

## Contextualizing Marshall McLuhan

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Résumé de l'article

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## Contextualizing Marshall McLuhan

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Abstract: My thesis is that the Canadian Renaissance specialist and media ecology theorist and Catholic convert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980; Ph.D. in English, Cambridge University, 1943) is an analogist. McLuhan himself developed the thesis that the Victorian Jesuit poet and Catholic convert Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is an analogist in his 1944 article “The Analogical Mirrors,” using Hopkins’ poem “The Windover” to discuss the analogical mirrors. Because I claim that McLuhan is an analogist, I explore that broader context of analogical thought in Western cultural history. In addition, I suggest that McLuhan himself might also be characterized as a practical mystic which is how he himself characterizes G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) in his 1934 article “G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic.”

### Introduction

No other literature professor in the twentieth century achieved the seemingly ubiquitous media coverage that the Canadian Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) achieved in the 1960s and 1970s. His most imaginative book, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*, was first published in 1964 – more than half a century ago. It helped catapult him to extraordinary media attention. I’d like to contextualize it and certain other early publications in McLuhan’s life and in the Roman Catholic culture of his time.

Overview: After the following introductory subsection, I use five “Timeline” subheadings to establish my chronological framework for discussing Marshall McLuhan’s life and thought. In each “Timeline” subsection, I focus on certain relevant publications by McLuhan and others. In the text, I provide the title and date of publications; see the bibliography at the end for full bibliographic information.

In the present essay, my general theme centers around McLuhan’s religious faith and his works. However, in my research on McLuhan’s life, I have not come across any published statements in which he discusses the earlier years in his life when he was a Protestant. As a result, I will of necessity center my attention on his interest in and conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1937 when he was in his mid-twenties. I will present the results of my research on his life in chronological order based on the chronology of his life. In each subsection, I will flash-forward to mention a later development (or developments), but then I will return to the chronological timeline as indicated in the next subheading.

I should explain that I undertook my research on McLuhan’s life in connection with my research on the life and work of the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003). I have discussed Ong and McLuhan in my *Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, revised edition with a new afterword and an updated bibliography (2015; orig. ed. 2000) and in my lengthy introduction to *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by me and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 1-68).

#### **Timeline: 1934**

In a posthumously published letter dated May 6, 1969, to Jacques Maritain, the famous French Catholic Thomist, McLuhan reports that he first read Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism* in 1934 when he (McLuhan) was in graduate studies in English at Cambridge University. At the end of his letter, McLuhan says, “It was a revelation to me. I became a Catholic in 1937” (*Letters of Marshall McLuhan*,

1987, p. 371). The juxtaposition of these last two sentences suggests that Maritain's may have contributed somehow to McLuhan becoming a Catholic in the spring semester of 1937, when he was teaching English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Before the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church (1962-1965), many college-educated Catholics in Europe and North America and elsewhere, not just priests but also lay people, studied Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy and theology in their undergraduate education at Roman Catholic institutions of higher education. As a result, they characteristically thought of themselves as Thomists. In North America, the two leading centers of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy were St. Mike's at the University of Toronto and Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in St. Louis, Missouri.

As we will see momentarily, McLuhan devoted the better part of his adult life teaching English at those two leading centers of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy in North America. No doubt McLuhan considered himself to be a Thomist. He had formal training in philosophy as part of his undergraduate studies at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, but no formal training in theology. But in regard to Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy and theology, McLuhan was mostly an autodidact. However, both in his years at Saint Louis University and at St. Mike's, the Basilian collegiate unit, at the University of Toronto, McLuhan lived in close proximity to well-informed philosophy professors.

Ong studied Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy in his undergraduate studies at Rockhurst College [now Rockhurst University], the Jesuit college in Kansas City, Missouri. As part of Ong's Jesuit formation, he was professionally trained in graduate studies in philosophy and theology at Saint Louis University.

The overall spirit of pre-Vatican II Catholicism is nicely expressed in the main title of Philip Gleason's *Contending with Modernity: [American] Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995). No doubt Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy was one of the ways in which pre-Vatican II Catholics were

contending with modernity and its spirit of secularism. In terms of philosophy, Catholic Thomists were contending primarily with Kant and the Kantian philosophic tradition of thought. Because Kant had not studied Thomas Aquinas's metaphysical thought, Thomists rejected Kant's critique of metaphysical thought on the grounds that he had not done his homework and therefore did not know what he was talking about. But pre-Vatican II Catholics were not just contending with modernity in the realm of philosophic thought, but also in a wide range of supposedly secular matters, including movies and other aspects of popular culture and consumerism. In any event, when McLuhan converted to Catholicism in 1937, he was presumably signing on to the Roman Catholic spirit at the time of contending with modernity and secularism. McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951) fits nicely within the Roman Catholic spirit of contending with modernity and consumerism.

Broadly speaking, certain aspects of the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic spirit of contending with modernity and consumerism resembled the aspects of critiques advanced by the critical theory of the atheistic Frankfurt school of thought in Europe. But of course, no self-respecting atheist would say anything favorable about papal critiques of modernity and secularism – or about similar critiques advanced by Roman Catholic authors such as McLuhan and Ong. Conversely, no self-respecting Catholics such as McLuhan and Ong would say anything favorable about critiques advanced by the atheists in Frankfurt school.

In American culture, the prestige culture was dominated from colonial times up to about 1960 by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). Up to about 1960 when the Harvard-educated white Roman Catholic Irish-American John F. Kennedy was narrowly elected president of the United States, the American WASP elite paid no attention to papal critiques of modernity and secularism – or to other Roman Catholic authors in general. For their part, pre-Vatican II Roman Catholics characteristically used the thought of the American WASP elite for target practice and critique – not for finding points of common ground. We should not forget this cultural context when we consider McLuhan's extraordinary

rise to fame in the 1960s after the publication of his books *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) and *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (1964).

Incidentally, Ong published a review-article in 1952 about McLuhan's 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. Ong's review-article "The Mechanical Bride: Christen the Folklore of Industrial Man" was originally published in the now-defunct journal *Social Order* (February 1952). Ong's review-article is reprinted with a different title in Gerald Emanuel Stearn's book *McLuhan Hot and Cool* (1967, pp. 82-92).

Ong's review-article is noteworthy because of the way in which he "Christens" (as the subtitle says) McLuhan's work in his 1951 book. Ong explicitly and unmistakably spells out possible Roman Catholic ways of understanding McLuhan's book. But did Ong discuss those possible Roman Catholic ways of understanding McLuhan's with McLuhan, when they were both at Saint Louis University years earlier? (Ong told me that McLuhan had been working on the material that eventually became *The Mechanical Bride* for as long as Ong knew him.)

Subsequently, Ong developed the spirit of those possible Roman Catholic ways of understanding McLuhan's 1951 book in the essay "The Faith, the Intellectual, and the Perimeters" in Ong's *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture* (1957, pp. 104-25). However, in that essay Ong does not happen to advert explicitly to McLuhan's 1951 book.

### **Timeline: 1936**

In 1936, McLuhan published his first significant article: "G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic" in the *Dalhousie Review*, 15 (1936): pp. 455-64. Chesterton was a prolific writer of books and op-ed commentaries and a well-known public speaker and debater. He was a larger-than-life character – and

a famous convert to Roman Catholicism. He wrote poetry, biographies, literary criticism, and religious reflections. Among his many books, you will find biographies of St. Thomas Aquinas (1933) and St. Francis of Assisi (1924) that are still worth reading today. Because McLuhan followed Chesterton's example and converted to Roman Catholicism, we should note that in his mid-twenties McLuhan was interested in Chesterton as a practical mystic. Was McLuhan himself also somehow a practical mystic?

McLuhan's 1936 essay about Chesterton is reprinted in McLuhan's posthumously published collection of essays titled *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* (1999, pp. 3-13).

When McLuhan was teaching English at St. Mike's at the University of Toronto later in his life, he served as the director of Hugh Kenner's Master's thesis on Chesterton. Kenner's thesis was subsequently published as the *Paradox in Chesterton* (1947) – with an "Introduction" by McLuhan (pp. xi-xxii).

#### **Timeline: 1937-1944**

From 1937 to 1944, McLuhan taught English at Saint Louis University. During this time, he continued to work on his 1943 Cambridge University doctoral dissertation. As a matter of fact, he took a leave of absence in 1939-1940 to return to Cambridge University to work further on his dissertation there. His unrevised dissertation was published posthumously as *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (2006). McLuhan's dissertation is about the verbal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic (or logic) from roughly the time of Cicero to the time of Thomas Nashe (1567-1601). (Nashe and Shakespeare were contemporaries in England.)

During the years when McLuhan was teaching English at Saint Louis University and working on his doctoral dissertation, Ong was in graduate studies there in English and philosophy as part of his Jesuit

formation – from 1938-1939 to 1940-1941. McLuhan called Ong's attention to Perry Miller's recently published 1939 *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. In this classic study, Miller discusses the work of the French logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572). Miller reports that he had found only one college-educated New Englander who was a self-described Aristotelian – everybody else was a self-described Ramist. Ramist logic dominated the undergraduate curriculum at Cambridge University, where most of the college-educated New England Puritans had studied it. After Harvard College was founded in 1636, Ramist logic also dominated the undergraduate curriculum there. Now, even though Miller's study was ambitious and massive, he called for somebody to undertake a study of the European origins and antecedents of Ramist logic. About a decade after the publication of Miller's book, Ong stepped forward to undertake just such a study. When Ong's *Ramus and Talon Inventory* was published by Harvard University Press in 1958, it carried the dedication "For Herbert Marshall McLuhan who started all this." McLuhan had indeed started Ong's interest in the history of dialectic (or logic) and rhetoric, and in Ramus and Ramist logic.

In McLuhan's 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, mentioned above, McLuhan frequently quotes Ong's massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*.

Ong's 1962 review of McLuhan's 1962 book is reprinted in *An Ong Reader* (2002, pp. 307-08), mentioned above. It is instructive to note the following statements that Ong makes: "If the human community is to retain meaningful possession of the knowledge it is accumulating, breakthroughs to syntheses of a new order are absolutely essential. McLuhan aids one such breakthrough into a new interiority, which will have to include studies of communication not merely as an adjunct or sequel to human knowledge, but as this knowledge's form and condition" (p. 308). Of course, Ong's body of work aids another such breakthrough into a new interiority.



At the time when Ong wrote those sentences, St. Thomas Aquinas was generally regarded among Roman Catholics as having worked out a wonderful synthesis. Thus, without explicitly adverting to Aquinas's much vaunted synthesis, Ong is here calling for a synthesis of a new order – which is to say not the same synthesis of old-fashioned Thomistic philosophy and theology.

### **Timeline: 1944**

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), McLuhan published an article titled “The Analogical Mirrors” in the *Kenyon Review*, 6.3 (Summer 1944): pp. 322-32. It's about Hopkins. This article by McLuhan is reprinted in *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan 1943-1962*, selected, compiled and edited by Eugene McNamara (1969, pp. 63-73). McNamara clusters this article with five other pieces by McLuhan under the caption in the table of contents “Part One: The Nets of Analogy” (xi). As this caption indicates, McNamara finds McLuhan working with the nets of analogy in the six pieces grouped together in this section of the book.

Even though McLuhan's 1944 essay “The Analogical Mirrors” was the earliest of the six selections that McNamara puts in “Part One: The Nets of Analogy” (pp. 1-94), McNamara puts in the fourth position (pp. 63-73). In it, McLuhan's thesis is that the posthumously published Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is “an analogist” (p. 65). McLuhan then discusses Hopkins' poem “The Windover” to illustrate the analogical mirrors with which Hopkins works in this highly compressed poem.

Question: May we also think of McLuhan as an analogist? The other five selections that McNamara includes in “Part One: The Nets of Analogy” show McLuhan's interest in analogy.

Question: May we think of McLuhan the convert to Catholicism as an analogist similar perhaps in spirit

to Hopkins the convert to Catholicism? Now, if we were to do this to McLuhan, then we would, in effect, be approaching him and his post-conversion work as he himself approached the prolific English convert to Catholicism G. K. Chesterton in his first published essay “G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic” in the *Dalhousie Review* (1936). The young American Catholic journalist Nick Ripatrazone (2022) sees McLuhan’s post-conversion work as permeated by his Catholicism, thereby making him, in effect, a practical mystic.

In McNamara’s “Preface” in *The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan: 1943-1962* (1969, pp. v-vii), he says that between 1934 and the present McLuhan “has published some thirty-seven critical essays” (p. v), only fourteen of which McNamara selected to reprint in the 1969 volume.

In Marshall McLuhan’s “Foreword” in *The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan: 1943-1962* (1969, pp. xiii-xiv), he says, “Cambridge [University] was a shock. Richards, Leavis, Eliot and Pound and Joyce in a few weeks opened the doors of perception on the poetic process, and its role in adjusting the reader to the contemporary world. My study of media began and remains rooted in the work of these men. Thomas Nashe [1567-1601] was a Cambridge pet in my terms there. I did my doctoral study on him, approaching him via the process of verbal training from the Sophists through Cicero and Augustine and Dante to the Renaissance” (pp. xiii-xiv).

Incidentally, Ong’s 1969 review essay about McLuhan’s 1969 book is reprinted in *An Ong Reader* (2002, pp. 69-77), mentioned above. For the record, McLuhan served as the director of Ong’s 1941 Master’s thesis about Hopkins’ sprung rhythm. Ong’s thesis was published, slightly revised as “Hopkins’ Sprung Rhythm and the Life of English Poetry” in *Immortal Diamond: Studies in Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman Weyand, S.J., with the assistance of Raymond V. Schoder, S.J. (1949, pp. 93-174). Ong’s “Hopkins’ Sprung Rhythm and the Life of English Poetry” is reprinted in *An Ong Reader* (2002, pp. 111-74). For a critique of Ong’s essay about Hopkins’ sprung rhythm, see James I.

Wimsatt's book *Hopkins's Poetics of Speech Sound: Sprung Rhythm, Lettering, Inscape* (2006).

For Ong's considered view of Hopkins, see his book *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (1986), the published version of Ong's 1981 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

A short selection from Ong's "Hopkins' Sprung Rhythm and the Life of English Poetry" is reprinted as "Sprung Rhythm and English Tradition" in *Hopkins: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman (1966, pp. 150-159) – and so is McLuhan's "The Analogical Mirrors" (pp. 80-88). As far as I know, "The Analogical Mirrors" is the only article McLuhan published about Hopkins.

So, let's discuss analogy. G. E. R. Lloyd has published a perceptive study titled *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (1966). George P. Klubertanz, S.J., in philosophy at Saint Louis University published *Thomas Aquinas on Analogy: A Textual Analysis and Systematic Synthesis* (1960). Ralph McInerney in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame published *The Logic of Analogy: An Interpretation of St. Thomas [Aquinas]* (1961). The Catholic priest and theologian David Tracy at the University of Chicago Divinity School published *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1987). More recently, John R. Mortenson published *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (2006).

The Jesuit priest and theologian Donald L. Gelpi at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley published the *Varieties of Transcendental Experience: A Study in Constructive Postmodernism* (2000), in which he regularly contrasts the American Protestant dialectical imagination and the Catholic analogical imagination (pp. 82, 132, 164, 172, 174, 192, 193, 206, 223, 224, 280, 281, and 282). As Lloyd's study shows, argumentation by analogy was used in early Greek thought. Later on, the analogical imagination became central to medieval Catholic thought – for example, in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

Gelpi's scholarly study focuses primarily on American culture historically. In addition to discussing American Protestants, he discusses American Deists, Unitarians, and Transcendentalists. More specifically, he also examines in detail the thought of Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Orestes Augustus Brownson (a Protestant who converted to Roman Catholicism), Francis Ellingwood Abbott, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Josiah Royce.

Historically, the dialectical imagination became central to American Protestant thought. Briefly, Gelpi characterizes the American Protestant dialectical imagination as displaying a uniform preference for the disjunctive, either-or thinking (p. 82). By contrast, he characterizes the Catholic analogical imagination as seeking "as much as possible to think in both-and rather than either-or terms" (p. 132).

Gelpi says that "Catholicism constituted a negligible presence in the British colonies [in American culture]. Even if Catholicism had enjoyed greater influence in colonial culture, at the turn of the eighteenth century, Protestant anti-Catholic prejudice would have almost certainly blinded the American Deists to the philosophical and theological subtleties of the Catholic tradition [of thought]" (p. 79).

Gelpi says, "The dialectical imagination displays a uniform preference for the disjunctive, either-or thinking. The dialectical imagination contrasts with the analogical imagination which invokes similarity-in-difference in the cause of inclusive thinking and which tends, therefore, to prefer, with proper qualification, both-and thinking to dualistic either-or thinking" (p. 82).

According to Gelpi, "The American Deists tended to approach religious questions with the dialectical imagination which they imbibed from their Protestant upbringing" (p. 82).

According to Gelpi, "The multiple dualisms of Emerson's Transcendentalism also reflected the fact that

he had inherited the dialectical imagination of his [American] Protestant forebears” (p. 132).

According to Gelpi, “Brownson, like all creative thinkers, borrowed insights from other thinkers but integrated them into his own personal synthesis. His reading of [Pierre] Leroux had finally enabled him to make the transition from a Protestant dialectical imagination, with its artificial either-or options, to a Catholic analogical imagination, which seeks as much as possible to think in both-and rather than either-or terms” (p. 164). Gelpi says that “in overcoming dualism with a dynamic vitalism Brownson also learned to think analogically and incarnationally rather than dialectically and dualistically” (p. 172).

Gelpi says that “in contrast to Brownson the convert [to Roman Catholicism], Abbott began his theological career (as opposed to his philosophical career) by endorsing enthusiastically the dichotomizing world of the dialectical imagination from which he would only partially emancipate himself” (p. 206). According to Gelpi, “When dealing with strictly philosophical issues Abbott’s mind gravitated to analogical thinking, but when he confronted strictly theological questions his imagination retained the dialectical character which he inherited from his Protestant heritage” (p. 223).

Gelpi says that “Emerson’s dualistic caste of mind prevented him from offering a philosophically consistent account of cosmic relatedness, but Peirce’s relational metaphysics succeeded better in that speculative enterprise by replacing dualism with a defensible philosophical relationism” (p. 280). “Neither Peirce nor Brownson felt constrained to choose between reason and Christianity. Both preferred the analogical to the dialectical imagination” (p. 281).

Unfortunately, Gelpi does not mention Miller’s discussion of Ramist dialectic in his 1939 book *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* or Ong’s far more extensive discussion of Ramist dialectic in his 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* – both of which McLuhan was familiar with. In his own 1943 Cambridge University doctoral

dissertation, McLuhan was concerned with detecting the influence of Ramist dialectic on Elizabethan prose styles. Historically, what Gelpi refers to as the American Protestant dialectical imagination was based on Ramist dialectic. Evidently, McLuhan became a convert to Roman Catholicism, at least in part, because he preferred the Catholic analogical imagination over the Protestant dialectical imagination.

Now, more recently, the German-born-and-educated theologian Johannes Hoff at Heythrop College in the University of London has published the relevant book *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (2013). But Hoff does not happen to advert to McLuhan or Ong – or to any of the other scholarly studies mentioned in the present essay. Nevertheless, Hoff's focus on visualist tendencies can also be related to both McLuhan's and Ong's discussion of visualist tendencies.

Now, in McLuhan's posthumously published letter to Maritain, dated May 6, 1969, in the *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (1987, pp. 369-71), mentioned above, McLuhan says, "My first encounter with your work was at Cambridge University in 1934. Your *Art and Scholasticism* was on the reading list of the English School. It was a revelation to me. I became a Catholic in 1937" (p. 371). McLuhan also says, "Analogy of proper proportionality . . . is a mode of awareness destroyed by literacy, since the literate man insists on visual connections where being insists on awareness" (p. 371). Now, regardless of the beauties of the Catholic analogical imagination, I do not expect to see the analogical imagination catch on among American Protestants. McLuhan was fascinated with the Catholic analogical imagination. But many academics are not fascinated with it. McLuhan understood that he was intrigued with the Catholic analogical imagination and that many people were not.

In contrast with McLuhan, Ong was not as intrigued with the Catholic analogical imagination as McLuhan was. Nor was Ong an old-fashioned Thomist, as Maritain was – and as McLuhan perhaps was also. Nor was Ong a technophobe, as McLuhan was. Basically, Ong was a technophile, but not an

uncritical one.

### **Timeline: Late 1950s**

Next, I would like to point out that in the late 1950s McLuhan slowly and carefully read Bernard Lonergan's 1957 book *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (5th ed., 1992). McLuhan says that he is reading Lonergan's book in a posthumously published letter to Ong dated September 21, 1957 (see *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, p. 251). The late Donald Theall (1928-2008; Ph.D. in English, University of Toronto, 1954) told me in an email exchange that he had read Lonergan's *Insight* along with McLuhan, when Theall was a young graduate student in English at the University of Toronto. According to him, he and McLuhan read an agreed-upon number of pages in Lonergan's each week and then met to discuss the agreed-upon material with one another. In this way Theall and McLuhan slowly and carefully worked their way through Lonergan's book.

The Canadian Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) was well known in Catholic circles in the Toronto area by the time that *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* was published in 1957. However, by that time, the Jesuits had called Lonergan away from the Toronto area to teach at the Gregorian University in Rome. McLuhan would most likely have heard of the publication of Lonergan's *Insight* from other faculty members at St. Mike's at the University of Toronto.

We know from McLuhan's 1969 letter to Maritain, mentioned above, that McLuhan claimed to have read Aquinas. McLuhan published the article "Joyce, Aquinas, and the Poetic Process" in *Renascence*, 4.1 (1951): 3-11. However, after Vatican II, old-fashioned Thomist philosophy has been on the wane in Roman Catholic circles. In contrast to Maritain and McLuhan, Lonergan was not an old-fashioned Thomist, but a new-fangled one – best described as a Lonerganian. As McLuhan's 1969 letter to Maritain suggests, McLuhan remained an old-fashioned Thomist years after Vatican II. For example, he

worked with the formal cause, which was part of the old-fashioned Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics. For a brief account of how Thomas Aquinas appropriated and used Aristotle's four causes in old-fashioned Thomistic metaphysics, see Edward Feser's *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (2009, pp. 16-23).

As noted, Ong was not an old-fashioned Thomist, even though he had been trained in old-fashioned Thomist philosophy and theology as part of their Jesuit formation years before Vatican II. But Ong was not explicitly Lonerganian in any of his publications.

As noted, McLuhan was not explicitly Lonerganian in any of his publications. Nevertheless, I want to argue that McLuhan had been deeply influenced by working his way slowly and carefully through Lonergan's *Insight* in the late 1950s. Let me explain how I think this happened.

Briefly, in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Lonergan famously takes an inward turn to explore consciousness. He identifies and discusses what I will here style as moments of consciousness: (1) the moment of sensory input and imagination; (2) the moment of intellectual processing of sensory input and imagination in language by making conceptual constructs and forming possible predications; (3) the moment of rational processing involving judging and adjudicating the adequacy or inadequacy of the possible conceptual constructs and predications; and (4) the moment of responsible decision-making and taking action based on the judgments about the conceptual constructs and predications. Lonergan claims that his four-fold account of human consciousness constitutes a generalized empirical method or way of processing that enables us to think critically about human thinking and understanding.

Because McLuhan was extremely fond of referring to "percepts," I should say here that technically percepts represent the moment of sensory input and imagination in Lonergan's way of thinking.

However, when I examine exactly what McLuhan refers to as "percepts," it strikes me that he is actually



referring to the moment of intellectual processing of sensory input and imagination in language by making conceptual constructs and predications.

Nevertheless, Abraham H. Maslow's discussion of "perception" strikingly resembles McLuhan's use of the term "percepts." In the *Toward a Psychology of Being* (2nd ed., 1968), Maslow differentiates what he characterizes as "the need-motivated kind of perception" from what he terms as "detached perception" (p. 41). He also refers to these two as need-interested perception, on the one hand, and, on the other, "need-disinterested or desireless perception" (p. 40). According to him, we perceive another person in a need-gratifying way, we in effect "see the person as a tool" that we can use to help gratify our needs (p. 40). Conversely, when we are not motivated by need-gratifying, "it is much more possible for [us] to take a non-valuing, non-judgmental, non-interfering, non-condemning attitude toward others" (p. 40).

The contrast that Maslow sets up in his own terminology resembles Martin Buber contrast between I-thou and I-it approaches to another person. What Maslow describes in his own terminology as taking "a non-valuing, non-judgmental, non-interfering, non-condemning attitude toward others" resembles what Carl Rogers refers to as unconditional positive regard.

In Lonergan's way of thinking, Maslow is in effect describing not moving to the moment of rational processing involving judging and adjudicating the adequacy or inadequacy of our conceptual constructs about the other persons. When McLuhan says that he is discussing percepts, he undoubtedly means that he is not judging and adjudicating the adequacy or inadequacy of the conceptual constructs that he himself is using to express himself.

In Maslow's terminology, McLuhan was most likely a self-actualizing person – and Lonergan and Ong almost certainly were also.

Now, Buddhist forms of meditation and some other forms of non-imagistic meditation aim to transcend consciousness. No doubt the experience of transcending consciousness through non-imagistic meditation can contribute to providing practitioners with a certain distance from consciousness. In short, such practitioners are distanced from the immediacy of consciousness.

Ong liked to say that we need both proximity (closeness) and distance to understand anything.

As Jesuits, Ong and Lonergan had been trained in the Jesuit tradition of imagistic meditation deriving from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit religious order in the Roman Catholic Church. Typically, Jesuit priests make two 30-day retreats in silence (except for daily conferences with the retreat director) following the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola.

As a result of his Jesuit formation, Lonergan had in effect been primed to examine human consciousness as he does in his inward turn to consciousness in *Insight*.

Now, I am not here claiming that McLuhan was familiar with the Jesuit tradition of imagistic meditation, because I do not know if he was. But I am claiming that he undoubtedly was influenced by Lonergan's inward turn to consciousness in *Insight*.

The subtitle of Lonergan's book advertises its focus on "Human Understanding." The main title of McLuhan's 1964 is *Understanding Media*. Of course, as an English professor, McLuhan was familiar with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's widely used textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938). (McLuhan and Brooks were friends.)

When we turn our attention to McLuhan's publications before 1964, we do not find anything remotely

approximating his inward turn to consciousness in *Understanding Media*.

McLuhan's inward turn to consciousness in *Understanding Media* threw many readers for a loop, to put it mildly. But it sold remarkably well and helped catapult him to extraordinary celebrity. (However, I myself do not find all of McLuhan's analyses in *Understanding Media* to be perceptive and persuasive.)

Of course, Lonergan's *Insight* never sold as well as McLuhan's *Understanding Media* did. Even so, Lonergan's inward turn to consciousness also threw many of its readers for a loop, to put it mildly.

Now, if you want to argue that McLuhan was not influenced by slowly and carefully reading Lonergan's *Insight*, you are of course free to claim this and to advance this claim.

However, if you want to contextualize McLuhan's thought in *Understanding Media*, you should not overlook Lonergan's philosophical treatise.

As far as I know, McLuhan's followers have not explored the influence of Lonergan's philosophical treatise on him – perhaps because they are not familiar with Lonergan's *Insight*.

Conversely, as far as I know, Lonergan's followers have not paid any attention to how his philosophical treatise may have influenced McLuhan's *Understanding Media*.

## **Conclusion**

We now live in a different time. As a result, we now have greater distance from McLuhan's works than the media and others had in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result of the basic thrusts of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church, certain aspects of pre-Vatican II Roman

Catholic cultural context out of which McLuhan emerged have changed considerably. For example, old-fashioned Thomism is not in the ascendancy in Catholic culture in North America and Europe and elsewhere today as it was during most of McLuhan's lifetime. Thus, the changes in Catholic culture should allow us today to be clear-sighted about the Catholic cultural context out of which McLuhan emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

In today's alignment of Roman Catholics as conservative or liberal, McLuhan would most likely be considered a conservative Catholic today if he were still alive. After all, he converted to pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, and he was an old-fashioned Thomist in as much as he worked with formal cause. By contrast, Ong would almost certainly not be considered a conservative Catholic today if he were still alive. I hasten to say that the alignment of Roman Catholics today as conservative and liberal does not necessarily parallel the American, or the Canadian, political alignments of conservative and liberal.

But in light of the question that I raised above about McLuhan the analogist perhaps being similar to Hopkins the analogist who works with the mirrors of analogies in his poem "The Windover," we should not forget McLuhan's understanding of Catholicism. If we see McLuhan as he saw Chesterton in his 1936 essay, then we would have to allow that what McLuhan refers to as a practical mystic might also be used to characterize Hopkins as a practical mystic in his poetry. However, if we also see McLuhan as a practical mystic in his performances and his publications, then we might understand why many non-Catholics were wary of him. But many Catholics were also wary of him. We might conclude that this religious dimension of McLuhan's life and work needs to be more fully articulated and explained to help both Catholics and non-Catholics understand him.

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