

**MCLUHAN AT MASS**  
**Understanding the Organ's place in a mediated church**

*Abstract and Author's Biography*

On Tuesday March 30<sup>th</sup> 1937 at the age of 28, Marshall McLuhan was received into the Catholic Church. According to Douglas Coupland in his recent biography, McLuhan, a cradle Protestant, "... like most converts, quickly became hard core. He went to mass almost every day for the rest of his life. He recited the rosary. He was a firm believer in Hell. He was disgusted that other Catholics weren't catholic enough." Although McLuhan didn't discuss his religion publicly, his intriguing insights and well-documented critique of the institutional church and the reforms of Vatican II have led many to wonder what he might prophesy about the church and the media of worship. This paper seeks to map McLuhan paradigms such as "Hot and Cool Media", the "Laws of Media", the visual/linear textual hegemony of what he called the "Gutenberg Galaxy" and of course "The Medium is the Message" onto liturgical technologies such as the organ and hymn books, the amplified worship band and the projection screen. In particular focussing on the organ's role in liturgy, it argues that the long-foretold but conspicuously unrealised extinction of the organ in church may speak deeply to the nature of liturgy and those who worship.

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I'm still not sure who was crazier last June, me proposing to talk about McLuhan to the technologies of worship or Neil Cockburn for agreeing to present it, but I hope that this intriguing and head-spinning subject provides some food for your thinking about the tools in our vocation.

I'm going to begin by sharing with you, or probably reminding you of a classic scene from Woody Allen's 1977 "Annie Hall." The character Allen himself portrays, Alvy Singer, is standing in a theatre line-up, and a man behind him is talking very loudly about Marshall McLuhan.

**Alvy Singer**                   What I wouldn't give for a large sock with horse manure in it!  
*[to audience]* Whaddya do when you get stuck in a movie line with a guy like this behind you?

**Man in Line**                   Wait a minute, why can't I give my opinion? It's a free country!

**Alvy Singer**                   He can give it... do you have to give it so loud? I mean, aren't you ashamed to pontificate like that? And the funny part of it is, Marshall McLuhan, you don't know anything about Marshall McLuhan!

**Man in Line**                   Oh, really? Well, it just so happens I teach a class at Columbia called "TV, Media and Culture." So I think my insights into Mr. McLuhan, well, have a great deal of validity!

**Alvy Singer**                   Oh, do ya? Well, that's funny, because I happen to have Mr. McLuhan right here, so, so, yeah, just let me...  
*[pulls McLuhan out from behind a nearby poster]*

**Alvy Singer**                   come over here for a second... tell him!

**McLuhan**                       I heard what you were saying! You know nothing of my work! You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing!

**Alvy Singer**                   Boy, if life were only like this!

Having Marshall McLuhan "manifest" to explain himself is a dream that many people, including myself, have had at times since encountering his ground-breaking and controversial insights. But Alvy Singer was correct: in real life, Marshall McLuhan doesn't step up to clarify or explain his extraordinary ideas and positions, nor defend them from attack or misuse. Indeed while he was alive he only rarely engaged his mis-users and critics, and if he did only rarely did he achieve anything beyond further perplexing or enraging them.

The inherent challenges are no reason to dismiss McLuhan as did his colleagues in the 1960s and 70s, the remarkable recent revival of interest in his work, or most especially his predictions of the media future.

This was him writing in 1962:

“Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unaware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.”

(Is your head spinning yet? Don't worry – it will be!)

Douglas Coupland, award-winning Canadian author and recent McLuhan biographer observed of these words, “In one stroke, Marshall anticipated – four decades in advance – the Internet, although there were many more than this one stroke. The man was fifty-one when he published those words, a Canadian professor of Renaissance rhetoric, a man who perpetually shared his loathing and contempt for most of the electronic age, yet a man who perversely and ironically is considered its biggest cheerleader.”

McLuhan's observations — “probes,” he liked to call them — are riddled with such flamboyantly undecipherable aphorisms as “The electric light is pure information” and “People don't actually read newspapers — they get into them every morning like a hot bath.” McLuhan wrote: “People make a great mistake trying to read me as if I was saying something . . . I don't want them to *believe* me. I just want them to *think*.” For me likewise, some of you know my broad area of work is Music Critic, rather than Musicologist or Music Historian – I say what I think and perceive more often than what I can prove, and I use this outlook to indemnify myself against sins that I could never get away with around academia.

Well, it is in that spirit that I stand trembling before you today. I feel this gathering may have a special interest in what McLuhan might have thought in consideration of the organ and other musical and worship technologies and practices – and it is this topic I hope to open to your consideration today, rather than exhaustively cover. I take some inspiration from this symposium's keynote speaker, who in her brilliantly-titled and beautifully-presented 1999 “A Royal “Waste” of Time – The Splendour of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World” tackled the debate of Hymn Books vs. Projection Screens from what I would describe as an intrigued perspective, rather than the adversarial perspective that too frequently characterises that discourse.

In the book I mention Dr. Dawn writes, “I don't intend to talk about preferences: instead, I want to use this topic as an example in which we can explore more thoroughly the kind of processes we need [in order] to think more carefully about the long-term effects of the decisions our congregations make.” I, too, am more interested in the content of this paper renewing your engagement with a discourse about older technologies like the organ and hymn books, and any number of newer ones in our electrically-mediated age. As Church Musicians we have confronted these issues and emotions many times – and time has shown them in some cases to mellow, but never seemingly to dissipate. Perhaps Marshall McLuhan can help us to look at them again.

What is meant by “a mediated church?” Well, every church, as McLuhan would have understood it, is mediated – indeed the church *is itself* a medium for the propagation of the Faith as surely as the Bible is a medium for the Word. And the letters of the Apostle Paul are as much a medium of the church as are church bells, and spoken sermons, worship band pyrotechnics, liturgical dance, and so on.

In communications study and common parlance, media are usually understood as “The form and technology used to communicate information.” As the Greek derivation suggests, media are those things which *come between* other things: for example, between an event and a TV news viewer lies the medium of television, and within it are hidden a microphone and camera, transmission apparatus, a concise and hastily-prepared script, reporters, researchers, editors and technicians, and the viewer’s receiving set, all of which impact his or her reception of the event.

But McLuhan takes the concept a step further: technologies that ‘extend’ people, their thoughts, senses, bodies and actions, are media. The shoe can be said to extend the foot (because it allows it to walk farther and more easily on more surfaces than it could bare), the amplifier and the radio can be said to extend the ear (since they enable hearing of things too quiet or too distant to be heard by the ear unaided). Cave painting and handwriting extend human thought beyond the usual limits of time and space (allowing a person not in the spatial or temporal presence of the thinker to know his or her thoughts), and as Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type in the 16th century gave birth to the mass media it extended human thought simultaneously to many persons not in the presence of the thinker. As in the television news example above, media often contain one another: the ear-extending microphone, the eye-extending camera and the judgment-extending reporter exist as media within the medium of television.

McLuhan’s career-long study of media manifested in a great many areas of inquiry, or “probes” as he liked to call them too numerous and convoluted to list here, so we will here concern ourselves with just three. In each case I hope, as clearly and concisely as possible, to introduce the concept, and then turn it loose on some of the tools of our trade to see what Marshall might have thought.

McLuhan’s project at its core was heralding a sea change occasioned by electric technologies in humankind and its society, and one of similar significance to the invention of the printing press and the proliferation of books, maps and other forms of information. It is also important to understand, as Coupland hinted to us earlier that despite McLuhan’s idealisation of pre-Gutenberg society he was in no way in favour of its retrieval in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the hands of electric media. He was, after all, a Protestant, a Professor of English literature and Renaissance rhetoric – perhaps in a sense the fullest flowering of his own Gutenbergian “Typographic Man.”

**Hot and Cool Media** – the form of analysis behind McLuhan’s famous critique of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, the introduction of the microphone to worship the west-facing celebrant of the mass.

One of McLuhan’s early characterisations of media was the notion that they were either “Hot” or “Cool.” Beginning from the premise that the media we consume impart information independent of their “message”, and indeed that they shape and transform us, this distinction sought to characterise our relationship with those media. McLuhan borrows a vocabulary from the technical language of television: “high-definition” means well-defined, sharp, solid, detailed. So to McLuhan, letters of the alphabet, numbers, photographs and maps, for example, are high-definition objects. Forms and shapes and images that are not so distinct (like sketches and cartoons) are “low-definition.” For these, our eyes must scan what is visible and fill in what is missing to “get the full picture.” This “fill-in-the-blanks” principle applies to sounds and other sensations as well. A high-definition medium gives a lot of information and leaves little to do; a low-definition medium gives a little information and makes the user work to fill in what is missing.

Thus, HIGH DEFINITION is HOT: McLuhan offers radio, print, photographs, movies and (for the students and academics here) lectures as examples; LOW-DEFINITION is COOL: examples include telephone, speech, cartoons, television and (once again, reaching out to students and academics) seminar. McLuhan believes that when the microphone was introduced to the Catholic Mass it brought about the demystification of things spiritual. The introduction of this new technology started a chain reaction: what McLuhan calls the “audio backdrop” of Latin used to provide an invitation to intense participation through meditation as the priest said mass (a “cool” medium.) This was replaced by the “High-definition” medium of the mass in the vernacular, required by and then intensified still further by the use of microphones and loudspeakers, but no longer requiring intense sensory or spiritual involvement. Next came the obsolescence of traditional church architecture, the decline of the use of incense (knocking out the sense of smell) and the disappearance of the rosary (eliminating the tactile, touch sense.)

In considering the switch from the east-facing unamplified celebrant, there is a clear analogy between the west-facing amplified “across-the-table” celebrant and his cousins, the personable walking-talking preaching minister and the charismatic lead singer of the Worship Band – both amplified, of course. Interestingly, while the invisible or mostly-concealed organist might recall the muttering, murmuring east-facing celebrant, the non-directional nature of the organ (filling all of acoustic space, as McLuhan would have said) recalls his amplified descendant. One thing is for certain, though: just as the far-removed east-facing celebrant is an instance of representative priesthood rather than a personal one, the organist who notoriously hides behind the console or at least shows only his or her back to the congregation is likewise representative of the church’s song rather than appropriative of it. The song comes from God through the medium, if you like, of the organ and organist – it does not come from the smiling, emoting band leader.

**The Medium is the Massage** – and yes, you are hearing that right. McLuhan himself frames his 1967 famous word-play on his even more famous “The Medium is the Message” in this way: “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the MESSAGE. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments.”

McLuhan argued that the hot medium of the printed word (preceded by oral traditions) transformed society and its thought processes into a strict linear model. The sentence I am reading on this page is a perfect example – it begins here... I follow it linearly from its beginning to its end. You as listener are not looking at and following a straight line of text in the way I am – but you, too, are following my linear expression of thought, so that you perceive first the beginning of the thought, then its middle, and finally its end. The abstract thought that appears in your mind’s decoding of my speech is thus formed along a linear trajectory. In pre-literate and early speech short utterances, gestures and conveyed thoughts in shorter simple structures – and they were never so minutely reliant on our visual sense to read them. McLuhan claimed that the portable book “was like a hydrogen bomb” from whose aftermath “a whole new environment – the Gutenberg Galaxy – emerges.” For him, Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type not simply allowed, but forced us to comprehend in a linear, uniform, connected, continuous fashion.

McLuhan would say our hymn books, prayer books and service leaflets are perfect expressions of the visual obsession of the “Gutenberg Galaxy”, or in other words, our minds and behaviours occasioned and determined by visual print. He would have seen in the projection screens that in some circles have replaced these older technologies a manifestation of the “Cool” medium of television. Why, you might wonder, are

projection screens projecting printed text not also a “hot medium” in the way that printed text is on paper? The answer lies both in the inherent “softness” McLuhan felt screens gave to text; to the variety of backgrounds, photographs, diagrams and perhaps most especially to the structure of praise and worship music with its short, repeating, simple and quickly memorable thoughts, flashing momentarily into and out of existence.

McLuhan was fond of idealising the tribal, pre-literate societies that preceded moveable type, and felt that the ‘electric revolution’ of his time was restoring this paradigm. It is in *this* sense, not in terms of the connectedness and shared knowledge and experience provided by television and other electric communications media, that he posited the emergence of a “Global Village.” By this tenet of McLuhanism, differing musical media such as the organ and worship band are alike in their effects, but hymns and Taizé refrains are not alike - the former describing in its straight lines and strophic organisation the enlightenment linear-intellectual trajectory, the latter with its simplicity and repetition, the pre-literate and sensual mist of community and ritual.

**Acoustic Space** – McLuhan wrote, “The ear creates acoustic space whose centre is everywhere and whose margins are nowhere. This has often been mistaken for God by tribal societies as well as by neo-Platonists and the Oriental world.”

Before writing became widespread, McLuhan claims, humankind lived in acoustic space, the space of the spoken word. This space is boundless, directionless, horizonless, and charged with emotion. Writing transformed space into something bounded, linear, ordered, structured, and rational. The written page, with its edges, margins, and sharply-defined letters in row after row brought about a new way of thinking about space.

In addition to the effects discussed earlier, McLuhan said, moving the celebrant into acoustic space by means of the microphone, while making it easy for someone to be heard by a large number of people it discouraged exhortation and vehemence by imposing overload levels. He also felt it made listeners demand an intimate experience with everyone around them, rather than a personal, meditative one.

This last observation touches on one of the great worship paradigms of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the now-ubiquitous community building, or raising to a similar level of importance as one’s relationship to God one’s relationship to God’s people. McLuhan having little interest in this clearly felt that by moving the voice of the celebrant into all of surrounding acoustic space worshippers were, awkwardly, brought into relationship with one another, and incidentally almost inside the head and body of the priest. Interestingly here again, the organ which also fills acoustic space about the congregation can be said to function in the same way, making all a part of the church’s song, and it a part of them – here the organ plays to the favour of our current understanding of worship paradigms in a way that the solo-driven, geographically-located lead singer figure does not.

Returning in conclusion to Woody Allen, I am reminded of this characteristic rhetorical question: “How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my waist and shirt size?”

My question after talking about McLuhan, which as I said earlier is more an exercise in intrigue than in practical application, is always what does all of this mean to us?

McLuhan became a convert to Catholicism on Tuesday March 30<sup>th</sup> 1937 at the age of 28. According to Douglas Coupland in his recent biography, McLuhan, a cradle Protestant, “... like most converts, quickly became hard core. He went to mass almost every day for the rest of his life. He recited the rosary. He was a firm believer in Hell. He was disgusted that other Catholics weren’t catholic enough.”

McLuhan’s thoughts about technology and the church may mirror many of our own, who value the church’s grand heritage of music and ritual, who drink deeply from the awe and mystery of salvation, and who are drawn to the sensual and ritual world it provides so uniquely. Not surprisingly McLuhan also observed that young people are drawn to vestments and ritual and role-playing, rather than to the rootsy, relaxed ecclesiologies and practices that were coming into fashion post Vatican II. So, as we must in any subjective presentation – and as you must in the case of mine – we must take McLuhan’s thoughts as he intended them – not doctrine to accept or refute, but suggestions for consideration and understanding.

McLuhan rarely discussed his faith publicly, but it is clear from many of his essays and letters that he cared deeply about the church – there is a collection “The Medium and the Light” of collected writings collected by his son, Eric. I find many of McLuhan’s insights deeply compelling – not just because five decades have mostly proved him right in his predictions of society’s breakneck journey into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although that too is compelling – but because while I share neither McLuhan’s orthodox Catholicism nor his ecclesiological model for the church, my own views on rhetoric, on inquiry, on reason and on understanding resonate.

When I minister as an organist, and as some of you know well I minister in a wide range of different musical and disciplinary contexts, I am deeply attuned to mystery and meditation as pieces of the worship puzzle. There can be no doubt that, had ever expressed an opinion on the subject, McLuhan would have preferred the organ to the worship band. While liking hymn books better than projection screens he would probably have argued that they are countercultural, and a relic of what he saw as the dying “Gutenberg Galaxy.” But what I like about him is that despite his deeply held personal feelings he was prepared to argue in a systematic way on both sides of the issue – in this way becoming a medium himself in the Greek sense, *between* the two sides of the message.

Thank-you.