

Article

Marshall McLuhan: The Possibility of Re-Reading His Notion of Medium

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Abstract: After describing the origins of media ecology and the role of Marshall McLuhan in that theoretical constitution process, this article addresses McLuhan's perspective on technology and media. In this context, the article warns that the impossibility of reading McLuhan stems from segregating technique and culture. This is impossible because there is a need to think about the extension of his idea of medium. The article proposes a conversation between McLuhan's contributions and the works of thinkers like Don Ihde and Martin Heidegger, and ends with a final discussion on the meaning of concept of medium.

Keywords: McLuhan; media ecology; media; medium; technology; theory

1. Introduction

Marshall McLuhan is best remembered for his now famous quote “the medium is the message”. It is undoubtedly one of those statements that has blazed a trail in the history of 20th century thinking, and whose understanding is, even today, just short of spurious. Indeed, McLuhan's propositions were not taken all too seriously by contemporary parties, who regarded him more as a *pop* culture star than as a thinker worthy of serious consideration. His provoking theorizations on mass media and his tough and intricate writing style (like “a sound”, by his own words) have made of his figure a sort of ambivalent sign, crossing between the slight and the dense, between the rigorous and the light. However, it is as though all those entangled terms that McLuhan had coined in the fifties and sixties became objective in the eighties, and, what at first seemed to be an intellectual delirium, turned into a go-to glossary to understand our times.

The article starts with a general reflection on media theories and the emergence of media ecology as a discipline. This first section also deals with the role of Marshall McLuhan in media ecology and the revival of his contributions in the last 20 years. The second part addresses McLuhan's perspective on history, and tries to track down the way in which technology redefines human perception. It is from this vantage point that the fundamental axis of our proposal for reading McLuhan stems, namely the impossibility to segregate technique and culture in his works. It is impossible, mainly, because there is a need to think about the extension of his idea of *medium*. This is an idea that brings about the ways in which humans enter in a relationship with the world, and it should be set against works foreign to McLuhan's own, such as those by Don Ihde [1] and Martin Heidegger [2,3]. The idea is to separate the notion of the classic readings immediately associated with the notion of “mass media” and start a new search that allows for a deeper and wider understanding of media within McLuhan's work, closer to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the philosophy of technology. This article ends with a discussion around the meaning itself of *medium* embedded in the relationships between humans

and their techniques, and the way in which McLuhan couples technological pursuits with sensorial and thought organization.

2. Theoretical Conversations

2.1. Media Ecology in the Context of Communication Theories (This Section is Based on Scolari [4–7])

What is a theory? According to widely-used dictionaries, a theory can be—simultaneously—speculative knowledge independent of all application, a series of laws that are related to an order or phenomenon, a hypothesis whose consequences are applied to a science (or an important part of it) and, for the Ancient Greeks, a religious process. As we can see, a theory covers anything from scientific explanations (of empiric or speculative origins, or so-called scientific theories) to religious practices. Etymologically, theory derives from the Greek for *observe* and is related to the action of looking or seeing. It comes from *theoros* (spectator), comprising both *thea* (a view) and *horar* (to see). In this article, we wish to re-examine the idea of theory, not so much related to seeing but closer to hearing: theory understood as a conversational field where different but more or less competent individuals talk about a specific theme. In other words, theories understood as something performed. If, as Austin [8] said, we can make things with words, then scientists make theories. Within this context, analyzing conversations is essential to understanding a scientific domain.

Where are theories talked about? Universities, books and scientific journals, research centers and conferences all go to make up organizational settings where scientific discourse is produced, circulated and interpreted. Scientists are not limited to exchanging words. They also discuss hypotheses; they argue; they arrive at agreements—the so-called scientific consensus—and make compromises. From this perspective, a scientific field is more than a space where conflicts appear and different players make their symbolic stakes [9] it is also a network of conversations, a fabric of linguistic compromises—in the sense of the theory of speaking acts [8,10] where these players define what kind of interaction they wish to hold with each other, in which class of conversation they are interested in taking part and how they will carry out these conversations. If we want to understand the activity of a scientific field, we need to look at their discussions, identify the speakers and listeners that go to make up the network of conversations and understand the acts of speaking and listening that take place inside this part of the *semiosphere* [11].

Communication theories constitute a discursive field characterized by its heterogeneity. According to R.T. Craig:

The various traditions of communication theory each offer distinct ways of conceptualizing and discussing communication problems and practices. These ways derive from and appeal to certain commonplace beliefs about communication while problematizing other beliefs. It is in the dialogue among these traditions that communication theory can fully engage with the ongoing practical discourse (or metadiscourse) about communication in society [12] (p. 120).

It could also be said that communication theories have been nothing more than a long conversation aimed at clarifying the meaning of the word communication.

Communication theories have been classified in different ways, based on their original discipline (sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.); their explanatory system (cognitive, systemic, etc.); their organizational level (interpersonal, group, institutional, mass, etc.); their epistemological premise (empirical, critical, etc.) or their implicit conception of communicational practice (rhetoric, semiotic, phenomenological, etc.) [12]. In addition to considering theories as conversation, this article also proposes a new classification: generalist theories and specialized theories.

Generalist theories propose building integration or global tables for all of the processes that affect the communication world. Although a theory that explains everything is unimaginable, it is obvious that some theoretical constructions tend towards integration and generate an explanatory model of greater scope. Amongst the generalist theories, the Political Economy of Communication and

Culture covers communication production, distribution and consumption processes without ignoring an analysis of cultural goods [13,14]. In its own way and time, Shannon and Weaver's Information Theory also proposed a very simple explanatory generalist model, while including all communication process elements (transmitter, channel, message, receiver, etc.).

Specialized theories focus on one particular aspect or process of communication and leave others outside their explanatory model. Theories of limited effects, of news-making, agenda-setting or semiotic-textual models are a type of theoretical construction that attempts to explain a smaller area of the communication universe. On the other hand, scientific discourses on communication have always shown a tendency towards speaking about the mediums in an isolated way: studying television, radio, cinema, etc. Semiotics have also followed the same route; this is why semiotics of television, semiotics of cinema, etc., exists.

If we base ourselves on this opposition between generalist and specialized theories, it will not take us long to find media ecology amongst the former: this is an expanded theory that covers, depending on the theory-statesperson of choice, almost all aspects of communication processes, from relationships between the media and the society to the perceptive and cognitive transformations undergone by individuals after being exposed to communication technologies. On the other hand, media ecology does not focus on one medium in particular: it is a theory that covers all media in all aspects. Nor is it limited in time: its reflection starts with the transition from orality to literacy and stretches into our agitated days of digital life.

2.2. McLuhan and the Constitution of Media Ecology

What can be said about Marshall McLuhan that has not already been said? McLuhan had a double effect on media ecology: on one hand, he presented an ecological viewpoint of contemporary media processes both inside and outside the scientific arena; on the other hand, his fame was also counterproductive as it eclipsed other media researchers (not only in media ecology) who worked in silence and rejected the Canadian's effervescent declarations. Within the context of 1960s mass culture, McLuhan was, undoubtedly, the paradigm of media researcher and enjoyed media fame similar to other popular icons such as Andy Warhol or Bob Dylan. This gained him no small number of enemies in academia. Such was the envy of some University of Toronto colleagues that McLuhan asked his students not to cite him in theses and dissertations to avoid reprisals [15].

The consolidation of an ecological vision for media and communication ran parallel to the diffusion of ecologist ideas from the 1960s. Although the concept of media ecology was officially introduced by Neil Postman in a talk for the National Council of Teachers of English in 1968, Postman himself recognized that Marshall McLuhan had used it at the beginning of that decade, when the Canadian's brilliance was at its brightest (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* is from 1962 and *Understanding Media* from 1964). However, other researchers prefer to award the distinction of semantic coining to Postman [16]. Whatever the case, during his talk, Postman defined media ecology as "the study of media as environments". It can be said that Postman brought about the shift from metaphor to theory or, better yet, the journey from a purely metaphoric use of the term media ecology to the start of the delimitation of a specific scientific field. Postman fought hard for the new concept: in 1971, he created the first degree in media ecology at New York University, thereby providing media ecology with its first step towards academic institutionalization.

As has already been mentioned, the concept of media ecology was introduced by McLuhan in the context of academic conversation with his colleagues [15]. However, from a more general perspective, we should also acknowledge the fact that it was McLuhan who updated and integrated within one approach the ideas of some of his predecessors such as Lewis Mumford, Sigfried Giedion, Harold Innis and Eric Havelock. McLuhan never tired of insisting that the media together form a sensory atmosphere or environment (a medium) in which we all move; like a fish in water, we do not realize their existence until we stop perceiving them for some reason. His ecology is totally biased towards the perceptions of subjects: we humans model communication instruments, but they, at the same time, remodel us.

Marshall McLuhan's other noticeable trait concerned his explosive forms of expression: his writing in mosaics, his ability to create unforgettable slogans and concepts—such as *the medium is the message* or *global village*—and the permanent inter-textual jump between the media, the literary and the technological make him an indispensable figure in the study of 20th century mass communication.

At the beginning of the 1990s, a decade after his death, when his detractors had forgotten about him, the appearance of the World Wide Web and the global consolidation of television channels such as MTV and CNN brought about a revival of Marshall McLuhan's ideas, a process which culminated in his canonization by *Wired* magazine (which voted him Patron Saint in its first edition in 1993).

McLuhan was back.

2.3. McLuhan: *The Apothegm, the Medium, the 'Method'*

As we said in the introduction, for most people, what little is remembered from Marshall McLuhan is basically a loose sentence, a sort of apothegm that mystified philosophers, sociologists, and even communication theorists since the 60s: “the medium is the message” is, as history has well demonstrated, a misunderstood sentence that has joined the cluster of statements that share the dubious fortune of becoming epigraphs and whose reach is seldom—if ever—explored in detail. Unlike what has occurred with other sentences (such as Machiavelli's alleged “the end justifies the means”), McLuhan did include this apothegm in one of his main works: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [17]. More than once, McLuhan fractured the schism drawn by the classic theories of communication, such as functionalism, between medium and message; and not only did he place them in an equivalence ratio, but he also underlined the little import of focusing on “contents” in the case of media or a machine:

Many people would be disposed to say that was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs [17] (pp. 7–8).

As with many of his statements, McLuhan plays with his reader. His modus operandi is almost aphoristic even though his texts have the deceitful appearance of an academic essay. Reading him is enthralling as much as it is unnerving: there is not one idea that tugs on another; there is no chance to trace a hierarchy in his fallacy. In 1967, in the epigraph of the well-known text compilation done by Gerald Stearn—*McLuhan: Hot & Cool*—he already warned about himself: “I'm a probing researcher. I lack a definite standpoint or posture” [18] (p. 9).

This posture irked critics and academicians and earned McLuhan the status of pseudo-thinker in that “his faith in the power of the probe allowed (him) [. . .] to take stabs at a wide range of topics, from the serious to the ridiculous, without necessarily compromising himself to conclusions or testing his hypotheses scientifically” [19] (p. 35). On this particular point, James Carey offers:

McLuhan is beyond criticism not only because he defines such activity as illegitimate but also because his work does not lend itself to critical commentary. It is a mixture of whimsy, pun and innuendo. These things are all right in themselves, but, unfortunately, one cannot tell what he is serious about and what is mere whimsy. His sentences are not observations as assertions, but, in his own language, ‘probes’ [20] (p. 53).

Maybe this is the sense of ambiguity felt when approaching McLuhan, as it occurred to George Steiner who, regarding the Canadian's work, maintained that reading Marshall McLuhan “is no easy task. [His texts] are full of such novelty, suggestive power, intellectual crassness, and carelessness that it is tempting to just put them aside” [21] (p. 287).

Such is the fascination spawned by Marshall McLuhan's work. Perhaps precisely because, in the midst of a backdrop in which reflection is formulated so academically to the point of losing its most prominent artistic sense, it opens the possibility of thinking in a non-transcendental and

non-metaphysical manner about the very condition of man and his way to inhabit the world. McLuhan opens many doors without closing any: he rudely leaps from Joyce onto news programs and, for instance, speaks of the Greek culture as though he were an expert distorting many of the texts he has read: fracturing them, making them talk, forcing them—in the most performative sense—to say something about *their* time. Here is what very well may be the point par excellence that reading McLuhan offers: *the compulsory of thinking*, the impossibility of casting anchors in a past we have petrified in the history books and also, beyond that, the need to renounce the modern promise of a future at so high a price as the loss of reflecting upon our own present is.

It is true—McLuhan was not a thinker of time, he was a thinker of space. However, not of abstract space, so many times diffused in the one we recur in our reflections. McLuhan gave a definite name to his space: *the medium*, the environment we populate, where we move, where we make sense, where our myths gain significance: *the medium* is the message.

His vision of the technical issue was, of course, beyond the merely objectional. His observations were not about one specific thing or another. His concern was not about what television or radio or cinema did *literally*; it was about the type of man they produced, about the very way in which they modeled subjectivity while spawning that *intricate background* that McLuhan—for lack of a better name called- a global village. It is odd how, half a century later, his apothegm holds as much water in communication courses classrooms and how it is repeated almost religiously when discussing new technologies, far above other apothegms much clearer and suggestive that McLuhan himself bequeathed us as “the medium is the message”. A message that is sensory, psychological, and even physical; it was more about this what McLuhan was talking about: he cared little or not at all about the contents of media and the endeavor of a semiotics-oriented interpretation; he cared little or nothing about what was objective in the cathodic scaffolding of the television tubes. His interests were vested in the manner in which an outward reality was architecturally crafted, in ambience, in environ: this is why *the medium* is the message.

Approaching certain basic elements, it seems clearer that McLuhan’s posture is intrinsically philosophical in that his starting question does not traverse only objects themselves—which we so authoritatively call *media*—but also the situation of man, who is immersed in these temporal, structuring/structured coherences that comprise the whole ecosystem where the technical system plays a part deeply set in the idea of the world’s own legibility. When something appears legible to our eyes—or to our ears or fingers—what emerges is the possibility of understanding. McLuhan’s question is one that seeks legibility and the ways in which a fundamental grammar to understand the world is built.

McLuhan’s question is one that seeks the very way in which the world presents itself to man in the very fashion to inhabit that human world. McLuhan thought language as a form of *mass media* in that he understood that when referring to mass media, the expression does not regard the size of the audience, “but the fact that everybody becomes involved in them at the same time” [17] (p. 349). This idea of mass media is key to grasping a good deal of the statements this Canadian man makes throughout his work and to explain, at least restrictively, the presence of these media like numbers, money, clocks, housing and the motorcar, which are featured in the second part of *Understanding Media*. This is why McLuhan speaks of macro-myths like oral tradition, writing, and electricity: macro-myths that provided that necessary grammar to read the world and which showed, again, how the relationship between and technique works bi-directionally in that continuous tension generated by thinking of the technical systems as structuring and, simultaneously, structured. If we wanted to read the idea of the macro-myth, in other words, we could state that it is the foundation upon which the inherently poetic configurations and mutations of the technological are structured. Quoting McLuhan, “it is the framework that changes with every new technology and not only the picture within the frame” [22] (p. 273). The *medium* is the message.

3. McLuhan's Vision of History

McLuhan proposed a singular vision of history chained to the dominant communication technology, and spelled out a tripartite view in which each stage was outlined clearly. From the idea of *tribal cultures*, McLuhan drove his reflection through what he called the *Gutenberg galaxy*, to arrive ultimately to his provoking *global village*: “As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village” [17] (p. 5).

Of course, there are many criticisms that could be made of McLuhan's vision of history. The first, and possibly the most common—and, at the same time, the weakest—is the possibility of falling in a manner of technological determinism. The second would have to deal with the potential linearity that can be glimpsed in his proposal and that should be placed alongside certain notions, today under scrutiny, such as those of modernity and progress, anchored to a linear vision of history.

Beyond these criticisms that stem from *cultural and subaltern* studies, the main issue here is related to the resurfacing of the figure of McLuhan. Despite how suggestive his ideas are about the new orality and post-literacy that would identify the *global village* are, it would be little less than folly to imagine that the Canadian thinker had fathomed something similar to the reality we inhabit today. Nevertheless, the idea of interconnection and environment reduction are key when it comes to understanding the *sensorium* in which we unfurl every day. The cultural forms “turn upon us instantly and continually” [23] (p. 14), and the electric circuits have upset the experience had with time and space.

McLuhan focused his attention on how mutation in technology (communication technology, especially) generated changes in the ways to inhabit the world, to relate to oneself and the others; he analyzed the inherent changes of the 20th-century man's subjectivity and, abandoning an early position in line with the Frankfurt School, little by little he begins to realize the necessity of understanding technology not as an alienating device, but as an extension of both mind and body.

This is when the problematic notion of *medium* comes into play which, in lighter readings done regarding McLuhan, inaccurately tends to be identified quite simply as *mass media of communication*. While a great deal of the support of the McLuhanian reflections deals with communication, as well as the notion of *medium*, seen as a mere externality in certain reading, here it is insufficient.

3.1. Medium (I)

It becomes necessary to tread certain paths that McLuhan himself has begun to make evident when he puts forward the idea of *medium*. Yes, it is tempting to limit the McLuhanian proposal to a kind of *new media* analysis; this is, however, reductionist as long as the proposed analysis pertains to any technology that, by its own virtue, becomes an extension of the body or the mind. McLuhan's idea of *medium* should be conceived as resorting to a more extended conception of the meaning of the word itself. That is to say, the very idea of *means of communication* (or transport) is underlying the consideration of *medium* as a tool that allows reaching a certain goal; here, it is a profoundly instrumental and artefactual view of the *medium*, which immediately turns it into something external to the subject giving it use. As pointed out by Lewis Lapham in the introduction to *Understanding Media*, two fundamental premises support a great deal of McLuhan's proposal:

- (1) We become what we behold
- (2) We shape our tools, and, thereafter, our tools shape us

Here we need to point out that the latter claim is not to be found, word by word, in any of McLuhan's work. We have included it, because we agree with Kuskis, who pointed out, that “it was actually written by Father John Culkin, SJ, a Professor of Communication at Fordham University in New York and friend of McLuhan. Although the quote is Culkin's, I would argue that the idea is McLuhan's, as it comes up in an article by Culkin about McLuhan: Culkin, J.M. (18 March 1967). A schoolman's guide to Marshall McLuhan. *Saturday Review*, [24] (pp. 51–53, 71–72). The idea presented in the quote is entirely consistent with McLuhan's thinking on technology in general”.

From this double starting point, the externality of the medium and the overlapping duality in the medium-user relationship turn out to be problematic. Nevertheless, and as said a few lines above, it is necessary to broaden the semantic spectrum in which the notion of *medium* is to be worked on, not so much as to find a definition as to seeking to approach some more of McLuhan's intentions. Thus, a first starting point would deal with the possibility to think the medium as more of a system of nature, as a physical-cultural space in which certain events take place. Indeed:

McLuhan examines the *diktats* of two technological revolutions that overthrew a settled political and aesthetic order: first, in the mid-fifteenth century, the invention of printing with movable type, which encouraged people to think in straight lines and to arrange their perceptions of the world in forms convenient to the visual order of the printed page; second, since the late nineteenth century, the new applications of electricity (telegraph, telephone, television, computers, etc.), which taught people to rearrange their perceptions of the world in ways convenient to the protocols of cyberspace. Content follows form, and the insurgent technologies give rise to new structures of feeling and thought [17] (pp. xi–xii).

In this state of affairs, McLuhan's ideas revolve little or not at all around a relationship of opposition between the medium as an artifact and the subject as user; instead, what he proposes is better said, a redefinition of *medium* that would have to clear two initial checkpoints; the impossibility of (i) conceiving man as a being isolated from his technological prostheses (I am still not convinced whether this last expression is a redundancy, and it is one of the key points of this work); and (ii) thinking the subjectivity outside of the technological revolutions that accompany it.

Stiegler [25] had already shown that, although there is a tendency of referring to technological determinism with disdain, it is unquestionable that the introduction of certain kinds of artifacts in social life has consequences that cannot be overlooked. Suffice it to think about the changes in the production of subjectivity caused by industrial capitalism, given the following rearrangement of time and space. Beyond the alienating background of technologies (particularly, those of communication and information) that Frankfurt, led by Adorno, tried to uphold, the problem with McLuhan is that he makes us consider technology on a more complex scale, and almost always in terms of revolutions. Here springs the importance of rethinking the idea of *medium* in McLuhan which, and just as he himself announced, is a sort of agent that makes something occur. Let us make a brief catalog of the ideas exposed thus far:

- (a) It is necessary to rethink the notion of the medium in McLuhan's proposal because its traditional reading, in which it is tacitly understood as a *means of communication* (or what we often just call *media*), is insufficient to account for the very reaches of the proposal.
- (b) Once a greater conceptual clarity is sought, the revision of the concept can be supported by adjacent notions: prosthesis and incorporation.
- (c) If thinking within the notions explained in point *b* is taken as a methodological possibility, it is possible to consider a reconfiguration of the notion of medium that overcomes the externality and artefactuality seemingly used by traditional readings of McLuhan to address it.

Thus, the current-time relevance of McLuhan is based on the fact that he allows us to approach technology in an unprejudiced manner and to understand the current process of subjectivism. Culkin's (or McLuhan's) proposal 2, which we remembered from a Lapham stance, allows for a better explanation of this last item: the relationship with technology is bi-directional and it becomes problematic to talk, in that sense, about a technological determinism. This is a good moment to recall that, for McLuhan, technology (mass media of communication, for example) restructures time and space and, therefore, it cooperates in the configuration of intersubjective social relationships. Thus, with a less deterministic view than McLuhan attributed to himself, his work continues to be full of ideas.

McLuhan offers an interesting analysis of the way in which the introduction of the telegraph transformed human intersubjective relations. He reminds us that, like the telephone, the telegraph makes us continually present and accessible to other persons for communicative relations. The technical medium of the telegraph, for instance, allows us to maintain intimate social relations across time and space, while also structuring those relations. In short, the telegraph does not govern the cultural content of our personal messages, but it does play some part in helping to form them [26] (p. 131).

3.2. Medium (II)

Considering this, the *culture-based* criticism of the technological determinism is not, for us, strong enough to invalidate McLuhan's proposal, as Williams and Hall (here, we heed to Stevenson's references [26]—in actuality, there are many more spots of criticism) have tried to demonstrate by highlighting the eminently technical character of their attempt to explain media. Even though McLuhan's concern is technical, it is not strictly artefactual since it introduces reflection in the world of life and retrieves, as seen above (in the case of the telegraph) the idea of intersubjective relationships. Ultimately, when McLuhan ascertained that *the medium is the message*—and this will be one of the key fulcrums within the hypothesis that this text expounds—he made us rethink both the notion of *medium* and that of *message* which, as McLuhan says:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology [17] (p. 7).

Certainly, this first explanation given by McLuhan is not clear enough to fully understand the outreach of the statement, but it at least provides a key element to grasp the relationship existing between man and technology, and it fosters a step beyond in the understanding of the notions of medium and message, detaching them from their traditional semantic universes of *artefactuality* (transmitter of) and *informationality* (transmitted in) by redefining the traditional ideas of medium and message and placing them inside the same equation, McLuhan took a momentous step towards understanding the reach of technology related to man, and he managed to architect a type of primal technological phenomenology.

Thus, the main problem has to do with the necessity to rethink McLuhan from a somewhat more problematic analysis stand and to include, in this exploration, certain conceptual tools that have been used, particularly, by the philosophy of technology. We do not mean by this that the approaches to McLuhan made by other disciplines, such as sociology or communication studies, are not as valid, but it is evident that this is a figure almost unexplored and sadly reduced to a misunderstood quote.

3.3. From Heidegger's Hammer to McLuhan's Prosthesis

It would be worthwhile, then, to rethink McLuhan's idea of *medium* from the primal technological phenomenology and, once outlined, go further, aiming for certain places not often visited by McLuhan's work; here, we mean, yes, the idea of media as extensions of man, but from the dialectic extension/(self)-amputation, the Canadian sketches and blazes a trail to think, upstream at least, in a possible reading of the idea from the prosthetic.

Perhaps once in the 21st century, the prosthetic issue as an essential part of the contemporary subjectivity is not particularly novel. In effect, we are everyday more used to complementing ourselves with a growing number of prostheses so that, little by little, we have begun to forget their existence. However, certain reflections by Heidegger thunder in here, at least in part: when an artifact, a hammer, is broken and it no longer performs its functions, it is thematized, it is brought to

light in its absence. Ihde says, precisely regarding the hammer: “Heidegger’s hammer in use displays an embodiment relation. Bodily action through it occurs within the environment. But broken, missing, or malfunctioning, it ceases to be the means of praxis and becomes an obtruding *object* defeating the work Project” [1] (p. 544).

The objectivity that Heidegger talks about is related to a point key to understanding the relationship between man and technologic artifacts: their complementarity. In a first encounter, this statement could seem somewhat excessive; however, suffice it to recall the idea that McLuhan proposed above regarding the relationship of bi-directional construction between men and tools. In spite of this, Heidegger’s point is much stronger since it forces rethinking the very conception we have of technology. Let us take Heidegger’s proposal a bit further.

When technologic devices are considered, they are thought of as objects; with Heidegger, it is clear that regarding these devices as objects can never precede the relationship with them. *What is useful becomes an object the moment it stops being useful*, when it is thematized, when, for instance, we realize we are missing it and we are at odds due to this lack. Another important point to highlight is the fact that the cluster of the useful things necessarily redirects us to man, the entire group is in a constant relationship with man. “The work produced refers not only to the ‘towards-which’ of its usability and the ‘whereof’ of which it consists: under simple craft conditions it also has an assignment to the person who is to use it or wear it” [2] (p. 100).

The whole cluster of useful things refers us, finally, to man; this computer is useful to me to write this text, the printer for me to print it out, the shower for me to clean myself every morning, the towel is useful for me to dry, the watch to tell the time. “Thus along with the work, we encounter not only entities ready-to-hand but also entities with Dasein’s kind of Being-entities for which, in their concern, the product becomes ready-to-hand” [2] (p. 100).

If this intuition that oscillates between the proposal of McLuhan, Ihde and Heidegger is plausible, the path to tread for us to more safely approach the idea of the prosthetic becomes clearer.

The first stage on which to stand at the moment of formulating the problematic has to do with the way in itself in which the prosthetic has been gaining terrain in the philosophic discourse, and that it implies, for starters, the necessity to assume the pressing metaphoric nature of the term, in opposition to its more literal uses which pertain to fields like medicine and biotechnology. Nevertheless, as Quintanilla [27] and Kline [28] have previously demonstrated, at the moment of considering technology, it needs to be detached from its purely artefactual condition; in some way, this was an idea present in Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology* [3] and his plea for the non-instrumentalization of reflection. Thus, and treading the paths cleared by technologies in the last eighty years, the idea of a world increasingly colonized by the artificial is less strange day by day, even if the distinction between natural and artificial is not so obvious as it would appear from the mere definition (About this, see Broncano [29] and Féher [30]). Nowadays, it would be folly to overlook the role of technology as a key component in the contemporary subjectivity. McLuhan was accused of technological determinism and of not being able to make a cultural reading of his reality, when considering technology constitutes one of the core facets of thought regarding culture: from production to usage, appropriation and incorporation (through key notions of *hegemony* and *ideology*).

Then, when we consider that McLuhan’s extensions can be thought of from the idea of prosthesis, we are considering that:

- (1) The problem of the idea of *medium* is not in the device itself;
- (2) All reflection on technology refers to the impact it has on man;
- (3) This impact may or may not be conscious, depending on the degree of appropriation.

These three base hypotheses bring up the sometimes-provoking statements that McLuhan makes regarding the figure of Narcissus (Suffice it to succinctly recall the story of Narcissus: beautiful child to the nymph Liriope, he met his demise by not being able to abide his own beauty upon seeing his image reflected in a pond. Some versions of the story state that he died then and there, anguished

by the mere contemplation; others claim that he drowned as he plunged into the waters seeking to embrace his one likeness; this latter is the one followed by McLuhan.), as narcosis. This *narcosis* or numbness that McLuhan mentions is profoundly suggestive since it portrays a dialectic seldom visited in his work: the dialectic extension/(auto)-amputation.

3.4. Narcissus

The sad end of Narcissus has little or nothing to do, as the most go-to versions of the story have it, with being in love with oneself. McLuhan points out the numbness produced by his own image reflected in the water, as a metaphor of the dialectic movement that technology entails. McLuhan states:

It is, perhaps, indicative of the bias of our intensely technological and, therefore, narcotic culture that we have long interpreted the Narcissus story to mean that he fell in love with himself, that he imagined the reflection to be Narcissus!

Physiologically there are abundant reasons for an extension of ourselves involving us in a state of numbness. Medical researchers like Hans Selye and Adolphe Jonas hold that all extensions of ourselves, in sickness or in health, are attempts to maintain equilibrium. Any extension of ourselves they regard as “auto-amputation,” and they find that the auto-amputative power or strategy is resorted to by the body when the perceptual power cannot locate or avoid the cause of irritation. Our language has many expressions that indicate this self-amputation that is imposed by various pressures. We speak of “wanting to jump out of my skin” or of “going out of my mind”, being “driven batty” or “flipping my lid”. And we often create artificial situations that rival the irritations and stresses of real life under controlled conditions of sport and play. While it was no part of the intention of Jonas and Selye to provide an explanation of human invention and technology, they have given us a theory of disease (discomfort) that goes far to explain why man is impelled to extend various parts of his body by a kind of auto-amputation [17] (p. 42).

With this idea, McLuhan managed to begin to elucidate the drive of man (western, at first) for those extensions of the body, which, in turn, constitute profound amputations. Hence, even in the starting metaphoric setting (One of the hypotheses that would need refining has to do, precisely, with the fact that McLuhan’s propositions at this point are not necessarily metaphoric.), the prosthetic boost in McLuhan drives down a road that is openly complex and forces us to bring the Canadian thinker out off the commonplace in which he is trapped. Here, it would seem that this dialectic opens the doors to think of McLuhan phenomenologically and to arrange an interpretation that, as Scott Lash has already said, lets us see:

For McLuhan, subjects and objects fuse. The media are the ‘extensions of man’. More generally, technology is the extension of man. To say ‘the medium is the message’ is to say that the technology is the content. But this is not technological determinism because McLuhan disputes linear causation and hence any sort of determinism. Linear causation belongs to the Gutenberg age and the phonetic alphabet. When technology, when the media, are extensions of the central nervous system, linear causation is deserted for a flattened, immanent world [31] (p. 178).

4. Conclusions

For McLuhan, the problem with technique was, of course, beyond the mere object or element. His reflections had nothing to do with *this* or *that* specific thing. He was not concerned about what television, radio or film were *exactly* doing, but rather the type of person that they were engendering, based on the way they modeled the human being through a collective subjectivity that McLuhan deemed—for lack of a better term—the global village. It is strange how, after the turn of half a century, his statement remains as current in communication courses and how religiously it is repeated whenever

talking about *new* technologies, far more often than clearer and more suggestive proposals, such as McLuhan's own "the medium is the message"—a sensory, psychological, and even physical message. Those ideas were far closer to McLuhan's own concepts. Even if we can read and recover McLuhan's contributions from a semiotic perspective [32] he was not interested in the content of media, much less so in the interpretation of the semiotic enterprise. McLuhan had little to no interest in the cathodic tubes of TV as a networked object. His interests focused on the way in which a whole reality was construed outwards, surrounding everything, an environment: that is why the *medium* is the message. This is far from a contradiction or a senseless equation, as many tend to argue. McLuhan, the old Canadian professor, was presenting us with a unique opportunity to *conceive the content of media output as irrelevant*. In other words, he was trying to forego the question about *what does it say* and address the macro-effect of technology in our ways of thinking as human beings: the changes in syntax and semantics, and changes in the perception of the self and others.

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