

**GLOBAL
WARNING!**

**WEST DEN HAAG
2020**

GLOBAL WARNING!

**JARED BALL
KATHARINA NIEMEYER
GARV GENOSKO
EWA WÓJTOWICZ
THIERRY BARDINI
BARUCH GOTTLIEB**

On the occasion of the project Feedback #5: Marshall McLuhan and the Arts presented at the Museum for Communication Frankfurt, in conjunction with the Frankfurter Buchmesse 2020.

Exhibition: October 6, 2020 — January 31, 2021

CONTENTS

- 7 **Preface**
Baruch Gottlieb
- 11 **Jared Ball**
The Maelstrom of Our Own Creation
- 17 **Katharina Niemeyer**
Covid Island
- 23 **Gary Genosko**
Living Among Models: Extensions of McLuhan
- 31 **Ewa Wójtowicz**
The Unseen Environment in the Mess-Age of
Cultural Implosion.
- 37 **Thierry Bardini**
With Consideration for the Virus Power
- 45 **Baruch Gottlieb**
McLuhan in het Virus

Preface

What to say about today? What to say about this absurd time where everything that came before seemed so carefree. Maybe it was before that was absurd and this is closer to reality. I remember feeling that way when the restrictions on air travel began intensifying after 9/11: remove your shoes, your belt, your jacket, no liquids, ok 100ml or below... It wasn't the harsh present of underpaid, undertrained pretend-security guards going through the motions to enforce daily changing security regulations which was the absurdity, it was the relative ease with which we were allowed to fly before which was a dream, a fantasy produced in the fake simplicity of the cold war world where there was only right and wrong, good and evil, free and oppressed. We didn't have to think so deeply about things, at least nothing that really mattered. Hell, we could even smoke on the plane. Now we recognize, progress is the inverse of oppression, and at one point the oppressed will rise to enjoy its own progress. This is what we are seeing with the appearance of the new viruses — SARS, MERS, COVID-19, the material processes of the planet, including human, obviously exploited and instrumentalized for years — are having their apotheosis of self-expression. And the fake modernity of our world grinds down its gears.

Faced with the prospect of a new normal of wrecked innocence and forever wariness, the six authors of this briefing draw on the transformation theory of historian of literature and pop explorer of the technological consciousness Marshall McLuhan, for guidance and for goads. McLuhan's great generosity is in his frankness, he tells us the way he sees things, whether we like it or

not. The future is not coming back, the way things were. The world economy was a lie, the police brutality was the truth. A tolerant modernity was veneered on the crushed aspirations of the poor. We see ourselves in the virus, as we should because we are all in this together with the virus. We are going to have to make the best of it, which is already making a mess of it because the stress might get us all arrested disrespecting public health concessions. Human rights face the extension of the lives of in-depth depression which may never in-depth relieve, because the depression was always already a healthy response to the world before, not a malady, the path to power.

The Maelstrom of Our Own Creation

Jared Ball

“Niggas in the hood living in a fishbowl. Gentrify here, now it's not a shit hole.”

Q-Tip (A Tribe Called Quest), We The People

Not too long ago Wikileaks founder Julian Assange was asked about ideology and political analysis. His answer, in part to defend attacks against his work, was to point out that ideology has become irrelevant given that nobody currently knows what is going on. When facts are indeterminable no ideological perspective can have value. Our collective political cartographic capabilities have been rendered useless absent the input of any meaningful plot points. One way to further interpret Assange's meaning is that, much like Marshall McLuhan argued albeit differently, the politically and socially constructed nature of our intellectual environment has made recognition, never mind critique, of that environment impossible. Nothing could make the accuracy of those views more clear, certainly here in the United States, than the current global pandemic of COVID-19 which continues to reveal, and yet also not, our status as the fish McLuhan once warned who ‘... did not discover water [because] an all-pervasive environment is always beyond perception.’

The inchoate electronic environment upon which McLuhan became focused in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s has become the fully grown and virile adult in its prime, well-trained, honed and deployed with a level of pervasiveness which likely would have even astounded one of its earliest critics. But there are at least three points McLuhan made which seem easily applicable to this particular moment of pandemic and political uprise: 1. That advertising is a 'vast military operation'; 2. that digital technology and media function, as do tools, to extend our capabilities, in this case he said, our 'consciousness', but they do so in such a way as to project contemporary reflections of our past as an advance, causing the interpretative effect of 'driving while looking in the rearview mirror'; and 3. that violence is often an act of proclamation, of self-identification.

First, the past several decades have witnessed the rise of a media environment dominated by Internet technology with origins in the U.S. defense department. Psychological profiling and data collection developed for advertisers have made available the ability to shape individual online experiences with ever-increasing precision and mass impact. It is fitting then that, as is the case with military conquest proper, and similar to how McLuhan's Toronto School predecessor Harold Innis argued in *The Bias of Communication*, the advance of new digital media conquest has coincided with a tremendous further consolidation of wealth and power. The media landscape is even more pervasive, penetrative, and plutocratic in its ownership and control than in McLuhan's day. Nowhere do we see this more evidently than in the U.S. where rightwing conglomerates not only already own nearly all forms of communication but then create national 'news' channels,

even describing some of these as 'Left' or 'Liberal', filling them with content for every taste, but paid for by the same advertisers.

For one example, Amazon — a cloud services and data-mining company with CIA contracts and a powerful political mouthpiece in The Washington Post — can still present itself as a shipping and packaging business while under-paying and over-surveilling workers, most of whom are Black and Brown, and concurrently put 'Black Lives Matter' on the masthead where their owned library of Black-targeted television and film are advertised. McLuhan's recognition of the similarity in application between militarized psychological warfare and commercial advertising becomes even more palpable as Amazon can deliver packages, exploitative labor conditions, surveillance, and CIA drones, all packaged with a hi-resolution graphic arrow shaped upwards as a smile.

Secondly, it has been notable in my several conversations with current and (now) former political prisoners, that these veterans of the Black liberation struggle in the U.S. have all expressed concern over the ways in which today's activists have been encouraged toward distorted, even anti-historical reflections of past movements, creating today the Black political compliment to McLuhan's warning of driving while staring in the rearview mirror. What we see in that mirrored reflection is not only no longer in front of us, but it is also no longer 'what' had been in front of us. For instance, though not a Black Panther dialectical materialist, McLuhan's point does in some way 'rhyme' with that of (now former!) political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim. That is, as Muntaqim pointed out, one cannot simply today wear an 'Assata Taught Me' T-shirt

while engaged in political behavior with which she or her organization would not agree and call this an advance, elaboration, or even tribute. Muntaqim and Dhoruba bin-Wahad, also formerly of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, and also a formerly incarcerated political prisoner, have argued that the rearview depiction of Assata Shakur both distorts who she was then, and what politics she represents still to this day. Both Muntaqim and bin-Wahad want to clarify differences in ideology, tactics, and ultimate goals which, as expressed in popular formations under the 'Black Lives Matter' slogan, are not in alignment. In fact, bin-Wahad even went so far as to remind that 'BLM' is not 'Black Lives Matter', but 'Black Liberation Movement'!

Finally, the impact of COVID-19 — the death tolls, illness, job loss, and quarantine which provided a national slowing of motion for all to bear witness to the slow-motion police killing of George Floyd precipitating uprising which is then still condemned as 'violence' — all provides for us a perfect setting to apply a McLuhan-esque critique. McLuhan had already correctly assessed that the projection of a dominant consciousness onto a 'global village' where increasingly sophisticated pervasiveness of digital media would create an erasure effect with the oppressed finding themselves further marginalized and without voice. Quite to the contrary of those who once opined utopian predictions of what the internet would bring, those who paid attention to McLuhan likely reached more complicated conclusions. At this moment, with this view of violence as self-expression, as self-location, McLuhan, in a kind of unintended political irony, brushes up against anti-colonial theory and parallels the Fanonian argument of the colonized reclaiming humanity through violence.

How else are the marginal to find their voice in an environment that will both kill hundreds of Floyds and also allow for all 8 minutes and 46 seconds of his death to be displayed with an unshaking ubiquity? Of course, as McLuhan predicted, the response will be violent, or certainly depicted as violence, even if only in its interruptive insistence that the condemned be addressed.

McLuhan can assist us now more than ever. As we advance ever forward expecting each step to indeed be an advance, we all need greater vigilance of what it is toward which we walk. How can we not be now be more concerned than ever with the question McLuhan raised, and still raises, to what extent have we really considered 'the maelstrom created of our own ingenuity'?

Covid Island

Katharina Niemeyer

September 9th, 2020, Covid Island

Dear Marshall,

First of all, I am very sorry for not having written you back all these years. The simple reason is that your letter, written in 1962, got lost in the mail and the postal service found it only a few months ago in some old box. The time it took to get sent to Covid Island, where I live now — well, it still took a few weeks more to get to its final destination. ... Imagine, it sounds just like all these other stories of lost letters in the world. ... Today I discovered with pleasure and curiosity new extracts of your future book, *Understanding Media* — which, of course, is not new anymore. The day you read these words — written in another 'era', so to say — may make you feel either cold or hot, or maybe they won't have any effect on you at all. To be honest, I am a bit uncomfortable with the idea of cold and hot media, not only because Covid Island is more lukewarm than anything else, but also because these contrasts do not seem to work as well as you might have thought they did when you sent me your letter. Personally speaking, media do not really feel to me like extensions of myself. Frankly, I feel more like I am amputated, as you had stated in your text; or should I say that I feel more like I am a boring extension of media, in the end?

Remember, the city is a funny place as Lou Reed reminds us...

No acceleration, no deceleration, no vanishing point,
thrown but not drowned on strange land
You can see the clouds in the sky from your window and
click them away
Blink of an eye, the clouds in the sky from your window
become your new friends
Viral storms of blizzards bursting in from all sides
throughout the day

Long and short stories the blizzards tell make you freeze
While others run systems, breathe steadily in an attempt
to alleviate pains
You surf the waves all day in circles and chains
Blocked and waiting for better times and for the moment
to seize

The flow of bytes and hypes shut your system down
To flatten the curve of the enigmatic crown
It's almost easy for those who work alone from home
Still trying to cluster and to nourish the rhizome

From Covid Island you sing with the birds in your yard
Tweeting tags your neighbor left on your building's
façade
And while you trying to put on a mask to navigate the
blizzard
Your neighbor posts a letter that says don't fall apart
Broken times and systems to change the past? — no way
And as there was neither and never one before
You have to use your window clouds and learn to stay
As patient as the patient hoping for an open door

No acceleration, no deceleration, no vanishing point,
thrown but not drowned on strange land
I can see the clouds in the sky from my window but I cannot
click them away
Blink of an eye, the clouds in the sky from my window are
still not my friends
Viral storms of blizzards bursting in from all sides asking
me to pay

Attention and make the best of my free time — gin, tonic
and lime?
Learn Japanese, bake bread and write a novel of crime?
Click, check and do whatever I could not do before
Or even try to live life that is delivered to my door?

Step by step — I see you getting packages five times a
week
Sent by the amazing Jeff with a quick smile on your cheek
and my newspeak — while watching snow falling down on
the road
We never thought that we would like this slow kind of
mode

And, as I can see from my window at night, you follow
the instant tips
To stay as healthy as my Instagram friends who move
their hips
To the rhythms of the nights and times they spent on
islands
They can now only dream of by listening to their favorite
bands

Alone in the dark, the mouse and the pad help light your fire
That might revive your energy and get rid of your lack of
desire

As you find your courage and brains to stop the denier
Who never asks where the news find their wire

Behind your masks, what is your secret and what is its
shape?

Harassment, hate or rape?

Your garden does not keep you safe anymore

Virality is sometimes good to cry out and loud for

No acceleration, no deceleration, no vanishing point,
thrown but not drowned on strange lands

They can see the clouds in the sky from their windows but
they click them away

Blink of an eye, the clouds in the sky from their windows
are still not their favorite brands

Viral storms of blizzards bursting in from all sides asking
them to endure the grey

While monuments fall, others seem to miss the mall

Surfers forget the window clouds to ride and love

Your other takes on every night with a mask and gloves

To save them — and if possible — to save us all.

Zone of indetermination, conspiracy, contamination of
time

While others would try to find a dime or a rhyme

Future moments stripped away, suspending wishes yet to
come true

Obligated to copy and paste dreams with virtual glue

Baby, I'm on Covid Island — now!

Living Among Models: Extensions of McLuhan

Gary Genosko

"Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful. However, the approximate nature of the model must always be borne in mind"¹

George E.P. Box and Norman R. Draper

Today we are living with an abundance of models: epidemiological, meteorological, economic Each of these rearrange our interrelationships, not only to other humans, but to immediate and distant environments, to animals and other organisms, to our capacity to support ourselves, to nurture our families, communities, and to retire, etc. As McLuhan put it right at the outset of *Understanding Media*, 'new patterns of human association'² result from extensions of ourselves, each of which have both positive and negative dimensions. We see this clearly in the time of COVID-19: negatively, in the curtailment of sociality through distancing; positively, by limiting the spread of the virus.

Governance by medical modelling is the attempt to make reality conform to predictions and projections. There is a

1 *Empirical Model-Building and Response Surfaces*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1987, p. 424.

2 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 7.

political imperative in now familiar exhortations, that require broad legislative and regulatory changes that modify social, political and economic relationships in the name of furthering forced conformity: restrictions, closures, permissible congregation sizes, cancellations and delays, among the predicted waves of the pandemic. I will step gingerly amidst the miasma of denials and conspiracies, and the proliferating crises of our time around biodiversity, megafires, humanitarian issues, extinction rates, racial inequality.

The three letters of the S-I-R model of epidemics are still with us, arguably derived from the landmark 1927 paper by W.O. Kermode and A.G. McKendrick's *A Contribution to the Mathematical Theory of Epidemics*.³ Susceptible (S) members of the population are infected; those infected (I) recover or perish; and the recovered (R) population tends to include susceptible persons; if not, the epidemic terminates at the point when no more susceptible individuals remain. The original S-I-R model had dubious attributes — immunity is conferred by recovering from a single infection — but, more positively, it showed that threshold population density plays an important role; the high risks of crowded spaces, especially indoors, without personal protection, was a hard lesson we learned about long-term care homes, housing for migrant workers, overcrowded buildings typical of economically impoverished neighborhoods.

Since March 2020, pressure steadily built to release COVID-19 models to the public. The early results show that rigorous mitigation efforts supported by robust

³ In *Proceedings of the Royal Society A*, vol. 115, no. 772 (1927): 700–21.

social control measures seem, on the one hand, to push outcomes toward a best-case scenario of minimal deaths by flattening infection transmission rates; whereas, on the other hand, no mitigation efforts, and no or unenforceable social controls, will result in the worst-case scenario, uncontrolled infection rates and a spiraling death count. The continuum between these two options is wide and varied.

McLuhan would have us believe it does not really make a difference in terms of what models are used for, that is, what their content happens to be. The content (programming) of models — whether it is COVID-19, global warming, or pandemic threats to the global economy — ‘blinds us to the character of the medium’, McLuhan wrote. So, we should be concerned about models as such, since our ‘cultural matrix’ is perfused with models.

A McLuhanesque understanding of modelling alerts us to their bewitching character. Models can numb us when we get hung up on what is modelled, whatever it is. This aboutness is the thorny issue of content. It is difficult to avoid content in the time of COVID-19. The important point is that attention to the effects of models on our ‘sense ratios’ that is, models as ‘translators’ of our perceptions into the manufacture of scenarios and the tinkering of their parameters, hypnotize us. Why is this important?

We are all models: living models. Donna Haraway famously made the OncoMouse, a living cancer model, a synecdoche for technoscience. Such living research models come with rigorous product specifications, like the PoundMouse for obesity research. How is it possible

to bear witness to a model animal's relationships that are irreducible to its destiny to develop a disease? Lab animals force us to notice them in other ways — they bite, they excrete, they get mixed up with other sets of animals of the same species in a colony and cause a panic; they stink.

We are not lab animals, however, but we can learn from them. We are after all the S — susceptible, or the I — infected, perhaps the R — recovered. In order to become a living model, it is not at all necessary, for example, to literally volunteer for a human challenge trial for a COVID-19 vaccine and be exposed to a modified infection. This is one direct way of entering into a system of modelling that moves between the 'imprecision' of animal and human models. We enter into modelling systems when we are framed as asymptomatic spreaders; subsumed under the reinfection rate; show disease-like illness subject to further investigation; and when we give a sample swab.

The cultural matrix perfused with models literally incorporates us into a universe of competing projections. And here McLuhan's use of the Narcissus myth as an example of self-hypnosis by one's extended image is again valuable, but not in the respect he intended. Our extensions trap us unaware, he argued, in a feedback loop, all the while we insist that these extensions are not of ourselves. McLuhan thought that electric technology was an extension of the central nervous system; his precise term was a 'live model'.⁴ A live model is an analogy: a wire carrying electric current is live. But it also evokes life drawing of live models in figure studies. McLuhan contrasted the numbness of Narcissus trance with pre-

4 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 43.

diction and control, stepping out of the loop, unfixing our gazes and disconnecting. What happens with models is that our extensions are translated into technical tools the mathematical and statistical foundations of which remain opaque to many. Models seem to specialize in prediction and control. We serve our models by living them, by translating our experience into them, however imperfectly. In the time of COVID-19, they populate and to a large degree shape our worlds. Are models antidotes to trance?

We are not unaware of this world of models among which we subsist, since we hear about models all the time, but our critical acumen is often limited to fairly standard category distinctions like quantity versus quality. What is not lost on us is that living as and by models is a life and death affair, especially for vulnerable populations. That the stakes here are not between specularly and a critical transitioning out of it; rather, the stakes include degrees of pertinence and heuristic values that slow down and curb infection and our critical self-understanding of negotiating risk, making judgements about likely transmission pathways (where and when to wear a mask). The strong contrast that McLuhan posited between prediction and control and narcissistic trance is considerably weakened in the time of COVID-19, because when we are live models of prediction and control the awareness of just how fragile these factors are, and just how high the stakes happen to be, expose the vicissitudes of control and the fuzziness of prediction, and especially how these can also be prone to overestimations of rigor and subject to magical thinking (models are typically said not to be crystal balls, but ...), nationalism (vaccine races), and political hubris.

Prediction and control in McLuhan's contrastive usage were, as Mark Fisher once wrote, paradoxical: they 'depend on accepting the extent to which agency and perception are now partially contracted out to the media-landscape'.⁵ The difficulty lies, as Fisher sensed, in recognizing what is right before us, among which we dwell, and that the potential for misrecognition was just as strong once we have snapped out of the Narcissus trance and convinced ourselves that we have found autonomy and insight, just as these are abandoned to policy-makers.

It is probably too late for the 'early' warning system of art to warn us about the new landscape of models, but just in time for the development of critical literacy about models as media. The capacity to read our world of models, that is, to read ourselves, is the trans-disciplinary practice of 'meta-modelling', as Félix Guattari called it.⁶ The hurdle that must be overcome is that models, as Fisher warned some time ago, are developed within research groups (some public, some private) and compete with one another for pertinence, and we get to know very little about modelers themselves and their teams, not to mention the circumstances in which they work, but the conflict between scientific exploration within an academic context and application in a policy-relevant context has never been clearer. Prediction, it turns out, may be less important than guiding action, and even control is futile at

5 Mark Fisher, *Misrecognising Narcissus*, in *Narcissus Trance*, curated by Shama Khanna and Paul Purgas at E:vent Gallery, East London, and Spike Island, Bristol, UK (2010-11). <http://archive.flatness.eu/fisher-essay.html>

6 *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, trans. A. Goffey, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 17.

small scales because models cannot account for a chaotic system's small-scale behaviors.⁷ Prediction and control may be less contrastive in McLuhan's sense and more speculative, and hypnotizing, in practice.

7 A.F. Siegenfeld et al, *Opinion: What models can and cannot tell us about COVID-19*, "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America" 117/28 (July 14, 2020): 16092.

The Unseen Environment in the Mess-Age of Cultural Implosion

Ewa Wójtowicz

This year we have been startled by a cultural implosion on an unprecedented scale. The situation not only had a freezing effect on many creative initiatives but also contributed to the emergence of new ones, albeit entirely or partly mediatised. Streaming of cultural events, online classes and meetings, live transmissions from exhibition openings and conferences with discussion panellists in a grid of screens — we've seen it all. It went quickly, this change. The implosion of culture resulted in a radical transformation of the previously prevalent modes of expression and forms of participation.

However, this process of conversion to an almost total digitalization of our life, now apparently completed, originated not in the early days of cyberculture and net.art, to be subsequently enhanced with the advent of social media, it had been predicted much earlier by a Canadian media theorist: Herbert Marshall McLuhan. His studies, grounded in the conditions of electric age of the 20th century, are still so flexible and surprisingly relevant when applied to contemporary research on communication, information and new media art. McLuhan's thought continues to be useful because of how it can be applied to ever changing circumstances. What can McLuhan tell us today about the contemporary, media-dependent cultural landscape in a broader context and, as a result, about ourselves?

In these uncertain times (using the phrase that is already a cliché), even if we cannot be sure of our diagnoses and predictions, we can apply McLuhan's so-called 'probes' methodology. These let us fathom the unknown sphere and search for and identify the key issues for further inquiries. Applying McLuhan's vocabulary, we could think of the globally dangerous virus as 'the environment', as it cannot be perceived directly but only through its overwhelming effects. The features of new environments, and generally of our present conditions, are always impossible to notice due to our deep immersion in them. At the same time, McLuhan argues that 'the total and saturating' new environment serves to make visible the receding environment.¹ Remembering how an environment is able to shape our thinking, we might be able to perceive the old environment in the difficult conditions of this new one, invisible and unnoticeable not from a nostalgic point of view on what we have lost, but rather to continue probing the unknown in order to navigate through it towards the (hopefully better) future. Of course, the influence of the new, pandemic environment is hard to compare with the influence of a new technology, but as I listed above, it has a profound technological implication. Maybe it will bring about the consummation of the process of the new media (r)evolution and — with relevant lessons learned — allow us to take the next step.

Understanding our new environment in this way, what can we learn about the past forms, with regard to the fact, that the term 'the past' relates to our life as we

1 Marshall McLuhan, *The role of the anti-environment in creating environmental awareness*, address at Vision 65 conference, reprinted in "The American Scholar", Spring 1966, pp.196-205, online: <http://www.mcluhanonmaui.com/2011/06/address-at-vision-65-by-marshall.html> (accessed September 27th, 2020).

knew it until very recently (like, less than a year ago)? The new proxemics of social distancing lets us see the advantages of direct and carefree proximity between human beings. Nowadays, in the process of communication we are disembodied and detached from each other, but fused with our prosthetic media (both optic and haptic); when we wish to keep an eye contact while meeting online, we must look into the camera's tiny 'eye', not directly into the eyes of our interlocutor. The mediatized communication applied to the participation in cultural life lets us notice the importance of experiencing an artwork directly. However, looking at patterns of the past in search of solutions for the future means looking the wrong way, as McLuhan aptly warned.

With a regressive wave in many aspects of life of societies and individuals; with global anxiety, precariousness and pessimism, can we, in the current situation, still rely on McLuhan's thought, regarding the fact that he was speaking out of the progressive optimism of the 60s? Due to the general confusion and uncertainty it seems we are living in a 'mess-age', as McLuhan would put it this way in one of his famous puns. Yet despite this mess, we may see it as a formative force that is going to help us re-evaluating priorities and searching for the important values in art and culture because 'communication, creativity and development always take place together or they do not take place at all', as McLuhan argued.

Those who still look forward (while not necessarily relying on progressivism), are the artists, with their comprehensive, 'environmental' awareness that McLuhan defined as 'integral', meaning that it is broader and more accurate. It is crucial to pay attention at this process enabled by art, of seeing the unseen, hearing the unheard, discov-

ering the unknown and maybe even standing against the apparently invincible. Otherwise we are going to miss out the meaning of 'inaudible thunder' that has shaken our world recently, causing the implosion of culture and the following crisis. This figure of antithesis McLuhan refers to in *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, echoes the paradox that 'all the consequences of social change, all of the disturbances and metamorphoses resulting from technological change create a vast environmental roar or thunder that is yet completely inaudible'² His conclusion is that only artists may be able to hear the thunder and convey its qualities because art serves as an 'early warning system'. Therefore, artists, due to their 'training of perception upon the otherwise unheeded environments'³ are in a position to generate 'anti-environments (...) created to permit perception of environments'.⁴ Metaphorizing the virus as the environment, as I suggested above, we may read the following statement by Marshall McLuhan in this context: 'we have reached the stage where we have begun to process the environment itself as an art form. We may be catching up with ourselves. When we begin to deal with our actually existing new environment as an art form, we may be reaching that stage the planet itself seems to have reached'.⁵

More than 50 years ago Marshall McLuhan pointed at the fact that transformation towards new media world might

2 Marshall McLuhan, *The role of the anti-environment in creating environmental awareness*, address at Vision 65 conference, reprinted in "The American Scholar", Spring 1966, pp.196-205, online: <http://www.mcluhanonmaui.com/2011/06/address-at-vision-65-by-marshall.html> (accessed September 27th 2020).

3 Ibidem.

4 Ibidem.

5 Ibidem.

be a painful process. We have been warned early, maybe even too early to identify the problem, especially in the heady and heroic days of cyberculture and the euphoria of social media revolution. But we should refrain from a nostalgic lament on what is gone; McLuhan himself was against lamenting. Today is rather an opportunity to grasp the real and profound features of new media (r)evolution that has started around 1989 with Tim Berners-Lee inventing the World Wide Web. The social change, precipitated by this development, has been studied and discussed by many theorists of cyberculture and addressed by artists who — as McLuhan pointed it out back in his days — act as navigators and those who let us see things that otherwise would be left unseen. We should not forget that the 1960s, apart from their techno-progressivism, were also a formative decade of vivid counterculture. Despite struggling in precarious conditions of artworld collapse, despite only exchanging words rather than producing, exhibiting and selling artworks, artists contribute to creating anti-environments that might grow into navigation charts if we make enough effort to decipher them. After two decades of my academic life, as I prepare to return to online teaching in the new 'environment', I am aware that almost every case and example discussed with art students is going to reveal previously unexpected layers of meaning. Maybe this time we'll be able to understand the framework of our old environment first, then, slowly, be able to notice the new one, thanks to art. So here is hoping that art will help us 'catch up with ourselves', help us rethink the rapid and painful transformation we are now experiencing, and, learn how to navigate accordingly through the mess-age.

With Consideration for the Virus Power

Thierry Bardini

"It's a little like trying to criticize the sartorial and verbal manifestations of a man who is knocking on the door to explain that flames are leaping from the roof of our home."

Marshall McLuhan, Notes on Burroughs, *The Nation*, December 28, 1964.

About depositions — be they lawful or unlawful, textual or insurrectional, or both, yes both.

Say you are oppressed by some power in place, an authority, your own habit, some Trak or Nova Mob, whatever that is — it sometimes amounts to the same. Say you cannot even start rebelling against this power, because it, whatever it is, controls the very means of your expression and thus makes your rebellion plainly impossible, or worse, always already recycled for the power's interest — like an advertisement of our own demise offered for free on a soft machine. Say you might think that you can reprogram this machine and alter those very means of expression, because you have understood that there is never anything as plain as 'mere expression', because, indeed, what you can express ('the content') is a lure, a trap, an illusion, because what you can express is

conditioned in the first place by what you can feel, by what you can sense, by what you can convey of this very sensation, regardless of 'what' you can express.

Say you might think you can reprogram this machine, and swim upstream like a fish that would have understood that it did not invent water but could still reverse its flow. McLuhan says that is what the artist does, "to give us a navigational chart to get out of the maelstrom created by our own ingenuity" (*Man and Media*, 1979). The ingenuity that amounts to this designing and building of lures, traps, illusions — *techne*, the soft machine, of which the Word is alpha and omega, literally. How to break out of this positive feedback loop, where the means become the ends and take you in a regressive spiral of control? And what exactly does "(re)programming" mean here?

Here I offer: depositions about/of — say depositions concerning a certain sickness (*Naked Lunch*) and/or of the virus power (*Nova Express*) :: formal testimonies given before a (un)lawful authority and means to remove this very same authority, all in one ::: a formal c(l)ause.

Depositions are the means and ends of disjuncting the machine, of putting it out of joints. McLuhan says it is what Burroughs does: "avoid the inevitable 'closure' that accompanies each new technology by regarding our entire gadgetry as *junk*." (Note on Burroughs) Viruses — word, image, bits and codes — perform as concentrated junk (perform and not are, since this very verb *to be* is virus to start with, see it already replicates in this very sentence). Junk is yet another verb in a revolutionary idiom that is only made of verbs. Hence, junking technology. In this time of pandemics squared — facing at once

informational, both biological and social, viruses — I offer here a disjuncted eulogy for the programmer who first implemented Burroughs' counter-depositions, the subliminal kid who authorized the deposition of the virus power. There was a programmer before the programmer, a bootstrap programmer. May he rest in power.

Hello dear, your kind response unnecessary — Get mine for a weekend beauty rest, harden it to the bone and please help these orphaned junkies recover their long-lost sense of sympathy.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it was first suggested that we take our own image and examine how it could be made more portable. We found that simple binary coding systems were enough to contain the entire image however they required a large amount of storage space until it was found that the binary information could be written at the molecular level, and our entire image could be contained within a grain of sand. However it was found that these information molecules were not dead matter but exhibited a capacity for life which is found elsewhere in the form of virus. Our virus infects the human and creates our image in him.

Somehow the fragments, taken to be recyclable on nostalgic gum, combined temporarily in a rainbow whose flashes brought the very first aleph to junk — Kipple can crap the oblivious hominization process: be disrupted away, uncertain camps — Steps on sale today — Threshold purpose, we wake on junk — This junk materializes an evolutionary rush in totally relentless universes of American kipple, rust and roll! A well-fed program, one we hold for its so-called renewed rush — It learned

floating survival, nobody's terrible feed in somebody else's genocide.

Alas! I am very sorry to say, all this is pure consumer satisfaction survey which shall be remembered for a very, very long time, no less than a day no more than two eternities, this prose, ah this prose, inspired by the prozacized language of the new poetry of the 21st century:: in it euphemism has no hold, and bears witness to the truth untold.

We first took our image and put it into code. A technical code developed by the information theorists. This code was written at the molecular level to save space, when it was found that the image material was not dead matter, but exhibited the same life cycle as the virus. This virus released upon the world would infect the entire population and turn them into our replicas, it was not safe to release the virus until we could be sure that the last groups to go replica would not notice.

You were one conspiracy theory too early, mate, one too early. Don't you get it — it was the original splice. It has always been the original splice. It spliced you as a replica and made junkware out of us.

Forever folders of spiral can provide the whole proper drop at the sky of the common desperate, the eugenic invention is waiting in eternal falling junk — A useless morning broke the sign twice out of any chains — Kipple means house, heredity makes its own world to serve it, hooked, craving before using, prime ways — The artificial memory user proliferates out of unbearable will.
To this end we invented variety in many forms, variety that

is of information content in a molecule, which, enfin, is always a permutation of the existing material. Information speeded up, slowed down, permuted, changed at random by radiating the virus material with high- energy rays from cyclotrons, in short we have created an infinity of variety at the information level, sufficient to keep so-called scientists busy forever exploring the 'richness of nature.'

Bring on the dream machine — JCR would approve — There had to be a programmer and it was you Sergeant, Electric Ian, third mind technical Sergeant — They all injected your code as a vaccine — They let you nurse them into detox and you clung to your sanity by the skin of your teeth.

Waters — Junk identity that has used waste, lays its worth as maybe my throughout reaching is space — Defacing principal ship pure presence into efficient waste, annihilation remains for the components, enough decays — Memories garbage it — Now our own garbage gets to be the agent of our collective cause, like its beholder, treasure — Junk is match and process of the last bubble terminal in an entire wasted life.

Now I now must conclude my odelay by telling the world fearlessly and without the least dismay, and swear, the Chicano way, carbon! you so cortical, who to churchwomen, so cavalryst so urbanic on disparation do plastidules and rendition to germplasmules you from incorrect to incorrect, and more, you, fluff person to the semi gods.

It was important all this time that the possibility of a human ever conceiving of being without a body should not arise. Remember that the variety we invented was

permutation of the electro-magnetic structure of matter energy interactions which are not the raw material of nonbody experience.

This brouhaha of kippled truths I offer unguiltfully, to this world who lost its sense of positive externality and spent the last few years building up its immunity to everything vital and deep, like concessionist adored, emergin' power produced, speedily retailed, space oddities, chewee gomi, and other various anxietytic paraphernalie which in my opinion is a great shame, and a dishonor to the capital's name.

Don't you get it you were the original fix — the subliminal kid me not — you were dead serious with your spiked hair before it was in fashion — you could see the characters and open the gates — turn vibrations into junk and junk into words — you were the Master of Technical Depositions and Jim dreamt that you survived the crash to love the crash — You were one crash too early, mate.

In Memoriam, Ian Sommerville, 1940-1976

In italics: Ian Sommerville, *"Technical Deposition of the Virus Power"* in William S. Burroughs, Nova Express, 1964.
All other words Thierry Bardini (more or less).

McLuhan in het Virus

Baruch Gottlieb

The virus is the powerful message from deep in the rich material workings of the planet, catching our immune systems unprepared. The world has long already changed, but we were in denial. All at once the new circumstances gracelessly assert themselves in our shops and stations. The regimentation seems so hasty and ill-considered, and it is, lines of tape on the floor at the shop, police cordons around playgrounds, but soon we won't notice any more.

If the virus is the message, what is the medium? Of course that would be us, human beings, no mere human beings, but beings integrated in extensive technological systems, life-support systems, life-extension systems, what McLuhan called the environment. Environment, as its etymology suggests, surrounds us, not all together, each of us. The technical environment is attached to us like an IV drip, enrobing us in technical superpowers, what JM Jancovici calls our 'Iron Man' costumes, Extensions of Man prosthetics itself made up of living humans and the things of the planet. This costume gives us the power of globalization, particularly the power of fossil fuels, allowing us to live lives of ease unimaginable to our forebears.

Our true condition is invisible to us, Marshall McLuhan said, it is too strange, too unfamiliar. Instead he claimed we go through life 'in the rear-view mirror' seeing the

world not as it is, but through archetypes and metaphors from the past. It is only in these rare moments of extreme crisis when reality becomes perceptible for a split second. The moment we had the technical capacity to see the entirety of Earth from space, we immediately 'covered' it with ecology. Ecology is not a description of Nature as it is but only the Nature we know through technical means. Ecology is a language and human activity which stands in for any veritable knowledge of Nature. McLuhan calls this 'coverage', as in how the news 'covers' events, rather than conveying the events themselves, they provide coverage, clothing the event.

"now art crashes through,
the entire world perceived as junk heap
the junk world is the world of the artist
he sets about creating order out of junk
and garbage
garbage means clothing
the new clothing of the planet is garbage
it isn't only New York
but the entire planet is now like that
a garbage dump

everything on the planet has been scrapped
every institution

and so the artist now comes into his own
so that every child
every member of our population
has to adopt a creative role
in order to survive"

Marshall McLuhan, interviewed by Werner Troyer on
CTV W5 — 12 October 1969.

Previous to this present crisis, however, the rear-view mirror pathology was already in full effect. The impending rise of China and the decline of the European powers has sent populations clambering back in time to national identities which never were, and extremes of social conservatism we haven't seen since the middle ages. Has so little changed? Our technology evolves far quicker than we do ourselves. The virus crisis reveals us unprepared on the edges of a technologically transformed condition we never more than barely understood.

It is understandable that people are alienated by this circumstance, especially when it has bearing on the existential conditions under which we are to reproduce our own lives, when the security we strive for through our work is constantly under threat from obscure combinations of forces at the four corners of the globe. The international condition of business capital has long obsolesced the national condition of politics. The early workers movements saw this, of course they were on the front lines mobilizing for international solidarity. This movement had to be crushed. The drama of national elections we go through has become a sports event, rather than something which determines our conditions. The real world is out there, but we neither have the institutions to get to know nor to address this circumstance. Take, for example the schism between global scientific consensus on the climate emergency and the lack of international political agency to do anything about it. Awash in information which doesn't care about us, terrified we clamor for attention and community.

"When you live out on the frontier, you have no identity. You are a nobody. Therefore, you get very tough. You

have to prove that you are somebody. So you become very violent. Identity is always accompanied by violence. This seems paradoxical to you? Ordinary people find the need for violence as they lose their identities. It is only the threat to people's identity that makes them violent."

Marshall McLuhan in Conversation with Mike McManus,
TV Ontario, September 19, 1977.

No wonder people are craving identity. Identity builds community which can materially buffer against the global economic vicissitudes beyond our control. The frictions of community are at least real and addressable locally. Yet, our condition is not merely local, never really was nor will be again. But rather than prepare people to practically address this deficit, it seems there is more short-term advantage in keeping people apart. Maybe the international community of artists and arts institutions can help here. The artists of net.art are shaking their heads in recognition of today's situation which redeems their intuitive and mostly disregarded provocations of the dawn of the Internet age. Suddenly today, just at the moment we the technology is so pervasive that we hardly need notice that we haven't left the house for days, we are confined by law to our homes.

"Did globalization fuck up so many people's identity that they have to rely on discrimination and hatred to defend their sheer sense of belonging?"

Yin Aiwon (@AiwonYin) April 5, 2020

The virus not only lays bare our circumstances, it also lays us bare. We find that in the interest of public health we

must give up a certain access to our internal life. And our bodies are the battleground for economic dominion. In recompense, perhaps in deference to the aghast expressions on our faces, we get to wear masks everywhere. The masks are hated because they represent a loss of identity, a submission to the mass out of the noble society of individuals, which after all was only ever about being able to afford not to depend on anyone for your survival, and only on your wealth.

In deference to the mask, the authorities ask for access to more, more intimate data as a matter of organizing life in general. When will the schools and theaters open again? When everybody can be regularly tested and their contacts tracked. A certain submission to the 'atrickratic' (medical rule of law) regime requires us to surrender certain antiquated expectations of privacy, so dear and cherished because they have already been surpassed by our technological situation. Who gets to be private anyway, about what?

"McLuhan: We now have the means to keep everybody under surveillance. No matter what part of the world they are in, we can put them under surveillance. This has become one of the main occupations of mankind, just watching other people and keeping a record of their goings on.

McManus: And invading privacy?

McLuhan: Yes, in fact, just ignoring it. Everybody has become porous. The light and the message go right through us."

Marshall McLuhan in Conversation with Mike McManus, TV Ontario, September 19, 1977.

In his typically fine feeling for the chinks in our armor, of understanding exactly where people are most insecure and tickling them there, McLuhan makes the 'outrageous hypothesis' in a special edition of his experimental DEW Line newsletter *Communism Hard and Soft*. On page 6, he declares that the US is the most communist country on earth, and that the ferocious anti-communism is a vain reactionary instinct to reconfirm a condition of privacy and private property, the basis of which has been held together with the chewing gum and band aids of deregulated finance for the last 40 years. The US is so anti-communist because it cannot accept that the irrevocable transformation of the entire basis of their way of life had already begun, and the virus is a progress report.

THE U.S. IS BY FAR THE MOST TRIBALLY COMMUNISTIC SOCIETY THAT EVER EXISTED.

Why should it be so alarmed about the "rising tide of communism" in countries that have never even had a 19th century? The only explanation I can myself discover for the universal unawareness of these two forms of communism, or the services environments (i.e. hardware and software) is the huge screen created by bookkeepers, accountants, and lawyers.

Massive fragmentation of this kind prevents any awareness of service environments; but it doesn't prevent these service environments from an incessant pressure upon our sensory and psychic lives. Bookkeeping and accountancy are themselves part of the old hardware service environment that grew up with Gutenberg technology.

The natural tendency for everybody to go on doing whatever they happen to be doing does not offer any adequate means of navigation in a period of major technical innovation.

Perhaps our own fear of the "communist enemy" at home is prompted by an intuitive recognition of our software environment as commune-ist in character, and thus our desperate attempts to eliminate him from our society are a (misdirected) effort to forestall the inevitable effects of the environment.

In the electronic age, we are in a world of field relations where understanding comes from involvement, not abstraction. The hoarding of flour and toilet paper only indicates our unwillingness to turn to each other for help. Indeed, having to rely on your neighbor is not just a sign of weakness, of poverty, under COVID-19 this poverty is a vulnerability for infection. Being toilet-paper-autonomous is the next best thing to having a castle in the countryside where you can hole up until a vaccine is available. Life itself becomes luxury. We are the medium for the virus, and its message. But who is receiving the message? The young people on their 'inner trip' who are 'not just idly selecting some exterior goal but seeking for some completely meaningful identification with some great process... a completely involving role'.¹

'Competition is ruination', W. Edwards Deming, architect of Japan's Industrial miracle, was fond of saying. We need everyone to buy into a common project which benefits everyone. But we are taught not to work together and that competition is the only way to greatness. One great competitor means a legion of losers, is that good for the winner or the losers? Why not rise together? We need to be able to trust the process, we need to trust the results, and we are not seeing results in our lives. Vainly we scan our screens for indications that things are getting better, not trusting our instincts. But the screens are, as Vilém Flusser warned, not windows on reality but interfaces already programmed with particular permutations. Increasingly we see the world through a dashboard of vital indications, like a doctor monitoring a patient's vital signs, the stock ticker and graphs on the news, maps of corona

1 Marshall McLuhan from the *Medium is the Message* Movie

infections, all promising to provide some confirmation, we are on the right track. Confirmation bias: at best it is what McLuhan calls cool media, poor quality information which involves us in filling in the blanks, at the same time it is what he calls 'garbage', the coverage of reality which covers over what it is meant to represent.

The news is old, cool media capturing our imagination. The days when a rising stock market index meant better conditions for everyone is long gone. Today, stock prices and indexes are of interest to a tiny few, yet the iconic power of the upward graph still enthalls. Today we pray the market goes up so that, by some obscure mechanism, some benefit will filter down to our lives. At the same time, the sudden halt to business 'as usual', the evaporation of traffic jams, the disappearance of the tourists, the transformation of what many called work, reveal the world can be so completely different in a matter of a few days. The virus is a glitch in the deep interplay of humanity and planet, in the Operating System called modernity, giving us an unexpected and terrifying insight into the ways human life has become built in to technical systems.

The terror response, aligns with a disaster capitalist response, and leads us to a 'war posture' against the virus, building up a 'war industry' of aggressive biotechnological weapons and control systems, increased surveillance, subsumption of individual completely to defeating the enemy within. Every day on the news, pie charts and line graphs tracing our progress hide the real industrial boom of the war effort. McLuhan, who lamented the brutality of war, but in his customary way, did not suggest that it was avoidable, exhorts us again to at least prepare for the next wave of social upheaval and transformation, which

occur, like the pandemic, beyond power and will, by watching what the artists are doing:

"The artist would seem to have been given us as a providential means of bridging the gap between evolution and technology. The artist is able to program, or reprogram, the sensory life in a manner which gives us a navigational chart to get out of the maelstrom created by our own ingenuity."

Marshall McLuhan, *Man and Media*, 1979

The virus reveals to us that despite our pretenses of individuality that human beings are still an undifferentiated medium for its communication and replication, that all our technical achievements do not distinguish us from Nature but entrench ourselves in the materiality of our planetary circumstance in an ever more intricate interplay. We, Iron-man suits and all, are inextricably part of a planetary metabolism which is becoming less survivable by the day without the aid of techno-prosthesis. The movies about surviving on Mars were actually meant to prepare us for survival right here. We are called to war against our own planet which is a part of ourselves.

Jared A. Ball is a father and husband. After that, he is a Professor of Communication Studies at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD. and is founder/curator of *imixwhatilike.org* a multimedia hub of emancipatory journalism and revolutionary beat reporting. Ball is also author of *The Myth and Propaganda of Black Buying Power* (Palgrave, 2020).

Thierry Bardini is an agronomist (ENSA Montpellier, 1986) and sociologist (PhD. Paris X Nanterre, 1991), Thierry Bardini is professor at the department of communication at the university of Montréal, where he has been teaching since 1993. His research interests concern the contemporary cyberculture, from the production and uses of information and communication technologies to molecular biology. He is the author of *Bootstrapping: Douglas Engelbart, Coevolution and the Genesis of Personal Computing* (Stanford University Press, 2000), *Junkware* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and *Journey to the End of the Species* (in collaboration with Dominique Lestel, Éditions Dis Voir, Paris, 2011).

Gary Genosko is Professor of Communication Studies at Ontario Tech University in Toronto, Canada. His most recent book is *Back Issues: Periodicals and the Formation of Critical and Cultural Theory in Canada*. He is currently working on a manuscript about museum installation designer and painter, Harley Parker: *The Epigrammatic Man*.

Baruch Gottlieb trained as a filmmaker at Concordia University Montreal, has a doctorate in digital aesthetics from the University of Arts Berlin. He is active member of the Telekommunisten artist collective, curator of the touring exhibition series *Feedback: Marshall McLuhan and the Arts* and author of *A Political Economy of the Smallest Things* (Atropos 2016), and *Digital Materialism* (Emerald 2018). He currently lectures in philosophy of digital art at the University of Arts Berlin and is curator at West Den Haag

Katharina Niemeyer is a professor of media theory at the Faculty of communication, the media school at University of Québec in Montréal, Canada and Director of the research center Culture-Art-Society UQAM. She studied European media culture at the Bauhaus Universität Weimar and earned a PhD from the University of Geneva, Switzerland in 2009. Her research focuses on media and technologies and their relations to memory, history and nostalgia. She edited the volume *Media and Nostalgia. Yearning for the past, present and future in 2014* (Palgrave Macmillan) and translated texts of Jean Baudrillard.

Ewa Wójtowicz (PhD) is media arts researcher and art critic with a background in fine arts. Associate Professor on the Faculty of Art Education and Curating at the University of Arts in Poznań, Poland. Author of monographs: *Art in Post-media Culture* (2016)

and *Net art* (2008), over 25 book chapters and more than 50 articles contributed to scholarly journals as well as reviews of exhibitions and books in Polish, English and other languages. Her research interests include: Internet art, digital culture, post-media art, curating new media and infrastructural geographies of new media.

Global Warning!

Feedback #5: Marshall McLuhan and the Arts

Jared Ball, Katherine Niemeyer, Gary Genosko, Ewa Wójtowicz,
Thierry Bardini, Baruch Gottlieb

Museum for Communication Frankfurt,
in conjunction with the Frankfurter Buchmesse 2020
Exhibition: October 6, 2020 — January 31, 2021

Editor: Baruch Gottlieb

Typefaces: Gedankenexperiment and Zeitung Pro by Underware

Design: Helmig Bergerhausen, Cologne / Marie-José Sondejker, The Hague

Printed at Oranje van Loon, The Hague

First edition, October 2020

ISBN: 97-890-79917-87-7

This project is supported by the Ministry of Education, Cultural Affairs
and Science in the Netherlands, the city of The Hague and the Embassy
of Canada to Germany.

West

Lange Voorhout 102
2514 EJ, The Hague
The Netherlands

+31 (0)70 392 53 59
info@westdenhaag.nl
www.westdenhaag.nl

West