THE FECUND INTERVAL:

Visualizing acoustic space in Canadian experimental cinema

by

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Introduction

In this paper, I seek to develop an analysis of an aesthetic framework in which my filmmaking practice is situated, through Marshall McLuhan's ideas concerning acoustic space and their resonances within the avant-garde cinema. This may sound at first to be an inherently contradictory formula, given that a visually predominant medium such as the cinema may not be considered to impart experiences beyond this realm, with the exception of its acoustic components. (Sound cinema, similarly, is generally assumed to evoke sense impressions that exist merely in support of the fidelity of its 'realistic' image). However, I seek to demonstrate how the visualization of acoustic space forms a centrally unifying aesthetic strategy within the Canadian avant-garde cinema and many of the perceptual investigations conducted by film artists working during the time of McLuhan's writings, resulting in a tradition of works which aim to translate visual experience beyond a fragmentary, visually-abstracted field, thus embodying aspects of kinesthetic vision and tactile/acoustic spatial experience. I begin by examining the reception of McLuhan's scholarship from within communication studies, suggesting the most fruitful reading of his often-controversial figure as an artist-mystic rather than strictly as a theorist. I will then examine the varied influences from literary and cultural traditions that shaped his unique approach to media analysis and the development of his model of acoustic space—which Richard Cavell proposes as the primary feature that “connects a multiplicity of elements in McLuhan's large and diverse *oeuvre*” (2003: xiii)—and

consider the relationship of the cinema to McLuhan's project of a history of the human sensorium.

It is my contention that acoustic space provides substantial insight into a variety of issues concerning avant-garde film practitioners from the 1920s to the work of contemporary makers, however, due to the immensity of this topic and the limitations imposed by a linear-space essay format, this study will focus on seven Canadian avant-garde filmmakers working within the period McLuhan developed his ideas (1954-1980): Norman McLaren, Arthur Lipsett, David Rimmer, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Jack Chambers, and R. Bruce Elder. In tracing a lineage of visualization of acoustic space in cinema, from the perspective of the poetics that inspired McLuhan, I aim to show that despite the cinema's highly visual character as a medium, it has nonetheless been utilized in fertile ways by artists who sought a means of transcending the print-oriented visual traditions and conventions of Renaissance-based perspective (as Stan Brakhage, in a Ryerson Kodak lecture¹, observed as a necessity for any serious contemporary artist). The quality of these works is further enhanced in the contemporary era by their anti-environmental aesthetic (to use McLuhan's terms), as photographed and projected on 16mm film stock within a context of digital media saturation that has resulted in the near-obsolescence of film, thus foregrounding the tactile and kinesthetic qualities inherent within analog media.

¹ Audio transcript from Kodak Lecture Series archives at The School of Image Arts, recorded 1987-02-20.

To my knowledge, while there have been comparisons made between McLuhan's theories and mainstream narrative cinema (including those by Canadians²), little to no scholarship has been conducted on the relationship between McLuhan's ideas and works of avant-garde cinema. This is surprising, given that McLuhan saw the artists of the avant-garde as the "antennae of the race"³ (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 76, 86-90), but not entirely so, given that avant-garde cinema has maintained little of the hegemonic reach possessed by narrative cinema and thus its canonical works are generally neglected by the analysis of scholars. However, many of the artists working within this milieu share the convictions held by McLuhan—from the importance of the modernist poetics of Pound, Joyce, and others, to interest in new models of physics and mathematics, as well as elements of neo-tribalism and the mystic awareness of non-Western cultures. It is through the inherently poetic forms utilized within the avant-garde cinema—involving simultaneity of image, sound, and duration, functioning in synergy beyond the technocratic constraints of narrative—that I argue the continued tradition of modernist poetics has been pursued, a tradition which so inspired McLuhan that he dedicated his career to a multi-faceted examination of the means by which they revealed insights into conditions of sensory existence wrought by media and technological environments (a career widely misinterpreted and highly criticized due to a lack of sufficient awareness of his influences). For McLuhan, the artist represents the individual who is able to

² Jakub Vémola, *Reflections of Marshall McLuhan's Media Theory in the Cinematic Work of David Cronenberg and Atom Egoyan* (2009), http://is.muni.cz/th/109783/ff_m/Vemola_MA_diploma_thesis.pdf

³ A phrase adopted from Ezra Pound (1934: 81).

live fully in the present, and thus write a history of the future in registering the blows s/he encounters within the landscape of mediated relationships in which they are situated. To this extent, the role of the artist is that of media ecologist—a role in which McLuhan clearly situated himself. The purpose of vanguard art may be defined as the artist's attempt to restore forms of experience denied by modernity—modes of experience which, as increased technological mediation extends our bodies and sense organs further and further externally, are increasingly situated within internal realms of perceptual awareness; effected and even effaced through the numbing of such awareness posed by the trauma of extension. It is therefore of interest to observe how artists dealt with such blows as the cinema began to shift from environment to anti-environment (a process beginning with the advent of television, and which is still undergoing changes to this day), becoming open to forms of new poetic expressions which served to evolve an aesthetic language, as, taking McLuhan's counsel, we may use these works to observe the effects of media environments within the cultural sensory landscape—environments which continue unabated within the contemporary era of oversaturation and alienation of sensory experience, presenting experiences that led McLuhan to assess in 1956 that "all of us today are displaced persons." (2003: 2) In order to become sensitized to the implications of the present era, and come to terms with our contemporary place within such a cultural geography, a new apprehension of spatial and sensory relationships is required—an approach to the senses that McLuhan, and many of the artists who were his contemporaries, sought to provide.

1. McLuhan as mystic: the function of the artist

No other figure within studies in communications and culture provokes such a variety of responses and misunderstandings as Marshall McLuhan. Dismissed by many, indispensable to some, the scope of his influence today—in which his once-shocking aphorisms have become commonplace rhetoric within an Internet-fuelled, post-globalized society—has continued in its wide-ranging and extensive impact, despite a period of marginalization following his rise to celebrity in the 1960s and subsequent backlash in the 1970s and 1980s. In *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (2001), Donald F. Theall observes, “since the mid-point of the century a single name, McLuhan, has brooded, ghost-like, over social and cultural understanding of the intersection of communication, computers, persuasion, and the emergence of a techno-culture.” (22-23) To contend with such issues, Tom Wolfe asserts, is necessarily “to contend with McLuhan.” (McLuhan 2003: xxiii)

Yet the significance of McLuhan’s influence and innovative approach within traditions of cultural studies and media aesthetics remains a subject of continued debate. As Theall observes:

McLuhan’s own particular genius and status as a historical figure still needs to be fully clarified – how he bridges a variety of areas in the humanities, a range of the arts of cultural production (from music and painting to film and multi-media), and areas in the social sciences through a variety of histories (communication, education, rhetoric, technology) to develop a visionary poetic insight into technology, culture and communication. (2001: 24)

This is compounded by the difficulty in characterizing McLuhan's status within a single landscape. For to resort to the easy path of labeling him a 'media theorist' implies a certain level of ignorance or dismissal towards his own thought—after all, he vigorously and consistently asserted that he operated not within the realm of 'theory' or 'concepts', but instead provided solely observations, or *percepts*. McLuhan was, in fact, openly hostile towards academic specialists who dealt in concepts alone, as evinced by his comments in an interview discussing the ramifications of a post-Sputnik environment in which our planet is transformed for the first time from *ground* to *figure*:

Concepts are wonderful buffers for preventing people from confronting any form of percept. Most people are quite unable to perceive the effects of the ordinary cultural media around them because their theories about change prevent them from perceiving change itself. It never occurs to people that a satellite environment can alter the perceptions of an entire human race. They have no theory that permits them to obtain such a concept of metamorphosis. In fact, we *perceive* the satellite environment whether we *conceive* it or not. The percept is what does the work in changing our experience and our organs of perception. (McLuhan and Szklarek, eds. 1999: 83, italics in original.)

McLuhan's holistic sensibility characterizes not only his popularized status as a 'media guru', but the nature of his insights as well. His classic aphorism 'the medium is the message' finds among its most exemplary demonstrations of its effectiveness McLuhan's own body of work. Theall notes the frequent tendency for "heavy, sombre academics" to misinterpret McLuhan is due to the fact that "he played games, used wit and satire, and employed a strategy of decentering and fragmentation" (2001: 17)—a method corresponding to "the strategy of advertisers [...] He therefore becomes the objective correlative of what he preaches, a fact he himself illustrates again and again." (1971: xvi)

This reveals a paradox: McLuhan's most significant insights are available only to those willing to make the necessary conceptual/perceptual leap into the waters in which he swims. These deep pools are populated by a dense history of literary studies and hyperactive scholasticism, as many recent retrospective studies by other scholars have shown (Theall 2001; Cavell 2003; Lamberti 2011). Towards the end of his career, McLuhan himself framed this leap as a capacity for right-brained (non-linear) association over left-brained (linear) modes of thought. Thus, to examine his writings without a consideration of their form as *content* is to misread them entirely. This is evinced by McLuhan's consistent predilection towards the use of puns in his work: his formulation "the medium is the message" was restated as "the medium is the massage," "the medium is the mass age," or even the "mess age." W. Terrence Gordon, in his formulation of a McLuhan media tetrad for puns, posits the pun effectively serves as a technology that "scraps (obsolesces) single meaning." (Gordon 2010: 165) It is through such an hermeneutical understanding of language—in which no absolute single reading or meaning is possible, as each instance presents a unique fusion of horizons—that McLuhan sought to transform his insights and investigations into projects of artistic nature. In a letter to the critic William Kuhns, dated December 6, 1971, McLuhan writes:

My canvasses are surrealist, and to call them "theories" is to miss my satirical intent altogether. As you will find in my literary essays, I can write the ordinary kind of rationalistic prose any time I choose to do so. You are in great need of some intense training in perception in the arts. To talk about my work without showing the centrality of percept vs. concept, and the totally diverse character of visual, audile, and tactile spaces, is to have no apprehension of my observations about the media. (1987: 448)

Arthur Schopenhauer describes the evaluation of truth through successive stages as follows: "To truth only a brief celebration of victory is allowed between the two long periods during which it is condemned as paradoxical, or disparaged as trivial." (1818, Eng. Trans. 1958: xxv) While McLuhan's oeuvre fails more often than not to register on course syllabuses in communications and cultural studies (usually due to the erroneous belief that he provides no serious or coherent arguments to support his 'deterministic' statements), many of the authors who are found in turn can be observed to expound on principles which are covered as subsets within McLuhan's writings—ideas often succinctly developed within no more than a few pages of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) or *Understanding Media* (1964).⁴ If we are to accept that McLuhan's message was his medium, then any unbiased account of how such a state of affairs came to be is beyond possibility (for, as Heidegger observes, every summation reveals a bias of interpretation), and, while such an aim is beyond this study's intent, some further examination of the context through which McLuhan has been denied his role as a significant originator of multidisciplinary, phenomenological and linguistic approaches to media studies (given that he developed such positions long before they became fashionable within a broader milieu) is worthwhile. After his inflation to mythic-celebrity status, sculpted by the PR firm of Gossage and Feigen, McLuhan came under fire from numerous sources, including Jonathan

⁴ Such instances include Benedict Anderson's analysis of nations as formed by print (*Imagined Communities*, 1983), James W. Carey's account of the spatialization of uniform temporality via the burgeoning technologies of railroad and telegraph (*Communication as Culture*, 1989), Friedrich Kittler's analysis of new media as predetermined by other existent forms (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 1999), and Lisa Gitelman's concept of 'intrinsic technological logic' (*Already Always New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 2006). Credit is sometimes given (ie. Gitelman), but generally misinterpreted.

Miller, Umberto Eco, Raymond Williams, James W. Carey, John Fekete, and even Guy Debord, who misread him so severely as to decry McLuhan's position on media as that of "the spectacle's first apologist."⁵ This represents a disturbing trend in this vein of criticism: McLuhan's harshest critics often evidently have not taken time to read him, or to read carefully enough. Discounting his merit entirely under the banner of "technological determinism", James Curran writes:

All that needs to be known about the evolution of the media and their place in human history is contained, it is assumed, in the speculative commentary of writers like Marshal [sic] McLuhan. The history of mass communication can be conveniently ticked off without the need to read a single, serious work of history. (2002: 66)

Such an accusation neglects McLuhan's extensive biography as a Renaissance scholar who spent his life as a professor of English literature, and leaves one wondering whether Curran is in fact describing his own approach. Other critics, such as Theall (1971)⁶ and Arthur Kroker (1984), assert his position within "a highly organized, comprehensive, and eloquent discourse on technology" (Kroker 1984: 7) originating from a uniquely Canadian perspective. As Kroker observes:

The essence of the Canadian intellectual condition is this: it is our fate by virtue of historical circumstance and geographical accident to be forever marginal to the 'present-mindedness' of American culture [...] and to be incapable of being more than ambivalent on the cultural legacy of our European past. At work in the Canadian mind is, in fact, a great and

⁵ Chapter XII, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988). The extent in misinterpretation of such a remark is so extreme in nature it reveals that McLuhan's adoption of a 'cool' persona, to fit with what he saw as necessary for a role within the TV medium, in fact served to enact a reversal of his message, given that in his personal correspondence he describes electricity as a "strictly Luciferian product" (1987: 369), and television "as radioactive as radium." (534)

⁶ Although *The Medium Is the Rearview Mirror* stands among few other comprehensive assessments from the 1970s that transcend a simplified position of either full support or dismissal of McLuhan's thought, his response to Theall (his first doctoral student) contained many reservations: "You take me too 'seriously.' It is really more fun to join the quest for discoveries than to try to classify and evaluate the processes in which I am involved. You are, in a sense, trying to turn me into an academic fixture." (Theall 2001: 215-6)

dynamic polarity between technology and culture, between economy and landscape [...] The Canadian mind may be one of the main sites in modern times for working out the meaning of technological experience. (Kroker 1984: 7-8)

The uniqueness of the Canadian experience, in the shadow of both the cultural heritage of Europe and the technological progress and cultural expansion of the United States, shines light on the ground from which the explosive ideas that thrust forth from the 'Toronto School' originates. This group, which also included Harold A. Innis (*Empire and Communications*, 1950; *The Bias of Communication*, 1951), and Eric A. Havelock (*Preface to Plato*, 1963), in fact had relatively little direct contact or overlap beyond their shared approach to the study of media influence. Innis's central thesis concerning media as environments developed from his work as a Canadian economic historian whose studies of staples and "the trade routes of the external world" led him to "the trade routes of the mind." (McLuhan 1953: 385) His insight was to apply to the communications industries his understanding of how "each staple in turn left its stamp" upon society in its development, revealing how "the shift to new staples invariably produced periods of crises in which adjustments in the old structure were painfully made and a new pattern created." (Innis 1950: 5) Innis further contended that media developed biases along polarities of space and time based on the implications of their material formations, thus influencing their nature and use:

Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay, and stone [...] Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper. (26)

In ascribing many of the insights in his work to Innis (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* is described as “a footnote to Innis”), McLuhan inadvertently proliferated misunderstandings in the relationship between the two thinkers, as evinced by Carey’s analysis of the ‘Toronto school’:

Despite the simplification, it is possible to describe Canadian communication theory by an arc running from Harold Innis to Marshall McLuhan. ‘It would be more impressive,’ as Oscar Wilde said staring up at Niagara Falls, ‘if it ran the other way.’ (1975: 27)

Richard Cavell (2003) successfully disputes and dispels Carey’s assessment, observing, “McLuhan was an eclectic thinker who rarely failed to transform any idea he encountered.” (16) Cavell notes a fundamental rift between McLuhan and Innis in their respective treatment of media environmental effects upon cultural understandings of space and time. While McLuhan undoubtedly derived the insight from Innis that contemporary society was biased spatially (20),

Nowhere does Innis convey the sense of the modern ‘speed-up’ of time that had so deeply impressed McLuhan, the sense of time as formulated by the Futurists – time as an assault, as a form of battery, as a violent affront to tradition and stability. (19)

Theall shares this interpretation and proposes, “his use of Innis as a forerunner was an absolutely essential defensive strategy” (2001: 49) against the criticism he would necessarily face in presenting his radical theories of communication; theories McLuhan felt were necessary to ground in studies beyond a literary context to be taken seriously. Theall notes McLuhan was “genuinely disappointed with Innis’s lack of a foundation in literature and the arts,” (49) a distinction that draws a sharp line between the two thinkers:

The later revival of Innis, while perhaps intensified by McLuhanism, had more to do with the congeniality of Innis's politico-economic emphasis to the 'spirit of the times' during and after the post-Marxism and renewed Canadian sense of national identity of the 1960s. (49)

McLuhan "was quite conscious of having made advances beyond Innis" (53), but

he obscures it mischievously. [...] This has led communications scholars to forefront the strictly politico-economic aspects of communication history without providing the vital, complementary grounding in the poetic and artistic on which McLuhan insisted. (48)

In the late 1980s, with the posthumous publication of *Laws of Media* (1988, co-authored with Eric McLuhan), along with McLuhan's correspondence (1987) and a biography by Phillip Marchand (1989), this misinterpretation began to subside in favour of a more developed inquiry. The 1990s brought forth a revival of interest via the rise of Internet and *Wired Magazine's* selection of him as its 'patron saint,'⁷ critical evaluations by Judith Stamps (1995) and Glen Willmott (1996) sought to respectively contextualize McLuhan within the traditions of the Frankfurt School and post-modernism,⁸ but nonetheless, a 2002 documentary⁹ nostalgically portrayed him as a lost seer, whose laws of media fell upon deaf ears amongst his contemporaries. Such a perspective belies the truth of yet another of his aphorisms: obsolescence is a beginning, not an end.

⁷ Though this was largely another misinterpretation, contributing to the notion McLuhan was essentially a figure who offered his blind support towards all forms of technological change and new media (and therefore somehow 'against' traditions such as literacy).

⁸ Nevertheless, while *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse* begins with the assertion McLuhan is "arguably the most powerful literary academic to have affected a North American popular consciousness," the abstract to Willmott's doctoral thesis (from which the book is sourced) contends that he fails to "articulate a critical theory or discourse which may usefully be retrieved and applied to situations today," (1992: iii) and that his work "has a purely historical meaning and value." (3)

⁹ *McLuhan's Wake* (2002), dirs. Kevin MacMahon and David Sobelman, produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

There is a common saying that it is easier to criticize a work than it is to produce a work worthy of criticism. If we take this statement as true, it becomes possible to observe the sustained attacks on McLuhan's discourse over the decades as a series of backhanded compliments. For, if he is truly as "crude, brash and dated today," as critics such as John Nerone insist (Valdivia, ed. 2003: 97), then what can explain the richness of his lasting influence? Authors who acknowledge this debt include Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Neil Postman, Hugh Kenner, and Walter J. Ong (the latter two of whom were among his students). His work has also been of great influence to the practices of many artists within a multitude of disciplines, including Glenn Gould, R. Murray Schaefer, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and many of the media practitioners associated with SUNY Buffalo. McLuhan has had a significant impact within the realm of the cinema and media arts, being among the first generation of critics to treat mainstream 'entertainment' as subjects worthy of serious consideration and deconstruction (a practice developed from his study at Cambridge under I.A. Richards), as well as through his formulation of a model by which the hybridization of media and developing aesthetics codes is rendered apparent—through a pattern of successive forms borrowing from previous 'environmental' media, and, in their obsolescence, reversing into an 'anti-environment' in which its previously invisible features (the ground) become more readily apparent (as newfound figure).

For McLuhan, "Art at its most significant is a distant early warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen." It is from an artistic perspective that McLuhan's continued relevance is found, as Pound once qualified literature: "news that STAYS news." (1934: 29) One major aspect of McLuhan's thought often lost amongst his critics is his astute and comprehensive knowledge of literature and the arts. McLuhan was primarily a man of letters: a professor of English who drew the bulk of his theories from his contact with the poetry of French Symbolists such as Mallarmé and Baudelaire, and High Modernists such as Joyce, Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis. He furthermore sought to consistently contextualize his work within the tradition of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of St. Thomas Aquinas and Renaissance scholars. His notions concerning aesthetics and media environments hold in primary importance the continued development of artistic perceptual sensibilities, which he viewed as integral for humanity's adaptation to the new spatializations and sensory ratios heralded by shifting media environments. Consider his analysis of the effect of Edgar Allan Poe's prose style on the poetics of Symbolism:

Baudelaire translated Poe [...] and took on this idea of simultaneity that if you want to write a poem you have to start with the effect and then look around for the causes. And this became the awareness of acoustic space in which the beginning and the end are at the same time. This is the kind of space and time in which we live now. Einstein was only catching up with Poe in the twentieth century when he invented space-time or relativity theory. The poets and the artists are usually fifty years ahead of the physical scientists in devising models of perception. (2003: 210-11)

Such vast and bounding leaps in association—connecting aesthetic modes of poetry to the new media of the telegraph and newspaper and the physics of

relativity and quantum mechanics¹⁰—bespeak of McLuhan's continued agenda to demonstrate "the arts are for survival purposes, and for navigation purposes and as such are indispensable even at the most homely and humble levels." (McLuhan 2003: 221) Theall suggests it is this paradigm, which McLuhan privileged as the means for revealing insight, that McLuhan must be understood—as "a new kind of artist, whose existence was made possible by the simultaneous emergence of modernism and mass media [...] he ought not to be described as a framer of theories but as a creative communicator – an essayist and a poet." (2001: 40; 52) Cavell describes McLuhan's trajectory in similar terms: that he "sought increasingly to be read *by* artists and – more radically – to be read *as* an artist" (2003: 92); as does Willmott: "McLuhan collapses criticism into art" (1994: 4).

There is much to support the proposal that McLuhan considered himself primarily an artist. Based on the trajectory of his publications, one might argue his collaborations with the graphic designer Quentin Fiore (*The Medium is the Massage*, 1967; *War and Peace in the Global Village*, 1968) are equally significant to his two major books (a fair assessment from a perspective of innovative book publishing). His original enrollment in post-secondary education was as an engineer before turning to the arts—thus, it is logical to infer he

¹⁰ Another example: "Symbolism is the art of the missing link, as the word implies: *sym-ballein*, to throw together. It is the art of syncopation. It is the basis of electricity and quantum mechanics, as Lewis Carroll understood via Lobachevski, and non-Euclidean geometries. The chemical bond, as understood by Heisenberg and Linus Pauling, is RESONANCE. Echoland. The world of acoustic space whose center is everywhere and whose margin is nowhere." (McLuhan and Watson 1970: 30)

maintained a natural interest in creation and the functioning of the works he studied throughout his career. Furthermore, McLuhan's invention of tetrads as tools of diagnosis "are themselves a variant on concrete poetry" (Theall 2001: 145-6), and can only be truly grasped within the context of the poetics of Joyce, Pound and other modernists. Alliterations and borrowings from *Finnegan's Wake* are commonplace in his work and require reader involvement for their decryption. Theall describes McLuhan's collaborator and friend Edmund (Ted) Carpenter as viewing him "as a shaman, trickster, and natural mystic who had already moved over to the world of mystery and initiation which Ted, as an anthropologist, studied." (Theall 2001: 202) Carpenter draws upon the poetic terms through which McLuhan found inspiration in explaining his mode of obtaining insights:

Using a format borrowed from Pound, he combined seemingly disparate elements into 'mosaics.' When you interface the right images, each illuminates the other, like a blade on a grindstone." (in Theall 2001: 246)

It is through an interpretation of McLuhan's writings as poetry that we can begin to more fully grasp his intentions, outside the left-hemisphere rationalism of the Shannon-Weaver transmission model, as "a poetic production whose value is not in what it says but what it is: the modernist principle that 'a poem should not mean but be.'" (Theall 2001: 41) Theall interprets McLuhan's approach as grounded in "the adaptation of a grammatico-rhetorical, allegorical, and poetic method for dealing with media and other new artefactual technologies":

that new world must be understood through its arts, artists, and poets – even if they were grounded in ambivalent and arcane knowledge [...] it is only as an allegorical exegete of the poets and artists, particularly Joyce, that McLuhan becomes one of the pre-historians of digiculture. (212-3)

As the “antennae of the race,” McLuhan saw the artist as “the person who invents the means to bridge between biological inheritance and the environments created by technological innovation” (1988: 98)—clearly, a role he sought to embody through his work in charting a history of the sensorium. McLuhan considered the artist to be fully aware of the present because s/he “glories in the invention of new identities.” (McLuhan and Fiore 1968: 12) For McLuhan, this shift in the role of educator and scholar was a necessary causality of the new conditions of integration furnished by the environmental transformations from a linear, print-based culture into a mosaic-based, audile-tactile, electric context:

As we move into the world of the simultaneous out of the era of mechanism and of the lineal succession types of analysis, we not only move into the world of the artist, but we see the disappearance of the old oppositions between art and nature, business and culture, school and society. (McLuhan 2003: 5)

In shifting from left- to right hemisphere-formulated thought, McLuhan brushed against the grain of an entire tradition of linear scholasticism—one that A.N. Whitehead famously noted as originating with Plato, and which Havelock (1962) interpreted as fundamentally marked by Plato’s position as the first thinker to utilize the technology of the Greek alphabet and thus begin the shift within Western consciousness towards the linear forms which dominated in epistemic fashion until the reversal posed by the electric era. In the *Ion*, Plato identifies the creative capacities of the artist with a form of inspired madness, one which is set far apart from dialectic method, through which Plato saw the only genuine means for achieving true knowledge and understanding. Thus, if we are willing to concede that McLuhan is best interpreted within such a role, it is not surprising

that the all-encompassing unification heralded in the above-cited passage exhibits strong similarities with forms of mysticism and mystical thinking. Indeed, McLuhan's entire theory of media, as extensions of the body, bespeaks an underlying sense of mystic union in all things—a tendency supported by his faith and conversion to Catholicism (though rarely posed in overt fashion in his work). To identify McLuhan as a mystic may seem a peculiar gambit, but one must admit this nonetheless places him in an adequate context in terms of the lineage to which he vows his allegiance: Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lewis, Aquinas, and the Christian author G.K. Chesterton. Published in *The Dalhousie Review* in 1936, McLuhan's first scholarly article, "G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic," examined the regard to which Chesterton fulfilled such qualities:

It is necessary to define the sense in which Mr. Chesterton is a mystic [...] He once wrote: '*Real mystics don't hide mysteries, they reveal them. They set a thing up in broad daylight, and when you've seen it, it is still a mystery.*' [...] The mysteries revealed by Mr. Chesterton are the daily miracles of sense and consciousness. (McLuhan and Szklarek, eds. 1999: 3-4, my italicization)

Through Chesterton's definition, we may come to understand mysticism not as an esoteric concept defying categorization, but a practical approach for dealing with the ultimate mystery and wonder that confronts our being in the world—a wonder irreducible and ultimate in nature. The mystery of multiplicity and unity permeates McLuhan's understanding of communication as participation and transformation, an understanding that sought to oppose and refute the transmission model of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1948) predominant at the time of his writing. In response to Theall's (1971) deconstruction of his meaning, Theall notes that McLuhan observed, "mystery was the essence of his

writing" (2001: 67), and, in *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan*, he devotes a full chapter to McLuhan's tendency, as a scholar of the Renaissance, to be "deeply interested in magic, alchemy, occult belief, and mystery religions." (109)

McLuhan's "symbolic value system" thus can be seen to reflect "aspects of occult lore [...] hermetic and gnostic accounts of a redemption of man by freeing him from the world of fragmented material existence." (119) McLuhan discussed such esoteric philosophies in his letters during the period he developed his model of acoustic space. A letter to Ezra Pound dated 28 February, 1953, begins: "Last year has been spent in going through rituals of secret societies with fine comb" (1987: 235), and, writing to Walter J. Ong on 14 October, 1954, he concludes: "I don't see how it is possible to teach English literature, or any European lit.

without full knowledge of the 'secret doctrine' for which the arts are the sole means of grace." (1987: 244) While McLuhan kept these elements of his studies mostly absent from his writings¹¹, he never sought to obscure these interests entirely—his analysis of the entire electric era is formed by a sense of its possession of an esoteric, 'occult,' nature (ie. the tetrad for television, 1988: 158), and he consistently presented his media analysis as a "kind of alchemical foreknowledge" (McLuhan 2003: 8). This sensibility is encapsulated by his notion of media retrieval, and finds full expression within his analysis of retrieval within the modern era as heralding a return to acoustic space:

¹¹ While his taste in poetry certainly held interest in mysticism, evinced by his invocations of Blake, Joyce, Pound and others, he never mentioned controversial thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin and H.P. Blavatsky in his published materials (both of whom figure prominently within his correspondence), opting instead to analyze the positivism of Francis Bacon as endemic to the consequences of technological environments.

One of the peculiarities of innovation is the unexpected retrieval of ancient forms. The electric age, this resonant acoustic times, retrieves, above all, the occult. This occult is by definition the form that is congenial to acoustic man... (2003: 222)

Theall notes “the ‘occult’ overtones of acoustic space” (2001: 147) are rendered most perceptible in relation to the twelfth-century Augustinian theological poet Alain of Lille’s description of God, which Jorge Luis Borges related in his essay “Pascal’s Sphere” as “an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere.” (1964: 190) McLuhan defines the properties of acoustic space in almost identical terms in a letter to Jacques Maritain, dated 30 May, 1969—placing it within a position of transcendence, as boundless resonance between subject and world¹²: “The ear creates acoustic space whose center is everywhere and whose margins are nowhere. This has often been mistaken for God by tribal societies as well as by neo-Platonists and the Oriental world.” (Gordon 2010: 127)

¹² A conception that the similarly mystically aligned Canadian psychologist Richard Maurice Bucke describes in his eponymous 1901 study as a mode of “cosmic consciousness.”

2. Locating acoustic space: media and the *sensus communis*

"What can't be coded can be decoded if an ear aye sieze what no eye ere grieved for."
— James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (482.34-36)

In *The Production of Space* (1974; Eng. Trans. 1991), Henri Lefebvre writes of the transformations at the outset of the twentieth century:

The fact is that around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space thitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communications; the space, too, of classical perspective and geometry, developed from the Renaissance onwards on the basis of the Greek tradition (Euclid, logic) and bodied forth in Western philosophy. (25)

In *Downcast Eyes* (1994), Martin Jay argues a single, overarching trend in contemporary French intellectual thought can be observed within the denigration of the visual sense and the attempt to find or develop alternative modalities:

Although definitions of visuality vary from thinker to thinker, it is clear that ocularcentrism aroused (and continues in many quarters to arouse) a widely shared distrust. Bergson's critique of the spatialization of time, Bataille's celebration of the blinding sun and the acephalic body, Breton's ultimate disenchantment with the savage eye, Sartre's depiction of the sadomasochism of the 'look,' Merleau-Ponty's diminished faith in a new ontology of vision, Lacan's disparagement of the ego produced by the mirror stage, [...] Foucault's strictures against the medical gaze and panoptic surveillance, Debord's critique of the society of the spectacle, Barthes's linkage of photography and death, Metz's excoriation of the scopic regime of the cinema, Derrida's double reading of the specular tradition of philosophy and the white mythology, Irigaray's outrage at the privileging of the visual in patriarchy [...] all these evince, to put it mildly, a palpable loss of confidence in the hitherto 'noblest of the senses.' (588)

The tradition against which this impressive list rebels may be traced to a visual bias rooted in Ancient Greek thought, and, as Lefebvre notes, connects to the

way in which spatialization has been since interpreted by Western cultures—an interpretation thrown into crisis within the early part of the twentieth century, and whose reverberations were felt in all branches of the arts and sciences. Hans Jonas contends this predilection heralded a chain of consequence for all philosophical thought that followed it: “The gain is the concept of objectivity, of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me, and from this distinction arises the whole idea of *theoria* and theoretical truth.” (Jonas 1982: 147) Martin Heidegger notes the implicit correlation within the etymology of the word ‘theory’ itself with the act of seeing:

The verb *theorein* grew out of the coalescing of two root words, *thea* and *horao*. *Thea* (cf. theatre) is the outward look, the aspect, in which something shows itself, the outward appearance in which it offers itself. Plato names this aspect in which what presences shows what it is, *eidos*. To have seen this aspect, *eidenai*, is to know [*wissen*]. The second root word in *theorein*, *horao*, means: to look at something attentively, to look it over, to view it closely. Thus it follows that *theorein* is *thean horan*, to look attentively on the outward appearance wherein what presences becomes visible and, through such sight—seeing—to linger with it. (1977: 163)

For Plato, higher knowledge was connected to a visual nature, an analogy made clear in the Allegory of the Cave. Jay writes of Plato’s understanding of vision: “the human eye... [was] able to perceive light because it shares a like quality with the source of light, the sun” (1994: 26), an analogy that presupposes a further analogy between the intellect (the ‘eye of the mind’) and the Good. However, the manner by which the Ancient Greeks understood vision was not coterminous to our contemporary era’s understanding of vision. The Greeks understood sight in accordance with the theory of *extramission*—the idea that light rays extended from the eyes to identify objects, rather than vice versa—a model that contains a

tactile resonance between sight and seer. For Plato, vision occurred through the eyes, not with them (and was therefore a process of mind, not body), yet still therefore maintained an integrated balance with the full range of senses of the body. Aristotle contended, similarly, that touch undergirds all senses. Jay observes this model poses a differing relation than contemporary understanding: "there was a certain participatory dimension in the visual process, a potential intertwining of viewer and viewed." (1994: 30) Hans-Georg Gadamer considers the implication of this model for the concept of *theoria* as "a true sharing [...]" being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees. It is from this point that people have tried recently to explain the religious background of the Greek idea of reason." (2004: 111)

McLuhan's analysis of the means by which the visual sense became distorted and fragmented through the shifting sensory relationships posed by technological environments is most significantly based upon his analysis of writing (a position shared with Havelock, who considered literacy and Platonic philosophy as necessarily and intrinsically bound together, and Innis, who sought to demonstrate how the Greek oral tradition was altered by its effects). The translation of communication from predominant acoustic and oral forms of expression into the fixed, segregated, and linear modality of print altered the relations of the senses by shifting the realm of vision into a new and detached (perspectival) existence as carrier of knowledge, an existence supported by the nature of the characters of the alphabet which supplant sonic experience with inert symbols that can be processed internally and maintained in linear reference.

However, to fully grasp the intention of McLuhan's statements regarding the fragmentation of the senses—which does not imply a shift in physiological perception between isolated senses, but rather a transformation of their balanced interplay (what McLuhan terms the *sensorium*) enacted through the conditioning and habituation of sensory experience by environmental factors—it is important to first understand how McLuhan perceived media as simultaneously amputation in addition to extension, through the numbing of experience or sensation within the sense extended.¹³ McLuhan's perspective on these issues is more nuanced and innovative than many of his critics often admit, and his treatment of the senses has been subject to much misinterpretation on the grounds of their analysis as operating in fragmentation or isolation. To comprehend McLuhan's position, we must first contextualize him as a follower of St. Thomas Aquinas, and therefore as adhering to a conception of sense experience grounded in the Aristotelian conception of a *sensus communis*: defined as a 'common sense,' or meta-sense, through which all other senses interact within the human nervous system. The function of the *sensus communis* is to render the information of the other senses explicate to consciousness. In Book II of *De Anima*, Aristotle describes the senses as a "*logos*," which is often translated as "proportion," though Aquinas translated it as "ratio." Aristotle compares the *logos* of the senses to a lyre, in analogy to their adjustment and pitch, and observes that if the strings of the lyre are struck too hard, the result is a loss in tuning—thus, if a

¹³ I.e. the effect of the wheel to extend the reach of the foot, but decrease sensitivity to distances traveled via such means in direct proportion to the effectiveness of the technology—as such, the car numbs the foot more than the bicycle.

sense organ becomes over-excited, its proportion (or ratio) is lost, and the experiencing of the sense is altered. McLuhan intuited the *sensus communis* is not only trained (acquiring habits of use and distinct *sensory ratios* based upon the perceptions it engages in within its environment) but that such environmental conditions are sculpted by the environs of technologies and re-orderings of social organization and communication produced: "Any technological innovation in any culture whatever at once changes all these sensory ratios." (McLuhan 1968A: 136) The amputation or numbing effect of technology, a feature that impedes greater awareness of the *sensus communis*, is incurred via the overstimulation of the sense as it is extended, as McLuhan notes in a letter to Walter J. Ong:

My theory is only acceptable to Thomists, for whom consciousness as analogical proportion among the senses from moment to moment, is quite easy to grasp. But print technology actually smashes that analogical awareness in society and the individual [...] A *sensus communis* for external senses is what I'm trying to build. (1987: 280-281)

In his logical extension of the internal *sensus communis* to encapsulate the external environments of *techne*, McLuhan contended such externalizations must be treated in terms equivalent to the internal senses, as these 'outerings' place our 'common sense' literally outside ourselves. He saw this exterior layer of sensory experience, mediated through technology, as posing a distinct and unique challenge within the era of electricity, wherein communication between such extended forms is rendered a possibility for the first time:

Our private senses are not closed systems but are endlessly translated into each other in that experience which we can con-sciousness [sic]. Our extended senses, tools, technologies, through the ages, have been closed systems incapable of interplay or collective awareness. Now, in the electric age, the very instantaneous nature of co-existence among our

technological instruments has created a crisis quite new in human history. Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands they become collectively conscious. Our technologies, like our private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes *rational* co-existence possible. (1962: 14)

Contrary to many interpreters (even supportive ones such as Kroker), McLuhan's perspective on this matter was far from entirely optimistic:

The principle of numbness comes into play with electric technology, as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die. Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy. (1964: 56)

The fact that McLuhan maintained his understanding of a sensory-biased spatiality (whether of visual, acoustic, or tactile nature) within a generalized *sensus communis* is reflected throughout his writings, evinced by his analysis of the perceptual illusions of 'realist' art, where he posits an interplay between the senses similar to that of Merleau-Ponty (who interpreted vision as inherently bounded within kinesthetic experience, and tactility not as a discrete sense, but the interplay of the senses):

[T]he real 'abstract' art is that of realism and naturalism based on a separation of the visual faculty from the interplay of the other senses. So-called abstract art is, in fact, the result of much sense interplay with varying dominance of ear and touch. I would suggest that 'touch' is not so much a separate sense as the very interplay of the senses. (1962: 83)

This analysis reveals that McLuhan considered even strictly visual media, such as paintings, to hold the capacity for multi-sensory experience. This sensory interplay forms an exemplary feature of the films discussed in the following section. For McLuhan, the representational developments expressed in the Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Cubist movements indicated, through

the barometric nature of the sensibilities of artists, a shift away from the single-point perspective that had previously been the hallmark of Renaissance art, a stylistic development which he attributed to the proliferation of standardized texts via the invention of Johannes Gutenberg. At the same time as this single-point perspectivalist paradigm had achieved the formation of a new mode of visual representation independent of the brush of the artist via the photographic image, artists such as Seurat, Matisse, and Cézanne were already moving towards what McLuhan defined as the mosaic visual field, which was a feature emergent within the new environment of telegraph-based news publications, and increasingly concentrated urban existence. This mosaic-acoustical approach—banished from the frame of representation since the single-point perspective mode had shifted sensibilities away from the multi-temporality of Medieval visual representation—re-entered artistic representation to a continuing extent in the collages of the Dadaists and Surrealists, the non-representational canvasses of Klee, Braque, Kandinsky, and the Abstract Expressionists. McLuhan cites E.H. Gombrich's analysis of Cubism as an attempt to move beyond the single-point perspective as "the most radical attempt to stamp out ambiguity and to enforce one reading of the picture—that of a man-made construction, a colored canvas." (1964: 27)

By contrast, McLuhan observes a lack of figure/ground relationship in the bias of the fixed-perspective visual space characteristic of the Renaissance, which assigns meaning to an abstracted field, independent of its context:

Visual space is continuous, connected, homogeneous, and static. All the other senses make spaces that are quite different, totally discontinuous, non-homogeneous, and dynamic, whether it's the sense of touch, smell, hearing, kinesis, or any sense whatever. (2003: 209)

The privileging of visual cognition privileges the development of certain modes of both spatial and cognitive relationships—relationships enhanced by a historical development towards print-based information as a primary source for knowledge. Despite the noted connectivity and homogeneity of visual space, McLuhan saw its effect as reversing these sensibilities, by developing a fragmented sensory balance that produces corresponding relations between the individual and world:

[T]he eye is not a unifying force. It tends towards fragmentation. It allows each person to have his own point of view and to hold it [...] making it possible for each reader to have exactly the same word in front of him at each instant had a considerable effect on doctrine. Each could thus think alone, look at it and invent his own particular point of view. Things did not happen this way in manuscript tradition, because the operation was much more acoustic than visual, and because transmission most came about orally. (McLuhan and Szklarek, eds. 1999: 47)

McLuhan contended the visual bias of the effects of the alphabet and printed word was a subject that had not received conscious treatment within the study of language or philosophy prior to Havelock and Innis. In a letter to Claude Bissel, dated 23 March, 1971, McLuhan relates it as his “biggest discovery”:

[F]or 2500 years the philosophers of the Western world have excluded all technology from the matter-form in entelechy treatment [...] Entelechy or *energeia* is the recognition of the new actuation of power brought about by any arrangement of components whether in the atom or the plant or the intellect. Pens and swords and ships and sealing wax which actuate human potential, creating specific new patterns of energy and form of action – these along with all technologies [...] were *written off*. That is, the Greeks and their followers to the present time have never seen fit to study the entelechies generated by the human arts. [...] In the electric age when the actuation of human energies has gone all the way into the structure of life and society, we have no choice but to recognize the entelechies of technology. This is called *ecology*. (1987: 429, italics in original)

It is within this context that the significance of acoustic space must be situated, for the importance McLuhan attributed to this insight places him in the company

of the other thinkers cited in Jay's analysis that sought to problematize the realm of visual knowledge and understanding. Cavell demonstrates it was McLuhan's investigations into the diverse properties of space that distinguishes his work from Innis, and formed the basis of the probe by which he approached the effects of the electric environment. Within the modern era, McLuhan writes, tactility, "the integral sense, the one which brings all others into relation" is "greatly enhanced" (McLuhan and Fiore, 1968A: 77). Tactility, as integral, forms a central aspect of acoustic space, which McLuhan defined alternatively as "audile-tactile space," "resonant space," or, in a preface to a memoir of Innis written by Havelock, "the fecund interval." (Cavell 2003: 76; 23)

Acoustic space provided the nexus of McLuhan's interpretation of how the environment of simultaneity generated by electricity effected new changes upon the human sensorium, which had previously contended only with the effects of the natural and mechanical world—the latter from which, McLuhan suggests, the Newtonian worldview found its unconscious and necessary formulation. The data that convinced him most strongly of this transformation was, as noted, the sensory data encapsulated within the art of makers who were witness to the massive environmental shifts generated by the telegraph, newspaper, typewriter, telephone, phonograph, electric light, motorcar, bicycle, airplane, photograph, cinema, radio, and television during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a shift so radical in the *sensus communis* of Western society that McLuhan would claim, in 1953, "all of us today are displaced persons." (2003: 2) Perhaps the most substantial influence upon his interpretation of this catalyst of change as

leading to the development of a newfound, re-emergent acoustic sensibility was the poetry of the Symbolists and Modernists. We have observed the importance he attributed to the Symbolist approach as a resonant poetics in which “the beginning and the end are at the same time” (2003: 211), and, in the anthology of essays and interviews *The Medium and the Light* (1999), McLuhan references in three occasions a similar passage from T.S. Eliot to describe acoustic space:

What I call the ‘auditory imagination’ is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious level of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. (Eliot 1933, 118-9)

McLuhan’s poetic-metaphoric treatment of media as biased translators of experience was most pivotally illuminated through the writings of Eliot’s modernist contemporary James Joyce, in whose novels *Ulysses* (1922), and especially *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939), McLuhan uncovered a complex interplay of perceptual investigations enmeshed within multi-layered language to encapsulate a history of the sensorium inspired by the model of cyclical history proposed by Italian scholar Giambattista Vico (1688-1744). Theall observes: “McLuhan found both the importance of tactility and its relation to gesture and the Aristotlean-scholastic conception of a *sensus communis* [...] throughout Joyce’s work.” (2001: xvi) In *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968), McLuhan incorporates quotes from *Finnegan’s Wake* on every page to interrogate the notion that the function of poetry and art is to adjust sense experience to the altered realities of new technological environments, and that such a premise is implicit within technology.

McLuhan's extensive study of Pound and his *Cantos* provided a further significant context. Pound exerted a substantial force upon the development of modernist poetics through his associations with Eliot, Joyce, Lewis and the Vorticist movement. Among his aesthetic and metaphysical influences was the neovitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson, which critiqued a uniform representation of temporality as existent within a single spatial order through the internal, embodied experience of duration, and was linked to a revival of esotericism that flourished in late nineteenth century Paris. An essay written by Ernest Fenollosa on the nature of the Chinese ideogram provided yet another important influence for Pound's poetry and McLuhan's diagnosis of writing. Fenollosa contended the ideogrammatic form served to shape the Chinese conception of reality, in which certain basic distinctions of Western language (ie. the division between nouns and verbs) had no existence. (Elder 1998: 198-9) Pound developed from this model a conception of form as a prime mover of content, and saw language the shaping influence of differing models of reality. This conception of language, as operating within an integrated modality of poetic principle (as ideograms are not divisible into inert characters as are words constructed through the linear coding of the alphabet), formed the nucleus of Pound's poetic impulse, and the distinction between ideogrammatic form and the nature of phonetic alphabet was central to McLuhan's analysis of how writing shaping mental processes—ideas further developed by Walter J. Ong in his studies of the cultural and phenomenological distinctions of oral and literate societies. (Ong 1982) The functioning of the ideogram, as a vector of intersecting forces, was also a fertile

source of inspiration for the Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, who, like Pound, in discussing the vectors of force conjured through imagist poetry, used the ideogram as a route for developing a language of montage (1949)—another line of influence upon McLuhan's thought, as Theall observes:

Eisenstein's writings about 'film language' and its syntax, and his theories about synaesthesia and the orchestration of the arts were to provide important insights and motifs for McLuhan's later explorations of media convergence. (2001: 43)

Fenollosa's conception of the bias of language hold a basic similarity with the linguistic relativism proposed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹⁴, which McLuhan encountered through his friend and collaborator on *Explorations*, Edmund (Ted) Carpenter. Developed primarily by American linguist Benjamin Whorf under the tutelage of Edward Sapir, this theory attempted to demonstrate how different languages structure the world in different fashions. After falling out of fashion for some time in the context of Chomsky's 'universal grammar', it has recently returned to continued study and debate. This idea has been credited in its first expressed by William von Humbolt in 1820, who saw language as 'the very fabric of thought' and 'the spirit of a nation': "The diversity of languages is not a diversity of signs and sounds but a diversity of views of the world." (Pütz & Verspoor 2000) One unfortunately misguided notion derived from this conception that was widespread in the early twentieth century was the idea that some languages were therefore naturally superior to others and that primitive

¹⁴ The hypothesis exists in two versions: a 'strong version', which states language determines thought and linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories; and a 'weak version', which states linguistic categories and usage influence thought and non-linguistic behaviour.

languages therefore maintained their speakers in 'intellectual poverty.' The linguist William Dwight Whitney sought, in this regard, to eradicate Native American languages, arguing their speakers were savages who would be better off adopting English. The first anthropologist to challenge this perspective was Franz Boas, Edward Sapir's teacher, who had become an Inuit ethnographer after developing a fascination with their culture whilst conducting geographical research in Northern Canada. Ted Carpenter conducted similar anthropological studies concerning the sense experience of the Inuit based on studies of their language and culture, and *Explorations* #9 was a book-length exposition of their "non-visual attitude to spatial forms and orientations," a "multi-directional space orientation, which is acoustic or auditory." (66) Not dissimilar to the bias of the Canadian perspective asserted by Kroker to be a formative aspect of Innis' and McLuhan's scholarship, Inuit cultures within the unique environment of the North were noted to orient themselves via a different distribution of their senses and language in defining the spaces they inhabited, using sound as a directional compass in environmental conditions where visual information could often range from minimal to non-existent.

The explicit formulation of the model of acoustic space was developed through the *Explorations* seminar groups, composed of a number of diverse University of Toronto faculty members from a variety of academic disciplines. Carlton Williams, a psychology professor, first presented a paper invoking the term 'auditory space' in 1954 following a seminar discussion that concerned findings Siegfried Giedion described in relation to spaces of architectural

enclosure as compared with unenclosed spaces. Williams obtained this terminology through a fellow U of T psychology faculty member, E.A. Bott, whose psychological experiments conducted on the subject had led to his formulation of the concept as a spatial field without margins or centre—as hearing occurs simultaneously from all directions at once. (Cavell 2003: 21) Williams's paper was re-written and published in *Explorations* in an amended fashion by Carpenter and McLuhan to encompass dialogue generated through the seminar group.¹⁵ Describing space as perceived by a blind person, for whom, McLuhan would write in *Counterblast*, “all things are sudden”—revealing not only a formative aspect of such a spatial form, but also a metaphoric truth in the powers of forms of artistic insight—this insight provided McLuhan with evidence that “*space had an existence outside the realm of the visual*” (Cavell 2003: 21, italics in original)—a model he correlated with the new physics of relativity and quantum mechanics, which he considered to represent “an auditory domain” (1962: 27) “made up of, and held together by, resonant interfaces” (McLuhan and Szklarek, eds. 1999: 53), which, as Lefebvre notes, disrupted the traditional spatial model of the Renaissance and Newtonian physics with the discovery of the curvature of space. In a letter to Wyndham Lewis, December 1954, McLuhan writes:

Acoustic space is spherical. It is without bounds or vanishing points. It is structured by pitch separation and kinesthesia. It is not a container. It is not hollowed out. It is the space in which men live before the invention of

¹⁵ Williams would later leave the *Explorations* group over this incident. This is worth noting for, as Carpenter observes in a memoir, *That Not-So-Silent Sea*, acoustic space was formulated by a number of different participants, and was not of McLuhan's sole invention. That it was ascribed solely to him was largely a result of his popularization through the PR firm of Gossage and Feigen, who, as Carpenter recalls, “ignored the community of contributors [...] Instead, they assigned everything to one guru. This wasn't Marshall's doing, though he didn't object.” (Carpenter in Theall 2001: 243)

writing – that translation of the acoustic into visual. With writing men began to trust their eyes and to structure space visually. Pre-literate man does not trust his eyes very much. The magic is in sound for him, with its powers to evoke the absent. (1987: 245)

The influence of Siegfried Giedion upon the development of this model is considerable, but has been subject to few evaluations beyond Cavell, Theall, and Lefebvre, who credited Giedion with “the first initiative taken towards the development of a history of space.” (1991: 126) Giedion was an historian of art and architecture who, in 1940, assisted Joyce in his escape to Switzerland from Nazi-occupied France. *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) had provided the initial spark of revelation within the *Explorations* group based on Giedion’s analysis which distinguished between the internally dark spaces created within Egyptian pyramids and the architecture of Ancient Greece, which formed visible, light-filled spatial containers. McLuhan writes, “*Space, Time and Architecture* was one of the great events of my lifetime. Giedion gave us a language for tackling the structural world of architecture and artifacts of many kinds in the ordinary environment.” (1987: 131) Cavell contends Giedion’s subsequent work, *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948), “stands most fully behind *The Mechanical Bride* [...] its insistent paralleling of mechanical with artistic production.” (2003: 37) In this text, Giedion asserts the role of the artist “functions a great deal like an inventor or a scientific discoverer: all three seek new relations between man and his world” (Giedion 1969: 432), and that the subject of this discovery in the contemporary era was within tensions of spatial relationships. The conclusion drawn by Giedion is consonant with McLuhan:

Like the scientist, the artist has come to recognize that classic conceptions of space and volumes are limited and one-sided [...] The essence of space as it is conceived today is its many-sidedness, the infinite potentiality for relations within it. Exhaustive description of an area from one point of reference is, accordingly, impossible; its character changes with the point from which it is viewed. (435-6)

Theall writes that it was Giedion's approach in this work that presented McLuhan with "a specific parallel use of the arts, particularly architecture, as an aesthetic method for examining [...] the rise of electro-mechanization." (2001: 55) A central thesis is that a factor unifying the history of mechanization can be observed within the attempt to capture and preserve movement, a process culminating in the birth of the cinema, which Giedion saw as most emblematic and characteristic of the modern era.

The analysis of the cinema as paradigmatic of modernity and the notion of its essence predating its invention is a view shared by other theorists of the moving image, including André Bazin, who discussed "the myth of total cinema" as an antecedent of its technological manifestation—"the concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven."

(Bazin 1967: 17) Giedion's contemporary, Walter Benjamin, expressed the uniqueness of the cinema as a medium of both artistic and industrial nature in his Artwork essay (1936)—in which he further contended that mechanization and reproducibility had permanently altered the ontological nature of works of art—and observed correlations between the cinema and the tradition of architecture in its capacity for providing "*matter* for simultaneous collective reception" in his essay "A Brief History of Photography." In *Harmony + Dissent: Film and Avant-*

garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century (2008), R. Bruce Elder advances the proposal that all other artistic movements within the era of the cinema's invention (among them Constructivism, Futurism, Surrealism, and Cubism) are best contextualized within their relationship to the development of this dynamic new medium to fully understand the significance of their radical innovations—"the new Paragone has been constructed and cinema turned out to be the *ottima arte*." (Elder 2008: 246) Martin Jay notes the *camera obscura*, which led to the development of single-point Renaissance perspective, and prefigures the optic paradigm of the cinema, held significant influence upon the philosophical models of Descartes and Locke as a metaphor for consciousness. (1994: 85) Jonathan Crary, in analyzing this metaphor, observes: "The orderly and calculable penetration of light rays through the single opening of the camera corresponds to the flooding of the mind by the light of reason." (1990: 43) McLuhan paralleled the fifteenth century's vivid interest in the *camera obscura* with the simultaneous development of the Gutenberg printing press, finding the two interrelated despite the correspondence being overlooked by historians: "printing is itself just such a *camera obscura*, yielding a private vision of the movements of others." (McLuhan 1959: 343) As such, Cavell notes the camera obscura "represented the supreme dominance of the visual among the modalities of sensual perception" (2003: 71-2), which McLuhan saw as a consequence of print, and thus forms a "telling index of the sensorium's history" (71):

It was also at this point, historically, that vision became part of physiological inquiry. [...] Paradoxically, to materialize the visual was to return it to the realm of the sensory from the transcendent realm of the

intellect. No longer did the visual have separate and universal status. It became one of a number of individual senses. (72)

The course of development of the fragmented visually-biased conception of spatiality from the realm of sensory interplay—such that “the visual field now replaced the visual world” (Jay 1994: 55)—can be said to have reached a significant turning point with the introduction of lenses to ‘right’ the images of the *camera obscura*, which initially were projected upside-down. As the human eye naturally re-orders this vision kinesthetically within the *sensus communis*, the introduction of an external lens to accomplish the task marks a crucial stage of separation through which the tactility of sight is numbed via technological interface (thus leading closer towards the actualization of the cinema). Giedion’s interpretation of the effect of mechanization was to break apart “organic values of space” (Cavell 2003: 38), resulting in “spatial disintegration” (Giedion 1969: 342).

McLuhan notes that a “great paradox of the Gutenberg era” is that “its seeming activism [movement] is cinematic in the strict movie sense. It is a series of static shots or ‘fixed points of view’ in homogeneous relationship.” (1962: 127) Yet, in *Explorations 4* (1955), his analysis of the cinema as mechanization of movement contains a new, unique potential, despite its further permeation of the interiority of sense experience, through its reconfiguration of sensory balance:

The MECHANIZATION of writing mechanized the visual-acoustic metaphor on which all civilization rests; created the classroom and mass education, the modern press and telegraph. It was the original assembly line [...] movies and TV complete the cycle of mechanization to the human sensorium. With the omnipresent ear and moving eye, we have abolished writing [...] we have regained our WHOLENESS... on... a cosmic plane.
[caps in original]

While McLuhan observes, "many of the conventions of literacy are built into even non-verbal forms like film" (1962: 50), given that "print teaches the habit of sequential analysis and of fragmentation of all motion into static units" (2003: 3), units from which the frames of the cinema found their origin (a genesis from which the filmmaker Hollis Frampton, in his essay "For a Metahistory of the Cinema", observed aligns film with the tradition of Newtonian physics), McLuhan further contended that, as elements of the new perceptual environment generated by electricity, "Linearity [...] is not characteristic of radio or television or movies." (2003: 36) McLuhan's understanding of the cinema is thus predicated upon the epistemic regime of perceptual codes embedded within culture by print technology, while also simultaneously permeated by the new and integrative elements of electricity:

By revolving a sequence of such static or pictorial spaces at a sufficient speed, the illusion of organic wholeness, or interplay of spaces, is created. Thus, the wheel finally becomes the means of moving our culture away from the machine. (1962: 58)

For Walter Benjamin, whose *Artwork* essay held forth great hope for the revolutionary potential inherent within the politicization of cinema aesthetics (informed from his encounter with the Constructivist sound-image montage of filmmakers such as Vertov), it was precisely this interplay between space and time which heralded the potential for photography to reveal "for the first time the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis." (Benjamin 2005: 511-512) He writes:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended [...] Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than

opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man [...] The camera introduces us to unconscious options as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin 1969: 236)

In his essay "Sorcery and the Cinema" (written c.1928 and first published in 1949), Antonin Artaud describes the occult nature of the cinematic experience in similar spatially and sensory transformative terms:

even the driest and most banal image is transformed on the screen [...] The cinema is essentially the revealer of a whole occult life with which it puts us into direct contact [...] The cinema has arrived at a turning-point in human thought at the very moment when language loses its power to make symbols and the mind tires of the play of representations [...] And today is a great age for sorcerers and saints, greater than ever before. A whole imperceptible substance takes shape and tries to reach the light. The cinema is bringing us nearer to this substance. (Artaud, in Sitney, ed. 1978: 49-50)

McLuhan saw this potential transformation as entirely dependent on the relationship established between the apprehensions of the viewer to the nature of the medium itself. Used as a tool of standardization, McLuhan saw its effects as destructive:

In ordinary perception men perform the miracle of recreating within themselves – in their interior faculties – the exterior world. This miracle is the work of the *nous poietikos* or of the agent intellect – that is, the poetic or creative process. [...] And in this creative work that is perception and cognition, we experience immediately that dance of Being within our faculties which provides the incessant intuition of Being. I can only regard the movie as the mechanization and distortion of this cognitive miracle by which we recreate within ourselves the exterior world. But whereas cognition provides that dance of the intellect which is the analogical sense of Being, the mechanical medium has tended to provide merely a dream world which is a substitute for reality rather than a means of proving reality. (McLuhan and Szklarek, eds. 1999: 165)

However, in the same interview, McLuhan quotes at great length an essay

written by the Italian neorealist Cesare Zavattini:

The cinema's overwhelming desire to see, to analyse, its hunger for reality, is an act of concrete homage towards other people, towards what is happening and existing in the world. [...] Substantially, then, the question today is, instead of turning imaginary situations into 'reality' and trying to make them look 'true,' to make things as they are, almost by themselves, create their own special significance. [...] I believe that the world goes on getting worse because we are not truly aware of reality. The most authentic position anyone can take up today is to engage himself in tracing the roots of this problem. [...] As the cinema's responsibility also comes from its enormous power, it should try to make every frame of film count, by which I mean that it should penetrate more and more into the manifestations and the essence of reality. The cinema only affirms its moral responsibility when it approaches reality in this way. (Cesare Zavattini, *Sight and Sound*, October-December 1953, pp. 64-65)

It is this approach—"suggesting a humanist rather than an aspirin approach to the film" through the penetration, rather than obfuscation of sensory reality—that many avant-garde filmmakers sought through a diversity of aesthetic means to pursue, concurrent to McLuhan's formulation of acoustic space and media effects. It is through these works we uncover a further interpretation of the influence of acoustic space on perceptual environments, as artist-antennae feedback evolving the poetics that inspired McLuhan into new language forms.

3. Visualizing acoustic space: Canadian avant-garde cinema 1948-80

From its outset, avant-garde cinema found itself neatly situated within a multitude of intersecting Venn diagrams shaped by various artistic disciplines, a design that placed it simultaneously at the forefront of aesthetic investigations within the twentieth century, and also rendered it nearly invisible to historians, critics and aesthetic theorists. As a visual medium, cinema is rarely considered as analogous to painting; nor is it often acknowledged as a serious modality for photographers. While its nature is as an electronic hybrid medium, avant-garde cinema is nonetheless generally neglected from contemporary analyses of 'new media' works, given its analog character (though digital effects were pioneered within it, prior to the invention of computer software for still and moving images). As a medium of a highly immaterial character, cinema is nonetheless existent outside the general bounds of other performative art practice—such as music, dance, or other forms of performance art—and is generally therefore sold less to collectors and galleries (to the financial loss of the film artists, whose expenses are often significantly higher than artists who work in other media). Cinema is less accessible to reproduction within texts than painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, collage, or other visual arts due to its integral temporality—these latter media can be more easily represented in books on artistic theory and history, and most such instances which trace the lineage of art in the twentieth century tend to therefore neglect the 'underground' cinema of the avant-garde within their scopes. The linkage of its audio-visual components places cinema outside most conceptions of music, and its dominant technological interface has

similarly obfuscated its resonances to dance and poetry. Furthermore, the disparate character of its technological platforms for recording and playback has ensured that its greatest enthusiasts are limited in their capacity to experience it in its intended form. The ideal space of the cinema is not easily come by, given its institutional quality, and the complexities embedded in many of the works generated in the medium over the past century have often not been met with contemplation equal to those of their makers due to the difficulty of creating a space for their reception. One might draw a parallel to modernist poetry, and suggest if its readers were only granted rare and temporary instances to read Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* or *The Maximus Poems* of Charles Olson, then it would be of course naturally assured that these works would stagnate and remain unnoticed for their glories, perhaps even eventually expiring and fading away entirely without sufficient appreciation or analysis. Such is the case with many works of avant-garde cinema, especially within the North American tradition. Yet this was not always so, and as the first two examples in my analysis demonstrate, such works at times did in fact hold capacity for mass appeal. The cinema of the avant-garde can even be said to prefigure many of the contemporary styles that dominate the current mainstream audio-visual culture of collage and the remix; as McLuhan asserted, artists are the figures most sensitive to the barometric pressure of the culture, and take up signs of the encroaching environment by processing them into new forms of aesthetic experience. However, many of these works today exist without due acknowledgement of their technical and aesthetic developments, and while less-

than-mainstream Canadian film artists like R. Bruce Elder and David Rimmer have recently won major cultural prizes¹⁶, their works still can be said to exist outside widespread recognition due to the lack of availability for their viewing outside of specialized screenings, which occur only in a few cities and often take place only once or twice a decade in forums dedicated to the cinematic art.

However, it is also possible to suggest a further reason why these works have not been digested by mainstream culture—namely, their vanguard nature and their radical experimentations with image, sound, and language, as well as the effects of these modalities upon consciousness in providing experiences beyond the normal categories and boundaries of society. It is my contention that such artistic experimentations offer forth experiences denied by the conditions of modernity (dominated by a visually-biased history built on print culture) and that the experiences found within the works of avant-garde film artists relate strongly to the aesthetics of acoustic space that McLuhan saw as returning intrinsically to cultural forms in the last century through the proliferation of electricity as a new communications paradigm. That these artworks exist simultaneously as visual, auditory and tactile aesthetic experiences provides, in their analysis, a means forward for the comprehension of not only the aesthetics of acoustic space, but the evolution of language as it evolves from print into an electric environment of light and sound.

¹⁶ Elder was a recipient of the Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts in 2007, the first artist to work solely within the medium of cinema to have won that award; Rimmer was a recipient in 2011.

Norman McLaren

“Beatrice Warde has recently described in *Alphabet* an electric display of letters painted by light. It was a Norman McLaren movie advertisement of which she asks: ‘Do you wonder that I was late for the theatre that night, when I tell you that I saw the two club-footed Egyptian A’s... walking off arm-in-arm with the unmistakable swagger of a music-hall comedy-team? I saw base-serifs pulled together as if by ballet shoes, so that the letters tripped off literally *sur les pointes*... after forty centuries of the *necessarily static* Alphabet, I saw what its members could do in the fourth dimension of Time, “flux,” movement. You may well say that I was electrified.’”

— *Understanding Media*, p. 156

Perhaps one of the most captivating and widely appealing examples of a cinematic treatment of acoustic space is Norman McLaren’s *Begone Dull Care* (1948). Despite the fact that it was made six years prior to the formulation of acoustic space theory by the *Explorations* group, its inclusion in this study is nonetheless of merit, for it serves to further validate McLuhan’s affirmation of the centrality of the role of artistic vision in its accurate assessment of the sensory environment: in an analysis of the influence of acoustic space upon the cinema, McLaren—a Scottish immigrant to Canada who experimented in a wide range of media, including different means of filmic animation (painting directly upon film, optical printing, utilizing photographed images as a soundtrack), as well as other formats including light-boards (the above quotation is likely taken from Warde’s reaction to a Times Square work McLaren was commissioned to make by the Canadian bureau of tourism)—may be cited as an electric-era example of effect preceding cause, or coexisting simultaneously with it. It is therefore surprising to observe that seemingly no critical writings on McLuhan have taken notice of this corollary, despite McLuhan’s mention of McLaren’s work in *Understanding*

Media, the propensity for alliterative punning between their surnames, and given that there are few artists in the twentieth century who experimented so daringly, consistently and prolifically within the cinematic medium.¹⁷ The innovative animation techniques developed by McLaren during his tenure at the National Film Board form a highly unique and original canon of visual experimentation within the history of twentieth century cinema, though a substantial reason for McLaren's success was his continued support and patronage from the NFB—an issue many other artists of the moving image had far less opportunity and luck with. *Begone Dull Care*, made in collaboration with Evelyn Lambert, fuses direct painting by hand onto the surface of the filmstrip with a jazz soundtrack provided by the Oscar Peterson Trio in a synaesthetic and polyphonic union of the senses. The visuals of the film range from patterned pulsations of colour and form to occasional fleeting symbols—the tree of life is represented in one fleeting frame, in a gesture that, in its intentional obscurity to modes of conscious, linear, scanning perception, alludes to the syncretistic nature of perceptual awareness. (Ehrenzweig 1971) These images are linked in stylistic approach through modes of synchronization and counter-point to the music of the soundtrack. During the second section of the film, in which the raging jazz rhythms of the first major section subside into a more contemplative piano solo, the film shifts from its display of radically pulsating colour and texture to a simple motif of white

¹⁷ However, despite the unique character of his experiments, McLaren was not alone in his experimental aesthetic approach and in fact shared common ground with many other artistic contemporaries—among them Len Lye, Harry Smith, Oskar Fischinger, and Stan Brakhage. All of these artists displayed strong interests in not only the sensory experiences of non-literate cultures, but in transcending the limitations of sensory experience within their own culture. While it would be fruitful to explore the relations between these makers and the ways their aesthetic strategies further compliment McLuhan's conception of acoustic space, I am forced by more linear spatial considerations to reserve these comments for another time.

scratched vertical lines on a black background. These lines dance onscreen in correspondence with the rhythms and chord progressions of the piano, until they culminate in a vertical grid of lines. This tension is immediately ruptured by the rapturous third sequence, which is predominated by Lambert's more textural work on the film surface, producing patterns of light and dark noise that registers on the edge between order and chaos. The rapid editing increases, and it is in this section that the tactility of the images in the work are most thoroughly evoked, through use of reticulation and diffuse, non-representational patterns which render the entire scope of the frame into a state of constant flux. Cavell's analysis of a film McLuhan completed in 1973, *Picnic in Space*, which utilized 'boogie-woogie' piano music and visual compositions by Piet Mondrian, reveals affinities with the approach of *Begone Dull Care*, as well as other films by McLaren:

McLuhan takes this as a representation of acoustic space in its allusion to a discontinuous musical form that is analogous to the discontinuities of the post-Euclidean space [...] The painting's musical interface is a further reminder that three-dimensional space is only one kind of space and that acoustic, or non-linear, space exists in the realm of sight as well as of hearing and tactility generally. (Cavell 2003: 3)

McLaren's other films demonstrate similar aesthetic strategies that invoke the interplay of the senses: from other hand-painted films (*Boogie Doodle*, 1940; *Hen Hop*, 1942; *Blinkety Blank*, 1955), experiments in synchronizing exact image/sound transformations (*Lines Horizontal*, 1962; *Mosaic*, 1965; *Synchromy*, 1971; *Spheres*, 1969, with René Jodoin, set to Bach performed by Glenn Gould), and through optical printing (*Pas de Deux*, 1967; *Narcissus*, 1983). In *Synchromy*, an image field of squares reproduces the visual components of sine

wave forms that make up the sound track, a feature McLaren used to score many of his films through the tactile process of photographing printed cards with different configurations of shapes to produce counter-point compositions of varying tones. In *Pas De Deux*, one of McLaren's more figurative, photographic works, optical printing extends the gestures of two dancers to reveal the hidden dimension of temporality within their movement. The effect extends the tactile resonance of the dancers' gestures through the multiplication of their visual forms into the fourth dimension of time, thus mapping it spatially within the pictorial frame, and at times generating figures which bear the complexity in form of multi-armed fantastical beings, as limbs are multiplied through step printing and a simple rotation of movement. McLaren's use of the Narcissus myth as the subject for his last completed works reveals a further affinity with McLuhan's discourse on media effects.

Arthur Lipsett

Arthur Lipsett was another practitioner whose tenure at the NFB provided a fertile opportunity for startlingly innovative developments in the language of cinema—in this case, towards the development of the found-footage collage film.¹⁸ Bearing close relation to the mosaic nature of the newspaper medium, and often utilizing material directly repurposed from audio recordings and stock footage of a newsreel and/or documentary nature, Lipsett's films have retained

¹⁸ As with McLaren, it should be noted these developments were established concurrently by other filmmakers, such as Bruce Conner (*A Movie*, 1958) and Joseph Cornell (*Rose Hobart*, 1936).

much of their initial impact; it is as though Lipsett, in the early 1960s, had already anticipated the effects of the television remote control and the introduction of a hyperlinked media environment in which still and moving images coexist within a dynamic tension. While certain qualities historicize his films within the period of their making (ie. black and white images, dated fashion styles), many elements of Lipsett's work are as relevant today as in the 1960s (anxiety over the influence of media, conditions of urban life, protest movements, technological progress, mass destruction). However, it is the form of Lipsett's films that maintains an entirely fresh character—a freshness McLuhan observes as a crucial and essential role for successful works of art:

The job of the artist is dislocation of sensibility to prevent us from becoming adjusted to total environment, and to becoming the servant and robots of those environments. That may sound paradoxical. The phrase is from Rimbaud: 'un ... dérèglement de tous les sens.' The job of the artist is to upset all the senses, and thus to provide new vision and new powers of adjusting to and relating to new situations. (2003: 223)

This quality is achieved in Lipsett's films by a consistent use of disjunctive, vertical montage that places image and sound in counterpoint to one another through a series of radical juxtapositions, translating elements of the paratactical structures found within the poetics of the modernist into a cinematic form. This innovative visual language evoked within first film, *Very Nice, Very Nice* (1962), earned him international acclaim¹⁹ and the work was widely distributed across Canada, with 200 prints in circulation by 1970. The visual and sonic collage-

¹⁹ Stanley Kubrick offered to hire Lipsett to edit the trailer for *Dr. Strangelove* (1962) after viewing *Very Nice, Very Nice*, an offer Lipsett dismissed, but whose final product nonetheless bears his influence. George Lucas was similarly influenced by Lipsett's work, crediting *21-87* with inspiration for 'the Force.'

based grammar of the film can be seen as having generated much of the techniques currently utilized within mainstream advertising and other audiovisual artifacts of pop culture such as the music video—further affirming McLuhan's counsel that the artist is most sensitive to developing environmental languages of their cultural surroundings, and that the materials they create are meant to acclimatize a broader audience to new incoming sensory changes and affects. Lipsett addresses within his films the substantial concerns and anxieties faced by modern Western civilization in the twentieth century by utilizing an aesthetic tactical approach best described as taking the form of a head-on collision. The rift between the modern scientific-rationalist worldview and the traditions of religion and faith-based apprehension of the world, the tension encountered within societies engaged in simultaneous war and protest, the possibility of complete and total annihilation and its contrast with the status of the natural world, the effect of accelerated development upon social aspects of culture and communication, and the resultant pressures of these forces upon the body and the anxiety produced by the entrapment of biology within the locus of technology that renders previous forms of labour obsolete are all issues developed in great detail within Lipsett's films—often within a single edit, which generates sparks of ideas and insight in the same manner Carpenter observed McLuhan combined quotes and insights from different sources and traditions.

The alienation portrayed in Lipsett's films bespeaks of the collective consciousness of modernity, rendered into a frothing, manic and schizophrenic state through the mechanized expression of all forms of human gesture and

communication. As such, a great deal of the found materials worked into his films evoke liminal spaces held between instances of communication, revealing the extent to which audiovisual technologies serve to impose their orderings on all aspects of reality, yet simultaneously fall short of providing a full or coherent representation of reality in its truthfully messy and dynamic state. Many shots are often outtakes that would never appear under normal circumstance within the conventional media environment of hegemonic discourse in Lipsett's day; the speakers who provide vocalizations on the soundtrack are often caught between takes in error, or speaking offhand. These speakers and images also serve to feature a comprehensive index of commentary upon the subjects represented—among them are included McLuhan himself and Northrop Frye, alongside images of everything from politicians, jazz musicians, boxers, anonymous protesters, mushroom clouds, Arthur Schopenhauer (*Very Nice, Very Nice*), a monkey being shot into space (*A Trip Down Memory Lane*, 1965), and a wrecking ball intercut with sunlit trees (*Freefall*, 1964)—as such, they combine medium and message in a fashion suggesting Lipsett possessed a strong understanding of McLuhan's critique of media.

A consistent characteristic of Lipsett's work can be found in the recurrent instances of rupture and dissonance that run parallel to alternative readings of images and montages as interfacing through the resonance of their form and content. These instances are generated through a vertically oriented montage of disparate elements, which emphasizes simultaneously the acoustic, tactile and resonant features of modern existence within a re-tribalized, electrified world—a

world in which everything is related to everything else. Among the elements deconstructed within this process is the very notion of a unified self or subject, as the sensory effects of multiple vantage points and perspectives ranging from the sensory effects of multiple vantage points and perspectives ranging from personal/intimate to objective/absolute unfold amidst a series of anonymous characters suffering from a loss of identity. In *Very Nice, Very Nice* and *21-87* (1963), recurrent shots present individuals staring off into the sky or far beyond the frame, gazing at nothing the viewer is able to apprehend. Additional shots intercut wild and captive animals exhibiting similar traits, suggesting an increasingly obsolescent biological perspective in a world becoming more and more dominated by the imperative of technological force. In *21-87*, this process of dehumanization is emphasized by a recurrent voiceover proclaiming that a human can be identified merely as a number. Not only is this is nothing to be troubled by, the voice assures us—it is, in fact, meant to be understood quite an affirming state of affairs. The state of alienation with which *21-87* leaves the viewer (a state experienced chronically by Lipsett, who suffered mental health issues and eventually took his own life) undercuts any hope for taking such an assertion for its 'literal' value, asserting a mutli-perspectivalist and ironic reading of the work that may be considered characteristic of all of Lipsett's films, and is a stance found within much collage-based (and postmodernist) art. As McLuhan observed, the age of electricity produces an age of anxiety, in which technological extension necessitates numbing as a survival mechanism. Lipsett's films confront us with the extent to which we have allowed this numbing to be enacted, providing an opportunity for us to pause and consider the implications.

David Rimmer

Many of the films of David Rimmer are characterized by the intervention of the intermediary device of the optical printer, by which the majority of his work is created, often by manipulating pre-existent material to reveal new properties. This process of collage relates to the work of Lipsett but transforms it substantially by supplanting a distinctly different aesthetic approach. Through the process of re-photography, the images of Rimmer's films present a dual nature: as images whose ontological nature are that of a photograph, whilst simultaneously being, as well, a photograph of a photograph. *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) examines the tactile and material nature of the film medium through re-photographing historical stock footage and stretching out duration by great extent, through which the aberrant nature of the film strip degraded by the passage of time is exposed for close scrutiny as its frames shift past in an unnaturally slow manner which provides an anti-environment to the traditional visual impulse of the cinema as illusionistic moving image, allowing for an expanded reading of the medium's tactile nature of each individually manifested, slightly-changing frame. The effect produces a polyphonic visual layer resulting in a multisensory reading of the film as a visual and tactile field of intersecting vectors, further enhanced by the lack of soundtrack to accompany the images and distract from their full, multi-sensory apprehension.

In *Treefall* (1970), *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapping* (1970), and *Waiting for the Queen* (1973), the footage utilized is looped, thus explicitly recycling time within the duration of the work. In the first two examples cited,

images are processed via the use of filters and matting, thus shifting the image to possess an iconic nature, enhancing the already audile-tactile qualities of their subjects—a falling tree, and a woman handling a large roll of wrapping material in an industrial setting. While *Treefall*, with its black and white phased image, is highly reductive, it manages to achieve a state of polyphony through its multi-layered composition of a single brief shot which is looped identically over and over, but set out of phase temporally so as to produce visual results that trace as varying outlines the material differences between varying layers—a moving image which bears the visual resonant trait of time through its experiencing as a contoured surface. *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapping* (a title inducing a tactile metaphor on both the image represented within the work, and also the experience of watching a film projection) by contrast offers a great deal of sensory stimuli, from its alternating and occasionally stroboscopic use of colour and layers that generate a synesthetic encounter in the building chasm of resonance between the sustained loops of the iconic image of the female worker and the sound track, which repeats a single loop within a similarly destructive fashion, as its temporality is drawn out further and sustained and a new form of visual experience is rendered possible. The ending of this looped experience is somewhat abrupt and without closure beyond the final, highest point of climax whereby the image ends whilst still caught within the same cycle as when the film began; the soundtrack, reduced from a recognizable factory sound to drone over its course, slowly fading out over the credits but seemingly never reaching its natural conclusion. Rimmer further interrogates the cinematic possibilities of a

polyphonic image in *Canadian Pacific I & II* (1974-5), a diptych in which two shots from the same window, masked by tape—a tactile gesture designed to render explicit the frame of the window, and thereby, the screen—unfold, side by side, thus creating a mosaic of simultaneous spatial repetition and temporal multiplicity. Rimmer also addresses distinctions between the film and video image in *As Seen on TV* (1986), which uses similar aesthetic strategies to those of *Variations*, effacing representational details through filtering to further the iconic nature of the images derived from the mosaic screen of a cathode-ray screen, re-rendered as interwoven colour fields built around cyclical patterns.

Michael Snow

Michael Snow is a Canadian artist whose distinctive use of the numerous and disparate media forms he has worked within over the past five decades has resulted in his international acclaim as one of the greatest living artists in the world today. The cinema is no exception within the extent of his influence. Snow has utilized his diversity of affiliations and expertise within different artistic forms to view his work simultaneously from a vantage point inside and outside traditional aesthetic considerations, providing a critical distance similar in nature to Kroker's assertion of the marginality (and therefore richness) of the perspective of Canadian thought surrounding the discourse of technology:

My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a painter, music by a filmmaker, paintings by a sculptor, sculpture by a filmmaker, films by a musician, music by a sculptor... sometimes they all work together. Also, many of my paintings have been done by a painter, sculpture by a sculptor, films by a filmmaker, music by a musician. There

is a tendency towards purity in all of these media as separate endeavours.²⁰

Resonant media combinations that generate inter-textual spaces (and, in doing so, challenge traditional or assumed modes of sensory experience) are found in many examples of Snow's photography—among them *Authorization* (1969), *Midnight Blue* (1973-74), *Plus Tard* (1977) and *Door* (1979). Among Snow's early work, the *Walking Woman* (1961-7) series presented a range of sculptures, paintings, and collages in a variety of material treatments based upon the use and reuse of one single motif, the same consistently repeated stencil. As such, these works form a systematic demonstration of the respects by which the medium of their creation invokes unique and often highly different messages. *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964, the same year as the publication of *Understanding Media*), is a film based on the figure of the Walking Woman as photographed in a variety of contexts in the urban spaces of Manhattan—contrasting the depth-based pictorial space of the photographic image with the flat pictorial space of the *Woman* to form a mosaic—as well as juxtaposed with human subjects within an interior setting within the film's second section. The soundtrack presents a dynamic free jazz ensemble that forms a distinctly heated counterpoint to the cool nature of the images, thus distinguishing between the eye and ear “control” of the film, and how these forms respectively affect the senses. Snow has observed that this title implies “a simultaneity between image

²⁰ Michael Snow, 1967, National Gallery of Canada website:
http://www.gallery.ca/cybermuse/showcases/meet/artist_e.jsp?artistid=5140. Retrieved 2012-05-07.

and sound”²¹ from which we may derive that the space with which this film is preoccupied is indeed a mosaic realm beyond the fragmented and isolated visual sense, but rather a vision embodied within sound and kinetic gesture—a subject brought into a fore-grounded tension by the static, silent and otherwise immobile nature of its principal subject.

The extent to which the language of cinema forms a discourse affecting our model of reality and consciousness can be seen as an underlying issue within all of Snow's films, and forms the basis of McLuhan's approach to the study of media forms. In her seminal essay “Towards Snow,” Annette Michelson notes this correlation—an extension of the philosophical discourse that surrounded the camera obscura five centuries earlier:

There is a metaphor recurrent in contemporary discourse on the nature of consciousness: that of cinema. And there are cinematic works which present themselves as analogues of consciousness in its constitutive and reflexive modes, as though inquiry into the nature and processes of experience had found in this century's art form, a striking, a uniquely direct presentational mode [...] Epistemological inquiry and cinematic experience converge, as it were, in reciprocal mimesis. (in Sitney ed., 1978: 172-173)

R. Bruce Elder has observed in his study of avant-garde Canadian cinema, *Image and Identity* (1989), that a great deal of Canadian artwork historically has assumed a highly Cartesian visual character, evinced by the need to craft an image to represent (and thus embody) the disturbingly vast quality of the landscapes with which Canadians were historically confronted through the frontier experience. (Elder 1989: 1) This experience of vast space would

²¹ Interview with Athina Rachel Tsangari, *Austin Chronicle*, 17 Sept., 1999: <http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/1999-09-17/73924/>. Retrieved 2012-05-17.

undoubtedly have influenced the trajectory of McLuhan's insights concerning space, given his upbringing in Winnipeg, Manitoba—a city surrounded by vast prairie lands. The films of Snow find a place within this Canadian tradition of the necessity of forming a picture of the external world, as they are marked by their consistent use of basic photographic principles to present images of commonplace nature—everyday objects such as rooms, doors, windows, and other natural formations that populate everyday reality. However, this nature is subverted through spatial and temporal processes that undercut, subvert and transcend the visual aspects of these representations. The spaces permeated by Snow's films are further complicated by their status as permeated by technological conditions of modernity, which characterize them as, to a large degree, invisible, like consciousness. In a letter to P. Adams Sitney and Jonas Mekas from 1968, Snow describes the body of his work as an attempt to move beyond the realm of superficial perception:

attempts to transcend through motion [...] a kind of demonstration or lesson in perception and in concepts of law and order and their transcendence [...] My films are (to me) attempts to suggest the mind to a certain state or certain states of consciousness. (in Sitney ed., 1978: 175)

This letter concludes with the statement, "waves are the visible registers of invisible forces," (179) and one might argue that, in his approach towards the investigation of consciousness in his cinematic work, Snow has been necessarily forced to turn beyond the realm of the visual to embody the nature of his inquiry. To this extent, motion and duration form centrally determining structural aspects of his films; structures which he has utilized as organizational principles in such an entirely unique and radical manner within the development of cinematic

language that his contemporary Hollis Frampton once remarked that knowing Snow was comparable to knowing the man who carved the Sphinx. (***) Among the innovations in Snow's films are systemized investigations of discrete aspects of filmic movement: the zoom in *Wavelength* (1967); the pans in *Standard Time* (1967) and *<->* (aka *Back and Forth*, 1969); the 360-degree rotations of *La Region Centrale* (1971); the extended still images of *One Second in Montreal* (19**) and *A Casing Shelved* (1970); the tracking shots of *Breakfast (Table Top Dolly)* (1976), and *Seated Figures* (1988). In each instance, the resultant images necessitate in their apprehension an understanding of their past and future tense, in addition to their present configuration—a kinesthetic relationship of duration.

The spiritual character of Snow's work—which requires a necessary shift from ordinary conscious perception to a contemplative mode not dissimilar from ritualized modes of trance or prayer—is elusive and missed by many observers, for there is little within his films that points directly towards it. Snow has described *Wavelength* as “a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings and esthetic ideas... a time monument.” (Sitney, ed. 1978: 173) and there are many aspects of the film which echo a McLuhan-esque treatment of media forms, from the invocation of the radio environment at the start of the film and the subsequent transformation (after the unexplained death of an un-introduced character) of the soundtrack to a pure sine wave tone that gradually increases in oscillation as the camera slowly progresses over the course of the film to rest on a photograph of ocean waves on the wall of the loft apartment in which the entirety of the film takes place. This transformation from three-dimensional to

two-dimensional space places the nature of the "time monument" within a space that is, at its end, no longer fully codified by traditional perspective (though it does present an analogical model for the film projection itself), a visual strategy supported by numerous ruptures where the image is overtaken by bursts of colour and occasional super-impositions from past and present. (A more recent version, *WVLNT: Wavelength for Those Who Don't Have the Time*, 2003, takes this strategy to an even further degree by superimposing the first, second and third 15 minute sections of the film on top of each other, to produce a highly complex image field which bears much relation to Cubist pictorial space.)

However, perhaps the most explicit work in Snow's filmography to deal with the development of a model of acoustic/mosaic space is his 260-minute long epic, *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (with thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974), an examination of the perceptual problems presented by sound within the cinema that possesses an almost-encyclopedic nature (taking as inspiration from the work of Diderot²²) that presents a mosaic character through its episodic format. Snow has remarked the film

[...] derives its form and the nature of its possible effects from its being built from the inside [...] i.e. the frame and the recorded syllable. Thus its 'dramatic' element derives not only from a representation of what may involve us generally in life but from considerations of the nature of recorded speech in relation to moving light-images of people."²³

In one of the most captivating sequences, fellow Canadian artist Dennis Burton

²² Diderot's defense against the challenge posed by Molyneux to Locke concerning the abilities of a newly sighted blind person's capacity to distinguish objects (on the grounds of the primacy of the sense of tactility and the support of a *sensus communis*) must be noted in connection to the subject at hand, though there is no room to develop it further here.

²³ <http://tiff.net/CANADIANFILMENCYCLOPEDIA/content/films/rameaus-nephew-by-diderot>. Retrieved 2012-05-05.

addresses the camera with a monologue seemingly composed entirely of gibberish statements, without ascertainable words beyond basic phonemes that float beyond the cognitive grasp of the viewer. As he speaks, his image is bombarded by bursts of colour that fill the frame and bespeak of an interconnected, synaesthetic relationship between sound and image (and, therefore, speech, hearing and vision). Near the end of the sequence, we hear Snow pose a question from off-screen: "Would you say that reality has the same limitations as our measurements of it?" This question bears essentially the same proposition of the relationship between language and meaning as that of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Burton responds in the affirmative, and at this point we are able to begin to comprehend what transformations have been enacted upon his speech (letters from different words have been adjusted to form new word combinations, rendering their previous 'content' unintelligible), but at this point, the clue is too late to be of much help in further decoding anything before the sequence concludes. The lack of ability to comprehend Burton's statements undercuts the artifice of the synchronized nature of sound and image—emphasized by the use of color strobes in simultaneity with his utterances—an artifice so endemic within most forms of cinema that it is difficult for the average 'moviegoer' to consider for a moment that there might exist any alternative form of representation that would not somehow be 'incorrect.' Yet, as Snow pointedly reveals, this convention remains entirely an artifice; the film itself is merely and always by necessity a projected image of light with sound emitted from a nearby loudspeaker, and never from the mouths of the luminous and effervescent figures

whose appearances are projected upon the screen's two-dimensional surface.

This relationship of sound and image is uniquely transformed from conventional presentation, in which the synchronization of elements are dominated by the logic of the 'realistic' image, whose authenticity is without question and whose illusion is supplemented through editing strategies that serve to bolster faith in the Renaissance-coded metaphor of cinematic space as a window of illusion, and space as a visual field that can be mapped, divided and conquered.

This complex relationship between image, sound and language resonates within each of Snow's films (as well as the other elements of his artistic *oeuvre*) in ways that are systematically unique and characteristically similar in their ingenuity. In *So Is This* (1982), the relationship unfolds as an entirely text-based experience—the entire course of the film presents, one at a time, a series of words that form a series of statements which present further investigations into the nature of the artifice of the experience. As these words play out in an entirely silent theatre, the linearity of the printed word, fused with the linear interpretation of time presented by cinematic duration, reverses into a space where each word resonates within its own space, and the forcing of connections is left to occur entirely within the internally kinesthetic realm of the viewer's consciousness. By contrast, films such as **Corpus Callosum* (2002), and Snow's collaboration with Carl Brown, *To Lavoisier, Who Died in the Reign of Terror* (1991), exhibit mosaic forms in which the representational qualities of the image are of a polyphonic, multi-layered nature, as complex tableaux are affected through photochemical and digital processing which enhances the tactile nature of their representations.

Joyce Wieland

Joyce Wieland was Snow's partner of many years and an equally astute multimedia artist, whose artistic production encompassed a wide range of tactile based media, including quilts and collages incorporating text and physical gesture within mosaic spaces often centered upon uniquely Canadian issues (*Reason Over Passion*, 1968; *O Canada Animation*, 1970). Wieland's work in the cinema is also highly unique and idiosyncratic, approaching the medium as a collage-based format for engaging simultaneous modes of vision by blending structural elements such as text or geometric superimpositions over a highly visceral shooting style intimately bound to the physical expression of her body.

In *Water Sark* (1965-6), Wieland crafts a self-portrait within her domestic environment by reflecting her self and other objects through a variety of prisms and surfaces. The visual distortions caused by this approach produce skewed visions of objects in which shape is developed within a dynamically deterministic relationship of tactile, kinesthetic influences via Wieland's manipulation of the objects depicted. This artifice is left entirely apparent within the film—the result is that viewers are constantly subject to the awareness that it is always Wieland's physical body that simultaneously manipulates the objects and operates the camera at the same time. (This has a further effect of providing instances of comic effect which accompany an interrogation of perception based on wonder, as evinced similarly at times within the work of McLaren, Lipsett, Snow and McLuhan himself.) As such, the modality of perception presented by *Water Sark* is integrated within the body of a single maker, rather than the conventional,

industrial filmmaking method of fragmenting the production to a set of specialists, who operate the sound, image framing, focus pulling, etc., to sustain the perfected illusion of a transparent medium without bias. This mode of representation is effaced by the physicality of Wieland's body, which undergirds the entire visual experience of the film and transforms the presence of the image into a moving kinesthetic body sculpture. Elder has characterized this method of representation as corresponding with what the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray argues is the "specific sexuality" of women, distinct from a masculine sexuality that is founded upon the primacy of the visual sense:

[...] women's sexuality is not single but multiple, based not on the gaze, which keeps the object of desire at a distance and perceives it as a bounded form, but on touch, which unites; not on the stiffness of individual, localized, autonomous forms, but on the merging of diffuse, multiple, functionally non-differentiated elements. (Elder 1997: 145)

This approach is also noted by Cavell as consonant within McLuhan's evaluation of the importance of art to demonstrate an integrated connection with principles of embodiment as a locus of experience and site of true knowledge, thus generating a critique of the visual field of technological production, and of the suppression of bodily experience that characterizes the effective and near-total amputations of the era of technological hegemony: "McLuhan [...] proclaimed affinities with artists whose practices declared that to contest the visual was to rediscover the bodily." (Cavell 2003: 105) This physical, sensual nature of *Water Sark* is furthered by Wieland's nude presence during the course of much of the film, rejecting the technological extension of clothing to achieve a greater sensitivity in her experiencing of the world, and evincing a further tactile parallel

between the skin of the body and the skin of the film (a metaphor that is also present in the work of Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, Elder, and many other filmmakers of the avant-garde cinema).

This mode of embodied shooting is also a central aspect of the radical statement encapsulated in Wieland's allegorical anti-war film, *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968). This work similarly focuses on tactile domestic objects (tablecloths, food), as well as textured, elemental materials (fire, water, earth), while simultaneously incorporating vertical montage elements of text, iconic appropriated images (the dead body of Che Guevara), and superimpositions on top of the photographed images. Wieland's aesthetic strategy of combining text and image forms a recurrent motif in many of her other films, including *Sailboat* (1967), *Solidarity* (1973) and *Reason Over Passion* (1969-70), in which a single word (or, in the latter case, anagrams of the titular phrase) are burned into the entire duration of the film's image field, forcing viewers to simultaneously confront two modes of language: word and image. This evinces an analysis of the image *as language* and the aesthetic tactic proves fertile in a number of other ways as well: foregrounding differences between the two forms (as in *Sailboat*); providing a multiple, enriched reading (*Solidarity*); or generating a dynamic system in which tensions of form and content are fore-grounded (*Reason Over Passion*). The multiplicity of readings evoked by the inter-textual mosaic spaces of these works serves to engage simultaneous vision in denying the existence of the image as transparent visual field and bespeaks of widespread similar uses of such tactics within a broader cultural milieu of media forms. Wieland's work thus provides an

anti-environment in which viewers are encouraged to develop their capacities of sensory awareness in response the effects of such forms of media discourse, thus providing opportunity for the development of critical faculties towards the ways in which the medium 'massages' its observer, working them over entirely.

Jack Chambers

Jack Chambers is well known as a significant Canadian painter, but his films have received very few audiences by comparison, perhaps due to their extremely personal and intensely demanding character.²⁴ *Mosaic* (1964-1966) and *Hybrid* (1967) both, as their titles suggest, evoke multi-textured spaces through combinations of vertical montage with disparate elements of dynamic and frozen images, developing polarities between life and death, darkness and light. *R-34* (1967) similarly depicts a portrait of fellow artist Greg Curnoe, through a montage of elements from Curnoe's diverse collage works, most often filmed in close-up so as to create visual fields which obscure a traditional perspective and focus instead on details of a highly tactile nature. In *Circle* (1967-8), Chambers photographed his backyard in a series of brief instances taken over the course of a year, footage bracketed with a dynamic collage of elements including newsreel materials. By not adjusting the settings on the camera in the photography of his

²⁴ A recent 2012 retrospective of Chambers' work at the Art Gallery of Ontario incorporated screenings of Chambers' films alongside an exhibition of his paintings, etchings and drawings—perhaps a sign that this oversight is finally coming to an end. However, lacking sufficient digital previews for public distribution, the films (all of which were produced and meant for exhibition on 16mm) still seem destined for obscurity.

yard, changes in light register as tactile through the ways in which they at times nearly efface all details of the subject.

In *The Hart of London* (1970), an extended meditation on life, death and perceptual awareness is developed through a collage of diverse elements that range from historical newsreels, family photographs, and images of a personal and often idiosyncratic nature. The soundtrack, a minimalist composition of rolling waves of white noise, evokes the oceanic experience of the infant whose birth is photographed in great detail and whose form the camera explores via a series of embodied handheld movements. This oceanic experience is registered for the viewer from the very start of the film, as the images of the first section are almost entirely white, effaced by multiple layers of re-printing (recalling strategies of the iconic image invoked by Rimmer) and are only occasionally discernable as they are recycled and recombined in differing phases—suggesting a vision evoked by the experience of embodied memory, for which the objective documents of reality fall short of being able to describe in their sensory nature. A great number of shots display hands working materials, from gardening to the slaughter of a lamb, and this tactility is furthered by the often degraded nature of the image, and the fact that the film itself, produced independently, bears multiple physical traces of splice marks, frame lines, scratches, dust, and other tactile reminders of its analog 16mm format, an anti-environment of material indexicality within a contemporary context of primarily digital (and therefore immaterial) image-sound distribution formats. This organic quality of *The Hart of London*, which requires its presentation on its original format for the aesthetic strategies of

perceptual fields invoked by Chambers to register in their full impact, joins its message and medium and may prove to be one of the few remaining defenses for the film medium as it is supplanted entirely by digital formats.

R. Bruce Elder

Louis Dudek has remarked: "There is no Canadian poet who has actually followed Pound [...] unless Marshall McLuhan is that poet." (in Gervais, ed., 1976: 131) To this we must further add the highly challenging films of R. Bruce Elder, whom we have had opportunity to cite as a theorist (and who therefore occupies a similar artist/scholar hybridity as that of McLuhan) and whose filmic output from the 1970s to the present bears significant influence from the aesthetics of Pound and McLuhan, as well as that of George Grant, Martin Heidegger, and the tradition of the cinematic avant-garde represented by Brakhage, Frampton, Snow, Wieland and Rimmer. Elder has proposed a reading of film as an analogical model for consciousness similar to that mentioned previously by Michelson, and this has led him (in similar but highly distinct terms to Snow and other practitioners cited) to reject a field of visual representation unaffected by the other sensory processes of the body within his work. The knowledge of the body as primary locus of sense experience and the experiencing of the world as a polymorphous realm of sensory flesh may be seen as a unifying theme that connects many of the diverse aesthetic strategies employed within his films, motives which resonate with McLuhan's desire to invoke new perceptual realms through the alternative modes of representation

within new media forms. Elder has consistently involves inter-textual elements in his films, ranging from text, algorithmic and aleatory editing strategies, diverse sonic elements, and optical printing techniques which divide and multiply the image field, to computer image-processing and (in his recent work) hand-processing techniques. His first film, *Breath/Light/Birth* (1975), combines film and video forms to generate an iconic image of birth as light; the soundtrack providing a referential anchor for a highly processed and reductive image which has been filtered through processes of video manipulation, evoking an internal sight perception which corresponds to the untrained status of the infant's oceanic experience of the world. *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979), by contrast, evokes a fully developed consciousness that nonetheless seeks to retain aspects of the cosmic, oceanic unification with the external world despite the pain and suffering it imposes. This process—noted previously in the films of Lipsett as taking the form of a paranoid consciousness in which everything is necessarily perceived and understood as linked to everything else—is cited by McLuhan as an endowment of the tribal, acoustic qualities of the electric environment:

One of the peculiarities of the electric age is that we live simultaneously in all the cultures of the past. All of the past is here and all of the future is here. This is a peculiarity of the instantaneous, the vibes, the acoustic resonance, the acoustic interface which has become the very pattern of our lives. This is a kind of audile-tactile interface which engenders its own patterns of perception... (2003: 213)

1857: *Fool's Gold* (1981), a film dedicated to Baudelaire, and which Bart Testa suggests forms a miniature for Elder's epic cycle *The Book of All the Dead* (1975-1994), an immense project that contains the entirety of his filmic output during that period (42 hours in total, the largest of its kind), combines image with

text to generate a visual language that recalls Freud's analysis of memory as a mystic writing pad, a palimpsest which overwrites other texts and thus effaces their individual, fragmentary nature within a mosaic form in which elements permeate each other in varying modes of co-existence. These elements include passages taken directly from Pound's *Cantos*, a spoken text from writings by Daniel DeFoe, numbers and mathematical formulae, and a multilayered soundtrack. As the film progresses, shots are repeated through a variety of optical printing filters which affect their colour and detail, producing results of a similar iconic nature as noted within the images in Rimmer's films—images of *images*, requiring the viewer to fill in gaps via kinesthetic vision—and which are characterized by a similar use of repetition. The inclusion of a diversity of elements, from arithmetic processes and counting numbers broken up by black stretches, to interwoven statements which bespeak the limitations of media as translators of reality ("Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel"; "Suppose fx is not a one – one function") and foreground a acoustic-dynamic reality as constant flux ("ear, ear for the sea surge"; "unceasing" "unstill"), amidst a voice-over narration which becomes increasingly harder to hear as the film progresses, suggests the film's invocation of these linear, discursive strategies is simultaneously a rejection of their limitations to translate the poetic, and ultimately mystical, nature of the real. Brett Kashmere observes of this work its correspondence with the aesthetic strategies of an audile-tactile, non-linear, mosaic, and integrated sensory approach:

We cannot make our way out of *Fool's Gold* if we attempt to take a straight-forward, linear (literal) approach through it. We must allow the film

to take control of the senses, to inform us on a subconscious level as the image text and sound compete for our attentions. It is a work of art, much like the *Cantos* and *The Waste Land*, that cannot be understood with an initial reading; it must be returned to to be lost in, then visited and revisited again. The insight that Elder pursues is one of visceral, intellectual and spiritual involvement, all of which must occur simultaneously. When we try and separate our experiences into these categories we are theorizing our involvement in the text and we lose the point Elder is attempting to make. The reality of experience is that it is diverse, and constantly changing. There are always multitudes of layers operating under the surface of our vision, which we have to be perpetually open to if we have any chance of gaining new insights.²⁵

In many other sections of *The Book of All the Dead*, Elder continues his use of an extended, stream-of-consciousness narration (including *Illuminated Texts*, 1982; *Lamentations: A Monument to the Dead World*, 1985; and *Consolations [Love is an Art of Time]*, 1988) with a similarly elliptical linguistic cadence that is presented simultaneously as spoken word and text—elements which never entirely correspond temporally, but occasionally hold similar content. Bart Testa notes this extreme fragmentation “denies the unity of the self” (Elder, *Anthology Film Archives monograph*, p. 5), a self which McLuhan might have suggested to be, in actuality, the false and fragmentary self generated by millennia of print culture. At the end of *Illuminated Texts*, in one of the most brutally powerful sequences of the entire cycle, images break apart into moving dynamic shards that are layered through optical printing processes (also used for the majority of *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, as well as *A Man Whose Life Was Full Of Woe Has Been Surprised By Joy*, 1997) as the film revisits Nazi death camps, that paradigmatic horror of modernity, to deliver testimony of a Holocaust

²⁵ Brett Kashmere, “Bruce Elder’s *Illuminated Texts* and *1857 (Fool’s Gold)*: A Modern Cinema”, <http://www.hi-beam.net/hi-beam/elder.html>, 2000. Retrieved: 2012-05-22.

victim spoken in non-linear segments by a computer-synthesized voice. It is only through lengthy repetition that the 'content' meaning of the fragmentary material emerges; the revelation that the film has entered this period of history is not evident until close scrutiny reveals the crumbling architecture is, in fact, a concentration camp—invoking the need for a development of capacities on behalf of viewers to be able to apprehend a multiplicity of information from image, sound and text-based sources that evince the contemporary barrage of media discourse evident in news channels which, decades later, have come to utilize similar aesthetic strategies of polyphonic representation. By combining such compositional tactics with a dynamic range of image and sounds that are further disrupted via an often extremely rapid use of vertical montage, the effect of Elder's films is such an overwhelming experience for the senses that the entirety of their content is literally impossible to fully absorb through a linear mode of consciousness. Bart Testa writes: "Elder deliberately ensures that the viewer cannot hold the film, even moment to moment, in a unified reception." (*The Book of All the Dead*, Anthology Film Archives monograph: 7), a process of defamiliarization McLuhan cites as a necessary approach in confronting the blows and sensory overloads posed by advancing technological environments. While Elder's films do not represent an easily-digestible approach for the aesthetic sensibilities of most viewing publics, which reside on conventions developed via the audio-visual grammar of hegemonic, mainstream cinema (conventions which most have largely therefore come to expect), these works nonetheless provide experiences which hold the potential to re-inform and re-train the sensory

experience of their viewers, and thus aiding in coming to terms with the new and transformed nature of the communication environment. As McLuhan describes:

[...] this is the way artists meet the challenge. They pull out the connections. They involve their public totally in images that are often revolting and irrational and so on. But this technique is to update sensibilities. Violence is a form of identity quest and the updating is often in the form of artistic violence. Any art movement or discovery that has any real core in it enrages people. (2003: 206)

The perceptual violence encountered at times in Elder's films may thus be considered as indicative of an even greater violence implicit in the act of perception itself, contained within the very act of awareness and its capacity for the reduction of subjects to objects, from a *noumenal* and unbounded existence to the finite limitations apprehended through their measurement and mediation. In posing such a problem, Elder's films attempt further to uncover a possible means of solution, and implicit within this challenge is found a new modality of sight, one which is connected to the full knowledge of the body and sensory capacities to experience the diverse and heterogeneous nature of the dynamic essence of the real world.

Conclusions

In his 2009 Massey lecture, *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*, the Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis makes a startling assertion: that of the 7,000 languages currently spoken in the world today, fully half may disappear within the lifetime of the current generation. Davis is quick to point out that this need not happen—yet, if we consider the current unyielding trends of inaction towards other issues of environmental and cultural destruction (the corporate exploitation and poisoning of natural resources, the systematic murder of the few remaining secluded tribes who inhabit rainforested areas, starvation in Africa, all left unchecked by worldwide corruption in politics and the continuing growth of a hegemonic media system increasingly maintained within fewer and fewer hands) the situation does not seem altogether promising. Among the languages that stand to be lost, growing evidence suggests, is the traditional medium of the cinema: analog film.²⁶ If we consider the cinema as a language (a new one, or even as an old one, retrieved and reconfigured within a new state), we may observe that this language as currently within a state of crisis that can be summarized as the confrontation of the “Last Machine” (to use Hollis Frampton’s term) of film within the electric environment of video. For most, this event—should it result in the total obsolescence of film to the extent that film is no longer shot or projected—will pass unnoticed. The hegemonic narrative cinema of Hollywood and its imitators stand little to lose and much to gain by

²⁶ I.e. the recent declared bankruptcy of Kodak, the closure of traditional film processing labs worldwide, and the closure of traditional film projection theatres—all of which mean that the technicians who embodied this technical knowledge will likely pass along their skills to few others, thus placing the language of film within an endangered state, just as any other language would become extinct.

adopting the new digital technology. However, among the makers of the avant-garde—who understood, as McLuhan did, that their medium formed an integral aspect of their message—this translation will take a much different form. As I have attempted to show, the practitioners of this tradition often sought to utilize their medium in adherence to its acoustic-tactile qualities, and these qualities will be immediately erased by a translation to digital. Stan Brakhage once remarked that despite the fact that the majority of his films are silent, they nonetheless always retain the 24-frames-per-second ‘heartbeat’ of the film projector; a beat lost in a shift to digital. Despite the fact that McLuhan was quick to analyze the medium of television as audile-tactile, his analysis of the medium took place in the early days of TV before it ‘heated’ up into its contemporary plasmatic form, and there are many senses by which film may be said to occupy different, yet equally important, tactile qualities. These tactile qualities are most apparent within the avant-garde cinema that has shunned the standardized aspects of the industrial medium of film—often only due to mere financial inability, but from which, an aesthetic has emerged. Such inherent features within the film form (in addition to the aesthetics of the diverse filmmakers cited in this essay) include: the medium’s indexical²⁷ relationship to the capture and projection of light through material chemical processes; the aspect, as with all analog media, of degradation (developing material scratches, dust, bits of hair, and so on) with each with each presentation (thus resonating with the experience of embodiment and eventual decay and death shared by all human beings); the need for a film

²⁷ I use this term in its context within C.S. Peirce’s semiotics, which describes indexical relationships as necessarily of directly material, and therefore tactile, nature.

strip to be materially developed by a physical body, and for a projection to be mediated and focused manually by a physical body (the focus integrally tied to a connection within the projectionist between eye/hand, sight/touch); and the feature, unique to film, of entirely half the viewing experience composing of *no image at all whatsoever*—the screen holding forth blackness in alternation with image as the projector shutter opens and closes every 1/24th second.

If we consider the means by which these aspects of the film medium affect the grammar and logic of what may be said within its system of language, phenomena supporting the conclusions drawn by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis can be observed—for not only does video provide different limitative capabilities within its language that are inaccessible to film (ie. the possibility for real-time playback; networked environments; increased capacity for the capturing and storing of images within a non-linear archive; projection through a multiplicity of means aside from the space of the traditional cinema; the expanded possibility of *light through* projection as opposed to *light on*, etc etc., all give video opportunity to manifest its boundaries far beyond the cinema of traditional film), the codes which govern the two necessarily influence the grammar and phrasing of works completed within these media. Such a comparison is perhaps most evident by considering Elder's *The Book of All The Dead* (particularly *Exultations*, in which the digital image begins to enact primary considerations of the film form), and comparing these works to his current cycle, *The Book of Praise* (1997-) which incorporates video as a more formative and intermediary element. Given the current media environment, Elder is likely the last filmmaker who will ever make a

cycle of works on film that will possess the scope, length, and depth as *The Book of All The Dead*. Any new contemporary filmmakers who will inherit the traditions of Elder, Snow, Wieland, Rimmer and other practitioners of the avant-garde will likely be reduced to making shorter works or producing such works on video out of the necessity of financial constraints and the lack of infrastructure, quickly diminishing, for film production and dissemination (to say nothing of the contemporary reduction of attention spans, in which genuinely experimental works longer than 20 minutes are rarely screened at festivals or anywhere else).

Jacques Ellul contends the most powerful forms of propaganda are environments, because they remain, in their full extent, invisible—just as the fish remains unaware of the full extent and limitations of the environment of water. McLuhan defines environments as necessarily invisible, eluding perception “except in so far as there is an anti-environment or a counter-situation constructed to provide a means of direct attention,” in which case it undertakes a reversal of figure and ground: “When an environment becomes an object of attention it assumes the character of an anti-environment or an art object.” (McLuhan 1966: 1;5.) He observes the connection between the development of technology and new media forms and the reversal of environment to anti-environment based on a figure/ground relation:

One of the things that happens when a new medium comes on the scene is you become aware of the basic characteristics of older media in a way that you were not when they were the only things around. (2003: 35)

Within this context, McLuhan views obsolescence as a new beginning, rather than a final ending—one through which we may presume a new life for the

sensory modalities that artists of the modern era have taken up their representational forms, provide experiences of that which has been denied by modernity—experiences, which, as McLuhan states, are of a crucial nature to a true awareness of the world beyond the visually-biased and fragmentary realm of calculative reason:

[...] our very word 'grasp' or 'apprehension' points to the process of getting at one thing through another, of handling and sensing many facets at a time through more than one sense at a time. It begins to be evident that 'touch' is not skin but the interplay of the senses, and 'keeping in touch' or 'getting in touch' is a matter of a fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell.
(1964: 60)

Slavoj Žižek often uses as a metaphor for the conditions of modernity an anecdote of a German worker who is sent to Siberia as punishment. Knowing that his letters to his friends will be intercepted and censored, he establishes a code whereby he will write true statements in black ink, and false statements in red ink. His first letter from Siberia is written entirely in black ink, and filled with joyous appraisals of the working conditions, cultural freedom, range of available products, and so on—the only thing lacking, he unfortunately concludes, is red ink. In the same way, Žižek comes to the conclusion that it is precisely this aspect that we moderns lack the capacity to articulate within our language: a capacity to formulate a necessary critique of the conditions of modern life.²⁸ We lack recourse to forms of ritual, contemplation, and prayer; trance states that were once a fully embodied aspect of our culture. In committing to a regime of

²⁸ This issue of the limitative capacities of linguistic conventions is a feature I found myself consistently engaged in a struggle with during the course of writing this essay—as most common words to denote understanding possess an inherent visual bias, as in keeping with Heidegger's observation of *theoria*: to view, see, observe, etc.

technology we have simultaneously committed ourselves to a destruction of all traditions except those which serve to further the autonomous and continued development of more technology. It is my hope that I have demonstrated some ways in which such a critique may indeed be possible, from the perspective of the artistic traditions from which McLuhan was informed—a tradition which posits a return to contemplative modes of thought through the aesthetic realms offered by art, which serves to recalibrate the senses, and the (often challenging) ways in which such forms have been generated by many astute and erudite artists who form a tradition of praxis neglected by the cultural majority (as evinced by the severe lack of study of this tradition, in favour of continued solipsistic analyses of Hitchcock, Tarantino, and so forth, on the part of most cinema studies majors). The correspondences between these works and the writings of McLuhan are unquestionable and reveal the richness of detail in McLuhan's appraisal of media landscapes and the nature of the development of poetic form in relation to such environments. In further investigations on this topic, I would also seek to include the work of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Robert Breer, Jonas Mekas, Carolee Schneemann, Maya Deren, Jordan Belson, Ernie Gehr, Ken Jacobs, Jim Davis, Willard Maas, Marie Menken, Bruce Baillee, and other members of the American avant-garde movement in cinema as indicating further rich connections between a model of perceptual acoustic/tactile/mosaic space and media artworks produced in the latter half of the twentieth century. The histories of Russian constructivism, the German Absolut film, and the work of the Surrealists evince further parallels in the first half of the 1900s. One can

also observe further resonances of this aesthetic paradigm (in addition to other elements of McLuhan's media ontology) in the works of contemporary Canadian makers of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Carl Brown, Garine Torosian, Barbara Sternberg, John Price, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Daïchi Saïto, Kelly Egan, Karl Lemieux, and many others, as well as other international artists like Hang-jun Lee, Peter Tscherkassky, Bruce McClure, Phil Solomon, Thorsten Fleisch and Pip Chodorov. It is my hope that this analysis may be expanded in the future to incorporate such contemporary makers, who truly exist within the most blighted vacuum of all, given that critical writings on avant-garde film have worsened in their extent from marginal to almost entirely non-existent. There is also room within such an analysis for the ways in which my own work fits within such a tradition. But for the time being, I will allow that work to speak for itself; a condition to which art should aspire, and a state in which all of the films cited in this essay exist prior to my interventions here. If my commentary has fallen short (as indeed it necessarily must), I hope that it be understood that it is not merely a consequence of the linear space of this paper, but also a consequence of the impossibility of translating poetry. Yet hopefully this study will yield some fruit, and to touch upon the makers I have cited (even if in only the most fleeting manner) is important, for together they evince an unmistakable tradition which reveals a more distinguished form of cinema within the history of Canadian art than most Canadians are currently aware of—a tradition which stands at the crossroads of a risk of being lost altogether amidst the shifting continental trends of developing media environments. To regain this tradition seems to me

Fox De Deux (1967), Norman McLaren.

essential in order to ensure that we are able to continue living in the present, with full knowledge of where we have come from, and where perhaps we may be going—"a hitherto unknown interpenetration of inner and outer space." (Giedion 1969:, lvi)

*Et ideo in toto tempore praecedenti
quo aliquid movetur ad unam
formam, subset formae oppositae; et
in ultimo instanti illius temporis, wuod
est primum instans ...*

"And therefore in the preceding time, by which anything is moved towards a form, it is supported by the opposite form; and in the final instants of its time, which is the first instant..."

— St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, quoted
by McLuhan in a letter to Jacques Mauritian, 1969

Appendix A: Supplementary Images

Begone Dull Care (1948), Norman McLaren and Evelyn Lambert.

Pas De Deux (1967), Norman McLaren.

Very Nice, Very Nice (1961), Arthur Lipsett.

Freefall (1964), Arthur Lipsett.

Treefall (1970), David Rimmer.

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper (1970), David Rimmer.

New York Eye and Ear Control (1964), Michael Snow.

Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen (1974), Michael Snow.

Sailboat (1967), Joyce Wieland.

Rat Life and Diet in North America (1968), Joyce Wieland.

R34 (1967), Jack Chambers.

The Hart of London (1970), Jack Chambers.

1857 (Fool's Gold) (1981), R. Bruce Elder.

Eros and Wonder (2003), R. Bruce Elder.

Appendix B - Media Project:

memento mori

2012 | 29 minutes | HD Video - 1280x720/24p | colour | sound

Sound and image: Dan Browne

Additional sound: Steve Richman, Dan Driscoll, The Conet Project

Synopsis: A meditation on death, mediated through a lifetime of images.

“A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he people’s a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.” – J.L. Borges

“He who would teach men to die would teach them to live.” – Montaigne

<http://www.mementomorifilm.com>

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Images from *memento mori* - © dan browne, 2012.

Statement of intent

memento mori originates out of a larger cycle of work entitled *Canon*, a film I have been making since 2006 that incorporates all of the materials photographed with my first digital stills camera. After using the camera for several years, I finally broke the lens a second time (at which point it had become less expensive to purchase a newer camera with better quality than to fix the original), and, as I replaced it, found myself with an immense collection of images lacking any similar sense of closure. I therefore decided that their sum total would form a single work, entitled after the camera. From the outset of my interactions with the device I had become instantly aware it was changing the ways in which I made moving images, and afterwards my interest was raised in how forms of digital media were altering my artistic practice in broader terms.

The accumulation of images over time as expressed in *memento mori* confronts the multiplicity of vision encountered within my interaction with digital technology with its newly generated existence as archive—every image was now immediately available for simultaneous digestion, a process entirely unlike my previous experiences working with analog film. As such, this multiplicity began to suggest a tactile resonance of accumulation. The palimpsest of my memory would conflate images as I recalled them; the archive, as memory, became subject to further re-memberings of the images—images now trailing my body through time as a developing identity, somehow independent of my own. Through this came the idea for a prelude for a larger cycle, which, in utilizing all materials shot with my camera, would necessitate use of all the still images, and I began to create the work from the sum total of images accumulated through my life to date.

The media work and paper both share a commitment to time. Included in *memento mori* are over 100,000 images, captured over 14 years—essentially every image I have ever taken within a single sequence of duration. Through creating an ultimate visual collage, I have attempted to demonstrate McLuhan's principle of reversal, via the transformation of images into an experience beyond the visual field. The soundtrack—which was created asynchronously through the aid of chance operations—incorporates materials gathered over the past six years since I first began (unconsciously) to work on the *Canon* project. The theoretical aspects of the major research paper also similarly developed over an extended time: I first became exposed to the work of McLuhan and Michael Snow in high school (via the well-stocked bookshelf of my parents), and saw the work of Norman McLaren at this time as well, before starting my Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree at The School of Image Arts. Taking Bruce Elder's course in experimental film exposed me to the work of Brakhage, Conner, Lipsett, Rimmer, Chambers, Snow, Wieland, Frampton, and numerous others, and I began to connect this work to a tradition of making, though it was still another four years ahead (now four years past) until I saw his film cycle, *The Book of All the Dead* (a work which convinced me that my own cycle could possibly be actualized).

This project served not only as a means for the formal experimentation I had intended to explore, but equally (and perhaps more significantly) as a means of personally cathartic self-therapy. Considering that Derrida suggests, in *Archive Fever*, that trauma is an irreducible aspect of any archive, and given that my project stems from such a conception (as perhaps does all art), this seems fitting, and it has emerged as one of the major themes of the work. Art is a vessel for experiential learning, but another

crucial factor consistently encountered in formation of my own art (whether I like it or not) has been engagement of my practice with external catastrophes and disasters and their employment as a form of therapy, or internal alchemy. The project thus deals with issues of death and loss, confirmed by the title as well as the speaking voices, and its creation took place over the course of several such incidents, including the passing of my grandmother, two friends, and another's illness. This project has aided me in coming to terms with such losses, as well as offering me a chance to testify of my experience for the record of history—and thus come to terms with my own eventual death.

I decided upon the title after hearing the term used to describe a music box, just as I added a layer of such a melody (broadcast via shortwave radio transmission) at the beginning of the film. A day later, I noticed a chapter on cinema in a book I was reading was also coincidentally titled "Memento Mori". The music box at the start of the film is also a refutation of the capacity in which it might serve as a reminder—for it does not slow down or stop, but repeats endlessly in an electric loop. (Such endlessness was a defining feature of many aesthetic decisions.) Death is further evoked by the soundtrack simultaneously with an image of vanishing point perspective—a bridge over a ravine near my parents' house, photographed amidst decaying fall leaves. The re-connection between death and vision, evinced by a proposal for the re-integration of death, and its celebration as natural function, plays metaphor for the perceptual struggle the images attempt to uncover and challenge. We may choose to understand the vanishing point as an ending, but when we look with vision informed by truly integrated senses, our fear may recede in favour of a newly integrated mode of sight—that the spaces and times we construct are extensions of ourselves and the vibrations which link us to the beyond.

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