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MODERNISM'S "DOORS OF PERCEPTION": FROM EZRA
POUND'S *IDEOGRAMMIC* METHOD TO MARSHALL
MCLUHAN'S "*MOSAIC*"

Abstract: Writing to Ezra Pound in May 1948, Marshall McLuhan told the poet that, "we [that is, Hugh Kenner and I] have long taken a serious interest [in] your work." And so, McLuhan along with Kenner visited Pound at St Elizabeths in June 1948. The rest makes for interesting modernist literary and cultural studies history. This paper argues that McLuhan's method of composition, which he called a "mosaic," derives from his understanding of Pound's poetics of the ideogrammic method. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), McLuhan explains that the book "develops a mosaic or field approach to its problems. Such a mosaic image of numerous data and quotations in evidence offers the only practical means of revealing the causal operations in history." McLuhan learned much from the American poet, including to view literature/pedagogy as "training of perception"; and both developed texts that placed readers *in media res*, encouraging an heuristic approach to "reading" whereby readers are empowered to arrive at their own meaning or interpretation irrespective of the writers' ideology and/or agenda. Using examples from *The Cantos* and *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), this essay also probes the relationships between modernist aesthetics, technological prophesy and sociopolitical *praxis*.

Keywords: Pound, McLuhan, modernism, ideogrammic method, mosaic, "the medium is the message."

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«ДВЕРИ ВОСПРИЯТИЯ» МОДЕРНИЗМА: ОТ ИДЕОГРАММАТИЧЕСКОГО МЕТОДА ЭЗРЫ ПАУНДА К «МОЗАИКЕ» МАРШАЛЛА МАКЛЮЭНА

Аннотация: В письме к Э. Паунду в мае 1948 г. Маршалл Маклюэн написал: «Мы [Хью Кеннер и я] уже давно и серьезно интересуемся Вашим творчеством». Так, в июне 1948 г. М. Маклюэн и Х. Кеннер навестили Паунда в госпитале Св. Елизаветы. Подробности этого визита могут послужить интересным материалом для исследований в области модернистской литературы и культуры. В статье предпринимается попытка показать, что тип композиции, который Маклюэн назвал «мозаическим», восходит к паундовской поэтике идеограмматического метода. В книге «Галактика Гутенберга. Становление человека печатной культуры» (1962) Маклюэн разрабатывает «мозаичный (или отраслевой) подход к решению проблем. Только мозаика огромного количества информации и текстов позволяет на практике увидеть, как из повседневных действий складывается история». Маклюэн многому научился у Паунда, в частности, его видению литературы и педагогики как «тренировки восприятия». И Паунд, и Маклюэн помещают читателей своих произведений *in media res*, подталкивая их к эвристическому методу чтения, когда читатель должен прийти к собственной интерпретации и осмыслению прочитанного, вне зависимости от идеологических установок и позиции автора. На примере «Кантос» Э. Паунда и «Средство сообщения – массаж: опись имущества» (*Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, 1967) М. Маклюэна в данной статье показана связь между эстетикой модернизма, прогнозами технологизации общества и социополитическим *праксисом*.

Ключевые слова: Паунд, Маклюэн, модернизм; идеограмматический метод, мозаика, «средство есть сообщение».

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The following is a May 31, 1948 brief letter written by Marshall McLuhan and addressed to Ezra Pound:

Dear Mr. Pound

My friend Mr. [Hugh] Kenner and I are [very] much looking forward to a visit and some talk with you about contemporary letters, and your work, in which we have long taken a serious interest. We live in Toronto and are visiting here in New York with John Farrell. We have written Dr. [Winfred] Overholser [superintendent of St Elizabeth's Hospital] to say that we will be in Washington Thursday or Friday of this week.

Cordially yours
H.M. McLuhan¹

Beginning in December 1945, Pound was to be confined for twelve and a half years (1945–1958) at the St Elizabeths Hospital for the Criminally Insane outside Washington D.C.; he was incarcerated there instead of being tried for treason for his Radio Rome broadcasts, his appalling wartime speeches (beginning in 1940) of Fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda.

The letter quoted above led to McLuhan and Kenner's well-known Friday, June 4, 1948 visit to St Elizabeths to meet Pound in person.² Though this encounter lasted for only two hours, it marked both the beginning of Kenner's lifelong interest in, and invention of Pound (and arguably Anglo-American modernist) studies as well as the exact moment of the conversion of "modernism's culture and aesthetics to a faith in communication [media]."³ This defining moment in the narrative of literary high modernism and its intersection with media history has attained the status of literary myth, something that Kenner underscores through his dedication of *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* to McLuhan.⁴ Surely, then, Kenner recognized from the outset

¹ McLuhan, Marshall. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, eds. M. Molinaro, C. McLuhan and W. Toye. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988: 192. This letter is in the Lilly Library, Indiana University. John Farrell was one of McLuhan's students at Saint Louis University.

² As we go on to mention again below, this meeting has important and momentous consequences for media and cultural studies, on the one hand, and Anglo-American modernist studies on the other hand.

³ See: Goble, Mark. *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010: 3.

⁴ The dedication reads: "TO MARSHALL McLUHAN / 'A catalogue. his jewels of conversation'." See Kenner, Hugh. *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.

the role Pound's wartime broadcasts played in signalling the importance of the medium of the radio as well as the collapse of the great divide between literature and propaganda and high culture and art.⁵

McLuhan himself had been aware of Pound and high modernism as early as 1934 while at Cambridge; he has described his education there as no less than a "revelation": "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."⁶ Though McLuhan's preference may have been for Eliot's poetry among the modernists, it is Pound and Joyce who made the greater impression on him and left their mark on his thought.⁷

This paper considers briefly McLuhan's method of composition, which he called "mosaic," arguing that it is rooted in his understanding of Pound's poetics of the ideogram. For instance, in a letter to Pound dated June 16, 1948, McLuhan describes *The Cantos* as "the first and only serious use of the great technical possibilities of the cinematograph" since they allow for "perceptions of simultaneities."⁸ Speaking of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962),⁹ McLuhan explains – borrowing heavily from Pound – that the book "develops a mosaic or field approach to its prob-

⁵ Melissa Dinsman suggests that, "Pound's desire to broadcast poetry to a mass audience, specifically during World War II, also challenges post-humanist and militaristic readings of mediation ... Pound's choice to lend his voice to radio broadcasting during World War II, a decision also made by [several of his] fellow modernists ..., invites a re-evaluation of McLuhan's ("the medium is the message") and [Friedrich] Kittler's ("media determine our situation") tactics of media determinism, in which human agency has little to no role." Dinsman, Melissa. *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics During World War II*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015: 2.

⁶ Our italics. See: *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Eugene McNamara. New York: Graw-Hill, 1971: xiii–xiv.

⁷ As Tony Tremblay explains, indeed, McLuhan's lifelong interest in Pound was rivalled only by similar interests in Lewis and Joyce (many, in fact, would argue that Joyce is McLuhan's most important influence – certainly Joyce was McLuhan's most studied subject in the last third of his career). See: Tremblay, Tony. *Ezra Pound and Marshall McLuhan: A Meditation on the Nature of Influence*. Ph.D. Dissertation. The University of New Brunswick, 1995.

Elsewhere in his dissertation, Tremblay talks about the fact that, "[Joyce's] work would lead McLuhan into an investigation of the historical territory James Joyce drew heavily upon in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* – the medieval *trivium* of Rhetoric, Dialectics, and Grammatica." [Tremblay, Tony. *Ezra Pound and Marshall McLuhan...*: 38.]

⁸ McLuhan, Marshall. *Letters*: 193.

⁹ McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

lems. Such a mosaic image of numerous data and quotations in evidence offers the only practical means of revealing the causal operations in history."¹⁰

Pound would have agreed with this reading of *The Cantos*, which led to McLuhan's development of his "mosaic," which, in turn, incorporates Pound's concepts of Imagism and Vorticism, its successor. According to Pound, an "'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"¹¹; elsewhere, with an emphasis on movement, Pound writes that "The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing." Vorticism, finally, is described as "the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art."¹²

Whether addressed as "luminous detail," Imagism, Vorticism, cultural overlaying, ideogram or ideogrammic method, subject rhythm, parataxis or epigrammatic technique, Pound's poetics sought to present a synesthetic and polyphonic text/medium, which reflects the artist's quest – that is, Pound is the artist who "seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. . . . [without] comment."¹³ The ideogrammic method (developed by Pound during his early London years) represents perhaps the culmination of the *periplum* as defined in several places (including in *The Cantos*¹⁴) as the method of "presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register."¹⁵

With an eye to the method of *The Cantos* but also to his own Pound-inspired medium theory, McLuhan discusses "In a Station of the Metro," Pound's early paradigmatic exemplar of modernist poetry, as a paratactically

¹⁰ McLuhan, Marshall. *Letters*: 45.

¹¹ Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays*, ed., introd. T.S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968: 4.

¹² Pound, Ezra. "Vorticism." *The Fortnightly Review* 96 (September 1914): 461–471. Online at <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism/>.

¹³ Pound, Ezra. *Selected Prose, 1909–1965*. New York: New Directions, 1973: 23.

¹⁴ Periplum, not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing (Canto 54). See: Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1996: 324.

¹⁵ Pound, Ezra. *Guide to Kulchur*. New York: New Directions, 1970: 51.

orchestrated “probe” whose meaning is not located in its content but rather its medium or form:

“The apparition of these faces in a crowd/petals on a wet, black bough.” The first line presents the situation; the second presents the effect on the sensibilities. The discovery that you could present effects directly and that one could bypass the cause of the effect, led to many developments in the arts in the past century. In a sense, it is embodied in my phrase “the medium is the message” in the way I present the effect of the medium on the sensibilities in a way that bypasses causes, at least those causes most people locate in the content.¹⁶

Obviously, the ideogram – in keeping with Pound’s aesthetic/ethical principle to “use no words that do not contribute to the presentation”¹⁷ – represents for him “the economical rendering of complex actualities.” And this emphasis on exactness, precision, economical parataxis and simultaneous presentation leads directly to McLuhan’s subsequent development of his “mosaic” concept and methodology.

Perhaps the clearest accounts of what the “mosaic” is and how it functions are offered by McLuhan, first, as a response to the first question in the famous 1969 *Playboy Magazine* and, second in another interview, “The Hot and Cool Interview.” Asked in the first of these about what he has been doing in his work on communications, McLuhan responds with this:

Sometimes I wonder. I’m making explorations. I don’t know where they’re going to take me. My work is designed for the pragmatic purpose of trying to understand our technological environment and its psychic and social consequences. But my books constitute the process rather than the completed product of discovery; my purpose is to employ facts as tentative probes, as means of insight, of pattern recognition, rather than to use them in the traditional and sterile sense of classified data, categories, containers. I want to map new terrain rather than chart old landmarks.

But I’ve never presented such explorations as revealed truth. As an investigator, I have no fixed point of view, no commitment to any theory – my own or anyone else’s. As a matter of fact, I’m completely ready to junk

¹⁶ Letter to Peter Bruckner. 5 January 1971. H. Marshall McLuhan Collection. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, n.pag.

¹⁷ Pound, Ezra. “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”: 4.

any statement I've ever made about any subject if events don't bear me out, or if I discover it isn't contributing to an understanding of the problem.¹⁸

While in his *Playboy* interview McLuhan is interested in the "mosaic" as process through which technology makes possible the collection of heterogeneous materials and initiates a process of charting as pattern recognition, in his *Media Research* interview, McLuhan focuses on the mosaic as a methodology and technique whose efficacy is the empowering of the reader to discover in the gaps between materials a kind of generative energy and even insight:

The mosaic is a world of intervals in which maximal energy is transferred across the gaps. This is the "massage" effect. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is a world in which energy is generated in the intervals, not by the connections. And the massage – the shaping, the twisting, the bending of the whole human environment by the technology – the reconditioning of the entire human environment by this technology – is a violent process, like all new technologies often revolting, as well as revolutionary. That is why Joyce calls them "thunders."¹⁹

Instead of linearity, continuous argumentation, and coherence of visual culture and its phonetic literacy, McLuhan discovers by following Pound's example and his methodology of the pictorial writing of the Chinese ideogram an affinity for electric technology, especially given the similarities between ideogrammic and electric simultaneity, a method McLuhan says is one "involving all the senses at once" and which he relates to the acoustic electric environment of post-Gutenberg technologies.²⁰ One way in which McLuhan puts this is by saying the following: "In an electronic world where all-at-onceness is inevitable and normal, we have rediscovered an affinity for the discontinuity of Oriental art and expression."²¹

¹⁸ "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan." *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969). Online at <https://www.nextnature.net/2009/12/the-playboy-interview-marshall-mcluhan/>, n.p.

¹⁹ McLuhan, Marshall. "The Hot and Cool Interview." McLuhan, Marshall. *Media Research: Technology, Art, Communication*, ed. Michel A. Moos. Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1997: 73.

²⁰ McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: 34.

²¹ McLuhan, Marshall, Parker, Harley. *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1968: 221.

Electric simultaneity being one of the lessons McLuhan learned from the modernists, another one is that of exploration, discovery and invention through the *periplus*, the empirical sailing or questing after knowledge. Indeed, the mosaic is a Poundian *periplus* that effects an interpretative junction “by opening up the perceptual field to the indeterminacies of fragment and chaos, recreating, in the process, a multi-sensory field within which reader and author, similarly oriented, encounter the same stimuli toward the desired end.”²²

Here is a long but illuminating quotation from Gail McDonald’s book on Pound and Eliot and the American University that considers the process or method of the *periplus*, the Odyssean “sail[ing] after knowledge,”²³ which, obviously, McLuhan picked up and used in the development of his own methodology of the mosaic:

[Pound’s methodology] permits the role of quester after knowledge to be passed around, or held simultaneously, by characters in the poem, by the poet writing the poem, and by the reader trying to comprehend the poem ... The confusing absence of predictable markers ... unsettles narrative assumptions; the “rag-bag” assortment of materials (letters, quotations, musings, and translations) dismantles poetic decorum. We lose both the spectatorial position and the comforts of convention. With preconceptions destabilized, we must devise a substitute for the Aquinas map as we go along; Pound’s aim is [consequently] to present education as an experience

²² McDonald, Gail. *Learning to be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993: 145.

²³ The phrase occurs in Canto 47:

So full of knowing that the beefy men know less that he,
Ere thou come to thy road’s end
Knowledge the shade of a shade,
Yet must thou sail after knowledge
Knowing less than drugged beasts phtheggometha
thasson

φθεγγόμεθα θασσον.

For a definition of *periplum* or *periplus* see the following:

Periplum is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as being “[o]riginally and chiefly in the poetry of Ezra Pound,” and as being equivalent in meaning to the English word “*periplus*.” The word is derived from the Greek *περι* (a prefix meaning around or about) + *πλοῦς* (voyage). As a noun, Pound uses “*periplum*” simply to refer to a voyage or journey, as in Canto 74, line 3: “The great *periplum* brings in the stars to our shore.” Here the “great *periplum*” refers to the daily journey made by Helios, the Sun God. “*Periplum*” is also used in *The Cantos* adverbially, as we see in this example from Canto 59: “*Periplum*, not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing.”

of navigation by periplus ... We and Pound are not, as it were, outside the poem observing its shape in overview, but inside it, mapping its shape as we encounter it.²⁴

Pound's rejection of the Newtonian Aquinas-map²⁵ in favour of the periplus leads straight to McLuhan's mosaic,²⁶ a process and pattern through which the artist/reader can quest after the knowledge of "live thought."²⁷ In Tony Tremblay's words,

In "coasting" by periplum, ... Pound was configuring theoretically what McLuhan would practice methodologically: the belief that content can only be manifest as *exempla* by its formal "outering"²⁸ or "extension of consciousness" [...], by a methodology concomitant with its intent – in other words, by a methodology that treats language/literature/sententiae/aphorism/cliché as "probe."²⁹

McLuhan's most famous aphorism, "the medium is the message," is another way of describing the "mosaic." Leon Surette (who studied with McLuhan – and Northrop Frye – at the University of Toronto in the early 1960s) explains this approach as follows:

McLuhan's principal exemplars of the new culture were the works of James Joyce and Ezra Pound, in which linearity, sequentiality, and external point of view were suppressed, and the intellectual and moral principles

²⁴ McDonald, Gail. *Learning to Be Modern*: 145.

²⁵ What Pound calls the "Aquinas-map" of the exegete. See: Pound, Ezra. *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound. 1907–1941*, ed. D.D. Paige. New York: New Directions, 1971: 323.

²⁶ That is, McLuhan's "rag-and-bone shop."

²⁷ Pound, Ezra. *Guide to Kulchur*: 56.

²⁸ Here is how Tremblay defines McLuhan's "outering":

"[Pound and McLuhan's] shared belief in the primacy of form over content (of students over system, method over dogma) led Pound and McLuhan to posit that all expression – critical, artistic, pedagogic, and political – was likewise a formal 'outering' [...], as McLuhan called it in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. The more formal the outering (i.e., the more inventive and distinct, forcing the observer 'out of the Narcissus-narcosis' ... and into contemplation), the more meaningful the expression. Through its 'forma,' Pound wrote, 'the concept rises from death'." Tremblay, Tony. *Ezra Pound and Marshall McLuhan*: 176.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 151.

of the counterculture, according to which participation, simultaneity, and sphericity were practiced in a perception of the world as a “global village.”³⁰

It is the effect of the medium (the form, the structure, the pattern) rather than the message (the content, the meaning) that McLuhan takes away from his study of, and correspondence with, Pound.³¹ At the same time, McLuhan’s development of his “mosaic” theory is premised on his view of civilization as the story of language and communication media, which can be presented here briefly by looking at a single “probe” appearing in *Gutenberg Galaxy*:

Civilization gives the barbarian or tribal man
an eye for an ear and is now at odds with the
electronic world³².

Participating in the reading of this probe, one discovers an open-ended version a story McLuhan has written about and addressed on several occasions and one he would have known through his humanistic education; this story also serves as a metaphor that involves three different terms and their interrelationships within their individual environments as well as three different physical or sensory states: McLuhan argues here that (i) preliterate man enjoyed a “natural” balance of the senses – of hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting – and “lived in a world where all the sense were ... simultaneous, a closed world of tribal depth and resonance, an oral culture

³⁰ Surette, Leon. “McLuhan, Marshall.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, eds. M. Groden, M. Kreiswirth. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995: 482.

³¹ One of the lines of argument that we are unable to pursue at any length here is the following: Pound’s ideogrammic method and McLuhan’s “mosaic” have been presented by the authors themselves but also certain scholars as open-ended, both in terms of form and meaning, aesthetically and semantically since, presumably, they encourage the construction of meaning by readers who are themselves enabled to arrive at their own conclusions regardless of the writer’s own ideology and/or agenda. It may be suggested, however, that the ideogrammic and mosaic methods are not at odds with narrative closure but, instead, invite it. Inadequately interrogated, the often-accepted opposition between Pound’s fascist political intentions and ideology and McLuhan’s conservatism, on the one hand, and the presumably radical methods of both men’s aesthetics, on the other hand, are in need of greater scrutiny. This paper is meant to begin the road toward revising our formulaic paradigms concerning the connections between modernist aesthetics, technological prophesy and sociopolitical *praxis*.

³² McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: 30.

structured by a dominant auditory sense of life"³³; (ii) the world of literate man brought about a change from sound to a visual world, from speech to reading, something the printing press caused to accelerate – this is the story of “Typographic man forgo[ing] the real-time embodiment of interpersonal interaction ascribed to oral cultures and [being] cut off from the holistic sensibilities of multisensory communication; (iii) restoring to an extent the original, “natural” balance, electronic media translates itself back into the oral and auditory modes of tribal age, fostering and encouraging unification and involvement, and promoting a *nostos*, a return to an earlier era, one inclined toward the tribal or “the global village.”

In lieu of a proper conclusion and given the parameters of such a brief paper as the current one, we close this discussion by offering a couple of examples of the ideogram/mosaic/probe, one from each writer. Pound's Canto I ends, famously, with a cryptic account of Odysseus' return to Circe's dwelling. Circe and Aphrodite being two different aspects of the same goddess, with the chthonic Circe turning into the celestial Aphrodite during the *hieros gamos*, the descent into Circe is but an exoteric manifestation of an esoteric ritual whose aim is the *epopteia* of Aphrodite, the Cyprian goddess worshiped in *The Cantos* the way she was once worshiped in sacred places in Cyprus:

And he sailed by Sirens and thence outward and away
And unto Circe

Venerandam,

In the Cretan's phrase, with the golden crown, Aphrodite,
Cypri munimenta sortita est, mirthful, orichalchi, with golden
Girdles and breast bands, thou with dark eyelids
Bearing the golden bough of Argicida.³⁴

³³ Here is McLuhan explaining his theory in a 1969 interview with *Playboy* magazine:

“Before the invention of the phonetic alphabet, man lived in a world where all the sense were balanced and simultaneous, a closed world of tribal depth and resonance, an oral culture structured by a dominant auditory sense of life.” See: McLuhan, Marshall. “The Playboy Interview.” McLuhan, Marshall. *Essential McLuhan*, eds. E. McLuhan, F. Zingrone. New York: Basic Books, 1995: 239.

³⁴ Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*: 5.

As everyone knows, *The Cantos* opens with a translation of a translation of the *Nekuia* passage (in Book XI) of *The Odyssey*. Pound's lines advance toward, and retreat from, the iambic pentameter he is rebelling against and the strong stress alliterative meter of Anglo-Saxon verse. His translation enacts a linguistic and prosodic return to the past (the literary tradition) by registering the various layers he offers to unearth in the rest of

This passage (like several others in *The Cantos* – for instance see Canto 39) offers an example of the poem's startlingly abrupt shifts, asyntactical phantasmagoria, syntactic fragmentation, idiosyncratic indentation, prosodic fracturing, and intensive use of quotation – it is a synesthetic, polyphonic and polyvocal climax that traces the poet's/speaker's *periplus* of exploration and echoes her *epiphanic* outburst at experiencing a vision of the goddess that also constitutes an unabashed display of modernist quoting praxis. More importantly, it is a clear statement of Pound's exuberant self-confidence in his project, whose process involves a knowledge attained at a rare moment of visionary ecstasy. It is also a paratactic mosaic that invites the return to the oral tradition at the same time that it employs the typographic practices of what is a primarily visual medium.

Our McLuhan example comes, predictably, from *The Medium is the Massage*, should suffice here. One could choose any one of the pages of this brief, bold, revolutionary declaration of McLuhan's "message." Here we have chosen pages 36 to 41, with special attention to 39 to 41.³⁵

the book

the poem: (i) Homer's retelling of the story of Odysseus (ii) in a Greek canonical text (iii) is translated by Andreas Divus into medieval Latin (iv) and re-translated by Pound into a modern English imitation of strong-stress alliterative verse. The traditional metrical contract expected in the opening lines of a poem is used here to signal that Pound's is both an excavation of past prosodic traditions as well as a determined effort to "make it new" through the use of Free Verse to graft avant-garde prosodic patterns onto traditional ones.

³⁵ McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001.

is an extension of the eye...

clothing, an extension of the skin...

electric circuitry,

an extension of
the
central
nervous
system

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world.

When
these
ratios
change,

men change.

"Now for the evidence," said the King, "and then the sentence."

"No!" said the Queen, "first the sentence, and then the evidence!"

"Nonsense!" cried Alice, so loudly that everybody jumped, "the idea of having the sentence first!"

The dominant organ of sensory and social orientation in pre-alphabet societies was the ear—"hearing was believing." The phonetic alphabet forced the magic world of the ear to yield to the neutral world of the eye. Man was given an eye for an ear.

Western history was shaped for some three thousand years by the introduction of the phonetic alphabet, a medium that depends solely on the eye for comprehension. The alphabet is a construct of fragmented bits and parts which have no semantic meaning in themselves, and which must be strung together in a line, bead-like, and in a prescribed order. Its use fostered and encouraged the habit of perceiving all environment in visual and spatial terms—particularly in terms of a space and of a time that are uniform,
c-o-n-t-i-n-u-o-u-s
and
c-o-n-n-e-c-t-i-e-d.

The line, the continuum
—this sentence is a prime example—

became the organizing principle of life. "As we begin, so shall we go." "Rationality" and logic came to depend on the presentation of connected and sequential facts or concepts.

For many people rationality has the connotation of uniformity and connectiveness. "I don't follow you" means "I don't think what you're saying is rational."

Visual space is uniform, continuous, and connected. The rational man in our Western culture is a visual man. The fact that most conscious experience has little "visuality" in it is lost on him. Rationality and visuality have long been interchangeable terms, but we do not live in a primarily visual world any more.

The fragmenting of activities, our habit of thinking in bits and parts—"specialism"—reflected the step-by-step linear departmentalizing process inherent in the technology of the alphabet.

"The eye—it cannot choose but see;
we cannot bid the ear be still;
our bodies feel, where'er they be,
against or with our will."
—Wordsworth

This mosaic with its probes and allusions and proleptic directives is a complex narrative that's made up of the picture of a nude woman, a white circle with six directional extensions, and four phrases/sentences arranged horizontally and vertically means that the way information is transmitted is more important than the information itself. Media alter our environments and thus the way we feel or behave or perceive the world and also the way we "understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media." But what does the conclusion "men change" might mean? Could it be that McLuhan is looking ahead to social media and the part they now play in cultural, civil, economic, educational projects and situations? Could McLuhan be pointing (there are six directional points here) to his proclamation that "Electrical information devices for universal, tyrannical womb-to-tomb surveillance are causing a very serious dilemma between our claim to privacy and the community's need to know."³⁶ Or could it be a reference to the fact that "One big gossip column that is unforgiving, unforgetful [unforgettable?] and

³⁶ Ibid.: 12.

from which there is no redemption.”³⁷ “Real, total war has become information war. It is being fought by subtle electric informational media – under cold conditions, and constantly.”³⁸ This is a narrative that probes and scrutinizes McLuhan’s entire output but also pays a proleptic visit to the future, with the Internet, the WWW, an interactive and interconnected global village, Google, Social Media and so on.

On pages 40–41 of *The Medium is the Massage* used earlier to describe how McLuhan’s mosaic works, “electric circuitry” is presented as “an extension of the central nervous system.” A thick arrow then points to the following:

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us
unique rations of sense perceptions. The extension
of any one sense alters the way we think and act—
the way we perceive the world.

When
these
rations
change,
men Change.

We suggest that this is performance in print of McLuhan’s understanding of perception but also change that’s caused by the “mosaic’s” facility to promote ideogrammic and electric simultaneity and connectedness, the very effects Pound is after in every one of his Cantos whereby no a variety of materials (ideas, texts, phrases, ideograms, lists and so on) is organized in assorted arrangements and patterns with no obvious connections in an effort to allow the reader to be present and active in those emotional and intellectual complexes when, in a single instant, an insight (even a metamorphosis) can take place.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.: 138.

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