

Mac

There was a moment, or many of them, in the French reception of the writings of McLuhan, in which his views were revealed to be a *trompe l'oeil* splashed across the mediascape. As the gaze of his admirer's shifted after an initial wide-eyed fixation, they noticed that McLuhan's views did not move with their own. These views appeared as something other than they seemed, or rather they now seemed to be something else, to paraphrase Jacques Lacan (1977: 112) ((In this lecture I refer to the following texts of Lacan

(1977) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Alan Sheridan (trans.), London: The Hogarth Press;

(1977a) *Ecrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan (trans.), London: Routledge;

(1990) *Television*, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson (trans.), Joan Copjec (ed.), New York: W.W. Norton.)). This other thing was the *objet petit a*.

I have just imagined the moment(s) in which McLuhan became MacLuhan for his French readers with the help of an extra little a. If this imagining is too hard to swallow, it is all for the better since the *objet petit a* is, Lacan notes, hard to swallow. As the loving stares of M(a)cLuhan's French readers broke away from their precious object, I would like to think they did so in terms similar to those Lacan used in describing the relation between analysand and analyst: the love transference hung on something more than the analyst had, and the analysand's gift of love turned out to be a load of shit (Lacan 1977: 268). There is very little difference between the *objet petit a* and the *objet petit tas*, as Lacan once punned. The Lacanian concept of

the *objet petit a* will help us to understand the meaning MacLuhan had for his French readers, especially those who insisted on spelling his name in this manner, a phenomenon that took place in France but not Québec. The word ‘reader’ is already problematic since one of the things Lacan and McLuhan had in common was television. If my very premise in this lecture appears suspect – that there is something to the matter of the ‘French spelling’ of M(a)cLuhan – I can only offer a justification, after the fact, based on anecdote. A certain sociological theorist, a postmodernist, no less, recently seized upon the rendering of the phenomenon of *macluhanisme* in the title of one of my recently published articles as if it were an invention of my own; to this spelling he added *sic*. Did he mean strange or incorrect? I did not invent it, strange as this may seem. Whether this was a comment on my French I will probably never know. The spelling was intentional, and this lecture attempts to theorize it. For me, what makes this banal act of mistaken ‘correction’ interesting is this: why was my reader compelled to add a little more to the addition?

Both Lacan and McLuhan appeared on ‘primal time television’, to use a phrase coined by Lawrence Rickels ((Rickels, Lawrence (1990) ‘Psychoanalysis and TV’, *Substance* 61: 39-52.)), broadcasts in France in the early 1970s. While Lacan’s appearance may have alarmed certain bookish Lacanians who feared that by massaging the masses psychoanalysis said nothing at all, Lacan himself spoke in the name of ‘non-idiot’ (analysts) and, presumably, ‘idiot’ (non-analysts) as well. If it didn’t make a difference to Lacan that he spoke in the name of the ‘public’ before the blackboard in his seminar or the couch potatoes – no pun intended! – glued to their television screens, it was because he addressed neither of their gazes, which he claimed were really only one. But this is just the sort of difference upon which McLuhan’s theory of media rested. To be fair to Lacan, he recognized that the mass media had psychical effects linked to technological developments, a lesson he learned and adapted

brilliantly by appeals to a variety of media, not from McLuhan, but from 'Freud's analogical hook-up of technology and the unconscious' (Rickels 1990: 43). For Lacan, McLuhan's mediatic extensions of man could not account for what was more than themselves.

MacSpell

McLuhan's great-grandfather William McLughan arrived in Essa Township in the Province of Ontario, Canada from Country Down, Ireland in 1849 and began his life in Canada with a new, shortened name: McLuhan. This change of family name ((This biographical material is culled from *The Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (1987: 1).)) was not an uncommon practice in the 19th and even 20th centuries, for Canadian immigration officers have, with every new wave of immigrants, indulged in the disfiguration of names, not to mention families. Having lost a letter from his family name, McLuhan would ultimately gain another, albeit a different one, from many of his French readers for whom a certain 'MacLuhan' appeared, at least at first in certain circles, as a prophet of sorts. This respelling was not an overt attempt at some kind of Franco-Scots-Irish amalgamation, according to which the little *a* imported a would signify an international family affair. Taken on its face value, the little *a* filled a perceived gap between *M* and *c* for the delicate French ear for which a little thing, already worming its way into pronunciation, would smooth over a ragged, foreign construction uncommon in French. For this reason, then, 'MacLuhan' is in a way a Gallicized version of 'McLuhan', even if the very gesture makes it foreign. But it is not without its confusions since, on the one hand, 'Mac' means 'son' while, on the other hand, in France a person called 'Mac' may attract notice in polite academic and analytic circles since this is the abbreviated form of maquereau (pimp). Although the two Macs are unrelated, they cannot be kept apart. Of course, not all of McLuhan's French readers

participated in this renaming game or, for that matter, name calling game. McLuhan and MacLuhan would appear alongside one another in contributions to learned journals and newspapers; French translations of books written by McLuhan became, under review, books by MacLuhan.

There were readers and commentators, however, whose desire had an object and appeared to them in this object: the little *a* of Mac. The *a* really depends upon desire. In this a certain readers could identify themselves, even though this little sliver of a broken mirror might very well disappear in the next version of McLuhan's name. For a reader whose desire is tied to this object and whose subjecthood is constituted by it, this instability is doubly significant since it indicates the fragility of this constitution and the division of the desiring subject who accomplishes it. In other words, McLuhan needs to be constantly rewritten as MacLuhan so as to embody the object of phantasy of the desiring subject. Yet no amount of constitutive respelling can change the significance of the little *a* as an image in which the subject's lack appears to him/her.

I am supposing that the little *a* is akin to an *objet petit a* [utré]. There are limits to this Lacanian supposition as a strategy of making sense of a cultural phenomenon since, as the deconstructionist reader of psychoanalysis Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen ((Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel (1991) *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, Douglas Brick (trans.), Stanford: Stanford University Press.)) reminds us, the objet *a* is a part of oneself which one separates from oneself, a quite literal – that is, real – matter of giving up or sacrificing a bodily substance or organ, the loss of which is irrecoverable. The little *a* of Mac is not a real body part. Bertolt Brecht's gangster Macheath ((The reference to 'Mac the Knife' is Brecht, Bertolt (1979) 'The Threepenny Opera', in *Collected Plays* Vol. 2, Part 2, John Willett and Ralph Manheim (eds.), London: Eyre Methuen.)) – 'Mac the Knife' from *The Threepenny Opera* – has neither turned his blade on

himself nor on the other, although in principle he handles a knife as well as or better than Macbeth. Still, the little *a* of Mac is an alphabetic morsel dropped into the gap between *M* and *c* which it moreover manifests as it drops into place, as one would expect of an *objet petit a* since it is a ‘symbol of the lack ... in so far as it is lacking’ (Lacan 1977: 103). I am not chasing after spittle, sperm, faeces, the maternal breast, Van Gogh’s ear, etc., these real objects which a body separates from itself or ‘sacrifices’, as it were. The diversity of such objects requires a typology distinguishing, for example, those that are cut and those from which one is weaned; Lacan’s ‘unthinkable list’ (1977a: 315) indicates just how hard it is to put one’s finger on the *objet petit a*; another list, no less thinkable, includes breasts, faeces, the gaze, and the voice (Lacan 1977: 242). All the same, the little *a* is figurally a ‘little pile’, an abject loop with a tail, a curled dropping evacuated from a pen. Our little *a* is a simulacrum of a semblance that is a pile as such.

What’s in a name? The *a* of Mac circulates in and out of a family name. It is a fiction that embodies desire. This *objet petit a* slips in and out of signification through the passageway between *M* and *c* despite the well-known claim that it ‘falls outside of signification’ by ‘evading the signifier’ (Grigg 1991: 112; and ‘resists significantization’ in Borch-Jacobsen 1990) ((Grigg, Russell (1991), ‘Signifier, Object, and the Transference’, in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Dracher (eds.), London: Routledge.)). It plays the game of presence/absence as well as any other signifier and, in addition, it comes and goes as the reader/writer pleases. It is, here, then, less a matter of resistance than one of unpredictability and at times fickleness (it’s a bit like television, I suppose: there isn’t much on when it’s on, and for many, there’s not much going on when it’s off). The little *a* holds the prophet and his disciples together and it is a letter that has had and continues to have a hold on the French imagination. In Alfred Jarry’s ‘neoscientific novel’ *Gestes et opinions*

du Docteur Faustroll, the doctor's assistant Bosse-de-Nage utters two French words at opportune moments throughout the text: 'Ha Ha'. Baudrillard understands this laughter in terms of the formula 'A = A', the operational and tautological perfection of a system grown as obese as a *gidouille*, and therefore ready to be pushed over the edge by means of the revolutionary pataphysical principle of 'more A than A'. A string of identical little mathemes (aaaaa...) is a laughable object. ((Jarry, Alfred (1972), *Oeuvres complètes I*, Paris: Gallimard. Baudrillard refers to Jarry throughout his writings, but the reference I have in mind is to *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (1976). See my investigation of 'Pataphysical gestures' in Baudrillard's work in my chapter on 'Varieties of symbolic exchange' in *Baudrillard and Signs* (1994).)) It is only a matter of time and, indeed, alphabetic inevitability, that *objets b* and *c* come into existence as residuality proliferates like television channels.

Mack

McLuhan began his correspondence with the British painter, writer and polemicist (less kindly, for many, a Fascist) Wyndam Lewis in the early 1940s from his post at St. Louis University. During this period Lewis was teaching at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario. McLuhan vigorously promoted Lewis as a portrait artist and had some success in opening the 'big pocket-books', as he called them, of St. Louis. McLuhan also arranged lectures for Lewis. The nickname 'Mac' was adopted by McLuhan himself as a short form in a letter to Lewis in 1944 (McLuhan 1987: 142-43). For years thereafter McLuhan signed his letters to Lewis with 'Mac'. According to the editors of McLuhan's published *Letters*, Lewis remarked upon this nickname to the effect that 'Mack is not too matey, but it is too generic. I have known so many "Macks" – it blurs the image. Shall think up a less dignified abbreviation of my *Feldherr* ' (McLuhan 1987: 142, n. 1). This

‘Mac attack’ did not in the end deter McLuhan, although Lewis appears to have used it sparingly. Meanwhile, McLuhan adopted it as his moniker with several other correspondents. Lewis himself blurred the image with the addition of the final k, suggesting another big American object, a truck. The nickname or *Surnommant* of Lewis’s *Feldherr* opens onto the matter of the remainder central to the objet a. By overnaming his *Feldherr* Mac, a diminished name actually and ironically accomplished the production of a surplus. There is something special, then, about the k.

McLuhan ultimately admitted in a letter of January 1944 that “‘McLuhan’ suits me and is preferable to “mac” ...’ (1987: 146). Indeed, for a field marshal patrolling the promotional front, ‘Mac’ was simply and sardonically too dignified and indistinct for Lewis’s taste. Despite this, Lewis never came up with a new name. And while he had doubts about his little name, McLuhan continued to use it in his correspondence with one of his former graduate students in St. Louis, Walter J. Ong, as well as with his colleague Felix Giovanelli. Ezra Pound put his own twist on McLuhan with ‘Mc L’, a subtle architectural arrangement which had little of the chuminess of Lewis’s remarks, but sufficient ideographic peculiarity to amuse them both (McLuhan 1987: 232, notes 3 and 4). This is, then, the story of Mac before it was taken up by McLuhan’s French readers in the 1960s, having long since disappeared from view in McLuhan’s correspondence with Lewis. In the manner of Lewis’s (1981 and 1981a) Vorticist journals *BLAST* 1 (orig. June 1914) and *BLAST* 2 (orig. July 1915) ((Lewis, Wyndam (1981), ‘[Reprint of] *BLAST* 1’ (June 1914), Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press; (1981a) ‘[Reprint of] *BLAST* 2’ (July 1915), Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press.)) whose influence on McLuhan would be decisive in the areas of book design and rhetorical posturing, one might say:

*Blast Mack for its British chuminess;
Bless Mac for its Gallic mannerism.*

Lacan and McLuhan come together through the letter-object a rather than under the glare of the video's light, that records, for some, the meetings of great men. Lacan was a master of the media, not the absolute master, of course, since this position was reserved for McLuhan. Consider Sherry Turkle's description of Lacan with reference to the broadcast of an interview with him called Psychoanalysis in January 1973 (published as *Télévision* the following year) by the ORTF (Office de la Radio-diffusion-Télévision Française):

*Lacan established himself as the undisputed master of the media, or as one analyst, who has always been hostile to Lacan but who said he was "overwhelmed by a virtuoso performance", described him: "The psychoanalyst for the Age of McLuhan". Like a neurotic's symptom, Lacan's *Télévision* ((Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981, pp. 201-2.)) was a program that people loved to hate.*

French television viewers had already entered *la galaxie MacLuhan* during his appearance *au petit écran* on 5 July 1972, as part of the program 'Dossiers de l'écran' (one needs to keep in mind that this was before Bernard Pivot and 'Apostrophes') ((Heath, Stephen (1989), 'Friday Night Books', in *A New History of French Literature*, Denis Hollier (trans.) Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press.)). McLuhan's appearance was organized by the telecommunications engineer and music professor Pierre Schaeffer ((Schaeffer, Pierre (1978-79), 'Dialogue chaud et froid avec McLuhan', *Millésime* (juin): 103-7. Schaeffer's article appeared in a special issue of *Millésime*, published at the Ecole supérieure de commerce de Paris, on McLuhan.)), long-serving Chef du service de la RTF (and later ORTF). In the early 1970s, Schaeffer was one of McLuhan's promoters in French media circles. Later in the decade, however, Schaeffer's (1978-79: 104ff) criticisms of McLuhan's work became severe. His charges included

professional and political irresponsibility, conceptual confusion, and above all else, deception. For Schaeffer, McLuhan was the first university professor to draw positive attention to the media. McLuhan made the media a legitimate object of intellectual concern, and in doing so presented Schaeffer with the opportunity to elevate his own work and position in the eyes of the French professors for whom the media had hitherto remained below their lofty gaze. Yet, in what Schaeffer regarded as often brilliant texts, McLuhan failed to live up to his promise of bringing the study of media into the academy, adhering instead to jokes, bad journalistic practices and sensationalism. In short, Schaeffer claimed that McLuhan's texts were surrealistic and they distracted French researchers from developing their own lines of inquiry into the mediascape. Schaeffer did not take any blame for what he called, with as much cliché as prescience, *l'affaire McLuhan* (bringing to mind the more recent print media event, *l'affaire Derrida*) although he helped to stage McLuhan's entry into French televisual consciousness. Despite the poignancy of Schaeffer's predicament, media workers found themselves making similar statements again and again during the course of McLuhan's French revolution.

McLuhan was not particularly pleased with his performance(s) on French television. He wrote to his friends Tom and Dorothy Easterbrook that they 'were complicated by my inadequate French'. Still, Paris provided Mac with the pleasing diversion of Eugene Ionesco's play *Macbett*, ((Ionesco, Eugene (1973), 'MacBett', in *Plays*, Vol. IX, London: Calder and Bryars; MP. 23-19. Unpublished letter to Tom and Dorothy Easterbrook (1 Aug. 1972) on the occasion of McLuhan's visit to Paris and his attendance at *Macbett*)) performed for the first time at Le Théâtre Rive-Gauche in 1972 (MP. 23-19). For its part, television provided McLuhan with a low definition rendezvous with the French public, a doubly cool (owing to the medium and the messenger) point of contact deepened by his awkward oral skills which would have necessitated, for those who cared to listen, a high level of

involvement in the completion and perhaps correction of his remarks. McLuhan had mastered the medium before he had mastered French. A perfectly fluent McLuhan may have been too hot for French audiences and, by the same token, a transparent and straightforwardly descriptive Lacan could not have ‘mastered’ television. Lacan was never cooler than on television – except, perhaps, when he was thought to be addressing a dog while standing on a soapbox during a talk at Vincennes (Lacan 1990: 117).

It is evident from his letters to his family written from Cambridge in the 1930s that the French language and culture had entered McLuhan’s consciousness in an enthusiastic but incomplete manner. These letters radiate youthful exuberance and his belief that the mastery of French opens one to ‘the mind of the greatest European people’ (1987: 28). While McLuhan did become a competent reader of French, he later lamented that he read only this language in addition to his own. Unlike his friend Lewis (1981: 13), McLuhan would not ‘Blast Parisian Parochialism’ and ‘Sentimental Gallic Gush’.

Ma – Ma – Ma – Ma

The journalist Guy Dumur reported on his meeting with McLuhan at the ORTF and the prophet’s television appearance(s) for readers of *La Nouvelle observateur* shortly after ‘Dossiers de l’écran’ was aired. McLuhan was a media personality and therefore newsworthy in the eyes of the media, turned as they are towards themselves. Dumur claimed ignorance when it came to evaluating McLuhan’s intellectual contributions. Despite what McLuhan’s admirers such as Schaeffer, Morin, Jean Duvignaud, and Alain Bourdin have claimed in the name of an ‘open’ sociology, Dumur (1972: 36-7) simply could not understand McLuhan because ‘he is too anglo-saxon’ (this was a rather odd thing to say of a Celt). Indeed, it was already

commonplace in journalistic reports on McLuhan to claim that his work was contrary to the French spirit of Cartesian thought. Figured as an ‘anti-Descartes’, McLuhan challenged the methods of separation, dissection and causal explanation by stringing together apparently unrelated ideas; this latter practice made his texts surrealistic, and surrealism had long since passed out of fashion. But for many French journalists ((In this lecture I draw on a wide range of press reports: Dumur, Guy (1972) ‘La galaxie MacLuhan’, *Le Nouvel observateur* 401 (23 juillet): 36-7; Garric, Daniel (1967) ‘Le prophète de l’information’, *Science et vie* 599 (août): 24-9, 142, 144, 147; *idem* (1967a) ‘La galaxie de Gutenberg de McLuhan’, *Le Figaro* (12 déc.); Marcotte, Gilles (1974) ‘Marshall McLuhan et l’énergie du banal’ (review), *Le Devoir* (15 juin); Brincourt, André (1972) ‘Si l’avenir donnait tort à McLuhan?’ *Le Figaro* (15 juillet); Desanti, Dominique (1974) ‘Marshall McLuhan, prophète de la communication – Il met en garde – “Attention: le dialogue ou la mort”’, *Argus de la presse* (22 juillet): 40-1; Gariépy, Renault (1967) ‘Etre ou ne pas être ... McLuhanien! Mais comment l’être’, *La presse* (8 juillet); Dommergues, Pierre (1967) ‘La civilisation de la mosaïque – le message de Marshall McLuhan’, *Le Monde* (18 oct.); *idem* (1969) ‘Marshall McLuhan en question’, *Le Monde* (9 août).)), several pieces of the puzzle of McLuhan always seemed to be missing. More to the point, Daniel Garric and others specified that while English is direct, and permits the formation of neologisms and explosive links between disparate ideas, French is at the pole opposite of *la pensée McLuhanienne* because it is intimately neo-classical in construction (Garric 1967 and 1967a; Marcotte 1974). This rather sweeping claim helped to fuel the charge that he was difficult to understand in translation.

These vague contrasts set the stage for more bizarre pronouncements, themselves worthy of the label surreal. For example, Dominique Desanti (1974: 40-1) referred mistakenly to McLuhan as ‘un pur WASP!’ White – yes – but anglo-saxon and protestant – no; well, at least not after his

conversion to Catholicism. Moreover, a mantra was being chanted in Parisian circles courtesy, among others, of the journalist associated with *Le Figaro littéraire*, André Brincourt (1972): ‘Ma – Ma – Ma – Ma: Marx, Mao, Marshall McLuhan’. The last syllable of the chant indicated what it was in the prophet and so-called revolutionary that was more than himself, an *objet petit a* that did not in this instance find its way into his name, but nonetheless transfixed those like Brincourt sunk in their chanting; it may as well have been Macheath, Macbett, Macbeth, MacDonalds, MacLuhan (whom, it is rumored, enjoyed more than a few Big Macs in his time). One needn’t go further than Yves Knockaert’s *Third Interlude* for piano to find a soundtrack suitable for Big Mac’s periodic Mac Attacks; after all, he composed this piece for the ballet aptly titled *MacLuhan at MacDonalds* ((Knockaert Yves (1988), *Third Interlude uit het ballet ‘MacLuhan at MacDonalds’*, Bruxelles: CeBeDem.)). What is also more than itself or the residue of the residue of the name? It is the further remainder that reminds us of a cry for mother: mama, mama. The pain of this cry is real enough because it wants satisfaction from an object from which one will soon enough be weaned. This *objet petit a* belongs to the (m)other or ma-ma.

Writing in the introduction to Jean Marabini’s (1973) book *Marcuse & McLuhan et la nouvelle révolution mondiale*, Armand Lanoux ((Lanoux, Armand (1973), ‘Introduction’ to Marabini, Jean, *Marcuse & McLuhan et la nouvelle révolution mondiale*, Paris: Maison Mame; *idem* (1967) ‘Les étranges idées de McLuhan’, *L’Aurore* (15 nov.); *idem* (1968) ‘Un penseur op’ art: MacLuhan’, *Les Nouvelles littéraires* 2140 (28 sept.): 1.)) refers to ‘les deux grands M: M. et M’, whose respective revolutionary ideas are said to be like thermometers since it is absurd to blame them for the heat they register. Lanoux’s activities in the French media included his presidency of the Comité de la télévision française in the late 1950s, as well as the directorship of the review *à la page* from 1964-1970. Today, the very notion

that Marx, Mao, Marcuse and MacLuhan could be brought together in a consciousness-raising chant about youth and revolution indicates the brilliant superficiality of mediatic representations of the political field and the abuses of 'Eastern' practices prevalent in the 1960s. Several years before Marabini's book and, writing in Montréal, Renault Gariépy (1967) had observed in the heady atmosphere of Expo '67 that 'on our little French screen ... the presence of MM (these initials no longer translate the reality of Marilyn Monroe or Mickey Mantle) has begun to make itself felt'. A Canadian 'MM' had temporarily eclipsed -no mean feat – several American standards. Let's not forget that years after 'MM' disappeared from the French scene, another MM (Mickey Mouse), a further American standard, would make his presence felt among the francophones.

The little *a* is the remainder, the surplus of the prophet's message. This message was a sublime object of fascination inspiring an impressive range of responses. McLuhan's flaws (his awkward French, his alleged journalistic excesses, flippancy, political irresponsibility in the eyes of the Left) helped to solidify his position as prophet rather than diminish his status. As Slavoj Zizek ((Zizek, Slavoj (1991), *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor*, London: Verso, pp. 254-55.)) explains in the case of the body of the king, his ordinary features undergo a transubstantiation as he becomes an object of fascination. To debase the king is not to diminish his status since the accentuation of his flaws reinforces his position by arousing compassion and fascination. This holds equally true in the case of the prophet MacLuhan, especially in his heyday. The more his work was subjected to critical debate, the more fascinating he became. A sublime object is a difficult target to hit, for the *objet petit a* is a second order semblance framed by a television screen. Having smashed the set, the medium may reassert itself through the adjoining wall of a neighbour's apartment, in a bar, in a picture window of a shop, etc. Standing over the wreck of a television set or, to use Zizek's example, over

the body of Ceausescu, one asks oneself: is it/he really dead? The *objet petit a* cannot be destroyed – unlike one of the sign vehicles by means of which it is delivered – and this is brought home by the image of Ceausescu's body broadcast televisually around the world, persisting not only in the memory of Romanians but in the international image banks. The lost *objet a* needs a medium to clothe it; even a name will suffice. Of course, MacLuhan was not subject to the regicidal intentions of his televisual audience. This did not make him any easier to hit. For the paradox of striking MacLuhan was this: it put one in the strange position of being seen as a counter-revolutionary, for one was thought to be on the side of mechanical reason and rationality, Western values, on the wrong side of the 'generation gap', anti-youth, a proponent of explication over exploration. In short, because MacLuhan aligned himself with youth culture and counter-cultural revolution against the academy, to attack him as a counter-revolutionary was to paradoxically become one oneself (see Dommergues 1969). Ultimately, however, MacLuhan's own corporatist assumptions, homophobia, and 'right to life' politics were read as the signs of a deeply conservative Catholic thinker. No paradox could, in the end, erase or obscure these beliefs.

The little *a* embodies the impossible *jouissance* of certain members of the French media community such as Schaeffer. The realization that their prophet was also an impostor caught them in a painful paradox. Mac could not provide 'it'; that is, he could not satisfy the desire of media workers for legitimation in relation to the French intellectuals. As he continued not to provide 'it', Mac still embodied the *objet a* of the legitimation phantasy as it showed those such as Schaeffer what they were: little twisted semblances of shit. Even the message of the medium, critically battered, taught a painful lesson about exclusion from intellectual discourse, while at the same time it filled page after page of reviews: yes, it's all over with Mac, isn't it? It was his success that destroyed him, wasn't it? We technicians

must have been wrong. It needs to be said again, doesn't it? This was the rather lengthy lesson taught by the little *a* of Mac. But Mac was not an analyst – although, as we saw earlier with respect to the concept of rationalisation, he sometimes was figured as one – who could teach his followers how to give up the *objet petit a* and readjust themselves to French intellectual life in the wake of another failed revolution; to give his name back its quasi-original spelling, leaving a gap between *M* and *c* which would really show the technicians where they belonged and what they were made of.

There is nothing particularly original in this situation. In the 1960s, *les moyens de masse* in France were often the concern of para-academic media workers or cultural *animateurs*. A further example is found in Brian Rigby's analysis of the *Vivre son temps* collection of books published from 1962-1967, and edited by Jacques Charpentreau ((Rigby, Brian (1991), 'The Vivre son temps Collection: Intellectuals, Modernity and Mass Culture', in *France and the Mass Media*, B. Rigby and N. Hewitt (eds.), London: Macmillan.)). 'All the writers in the collection agreed', Rigby writes (1991: 44), 'that the new phenomenon facing France in the early to mid-1960s was that of *mass society*'. Few of these writers had university posts. They were *animateurs* committed to bringing high culture to the masses. They sought to humanize new technologies and play a mediating role in the 'permanent education' of the masses. While Rigby treats these writers as intellectuals, he notes:

In the eyes of some French academics and intellectuals, this group of writers may well not seem very distinguished. One can even image sociologists such as Bourdieu and his disciples refusing to acknowledge that they were part of an authentic intelligentsia. (Rigby 1991: 44)

The division between cultural action and the scholarly field or, to use other terms, between the cultural *animateurs* and intellectuals-academics, was played out in *l'affaire McLuhan*. Rigby's imagination did not need very much exercise to evoke the class politics of the study of the mass media in France in the 1960s. McLuhan was perceived as inauthentic by the intellectuals because of the support of the *animateurs* and his interest in their work; the *animateurs* considered his work authentic precisely because he appealed to their practices from the site of the academy and the television studio and could be said to have recognized something to which French intellectuals had hitherto been blind. The *animateurs* are a little like desire since they are never content (to let the masses pursue their own delirious ends in the mediascape).

One of the most important features of McLuhan's reception in France was the issue of who read and promoted him and the sites from which they worked. While those in the mass media, artists of all stripes, especially graphic artists, and pedagogues eager to introduce new audio-visual tools into the classroom, found inspiration in his theories, this led to claims that it was his success that destroyed him, that his prestige did not originate from a site where prestige could be afforded to a thinker. With the advent of the concept of *macluhanisme* there emerged the figure of a prophet who might have provided satisfaction for the 'men of images', the professionals of the communications industries (advertisers, media technicians, printers, designers, and teachers). But the prophet failed to do so for, as we have seen, several reasons; and with this disappointment came a barrage of criticism against him. The very inseparability of the desire of the 'men of images' and the object-cause of their desire, led to very public suffering and loss of potential prestige and glory.

François Mariet (1978-79: 108-9) ((Mariet, François (1977),
'Le *macluhanisme* dans l'éducation', *Le Français aujourd'hui* 38 (juin):

47-52; *idem* (1978-79) 'McLuhan, prophète ou imposteur?' *Millésime* (juin): 107-9.)) correctly diagnosed this situation in recognising that *macluhanisme* 'is inseparable from the public whose expectations it fulfills and for whom McLuhan becomes ... a prophet'. Occupying a position subordinate to the theoretical disciplines of the academy from which concepts are borrowed, and less well known than philosophers, writers and filmmakers, the media workers, represented by Mariet as a 'fan club', entered the public sphere of intellectual debate only to have their own subordinate position displayed to them in the media in which they worked. Moreover, in his study of the recognition factor of *macluhanisme* among teachers in France, Mariet catalogued the diverse effects of hearsay and found that McLuhan's French readers in the pedagogical milieu needed no specific competence in order to tune into his messages. This made him enormously popular. Mariet (1977: 51) attributes the success of *macluhanisme* among teachers to the 'conjunction of this diffuse expectation of a philosophy of the media and to an unusual oeuvre in which no scientific method of demonstration limits the access of the hurried or untrained reader, and against which no critical text forewarns'. Mariet situates himself on the side of the critical, unhurried pedagogue, the trained reader who specializes in identifying the follies of interpretation of a servile class.

On the other hand of this rhetoric of speed, the hurried McReader has no time to reflect, Mariet suggests. But among such typographically-minded groups as the Association des Compagnons de Lure, for example, points of resistance against just this sort of professional pronouncement had been established in the course of a seminar (attended by McLuhan in August, 1969) devoted to 'M.McL.'. In his introduction to the seminar, Gilles Gheerbrand ((Gheerbrand, Gilles et alia (1969), *Pour comprendre M.McL.* Association des compagnons de Lure: Rencontres, p. 10.)) presents a reading of three categories of French articles on McLuhan

(reviews; those which purport to reveal the fraud of *macluhanisme*; and serious and honest reflections), the second of which briefly describes some of the errors made by the intellectuals in their attempts to discredit McLuhan, while hinting at the similarity of some their ideas to those of McLuhan. Even distinguished university professor François Châtelet, Gheerbrand remarks, read McLuhan hurriedly, pointing out his error of thinking that the telephone was a hot medium. The speed of one's reading was the shit which was flung back and forth over of course of the public debates on the merits of McLuhan. How did McLuhan himself read? He was not a slow and careful hermeneut by any stretch of the imagination. His reading habits were, as Philip Marchand ((Marchand, P. (1989), *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*, Toronto: Random House, p. 129.)) explains, selective:

*To determine whether a book was worth reading, he usually looked at page 69 of the work, plus the adjacent page and the table of contents. If the author gave no promise of insight or worthwhile information on page 69, McLuhan reasoned, the book was probably not worth reading. If he decided the book did merit his attention, he started by reading only the left hand pages.*²⁰

The charge of unreflective speed reading could not be used effectively against McLuhan's followers on the grounds of its inadequacy to the master's habits and the texts they informed. One may claim against his detractors that the errors of their readings were the result of slow reading against the grain.

Into the gap between desire and fulfillment went the little *a* of Mac, and the prophet was taken as the cause of his subjects' desires. *Le mac* or the pimp didn't and couldn't deliver or, rather, he delivered his followers into servitude. This does not mean that they went without a struggle. Zizek

would have us believe that such servitude is voluntary since the other name, the sublime Mac, hypnotized his readers because they conferred upon it the power to do so. They were glued to their sets, if you will; and, after smashing them, they were glued to the idea of the set that Mac preached. To be called *un petit mac* carries a further meaning. *Un mac* is a person who invites a guest to dinner and, when the time comes to settle the bill, notices that he is short of money, and asks his guest to loan him some. Mac's followers suffered the indignity of having to pay the price of accepting an invitation to bring their work to the intellectual table, a table set for them in the name of their host, but for which they had to dearly pay, and pay some more.

Both 'le pape du pop', as Garric dubbed McLuhan in a catholic gesture (in this name alone one senses why the dictates of the prophet were followed to the letter by certain believers), and Lacan renounced personal brilliance in the name of orders greater than themselves; for Lacan, it was sainthood. The saintly psychoanalyst, too, embodies the *objet petit a* and it is one of the 'oddities of the acts of saints', Lacan noted (1990: 15-16), to make those whose ears were glued to their television sets aware of this and to unstick them. It was only after the program was over, after the screen had absorbed its blue glow, and Lacan was silent – as mum as a saint – that one could really hear what one is in the sound of sight. The important displacement hinted at by Lacan is that of sight by sound, eye by ear, even before the television set. Recall, however, that we are in the 'Age of McLuhan'. This displacement was, McLuhan claimed, at the center of the Gutenberg civilisation's deafening of the tribal ear for the sake of the biases of literacy and visual culture. This made one ill-equipped to experience the auditory-tactile world of the new electronic technologies. For McLuhan, tuning in meant keeping one's ears glued to the set. Unlike the saintly analyst, and despite his renunciation of personal brilliance, McLuhan didn't stop producing euphoria. He simply could not be mum in the oral-aural

electronic village even if, in French, he occasionally stumbled. Watching television made lousy theory.