

McLuhan in Reverse by Robert K. Logan (2021)

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A Review of *McLuhan in Reverse* by Robert K. Logan (2021)

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In a changed world that defies tidy deconstruction we are seeking ways to make sense of the onslaught of messaging whose only constant is change. Media and science jostle for the podium and the definitive explanation of a fluctuating situation that is the global pandemic, asserting their authority over the mass consciousness with statistics and predictive rhetoric cloaked as hard fact. Media pundits and scientists compete for air time much like performers vying for attention. Covid-19 has cast science and media as the latest stars of reality television, the medium and its ubiquity choking the message.

In his book “*McLuhan in Reverse*”, Logan presents the theory that Marshall McLuhan was a scientist as much as a media theorist (which in 2021 would place him high up the mass media food chain) who utilized reversals as an underlying component and the fourth element of his tetrad. In this context the suggestion is that McLuhan’s General Theory of Media (GToM) can be viewed through the lens of science in spite of McLuhan’s assertion that he merely “watched what people do” (Logan 2021, 11). Logan references several instances where McLuhan outs himself as a scientific theorist (his own fallacy perhaps?)

A significant part of Logan’s observations is that of McLuhan’s ability to predict the evolution of media and communication technology (The Global village, Amazon-type services, the Internet) and the hybridization of media – combining a camera, phone, tape recorder, Walkman, computer and many apps. Technology being upgraded and improved result from a device or artifact being “pushed” (reversed) to enhance its function within the science of electronics – reinforcing Logan’s theory that McLuhan operated through a scientific lens as much as he (McLuhan) asserted that he had no theories from which he operated but then went on to list them in his letter to William Kuhn (Logan 2021,41).

Logan goes on to suggest that McLuhan probes are hypotheses and predictions that can be proved or disproved much as a scientist would attempt to prove or disprove a theory and that language in the form of the alphabet is a form of classification and decoding of information, ergo, the science of language and its relation to media theory is responsible for the development of scientific innovation (Logan 2021, 51). Communication methods have evolved from oral to print to electronic to digital but the onset of the latter has split the technology into subsets that with use of the tetrad one can find explanations via the science of McLuhan. The tetrad is to media what the periodic table is to science.

Logan’s book is a wonderful probe in itself and provoked a lot of thought on the part of this reader around the figure/ground environmental theory and particularly the reversals that modern media technology and platforms have birthed.

Referring to McLuhan’s tetrad if we take the figure of the laptop and consider its Wi-Fi connection as its the ground, it both enhances the clay tablet, the pencil/pen, the typewriter

and the printing press and paper and makes them obsolete yet retrieves the written word/text. The use of Zoom or Skype retrieves oral communication but in reversing the method into sound and vision eliminates or obsolesces text.

For entertainment media the laptop is also responsible for several other reversals – our entertainment format has become enhanced by the evolution from radio to movies to TV and now to the laptops, tablets and smartphones which also serve as platforms for radio and TV and motion pictures. In the pandemic the movie theatres are streaming their films on TV (HBO Max) making the theatre obsolete and even a television screen isn't required as a laptop will suffice. Anecdotally, I am aware of many acquaintances who no longer subscribe to cable or even own a television.

With "Masterclasses" online we are back to DIY; those hosting are not even required to be masters which permits anyone with a laptop and Wi-Fi to participate in today's Global Village. Online shopping versus bricks and mortar and downloading books have created an anti-environment but to witness the crowds lining up for the newly opened stores this appears to be a retrieval/reversal. We seem to be getting back to in person shopping which provides a tactile, visual and acoustic ground.

In the pandemic the usage of the Toronto bike rental system has accelerated and more mixed-use roads are being constructed with cars, pedestrians, bikes, e-bikes, skateboards and streetcars sharing the roadways. I feel the enforced lockdowns have enhanced human interaction with nature while retrieving community gatherings and creating a reversal of McLuhan's amputation. A reversal from cars to bikes to walking with a different sense ratio, i.e. an acoustic, visual and tactile ground within which we engage in the oral tradition of outdoor gatherings.

On the flip side, however, there are increasing numbers of online meetings resulting from dating and the use of Zoom platforms where humans don't have to engage in real life – the whole person becomes amputated from self and becomes an avatar on on-line platforms. It is possible that the more humans interact in cyberspace the more likely they could be prone to being less empathetic and more likely to find communicating orally or in person difficult. Could we have become the ultimate extension of our technological matrix and have become partially obsolete? Just a thought.

Let me close by suggesting a read of *McLuhan in Reverse* can help us to understand the reversals we are experiencing as our lives become more and more digital.