McLuhan's Window.
In Praise of Conservatism

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Everyone, almost everyone, wants to be fashionable at all costs. As regards lifestyle, self-image, outfits, and the latest gadgets; the same applies to art and science. The new is sexy. Nobody wants to be considered a conservative.

Today, when the idolatrous cult of the new and technological progress seems to govern everything we come into contact with and everything that surrounds us, the title "In praise of conservatism" comes across as a provocation. Why should anyone concern themselves with "conservatism"? What for? In the name of what?

When one announces that they are a conservative, whenever such an ideological coming out takes place, it evokes only unpleasant associations. After all, you must be modern. The world demands it from us. In the light of the prevailing preferences and contemporary popular opinions, conservatism as an attitude represented by an individual, a group, or a community is almost synonymous with anachronism. Since Marshall McLuhan refuses to participate in an uncritical apotheosis of new technologies, he should be called a "conservative."

In the eyes of the devoted admirers of the new, its apologists, conservative views seem outdated, old, and moldy. Shame on you. Shame. Conservatism is *démodé*. The negative aura surrounding this concept has influenced the negative connotations it evokes. Unfortunately, conservatism and being a conservative are no longer considered simply attitudes, rational cognitive *modi*, or rational worldviews, but come across as almost defamatory – as a contemptuous and compromising label.

We live in a world in which languages, concepts and meanings are confounded. We are not the first to live in such a world. While it is not the time to look for the perpetrators and culprits responsible for the confusing *status quo*, it is clear that losing a sense of unity and coherence will make you lose your mind and question your sensibility: there is no doubt about it. Why do I appeal to the senses? That is a good question. I suggest that you keep the senses in mind and wait for the answer. It will be revealed below.

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Empirical reality is becoming more and more distant from us. It is losing its proper weight; it no longer is the touchstone of human experience; it falls deeper into the depths of collective oblivion. It exists but not really. It has been replaced by omnipresent and omnipotent images which function as simulacra. The simpler the better, because why should we complicate everything? In today's empire of images, what matters is skin deep. Our eyes, ears, even our fingers slide over it – the superficial, too, plays a role in this deceptive performance. The empirical has been divorced from the senses.

This artificial reality turns out to be infinitely fuller and more perfect than the one in which we exist. Maybe it is, after all, unreal, but it is unparallelly more malleable. We can shape it, change it, inhabit it in our imagination. The real is real because we experience it. Experience, therefore, lies at the heart of it, because experience, and only experience, protects against the dangers of the digital illusion.

Wasn't it what the prophet of the electronic age was afraid of a few decades ago?

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The past, as a vast reservoir of social experiences, appears too distant to become an effective warning. Unfortunately, I do not really believe in the mechanism of generational transfer of experiences, be it good or bad. Despite global cataclysms experienced throughout the twentieth century (by the way, the nineteenth century was also a century of unimaginable horrors), mankind did not manage to fully understand and learn from the cruel lessons which led to the cataclysm of total stupefaction.

Contrary to what the ancient maxim rather hastily proclaims, history is by no means a good *magistra vitae*. Unfortunately. Unfortunately, indeed. New generations which opt for change (be it for the "better" but not only) have not created historical antibodies capable of fighting the temptation to create new nationalisms, totalitarian regimes, populisms, authoritarianisms, neo-fascisms, neo-Nazisms, etc.

All sorts of healers of nations are doing very well. The recipe is always the same. We will bring order. Be ready for anything. I promise that we will succeed. Something went wrong again? Be patient. Revolution requires casualties. Oh, well. Our goals will be achieved, whatever the

cost. Let's improve the world together, together, my friends, go forward, it cannot be achieved without you. Trust me.

The old and new leaders are still able to trick their followers all too easily – they promise them a lot in exchange for their personal freedom. People are supposed to obey someone who promises to make everything right. And they will, just you wait. History *magistra vitae est*, but only to those who want to learn something. Do you remember the old mock slogan from the times of the Polish People's Republic: "Our party never promised anything to anyone and will keep its word"? This is a perfect motto for the present.

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Getting rid of fanatical tendencies is not so easy. "The sleep of reason produces monsters." Ideological insanity, which is a constant threat, always begins the same way: with the confusion of concepts in millions of minds overwhelmed by thoughtlessness. We know its effects; we experience them every day. For quite some time, left- and right-wing tendencies have not been clearly delineated, separate, forms of individual and social action; as a result of cheap political games, the left and the right have lost their meaning. They have lost their original meanings, having been processed in a conceptual centrifuge.

This is how it works, and this is how it is generally perceived. Shamans in power feed on their voters' confusion, drawing sinister power from this practice. War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength... If you do not agree with us, you are our enemy, an unrepentant conservative, and after all, we call ourselves conservatives, defend our noblest traditions, and let no one tarnish what is sacred to us or hold a different opinion.

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The concept of conservatism has been, with disastrous results, appropriated by those who do not necessarily understand it well, who do not understand its value in the life of individuals and societies and what it should actually and truly involve. This concept has fallen victim to manipulation – some only pretend to be traditional, faithfully honoring the most sacred.

And what about change? It has to take place – just because – but, ideally, only if we accept it and introduce it ourselves. It is supposed to be "our way." Did you want to modernize the rolling stock and trainways in a European fashion, to replace the vehicle we have been using for years? We will not allow it; let the train of history go on as it used to, preferably without brakes. If necessary, we will make the hearth of our historic locomotive red-hot. The world won't wait? Why should we care? Let us joyfully ride on in our beloved narrow-gauge train. Who knows, maybe it will be possible to overtake it thanks to the radical reforms we are introducing. We know where we are going and where this escapade will take us all. Somewhere, without a doubt. Let's ride! No one will stop us. And whoever does not want to ride with us has to get off.

We will also tame the news. Who needs free media? New technology is to serve society. Too much freedom given to the people marks its inevitable doom. It is better to limit it, to control it. You can't do this, you can't that. Of course, we are not going to impose censorship (especially as it is impossible to do so online), but social control of the flow of information is necessary. It is better not to know too much. Why should you? Each authority has its secrets and sins. Everyone makes mistakes; politicians are people too; let's not dwell on bad decisions; everyone hides their mistakes and "distortions." Why would you worry the society that has trusted us? We love progress, but deep down in our hearts we want everything to stay as it has always been. After all, we act and rule for the common good, and the general public does not like change. Why? It's simple – because people never know if they will benefit from it.

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Was Marshall McLuhan a conservative? He was, and his adversaries repeatedly accused him of it. On what grounds? Why did they detest him so much? Considering his research interests, it should be the other way round. Almost seven decades ago, he was the first scholar in the world to envision scientific models of the impending information age and he did so in the name of defending traditional cultural values. Paradoxically, for this very reason, neither the electronic nor any other revolution could claim him as its founding father.

However, I think that the opponents of the Canadian scholar, if, of course, we are to ignore the evident animosity which may be felt in many critical texts, correctly identified McLuhan's perspective. Precursor – conservative. This juxtaposition is almost incomprehensible for someone who habitually perceives and understands reality (*vide* Sapir-Whorf) – this is a type of dislocation known to orthopedists – by means of binary reasoning.

Derrick de Kerckhove deals with contemporary media development in a different manner; his approach is polyphonic and holistic:

> The development of the web and the sheer number of connections gave rise to a powerful new technological metaphor that has had a significant impact on our perception of space-time. Until now, major information technologies have influenced people's perceptions of the environment in terms of size, order, texture and, of course, boundaries. While literacy and the invention of print, by externalizing and focusing attention on the visual side of the local language, created the awareness of the "Nation" and the need to define and control its "natural" boundaries, the electronic media destroyed them, thus widening the dimensions of the mental representation of a given space.[1]

Reflecting on Marshall McLuhan's and the Toronto School of Communication Theory's legacy, Agnieszka Ogonowska contrasted Derrick de Kerckhove's and his academic master's views on *mediamorphosis,* a phenomenon that is over 100 years old. Ogonowska observes that:

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[1] Derrick De Kerckhove, *Connected Intelligence: The Arrival of Web Society* (Toronto: Somerville House Books, 1997), 150.

The understanding of Derrick de Kerckhove's works as, in a way, extensions of McLuhan's views should be broader, not only in terms of furthering a specific paradigm but also in terms of taking into account its development based on very similar linguistic tools used to create the discourse. This (mental, epistemological, theoretical) affinity cannot be explained only in terms of the Master-Apprentice relationship and the fascination with the theories of the "media prophet" or the desire to mechanically duplicate some specific linguistic constructions. [...] Derrick de Kerckhove's McLuhanism has a clear mental motivation: the interdisciplinary and global understanding of events comes hand in hand with a language that is able to express them properly.[2]

Considering the above, the semantic connotations of the adjective "global" are particularly intriguing. As we know, the word "global" is one of the most recognizable key words in Marshall McLuhan's philosophy of contemporary media. Well, in Derrick de Kerckhove's approach, "globality" and "global surroundings" (de Kerckhove) is no longer defined in terms of topographic or geographic categories but instead is seen more holistically, which, naturally, does not exclude other definitions.

De Kerckhove understands and "explains" his Master in a peculiar way – his interpretation differs greatly from the commonly accepted exegesis. In the metaphor of the global village, the word "global" is key. This interpretation corresponds to such essential McLuhan's concepts as: openness, multi-polarity, co-occurrence, simultaneity, interdisciplinarity and heterogeneity.

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I don't know, I'm not sure, if Marshall McLuhan was really a conservative. However, having read his texts, I know that his thoughts on the evolution of the media, the development of technology, civilization, culture, social life, etc. stem from his skepticism. This observation, although it seems right, requires proof.

Was McLuhan a skeptic? Yes, but this observation alone is not enough to allow one to penetrate deeper into his philosophy and rethink the methodology of his works. In recognizing these inherent skeptical cognitive foundations, one should consider the proper definition of skepticism. The Greek word *skeptikós* means doubting, critical, disbelieving, suspicious of something.

Depending on the context in which we place McLuhan's skepticism, it may be regarded as a philosophy or as a general, and not only academic, attitude to life, involving distrust and doubt. The skeptic, both a scholar and a mere mortal, keeps in mind the uncertainty of human cognition, believes in it and proclaims it, which by no means makes them an agnostic.

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[2] Agnieszka Ogonowska, *Twórcze metafory medialne: Baudrillard – McLuhan – Goffman* [Creative media metaphors: Baudrillard - McLuhan - Goffman] (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 133.

There is no need, I think, to refer to the philosophy of Descartes or Hume. Neither should we refer to such skeptics as Sextus Empiricus or Pyrrho of Elis. For our purposes, it will be entirely sufficient to invoke the modern version of skepticism, which places particular emphasis on the methodological aspect of the proposed hypotheses and the epistemology and accessibility of truth.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and specifically Juan Comesaña and Peter Klein, thus define cognitive skepticism:

> Philosophically interesting forms of skepticism claim that we do not know propositions which we ordinarily think we do know.

Another passage in their definition of skepticism is also significant in the context of McLuhan's research:

> Thus, consider skepticism about the future: the claim that the only justified attitude which respect to propositions about the future is suspension of judgement. That kind of philosophical skepticism overlaps partly with ordinary skepticism about the future.[3]

The British philosopher Duncan Pritchard considers and defines skepticism from a slightly different perspective:

> We are unable to know that any one of a number of skeptical hypotheses are false, where a skeptical hypothesis is understood as a scenario that is subjectively indistinguishable from what one takes normal circumstances to be but which, if true, would undermine most of the knowledge that one ascribes to oneself.

In addition, Pritchard was also very much interested in the "skeptical paradox." Crucial in understanding the rational sources of cognitive skepticism, the skeptical paradox boils down to three brief and interconnected observations which concern the rational pursuit of knowledge:

> I. I am unable to know the denials of skeptical hypotheses.
> II. If I don't know the denials of skeptical hypotheses, then I do not know very much.
> III. A lot of what I believe, I know[4].

Bearing in mind the above and referring to the skeptical philosophy of knowledge, let us try to find a deeper principle that governs the macrosystem of views held by the Canadian media scholar. While he was seen as a "conservative," he was probably a promoter of the new media

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[3] Juan Comesaña and Peter Klein, "Skepticism", in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/skepticism/.

[4] Duncan Pritchard, "Contemporary Skepticism", win *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, date of access: 14 March 2022, https://iep.utm.edu/skepcont/. See also Pritchard's newest monograph: Duncan Pritchard, *Skepticism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

in equal measure and studied this phenomenon when the era of *homo informaticus* and *homo digitalis* had just begun.

Hailed as the "prophet of the electronic age," in my opinion, he did not represent and did not behave like a typical prophet. As a scholar, he was never inclined to make effective prophecies but instead avidly sought the truth. He posed questions and examined the issues he was interested in, shying away from giving ready-made, final answers.

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Marshall McLuhan's views on the media, on their evolution, and the overwhelming impact that these changes had centuries ago and continue to have in the history of mankind, in many ways correspond to the above-cited definitions of skepticism: both epistemologically and methodologically. One may find in them Socratic humility concerning "ignorance" and the "unknown;" it is a deliberate starting point in one's pursuit of knowledge.

The skeptical paradox from which he derives his method of seeking the truth makes his investigations, on the one hand, open and, on the other, restrained. Indeed, this academic discipline is methodical. The method that McLuhan chose and creatively developed determines the relation between the sign and its meaning as well as the vast intellectual horizon that it opens up.

The architecture of the poetics of McLuhan's argument is unique. It involves a consistent, contradictory dialogue with the arising assumptions and doubts, including other people's (especially widely held) beliefs. "I don't know" rather than "I know for sure." At every step, as the discourse develops, *dubito ergo sum* becomes more and more palpable. In the case of this researcher, the ethical aspect of research is closely intertwined with and corresponds to the poetics of his reflections.

In his studies, McLuhan opposes the temptation to believe that he has access to absolute, unquestionable, undisputed and fully objective knowledge. Instead, he chooses a skeptical approach, *ergo*, in the conventional sense of the word, a conservative approach. On the one hand, it is largely what makes him a "conservative" in the eyes of many of his critics and adversaries. On the other hand, it makes him address a mass audience, people who are not interested in science and his research, with ease (the famous interview for "Playboy," September 1969).

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Thus, "conservatism" often attributed to McLuhan helped reveal to us a very important aspect of his intellectual pursuits. The kind of skepticism that McLuhan represents, constantly shifting between "science" and "faith," between the development of communication technology and collective consciousness, turns out to be a very powerful cognitive strategy, closely related to the methodological aspect of his reflection on the social functions of communication media.

Let me at this point share some concluding remarks regarding Marshall McLuhan's alleged "conservatism." It can be said that he is a "conservative" in his works to the same extent as he turns out to be a cognitive and methodological skeptic.

As a scholar, and not a propagator or uncritical enthusiast, he approaches the media with due reserve. Whatever his research interest, whatever his chosen topic, he carefully avoids both risky prognoses and hasty generalizations. When he chooses examples to illustrate a given problem, he presents the reader with a description, an analysis and an interpretation of specific detailed cases of communication practices, which are consistently embedded in a specific context and situation.

Perhaps that is why, i.e., thanks to the research strategy described in this article, Marshall McLuhan was an outstanding researcher of the micro and macro cultural evolutionary processes; he is a classic scholar in media studies and a media theorist whose works, interdisciplinary ideas, and personal reflections have not lost their value over the years and continue to attract great interest from contemporary scholars.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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ABSTRACT:

This article attempts to functionally reconstruct the views expressed by Marshall McLuhan in his works, both from an epistemological and the methodological perspective. The author argues that at the core of McLuhan's theory, often regarded as a manifestation of "conservative" views, lies an individual form of cognitive and methodological skepticism. The skeptical attitude of the author of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* means that his considerations, despite that fact that they date back to the 1960s, are not outdated and still attract great interest from contemporary media scholars.

a u d i o v i s u a l   p o e t i c s

cognitive theory

methodology

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