«OUR ONLY HOPE IS APOCALYPSE»: MARSHALL MCLUHAN, CATHOLIC ANTIMODERNISM, AND 1960s EDUCATION REFORM

«Nuestra única esperanza es el apocalipsis»: Marshall McLuhan, antimodernismo católico y la reforma educativa de los años 1960

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ABSTRACT: The Canadian thinker Marshall McLuhan is widely recognized as one of the great theorists and commentators on modernity in the post-1945 period. Yet he himself was not a modernist in any simple sense of that word. He consistently engaged with modernity, but did so in order to undermine it in favour of a pre-modern conception of the world inspired by his intense relationship with Catholicism. McLuhan was, in fact, an arch antimodernist, which makes his pre-eminent role as an «expert» on modernity and education within the self-consciously progressive 1960s Ontario (Canada) Department of Education a deeply ironic one. This paper uses that paradoxical relationship to bring out the full complexity of McLuhan's interconnected ideas on modernity, antimodernity, Catholicism, and school reform, while shedding light on his unique status as a public intellectual during Canada's 1960s.

KEY WORDS: Modernity; Catholicism; education; media; 1960s; Canada.

RESUMEN: El pensador canadiense Marshall McLuhan es reconocido por ser uno de los grandes teóricos y analistas de la modernidad en el período posterior a

1945. Sin embargo, el pensamiento moderno de McLuhan tenía cierta complejidad. Constantemente comprometido con la modernidad, su defensa se orientaba a intentar debilitarla a favor de una concepción premoderna del mundo inspirada por su intensa relación con el catolicismo. McLuhan era, de hecho, un gran antimodernista. Un posicionamiento que resulta irónico si se observa el papel tan destacado que McLuhan desempeñó como «experto» en la modernidad y en la educación en el Departamento de Educación del gobierno progresista en la década de 1960 en Ontario (Canadá). Este trabajo parte de esa relación paradójica para abordar la complejidad de las ideas interconectadas de McLuhan a favor y en contra de la modernidad, el catolicismo y la reforma de la escuela, al tiempo que aporta claridad con respecto a su estatus único como intelectual público durante la década de los años sesenta en Canadá.

Palabras clave: modernidad; catolicismo; educación; medios de comunicación; años sesenta; Canadá.

> It was not a new terror that thus affected me, but the dawn of a more exiting *hope* … I no longer hesitated what to do. I resolved to lash myself securely to water-cask upon which I now held, to cut it loose from the counter and to throw myself with it into the water.

> Edgar Allan Poe, «A Descent into the Maelstrom».

> With instant information, there's no longer any time for history itself. In a sense it doesn't have to take place. It's short-circuited.

> Jean Baudrillard, *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit.*

In 1999, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz highlighted the disbelief of many scholars around the world when they announced that Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) had arrived, yet again. After reaching superstardom in the 1960s, McLuhan slid into obscurity in the 1970s and 1980s, only to rise from the dead in the 1990s with the advent of the «World Wide Web», which seemed to bear out his predictions of the imminent arrival of an electronically-generated «global village». Suddenly, he went from being a joke to a being a thinker on modernity «worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as Adorno, Foucault or Heidegger»[1]. McLuhan was indeed a profound thinker on modernity, though hardly a straightforward one. He loathed it and sought to undermine it at every turn. His real inspiration was the pre-modern Catholic Church – an influence which he thought the global village would resuscitate, sweeping hundreds of years of false progress away in its wake. He used his remarkable influence among educators – particularly those in the highest reaches of the Ontario Department of Education to further these antimodern goals. This

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[1]   Kittler, Friedrich A.: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (G. Winthrop-Young and M. Wutz, Trans.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. xiv.

paper traces this understudied connection between McLuhan, Catholic antimodernism, and education reform in 1960s Ontario, Canada.

What is modernity? It entails the transformed economic relations of corporate capitalism and their spatio-temporal consequences. It entails a future-oriented perspective towards time: a sharp impatience with mere tradition and merely parochial specifics if these impede acknowledging the global forces that tend to liquefy all such traditions. It entails an exhilarating humanism, in which people are the measure of all things; and an equally sharp resistance to age-old forms of hierarchy, especially if these stand in the way of progressive adaption to that liberal democracy which, alone among systems, allows individuals to adapt to the changes inherent in modernity. It means a respect for the social sciences as sources of knowledge about these daunting developments, and a concomitant emphasis on reflexivity – meaning, in this context, that one can no longer take for granted the «naturalness» and «obviousness» of the given world, which must, on the contrary, be subjected to scrutiny and analysis[2].

Antimodernism, on the other hand, is a complex set of reactions to the hegemony of such «progressive», modern values. Antimodernity entails a shift away from the «Promethean optimism» of modern, liberal culture[3]. It involves the search for alternatives to excessive individualism, the «cult of science and technical rationality, and the «worship of material progress». Antimoderns seek stability and control over a world of flux and through a return to more authentic social relations and forms of selfhood[4]. Seeing modern life as empty, they seek to fill it once again with «innocence, fierce conviction, physical and emotional vitality, playfulness [and] fantastic or dreamlike states of awareness»[5]. This often takes place through imagined encounters with «other worlds» such as the pre-modern past or an Orientalized «East». It has given rise to some of the more valuable and productive critiques of liberal modernity, including its often destructive drive towards «maximum personal achievement», the «systematic organization of economic life for maximum productivity», and «the reduction of the world to a disenchanted object to be manipulated by rational technique»[6]. It also has a darker side, as the Fascists and the Nazis of the 1930s were stout antimodernists.

After 1945, the world was ripe for modernist dreams. The Second World War saw Europe in tatters, a «blasted landscape of broken cities and barren fields … worn out, without resources, exhausted»[7]. As the historian Tony Judt argues, this

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[2]   See MCKAY, Ian: «Modernity: In Search of a Critical Definition», unpublished manuscript, 2010. See also BERMAN, Marshall: *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York & London, Penguin, 1988; and BAUMAN, Zygmunt: *Liquid Modernity*, Oxford, Polity, 2000.

[3]   LEARS, Jackson: *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 4.

[4]   *Ibidem,* pp. 12-13.

[5]   *Ibidem,* p. 142.

[6]   *Ibidem,* pp. 6-7.

[7]   JUDT, Tony: *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, New York, Penguin, 2005, p. 13.

was a cultural and political context in which many people were inclined to favour the «new» in all things. After all, what treasured traditions from the pre-1945 world did most people really want to conserve? Certainly not the cultural and material forces and tendencies that led to the horrors of that war. The modernist plea to 'make it new' took on considerable plausibility in such a postwar environment[8]. Education in particular became a primary –perhaps *the* primary– locus of postwar modern «progress».

After 1945, and particularly after 1960, education was seen the world over as a democratic right, a bulwark both Fascism and communism. It was an engine of economic growth, a means of citizenship training, and a force for egalitarian liberal enlightenment. The American historian Diane Ravitch describes U.S. education's «structure of feeling» –i.e., its (conscious and unconscious) way of construing reality– as one that entailed a deep association of education with «energy, youth and dynamism [with] university scholars, major philanthropic foundations, big-city schools systems, and almost everyone else in the field» zeroing in on it as a means to shape a more productive, just, and democratic polity. Ravitch's description of this American «structure of feeling» could be applied without much alteration to Ontario in the 1960s. By the end of that decade, Canada was spending more per capita on education than either the United States or the Soviet Union. This spending spree was led by Ontario, which had turned transformed itself into Canada's educational high-roller[9]. In Ontario, perhaps more than anywhere else in North America, liberal educational modernity became a highly influential –at times seemingly the predominant– current of thought in educational circles.

Leading the charge was William G. Davis, Ontario's Minister of Education from 1962-1970. The man who hired him, Premier John Robarts, inaugurated a period of Canadian educational modernity unmatched before or since. Robarts was first major Ontario politician to describe himself as a «Management Man». He was eager to expand and control the operations of an educational system that, by 1967, had about 1,800,000 children attending over 5,700 schools, presided over by about 75,000 teachers and administrators. For a man of Robarts's outlook, it was a challenge that could only be managed by a modernist technocrat, and he recognized such a man in Davis[10].

Education was the single most important portfolio in the Ontario government – indeed, generally seen as stepping-stone to the Premier's office. And Davis –ambitious, intelligent, managerial, and politically astute– could be trusted to manage its vast operations. As historian R. D. Gidney points out, Frost, Robarts,

[8]   *Ibidem*, p. 64.
[9]   STEPHENSON, H.: «Developing Public Education in Post-War Canada to 1960», in WILSON, D. J.; STAMP, R. M. and AUDET, L.-P. (eds.): *Canadian Education: A History*, Scarborough, Prentice-Hall, 1970, pp. 400-401.
[10]   McDOUGALL, Allan Kerr: *John P. Robarts: His Life and Government*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986, p. 142. GIDNEY, R. D.: *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario Schools*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 44.

and Davis were «young men in power», eager to pursue bold plans in the name «of the present rather than the past». Further, they surrounded themselves with a coterie of advisers and bureaucrats who were even more open to change, to the future, to «new ideas and opinions» than they were[11].

During the 1960s, Davis' Department of Education opened five universities, created a system of community colleges, and overhauled teacher-preparation in the province, harnessing the education of teachers to the universities. He centralized school governance in the province through the consolidation of some 3,500 local school boards into just 230. As Gidney points out, «In one fell swoop the traditional rural three-member board of trustees, one of the province's oldest public institutions, was gone forever»[12]. He introduced educational television into the province, and opened the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) – conceived as a research and development centre for educational modernization in Canada, and beyond. For all this he was roundly applauded. Stephen Lewis of the Ontario New Democratic Party exclaimed in 1967 that «Not since Henry VIII or Louis XIV, has one man accumulated such a retinue of courtiers, admirers, fawning journalists and a positive harem of sycophants»[13].

Davis rose smoothly from law school, to the modernist Department of Education to the Premiership of Ontario in 1970. His antimodern counterpart Marshall McLuhan's trajectory could not have been more different. He was born in Alberta, and thus far from Ontario, Canada's traditional centre of power. He considered his upbringing on the margins of North American politics and commerce to be an advantage – a cultural position that allowed him to see beyond the hegemony of liberal modernity[14]. After taking Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English Literature from the University of Manitoba, he disembarked for Cambridge to take another Bachelors and then a Doctorate. McLuhan chose England because it seemed to be an imagined community far different than that found in Canada. During his first visit as an undergraduate, he was stuck by his its antimodern possibilities. It stood in stark contrast to the «mechanical» and «commercial» societies found in North America. Instead, it was a vibrant echo «of something cultivated and literary that had once set the tone for civilization»[15].

On this initial trip, he discovered one of his most important intellectual influences: the English Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton. McLuhan responded enthusiastically to the antimodernist strain in Chesterton's work, concentrated as it was upon «personal liberty, the sanctities of the family, [and] the traditions of Christian Europe that were opposed to both socialism and rampant capitalism»[16].

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[11] *Ibidem*, pp. 43-44.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 47.
[13] Quoted in STAMP, Robert: *The Schools of Ontario, 1976-1976*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982, p. 211.
[14] MARCHAND, Philip: *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*, Toronto, Random House, 1989, p. 5.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 23.
[16] *Ibidem*, pp. 23-24.

McLuhan's first academic article –published in *The Dalhousie Review* in 1936– examined Chesterton, whose thought he described as «rigid with thought and brilliant with colour … the very antithesis of the pale-pink lullaby-land of popular science»[17]. In McLuhan's estimation, Chesterton had taken an important stand against a «modern life» which was «thoughtless and unpoised», swiftly degenerating «from a dance into a race, [where] history is regarded as a toboggan slide». For Chesterton and increasingly McLuhan, the doctrine of modern «progress» was little more than a «Christless cynicism» hollowing out the heart of western culture[18].

McLuhan's doctoral dissertation on the Elizabethan pamphleteer Thomas Nashe was awarded in 1943. It furthered both his Catholicism –ignited by his encounter with Chesterton– and his antimodernism, articulating education with both. In order to understand the complexities of Nashe's very public arguments with interlocutors such as Gabriel Harvey, McLuhan delved into a lengthy historical examination of the «Trivium» – the basis of western «liberal arts» education. Writing «one of the most learned theses that Cambridge had ever seen» immersed McLuhan in Catholic doctrine over a vast swath of time, but the encounter was more than intellectual. It cleared the ground for his conversion, which took place in 1937. After this, he became a serious Catholic indeed, reading the bible in Latin every day, and attending mass nearly as often. He became devoted to Mary, the mother of God, whom he came to see as guiding his work[19]. He also became intensely intolerant of Protestants. As he developed his theories on the «nature of human understanding and the entire process of learning and tradition of interpretation right across the whole of the arts and sciences», the Protestant served as a kind of boogeyman or scapegoat for McLuhan, as we shall see[20].

His antimodernism found its first major expression in 1951's *The Mechanical Bride: The Folklore of Industrial Man*. By the time he arrived at St. Michael's, University of Toronto's Catholic College, he had been teaching English via popular culture for years. Though he appreciated the craft behind that culture, he loathed its effect on people. Drawing on a trope familiar from other critical writers on culture in the postwar period (from C. Wright Mills to Paul Goodman), he argued «ads and entertainment» lulled modern people into a state of total passivity in the face of a bureaucratic «machine» bent on robbing them of authentic identity. Modernity was an «abstract tyrant that carries its ravages into deeper recesses of the psyche than did the sabretooth tiger or the grizzly bear» in times past[21]. The *Bride* was a commercial failure, but it marked an important turning point for McLuhan. After composing it, he decided that the «mechanical civilization» –characterized by the overt «ravages of capitalism, industrialism, dialectical

[17]   McLuhan, M.: «G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic», in McLuhan, E. and Szklarek, J. (eds.): *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*. Toronto, Stoddard, 1999, pp. 5-6.

[18]   *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[19]   Marchand: *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

[20]   McLuhan, E.: «Introduction», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. xi.

[21]   McLuhan, M.: *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, Madera, Ginko, 2001, p. 33.

thinking, and mechanistic automatism»– was over. Therefore, there was no more need to «moralize» about it. Rather, it just needed to be understood[22].

It was his introduction to the late works of the Canadian political economist Harold Innis that cleared the ground for this breakthrough. Innis' early reputation was based upon his analysis of the historical development of the Canadian economy. He argued that in order to understand that development, one had to see it as the history of human interaction with raw materials and the tools devised to deal with them. It was his later work that intrigued McLuhan, however. Innis turned his attention in the 1940s toward an idiosyncratic *longue durée* history of media and communications. He developed an approach which traced the shifting articulation of media, politics, and the formation of empires. What was crucial for Innis was how media shifted the ground underlying ideas and social organization. He designated the two key categories of media-regimes as «time-based» and «space-based». Time-based regimes relied upon oral communication, and were inclined towards conservatism. Space-based regimes relied upon light, transportable communications (such as papyrus or paper), which leant themselves to knowledge/power relations at a distance[23]. Initially ignored or ridiculed, these studies were enthusiastically received by McLuhan, who quickly turned them towards antimodern ends (Innis himself being a liberal modernist) in his twin-masterpieces, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).

In these works, McLuhan merged his work on the Trivium with his newfound interest in Innis' take on media and historical change. He took Innis' interest in the «macro» level of media effects (politics and colonialism), and added a «micro» level to it, by exploring how media affects individual subjectivities. He also took up Innis' differentiation between the media effects of the aural and the visual – or the ear and the eye. The first was always superior for McLuhan, so much so that he built an entire history of western consciousness upon it. In the post-Innis work of McLuhan, modernity was not the result of any particular change of ideas, politics, or economics. Rather, it was the result of the introduction of Gutenberg's technology of movable type – a medium that shifted the pre-modern word of the ear, to the modern world of the eye. The difference was all-important. The world of the ear lacked «perspective» and a «point of view: it was all-at-once, mosaic»[24]. It was a timeless world of sensory immersion, deep feeling, and faith. The print-culture of the eye overturned all of this. McLuhan argues that following this, for the first time, the world could be seen statically and thus «objectively». It could be broken down into constituent elements, examined, and then reconstructed in endless, novel combinations – just like the type on Gutenberg's printing press. Only after this modern «break» could liberal

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[22] MARCHAND: *op. cit.*, p. 110.

[23] On Innis, see especially WATSON, Alexander: *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007.

[24] MCLUHAN, M.: «Communication Media: Makers of the Modern World», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 40.

ideology, capitalism, and nationalism come into being. Individualism comes to the fore, and Protestantism as a religion of individualism, developed and flourished[25]. In short, the introduction of print *created* modernity.

Yet this was not all. Going beyond Innis, McLuhan posited a third move: from the eye to the total sensorium, or the nervous system. This was a return to the oral, but magnified to a global scale. With the introduction of electronic media –represented above all through television– modernity ended, and was supplanted by a new form of late-twentieth century antimodernism. As he wrote in *Understanding Media*:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media[26].

This antimodern world was McLuhan's «global village» –an «acoustic or simultaneous space» akin to a «sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose margins are nowhere»– a spiritual space in which reason and individuality dissolved in the wake of a «miracle» through which «society is to be illuminated, once again, with meaning»[27]. It was an approximation of an ancient ritual or mass, expanded to all corners of the globe. It would beat back what McLuhan saw as the «real heresy» of the twentieth century: Gnosticism – the «denial of the reality, reasonableness, and goodness of God's creation»[28].

That reality would be omnipresent in this «electric world», which would be «instantaneous and simultaneous» – «a vast global resonant unity [bypassing] all forms of specialization, all fragmentation, all logic»[29]. A rejuvenated Catholicism –and not a little fire and brimstone– would take the place of Protestant/print-values, which for McLuhan had also infected the Church (particularly after Vatican II, which he saw as an unforgivable capitulation to modernity). This new world of «spiritual substance» would be at one with «the instant of Incarnation [when] the structure of the universe was changed»[30]. All the false sophistication

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[25] McLuhan, M.: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York & Toronto, McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 124.

[26] *Ibidem,* p. 4.

[27] Marshall McLuhan quoted in Benedetti, P. and Dehart, N. (eds.): *On McLuhan: Forward through the Rearview Mirror*, Cambridge, ma, mit Press, 1996, 1996, p. 46. Kroker, Arthur: *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant*, Montreal, New World, 1984, p. 65.

[28] Marchand: *op. cit.*, p. 24.

[29] McLuhan, M.: «Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 50.

[30] *Ibidem,* p. 55.

that McLuhan associated with modernity would melt away as people came to resemble the «primitive African» or the child, both of whom found modernity «meaningless»[31]. For them, «written communiques and doctrinal promulgation [became] an embarrassing impediment [as] the magisterium [was] now experienced simultaneously experienced»[32] by all people in all places. History as a «progression» comes to a close, alongside liberal individualism, as «Everybody is now simultaneously in the same place and involved in everybody»[33]. As he put it in 1977: «The present Church demands an extreme unworldliness. But that's easy now. It is easy to be unworldly… everything we've been accustomed to is obsolete now»[34].

McLuhan also applied this anti-institutional critique to the modern school – where, unlike in Catholic circles, he had enormous influence. Yet his Catholically-inspired critique underlay both. For McLuhan, modern education was born from the same print culture that eclipsed pre-modern Catholicism and produced Protestantism. Protestants like Martin Luther were derided as mere «schoolmen» in his work, and his enemies in the contemporary academic word were considered Protestants at least, and often dismissed by him as sinister «Masons»[35]. Mass education was of a piece with «nationalism, industrialism, and mass markets», «breaking the individual out of the traditional group while providing a model of how to add individual to individual in massive agglomerations of power»[36]. The resulting «product» was the modern individual – rational, self-sufficient, and alienated in ways she did not fully understand. The modern school's emphasis on visual modernity simultaneously «taught» students to ignore other educational possibilities. Such an education –based upon books and rote learning– led to children and young people who were masters of «logical, sequential, and visual control», but blind to other aspects of human experience[37]. In a modern era, this made perfect sense. As McLuhan put it in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*: «For a nationalist society keen on exploiting its entire manpower for the common tasks of commerce and finance, of production and marketing, it needed very little vision to see that education of this kind should be compulsory»[38].

Yet, for McLuhan, this «Newtonian» idea of education as «human capital» was «crumbling» by the 1960s[39]. In true antimodernist fashion, he pointed toward the wisdom of the child to make his point. As he argued, postwar children and young people instinctively understood the revolution upending their lives – the «irrelevance of the visual order» in the age of television. As he put it in 1959:

[31]   *Ibidem*, pp. 40-41.
[32]   *Ibidem*, p. 50.
[33]   *Ibidem*, p. 134.
[34]   *Ibidem*, p. 65.
[35]   *Ibidem*, p. 47.
[36]   MCLUHAN: *Understanding Media*, 1964, p. 172.
[37]   MCLUHAN, M.: «Keys to the Electronic Revolution», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 52.
[38]   MCLUHAN, Marshall: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962, p. 146.
[39]   MCLUHAN, M.: «Keys to the Electronic Revolution», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 53.

«The ordinary kid in the classroom today has this enormous built-in bias. In the world he lives in, *auditory order* is the only kind he has ever experienced». His world was that of the global village – an «all-at-once sort of "being with it"»[40]. Presenting this post-print child with a book, or a rote-based pedagogy was doomed to failure from the outset: «When he is presented with *visual order*, in which a subject is given to him in visual terms, one thing following another, he finds it absolutely meaningless»[41]. Teachers, raised as they were on print-modernity were baffled by these developments. They saw a «frightful conflict» between these two media worlds. They may have absorbed the work of educational radicals like John Dewey, but McLuhan was quick to insist that progressivism of that sort had been bypassed by technological developments. Dewey was only dimly aware of the electronic revolution. While he worked to «restore education to its primitive, pre-print phase», in order to «get the student out of the passive role of uniformly packaged learning», his own modern bias prevented him from grasping it fully[42]. In reality, as he asserted, the teacher and the school –*just like the Priest and the Catholic Church*– had been superseded. In both, the young would lead the way, because they felt the new electronic environment in their bones. They no longer sought «goals» (rational ends generated by modernity), but rather «roles» (exploration of an immersive, antimodern experience) driven by the postwar «acoustic, non-visual world» of electronic media[43].

McLuhan's radical antimodernism hit a chord with the zeitgeist of the 1960s, inclined as it was toward a volatile mix of liberatory modernism and antimodernism mysticism – Civil Rights and feminism on the one hand; Yippies, drugs, and ill-understood eastern borrowings on the other. McLuhan's cultural «probes» were received in many circles with great seriousness, most of all (ironically) among forward-thinking educators. *This Magazine is About Schools* –which represented the storm-centre of Canada's 1960s educational avant-garde– had McLuhan's «Electronics & the Psychic Drop-Out» in their first issue in 1965. Here, McLuhan made his position clear. Firstly, as he argued: «Mere literacy won't do anymore». That is, the levels of information in «our typical environments» are so high that literacy is outmoded. Much better to concentrate on «pictorial and electronic forms of knowledge», rather than waste time on print-based modernist pedagogy[44]. Secondly, in the world of the global village, «Small children can now do top level research». What used to be done in the highly-literate enclaves of the university could now be done though the independent explorations of average children. As for basic skills, they no longer needed to be taught. Instead they would be absorbed directly by the child, without the help of a teacher or «expert» of any kind[45]. Finally, due to the antimodern counter-hegemony of this

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[40]   McLuhan, M.: «Communication Media», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 40
[41]   *Ibidem*.
[42]   McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962, p. 44.
[43]   McLuhan, M.: «Our Only Hope is Apocalypse», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 61.
[44]   McLuhan, Marshall: «Electronics & the Psychic Drop-Out», in *This Book is About Schools* (Repo, S. Ed.), New York and Toronto, Random House, 1970, p. 387.
[45]   *Ibidem*, p. 385.

«backward country of the mind», «the psychic drop-out is probably 100%». Be-
cause the print-culture environment of the school constituted an alien world to
the youth of the 1960s –a «fragmented, specialist environment of subjects and
hours and instructions»– they would reject it completely[46]. One would, McLu-
han argued, be a fool not to drop-out under such conditions.

Amazingly, considering his incredibly unorthodox views on education, the
Catholic antimodernist McLuhan became the darling of Davis' modernist (and
deeply Protestant) Ontario education regime. After the media theorist became
an academic star in the early-1960s, Claude Bissell, the President of the Uni-
versity of Toronto created a research centre in 1963 (The Centre for Culture
and Technology) to keep him in Canada, for McLuhan was receiving offers of
employment with «two, three, five times as much money as he was getting» at
U of T by this time[47]. The Davis regime and Davis himself also wished to be
closely associated with the great man and his work. In one important 1965 report
by the Ontario Curriculum Institute called *Technology in Learning*, McLuhan
was praised in the following way: «To talk of media of communication theories
without talking about McLuhan, would be incomplete»[48]. Antimodern views
like the following were extensively quoted in the report: «We have on our hands
the largest obsolete school system in the world … I don't think this is a very
amusing situation. Really it is a terrible waste, not only of money and time, but it
is so confusing and frustrating to children and teacher and parents alike»[49]. This
was not a call for improvement, or a plea to contain technological change. It was
a call to raze the Ontario school and the print-culture behind it to the ground.
Nevertheless, Davis the modernist and McLuhan the antimodernist were por-
trayed as two sides of the same coin. As if to drive the point home, *Technology*
contained two vinyl recordings: one by Davis entitled «Role of Technology in
Schools», and one by McLuhan, entitled «Media of Communication». The for-
mer was orthodox and timid (addressing questions such as «How should the
schools be responding to the new technology?»); the latter full of McLuhan's
calls to scrap education completely.

Yet, Davis and his people wanted McLuhan still closer to the action. By the
mid-1960s, Davis came to feel that his educational empire lacked something
fundamental: a comprehensive statement regarding the aims of kindergarten,
primary, and secondary education. He wanted to bring early-childhood educa-
tion in Ontario 'up to speed' with the social, cultural, and economic changes
sweeping the postwar world. The Provincial Committee on Aims and Objec-
tives of Education in the Schools of Ontario was created to make a «careful
study of the means whereby modern education can meet the present and future
needs of children and society», and they considered McLuhan central to this

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 387.
[47] MARCHAND: *op. cit.*, p. 158.
[48] ONTARIO CURRICULUM INSTITUTE: *Technology in Learning: An Interim Report of the Study
Committee on Instructional Aids & Techniques*, Toronto, Queen's Printer, 1965, p. 33.
[49] *Ibidem*, p. 32.

mission. A letter sent by Dennis to McLuhan on 5 October 1966 reveals that the committee was willing to adjust its own agenda if it conflicted with his research and teaching schedule. Furthermore –and more extraordinarily– the committee was ready to allow McLuhan to name his price for speaking to them[50].

Once before the committee, McLuhan, ever the antimodern iconoclast, urged it to go beyond ungrading to «de-schooling». McLuhan began his address –«Education in the Electronic Age»– by imploring the committee to come to grips with the vastly changed electronic environment that children and young people in Ontario (and Canada, North America, and the world as a whole) were living through in 1967. As he argued to a baffled, middle-aged, deeply liberal modernist committee, to assume that postwar children raised on the «cool» medium of television would share the same relation to learning experienced by a previous generation would be to commit an egregious error. The world they encountered through electronic media was not «continuous and connected». Rather, they experienced the world as immediate and simultaneous. This made them «inner-directed» and tied to people and events from all over the televisual global village. McLuhan used a contemporary example to impress this change upon the committee: «it is as simple as this: TV has invented the inner trip, L.S.D. style, for the ordinary child. The T.V. watcher goes on an inner trip… [television] goes inside you. You are the screen; you go inside yourself, in depth»[51].

The conclusion, however unwelcome, that educators had to draw from McLuhan's analysis was that the new electronic environment –and not the traditional school– was the new locus of learning. As he asserted: «what is going on in the school is puny and under-nourished compared to what goes on the moment the child steps outside». He offered an example of what he meant by this iconoclastic claim: «In Watts there was a report of kids saying quite freely, "We are drop-outs because we do not want to go to school and disrupt our education"»[52].

In a world in which the medium was the message, students forced to go to schools formed on the basis of print-media were apt to become alienated. He asserted (repeating what he wrote in *This Magazine is About Schools*) that postwar children were no longer modern «hunters». Instead, they were «planters». The antimodern child «has his own little strip culture, his own little pattern, his own little specialty, his own little skill». Further, it was they who instinctively understood the changes going on around them in a way that their parents, grandparents, and teachers did not. «Dropping-out» was rampant in the later 1960s because young people with «no goals» understood «the world they are living in».

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[50]   Lloyd Dennis, Letter to Marshall McLuhan, 5 October 1966, in File: «McLuhan, M», in Archives of Ontario, RG 2-168, Box no. 15, p. 2. Lloyd Dennis, Letter to Marshall McLuhan, 27 October 1966, in File: «McLuhan, M», in Archives of Ontario, RG 2-168, Box no. 15, p. 1.

[51]   MCLUHAN, Marshall: «Education in the Electric Age», in THE PROVINCIAL COMMITTEE ON AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS OF ONTARIO: *Documents Relating to Studies of The Provincial Committee on Aims ad Objective of Education in the Schools of Ontario*, Toronto, Department of Education, 1968, p. 1.

[52]   *Ibidem*, p. 2.

It was a radically fluid world: «you can't have goals in an electronic total-field world. You cannot have fixed objectives». Rather than trying to punish these students, the schools should follow their example[53].

Though the committee was somewhat baffled by what they heard, they gave in. The resulting 1968 report –*Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*– was remarkably McLuhanesque. It was made up of thoughts grafted together in a way that resembled one of William Burroughs contemporary «cut-up» literary interventions (Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* was used by McLuhan as an example during his presentation to the committee). It was as filled with graphics and visual information as it was by text – approximating a «multi-media» approach, half-way between a book and television, print and visual culture. And it took McLuhanesque rhetoric fully on board. It contained many statements such as the following: «Johnny has been personally present at many great historical events. He has seen the launching of astronauts, the funeral ceremonies of Kennedy and Churchill, battles in Vietnam, peace marches, and race riots. After all, through television and the press of a button, he can see the world from his own living room. He need not wait to learn about it from his parents and teachers. In this age of mass media, the mountain comes to Mohammed»[54].

Through this deeply influential report (both inside and outside of Canada), the antimodernist McLuhan had, in in important overtaken the Davis regime and the mighty Ontario school system – perhaps a pinnacle of postwar western educational modernity. At the very least, he cast a spell on the Department. But what exactly was gained by this victory?

His Catholic global village has not yet come to pass, though the modern mass education system he loathed has been undermined. As Davis was building his educational regime in Canada, what would come to called «neoliberalism» was just coming into being. In 1960s California, right-wing, grassroots intellectuals deeply alienated from mainstream modern society focussed their efforts on changing modern, liberal society from the ground up. Their particularly fierce version of antimodernism sought a «revolving back … to the foundations of society» before postwar modernity became hegemonic. Erasing mass education was central to their political project. Through instruments like «vouchers» and later «charters» they sought to bypass the school system that they felt was indoctrinating their children into a false system of modern values. Under this new way of thinking about education, «unsatisfied educational consumers» would be given public means to tailor their children's education to suit their personal preferences (which were at first religious or racial, and later economic – enforcing a regime of standardized testing and excessive discipline aligned with neoliberal ideals). In

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[53]   *Ibidem*, p. 4.
[54]   THE PROVINCIAL COMMITTEE ON AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS OF ONTARIO: *Living and Learning: Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*, Toronto, Ontario Department of Education, 1968, p. 39.

recent years, governments in the United States and England have taken up this
cause, coercively undermining the legacy of public education by closing down
public schools, and replacing them publically-funded, privately managed institu-
tions. More recently, the advent of Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs) –
electronic university courses, divorced from any «brick-and-mortar» institution,
threatens public education on an even more basic level. According to advocates
of MOOCs, no more money need be raised for, and spent on, public universi-
ties. Any child or young person could have access to pre-programmed lessons,
delivered by (purportedly) the best teachers in the global village. The student
could move at her own pace, free from discipline, and equally free from any
extra-educational distractions such as labour disputes among disgruntled (flesh
and blood) parties. Teachers would no longer need to be formally trained, as
the cream would naturally rise to the top, the dregs being abandoned through a
process of natural, free-market-style elimination. Davis and his Ministry started
experimenting with such educational neoliberalism at the same time that it was
counselled on school reform by McLuhan. A correlation between McLuhan's
Catholic antimodernism and the coming of neoliberalism in Ontario and Canada
should be the object of further study.

And outside of the classroom, what has become of McLuhan's vision? His
global village has come to pass, but its effects are uncertain, to say the least. He
correctly identified the «highly integral electronic environment» as a pedagogical
force, but he assumed that it would be a positive development. It doesn't look
that way in 2015. McLuhan's utopia has taken a distinctively dystopian turn. As
Brad Evans and Henry Giroux point out, the ubiquity of media technologies are
potentially leading children and young people down a treacherous path, where
«constantly evolving, increasingly mobile media technologies such as smart-
phones, tablets, and wearable devices have enacted a structural transformation of
everyday life by fusing sophisticated networking technologies with a ubiquitous
screen culture, while simultaneously expanding the range of cultural producers
and recipients of information and images»[55]. Contrary to what McLuhan so con-
fidently anticipated, this has had a deeply corrosive effect on the public sphere,
while allowing powerful new forms of centralization to come into being (mass
surveillance and increasingly sophisticated forms of commercial persuasion, most
importantly). Evans and Giroux point to how violence, through new media, has
taken on a virtual life that is increasingly difficult to disentangle from corporeal
events. This is both anti-educational and anti-social. McLuhan was surely correct
to point out how «time, space, knowledge, values, identities, and social relations»
were being revolutionized by the shift from print to an «audio-visual mode» of
communication in the 1960s, though he was clearly naive about its actual effects.
The child is not set free under such conditions. On the contrary, she is made
more malleable –more ductile– than before, just like the binary information that

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[55]   EVANS, Brad and GIROUX, Henry: *Disposable Futures: the Seduction of Violence in the Age of
Spectacle*, San Francisco, City Lights, 2015, p. 21.

surrounds and engulfs her. This is no «mass». Rather, it is an unsettling form of media-based «massification».

The corporal Church and all other institutions would fall away, for the only true relationship would be between God and human beings, and between human beings – drawn together by shared sin, and a drive towards charity to relive it. As he proclaimed in 1970: «The problem of orientation means that drop-outs will only be at the top. The drop-outs will be the Cardinal Legers (who left his diocese to work among the lepers). The higher up in the hierarchy the harder it is to get involved. We must get rid of the hierarchy is we want participation. But we don't have to wish for it. It's happening»[56].

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[56] McLuhan, M.: «The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church», in *The Medium and the Light*, 1999, p. 56.