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Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding of Media and its Fulfillment in the Incarnation of Christ

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Abstract

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a professor of English literature at the University of Toronto who is best recognized for his pioneering and often controversial studies in the field of communications. He became popularly known as a prophet of the “electronic age,” whose works were characterized by his use of witty “McLuhanisms” such as “the medium is the message” and “the global village” to describe the interaction between people, media, and culture. However, by the time of his death, much of his work had come to be viewed as a passé intellectual fad.

There has been a recent renewal of interest in McLuhan’s work from a variety of different perspectives, particularly in the fields of communications and media studies, but little scholarship has been devoted to investigation of the intellectual foundations of McLuhan’s thought. When these are more closely examined, three primary formative influences will be brought to light as manifesting themselves in the manner in which McLuhan approached the study of media: modern literary humanism, pre-modern Christian philosophy, and the Catholic faith. Having been formed by these influences, McLuhan attempted to come to an understanding of media under the aspect of its formal causality, as revealed by its effects upon human cultures and persons. He then attempted to communicate this understanding to his audience by re-presenting his observations in a manner which would shake his audience from preconceived biases and open it to real insight into the relationship between man and media.

It is the intent of this honors thesis to illustrate the cogency of McLuhan’s manner of approach to media, and that this approach is informed by more foundational disposition towards reality as intelligibly dynamic. This thesis will argue that in light of this disposition, McLuhan’s understanding of media finds fulfillment in the Incarnation of Christ, a fulfillment which must re-presented in the way in which Catholics evangelize in the electronic age.

(313 words)
Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a professor of English literature at the University of Toronto, is best known for his pioneering work in the field of communications. He is particularly notorious for his pithy statements concerning the nature of media, the most notable being “the medium is the message.”\(^1\) In the context of the cultural milieu of the 1960s, McLuhan was popularly acclaimed for being a prophet and herald of the “electronic age,” but was equally reviled by many in academia for the same reason. However, by the time of his death in 1980, his work had receded from the popular spotlight and from the attention of academic critique. His once provocative statements no longer carried the same rhetorical impact, and they took on the character of dated clichés.\(^2\)

It is not the intent of this thesis to attempt to defend, on a literal level, Marshall McLuhan’s particular statements and diagnoses concerning the effects of particular kinds of media. Such statements were made in particular rhetorical contexts and were not intended by McLuhan as magisterial pronouncements to be accepted univocally and universally. Rather, the purpose of this essay is to undertake a retrieval of McLuhan’s thought in the light of its intellectual foundations. It will attempt to illustrate that at the heart of McLuhan’s thought lies a profoundly catholic approach to reality which is informed by literary humanism, Thomistic epistemology, and the Catholic faith. When these foundations are considered, we can recognize McLuhan as bringing a cogent and dynamic approach to media which allows him to gain insight into the nature of human communication, and the relationships between media, persons, and society.

Above all, Marshall McLuhan was a scholar of letters who dedicated his life to the penetration of the richness of the written and printed word.\(^3\) In particular, McLuhan was schooled in the modern literary tradition of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound. This literary formation would greatly inform McLuhan’s approach to reality as a whole, thereby
shaping his manner of studying and understanding media. As Eric McLuhan notes in his introduction to *The Medium and the Light*, Marshall McLuhan was trained in the school of practical criticism. In this way of approaching literature, the reader is required to “perform texts and so find the voice that utters them…the experience of performing a poem or passage supplies the basis of understanding and of analysis.” In practical criticism, the text is not to be approached in a purely ‘scientific’ manner; it is not considered as a dead, static object which is held in complete separation from the knower and reduced to clear and distinct parts. Rather, the work is beheld as a living, dynamic reality to which one must be conformed in order to understand it. Practical criticism echoes what Marshall McLuhan identifies as the pre-Platonic practice of mimesis, whereby the audience of a theatrical act would ‘put on’ and become psychically the characters of the act. The act of mimesis was understood as a means of arriving at insight into the meaning of the characters’ words and actions, since the audience would be able to identify personally with the characters involved.

It is true that the practical-critical or mimetic approach to literary understanding could be interpreted as a total descent into subjectivity, entailing a loss of the ability to interpret the literary work in any objective manner. However, if this were the inevitable result of a mimetic approach, then practical criticism would be useless as a means of literary analysis, which presupposes the literary work as an object of rational inquiry. Rather, literary mimesis signifies that a kind of humility is necessary in the approach to literature as an object of inquiry. This humility recognizes the priority of the object of understanding in relation to one’s own desire to comprehend it. It recognizes that understanding of a work, while requiring an analysis of its individual parts, involves a vision of the dynamic whole of the work, which can only occur when one is conformed to the work. There is a definite spiritual element whereby the work is
recognized as a source of revelation. In this spiritual context, literary analysis is an attempt to appropriate, as a knowing subject, an understanding of that revelation as objectively rooted in reality, manifesting itself in a dynamic way. McLuhan notes that such spiritual openness was characteristic of the patristic and medieval exegetes, who approached both Scripture and nature as books, written by God, which were effusive of God’s revelation.9

There is a definite analogy between a person’s approach to literature and a person’s approach to reality, which is evidenced by the exegetes’ approach to nature in a manner analogous to the book of Scripture. If one dedicates one’s life to the pursuit of understanding literature, as McLuhan had, and is formed to pursue this understanding in a specific manner, then this formation will undoubtedly manifest itself in one’s disposition towards reality as a whole. This is especially taking into consideration that in the understanding of literature to which McLuhan subscribed, literature is not understood in isolation or separation from the breadth of reality, but in relation to it and as a modality of it.

When such a kind of literary approach is taken to reality, there is an implicit willingness to enter into a kind of understanding that goes beyond the univocal.10 In the study of literature, it is readily apparent that there is more to a work than the literal signification of words and sentences. The literal level is necessary as a first encounter with the work, but it is not sufficient as a level of analysis. It must act as a gateway to deeper levels of meaning, both intended and unintended by the author. Again, such an approach was characteristic of the patristic and medieval scholars who interpreted Scripture, and by analogy all of nature, by way of multiple levels of exegesis.11 When there is an openness to literature and to reality in this way, there is a recognition that that which we seek to understand cannot always be understood in clear and distinct terms. There is an acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty as being to some extent inherent in whatever is being
studied, where this ambiguity and uncertainty is not interpreted as betokening a sort of irrationality, but rather a kind of effusiveness which is mysterious in relation to us. Consequently, there is an acceptance of paradox as being expressive of a kind of rationality which cannot be apprehended in univocal modes of awareness.\textsuperscript{12} From McLuhan’s perspective, in order for us to enter into and understand the dynamism of reality, we cannot confine ourselves to a purely scientific approach, but must take a literary approach.

As outlined by the school of practical criticism and the pre-Platonic act of mimesis, such a literary approach necessitates personal participation in the reality which one desires to study. However, McLuhan would argue, many people, if not most, are disinclined from such participation due to pre-existing personal and cultural biases, and a desire to remain completely detached from the object of study. Such disinclinations, in McLuhan’s mind, create a kind of somnambulism which prevents people from participating in a reality which may be directly in front of them. Thus, for McLuhan, one critical role of literature is to jolt people from their somnambulism and invite them into participation. As a man of letters, McLuhan took it upon himself personally to do so, which explains his unconventional manner of delivery, both on the public stage and in his major written works.

In addition to making somewhat bombastic claims embedded in short, pithy statements, McLuhan structured his major works in “mosaic” form. Instead of attempting to organize paragraphs and chapters to form a continuous development of argument, he treated each paragraph, section, or chapter as a “probe” which would address the main theme of the work from a different perspective.\textsuperscript{13} Each probe would address a specific preconception which McLuhan desired to challenge, and then suggest, either implicitly or explicitly, a radically new way of approaching the issue which would not destroy the preconception but reorient it
decisively. Taken as an entirety, a work consisting of these probes would constitute a mosaic.\textsuperscript{14} In the mosaic, the object or theme of the work, such as print technology in \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy}, is re-presented in a manner which does not destroy its ordered intelligibility, but allows this ordered intelligibility to be perceived by the reader in more depth and breadth than before, when the reader’s supposed familiarity with the theme had prevented full perception of it.\textsuperscript{15} The reader is presented with individual pieces whose relations to the others at first appear ambiguous, but once they are beheld in their entirety, the reader is able to grasp relations between them which were always implicit. The grasping of these relations in the context of the whole constitutes insight, which McLuhan hoped to inspire through his works.

According to McLuhan, the subjects with which he dealt in his major works, such as print technology and the newly emerging electronic media, had become cultural clichés.\textsuperscript{16} For McLuhan, the notion of cliché is not limited to verbal expressions, but encompasses any commonplace object or phenomenon which is so often encountered that its inherent meaning, dynamism, and intelligibility is ignored.\textsuperscript{17} McLuhan saw technology as analogous to literary clichés, which were literary symbols, motifs, and storylines which had become so familiar and recurrent that a perception of their inner depth had been lost. Just as he believed that contemporary literature needed to “retrieve” and re-present old clichés in a manner which broadcast their inner potency and meaning, so he also believed that the study of media needed to “retrieve” particular forms of technology as cultural clichés and re-present them accordingly, as he tried to do.\textsuperscript{18} Perhaps ironically so, and in a manner likely unforeseen by McLuhan, his own literary treatment and re-presentations of media would themselves transform into cultural clichés, becoming familiar and dismissed as lacking content. However, this has meant that McLuhan’s own work has become material for retrieval by today’s scholars. While this may have been
unanticipated by McLuhan, he would likely not find it surprising, since he considered the cyclic
process of cliché making and retrieval to be constantly occurring.\textsuperscript{19}

While McLuhan’s usage of the techniques of probe, mosaic, and cliché retrieval was
conducted in an innovative way in relation to contemporary media, such techniques had
grounding in literary and artistic tradition. What McLuhan described as probes, including his
provocative statements and seemingly disconnected book chapters, could be interpreted as
analogous to the ancient practice of aphorism, common particularly in the mystical and religious
traditions of Eastern Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. In this manner of teaching, a
master would instruct by way of aphorisms, which would contain multiple levels of intelligible
meaning not necessarily apparent upon first encounter, thus inviting the student into
participational inquiry. In his doctoral dissertation, McLuhan hinted at a need to retrieve this
form of pedagogy in the West, quoting Francis Bacon as stating that “aphorisms, representing a
knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire farther; whereas Methods, carrying the show of a
total, do secure men as if they were at farthest.”\textsuperscript{20} Such a manner of communication was
characteristic of the modern poets and men of letters who became a significant source of
inspiration and formation for McLuhan, particularly Joyce, Eliot and Pound. In addition,
McLuhan found a similar approach in many aspects of modern art, such as symbolism, which
attempted to convey meaning through seemingly disparate and convoluted forms, thereby
inviting their audience into participation.

In taking up such a literary approach to his presentation of media, McLuhan reveals a
teleology of art and literature which is implicit within it. Contrary to some interpretations of
modern art and letters, McLuhan’s interpretation of modern art is indicative that a work of art or
letters is inherently ordered to ends beyond the work itself.\textsuperscript{21} The two principal ends to which he
would assert all art and letters are ordered are the re-presentation of reality itself in its dynamic intelligibility, and the formation of the viewing subject so that the subject may able to grasp the work’s intelligibility. Art, for McLuhan, is a necessity, for despite the fact that all people encounter the same reality in their everyday experience, they do so in a somnambulistic manner; they are closed to its dynamism and so come to perceive it in a static way. It is the task of art, then, to re-present, to magnify reality to its human audience, under a certain aspect, so that the audience is shaken from its slumber, and formed by the art so that it may come to an awareness of reality’s dynamic nature. Having encountered this dynamism, the person may return to everyday experience with the scales fallen from their eyes, so to speak.

In light of this teleology, McLuhan is critical of art which explicitly attempts to make an argument by persuading the audience to accept a particular set of concepts or ideas. This kind of conceptual approach to art, McLuhan would argue, does not understand the nature of art as a perceptual experience, which precedes and informs ideas and concepts. It attempts to place the work of art in a position prior to its audience and to the reality which it must re-present; instead of treating the audience and reality as ends, it treats them as means to conveying a particular argument. An artist who attempts to impose an argument on his audience by means of art does not have the kind of humble disposition towards reality and towards his audience that betokens an artist. Furthermore, attempts to use art as a means of argumentative demonstration rather than as re-presentation generally fail, since demonstration is not in the nature of art, but is proper to other disciplines.

McLuhan is also critical of art which purports to re-present reality in a manner which is wholly objective, that is, through a kind of pictorial realism. This, McLuhan would argue, is impossible, for all art presents reality under a certain aspect. McLuhan gives the example of
Renaissance artists who attempted to portray reality in a wholly objective manner, using mathematical perspective and techniques, but were instead portraying reality under the particular aspect of geometrical precision. Underlying McLuhan’s criticism of Renaissance pictorial realism is the fact that reality as a whole is so vibrant that no single work or kind of art can ever encompass and present it in its totality. Art can rather re-present the dynamism of reality under a particular aspect, forming the audience so that the audience may become receptive to this dynamism in everyday experience. The realism to which art endeavours should not be a static picture realism, but a dynamic realism. When a person is able to encounter reality re-presented in a plurality of ways through art, he becomes more receptive to experience of reality as a whole. McLuhan would argue that of all manners of studying and re-presenting reality, art and literature are able to best re-present the dynamism of reality, through their plurality of forms.

McLuhan’s understanding of art as a re-presentation of reality under a limited aspect gives rise to a literary and analogous understanding of formal causality. On one level, the specific kind of art is the formal cause of a particular work, since it re-presents reality under a particular kind of formal aspect. McLuhan calls works of art metaphors, because for McLuhan, a metaphor is re-presentation of a thing or situation through the form of another. As noted in the previous section, all works of art will be metaphors, for they re-present reality under a particular form. On another level, the intended audience of a work of art constitutes its formal cause, for a work of art should be ordered so that its particular formal re-presentation of reality may be received according to the mode of the recipient. Again, recognition of audience as formal cause is a recognition that art is not to be imposed upon the recipient at the will of the artist, but must be humbly brought forward with an eye to the condition of the audience. An artist begins with the reality which he desires to present to the audience, but then looks to the audience, to see what
kind of effect will arise in the audience under different forms of re-presentation. Consideration of the effect of the art on the audience thus precedes the actual making of the work itself.  

When McLuhan describes the audience as the formal cause, we should not interpret him as meaning that the work of art itself is formally passive in relation to the audience. On the contrary, the artist will conform the work of art to the mode of the audience, so that in turn, the audience may be conformed to the work in a manner which opens the audience to the dynamism of reality in a new way. An analogy would be that in order to form a ball of clay, a potter must conform his hand to the clay, but he does so with an end to forming the ball of clay in a new way. Therefore, the audience can be said to be content or matter in relation to a work of art, insofar as in the beholding of the art the audience will be conformed to what is beheld.

In addition to the relationship between the work of art and the audience, there is also a critical formal relationship between a work of art and those works that precede and succeed it. This is because no work of art is made in a cultural vacuum; it is made in a specific historical and cultural context which is shaped by the forms of art which precede it. In this manner, a work of art is the content of those which precede it. However, by entering into a specific context, a work of art will indeed shape that very context, and thus become a formal cause in relation to all other works of art which succeed it. It will also become a formal cause, in a way, even in relation to those works of art which precede it in time. Having been formed by a new work of art in a particular way, the audience will approach earlier works of art in a different way, and the formational effect these older works of art will have on the audience will be different as a result of the new work. It is for this reason that McLuhan quotes T.S. Eliot as stating that the advent of a new art form will affect all other forms.  

In his elaboration upon the nature of formal causality in art and literature, McLuhan was
appropriating, in a manner specific to his literary discipline, a notion of causality which arose from the realist philosophical epistemology of Aristotle and Aquinas. In fact, McLuhan privately identified himself as sharing in a Thomistic worldview. Indeed, there is a fundamental resonance between the literary realism of McLuhan and the epistemic realism of Aquinas, so that when examined in light of Thomistic epistemic realism, clarification and complementation can be brought about in relation to McLuhan’s understanding of art and media.

In a Thomistic understanding of reality, knowledge begins with an experience of things themselves as they act upon us in their dynamic intelligibility. What this means is that we can gain real insight into the natures of things, because natures are manifested by the specific ways in which things act upon us, for “action follows upon form.” At the same time, we can never completely and exhaustively encompass the dynamism of things, and there will always be more to be understood about the essence of each thing. Thus, in each thing there is a profound intelligibility and at the same time a profound mysteriousness in relation to us. Here a definite parallel can be seen with the work of art, which is intelligible but at the same time continuously revelatory. Therefore, in order to understand reality, a proper disposition or habitus is required in the approach to things on the part of the human knower, as with the artist. At once, the knower must possess a confidence in the intelligibility of things, but at the same time a spirit of humility that his own understanding of this intelligibility will be in some way incomplete in comparison with the fullness of the dynamism of what the thing is. This simultaneity of confidence and humility before reality stands in contrast with the modern scientific approach since Descartes, in which knowledge is sought as clear and all-encompassing understanding, and in which the effort to understand anything else which cannot be understood in these terms is dismissed. As McLuhan understood that this kind of approach, when taken to literature, would constitute a
crippling and arbitrary reduction of our understanding of it, so too does any Thomist recognize that such a modern approach taken to reality as a whole would do the same.  

The humility of a Thomistic approach to reality constitutes a recognition that the thing itself stands as prior to our understanding of it. This is not to say that the human knower is wholly passive in his encounter and understanding of things. Rather, there is a complementarity in the act of human cognition between the human person and that which is known. On the one hand stands the active, intelligible effulgence of things acting upon us, and on the other stands the active drive of the human person to understand reality. On one level, that of potency or first actuality, there is already a conformity between the human person and things insofar as the things have inherent intelligibility, and the human intellect has the potential to be conformed to the intelligibility of all things. In the act of human cognition, this conformity is brought from first to second actuality as the person is conformed to the thing cognized and thereby becomes it cognitionally. Knowing then, is not so much an attempt to grasp something which is external to oneself, but an understanding of something to which one is united in an intimate way. In this way, the act of human cognition could be said to be an act of mimesis. There is another similarity between literary mimesis and cognition insofar as the becoming of that which is known is spoken of in an analogous way; that is to say, it does not entail the dissolution of the subject into the object but retains the real distinction between them. Furthermore, in both literary analysis and human cognition, there is a definite agency on the part of the knower in the understanding of that to which he has been conformed.  

The corresponding agencies of the known and the knower in the act of cognition mean that in a way, the act of cognition is a responsive act on the part of the human knower. The cognitive act begins with the action of the thing known upon the knower which is revelatory of the form or
essence of the thing, so that the thing is made present to the person, by means of the person’s senses, and the person becomes conformed to the thing cognitionally. This conformation is described in Thomistic epistemology as sense cognition, and at this level, there is an emphasis on the agency of the thing known as acting upon the person, thereby being both a formal and an efficient cause in relation to the human person considered cognitively.\(^{39}\) The thing acts as a formal cause insofar as it is that to which the human intellect is conformed, and an efficient cause insofar as its prior act draws the human intellect from first to second actuality in becoming something which it is potentially. However, the act of human cognition does not cease at this point, for being conformed to the thing by means of sense cognition does not necessarily entail an understanding of it. A similarity can be drawn again with the act of literary or artistic understanding, for an immersive experience of a work of art, while being necessary for understanding, does not necessarily entail understanding.\(^{40}\) There must be work on the part of the human agent in order to understand that to which he has been conformed.

Thus, Aquinas will speak of the agent intellect of the human person as making available the intelligible content of that to which we have been conformed, so that the intellect may then come to an apprehension of what the thing is essentially, what about it makes it specifically different in kind from other things which have been encountered.\(^{41}\) Subsequent to this, the intellect can make a judgement, a kind of re-affirmation, of the truth of the existence of the thing, and of the intellect’s apprehension of its essence and what is definitive of it. Having made these judgments, the intellect can then reason discursively about different things as they stand in relation to each other. These acts of apprehension, judgment, and discursive reasoning are known in the Thomistic tradition as the three acts of reason by means of the patient intellect, consequent to the act of the agent intellect. While McLuhan does not explicitly articulate his acceptance of
this metaphysical outline of cognition, it is given here to illustrate the kind of human agency
which is required in a realist outlook, whether in Thomist epistemology or literary realism. Such
human agency is real and necessary for understanding, but it is always responsive to the action of
the thing itself.

In the act of intellectual cognition or literary analysis, one does not immediately propose
causes *a priori* and from them deduce what the effect will be. Rather, one begins with the effect
of the action of the thing upon the subject, and from this effect is able to apprehend and reason to
the cause at the formal level.\(^4^2\) It is from this understanding of causes at the formal level that
other potentialities, actions, and effects can be reasoned to. McLuhan is adamant in his insistence
upon the priority of the movement from effect to cause, rather than cause to effect, which puts
him in fundamental agreement with a Thomistic epistemological understanding.

Another aspect of both Thomistic realism and literary realism which cannot be overlooked
is the importance of analogy. For it is clear that the terminology used in a realist description of
the world cannot be interpreted in a univocal way. When we say that the knower becomes what
is known, we are not speaking univocally, but rather of a conformation which occurs
cognitionally. In being conformed to that which is known, one retains one’s own essential form
and the potency to be conformed to other things simultaneously. Because realist epistemology
does not describe the phenomena of human cognition in a univocal way, it has been often
dismissed as equivocal, a fanciful manner of description which may or may not be indicative of
what really occurs. However, to dismiss analogy as mere equivocation would be the death knell
of realism of both an epistemic or literary kind, for both epistemology and literary analysis
would be thereby reduced to imposed descriptions, in which case there would be no way to
articulate how we can come to a true understanding of the essential reality of things or of art. If
one denies the possibility of analogy, then one either affirms true understanding as an act of faith alone or denies the reality of this understanding. If we are to affirm the rationality of human understanding, through the cognitive process or literary analysis, we must affirm the fittingness of analogy.

For analogy to be fitting, then, the analogy we use to describe cognition or literary understanding must be representative of analogy present in the fabric of the real world. This analogous intelligibility of reality is manifested in a similarity or proportionality in action which at the same time differs according to the kind of thing in action or being acted upon. Thus, when we speak of becoming the thing known in cognition, we are not speaking of becoming the thing under all aspects, but rather the formal aspect. Form, too is spoken of in an analogous way. Most fundamentally speaking, form refers to the substantial essence of what the thing is, but analogously speaking, the thing can be conformed, that is conditioned, to act and be the recipient of action in a plurality of ways grounded in the unity of its substance. In regards to cognition, we are speaking of conformation not in terms of substantial form, but rather a cognitional conformation which arises from a dynamic and peculiar potency of the human form to become the other thing in this specific way. The encounter with and becoming of another thing will indeed change the human being, so that his subsequent action and receiving of action will not be entirely the same, but in a manner in keeping with the essence of his humanity so that he remains a human being.

In his discussions of formal cause in relation to art and literature, McLuhan is extending an understanding of form to include the formative impact different works of art and literature have upon the human person and each other in a manner which is analogous to the formation which occurs in the act of human cognition. Obviously, there is not a transformation of substance which
occurs when a person experiences a work of art, nor of the substance of other works of art when a new work is made. However, a formation does occur so that the person will receive the action of other works of art, and act upon other works of art through observation and through making, in a different way. In other words, the formation which occurs through art forms the person so that the person’s action and experience will be changed, but always in accordance with the person’s essential mode of humanity. In this way, McLuhan’s literary realism is in keeping with the fundamental principle of Thomistic realism that “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient.” In McLuhan’s opinion, “creativity is the parallel of cognition,” because the conformity which arises in the experience of art, which is a representation of reality, is analogous to the conformity through which every act of human cognition occurs. As a result of this, McLuhan was of the opinion that in the modern era, when philosophy took a decidedly anti-realist turn, it was men of letters who upheld and re-presented to the world a realist approach to reality. In particular, McLuhan singles out James Joyce and G.K. Chesterton as re-presenting a Thomist understanding of reality through their works.

The realist approach to the world, articulated in modern humanist literature and Thomistic philosophy, McLuhan believed to be a fundamentally catholic view of reality, finding fulfillment in the Catholic faith. In McLuhan’s own life, it was his encounter with the catholic view of reality, through his research of patristic and medieval Christian philosophy, and modern literary humanism, especially that of G.K. Chesterton, through which he was led to embrace the Catholic faith. As McLuhan articulates, the manner in which we encounter reality through cognition and through literature is profoundly incarnational, and ultimately points to the Incarnation of Christ. McLuhan describes the act of cognition, whereby the person becomes conformed to the thing itself as made present to him cognitively, as the incarnation of the thing itself to and within the
person as a knowing subject. Similarly, the re-presentation of reality through art incarnates reality to the person, so what had always been evident but invisible because of the prior condition of the recipient, could now be present to the recipient in an incarnate way. Having been thus made present, it can be appropriated by the recipient, not in a passive way, but rather in a manner which so conforms the person that he may return to behold the intelligible dynamism of reality which he had been unable to see before. In a similar but superlative way, Christ was Incarnated as man. Christ made God visible to a people who had been only been able to dimly see God because of their sinful condition. In the Incarnation, God made himself present so that he could be received according to the mode of the recipient. McLuhan writes that sinful man, the “audience,” was the formal cause of the Incarnation, insofar as Christ took on the form of sinful man. Yet, at the same time, he still remained fully and essentially God, a concomitancy which can also serve as an analogue for how a person, in the act of cognition, remains who they are while at the same time taking on the form of that which is cognized.

Furthermore, Christ did not come and conform himself to man so that he could be passively received, but rather so that man could be conformed to his divine nature, and thus be able to see God in the world where man had been unable to see God before, and ultimately see God in the beatific vision. This did not mean, however, that the Incarnation was meant to be a pleasant experience for the audience. McLuhan emphasizes the nature of the Incarnation as being provocative, and indeed a “sign of contradiction,” so that thus provoked and disrupted from their slumber, people could be awoken to the reality of God. Such provocation however, would only be possible if encountered in the audience’s own mode of experience. In a similar way, art re-presents reality to man so that in being conformed to the art, the order and intelligibility of reality can be seen where it could only be dimly glimpsed before. This conformation often
involves challenging or provoking the audience. The Incarnation, therefore, can be described as the eminent aesthetic event, to which all other art refers in an analogous way. The aesthetics of the Incarnation, as well as the implications of the Incarnation as aesthetic event, have been more thoroughly developed by the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. However, the fact that the thought of Marshall McLuhan leads essentially to the same conclusion regarding the Incarnation is indicative that a person with a basic fundamental knowledge of what the Incarnation is, stands capable of recognizing the aesthetic nature of the Incarnation as the fulfillment of a realist, catholic approach to reality.

McLuhan’s identification of the aesthetic nature of the Incarnation is explanatory of his fascination with the art of the Christian Middle Ages, particularly mosaic, iconography, and stained glass. For McLuhan, these forms of art exemplified his belief that art should re-present reality in a manner according to the mode of the recipient, so that the person could be formed and come to a more authentic encounter with the realities thereby re-presented. In McLuhan’s mind, these forms of art did not need to be pictorially realistic because their purpose was to re-present a reality under a particular aspect, in a manner which would resonate with the audience. Hence, McLuhan describes medieval art as having a very tactile quality which would appeal to the largely illiterate Christian population, making incarnate otherwise invisible realities. In particular, stained glass for McLuhan constituted a very apt example of incarnational art, for it re-presented a reality which many people took for granted, white light, under a certain aspect which manifested the radiant dynamism inherent within light so that it could be appropriated and received in a way in which people would not have been able in their everyday encounters with the world. Having appropriated this dynamism, people could then come to an understanding of its ultimate source.
McLuhan’s discussions of the aesthetic nature and significance of the Incarnation and of Christian art are significant because they provide a clearer insight into McLuhan’s perspective of the ultimate teleology of art, which is only implicit in his discussions of modern technological media. As becomes apparent, for McLuhan art is neither to be pursued as an end in itself, nor as a means to disseminating the content of particular ideas or arguments. Rather, the purpose of art is to re-present reality so that its intelligible dynamism can be appropriated by the audience in a manner in which they had been previously unable. Having thus appropriated this dynamism through art, the audience then becomes able to experience it in a return to reality itself. This is not to say that each artist who fulfills this end goes about his craft with the conscious intention of doing so. In a manner parallel to the patristic exegetes’ view of Scripture, McLuhan would argue that there is much more dynamic intelligibility implicit within a work of art than what could be directly intended by the artist, as there are more levels of exegesis in Scripture than the literal level intended the author.

In his own evaluations of media, McLuhan attempts to work according to his own vision of art, which he believed precluded him from making explicit judgments on the teleological appropriateness of particular forms of media. McLuhan was adamant that in the study of media, especially modern technological media, one had to be extremely cautious not to assume media’s causal influence on people *a priori* and from this assumption try to deduce effects and make moral evaluations. In his opinion, most people already had various preconceived biases about media. On the one hand, he criticized a kind of modern technological progressivism which viewed any new development as beneficial and desirable in itself. He also had no time for a kind of technological mysticism which viewed modern technology as a kind of panacea. On the other hand, he severely denounced moralistic attitudes toward media which condemned any form
of new media, in particular attitudes which denounced a form of media because of the content which it carried.

For McLuhan, in order for one to come to a true understanding of any particular medium, one needed to first come to an awareness of what exactly its effects were, and only then attempt to articulate the nature of the formal causality of that medium, consequent to which one could come to anticipate other potential effects. In other words, McLuhan was attempting to take in his study of media the realist approach of working from effects to causes. In writing about media, McLuhan attempted to form his audience so that they would put aside their pre-conceived biases and personally appropriate the kind of approach to media which he was putting forth, of coming to an understanding of media through observation of their effects. However, this could not be done if a person continued to hold on to preconceptions. Thus, McLuhan saw himself taking on the role of the artist, and thus re-presenting media in a way so as to jolt his readers from their preconceived notions, and form them so that they would be able to encounter and understand the realities of a technological world in a new way.

An important implication of this is that one does not have to accept all the particular statements by McLuhan in order to recognize the potential of McLuhan’s work as a formative guide in our understanding of and response to media, particularly in modern technological society. However, this also meant that McLuhan would refrain from explicitly stating his epistemological and teleological commitments, for fear that these would lead people to either accept or reject his conclusions simply based on his apparent agreement or disagreement with their own biases. McLuhan attempted to take into account the mode of his audience, but in his mind, this would require unhinging the audience from its biases through a mosaic style which presented short, discontinuous reflections and aphorisms. Whether the particular method
McLuhan used was effective in achieving its intended effect is debatable, as the majority of people, especially youth and the academic elite, saw McLuhan as falling into the camp of technological triumphalists or mystics, and either lauded or reviled him as such. However, what is evident is the continuity found between McLuhan’s approach taken in his popular works and his other articulations of his underlying realist worldview.

McLuhan began his investigation of media by primarily examining effects which were manifested in human culture, and then attempting to apprehend the causal relationship between these effects and the dominant form of media of the day. This approach is especially apparent in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where McLuhan draws contrasts between man’s understandings of reality in tribal, classical and medieval, and modern cultures. In particular, McLuhan takes particular interest in different cultural understandings of the word, which he believed to be the dominant medium in each kind of culture. He observed, however, that in each kind of culture, a specific form of the word was dominant. In tribal cultures, the spoken word was dominant, in classical and medieval cultures, the written word, and in modern cultures, the printed word.

In tribal societies, the reality to which man was conformed was essentially the same reality as it is today, a reality which is dynamic and intelligible. However, unlike modern man, tribal man understood this reality primarily as it was dynamic and changing; he understood its intelligibility and order in only a limited way. Tribal man understood his conformity with reality as he knew his oneness with reality, but had little understanding of the distinction between things as objects and himself as a knowing subject. This kind of understanding of reality was expressed through myth, in which man saw himself as immersed in a universe of dynamism and chaos, where order was brought about through magic or the will of spirits. Man understood his conformation to his fellow man in a similar way, in which the I-Thou distinction was minimal.
and identity lay in the oneness of the tribe. Man’s understanding of himself as immersed in subjective unity with reality and his fellow man was manifested in his dominant medium of communication, the spoken word.

In examining these cultural effects, McLuhan apprehended a causal relationship between them and the spoken word. In particular, he would apprehend that the medium of the spoken word acted as a formal cause of tribal culture. When discussing the spoken word as formal cause, McLuhan was not attempting to describe it as a kind of formal imposition which efficiently caused man to perceive the world in the manner peculiar to tribal societies, but rather a formal expression of this manner of understanding. The spoken word, as formal cause, must be understood in this way to avoid being misinterpreted as efficient cause of tribal man’s way of thinking and communicating. As McLuhan recognizes, form is not some thing that causes a linear, temporal sequence of effects, but is rather a structural essence.

When examining the relationship between tribal culture and the spoken word, McLuhan noted that the sense of immersion and spontaneous simultaneity was characteristic of an environment of acoustic space, where sounds are difficult to pinpoint in their origin and distinguish from each other. In an acoustic environment, while order is discernible, it is the resonant dynamism of sound which is most apparent. McLuhan noted that the spoken word was an acoustic medium, and he apprehended the formal similarity between acoustic space and the spoken word. Thus, for McLuhan, it was reasonable to assert that the spoken word acted as a formal cause of tribal culture. In reflecting upon the subjectivity of the tribal worldview, McLuhan also noted the subjectivity of the spoken word, as it is the form of the word which is most intimate to the person himself. The spoken word, when uttered, does not appear to stand as something separate from the person, but is more akin to an emanation from the person. McLuhan
notes how thought and the spoken word were understood by tribal society as so intimate that a person’s words were seen as an immanent manifestation of that person’s thoughts and intended actions.\textsuperscript{64} While not necessarily acting as the efficient cause of tribal culture, the spoken word evidently had a causal relationship with tribal culture on the level of form.

As informed by a number of different formal causes, the transition between human periods of understanding and communication should not be thought of as a lineal progression of clear and distinct stages, caused efficiently by dramatic shifts and revolutions in communication, but as a continuum. As tribal man became classical man, his understanding of his conformity to reality changed, so that he began to draw forth more of the ordered intelligibility implicit within the dynamism of experience. He began to discern his own status as a knowing subject in distinction from the object, while recognizing the conformity between subject and object. This understanding was communicated by means of the written word, which expresses order in visual terms, such as the syllogism. The form of the written word did not create the syllogism, but rather enabled the order implicit in reality to be visually expressed in syllogistic form. The written word informs an environment of visual space,\textsuperscript{65} in which words can be held external to the knower as objects.\textsuperscript{66} The visual space is space in which distinctions can be made between objects, whereas the objects of sound are distinguished with much greater difficulty. At the same time, however, the form of the written word manifested man’s continuing appreciation for the dynamism of being. Materially each written word was unique; while sharing a common form, no two written words or letters would ever appear alike. Each word was a material re-presentation of the uniqueness of each being. Furthermore, the form of the written word continued to have an aural character, with words being written without spacing, so that the distinctions between them would need to be brought out through oral reading.\textsuperscript{67} Above all, the written word formally
manifested an understanding of reality as both dynamic and ordered. The written word was conformed to such an understanding, while at the same time informing it.

The central theme of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is that the printed word is the formal cause of modernity, insofar as the linear, discrete, sequential form of printed type is the formal cause of linear, sequential forms of reasoning, such as Cartesian dualism, Newtonian mechanism, and Humean causation. According to McLuhan, the form of print was the form of subsequent modern media such as the industrial assembly line. It is critical, however, that McLuhan not be interpreted as asserting that print media is the efficient cause of modernity. Rather, print media must be seen as the formal manifestation of a manner of understanding reality in which man attempts to suppress the dynamism of reality and understand it in wholly static terms. The distinction between subject and object is made to be absolute, and all concepts need to become clear and distinct. In such an understanding of reality, all causation becomes efficient and describable in lineal cause-and-effect terms. Although McLuhan sometimes gives the appearance of describing the progression from tribal to modern culture in such sequential terms, in which oral, written, and print media appear to stand as the efficient causes of these cultures, it would be disingenuous to accuse McLuhan of such a blatant self-contradiction. Indeed, he identifies the roots of print culture and media in medieval scholasticism, which retained the forms of aural culture such as disputation, but also gave rise to the nominalism and strict emphasis on method which would characterize modernity. Furthermore, he acknowledges that formal characteristics of aural culture persisted in print culture, such as in literature through the 1800s. Neither does McLuhan attempt to portray the modern understanding of reality as a total misunderstanding of it, but rather an understanding of it from a narrow point of view. For example, Newtonian physics and mathematical perspective in art were not incorrect in their understanding of reality,
but were very limited. Print, as a formal structure, stands neither efficiently prior nor consequent to modernity, but as a concomitant formal cause.71

In observing the effects of media upon culture and in discerning a relationship of formal causality between media and culture, McLuhan also recognized the effects of different forms of media upon each other, and from these articulated a relationship of formal causality between them. For McLuhan, man’s makings throughout history can be seen as a vast mosaic of different forms of media standing in relation to all other media and the mosaic as a whole. The mosaic is a formal structure which is not reducible to its material constituents, which in the case of the media environment are individual mediums. No constituent piece stands in isolation, but is only understood in relation to other pieces and the formal context of the whole. The formal structure of the mosaic, and hence the formal relations between each of the constituent pieces of the mosaic, is changed with the addition of new constituent pieces. Since each medium is a formal reality, each medium will be altered with the advent of a new medium. Hence, it is true for technological media as for art, that “the advent of new form affects all earlier forms.”72 All previous forms of media thus become content in relation to new media, which shape old media so that their formality is forever altered in some way.73 However, old forms of media should never be thought of as inert material to be passively formed by new forms of media. Since all media are formal realities, old media, as they are formed in some way by the new media, will also form the new media, so that the new media are in some way conformed to the old; the content is at the same time a form. New forms of media will always be formally configured in some way by the media which preceded them, and do not exist as they are without the old.74 The media environment or mosaic is marked by formal changes to its structure, but at the same time by an essential stability.
McLuhan remarks how the spoken word became content that was informed by the written word. Words which were spoken orally were translated into the new form of the written word. However, the form of the written word is something which is indelibly shaped by the spoken word, and has its formal identity only in relation to the spoken word. Although it is in a visual form, the written word shares an essential formal commonality with the spoken word, which is why both can be referred to as “words” without speaking equivocally. Translation of one form into another does not destroy the essential nature of the form. The written word did not abolish the spoken word, and was indeed so shaped by the spoken word that the two forms, while distinct from each other, were essentially inseparable, as indicated by the fact that written words were read aloud, and writing was undertaken by means of oral dictation. At the same time, the spoken word, standing in relation to the new form of the written word, was never the same as it was when there was no relation to a written form. Speech took on the formal characteristics of the written word, such as syllogistic ordering, clarity of enunciation, and intentional punctuation of accent. The spoken word retained its own form, but this form was changed as a result of its relation to the written word.

The dynamic of the formal relationship between media is further expressed in the relationship between the printed word and the written word. The printed word takes the written word as content and transforms it into a new structure. At the same time, the printed word is a word only insofar as it is conformed to the written and spoken word. The ability to translate a word from one form to another, without destroying the formal identity of the word, rests on the formal commonality among all three forms of the word. A word in spoken, written, or print form is not communicated in a univocal way, in which case there would be no difference between the forms. Neither is it communicated equivocally, in which case the formal difference between
speech, writing, and print would be so great that it would be an essentially different word
communicated in each medium. This would render translation between forms impossible, and
mean that manuscript works such as the Bible and the Confessions of St. Augustine, two of the
most commonly printed works after the emergence of the printing press, would be essentially
different works in print versus manuscript form. Rather, a word in spoken, written, or print form
is analogous, sharing a common formal essence that makes it the word which it is, but formed in
different ways so that they act upon the audience differently and cause different effects.
Manuscript works such as the Bible and the Confessions were the content of early print media,
translated into a new print form but retaining an essential formal identity. The very form of print
is conformed to the spoken and written word, a conformity which is manifested in formal
characteristics of manuscript writing which continued in print media through the 19th century.

The printed word did not abolish the form of the written or spoken word, and is indeed a
translation of these forms. However, the printed word stands in relation to the spoken and written
words so that these forms of the word, while remaining distinct forms of the word, are
conformed in some way to the form of the printed word. McLuhan notes that rules of consistent
grammar, spelling, and punctuation became common to the form of writing as writing was
expected to conform to the homogenous form of the printed medium. Works of philosophy and
literature, even if originally written in manuscript, were informed by the static, linear, sequential,
form of print. Although Descartes may have penned his Meditations in ink, the structure of the
Meditations was indelibly marked by the form of print.

McLuhan’s exploration of the effects of the word in various cultures allows him to trace
from these effects back to the formal causality of different forms of the word, and is illustrative
of the cogency of the approach McLuhan takes toward media as informed by a literary and
Thomistic understanding of formal causality. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan attempted to take this approach to electronic forms of communication by observing the effects of a diversity of particular forms of electronic media, and from these coming to an understanding of their formal causality. According to McLuhan, the cultural effects observed during the 20th century were, in his opinion, indicative of a return to the subjectivity, immersion, and simultaneity of the tribal era. As a result, McLuhan spoke of his contemporary world as a “global village,” not in any kind of sentimental manner, but as indicative of what he believed were effects which mimicked those of tribal societies.\(^7\) This led McLuhan to argue that the contemporary world was being re-immersed in an environment of acoustic space.\(^7\) Looking at the predominant medium of the time, he identified electronic media, taken in general, as a formal cause of the culture of the “electronic age.” This was not to say that McLuhan believed each particular form of electronic media had the same effect on culture. On the contrary, McLuhan identified particular forms of electronic media as having contrary effects when compared to other particular forms.\(^8\) However, when the formational relationship of a dizzying array of media is taken as a whole, the form of the resultant mosaic is indeed informative of a culture in which simultaneity, subjectivity, and immersion are the rule.

In describing the electronic age as a return to acoustic space and a new tribalism, McLuhan is not speaking of a simple return to tribalism. McLuhan would remind us that any new medium will affect perception in a manner which makes it impossible to return to any previous form in exactly the same way. Whereas the tribal age existed without ever having seen print, the electronic age is one where the form of print is still pervasive.\(^8\) In stating that electronic media are the formal cause of a new tribal culture, McLuhan should not be interpreted to be saying that the formal causality of electronic media in relation to contemporary culture is essentially the
same as the spoken word’s relation to tribal culture. Rather, it is closer to his meaning to say that tribalism is the closest analogue with which we can describe the form of the new effects being observed in the electronic age.

The evident formal relationality of technological media to human culture thereby points to a more fundamental question of media’s relationship to the human person considered insofar as he is a human person. Human culture should never be considered as something reified in separation from the person, for it is human persons who compose a human culture. If media are formally related to human culture, then there must also be an analogous formal relationship in relation to the person considered in himself. It is this formal relationship which McLuhan articulates with his famous aphorism, “the medium is the message.” In stating that the medium is the message, he is articulating the fact that any medium will act as a formal cause in relation to its user, who thereby becomes content or matter in relation to the medium. It is this formation, and its manifestation through particular effects on the user, which becomes the “message.” This “message” is of an entirely different order than “message” understood conventionally as discrete content which is imparted between two points. In order to understand fully what McLuhan is articulating when he states that the “medium is the message,” we must return to McLuhan’s vision of artistic experience, whereby through a work of art reality is re-presented in a manner which forms the audience in a specific way. This for McLuhan is the essential purpose of a work of art, more than any particular content. McLuhan, therefore, in stating that the medium is the message, is drawing an analogy between forms of art and technological media. This is not to deny the proximate, utilitarian purposes of technological media, which indeed use media as tools for imparting content. However, when we look at media and relation to persons in terms of the effects upon the person, the formal cause of this effect is the medium itself, rather than the
proximate content.

In articulating the relationship of media to person in this way, McLuhan is critiquing a contemporary vision of media which defines media in solely material and utilitarian terms, as inert means of transmitting informational content from one to another. This vision McLuhan describes as the conduit metaphor, of which he gives as an example the Shannon-Weaver model of communication, where,

The *information source* selects a desired *message* out of a set of possible messages…The selected message may consist of written or spoken words, or of pictures, music, etc.

The *transmitter* changes this *message* into the signal which is actually sent over the *communication channel* from the transmitter to the receiver. In the case of telephony, the channel is a wire, the signal a varying electrical current on this wire…In oral speech, the information source is the brain, the transmitter is the voice mechanism producing the varying sound pressure (the signal) which is transmitted through the air.

The *receiver* is a sort of inverse transmitter, changing the transmitted signal back into a message, and handing this message on to the *destination.*

McLuhan would not deny that the Shannon-Weaver model appears to very accurately describe the material processes applicable to most, if not all, forms of communication. Indeed, electronic forms of media do involve the transmission and reception of information in the form of electronic signals; there is no denying that human speech involves information in the form of brain messages and sound waves. McLuhan’s primary critique of the Shannon-Weaver model lies in its exclusive emphasis on lineal causality and content, and its univocal application to all forms of communication. If applied in this way, Shannon-Weaver obviously betrays a modern, mechanistic, scientistic worldview which reduces all phenomenon to a material level and
sequential events understood univocally.

This worldview, however, does not adequately re-persent the dynamic relationality of reality which can only be described according to a realist approach. The kind of realism to which McLuhan ascribes is primarily literary, and this will affect the way in which he describes the formal relationship between man and technological media. In appraising the formal relationship between technological media, he sees a formative relationship which is analogous to that of art, as reasoned from observation of similar effects. Hence, he will treat all media as forms of art, in an analogous way.

It is evident, when this kind of approach is taken towards media as forms of art, that a work of art will have a formative impact upon its ‘audience,’ just as media will have a formative impact upon the ‘user.’ However, in art it is also taken as a fundamental principle that it is the maker of the work of art who forms it, and who stands in a way in relation to the work of art as a formal cause. It is this formal relationship of artist to the artwork which McLuhan attempts to describe in analogy when he describes media as extensions of the human person. While he articulates particular forms of media as “physical” extensions of the human person, taken in the context of his artistic approach, we can see a definite aptness in describing a medium, that is to say, a work of art, as a formal extension. For in the making of a work of art, it is the reason of the person which informs it. In the work of art, material is informed so that it stands as an incarnation of the reason of the person under a particular form. However, it is not a creation ex nihilo nor an incarnating of an innate idea, but rather a re-presentation of reality in some way, under some aspect. For man makes and informs his art only insofar as he has experienced reality in some way, and through the dynamism of his intellect, is able to abstract, appropriate and re-present it in some way. In this manner, there is a fundamental conformity between art and
reality which allows McLuhan to describe concepts such as number, Aristotelian causality, and Newton’s laws as artifacts, in an analogous way.\textsuperscript{87} In doing so, he is speaking of them as conceptual artifacts, that is to say, abstracted re-presentations under a specific formal aspect of the reality which one has experienced. The difference between a conceptual artifact and a physical work of art is that the conceptual artifact is a re-presentation within one’s own intellect, whereas the artifact is re-presented in a physically sensible way.

As an incarnation of the reason of the person, there is a fundamental dependency of the work of art upon the artist for its form.\textsuperscript{88} However, since art is an incarnation of human reason, art will be conformed to man in a manner through which it shares or participates in the formal dynamism of man. Therefore, we cannot just view any artifact, no matter how mundane or mechanical it may appear, as a static object, with a purely accidental and absolutely no essential relationship between its material constituents.\textsuperscript{89} While not possessing the dynamism of a natural object per se, any human artifact in a sense becomes naturalized, which allows it to become ‘wild’ in a way and exert a formal influence upon the person.\textsuperscript{90} In \textit{Cliché to Archetype}, McLuhan cites a precedent for such a natural understanding of artifact in Aristotle, who in \textit{Physics} \textsuperscript{II.VIII} states that “if a house had been a thing made by nature it would have been the same way as now by art; and if the things made by nature as also by art, they would come to be in the same way as by nature.”\textsuperscript{91} While perhaps not intended by Aristotle to be interpreted in the same way as McLuhan does, Aristotle’s statement is indicative that the Philosopher himself saw there to be a complementarity or resonance between art, man, and nature, and that in art, through man, nature is re-presented. Art therefore, finds a fundamental basis in nature, both in human reason considered as natural and the re-presented thing considered as natural. Thus it does no violence to Aristotelian realism to approach artifacts in a manner analogous to natural objects.\textsuperscript{92}
When all media are considered as artifacts, made as extensions or “outerings” of human reason, ordered to the re-presentation of reality and the ultimate end of forming the human person in some way, it becomes clear that some media will be better inclined towards this purpose than others. While all media serve their proximate ends and present reality under a particular aspect, taken as a mosaic they are purposed to the formation of the person so that the person may return to his encounter with reality in the fullness of its dynamic intelligibility. The question then becomes whether there is a specific medium which is more representative of this fundamental purposiveness. McLuhan himself would not venture to make this judgment explicitly in his popular works of media. However, he gave strong indications of his inclination toward holding the word as the archetypal or primary analogue for all extensions of human reason.

Again, McLuhan first chooses to illustrate this at the level of cultural effects, which he views as being illustrative of a formal reality. McLuhan identifies the spoken word as being the first artifact of primitive man. That is to say, the rationality specific to man was first made visible and outered from man in the form of the spoken word, indicating a primal relation between rationality and the medium of the word. Furthermore, McLuhan notes how the word was the medium which was given the foremost attention and reverence by primitive man among all of man’s artifacts. In primitive societies, many people believed the word to have transformative power over the things of the world, the ability to call upon and make present the supernatural forces undergirding reality, and even the ability to call forth life itself. 93 McLuhan gives the example of an Inuit ritual during childbirth in which different names are continuously called out until the child is born, in which the name called at birth was understood as the proper name which had called the child out of the womb. While obviously not insisting that we return to such
a mythic understanding of the word, McLuhan suggests that such myths, as cultural effects, reflect a deeper apprehension of the kind of formal causality at work through the medium of the word.

McLuhan further illustrates that cultural effects which were indicative of a primacy of the word among human artifacts which did not diminish with the transition from tribal to civilized society, but were articulated in a more philosophical and less mythic way. He recounts how the Greeks believed the word to be the immanent manifestation of reason, and thus used the term *logos* to signify both. The Stoic belief in the relationship between words and things was reflected in how they saw all natural things as things as visible, immanent manifestations of the cosmic *logos*. This apprehension of the fundamental formal relationality between words and things was assumed into Christian understanding. While the Christians recognized the things of the world to be distinct from the divine *logos*, Christianity affirmed that all things are formed by the *logos*, proceed from the *logos*, and are continuously being held in being by the *logos*. Things were understood as being formed and held in existence through the performative utterance of God. Thus, the utterance of the word was understood in the classical and early Christian world as a “making” which causes the thing to be what it is.

Therefore, if all natural things are words spoken by God, that is, makings of God, then in an analogous way, human makings can all be described in some fashion as words of man. For, as all natural things are manifestations or ‘first incarnations’ of the divine *logos* while at the same time remaining distinct from Him, so too are human artifacts manifestations of human reason which exist in distinction from the person. The difference between God’s relation to his words and man to man’s words is that God stands in relation to his makings as both an efficient and a formal cause, whereas man’s relation to his artifacts is primarily formal, and efficient in a
secondary and analogous way. In forming things, God is not re-presenting anything, but efficiently causing the very form of the thing into come into existence *ex nihilo*; his formal causation of the thing is coextensively efficient. While man forms all of his artifacts in some way, thus manifesting his reason, he never brings them into existence *ex nihilo*; any human artifact will always be a re-presentation of something. The analogous relationship between things considered as words of man and natural things considered as words of God is a further illustration of the reasonability of taking a literary approach towards media, even contemporary technological media. For if the world of natural things, made by God, was interpreted by the exegetes as a book to be read at multiple levels of exegesis, then so too man’s makings can be read as a ‘book’ in like fashion and approached in a literary way which is revelatory of their dynamic rationality.

At this point, a logician would perhaps object that understood in a logical sense, a word is nothing more than a conventional or arbitrarily given sign which points to a concept. However, to understand the word solely and absolutely in such terms is to court nominalism. Although different words may be assigned to the same concept, or the same word referring to different concepts, there remains the fundamental fact that man’s being able to name things at all is signifiatory of his ability to apprehend their essences. A person can name a thing only insofar as he has been informed by it, so as to be able to form a concept of it. As McLuhan notes, it was this ability to know the essences of things, that is, the heart of man’s rationality, which is indicated by the account in Genesis of man being able to name things. For McLuhan, words are signs not only in a logical sense, but in the sense that they point to something other than themselves, in a manner which is revelatory of a formal relation to that which they signify. Hence, natural things as words are signs of God bearing a formal relation to God. Any human
work of art, but most especially the word, is significatory of the formal relation it has to the human which made it, and also to that which it re-presents, which had informed the maker in some way.

It is true that the analogies between natural things as words of God and artifacts as words of man cannot be demonstrated on purely discursive grounds. As a result, such analogies were rejected after Descartes. In the modern era, nature became viewed as an inert machine standing in complete separation from God, and human artifacts were viewed as static tools in complete separation from man. In rejecting the ability to apprehend analogies between nature and divine words, and between artifacts and human words, modern philosophy became ignorant of the relationships of formal causality between nature and God, and artifacts and man. In articulating the development of cultural understandings of the word from the tribal through the patristic and medieval Christian eras, McLuhan is attempting to retrieve an understanding of such relationships of formal causality. For McLuhan, such formal relationships can be apprehended because cultural effects, such as a culture’s understanding of the word, are indicative of some kind of formal cause. This ability to reason from cultural effects to formal causes is further corroborated if the cultures in question, such as those of the classical and Christian eras, possess a realist worldview which sees the universe as dynamically intelligible. It is this kind of approach to reality which McLuhan upholds as the one which leads a person to the most authentic kind of encounter with reality itself. Thus, if one wants to authentically understand media, it is wise to build from the insights of cultures which approach reality with such a disposition. When the catholic understanding of reality shared by the diverse cultures of which McLuhan writes is clarified in light of Thomist epistemology, as we have done, the rationality behind McLuhan’s identification of media as analogous to the word is apparent.
More significantly, the analogy that McLuhan illustrates between all media and the form of the word finds its fulfillment when it is brought into the context of the Catholic faith, thereby pointing to the completion of any realist worldview within the Catholic faith. It is in the context of faith that we can articulate with greater clarity and concreteness the teleology of media which is implicit within McLuhan’s popular writings. This perfection in faith of a realist approach to reality in general, but specifically toward media, is hinted at in McLuhan’s own personal life. It was his study of modern humanism, and also classical and medieval philosophy, which for McLuhan raised questions and presented a challenge which he believed could only be resolved in the light of the Catholic faith. Thus, for McLuhan, faith is not something \textit{a priori} which determines all other thought, but rather the fulfillment and perfection of an approach to reality which is open to dynamism and intelligibility.

As a believing Catholic, McLuhan affirmed that Christ was the Word in whom and through whom all things are made. Immediately, the analogy between the Word and media becomes clear. As all things are made in and through the Word, they are conformed to him in some way, analogously speaking, as words. As natural things are conformed to and by the Word, so are artifacts conformed to the ‘word’ of human reason. McLuhan will build upon this analogy explicitly when he states that Christ is the perfect medium, for in Christ, the medium and the message are one.\textsuperscript{101} Whereas in every act of human communication, there is a duality between the proximate content which is conveyed and the effect which is caused by the form of the medium, in Christ there is no such duality. The effect of the Incarnation is precisely the same as the content which he preached:\textsuperscript{102} conformation to his very person, which then allows the human person to be able to return to all of reality with a new appreciation of its truth, goodness, and beauty, and ultimately to return to God.
Christ is also the perfect medium when considered from the aspect of the kind of formal relationship he has with his ‘audience’ and with God. As McLuhan articulated, a good work of art will be conformed to its audience in a manner so that the work does not do violence to the nature of the audience. In this way, the audience will be more receptive to the formation which the art is to effect. More than any other medium, Christ conforms himself to his audience perfectly, taking on the very essence of human nature, so that he could be received by man in a manner which prepares man for conformity to God. A work of art’s conformity to the audience will be ordered to the re-presentation of reality under the aspect of some particular form. However, in any human artifact, which by nature is limited, there will always be a limitation or mal-formation of the reality which is presented. In Christ there is no such limitation; as the Word he is conformed perfectly to God, therefore he is that which he re-presents.\textsuperscript{103} In Christ, we do not only see a re-presentation of God, but God himself, the perfect “image of the invisible God.”\textsuperscript{104} In Christ, re-presentation becomes Incarnation. While human art and cognition incarnates reality in an imperfect way to the knower, Christ incarnates and re-presents God perfectly.

Because Christ is perfectly conformed both to his audience as formal cause and to the God which he Incarnates, the effect of Christ as medium upon the audience is also ordered to perfection. The effect of the Incarnation of Christ, in taking on the form of man, is conformity of man to God, and ultimate union with him. McLuhan saw a kind of imperative to art, because it awakes man from a somnambulism arising from his own malformedness and preconceptions, and allows man to perceive fullness of the dynamism of reality. As a result, while never violating the nature of the recipient, art must sometimes be jarring, such as with forms of modern art. The ultimate example of this too is found in the Incarnation, where Christ \textit{conformed} himself to man
in his condition, but did not confirm man in it. Rather, Christ revealed himself as the most provocative medium man has ever known, a “sign of contradiction,” a God Incarnate but crucified. The medium of Christ serves as a confrontation to man, which rouses him from his sleep and awakens him to the reality of God’s love.

The effects of the Incarnation as formal cause do not only manifest themselves in relation to the human person, but also in relation to human culture and to all of creation. According to McLuhan, the Incarnation renders all non-Christian religion obsolete. In saying this, McLuhan is not attempting to absolutely negate and deny that there are ways in which man could become conformed to the divine through natural religion. Rather, to say that the Incarnation makes non-Christian religion obsolete means that while each religion is in some way conformed to God by reason of man’s natural conformity to God, the Incarnation has a profound formational effect on all of human culture, and in particular on human religiosity. The forms of non-Christian religion, when seen in light of the Incarnation, are recognized for their incomplete conformity, and thus act as signs pointing to the fullness of formation to be found in Christ, who became Incarnate within a particular human culture so that all of human culture could be brought to conformity with him. Similarly, understood in relation to creation as a whole, the Incarnation effects a conformity which was present from the beginning in an incomplete way. This initial conformity was present as all things of nature, as words spoken through the Word, shared some limited kind of conformity to their author. However, this conformity could be said to have been in a state of first actuality, awaiting further perfection and completion. At the Incarnation of the Word, creation becomes conformed to the Word in a more perfect way, finding its fulfillment in him.

As man and all of God’s makings find their fulfillment in the Word, so too do all of man’s makings, as words of man, find their fulfillment in Christ, to whom all other media point in an
analogous and imperfect way. In light of this ordering towards Christ, a teleology of media becomes more apparent. It is in comparison with the medium of Christ that we can more clearly make a judgment of the ability of a particular form of media to achieve its ultimate purpose. This is not to deny that specific media forms may be better suited to conveying material content in particular circumstances than others. However, when judged against the standard of Christ, we will begin to see that there is a hierarchy among them. A medium, as Christ shows, must first of all be conformed to the audience, so that it is received according to the mode of the recipient. While all media will never be perfectly formed to the audience, and will thus constitute a deformation in one way or another, this de-formation will be greater or less in degree or different in kind. Some media, more than others, in order to be appropriated by the audience, will have to be forcibly imposed upon the audience. A point which McLuhan notes is that it is the nature of man to be an incarnate being, but there are particular media which have a discarnate form and thus a discarnate effect upon man. While they may be of use in the utilitarian manner of conveying content, McLuhan hints that we need to be wary of the effects which their prevalence can cause in society.

Furthermore, a medium must be able to formally re-present reality in a manner which allows man to return to reality more open to its intelligible dynamism than before. Again, this does not necessarily entail a kind of picture realism; indeed, art forms which may at first appear unintelligible, such as kinds of modern art, may draw man to be more attentive to a less readily apparent kind of intelligibility. Taken as a totality, man’s makings should re-present the dynamic intelligibility of reality in a manner which draws man to seek and see it in a manner in which man had not been able to see previously. A medium should not draw attention to itself, or turn man’s attention back toward his own self, but rather form man to behold reality as a whole.
As McLuhan notes in *Understanding Media*, if the primary effect of a medium upon man is a discarnate one, or exclusive conformation to the medium itself and not to the reality which is re-presented, then the medium can become for us an idol. When beholding an artifact as an idol, man becomes forgetful of its intrinsic relation to him and dependence upon him. Man forgets that the idol is not meant to become the sole object of conformity, but rather was made to re-present reality. Instead of being an incarnation which manifests the dynamism of human reason and which constitutes a form through which this reason can come to know the dynamic intelligibility of reality, an idol becomes a “‘spectre of the Reasoning Power in Man’ that has become fragmented and ‘separated from Imagination and enclosing itself as in steel.’”

Because every artifact will conform man to itself in some way, every artifact has the potential to become an idol. However, this potency will be greater in some media than others because of the discarnate effects which follow from their form. In order not to become a “servomechanism” of technology, man must bring himself to an awareness of these effects, and thereby form and prepare himself so that he may use such media in a manner which minimizes these effects.

While McLuhan did evaluate the effects of various particular forms of modern media, these evaluations were contingent upon the situation and perspective of his day and should not be interpreted as authoritative and representative of the manner in which he may have seen them today. Furthermore, when discussing such modern media, any teleological discussion is kept implicit by McLuhan in order to avoid confirming his readers’ particular biases. However, he does give an example in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* of a particular medium which tends towards the ends of a medium as exemplified in the Incarnation of Christ. This is the medium of the stained glass window. The stained glass window was formed as medium which allowed both the light of truth and the light of the sun to be received according to the mode of the largely illiterate
faithful of the Middle Ages. The stained glass allowed the sunlight to be received in a manner which was not blinding, and re-presented the drama and intelligibility of sacred truth in a manner which the common person could understand. It re-presented the dynamic intelligibility of the reality of light under the form of vibrant coloration which was always implicit within the light but could not be perceived by plain sight. It was through the form of these colors which sacred stories, as well as natural things, were re-presented in a manner which formed the audience to be able to come to a fuller encounter with the things re-presented. The stained glass formed and inclined the audience towards the presence of God in the church, in the natural world, and in reality as a whole. As McLuhan states, stained glass is an eminent example of how the purpose of a medium is not so much to act as a tool to shine light on reality, but rather to let the light of intelligible reality shine through it under a particular form. Thus a particular medium never assumes a status above that which it re-presents; it should not draw attention to itself but instead efface itself as a window towards reality as a whole.

The teleology of media which becomes apparent in the light of Catholic faith has great implications for the manner in which Catholic evangelization is carried out today, particularly in consideration of the pervasiveness of new forms of technological media. The first principle of this teleology is that in order for evangelization to be authentically Catholic, it must be incarnational. What this means is that Christian evangelization has to be ordered to more than the transmission of the content of the faith. It must rather be ordered toward the formation of the human person so that the person becomes receptive to ultimate union with God. As McLuhan states, the effect of faith cannot be merely the knowledge of content, it must be the formation of person and their perception so they are able to “see” God in a manner through which they are drawn to him. This formation can only be effected by a re-presentation of God to the world, in
a way that is dynamic and according to the mode of the recipient.

Therefore, evangelization cannot be conducted in a univocal manner, indifferent to cultural and historical condition. Evangelization must conform and incarnate itself in a way which is fitting to the particular condition of the people in a particular time and place, just as Christ conformed himself to human nature and was incarnate in a particular time and place in history. However, this conformation to audience as formal cause cannot be the final end in itself. It must be ordered to the formation of the people and culture so that they are brought to awareness and embrace the God of whom they were only previously dimly aware. As Christ himself shows, taking the form of the audience does not mean that the audience’s experience must be in any way pleasing. Indeed, the mode of the audience may cry out to be awoken from slumber, for idols to be smashed. Thus, an assessment and thorough understanding of a culture must be present in order to evangelize it, as an artist must have an understanding of his audience; only then can a prudential judgment be made as to the manner in which one might properly inform the efforts of evangelization. Thus, a culture steeped in pantheism may require a presentation of God which particularly illuminates his otherness and transcendence; in a culture with no eye to the transcendent, God must be presented in his transcendent glory. In this way, God can be represented to the culture in a particular manner which will be informative of the culture.

The evangelization of a culture is ultimately ordered to the formation of the culture in a manner which allows it to be receptive to God. Thus, as has been stated, evangelization cannot be rooted in the material content of the faith. This is not to say that there is no place for the content of faith in evangelization; indeed, in a realist and hylomorphic view of reality, form will always inform some kind of matter. What this means, however, is that evangelization efforts focused exclusively upon transmission of content will inevitably fail to be effective. Without a
recognition that evangelization must be ordered towards bringing people to conformity with God, evangelization degenerates into proselytization. McLuhan identified that this is where the problem often lies in evangelization efforts in the Western world. Often, modern Western evangelization efforts focus on content to such an extent that in the result is a moralism or legalism which leads the audience to reject outright the very content presented to them, even if it is true, because it is not given in its proper formal context. Or, perhaps an even greater problem is that when not presented in the formal context of the faith, the content is dismissed as lacking the life and vitality proper to the form of faith.

Furthermore, the recognition that evangelization is ordered to transformational experience prior to the dissemination of content entails a recognition of the inherent limitation of any human efforts to evangelize, especially through rational persuasion. While a person may recognize the legitimacy of, or even give a degree of intellectual assent to, the conceptual content of the faith, this will not entail acceptance of the faith. In order for the content of the faith to be appropriated and blossom within the life of the person, the person must be formed in a manner which enables this germination to occur. While this formation, as in the act of human cognition, does come from some extent from without, such as through the actions of evangelizing Christians, there must also be a responsiveness on the part of the person who is the subject of evangelization. Just as the intelligible world does not impose itself upon the knower, but instead requires the agent intellect to draw forth its intelligible content, so must the intelligible content of the faith be actively appropriated by the person who is evangelized. The Christian can form the person who is evangelized so that he is inclined towards such an active appropriation, but cannot force him. A proper pastoral recognition of this means that Christians should not become overtly alarmed if people fail to enter the Church or even leave the Church because of seemingly
irreconcilable intellectual disagreements over doctrine or morals, and should not react by constantly devising new ways by which to convey the content of the faith. Intellectual assent is in itself insufficient, and requires a prior conformity which arises secondarily by means of a personal response to the movement of evangelizing Christians, but primarily by the grace of God.\textsuperscript{119}

The issues with relying upon modern mass media as a means of evangelization stem from the fact that such reliance is indicative of a vision of evangelization which over-emphasizes the role of human agency in evangelization, and which sees such human agency primarily in terms of conveying content. When such an approach to evangelization is taken, media are primarily used as seemingly inert conduits, without regard for the formational impact of the medium itself upon the user. As McLuhan would point out, one of the primary errors of Protestantism was its the uncritical belief that aggressive proselytization and the spreading of the content of the faith, especially through the medium of print, would bring people to true conversion, all the while ignoring the need for formation and how the medium used for proselytization tended towards a mechanistic worldview which was contrary to the formation requisite for acceptance of the Christian message.\textsuperscript{120} The temptation posed by the reliance upon the use of any technological medium, whether print or electronic gadgetry, as a means of evangelization, is that in focusing on their ability to transmit content instantaneously and universally, we place our own limited voices, extended through media, prior to the formation of the person in light of the real object of our faith, God himself. We forget the potential discarnate effects of our technologically extended selves upon the incarnate person, and his acceptance of an Incarnate faith.

Ultimately, evangelization cannot rely on any human artifact, and must always uphold the priority of the human person and the faith which is re-presented to him. For the artifact never
stands with an independent autonomy of itself, but ultimately takes its form from the person who makes it and that which it re-presents. As illustrated through the example of the stained glass window, we should not delude ourselves in thinking that our evangelization efforts are primarily oriented to shining light on the content of the faith, as if man could shed light on God. Rather, evangelization must be the medium through which the light of God shines. The role of the human person is to be the incarnate means whereby the light of God shines forth under particular aspects of its dynamism, so as to form the audience to be attracted to that which is the source of the light. As a result, there must be a personal conformity, on the part of all who call themselves Christians, to that which we claim to re-present. As we know through literary realism and a realist understanding of cognition, one must be conformed to something in order to communicate and re-present it. For it was through the very form of the human person in the Incarnate Christ by which God revealed himself once and for all, and incarnate in each Christian that he will make himself known in every time and place. Therefore, as Fr. Brisson states, for authentic evangelization to occur, every Christian is called to be Christ incarnate walking again on earth.

**Conclusion**

As has been illustrated throughout this essay, when Marshall McLuhan’s thought is examined in consideration of its foundations upon literary and Thomistic realism, and in the light of Christian faith, his insights into the formal causality at work between human persons, culture, and media become manifest. There is a recognition that the makings of man cannot be interpreted in isolation from the human person and the manner in which man approaches reality as a whole. On the contrary, man’s makings are rooted in the manner in which man confronts the dynamic intelligibility of the world before him, to which he becomes conformed through the act of cognition. It is from this conformity which springs the human artifact, as simultaneously a
form of human reason made concrete, and a re-presentation of the reality to which man is
conformed. Thus related to man in this way, man’s makings cannot be seen as mere tools or
instruments in a utilitarian way, but acting as formal causes in relation to the person. This formal
causality is manifested in effects found in human culture. Although it is difficult to detect upon
first glance, there is a purposiveness in this formal causality as ordered to the formation of the
human person so that he may not rest in the use of his artifacts, but return to reality in a manner
which is more attentive to its intelligibility than manifested before. This purposiveness finds its
completion in the Incarnate Christ, the perfect medium and message in light of which all our
various forms of media may be evaluated. In particular, the Incarnate Christ provides an example
of the form Christian evangelization must take if it is to constitute an authentic re-presentation of
God to the world.

In so examining and drawing forth the implications of McLuhan’s work and thereby
retrieving it, we do not find dated clichés from an old prophet of the new media. Rather we find
an approach to media undertaken in light of a realism and Christian faith which is revelatory of
an understanding of the relationality between man and his makings. In the retrieval of
McLuhan’s work, in a manner similar to an exegesis of Scripture, there is found a dynamic re-
presentation of the reality of media containing not only the insights the author himself stated on a
literal level, but even those unarticulated by the author and latent within it.
NOTES


2 The principal theme of McLuhan’s 1970 publication, *From Cliché to Archetype*, is that all clichés are pregnant with meaning and can be retrieved in a manner which rediscovers and manifests their inherent intelligibility. It is fair to say that in treating McLuhan’s own work as cliché, we are affirming its inherent intelligibility, and proposing an approach which can draw this intelligibility forth.


4 Eric McLuhan, introduction to *The Medium and the Light*, xiv. Eric McLuhan is a son of Marshall McLuhan, and a professor of English literature, who collaborated with his father on the study of media and continues this study to the present day.

5 I am here using the word “scientific” in its narrowest modern sense.


7 Ibid., 119.

8 Marshall McLuhan unequivocally rejected an emotionalist approach to literature which emphasized one’s own subjective feelings over the work itself. This is illustrated by an anecdote given by Eric McLuhan in his introduction to *The Medium and the Light* (xviii). Once a student asked Marshall McLuhan, “did he experience any feelings when reading a poem,” to which Marshall McLuhan replied that he obviously experienced feelings, but that “such matters were naturally private and not a proper subject of public or critical discourse.”


10 This contrasts with scientific method understood in the modern sense, which requires, by necessity, a univocal understanding of things. While necessary within the field of modern scientific inquiry, univocal understanding constitutes a severe reduction if applied to reality as a whole.


Ibid., 129. McLuhan gives the medieval scholastic method as an example of a mosaic approach. He states that “the scholastic method was a simultaneous mosaic, a dealing with many aspects and levels of meaning in crisp simultaneity.”

McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 46.

Ibid., 43-44.

Ibid., 71. McLuhan saw a kind of imperative to this process of cliché retrieval, owing the depth of meaning and intelligibility contained in each cliché which would be lost if not retrieved in some way. In his own words, “the flat cliché is an enormously richer and deeper form than anything that can be achieved by pictorial realism.”

Ibid., 41, 103-104.


This is to say that every artistic endeavor is undertaken with a directedness towards a final cause which is present prior to the efficient making of the work itself. This final causality will be present regardless of the conscious awareness or intentions of the artist. To quote Eric McLuhan, “final cause is present in toto from the outset, even before the sequence of making gets underway.” Eric McLuhan, “On Formal Cause,” in *Media and Formal Cause*, 127. Originally published in *Explorations in Media Ecology* IV, nos. 3/4 (2005): 181-209.

See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 65-66. See also *From Cliché to Archetype*, 79.

As Marshall McLuhan states in “G.K Chesterton: A Practical Mystic,” “profound humility in the face of reality is the very condition of honest art and all philosophy” (5). There is therefore a definite kind of responsibility on the part of the artist to approach reality and his own craft with such a humble disposition. Furthermore, the habitus of the artist will have a direct bearing upon the formal manifestation of the work itself. McLuhan’s identification of the need for a specific disposition on the part of the artist and the relationship such a disposition has with the work itself signifies that McLuhan does not take a viewpoint which sees art in terms of imposed ‘value’ in the eyes of either the beholder or artist. Rather, art is by its nature ordered to re-presentation of reality under a specific aspect proper to the specific art form, and must be evaluated in light of this ordering.

Eric McLuhan develops this teleology of art in his article “On Formal Cause,” and in doing so cites a significant portion of text from Ezra Pound’s essay, “The Serious Artist.” In Pound’s words, Bad art is inaccurate art. It is art that makes false reports…If the artist falsifies his report as to the nature of man, as to his own nature, as to the nature of his ideal of the perfect, as to the nature of his ideal of this, that or the other, of god, if god exist, of the force with which he believes or disbelieves this, that or the other, of the degree in which he suffers or is made glad; if the artist falsifies his reports on these matters or on any other matter in order that he may conform to the taste of his time, to the proprieties of a sovereign, to the conventions of a preconceived code of ethics, then that artist lies…It takes a deal of talking to convince a layman that bad art is “immoral.” And that good art, however “immoral” it is, is wholly a thing of virtue. Purely and simply that good art can NOT be immoral. By good art I mean art that bears true witness, I mean the art that is most precise… (135)

The excerpt from Pound’s essay constitutes a development of the kind of teleology of art to which Marshall McLuhan adhered, namely that the purpose of art is a re-presentation of reality in its plurality of forms. This formal re-presentation constitutes the standard by which art is to be judged as good or bad, not in terms of the perceived moral value of the art’s content. Thus, McLuhan, with Pound, does not deny the moral nature of art, but rather...
asserts this morality is to be defined in terms of teleology, not as a value judgment. Art’s goodness or badness has an inherent relation to its truth, that is to say, in its conformity and re-presentation of that which it re-presents.

24 McLuhan reiterates the impossibility of picture realism by citing E.H. Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*:

Representation is never a replica. The forms of art, ancient and modern, are not duplications of what the artist has in mind any more than they are duplications of what he sees in the outer world. In both cases they are renderings within an acquired medium, a medium grown up through tradition and skill—that of the artist and that of the beholder.


25 See McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 16, 54. McLuhan discusses how conventional labels of art as either “realist” or “abstract” are founded upon an ideal of art which emphasizes precise mathematical congruence with nature. This ideal, argues McLuhan, is informed by a modern understanding of nature as a finely-tuned machine, an understanding which is then manifested in mathematically-refined art. McLuhan counters that this modern idea of realist art is “based on a separation of the visual faculty from the interplay of the other senses” and that “so-called abstract art” is in a way more realistic because of its causation of “sense interplay with varying dominance of ear and touch.” According to McLuhan, the Renaissance had a perspective of nature as a kind of machine for applicative uses, and therefore presented it as such through art. See also *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 65, 185.

26 Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 120, 225. It is evident that McLuhan is using a notion of metaphor which is far more expansive than the conventional understanding of metaphor, which McLuhan describes as the mere matching or linking of one thing or situation at a literal level. He critiques Aristotle’s definition of metaphor, given in *Poetics* 1457b, as “the giving the thing a name that belongs to another.” It is not this paper’s intention to evaluate the respective merits of each notion of metaphor, but rather to illustrate that the understanding of form to which McLuhan adheres is one which is primarily informed by his literary background, rather than a purely epistemic or metaphysical notion of form, such as that of Aristotle. For a further discussion by McLuhan about media as metaphors, see chapter 6 in *Understanding Media* (56-61).


31 It should be noted at this point, for clarification, that when we speak of McLuhan’s “literary realism” we are referring to his manner of approaching reality, not his personal affiliation with any specific literary school of thought.


34 Again, this is not a critique of the methods of modern science in context of their proper domain. Rather, it is to say that while the modern approach is necessary for an understanding of reality under a particular aspect and is necessary for modern science, it should not be thought of as the approach we ought to take to reality considered as a whole.
35 Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 14-15. See also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1 980a21, where the Philosopher states that “all human beings by nature desire to know.”

36 Hence, Aristotle says in De Anima III.8 that “the soul is in a way all existing things.” Quoted in McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 122.

37 McLuhan concisely affirms this in *Understanding Media* (19), where he states that “we become what we behold.”


40 McLuhan elaborates that that “any substantial form impresses itself upon you without benefit of awareness or conscious understanding on your part…it is the same with a work of art.” Marshall McLuhan, “Communication Media: Makers of the Modern World,” in *The Medium and the Light*, 37-38. Originally given as an address at the 12th annual Seminarians’ Conference, St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, 29-31 August 1959.


42 McLuhan concisely affirms the epistemic movement from effect to cause in “Formal Causality in Chesterton” (76), where he states that “in the everyday order, formal causality reveals itself by its effects.” Eric McLuhan, in his essay “On Formal Cause” (94), also summarizes this movement in the encounter with art, stating that “the formal cause of a work of art [is] realized as an effect of the item,” with the cause being known through the effect.

43 Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 49.

44 Hence, McLuhan stays clear of a post-modern existentialist notion of form which views it as entirely fluid and thus dependent upon the will for any kind of stability.

45 See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I.75.5.

46 McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 120. In “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters” (165) McLuhan further illustrates the analogy between cognition and art by noting that the agent intellect is called the *nous poietikos* in Greek.

47 Eric McLuhan, introduction to *The Medium and the Light*, xii-xiii.


50 See Luke 2:34. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 578.

51 Eric McLuhan notes that the death of God, the ultimate sign of provocation, could have only occurred because God became visible, that is, took on the mode of human nature. See Eric McLuhan, Introduction to *The Medium and the Light*, xxvi.


53 Ibid., 105-107.
That art is not to be sought as an end in itself, nor as a vehicle for content, is illustrated by Eric McLuhan’s description of an “inferior poem”: “The inferior poem draws your attention to itself and its language, its tricks and devices, then does nothing, leaving you numb in that quarter. Or it tries to convince you of some doctrine. Either way it attempts to force-fit the formal cause inside the poem. The poem by itself, in the abstract, is meaningless.” Eric McLuhan, “On Formal Cause,” 131.


See Eric McLuhan, introduction to The Medium and the Light, xxiii.

Interestingly, McLuhan himself was accused of technological mysticism, because he refused to pass moral judgment on media forms and their effects.

McLuhan believed that such awareness of effects was sorely lacking in contemporary society, to extent that “[no] person is able yet to make value judgments [concerning media].” As a result, McLuhan stated, “our job is diagnosis and observation prior to judgment.” McLuhan, “Communication Media: Makers of the Modern World,” 37. See also Marshall McLuhan to F.J. Sheed, in The Medium and the Light, 140.


The widespread misinterpretation of McLuhan, however, does raise the important question of whether such an artistic means of re-presentation is the most effective means of forming people to a realist worldview in today’s time, compared to philosophy properly considered. It is notable that McLuhan presented art and philosophy as working in concert in the Middle Ages to effectively convey a catholic view of reality, while he argued that in the Renaissance and early modern era the art and philosophy of the day were equally ineffective, leading people to adopt a mechanistic, mathematical view of reality. He was, however, of the opinion that late modern art such as impressionism and late modern literature of the humanist school of Eliot, Joyce, and Pound were able to revive a catholic view of reality. Questions left largely unanswered by McLuhan concern the contemporary situation, including what kind of form is most fitting today in light of the mode of society. The answers to these questions lie implicit within a teleology of media, and warrant far more detailed and in-depth study than can be given here.

It is true that McLuhan, especially in The Gutenberg Galaxy, sometimes gives the impression of presenting particular forms of media as the efficient causes of their culture. However, when The Gutenberg Galaxy is read in light of McLuhan’s literary realist background, the understanding of a dominant medium as formal rather than efficient cause is a far more cogent interpretation which avoids a tendency to determinism which occurs whenever efficient cause, interpreted in a linear Humean fashion, is used to relate cause and effect.

For a further discussion of acoustic space, see McLuhan, Laws of Media, 33.

McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, 32.


This externality would be further emphasized in the form of print. McLuhan, quoting Walter Ong in The Gutenberg Galaxy (104), states that “the use of printing moved the word away from its original association with sound and treated it more as a ‘thing’ in space.”

McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, 82-84, 88-89, 92-93.

See McLuhan, Understanding Media, 174. See also McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, 124-125, 151.


See McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 269. That McLuhan saw print as a formal cause of culture in this manner, and not merely a linear historical event which led to other events, is further illustrated by his statement that “the causes of the dilemma [of individual culture and liberty cannot] be found anywhere but in the *total galaxy of events* (emphasis mine) that constitute literacy and Gutenberg technology.” When McLuhan considers print as a formal cause, he is considering it as it is manifested by a formal totality of cultural effects and events, rather than a linear progression resulting efficiently from a single event.

See McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 149. Another analogy which McLuhan uses to describe the mutual formation which occurs between forms of media is that of the meeting of two galaxies: “Two cultures or two technologies can, like astronomical galaxies, pass through one another without collision; but not without change of configuration.” Their interaction does not consist in the creation of a chain of efficient causal events, but in reciprocal conformation.


McLuhan draws a parallel here with the formal relationship which a new idea has with the intellectual context in which it germinates. Quoting John Henry Newman’s essay on the development of doctrine, McLuhan states that “an idea not only modifies but is modified, or at least influenced, by the state of things in which it is carried out, and is dependent in various ways on the circumstances which surround it.” McLuhan, “Formal Causality in Chesterton,” 80.


Ibid., 231-233.

Ibid., 231-233, 238-239.

Ibid., 8-9, 21, 31.


Whether the particular media in discussion ultimately had the particular effects which McLuhan ascribed to them is incidental to his overall project and our assessment of it. Hence, we will not address McLuhan’s classifications of “hot” and “cool” media, and his theory of effects as being the result of “acceleration” and “implosion,” among other particular processes he claimed to observe in electronic media. It must be remembered that when McLuhan was evaluating particular forms of electronic media, many of which had only been extant for a few years, many of the effects were only beginning to come to light, whereas the cultural effects of oral speech, writing, and print had been observable for centuries. However, McLuhan would have liked to point out that he believed most people simply took these old effects for granted without looking to the causal influence of media. That said, McLuhan himself indicated that it was more difficult to apprehend the causes of effects of a culture from a position of immersion, particularly when looking at media. McLuhan, in the preface to *The Mechanical Bride*, likened the situation to that of the sailor caught in the whirlpool in Poe’s *Maelstrom.* This is because one’s own way of thinking, making, and doing is itself an effect, informed unconsciously by the formal cause of the culture. **It is therefore more difficult to examine a phenomenon of which one is currently under the formal influence, whereas the formal causality of past culture upon oneself is less proximate.** McLuhan would argue however, that one did not have a real choice about whether or not to attempt to understand, by means of their effects, the formal causes of the culture in which one is immersed. The choice is not between understanding from an immersed versus external position, the choice is between understanding them or not understanding them at all. If one chooses not to pay any attention to the sea of effects in which one is immersed,
then one is fated to not only become informed, but determined by their formal causes. Man can either attempt to observe the causal patterns drawing him in, and risk being mistaken, or can inevitably perish. However, as McLuhan states, “there is no absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.” McLuhan’s sense of moral imperative in the necessity of studying media, cannot be interpreted in any sort of Kantian sense, but instead betrays an anthropology and teleology. Man is not meant to be influenced unawares by his own makings.


81 McLuhan to F.J. Sheed, in *The Medium and the Light*, 139.


86 Thus, the great medieval monk Alcuin could say that the arts were discovered, not created. McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium*, 86.


88 McLuhan articulates this dependency in a slightly different way when he states that “media, being extensions of ourselves, also depend on us for their interplay and their evolution.” McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 49.

89 Here I concede that I diverge from the conventional Aristotelian notion of artifact as articulated by Clarke in *The One and the Many* (66). This divergence, however, I believe is necessary in light of McLuhan’s view on the formal agency of artifacts.

90 See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 49.

91 McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 121.

92 As a result, it is possible to reasonably undertake study of “media ecology,” a field which arose under the influence of McLuhan’s work.

93 As McLuhan states in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (25), for tribal man, “every word is a poetic world unto itself, a momentary deity or revelation.”


95 Ibid., 22.


When we speak of a ‘logician,’ we specifically mean a logician, typically of a modern persuasion, who does not view formal logic in a metaphysical context, but rather in isolation from reality. The intention here is not to denigrate the value of formal logic per se, but to argue that logic must always be understood in relation to the intelligible relations between real things of which logic is a re-presentation. McLuhan briefly discusses the movement from classical to modern logic in late scholasticism in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (159). In a classical understanding of logic, such as that of the Stoics, “what logic claims to be is a translation of the real into words...logic consists essentially in a dialectic, or science of correct discourse by questions and answers, capable of discriminating true and false in relation to truth (emphasis his) that is the real.” McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium*, 52.

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100 McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium*, 16.
102 Ibid., 104.
103 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VI.10.11.
104 Colossians 1:15
107 Marshall McLuhan, “Liturgy and Media: Do Americans Go to Church to Be Alone?” 118.
108 It is for this reason that McLuhan, in *Understanding Media* (20) quotes Pius XII as stating, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual’s own reaction.” McLuhan goes further in his first conversation with Pierre Babin, and states that “electric man has no bodily being. He is literally dis-carnate. But a discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a tremendous menace to an incarnate Church.” See Marshall McLuhan, “Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin,” in *The Medium and the Light*, 50, originally published in *Autre homme, autre chretien a l’age electronique* (Lyon: Editions du Chalet, 1977).
109 In *Understanding Media* (45), McLuhan discusses the potential of media to become idols as he delivers a gloss on Psalm 115, where the Psalmist reflects that, “Their idols are silver and gold, / The work of men’s hands. / … / They that make them shall be like unto them, / Yea, every one that trusteth in them.” In “The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church” (55), McLuhan makes a similar assessment in relation to the Tower of Babel, as symbolic of the fragmentary effects which artifacts can have if they become idols.

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112 Ibid., 105-107, 113. See also “Communication Media, Makers of the Modern World” (35), where McLuhan states “things themselves have formal character and are quite able to speak for themselves. 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 forms within them...the thingness of things must come through [art] at you and must not be reported or described.”
According to McLuhan, if the faith is reduced entirely to conceptual content, it is effectively killed as a means of bringing people to God. As he states in “Electric Consciousness and the Church” (81), “The death of Christianity occurs the moment they become a concept. As long as they remain percept, directly involving the perceiver, they are alive.”


115 The examples of conformity of Christian evangelization efforts to the culture are numerous throughout history. Take, for example, the incarnation of Christianity in the Greek world and its willingness to convert and appropriate cultural forms such as the language of Greek metaphysics and epistemology. Or as another example, the Jesuit missions to the Hurons in Canada.

116 See Marshall McLuhan, “Our Only Hope is Apocalypse, in The Medium and the Light, 62. Originally published as “Futurechurch: Edward Wakin Interviews Marshall McLuhan,” in U.S. Catholic 42, no. 1 (January 1977): 6-11. According to McLuhan, “one of the jobs of the Church” is “to shake up our present population.” In the present age, McLuhan argues, with a flair of rhetoric, this means that “you’d have to preach nothing but hell-fire.” McLuhan here is obviously not advocating for a univocally applicable method of homiletics, but rather insisting that an honest accounting of the condition of the audience will require them to be challenged in a manner which may involve breaking their hearts of stone and thus making them malleable for conformity to the Word.

117 An example of such idol smashing would be the legend of St. Boniface cutting down the sacred oak dedicated to Thor. The example of Boniface is illustrative that idol smashing requires a thorough understanding of culture. Boniface did not indiscriminately target every idol, but instead manifested a knowledge of the culture by choosing the most potent symbol of the idol’s power, so that the simple act of cutting it down won conversion rather than contempt.

118 Hylomorphism is the apprehension of the relationship between the matter and form of things, as articulated in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas. In a hylomorphic view of reality, matter and form never exist apart from things; that is to say, matter will always be informed by some kind of form, and form will always inform some kind of matter. For a more thorough articulation of hylomorphism, consult chapter 6 of W. Norris Clarke’s The One and the Many (92-108).

119 McLuhan accounts for the insufficiency of intellectual assent in his own conversion, and testifies that I never came into the Church as a person who was being taught. I came in on my knees. That is the only way in...You don't come into the Church by ideas and concepts, and you cannot leave by mere disagreement. It has to be a loss of faith, a loss of participation. You can tell when people leave the Church: they have quit praying...Any Catholic today who has an intellectual disagreement with the Church has an illusion. You cannot have an intellectual disagreement with the Church: that's meaningless. The Church is not an intellectual institution. It is a superhuman institution. McLuhan, “Our Only Hope is Apocalypse,” 64.


