrases began operating as “globally recognizable jingles for the work of multinationals trading in digital commodities” (Genosko 10).<sup>1</sup> Since the revival, McLuhan’s phrases have been fetishized within the academy too. In *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics, Media and Communications*, for example, Danesi reduces McLuhan’s legacy to

that of a communication “theorist,” who argued that electronic technology has transformed the world into a “global village,” best known for coining the phrase “the medium is the message” (140). Danesi’s treatment of McLuhan is not an anomaly. Since the revival, McLuhan has rarely been afforded escape velocity from his aphorisms and phrases. His critics and commentators all too frequently seek to *encounter* him through the lens of one or more of his famous aphorisms or phrases—treating the medium solely in terms of a fragment of his message.

The fragment of McLuhan’s “message” invoked above all others has been the image of the global village (Dery). Several of McLuhan’s critics and commentators have sought to leverage the global village to inform and focus their respective critiques. Andreas Huyssen, for example, makes the global village an integral part of a reading experiment created to critique McLuhan. According to Huyssen, a truer account of McLuhan’s “media theology” can be seen if we substitute Holy Spirit for electricity; God for Medium; and planet united under Rome for global village (183). Fawcett too hangs his commentary on McLuhan off the global village. He uses the phrase to launch a critique of McLuhan’s: apparent optimism for television, over-estimation of the pedagogic possibilities of video, propensity to ignore criticism, Christianity, inadequate diagnosis of re-tribalization, misreading of James Joyce, use of overstatement and/or hyperbole, relationship to the wealthy, carelessness, belief in an orderly world, and ignorance of finance and economics.

McLuhan’s global village has also been a prominent feature in several discourses catalyzed by the explosive growth of the Internet. Antecol, for

example, looks at the media and communications scene of the late-1990s through the lens of McLuhan's global village. The crux of his inquiry is "are we there yet?" Has McLuhan's "prophecy" been realized? Tom Wolfe's approach is not dissimilar. According to Wolfe, McLuhan's global village is the first and most memorable name for the digital universe he predicted. Cohen offers a similar assessment. He argues that while McLuhan's acoustic space was not, precisely, cyberspace it appears to have been close enough for those within the sphere of its development to have made the links to McLuhan and to foster the popular belief that McLuhan had prophetically anticipated a world that bore witness to his vision. Levinson too, effectively, concurs. Dery, however, takes a slightly different approach. According to Dery, the global village is a utopian vision. He argues that McLuhan's global village has arrived but it only bears a passing resemblance to McLuhan's paradise. Ergo, McLuhan is wide of the mark in his contention of what electric technology has meant for Western man. Shafer, by contrast, argues that we are not there yet—McLuhan's global village has not arrived. However, he remains optimistic, arguing that the digital natives are bringing it into existence. Browne and Fishwick also argue that McLuhan's utopian and retrospective vision of the global village failed to materialize. So too does Eco. For Eco McLuhan's global village is a fallacy: "we are certainly living in an electronic global world but it is not a village, if by village one means a human settlement where people are directly interacting with each other" (304).

Today, McLuhan's image of the global village still haunts discourse about techno-culture, globalization, and the contemporary drama of audience participation in their own participation.<sup>2</sup> Fragments of his "message" are also

being redeployed in relation to web 2.0 and the rise of social media—a fact that will undoubtedly come to light under the retrospective gaze of academic discourse in the coming years in much the same way as the McLuhan revival of the 1990s was only acknowledged at the end of the decade. Unfortunately, this emerging discourse replays many of the patterns and themes established during the McLuhan revival of the 1990s, including the tendency to avoid any real encounter with what McLuhan *actually* said about the global village, the nature of his own work, and the context(s) for the image. Subsequently, clichés about McLuhan—the theorist-prophet-utopian—abound and the focus remains resolutely on what McLuhan was *thought* or *felt* to have said. As Fawcett notes (and this may also apply to much of his own commentary), “most of what we ascribe to McLuhan is in our fevered imaginations and specious interpretations” (p. 210). The effects are narcotic.

Here, on the on the occasion of the centenary since McLuhan’s birth, I intend to go against the grain. This paper offers a retrospective of the global village that looks to reveal and engage with what McLuhan *actually* said. This paper also documents the succession of images McLuhan used after the global village to characterize the media landscapes of the late-twentieth century. Consequently, the immediate value of this essay is historical, but it is history in a new key. This paper is informed by archival material from the Marshall McLuhan papers held at the National Archives, Canada. Some of this material will receive comment for the first time here. This paper also re-presents McLuhan in a new light, and opens up the later-McLuhan of the 1970s as a figure for critical attention.

### **A Small Village-Like Affair**

The immediate context for McLuhan's first use of the global village was his work with the Seminar in Culture and Communication, an inter-disciplinary research project in communication at the University of Toronto, and the *Explorations* journal. It appears that, throughout the 1950s, McLuhan was trying to communicate with an elite audience. In many respects the spirit of what he was trying to achieve for Media Studies and Communication is expressed in a letter to Edward T. Hall:

Reading Heisenberg has made me feel that my media studies are at the state that nuclear studies had reached in 1924. But my heart sinks, because those nuclear studies were being urged forward by eager teams, and media studies enjoys no such support at all. But I am bold to say that many of the same techniques and concepts are needed for advancing media studies as were used for nuclear studies. But there is the huge difference, that media studies involve human lives far more profoundly than nuclear studies ever have done, or ever can do. (n.pag)<sup>3</sup>

At the seminar most of the work McLuhan and his colleagues were engaged in took the form of creative exploration in and through dialogue. Most of the discoveries of the group were made in oral discussion and in the process of uttering ideas and observations. Interlocution at the speed-of-speech appears to have been necessary to get seminar participants beyond a book-orientated, conceptual framework and into that not-so-silent sea of the contemporary communications scene (See "Report on the Ford Seminar at University of Toronto").

In several respects, the dialogue at the seminar can be likened to how McLuhan describes the practice of the scholastics who “went to work, operations research style to solve new problems by banging old clichés together” (“Communism: Hard and Soft” 2).<sup>4</sup> Alternately, the dialogue could also be likened to the praxis of jazz musicians whose performances are composed by improvisation, by way of transforming a store of formulae according to the need of the moment. Seminar participants, looking to discuss the present—the contemporary communications and media scene—banged together old clichés to find the name-form and character of the new and as yet unnamed, invisible *ground*. In other words, the participants in the Seminar sought to use the language of the recently obsolesced environment(s) to do for media landscapes what Theophrastus had done millennia prior for moral characters.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this context—using the old as a bridge and/or means to discovering the new—that McLuhan appropriated a way of characterizing the communication(s) scene from P. Wyndham Lewis’ “history of the future” (E. McLuhan; McLuhan “A Critical Discipline,” 94), and raised the term to its “first intensity” (Theall 26, 244, 103).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, one of the earliest expressions in print can be found in “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters.” Here McLuhan notes how: “today with instantaneous global communications the entire planet is, for purposes of inter-communication, a village rather than a vast imperial network” (162). Similarly, McLuhan writes to Edward Morgan in 1959:

Another aspect of the same kind of patterning in the Electronic Age which results from instantaneous flows of information from every part of a situation, from every quarter, is that we develop a new attitude to space, a

new attitude to time. The globe becomes a very small village-like affair.  
(253)

Lewis' image, replayed by McLuhan, is used to characterize the media and communication(s) situation during the era of our electric extensions that amplify the voice and speech—the telegraph, telephone and radio—and juxtapose or set in immediate proximity distant geographical locations. It is not a theory.

Trednick is wrong to suggest that the global village is a theory that can be cast against and critiqued alongside other “theories” such as Toffler’s future shock, Bell’s “post industrial society”, Lyotard’s “post-modern condition”, Fukuyama’s “end of history”, Castells’ “network society”, Cairncross’ “death of distance”, Taylor’s “moment of complexity, and Keen’s “cult of the amateur” (22). Rather, it is an empirical observation of a situation that by the 1950s had been made readily visible as *figure* by the new *ground* of Television (which had also retrieved the orality/literacy vortex as a contemporary concern). Whether the image is realized at the level of any single individuals’ experience is beside the point—a fact McLuhan stressed via his use of Jacques Maritain’s reflections on the image in *The Range of Reason* (See “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters” 154).

Perhaps, McLuhan’s use of Lewis’ image of the global village can be better illustrated in terms of his use of the obsolesced orality/literacy dichotomy that was also a significant feature of the dialogue at the Seminar. In the 1950s McLuhan and the other participants in the Seminar saw that the new situation or communication(s) environment was not leaning too heavily on any one means of encoding experience and representing reality. McLuhan notes: “I would draw

your attention to the fact that with the radio, movie and television, the word has become audible once more" ("The New Criticism" 11). The newly audible word, McLuhan illustrates elsewhere, (re-)creates the same ambivalent relation to the written word and pictorial image that underpinned the metaphysical poets ("Symbolist Communication"). Further, the moving image *with* sound, as encountered in film and television, created a break with: "our four century preoccupation with print" that "has fixed our attention on so limited an aspect of the media" ("A Historical Approach to the Media" 106). Consequently, McLuhan appears to have apprehended that both orality and literacy, which have at various times been *grounds*, became visible as *figures*. That is, they were no longer constitutive but where everywhere visible. In other words, using McLuhan's idiom, the modalities of orality and literacy were obsolesced. Obsolescence, McLuhan notes in "The Global Theatre," is not the end. Rather, obsolescence means the beginning. Obsolescence is where the audience are at: "people always live in obsolescent frames of mind and obsolescent technologies" (3). McLuhan makes his procedure this explicit in *Gutenberg Galaxy*: "That print increasingly hypnotized the Western world is nowadays the theme of all historians of art and science alike, because we no longer live under the spell of the isolated visual sense" (183). McLuhan also makes it clear in the *Galaxy* that contemplating the obsolesced orality/literacy dichotomy is something of a doorway that opens out on an exploration of the new: "We have not yet begun to ask under what new spell we exist. In place of spell it may be more acceptable to say "assumptions" or "parameters" or "frame of reference" (Ibid).<sup>7</sup>

## Global Village

Another dimension to McLuhan's use of the global village, that became increasingly apparent in the 1960s, was that it ought to be considered as an element of his artistry. If we take what McLuhan said about his own work seriously then his use of global village is part of his operations as metaphysician, satirist, and artist. Ergo, the phrase needs to be considered in relation to the problem(s) of trying to create and communicate with a general audience, which entails moving away from his early concerns with an elite and trying to communicate with an audience that are "always one phase back ... never environmental" (McLuhan, Letter to Charles B. Silberman n.pag), without compromising his ability to "renew human awareness of itself and of the world" (McLuhan qtd. in Buxton 191).

In the 1960s McLuhan submitted his early works, including his insights and revelations regarding the global village, to the kind of editing and revision not dissimilar to that which he outlined in "Pound, Eliot, and the Rhetoric of *The Waste Land*." Here McLuhan provides an account of the "Caesarean operation," the path and process by which Eliot, working with Pound's guidance, cut out the narrative sections of his poetry in a quest for greater compression and "to enhance discontinuity and intensity" (573). Cutting out the narrative between the polarities globe and village appears to have allowed McLuhan to mime the action of the contemporary communications scene:

After three thousand years of specialist explosion and of increasing specialism and alienation in the technological extensions of our bodies, our world has become *compressional* by dramatic reversal. As electrically *contracted*, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. (*Understanding Media* 5. Emphasis mine)

This mimetic dimension of McLuhan's art and how the very life of his images and/or phrases become a window on the evolution and effects of our media landscapes has, perhaps, been given the best treatment by Schwartz. In "A Second Way to Read *War and Peace* in *The Global Village* Or McLuhan Made Linear" Schwartz notes that McLuhan's style is an attempt to contend with complexity and an attempt to parallel, with the written word, the total impact of the new electronic media on our day. In contrast with McLuhan, circa 1954, Schwartz argues that the later McLuhan drives for energy and compression. Radio, TV and computer all have characteristics in common—information at the speed of light, which blurs details, and cause-effect relationships are drastically compressed so as to appear simultaneous. McLuhan, Schwartz states, uses the same process for the basis of his style in his quest to achieve "absolute essentiality" (8). McLuhan condenses, compresses, and aphorizes to present multi-perspective montages of the same phenomena. Clarity, Schwartz adds, is sacrificed for effects.

In the 1960s we can see further changes in how McLuhan is using the image. McLuhan deploys the phrase as a probe to incite global thinking and to gesture in the direction of "total interdependence, and super imposed coexistence" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 31), and the end of two thousand years of

“specialist and fragmented civilization of centre-margin structure”

(*Understanding Media* 93). He also uses the phrase in titles of books (presumably for marketing purposes) and in his correspondence. He also takes care to point out that the global village is no paradise:

The more you create village conditions, the more discontinuity and division and diversity. The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquility were the properties of the global village. It has more spite and envy. The spaces and times are pulled out from between people. A world in which people encounter each other in depth all the time. The tribal-global village is far more divisive — full of fighting — than any nationalism ever was. Village is fission, not fusion, in depth all the time. (McLuhan “The Hot and Cool Interview” 57–58)

Rather, the global village is an illness and/or state of hypnosis, hallucination or manic states arising from the ceaseless pressure on the global human community to create a consensus (or ratio) among dilated and/or extended senses (“Article for ‘Encounter’” 22). The cure for this illness, McLuhan prescribes elsewhere, is the creation of a “global city” as a centre for village margins. The parameters of the task, he notes, are no means positional. Rather, he states: “perhaps the city needed to coordinate and concert the distracted sense programs of our global village will have to be built by computers in the way in which a big airport has to coordinate multiple flights” (*Letters of Marshall McLuhan* 278).<sup>8</sup> In view of McLuhan’s warnings here it still something of a mystery how Barbrook, having undertaken an extensive survey of McLuhan’s commentators, was able to say that: “More than anything else, McLuhanism was identified with this prediction that the Net was going to create the new—and much better—social system of the global village” (76).

## Global Theatre

The global village could not remain a viable part of a critical idiom for long. McLuhan was well aware of this given the West's unrelenting commitment to the full extension of communications by every means. Subsequently, by the mid-late 1960s, in view of the emerging satellite-computer matrix that usurped "nature," McLuhan responded with a new image of "the globe" as having been transformed "into a repertory theatre to be programmed" (McLuhan & Watson 9–10).

When Sputnik went around the planet in 1957 the earth became enclosed in a man-made environment and became thereby an "art" form. The globe became a theatre enclosed in a proscenium arch of satellites. From that time the "audience" or the population of the planet became actors in a new sort of theatre. Mallarmé had thought that "the world exists to end in a book." It turned out otherwise. It has taken on the character of theatre or playhouse. Since Sputnik the entire world has become a single sound-light show. Even the business world has now taken over the concept of "performance" as a salient criterion. ("Roles, Masks and Performances" 22)

It is difficult to get a sense of the nature of the break McLuhan's new image represents from the global village. The rupture is not clear-cut. In one sense McLuhan's new image represents a minor move that shifts a reader's attention from the quest for identity through violence in a world of rapidly shifting technologies, as expressed in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, to the theater of the streets and sites where the quest for identity was being acted out. In another sense, however, the new image represents quite a radical change and it draws his reader's attention to the new constitutive pattern of communication—the full verbi-voco-visual spectrum that is gestural, programmed, and

environmental. That said, however, McLuhan had discussed both of these issues under the banner of his reflections on the global village: “The electronic culture of the global village confronts us with a situation in which entire societies inter-communicate by a sort of “macroscopic gesticulation,” which is not speech at all in the ordinary way” (*War and Peace in the Global Village* 17).

Perhaps, a better grasped of the break and nature of the new image can be had in view of McLuhan’s failed bids to create a number of theatrical productions. While none of them were ever performed, considering the theatrical productions McLuhan conceptualized permits us to re-trace the path from global village to global theatre from a different vantage. The minor digression also brings to light another factor that we must consider when dealing with McLuhan; his writings are only a small sub-set of his total outputs and activities. McLuhan, as with every writer, then and now, who has genuinely confronted the challenges that come with “theorizing” and/or writing about the “global” and our contemporary media and communication(s) scene, was well aware that there is terrain and transformations of a kind that no prose writer can approach.

McLuhan’s earliest meditations on using performance as a critical vehicle can be found in *The Mechanical Bride*. Here he notes how Broadway would soon be ripe for a Rodgers and Hammerstein type musical on the subject of male and female. Nearly a decade later, at the height of the Cold-War, McLuhan set about writing just such a play/musical. In place of male and female he uses the U.S.A and the U.S.S.R. It is a global village era play. McLuhan’s notes that he regards the

choice of the form ideal because the musical is the only form that can cope with the speed at which both countries have had to reverse roles and attitudes. While we do not have the title of McLuhan's proposed Musical, we know from his documents that it was to hinge on the basic dynamic whereby the West is moving East and the East moving West. All the thrills and surprises of the musical, McLuhan holds, would arise from this dynamic. McLuhan adds that to handle these serious matters in a Musical would provide both illumination and catharsis for a frantic and anxious world ("Idea and Outline for a Musical to Concern U.S.S.R and U.S.A" n.pag.).

In the 1970s McLuhan tried again to write a Broadway drama for stage and/or screen called "Every Man in his Media (or Medium)" about the "global theatre." Here we see that stage becomes a vehicle to communicate the insights of the previous decade to a general audience still one if not more stages or phases behind. In a letter to Tom Wolfe trying to solicit his help McLuhan states that the project would be possible given that he had just discovered that Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humors* provides the natural model for such a play on media.<sup>9</sup> "Everyman in his Media (or Medium)," says McLuhan, would have various media masquerade as real life cultures of differing stature, tempers, and humors. That is to say McLuhan's script entails all the previous media forms or landscapes, formerly *grounds*, acting as *figures* under the new proscenium arch of computer-satellite orchestration. McLuhan adds that the naturally occurring conflict and interaction between various media themselves would provide the production with the full variety of dramatic effects.

## Beyond Science Fiction

By the 1970s it appears that McLuhan deemed that new environmental conditions had also rendered the image of the global theatre inadequate. In response McLuhan set about revealing how the global theatre was in the process of shrinking, and world-sized “single sound-light show” was being transformed into a “single household with many monitors and conflicting programs” (McLuhan & Nevitt 45). It also appears that McLuhan deemed that merely one or two images—global village and/or global theatre—could no longer suffice to adequately characterize the media and communication(s) landscapes of the period. How can one describe and discuss what amounts to a single, uninterrupted action—the “single sound-light show”—if it is not possible to look the situation through the lens of another, if there is no “other,” no outside of the singular action? As the McLuhan’s note at the conclude of *Laws of Media*, the situation they were confronted with was the new and “ever uncharted and unchartable milieu” (239). Consequently, McLuhan offered a multiplicity of provisional images and cancelled or negated these images. In other words, McLuhan appears to have deemed that he needed to mime the process he referred to as the “rapid succession of innovations as ersatz anti-environments” (McLuhan & Parker 30–31). In the following I will briefly look at three of his most striking and/or frequently used images.

### 1. The Screen

The first of McLuhan’s three main images he used after the global theatre is the innumerable pulsations of the TV screen itself. The screen, he asserts in “A

Media Approach to Inflation”, is the most appropriate analogy and means of grasping the discontinuous simultaneous pattern of the new situation, both in economics and society, because “the entire world of electric information now presents pulsating intervals for the intervention and involvement of the world population” (n.pag). To amplify and supplement this image McLuhan indicates that all former hidden environments were pushing forward into full visibility: “When the ground moves too fast, a condition endemic to the electronic society, only figure is left” (McLuhan and Powers 99). And these figures, as he stresses by way of the image of the screen, are pulsating, flashing or oscillating. Further elaboration can be found in his “Article on Death” and *The Medieval Environment: Yesterday or Today*.” Here McLuhan suggests that, by the 1970s, we had gone beyond the state outlined by T. S. Eliot in “Hollow Men”. The age of boredom, which had earlier supplanted the age of anxiety, had given way to an age of rapid oscillation or phase shifting (pulsating intervals) between ecstasy and the thrills of widespread festive celebration (“*The Medieval Environment: Yesterday or Today*”) and paranoia and panic terrors. Paranoia, McLuhan implies, is the necessary adjunct and shadow of “ecology,” and it is evoked when there is a pervasive feeling that every kind of change affects everything else (“*Violence of the Media*”). He also notes elsewhere that there is a general awareness that the technological game is out of control (*Living at The Speed of Light – The 80’s*).

## **2. Discarnate Man—Organs Without Bodies**

The second image for consideration here is McLuhan’s image of man as discarnate and/or organs-without-bodies.<sup>10</sup> In “*Violence of the Media*” McLuhan

attributed the creation of this state to the “media’s” ability to inflict (rather than depict) violence by way of instant invasion and deprivation of their users physical bodies as they are merged into a network of extensions of their nervous system). Or, as McLuhan writes to J. E. Skinner:

The deepest effect of the telephone (as of radio and TV) is that the user has no physical body. In these electric media "the sender is sent". Twentieth century man— electronic man— has now lived minus a physical body for some decades. In fact, he has become discarnate, and has become accustomed to substituting an abstract image for his physical being. The telephone is the most prominent of these discarnating instruments, and underpins all the effects that go with the discarnate state. Discarnate man has no relation to Natural law, and thus has no private identity and no relation to natural morality. The moral anarchy of our time is directly related to our electric technology, which is totally overlooked by the commentators on the impact of the telephone. (n.pag)

In one sense, if we follow McLuhan’s logic, he is presenting a situation where the boundaries of the physical body have been transgressed skin. McLuhan elaborates in a letter to Clare Booth-Luce:

On the telephone, or on the air, man is in every sense discarnate, existing as an abstract image, a *figure* without a body. The Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland* is a kind of parallel to our state ... As electric information moved at the speed of light, man is a nobody. (543)

The Cheshire Cat, like the pulsating TV screen that draws attention to light-speed data flows, fluidity, and the hyper-real, flickers in and out of visibility before disappearing slowly, starting with its tail, finishing with only a disembodied grin. Here McLuhan is evoking the themes of disappearance, fragmentation, the collapse of identity (at least as it was formerly constituted) and drawing

attention to the new emergent possibilities for autonomous hybridization of our extended organs.

The image of discarnate man or organs-without-bodies as per the Cheshire Cat, also draws attention to the profoundly paradoxical nature of the new situation. On one hand there is a drive for fragmentation, yet on the other McLuhan gestures towards the simultaneous drive towards a state of total merger and a much deeper state of involvement than the intimacy of the village or even the intimacy of the role players on a small stage (where some sense of difference is persevered). McLuhan elaborates in a letter to Father Shook:

Electric man is discarnate man, sharing a consciousness or at least a consciousness, as fully as any native tribe. Information moved at electric speeds also sends the sender instantly. Not just the broadcaster but his public go to Peking and return, and everybody becomes totally involved in everybody. (n.pag.)

### **3. New Religious Age**

The last of McLuhan's significant images for the post-global theatre situation discussed here is his heralding of a great new "religious age" ("Electric Consciousness and the Church" 88). On one level, McLuhan is merely continuing to develop the "traditional" parodies of Alexander Pope and James Joyce. On another, however, he being very literal, acting as the "antenna of his race," observing and reporting the experiences of his age in much the same way as he had with the global village. In some respects it is easy to see how he concluded that the last decade of his life was a religious age. It is a logical conclusion in the age of advertising, when man began living "not by bread alone but by slogans

also” (McLuhan, *Culture is Our Business* 42). Further items of inventory that might inform his proclamation could readily be gleaned from the permanent place horoscopes have found for themselves in newspapers. Or perhaps from his viewing of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (a film noted for its treatment of technologies coming “alive” and spinning out of human control). Arthur C. Clarke, who collaborated with Stanley Kubrick on the project, has since noted: “Quite early in the game I went around saying, not very loudly, ‘M-G-M [Metro–Goldwyn–Mayer] doesn't know this yet, but they're paying for the first \$10,000,000 religious movie””(249).

McLuhan can also be read as using the image of the new religious age to draw attention to new patterns of human inter-association in what was formerly known as the “political” arena. As I have already noted, McLuhan saw discarnate man as having no necessary relation to Natural law, and by extension no relation to natural morality. Rather, as he notes to Edward Wakin, discarnate man “retains and perhaps intensifies his relation to ‘supernatural law”” (n.pag). “Supernatural law”, he continues, becomes the only recourse and “means of cohesion, coherence and meaning.” On these grounds McLuhan notes elsewhere that “some glorious heresies” will emerge from the age of discarnate man. The theology of discarnate man, he says, is going to be (or is already — they may already be here and we haven't noticed) extremely transcendental and Gnostic and “it's not going to have much place for the human being as incarnate spirit” (“Interview with Marshall McLuhan”, n.pag).<sup>11</sup> In view of the situation McLuhan went on record stating that Lewis Mumford might “be quite correct in seeing the wedding of the old mechanical hardware and the new electric software as

creating a mega-machine of the Aztec or Pyramid type” (“The Case of the Unhappy Medium” 17).

## Conclusion

Writing to Ezra Pound in 1951 McLuhan notes: “the trouble with George Orwell (and duffers like him) is that they satirize something that happened 50 years ago as a threat to the future” (n.pag). Perhaps, if McLuhan were alive today he would have similar things to say about his old work, and even harsher things to say about anyone still using his image of the global village as diagnosis or signpost to the contemporary media and communications scene. If we accept the author’s intent to be the most significant dimension of the meaning of the phrase (and this is not without its problems), then McLuhan’s global village characterized the media and communication(s) environment of the radio era *before* television. The phrase *was* useful insofar as it gestured in the direction of a situation that could be seen and understood, and could serve as a component of a shared language in a dialogue between some of the top minds of the 1950s probing the emerging Television environment. It also served a purpose, a decade later, to communicate with a general audience whose perceptions and sensibility were one stage further back. Beyond these contexts, however, the phrase promotes maximal disorientation, and it is almost 100 solar years out of date.

McLuhan, as I have hopefully demonstrated, knew that the global village was obsolesced by television, and he labored extensively to ensure that his

readers were afforded the linguistic and perceptual tools to apprehend and understand the newer media environments. After the global village McLuhan took his readers beyond the conventional arenas of science fiction (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 32; “Notes on Burroughs” 91). When the planet became parenthesized by a man-made environment, McLuhan left his readers with an image of their extended selves splayed out against galactic space reminiscent of the backdrops for science fiction of a *Star Wars* kind. In the age of the satellite, when images of the big blue planet were being televised, McLuhan saw that the planetary globe was no longer the *ground*. The planet was *figure*. The ground was galactic and globalization was a rear-view mirror image of the situation. After the global theatre McLuhan withdrew even the dark of space, leaving only figures that cannot be adequately visualized. The world of the screen(s) calls attention to information movement at the speed of light and the new, invisible yet constitutive language(s) of code and data—computers talking to computers. With the image of discarnate man or organs-without-bodies McLuhan took his reader even deeper. The “self” has become unrecognizable, no longer bearing any likeness to that skin-bound entity that can be reflected in a mirror. And by heralding a new religious age McLuhan took his readers deeper still, gesturing at the disappearance or etherialisation of matter.<sup>12</sup> The sum of these images, however, could not be resolved into any single unified image with any staying power or certainty as was possible under a one-to-many broadcast situation.

## Notes

1. Kroker's assessment of McLuhan's obsolescence in face of the new digital situation has since been echoed by both Moulthrop and Lanham. A significant counter-point to Kroker's assessment can be found in the work of Stewart Brand. Brand documents how, in the mid-late 1980s, McLuhan had been taken up as an inspiration for inventors, like those at MIT's Media Lab, who were engaged in the design of human-computer interfaces. According to Brand, the revived interest in McLuhan was because he provided a language and ways of thinking about the development of Information and Communications Technologies issues and, ultimately, the question "how will we directly connect our nervous system into the global computer?" (xi).

2. Bill Friend documents how studies of globalization, by Richard Pells and Benjamin Barber, merely reiterate and rework McLuhan's diagnosis made 30 years prior without referencing or acknowledging him ("Global Villages, Global Economies; Rethinking McLuhan" 57-59).

3. Perhaps, it is more accurate to suggest that McLuhan sought to take Media Studies well beyond what happened in the world of physics. In "Typhon in America" McLuhan asserts: "equally obvious to those who have thought of the interrelatedness of things is the fact that physical laws as described by Einstein and Newton are of the utmost triviality beside psychological and spiritual laws" (68).

4. McLuhan also notes here that the scholastics were oral dialoguers who had memorized the basic philosophic components needed in their dialogue. Every scholastic was an encyclopedia of such lore. The scholastic procedure worked at a time when books were too slow. Paradoxically, McLuhan holds, similar conditions pertain in the mid twentieth century for exactly the opposite reasons. “For us there are too many books and they issue too quickly” (“Communism: Hard and Soft” 2).

5. Theophrastus’ systematic approach to character writing, and his thirty portraits of moral types, has exerted an unfathomable influence on letters and literature. Arguably, McLuhan’s characterization of media landscapes, in works such as *Understanding Media*, develops out of and owes a debt to the contributions of Theophrastus. It is also interesting to note that several of the core themes of *Understanding Media* are also themes Theophrastus is known for: warm and cold (hot and cool), and coagulation and melting (implosion and explosion). Theophrastus also wrote extensively about sensuous perception, space, time, causality and various mediums—water, fire and the sea (all of which were also significant concerns for McLuhan).

6. Theall, in his brief history of the phrase, notes that the context for its development was McLuhan’s probings in relation to margins and centers, villages and cities, tribal collectives and democratic individualism. Theall also notes that McLuhan wished he could use the phrase the “global metropolis,” since “‘village’ obviates much of the complexity of the multiculturalism that is a

defining mark of McLuhan's Canada" (33). Unfortunately Theall does elaborate on why McLuhan did not use "global metropolis."

7. McLuhan's treatment of orality and literacy in view of the future (which is our present) goes a long way towards differentiating McLuhan from the others in the so-called Toronto School of Communication with whom he is often paired. It might be more accurate to say that he satirized the figures associated with the Toronto school of communication.

8. Recently, Barevičiūte has argued that the phrase "global city" is a more appropriate phrase for the contemporary media and communications scene/environment than the global village. He does not, however, indicate that he is aware of the sense of the phrase McLuhan uses it here.

9. McLuhan, perhaps, forgets to mention to Wolfe that he had, for some time, referred to *Finnegans Wake* as a drama or play where the characters are the media themselves.

10. McLuhan's image here, that I have called "organs without bodies," is not to be confused with Deleuze's "body without organs" as expressed in *The Logic of Sense*, or as developed with Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

11. A topic for further research would be to look at McLuhan's infrequent meditations on how the "media" themselves are assuming a character analogous

to the un-moved mover or deity as developed by his colleague, Tony Schwartz (See McLuhan's letter to J. M. Davey).

12. Arguably, McLuhan's observations are clearly visible in recent research that deals with the wider effects of ubiquitous radio frequency identification.

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