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Horrors! Maybe I'm a formalist!? Such was my worry upon completing *Understanding Media*, after spending three years as a Chemistry and English major focused on the *content* of my Erlenmeyer flasks and Norton readers. Despite the fact that my undergraduate brain was aching from the effort of following McLuhan through 300+ pages of rhetorical and logical acrobatics, I still sensed a resonance with his way of thinking about media – as forms, objects, networks; and not just substrates or windows we look *through* to get at the words and pictures.

This was, however, a disheartening self-realization, since I knew the term *formalism* primarily as a pejorative. Calling someone a formalist seemed akin to calling him a technodeterminist, which Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (2011: 121), in *Kittler and the Media*, says is ‘a bit like saying that he enjoys strangling cute puppies’. I should’ve seen the warning signs. In my English seminars, I’d always been just as interested in the heft of our anthologies, their typeface and layout, and the smell and texture and translucency of their onion-skin pages, as I was in the actual *text* of ‘Beowulf’. In the lab, too, I spent nearly as much time pondering how the design of beakers and pipets shaped the way we interacted with chemicals and the kinds of results we could derive.

I had encountered McLuhan while writing a senior thesis exploring representations of human–computer interaction in the early years of *Wired* magazine, well known for its formal experimentation. Through my immersion in the magazine and exposure to its patron saint, I came to recognize that I, too, had long cared about forms of communication, and about mediation as a multisensory process and experience. But what did these interests say about me? Did being a formalist mean that I pay too little attention to content and social and historical context; that I ‘desocialize’ media and fail to see mediation as a ‘practice’, as Raymond Williams claimed of McLuhan?

Not necessarily. There *are* some formalist puppy-killers out there, but McLuhan needn’t be counted among them. His interests include the ‘psychic and social consequences’ of media technologies, and the ‘change of scale or

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pace or pattern' they introduce 'into human affairs' (McLuhan, 1994[1964]: 8). His media are *socialized* (even if the social is often generalized in his work). And he recognizes that technological change incites the recalibration of myriad social and psychological patterns; 'each new impact shifts the ratios among all the senses.' When we add a new medium into a culture, he says, 'it is the entire system that is changed' (p. 64). This 'entire system' can expand to allow for a highly multifaceted approach to studying media.

Over the years, in my research on media-architectures, I've found that thinking *formally* helps in modeling the systemic interactions among technologies, people, institutions, places, and various cultural and political-economic factors. *Understanding Media* provided early inspiration for the development of my own method. McLuhan (taking cues from his mentor, economist Harold Innis) recognizes media as 'staples or natural resources' that have a profound impact not only on a society's political economy, but also on its social configurations, its 'entire psychic life', and its 'unique cultural flavor' (p. 21). Just as cotton helped to define the 19th-century American South, and oil the contemporary Middle East, papyrus played a key role in shaping the 'entire system' of ancient Egypt. And when 'paper from China ...[made] its way through the New East to Europe', it 'accelerated education and commerce ... and provided the basis for "the Renaissance of the twelfth century"' (p. 101). The movement of this space-biased medium eventually exploited, and in some cases even incited, developments in transportation infrastructure (consider the creation of postal routes).

Through McLuhan, Innis, and Lewis Mumford, to whom McLuhan is likewise indebted, I came to realize that media don't merely exploit infrastructures for their production and distribution; they themselves *are* infrastructures. They're the systems, often invisible, that undergird and structure our daily existence. McLuhan acknowledges the etymological connection between communication and transportation (e.g. the Greek *metaphor* means to carry across or transport), and 'the term 'communication' has had an extensive use in connection with roads and bridges, sea routes, rivers, and canals, even before it became transformed into 'information movement' in the electric age' (p. 89). Each of these forms of transport 'not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver, and the message'; thus trucks and boats are media, too (p. 90).

Media systems are also like transit in the ways they change how we organize and inhabit space. The steam railway created a 'new political centralism and a new kind of urban shape and size' – an 'abstract grid' with separate zones for production, consumption, and residence (p. 104). Electric power reversed the trend toward decentralization; electric light transformed the way people moved, worked within, and experienced space; and the car and the plane further 'scrambled' spatiality and amplified mobility. The telephone, the radio, and now mobile and sensing technologies have played similar roles in reorganizing physical and psychic space. McLuhan even acknowledges the politics of these transformations in media-geography: 'any new means of moving information will alter any power structure', and

that uneven distribution of resources and ‘lack of homogeneity in speed of information movement’ can create a ‘diversity of patterns in organization’ and incite ‘serious conflicts’ (pp. 91, 104).

It’s hard to see how an individual might have any power to influence the design of these media-infrastructures, to manage their psychic effects or their recalibration of our sense-ratios, to monitor how they alter our ‘habits of life’ and our ‘patterns of thought and valuation’ (p. 63). One place where this *can* happen is in the classroom. *Understanding Media* encourages us to acknowledge and evaluate multiple forms of learning, and to appreciate the multisensory nature of knowledge-production. We adhere to educational standards rooted in print-based values and ocularcentrism; ‘our testers assume that uniform and continuous habits are a sign of intelligence, thus eliminating the ear man and the tactile man’ (p. 17). ‘The American stake in literacy as a technology or uniformity applied to every level of education, government, industry, and social life’, McLuhan observed 50 years ago, ‘is totally threatened by the electric technology.’ Those stakes are further challenged today by video games and mobile technologies. McLuhan advocates that we prepare our students to develop ‘literacies’ in myriad media forms. ‘Would it not seem natural and necessary that the young be provided with at least as much training of perception in [the] graphic and photographic world’ – and, I would add, the sonic and interactive and mobile worlds – ‘as they get in the typographic?’ (p. 230).

McLuhan’s appreciation for multiple literacies and forms of knowing – and for pedagogical strategies tuned to those various formal sensibilities – inspired me to commit, early in my teaching career, to what are known today as the digital humanities. Furthermore, his acknowledgment that artists, keenly tuned in to ‘changes in sense perception’, are ‘indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures created by’ different media technologies, has led me to insert artists’ works among the theoretical texts on my syllabi, and to engage my students in critical-creative practice (pp. 18, 65). I want them to think about the material properties, affordances and limitations, sensory dimensions, epistemologies and ideologies of the media-forms they’re learning, and making, with. I want them to proudly embrace the formalist mantle. It’s come to fit me quite well.

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