

McLuhan
Studies



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Volume I

Laws of Media: The Pentad and Technical Syncretism

Of all the carping against his ideas, McLuhan seemed most dismayed by the complaint that he was not scientific, that he was wrong because he ignored the facts, the evidence and the causes of the effects that he studied. As for causality, he knew that only in entering the future by looking back, as though into a rear-view mirror, could one support the idea of judgment by a theory of causal relations. The reversal of time's arrow was a trick of positivistic science that was inadmissible, in an electric age, biased by the indeterminacy of its new communications.

Typically, McLuhan's adversaries were the specialists who perceived rightly that their survival was at stake in his criticism of their one-dimensionality and they were ever after bent on reprisal. Specialism, he would say, is a special sort of blindness. Electric process requires wholeness of perception, not fragmentation and categories.

McLuhan answered his critics by inventing *relative causality*, treating causation as a continuum of simultaneous operations. Assisted by his son Eric and a few other colleagues, he produced the laws of media: four simple rules of transformation on the elegant scale of Kepler or Newton, in the form of questions, for opening up any artefact to insightful inquiry: what does the subject *Enhance*, *Obsolesce*, *Retrieve* and *Reverse into*. Their *Laws of Media* maintains that only four fundamental operations were found, while allowing that others may exist.

But our understanding and appreciation of the achievement in these laws oblige us to ask: why *four* operations? Why this *particular* four? The annoyance in these questions persists, burns. This is not fourness on the scale of the atomic structure of Beryllium, is it? And why does it matter that there are only four?

Because if only four are promulgated, or only four are allowed, everything Marshall McLuhan stood for, is vitiated. McLuhan's work emphasizes the paradox and ambiguity of communication, the gestalt richness of information patterns. Laws, of any sort, delimit. Worst of all, the appearance of a lack of openness to chance occurrence plays into the hands of those who accuse McLuhan, groundlessly, of technological determinism. *Laws* offers the caveat of a possible fifth but operates as though there may never be one. It is useful to recall that from the third of Kepler's three laws of celestial motion, Newton derived the law of gravitation. One person's slate of laws, elegant, useful is a beginning for extensions by others, as Newton's laws of motion in his *Principia* were add-

ed to by Einstein. Relativity did not destroy causality but recontextualized it as a special case phenomenon.

Beyond its quadratic form, causality also had strong theological meaning in that the *material*, *formal*, *efficient*, and *final* dimensions of causality were perceived by many as linked ineffably to a fifth, *first cause*, or God. (In the Christian context, to ignore causality is to ignore God, the Creator.) Causality itself, then, historically considered, is a four-plus-one form like rhetoric as well, with its *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* categories, which one can regard as the planning stage completed by *actio*, the contemplation of and act of delivery.

In a sense the first four operations are a ground for the delivery, just as, for the Christian, knowledge of God flows from the contemplative ground of causality. As Leucippus, the Atomist, had said, "Nothing happens without a ground, but everything through a cause and of necessity" (Wiener 271).¹

Necessary or not, a prepossession with fourness, Viconian, Baconian or otherwise² may have no more to recommend it than an adamant preference for five-ness; each has a rich mythic and historical fullness.³ Every time I look at my fingers and toes, or the number of apertures in my head I'm pressed to favour the pentacular, but my four limbs tell me not to be exclusive about it; even they can unexpectedly become five, as Oedipus learned from the Sphinx.

Vico's famous cycle is a four-phased historical evolution of Nations from an age of the *Gods*, (everything human measured by divine standards), to an aristocratic age of *Heroes*, (priestcraft loses its exclusivity to the nation's warriors) followed by an age of *Man*, (power with human values politically entrenched). But chaos comes around again to unseat man's controls over the nation and a *Ricorso* period of getting back on track occurs, with former condi-

1. Nor did McLuhan think much of people who thought him a technological determinist: he had a high regard for chance and said so often. Nothing had to happen, he would say with a smile.

2. Vico's famous division of the fourfold historical evolution of Nations (from an age of Gods, a theocracy in which everything human is measured by divine standards, to an age of Heroes, an aristocracy in which priestcraft gives way in part to the warriors of the nation, to an age of Man, a democratic sharing of power so that exclusively human values can be politically entrenched. But matters do not end there because chaos comes around to unseat man's controls over the nation and there occurs a *ricorso* period of getting back on track with former conditions in new formats.) Obviously Vico's structure for the great sweeping metamorphoses of nations is a three plus one structure. Just a glance at the *Scienza Nuova* shows his commitment to threeness. (In Book Four, for example, there are fourteen sections devoted to triplicate approaches to several themes. At the same time *The New Science* itself is divided into five books and the fifth book begins with a chapter on the three plus one nature of contemporary times in Florence, "The Latest Barbaric History Explained as the Recourse of the First Barbaric History," giving us one full round of the helix of historical change and a return or 'getting back on track' period following.)

3. The projected structure of Bacon's impossibly ambitious *magnum opus*, *Instauratio Magna* was in six parts of which only *The Advancement of Learning* and *Novum Organum* were completed. But, as the McLuhans in *Laws of Media* make clear, they are thinking of Bacon in propounding their laws, and specifically refer to the "four Idols" in the *Idola teatrum* of the *Novum Organum*.

tions in new formats.

Obviously Vico's millenarian structure for the epochal stages in the metamorphosis of nations is a three plus one structure. Just a glance at the *Scienza Nuova* shows his commitment to threeness. According to his agent, McLuhan himself had a predilection for threeness worthy of Joachim De Floris. But it is not unusual for Catholics to have a trinitarian bias, and one for four⁴ (Eric McLuhan 203).

In Book Four, for example, there are fourteen sections devoted to triangular studies of "Natures, Customs, Languages," and so forth. The *New Science* itself is divided into five books. The fifth book begins with a chapter on the three plus one nature of contemporary times in Florence. Numerologies of this sort quickly risk becoming silly. Still the question persists: Why four and why just that four transformations for the *laws*?

I am not unappreciative of the sweet corroborations of causality and metaphor that emerged as the McLuhans polished the operations model of the tetrad. Mathematical simplicity can be beautiful.

As we searched for a fifth law, we made further discoveries, the most important of which was the realization of an inner harmony among the four laws. It surfaced when we noticed there were special ratios, and pairs of ratios, among the laws. Furthermore this harmony showed that the laws taken together should exhibit the same structure as metaphor. And they did.⁵

Finally, this dance to a three/four time waltz with truth remains arbitrary, if not tautological; but it can be fun. Should our credence in the validity of fourness be enhanced because Joyce did *Finnegans Wake* in four books, or because of the relationship between the trivium (rhetoric, dialectic and grammar) the quadrivium (music, geometry, mathematics and astronomy) of classical education, as triunite Augustinianism is followed by the fourfold method of exegesis of Aquinian theology, and so forth pedantically until quaternity is fully exploited?

No one more than Bacon despised generalizations and sought exceptions to every principle and vigorously uncovered the negative grounds for every positive statement, although that aspect of Bacon may not be a boon to the harmonies sought in the *Laws* from Bacon's work.

I propose a fifth operation which I believe has the same fundamentality and harmonious relations as the other categories. That new law, that fifth fundament is *Syncretism*, or *fusion*, the combining of insistent technologies into new and more complex unities.

Insistent technologies, like archetypes, are rooted in prehistoric imagina-

4. Recounted in Sanderson and Macdonald by Matie Molinaro. Joachim De Floris (1135-1202), Calabrian mystic. Even the Gospels are a three-plus-one arrangement of the so-called Synoptic three, plus John.

5. This may refer to Aristotle's fourfold division of metaphor: 1. From genus to species; 2. From species to genus; 3. From species to species; or 4. "On grounds of analogy" (*Poetics* 20.215).

tion; they *must* be born: they are technical processes emerging. The eternal dream of flight persists through history, from the Mesopotamian myth of Zu to Kitty Hawk; escalating explosive power progresses from the actions of earth in paroxysms of volcanic eruption, images of godly powers, later bequeathed as gunpowder to warlords and then as earth-consuming nuclear bombs to benignant democrats. And NASA's finely alloyed probes ensue from the first smith's concocting a method for removing the magical "sword from the stone," that is, when the rudiments of smelting iron and making steel are learned. The alchemist's complex dream of transformations is realized in particle physics in which matter is treated as pure energy, and so on.

The syncretic fusion of technologies is rooted in physiological extension: it is a sort of concrete dialectic which synthesizes bodily parts, increasingly extending them for action at a distance. Extension involves elementary set theory: *tooth/finger = fork/tine*, or *fist/rock/larm = flint/stock/larm* of the spear. As Vico says, "in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions" (*The New Science* 88). (Think of the arms, legs and back of a chair or the eye of a needle, or a ball-joint suspension.)

Take the set, *arm/fist* extended into stone *axe/shaft*. Similarly, in electric culture, *silent film/radio*, fuse inevitably into the *talking motion picture*; *radiomovies* cohabit to make *Television*. Trains and elevators came out of improvements in mines for moving ore, and extended both horizontal and vertical movement in the skyscraper and commuter train.

New technologies come from the combination of an insistent fantasy and the timely material means to achieve them. Sometimes they are quite literally dreamed up, as in the case of Singer's sewing machine bobbin. Archetypes are not perceivable; instead, they produce insistent images of deep, psychic processes. Men devise techniques to make these into artefacts.

McLuhan knew Mumford on this subject. Technologies usually occur at least in pairs. That is, any new technology is the result of two earlier technologies coming together and fusing into another more useful and powerful third. There are many examples of such pairing. When the Napier press adds rollers (assembly line efficiency) to the old screw press (idiosyncratic artisan), we have two ideas beautifully married into the epochal improvement of offset printing for force-feeding mass literacy.

But the tetrad is a set of operations. One ought to be careful that this approach doesn't lapse into *operationism*—which, like logical positivism, holds that the meaning of a concept is given by a set of operations. Nothing could be further from McLuhan's intentions, except, perhaps inadvertently, in *Laws of Media*.

The tetrad can only be a beginning. Doesn't everyone say so? What comes after it? The pentad, I believe, because I find the tetrad more useful intellectually with the syncretic function added:

FORK

- Enh.: Retrieval
- Ret.: Spear
- Obs.: Hand
- Syn.: Tooth and Finger
- Rev.: Convenience hand food

MOVIE

- Enh.: Story
- Ret.: Dream
- Obs.: Print
- Syn.: Movement and Stasis
- Rev.: Freeze frame (videotex, VDT)

PAPER MONEY

- Enh.: Transaction
- Ret.: Personal power
- Obs.: Bartering
- Syn.: Gold and Print (i.e., metallurgy and press)
- Rev.: Pure information

RADIO

- Enh.: Inner image
- Ret.: Tribal acoustic
- Obs.: Outer image
- Syn.: Ear and Eye
- Rev.: TV image—audile-tactile

CHAIR

- Enh.: Headwork
- Ret.: Self importance
- Obs.: Lotus
- Syn.: Squat and stand
- Rev.: Recliner

These examples reveal the syncretic function as the missing heart of a five-part array of operations. In every case, fusion sharply improves the depth of insight into each change. Any idea pressed to the limit of its capability subdivides into smaller more combinative units. Mosaics of some complexity emerge from this action, producing a syncretic function which operates as the true basis of technical progress.

Syncretism was recognized as a powerful cultural force in the Renaissance, in the works of Ficino and especially of Pico della Mirandola. They saw how philosophical and literary syncretism played a formative role in the evolution of culture. Christianity, for example, had tributary inclusions from its Gnostic forebears, from Roman Mithraicism, Hebrew sources, even Zoroastrianism and Greek Orphism.

Pico points out that syncretism is not the same as synthesis. *Syncretism* preserves the individual traits of the combining beliefs, whereas *synthesis* creates a radical transformation of the contributory sources by allowing a single set of mutual characteristics to emerge as dominant. Syncretism, moreover, is "the cult of diversity within culture, which yearns for unified order" (Wiener 4.43b).⁶

In our time, the unifying effects of technical syncretism have been investigated by Lewis Mumford, an important McLuhan forebear. Mumford, in *Technics and Civilization*, cites warfare as a primary agency of syncretism. Rare world travelers like Marco Polo certainly aided the spread of technologies and artefacts, whether of gunpowder, noodle-cutting, or paper-making. And the Crusades established a valuable network, or ground, for Syncretic borrowings in the west. This wholeness and the global nature of Syncretism Mumford makes clear:

One further fact about syncretism must be noted. In the first stages of integration, before a culture has set its own definite mark upon the materials, before invention has crystallized into satisfactory habits and routine, it is free to draw upon the widest sources. The beginning and the end, the first absorption and the final spread and conquest, after the cultural integration has taken place, are over a *worldwide realm*. (108) [emphasis added]

Technical syncretism became an overwhelming power during the machine age. The fusion of every conceivable technical form accelerated increasingly. Ever since, we have been buffeted by the extreme speed of change caused by the explosion of technical forms. Again, Mumford:

A creative syncretism of inventions, gathered from the technical debris of other civilizations, made possible the new mechanical body. ... In short, most of the important inventions and discoveries that served as the nucleus for further mechanical development, did not arise, as Spengler would have it, out of some mystical inner drive of the Faustian soul: they were windblown seeds from other cultures. (108)

The irresistible force of syncretism moves on, Xerox and telephone producing FAX, television and the electric range having resulted in the microwave oven, boon to simultaneous eating and viewing.⁷

If the Laws are in any way scientific, we should approach the question of a fifth law in the spirit of Popper's proposition that Science is the search for the falsifiable instance of any hypothesis.

In the case of the tetrad itself, its operations are themselves syncretically linked. The enhancement, obsolescence, and retrieval come together, through time, in order to create the reversal, that transcendent, radical transformation which is the tetradic action. Making a distinction between things that *can happen* and things that *must happen* is useful here. The reversal and the syncretic actions must happen. Fantasy projections, for example, or topological analysis can happen in the production of imaginative human artefacts, but these are not fundamental to the process of the Laws though important secondarily.

Finally, considering the possibility that the tetrad sheds light on any human artefact, what about the tetrad itself? (See also Eric McLuhan's tetrad of the tet-

6. Pico always maintained that there was syncretic linkage between Plato and Aristotle sufficient to see them as similar in many instances. In an oddly similar case, St. Augustine, nearly two different men, is a syncretic figure, and he capitalized on his pagan reversal as no born Christian could.

7. Microwave ovens operate in the same range of the electromagnetic spectrum as telecommunications.

rad, *Laws of Media* 224.)

PENTAD

- Enh: awareness of process
- Ret.: logic of myth
- Obs.: historical narrative
- Syn.: cause and effect
- Rev.: Relativity.

It would be nice to think that the metaphoric structure of the tetrad makes the device produce concise meanings; actually, there are specific limitations evoked when metaphor operates to control meaning.

Vico regarded metaphor as a short fable (Runes 195) a sort of cartoon sketch to be filled in, but he was referring to metaphor in the hands of poets operating freely to extend the extraordinary resources of language. Metaphor, when used to regulate, implodes meaning, working like a shorthand recording many simultaneous properties. That is only partly good.

When metaphor is hedged with rules, it quickly loses its power to create rich meanings. Used too precisely, (as in a system of laws?) metaphor reverts to a new type of technical terminology, rather like what happens to poetic devices in advertising. Even if metaphor did not tend so easily to go stale and simplistic, it is a notoriously unstable cognitive or semantic device. Its unavoidable complexity makes it liable to misunderstanding and, also, as the user moves away from the central or obvious aspects of a metaphoric perception, the material on the margins fades into obscurity.

The metaphor's purpose always is to retrieve those marginal aspects of perception and push them into a central location; this gives metaphor a context volatility that is too high for precise communication—that is too high for use in a set of laws. Adding a syncretic function to the tetrad at least stabilizes it against the vagaries of imprecise meaning associated with the metaphor. The little system, thus bolstered, precludes some of the more fanciful and obfuscating meanings that can't be supported by the fusion requirement. The examples above make this clear. The syncretic function of the tetrad is its fulcrum and that makes it a pentad. This inquiry, into a rich subject, aims simply to stimulate others to make their own assessments of the Laws and perhaps to contribute additions to their increasingly manifold elements and operations.

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