Before the Letter

It is commonplace to find mention of the relationship between the writings of McLuhan and Barthes in both French and English (primarily North American and British) reflections on popular culture. One could catalogue an impressive inventory of reminders of the parallel concerns of *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and *Mythologies* (1957). It needs to be kept in mind, however, that it was the question of McLuhan's relation to the practices of structuralism that often animated such comparative observations, and that Barthes was not always the first figure suggested to French readers of McLuhan. In terms of reading practices, this meant that it was the work of Claude Levi-Strauss that came to mind in the first instance. In 1966, the year McLuhan's writings first received widespread critical exposure in France, the journal founded by Georges Bataille, *Critique,* published a review of the English editions of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* by Paul Riesman (1966) ((Paul Riesman (1966), 'De l'homme typographique à l'homme électronique', *Critique* 225 (fév.): 172-82. The following year, the English editions of *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* were again reviewed in the pages of Critique by Kattan (1967), 'Marshall McLuhan', *Critique* 238 (mars): 322-34. Kattan's (1966) earlier interview was conducted at the PEN Congress in New York; 'L'âge de l'électricité', *La Quinzaine littéraire* 9 (15 juillet): 8-9.)), while *La Quinzaine littéraire* carried an interview with McLuhan by their Canadian correspondent Naïm Kattan (1966). In addition, by 1966, Barthes had, in fact, begun to turn away from the structural analysis of narrative.

Riesman (1966: 174) thought that traditional social scientists would have difficulty with McLuhan's mosaic method since it was unlike the methodologies with which they were accustomed to working. Moreover, it would be pointless to judge McLuhan's work on the basis of such methodologies since his debt was to literature rather than sociology. For Riesman, McLuhan was more of a novelist sketching the personalities of technologies than a sociologist. Even so, Riesman believed that McLuhan left too much to the reader's imagination in his infatuation with collecting and juxtaposing quotations and ideas. Despite this literary debt, McLuhan is not exempt from the so-called error of thinking that 'the simple spatio-temporal juxtaposition of things – pseudo-einsteinian approach – constitutes a sufficiently powerful analysis of their relations' (Riesman 1966: 174-75). If social science errs on Newtonian rather than quantum grounds in the pursuit of rigor and exactitude, McLuhan stretches the limits and coherence of 'social Einsteinism' as a critical approach relevant to understanding social change. What is interesting about this criticism is that McLuhan's method is thought to suffer from the very thing that would win it praise a few years later in some Anglo-American circles. Riesman's critical discussion of the mosaic method itself roams freely across the disciplines. He refers to it in psychoanalytic terms as 'a chain of free associations' and treats it as a biological entity whose parts, like the amputated limbs of certain organisms, may engender new organisms since the part contains details of the whole.

Riesman situates McLuhan in relation to two key French figures. Like Jacques Ellul, McLuhan takes critical notice of the mechanization and dehumanization of persons and the disappearance of individualism since the Renaissance. While Ellul bases his social criticism and vision of the future on the extension of his general concept of technique, McLuhan considers media of communication to be vehicles of radical change, and this change will be marked by the re-emergence of a healthy and

wholesome tribalism. The second figure to whom Riesman refers is Claude Levi-Strauss. The analyses found in *Understanding Media* are in agreement with the 'spirit of the times', Riesman thinks, despite the unverifiability of the hypotheses advanced in this book. The insight into 'the inherent message of the structure of the media of our age" suggests to Riesman (1966: 179) that the point of attack of McLuhan and Levi-Strauss is 'formally the same', even though their goals and methods are different. McLuhan and Levi-Strauss do not meet by chance for 'these two researchers have recognised independently of one another that the structure of communication also contains a message and it is often the message which is the most important. But for Levi-Strauss the importance of this message [ie., rules of kinship and marriage assure the exchange of women between groups, just as linguistic rules assure the communication of messages] is that it reveals at the level of the unconscious the structure of the human mind while, for McLuhan, this message has a certain effect on the mind of man without him being aware of it' (Riesman 1966: 179). It is in light of this difference that Riesman criticises McLuhan on the ground that he has an inadequate concept of the nature of man and cannot explain whether or not his 'man' receives the messages inherent to the structure of the media. McLuhan recognizes this problem without solving it, turning instead to the observation, for instance, that it is not easy to explain the fact that the transformative power the media can be ignored.

In Riesman's staging of an early encounter between McLuhan and structuralism, McLuhan proves to be an unworthy partner for Levi-Strauss. Read retrospectively, this was a sign of things to come since McLuhan's French and English readers would struggle to find a mode of analysis into which he would fit with a minimum of theoretical violence. The terms of McLuhan's relationship to structuralism would be drafted again and again without, I want to show, much success. It is in this context that Barthes would emerge as a fellow traveller whose path through literature to the

social paralleled that of McLuhan and whose relationship to structuralism was troubled enough to allow for flexibility in the comparison. Style supplants method as the common measure of both men.

Nominating Barthes

Writing in the daily newspaper *The Toronto Star* in the summer of 1978, the Canadian journalist Robert Fulford ((Robert Fulford (1971), 'From gurus we always get enigmas', *The Toronto Star* (25 sept.) and (1978), 'Meet France's Marshall McLuhan', *The Toronto Star* (17 june).)) asked his readers to consider the complexities of a recent book by Barthes (*Roland Barthes By Roland Barthes*) under the provocative title of 'Meet France's Marshall McLuhan'. Aside from the title, Fulford said little concrete about the relationship between McLuhan and Barthes, dwelling instead upon the 'impenetrability of [Barthes's] thought' and the perils of an intellectual celebrity who has been canonized for writing against the canon, as it were. Fulford's single reference to McLuhan read: 'Like Marshall McLuhan, [Barthes] sees the way that you express yourself as potentially more important than what you actually say. Barthes sees a great historic drama in the attempts of various underclasses to imitate the style of those who have power'. The Barthesean theme of the weak 'stealing Language' from the sites of Power, which he expressed in *Mythologies* (1957) as the ubiquity of bourgeois ideology in French society of the 1950s and the necessity of all other social classes to 'borrow' from the bourgeoisie, became for Fulford a way of situating Barthes's own intellectual development and rise to international intellectual fame. This modest newspaper article provides an early example of the rhetoric of the search for the 'French McLuhan'.

It is not only that McLuhan and Barthes shared an interest in popular culture and the analysis of forms of expression. Rather, Fulford implies that the relation between McLuhan and Barthes is based upon the impenetrability of their respective writings. In short, the writings of French intellectuals are just as impenetrable as the work of McLuhan, and equally insightful, if not audacious. 'From gurus we always get enigmas', Fulford wrote some years earlier in the Star (Sept. 1971), referring to McLuhan among others.

'Meet France's Marshall McLuhan' did not go unnoticed by McLuhan. A few weeks after its publication he wrote a letter 'To the Editor of *The Toronto Star*' in response to Fulford. Deepening the connection between himself and Barthes, McLuhan (1987: 539-40) wrote that Barthes 'once asked me to collaborate with him on a book'. Although McLuhan did not elaborate on his contact with Barthes, he was flattered to be placed by Fulford in the company of Barthes. I will elaborate on McLuhan's meetings with Barthes and the 'myth' of their ill-fated collaborative project later in this chapter. In the meantime, and despite the remarks of the editors of McLuhan's *Letters* for whom the fact that Fulford did not explicitly refer to McLuhan's work as 'impenetrable' provides a posthumous line of defence, McLuhan himself drew the obvious conclusion: 'Fulford sees Barthes as impenetrable as myself'. McLuhan specifies that the special character of his 'impenetrability' results from his study of effects rather than his theorizing; to use other words, he claimed to study patterns without theories. Equally significant, however, was McLuhan's naming of Barthes's work: 'As for Barthes, he is a "phenomenologist" – that is, one who tries to see the patterns in things while also playing along with the dominant theory of his world'.

I will use this misidentification of Barthes as the occasion for a reflection on McLuhan's relationship with structuralism. In exploring this relation, two

perspectives need to be distinguished. First, some of McLuhan's French readers aligned his work with multi-disciplinary structuralist research as it developed through the late 1950s and into the 1960s. McLuhan was either a precursor of structuralism or a fellow traveller. Finding McLuhan a place in a recognizable stream of research was a normalizing and legitimizing gesture since it provided a readymade context of understanding for his work, even if this contextualization relied upon a negative critereon such as 'impenetrability' to make the connection. The appeal to structuralism as a means of connecting Barthes and McLuhan is even more strained if it is recalled that by the time of the publication of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), Barthes had abandoned the technical demands of structuralist method and disavowed the orthodoxies of Literature for an autobiographical writing in which he treated himself 'as an effect of language'.

Second, McLuhan's own 'understanding' of structuralism and phenomenology resulted from his translation of general orientations in these areas into the interpretive double of figure/ground. On the face of it, Barthes was certainly not a phenomenologist; yet, any reader of the essay which grounds theoretically Barthes's little cultural sketches or 'mythologies', 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' in *Mythologies,* would admit that his description of the bi-planar structure (full of meaning, yet formally empty) of the mythical signifier of the second order semiological system of mythology is richly phenomenological (the final term of the signifier-signified-sign triumvirate becomes the first term or signifier of the mythical system). Barthes describes how myth gets ahold of first order linguistic signification for its own purposes. Form plays a game of hide and seek with meaning, holding meaning at a distance and in turn hiding in it; form also preys parasitically upon meaning by emptying it of history, reality and contingency. Indeed, in an earlier book, *Michelet par lui-même* (1954), Barthes had undertaken a phenomenologically inspired description of

selected 'existential thematics' pertaining to the sensations and substances at work in Michelet's imaginative histories. These observations do not commit one to McLuhan's position since neither of the 'two Barthes' to which critics commonly refer were strictly speaking phenomenologists. To use slightly more positive terms, McLuhan's naming of Barthes was not as ridiculous as it first appeared.

Calling all Structuralists!

In the late 1960s in Québec, the translator, writer, and editor Jean Paré (1968: 9-10) ((Jean Paré (1968), 'Qui est Marshall McLuhan?' and 'McLuhan: son oeuvre et les enseignants', *L'Enseignement* [Journal de la corporation des enseignants du Québec] 5 (15 nov.): 9-10 and 11-12. For scattered remarks on McLuhan and structuralism see Said, Edward (1971), 'Abecedarium culturae: structuralism, absence, writing', *Triquarterly* 20: 33-71 and Kroker, Arthur (1984) *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/ McLuhan/Grant,* Montréal: New World Perspectives. In Lecture 5 I will have a good deal more to say about Kroker, the self-promoted and annointed heir to McLuhan in postmodern garb.)) had attempted to identify McLuhan as 'an estranged parent' of the structuralists, rather than a presursor or product of structuralism. While Paré developed the figure of McLuhan as an 'amateur structuralist', his efforts at establishing his next of kin quickly unravelled with the qualification that McLuhan is not really structuralist, since he is neither part of this diverse movement nor a disciple of one of its figures or methodological variations. As the figure of McLuhan and structuralism began to lose touch completely, Paré sought a safe common – albeit vague – ground: McLuhan became a contemporary of the practitioners of structuralism. Paré's final figure expressing the relationship between McLuhan and structuralism is of 'a circle inside of a polygon' suggesting that the relationship of the former with the latter is tangential,

rather than being totally oppositional. This was not the only attempt to unite McLuhan and structuralism.

Praising structuralism for both its housekeeping skills and ability to mirror mass-mediated confusion, Edward Said (1971: 56-7) set this method in and against the North American sprawl of McLuhanism. Said mentioned nothing, however, about the spread of *macluhanisme* among the francophones. Kroker (1984: 78) referred to McLuhan as 'structuralist (before his time)', picking up the pieces of a long series of disjointed efforts to rearrange a marriage that was, from the outset, made somewhere other than in heaven.

During the early 1970s, James M. Curtis ((James M. Curtis (1970), 'The Function of Structuralism at the Present Time', *The Dialogist* II/2: 58-62 and (1972), 'Marshall McLuhan and French Structuralism', *Boundary 2* 1/1: 134-46. The Picard-Finkelstein comparison refers to Finkelstein, Sidney (1968) *Sense and Non-sense of McLuhan.* New York: International Publishers and Raymond Picard's (1965) *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert), his widely supported acritical rant about Barthes's *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963).

On the question of McLuhan and structuralism see also the unpublished manuscript by Vermillac, Michel (1993) *MacLuhan et la modernité.* Vols. I et II, Thèse de Doctorat Nouveau Régime de Philosophie, Epistémologie, Histoire des Idées. Présenté sous la Direction de Dominique Janicaud, U.F.R. Lettres et Science Humaines, Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis.

McLuhan had read with great interest Jean-Marie Benoist's (1978) book *The Structural Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), which he described in his own conceptual vocabulary in a letter dated 19 Dec. 1978 to Claude de Beauregard (MP. 22-17). See also McLuhan's letter to

Cleanth Brooks of 16 May, 1977 (MP. 20-2) on structuralism and figure/ground relations.)) addressed the issue of McLuhan's relationship with French structuralism in two articles, the first of which focussed on Levi-Strauss, and the second on Barthes. Curtis's (1970) hyberbolic importation of McLuhan into his review of *The Languages of Criticism in the Sciences of Man* provides the occasion for the claim – echoing Riesman – that McLuhan and Levi-Strauss 'share almost everything'. What Levi-Strauss and McLuhan share in particular is 'an oracular style, a disregard for academic conventions, and a wide public impact, a combination which naturally arouses their more traditional colleagues to a near-apoplectic frenzy' (Curtis, 1970: 62). Their relationship is based first and foremost on style, one marked by ambiguity and portentousness. Beyond this issue, Levi-Strauss and McLuhan are said to share an attitude; their respective writings have had a wide and major impact; they have both been the target of their colleagues' outbursts. Only the matter of style opens the door ever so slightly to a consideration of the relationship between their writings. But since the appeal to style in this instance remains undefined and vague, we should expect little from such textual considerations.

While the 'family resemblances' first postulated by Paré dissolved into abstract geometrical lines, Curtis frames his sense of resemblance with the wide borders of a general sociology of knowledge production in which references are made to the reception of interdisciplinary work in a disciplined academy and the phenomenon of university professors who become popular sages. It follows for Curtis that two innovative thinkers who 'share everything' – but may, in fact, have nothing in common – may be said to both practice a certain brand of 'structuralism' full of creative play. This structuralism is more poetic than analytical and it entails the implosion of the subject/object distinction, the end of the primacy of empiric evidence, and the collapse of distinct disciplines. These are the main features of the post-Newtonian world of the human sciences. For Curtis, both Levi-Strauss

and McLuhan are in these terms practitioners of 'social Einsteinism'. These features allow Curtis (1970: 65) to apply to McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, a book he admires for its puns and non-sequential analysis, what Eugenio Donato wrote of Levi-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit:* "… it is impossible in a work such as [this] to separate myth and literature, science and interpretation, analysis and criticism …" Ultimately, Curtis (1970: 67) will posit the convergence of 'the linguistic concept of structure, anthropological findings, modern literary criticism, and the interests of McLuhan and others in contemporary society … in the study of myth'. Taken together with the matter of style, Curtis's emphasis on myth facilitates the inclusion of Barthes in his stable of French structuralists whose work lends itself to somewhat banal comparisons with that of McLuhan.

In his second essay, Curtis is content to rehearse the features of the conceptual universe of 'social Einsteinism', but in relation to McLuhan and Barthes. The work of McLuhan and Barthes is, he claims, postmodernist, and the consideration of their work 'elicits a better understanding of the postmodernist situation as whole' (Curtis, 1972: 143). Here, postmodernist seems to be synonymous with 'social Einsteinism'. It is not at all evident that one can be both structuralist and postmodernist. Further, Curtis compares passages in Raymond Picard's *New Criticism or New Fraud?* and Sidney Finkelstein's *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan* as instances of two virulent attacks on Barthes and McLuhan which were provoked by their similar styles of presentation. These venomous responses enable Curtis to hold together McLuhan and Barthes by means of external criteria; here, quite explicitly, in terms of provocations.

Curtis's interest in style is at times strikingly McLuhanesque since he is concerned with the effects of non-sequential writing rather than with analyzing its features. He is content not to squarely face the matter of style but, rather, to sustain McLuhan's resemblance to Barthes on the most

general level since they are both interested in contemporary society, and this interest does not work itself out in Marxian terms (Curtis, 1972: 140). This unanalyzed anti-Marxism clears the ground between Barthes and McLuhan so that Curtis may listen to the 'echoes' between sentences from Barthes's *Mythologies* and McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. Although these sounds are not discordant, the formal relations between Barthes's cultural sketches and McLuhan's series of exhibits in *The Mechanical Bride* are in agreement. Style is, it seems, nothing more than this kind of agreement. Any reader of these two texts can master style by noting the obvious.

Mass produced objects such as cars and toys, including certain materials (plastic), as well as performances, exhibitions, films, food and drink, and sporting events, all yield their mythological significations to Barthes. His mythological investigations often commence with representations of events and objects in popular French print media. Women's magazines such as *Elle,* newspapers like *Le Figaro,* and glossy newsmagazines along the lines of *Paris Match* are for Barthes treasure-troves of myths. The Barthesean mythologist may study anything since myth touches and corrupts everything; even those objects which resist myth are 'ideal prey'. Likewise, McLuhan's commentaries on the folkloric landscapes of everyday objects are inspired by advertisements, the organization of newspapers, comic books, popular magazines (*Reader's Digest, Time, Life, Fortune)*, detective novels, and various manifestations of the ligature of sex and technology (drum majorette, chorus line, glamor girl, etc.).

But readers of Barthes would be familiar with his early contributions to Marxist scholarship in the pages of the journals *Esprit, Combat* and later *Arguments,* on topics as diverse as the theatre of Bertolt Brecht and *le nouveau roman.* No reader of *Mythologies* would have overlooked one of the key figures of Barthes's political semiology of myth: inversion. Armed

with Marx's image, then, Barthes read the myths of France as it became a consumer society in terms of the processes of bourgeois ideology which gave a universal standing to their particular historical status. The political task of the mythologist was to 'upend the mythical message' by revealing how bourgeois ideology 'ex-nominates' itself while contaminating every event and object. Ultimately for Barthes, semiology, too, became a myth whose distortions in the name of a science of signs and a science of literature required unmasking. I do not mean to suggest that Barthes's semiology retained the political concerns of *Mythologies.* Although Barthes did not develop a political economy or even sociology of the sign in the manner of Baudrillard, he employed the concept of a 'deciding group' that influenced individual use by controlling the language, for instance, of the fashion system. In Barthes's 'Eléments de sémiologie', use is guided by the fabricated languages or 'logo-techniques' of the 'deciding groups', regardless of whether these groups are narrow and highly trained or diffuse and anonymous. The restriction of speech results from socio-semiotic determinations at the level of the system. This is one of the features of Barthes's semiology that is often overlooked.

The question of style is not so much a matter of the impact of McLuhan's and Barthes's rhetorics as an issue of McLuhan's translation of concepts into his own terms in the absence of an adequate table of conversions. Barthes was always much more explicit in his reuse of concepts, even if he often insisted on redefining concepts in confusing ways. His unfortunate penchant for the constitutive redefinition of linguistic terms produces an awkward vocabulary in which 'arbitrary' means signs formed by the unilateral decision of a deciding group functioning like the superego, one might imagine, behind the parade on the catwalk, and 'motivated' refers to the analogical relation between signifier and signified. Thus a Barthesean semiological system may be both arbitary and motivated, a contradiction in linguistics terms, many of which he retains and employs in standard ways.

But McLuhan, as Michel Vermillac (1993: 55-6) observes in his unpublished *thèse de doctorat,* did not provide a code which would help his readers decide about the status and relation of the heterogeneous fragments in which he wrote. McLuhan provided no key to the hierarchy among the fragments, and gave little direction about whether a given passage was intentionally insightful, accidental, comic, or purely stylistic. The 'mosaic method' was characterized, according to Vermillac, by a 'generalized indifferentiation' which made McLuhan 'neo-baroque' and 'postmodernist before the letter'. The absence of this code allowed McLuhan to be many things for many people and, more importantly, also enabled him to appear to be mining a number of intellectual veins.

In a letter to Edmund Carpenter, McLuhan situated the work of Levi-Strauss in the Cartesian tradition, which he described as working on figure minus ground (1987: 477). Against this tradition, McLuhan approached phenomena through their grounds, which he sought to feel. In spite of this important difference, McLuhan still referred to his approach as 'structuralist', and in the same breath as 'existentialist'. His explanation, in a letter to Marshall Fiswick written a year later, was twofold: 'The reason that I am admired in Paris … is that my approach is rightly regarded as "structuralist"'. Moreover, 'nobody except myself in the media field has ventured to use the structuralist or "existentialist" approach' (1987: 506). McLuhan suggested in this letter that *The Mechanical Bride* was in some sense 'existentialist'. By this term McLuhan suggests that his first book recorded the perceptions of his experience of objects and tried to avoid what he thought of as a moralising tone, which was a 'poor guide' in decoding social myths.

The problem with so-called 'phenomenologists' such as Levi-Strauss, McLuhan believed, was the 'left hemisphere tradition' of groundless, pure ideas (*MP.* McLuhan-C. Brooks, May 16, 1977, 20-2) in which they worked;

moreover, they ignored the study of effects, environments or grounds. McLuhan could take the name 'stucturalist' since his focus subsumed this approach without succumbing to its overemphasis on abstract forms. A clarification is in order. It may be, as Curtis suggests, that the 'medium is the message' entails the study of *langue* rather than *parole.* McLuhan approached figure through ground in order to understand their interplay or Gestalt. The medium may be the figure of the message's ground, or vice versa. This makes McLuhan's 'structuralism' Barthesean to the degree that Barthes's particular brand of semiology taught a related lesson with regard to the langue/parole distinction. In 'Eléments de sémiologie' (1964), Barthes's semiological extension of the linguistic distinction between *langue/parole* led him to reflect upon the 'reciprocal comprehensiveness' of the terms in the dialectic of social object and individual act. Barthes was interested in the semiological prospects of such a distinction, and they were for him brightest in the case of the garment system, as he would show in detail with regard to the written systems of fashion in *Système de la mode*(1967). McLuhan's interest in figure/ground interplay allowed him to take many labels since his work was neither trapped in the study of pure form nor merely a registry of disconnected effects. His 'inventories of effects' in *The Medium is the Massage* and *War and Peace in the Global Village* did not appear until the late 1960s.

McLuhan was not well read in structuralism. His reading of Jean-Marie Benoist's *The Structural Revolution* in the late 1970s, however, conjured for him the image of the x-ray characteristics of the electric age, one of whose effects he believed was the structural method itself, with its abstract, disembodied patterns (*MP.* McLuhan-Claude de Beauregard, Dec. 19, 1978, 22-17). McLuhan's terms of translation had by then changed, even though he continued to refer to structuralism as phenomenology, while thinking of phenomenological philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre in terms of their supposed responses to the violent, discarnate x-ray favored

by structuralism. 'Phenomenology' – that is, structuralism – in McLuhan's words was, echoing the language he developed in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962: 107ff), 'light-through' and therefore a televisual pattern through which light travels (a kind of x-ray), as opposed to 'light on,' with which he associated visual intensity, a blinding bias for fixity (of point of view), literal interpretation, and the treatment of space as a container. McLuhan's approach to the history of French philosophy was novel, indeed, for he read the Cartesian tradition in terms of the effects of electricity.

My goal here is not to explain away McLuhan's misuses and of terms. His handling of methodological labels was so obviously misleading that to merely repeat this would be uninteresting. There is little point in 'correcting' such glaring misnomers as McLuhan's (1987: 528) reference to the practices of Yale Derrideans as 'phenomenology as it is currently in vogue at Yale and elsewhere'. McLuhan's penchant for the translation of concepts into his own loosely defined nomenclature, making available only vague tables of conversion, might be called Barthesean in scope and intensity. While it is well known that Barthes did not honor the concepts he frequently borrowed from several disciplines, he normally provided a table of conversions.

St. Louis/Paris/Birmingham

In the study of popular culture in the 1950s, *Mythologies* had an important precursor in McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride.* For while, as Vermillac puts it, 'this Fiancée recalls to our French ears certain pages of *Mythologies'* (1993: 30), McLuhan's political position in this book was on the face of it distant from that of Barthes. Despite this distance, there were points of contact and numerous devices used to establish it. Vermillac suggests that 'McLuhan mentions as one of his fondest memories the fact

of having shaken hands with Roland Barthes, a thinker for whom he had great respect' (1993: 30). Whatever the origin of this 'memory', suffice to say that McLuhan's sense of mythology was not explicitly Barthesean, even though it did not completely eschew politics. The meetings of McLuhan and Barthes still endure as myths; whether they took place on paper or in a café seems a moot point, but one worth pursuing nonetheless.

In the 'Preface' to *Mechanical Bride,* McLuhan reveals that he will 'co-operate' with the whirlpool action of the 'new commercial education' of the mass media. He does not use the figure of inversion. Rather, McLuhan 'reverses' the direction of advertising, turning it against itself, forcing it to enlighten as opposed to devouring its 'prey'. McLuhan situates the target audience, at first figured as 'prey', at the center of the mediatic maelstrom. This vantage point enables one to better witness and analyze the action at hand. And from this critical observation 'it is hoped', McLuhan adds, 'many individual strategies may suggest themselves' (1951: v). The lesson McLuhan learned from Poe is well known: if one struggles against the current of a whirlpool, one will drown; if, on the contrary, one observes and rides the current, waiting for an opportune moment to save oneself by breaking out of it, then one is likely to survive. 'Co-operation' is a key but not the only important factor since hope hangs between capitulation and the formation of a personal strategy which is not necessarily oppositional. Between a paralyzed and an energized mind there is for McLuhan the privileged attitude of amused and rational detachment, of watching oneself sink in order to swim. This attitude was McLuhan's remedy for the ills of passivity produced by mechanization and homogenization. 'The reader has to be a second Ulysses in order to stand the siren onslaught', as he put it, shifting from Poe to Homeric myth in the process (1951: 97), but without abandoning the nautical metaphors he favored.

McLuhan was not prevented from identifying an attitude at work in advertising which did not want to be named. Just as Barthes argued that the bourgeoisie 'ex-nominates' itself, obliterating its name so as to become the unnamed source of meaning, McLuhan explained in similar terms in 'The Ballet Luce' in the *Bride* that the style and technique of *Time* magazine 'constitute a most influential set of attitudes which are effective precisely because they are not obviously attached to any explicit doctrines or opinions' (1951: 10). McLuhan sensed the process of 'ex-nomination' in the way a magazine provides its readership with certain attitudes, emotions and signs of their difference from other audiences, building coherence through, in the case of *Time,* a kind of formulaic diary writing. Depoliticized speech has political effects, McLuhan observed, even though he did not investigate them beyond noting the mindlessness and infantilism of *Time'*s readers and expressing the fear that one day a 'goose-stepping reader' might make a grab for power. In spite of his efforts to avoid 'moralizing', McLuhan could not help but condemn 'irresponsible' uses of communication techniques in the name of an explicitly Fascist power grab. McLuhan certainly recognized numerous symbolic reinforcements of the unequal relations of power in the everyday lives of Americans. For instance, his essay on 'Charlie McCarthy' identifies the voice used by the ventriloquist Victor Bergen in relation to his dummy Charlie McCarthy as a parrot-like version of corporate and state paternalism riddled with bureaucratese. The distinctive feature of Bergen's voice is a 'neutral patience' which for McLuhan 'embodies the relationship between the average man and the impersonal agencies of social control in a technological world' (1951: 16). Unfortunately, these agencies remained uninvestigated in McLuhan's work. But at his best he could hear them in the cultural ephemera of the 1950s. It is in this specific sense that there are echoes worth listening to between the *Bride* and *Mythologies.* Still, there always seemed to be something holding McLuhan back. Even his insightful studies of the mechanization and fragmentation of women's bodies in

advertising discourses were mired in his distaste for powerful expressions of female sexuality, and treatment of homosexuality and the division between pleasure and procreation as the deleterious effects of the commodification of sex.

It is useful to recall in this context Jonathan Miller's (1971: 76) ((Miller, Jonathan (1971), *McLuhan.* Glasgow: Fontana/Collins. Miller is particularly insightful on the matter of McLuhan's advocacy of Old South values, that is, of Dixie Noblesse and the questions of race and racism that haunt McLuhan's 'social speculations'.)) remarks on McLuhan's 'abdication of political intelligence' entailed by his focus on abstract form over content and his celebration of mediatic techniques as examples of avant-gardist practices akin to those used by poets and painters. Miller's reading is astute on the matter of McLuhan's 'general ignorance of social reality'. Conversely, McLuhan's (1987: 442-44) response to Miller is a masterpiece of professorial paternalism. While the sheer number and variety of political gaffes McLuhan made is in itself astonishing – not to mention the negligible effects the recognition of these have made on contemporary McLuhanites – Miller (1971: 31) acknowledges the important place *The Mechanical Bride* has in cultural criticism.

In *Technology and the Canadian Mind,* Kroker identifies what he calls the first of two 'blindspots' in McLuhan's communication theory:

First, McLuhan had no systematic, or even eclectic, theory of the relationship between economy and technology; and certainly no critical appreciation of the appropriation, and thus privatisation, of technology by the lead institutions, multinational corporations and the state, in advanced industrial societies. It was not, of course, that McLuhan was unaware of the relationship of corporate power and technology. One searing sub- text of Understanding Media and The Mechanical Bride had to do with the

almost malignant significance of the corporate control of electronic technologies. … But if McLuhan understood the full dangers of corporate control of technological media, nowhere did he extend this insight into a reflection on the relationship of capitalism and technology. (Kroker, 1984: 79)

In short, McLuhan had no political economy of technology and his Catholic humanism did not contradict 'the will to empire'. But the 'blindspot' of economy was not exactly a dead spot of political mythology. Kroker rarely mentions the *Bride* and when he does, it is in virtue of its sub-text, albeit a searing one, a textual manoeuvre designed to play down the outburts which run through McLuhan's text. These very moments of excess are signs of the text working against itself. Despite Kroker's sympthetic reading of McLuhan – a rarity, after all, on the left, given the torrents unleashed against him – I want to draw a different conclusion. Every eruption of political mythology in the *Bride* was for McLuhan a step backwards into moralizing. Yet, in spite of himself, there are untheorized perceptions of a ubiquitous mythic consciousness whose influence derives precisely from the ideological fact that it is represented as the common values of the people. In 'Freedom to Listen' and 'Freedom-American Style', McLuhan made an issue of corporate ownership in America because he witnessed through his study of the mass media the simulated freedoms permitted to individuals by means of the practices of consumption. I am not suggesting that McLuhan had a political mythology of technological consciousness and an insight into the consequences of the ownership of the means of production. McLuhan's political remarks became reflective only to the degree that he struggled to achieve the status of a detached and rational observer who did not 'attack' his subject matter. His attempt to avoid moralizing and erase his point of view did not reveal its own mythic dimensions through a reflection on his identification with a rational, detached, paternal, and neutral voice, supported by literary allusions.

Picking up on his nautical metaphors, McLuhan taught that students of the mass-media must swim in their waters, practicing so often as to feel at home in them, if you will. The swimmer who does not experience rough water, however, has not experienced the power of the medium through which he moves. The swimmer must be in a position to experience the process by means of which the medium makes itself strange to him. In this process the medium reveals its dangers. Applied to the mass-media, the image of the whirlpool implies that there is simply more water around it. This water may be less turbulent, of course, but it is still water, which is only to say that there was not, for McLuhan circa 1951, a shoreline in view marking the extent of mass-mediated life. If one cannot simply get out of the water, then one must adapt in order to endure.

Despite the dissimulations and vagaries of the demonstrations of the relationship between McLuhan and Barthes, there remains the matter of the unfulfilled promise of their collaborative effort. 'There is no rewind button on the BETAMAX of life', wrote the video artist Nam June Paik (1986: 221) ((On the meeting of intellectual stars see Paik, Nam June (1986), 'La vie, Satellites, One Meeting – One Life', in *Video Culture,* John G. Hanhardt (ed.), Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop. Paik is not dreaming. One does wonder about the conversations between John Cage and McLuhan, for example, the dialogical character of which simply doesn't survive in the correspondence.)) in the course of lamenting that no one had videotaped the periodic meetings of earthly stars such as Cage and McLuhan or even, to add insult to injury for my purposes only, McLuhan and Barthes.

The meetings of McLuhan and Barthes in Paris in 1973 belong to a universe of untaped but not unrealized points of personal contact. These are the stuff of myth or rather, they are the mythologies of sociologists concerned with sociologists of mythologies, to borrow a reversal used by

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1963: 1006), whose use of these phrases in the early 1960s revealed the circular and fantasmagoric logic of French *massmédiologues* for whom 'the masses are masses only as the massified receivers *[destinataires]* of a massively diffused mass culture'. I will be careful not to confound the meetings of figures of mythic proportions with myths of their meetings.

Barthes could not be counted among McLuhan's young French readers whose excitement about his ideas seemed to unsettle an older generation of established intellectuals. Moreover, Barthes did not mention McLuhan in his published writings. Conversely, McLuhan mentioned Barthes only in his letters. He appears to have known of *Mythologies* from secondary sources, but he had been made aware by his correspondents of the parallels various critics had found between his and Barthes's early writings on pop culture. Notwithstanding what may be called the 'detergent factor' which bound them together – both McLuhan and Barthes recognized the mystical properties afforded to this product, a fact commented upon by both French and English readers alike – their meetings could not generate as much interest in a collaborative project as soap-powder advertisements held for them. McLuhan and Barthes met at a cocktail party at the apartment of Claude Cartier-Bresson (the former's publisher at Maison mame) in Paris in the early summer of 1973. McLuhan had flown to Paris on his way to read a paper at the Biennale internationale de l'information in Le Touquet, France (June 20, 1973) – (*MP.* 137-33, ms., McLuhan, 'From Reporting to Programming: The Next One Hundred Years', translated into French by De Kerckhove). Among those present were Cartier-Bresson's well-known brother, the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, sociologist of art Jean Duvignaud, playwright Eugène Ionesco, journalist Guy Dumur, media artist Fred Forest, and McLuhan's friend and colleague in Toronto, Derrick de Kerckhove ((In response to my questions about the meetings of McLuhan and Barthes, Derrick De Kerckhove, Director of the McLuhan Program in

Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, generously provided his memories of the events in a conversation in July 1993 in Toronto. Although De Kerckhove's account contradicts McLuhan's brief mention of the episode in his published response to Fulford (that is, McLuhan wrote that 'Barthes once asked me …'), the idea of a collaborative effort may have at the time been relayed by several willing translators and one very eager publisher whose genuine excitement at the prospect of such a project may have obscured its precise origin. See also the letter of Claude Cartier-Bresson to McLuhan of 13 July, 1973 (*MP.* 20-81) and the ms. of De Kerckhove's translation of 'From Reporting to Programming: The Next One Hundred Years', presented at the Biennal Internationale de l'Information, Le Toquet, France, 20 June, 1973 (*MP.* 137-33).)), as well as an entourage from Mame. As the conversation drifted onto the topic of myth, De Kerckhove, who was acting as a go-between and translator for McLuhan, suggested that the micro-myths of *Mythologies* may give a specific shape to McLuhan's recent thoughts about reworking and updating *The Mechanical Bride,* a book about which he had reservations because he believed it to have been too jujune, too literary, too moralistic, etc. It was McLuhan's enthusiastic French publisher Cartier-Bresson who proffered the idea that McLuhan and Barthes could work at this project together. It is hardly surprising that McLuhan's publisher would suggest such a collaborative effort given the enormous interest it would have generated. A few months after his visit to Paris, Cartier-Bresson wrote to McLuhan inquiring about and expressing his great interest in any projects he may have been working on with Barthes (*MP.* 20-81). While McLuhan had initially received the proposal of a collaboration as an amusing idea which he suggested might be looked into in more detail, Barthes was willing to entertain it, but with only mild interest. Indeed, the collaborative project was not raised the following day at a meeting over lunch with McLuhan, Cartier-Bresson, Barthes and De Kerckhove. Sensing that the project was doomed, De Kerckhove did not pursue the matter further with McLuhan.1

The details of McLuhan's meetings with Barthes neither suggest that Barthes was 'the French McLuhan', nor do McLuhan's remarks on structuralism support the claim that he was a structuralist; it is surely ridiculous to suggest that McLuhan was the 'Canadian Barthes'. The seductive power of a suggestion at a cocktail party was also at work in the literature of the period, animating the discussion of all those concerned, and driving them to the unstable arrangement of McLuhan and Barthes as potential co-authors. I have been a kind of party pooper in all of this, I admit, having risen to the occasion to isolate an unnoticed correspondence between the two earthly stars on the grounds of their mutual recognition of 'bourgeois' consciousness, in their respective countries, as the 'common sense' of the period.

McLuhan's *Bride* and Barthes's *Mythologies* belong to a period rich in cultural criticism. In addition to these two ground-breaking books, one may add Richard Hoggart's ((This lecture is built around my thinking about the relationship between McLuhan, Barthes and Richard Hoggart or, my key international triumvirate from cultural studies in the 1950s. The key texts are Barthes *Mythologies,* McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride,* and Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy,* London: Chatto and Windus and, in French translation, (1970) *La Culture du pauvre: étude sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre,* Paris: Minuit. In addition, Hoggart's memoirs are fascinating, (1992) *An Imagined Life: Life and Times,* Vol. III (1959-91), London: Chatto and Windus. See also Hall, Stuart (1980), 'Cultural Studies and the Centre: some problematics and problems', in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies,* 1972-79, Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis (eds.), London: Unwin Hyman. See also the one-sided view of Pétillon, Pierre-Yves (1969), 'Avant et aprés McLuhan' (review), *Critique* 265 (juin): 504-11.)) *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Together these constitute a strong trio of cultural studies in the 1950s. This does not mean that cultural studies has its origins in

these books of the 1950s. Nonetheless, much can be learned from the evocative literary flavor of their analyses. Anyway, it would be hard to convince those wedded to the Gramscian tradition that cultural studies began with this trio. Stuart Hall (1980:16) was perhaps correct when he wrote of Birmingham school cultural studies that 'the search for origins is tempting but illusory'.

What is striking about these books of McLuhan, Barthes and Hoggart is the sense of regret each had about the emergence of a mythic consciousness whose distinguishing feature was that it did not want to be identified, and that it erased itself in order to more fully and powerfully perfuse and influence social and cultural life: French bourgeois ideology ex-nominates itself; American magazines offer satisfyingly comprehensive attitudes and opinions to their readers; and the emerging mass form is a 'faceless' and 'classless' and 'characterless' culture (Hoggart 1957: 342). Each of these thinkers isolate, with varying degrees of acuity, how the emergence of a self-effacing consciousness steals away the means of self-differentiation and self-definition by making itself the general measure of social being. To be sure, since the writings of McLuhan, Barthes and Hoggart span an impressive political spectrum – Hoggart's 'centre socialism' (1992: 90) and Barthes's Marxian-flavoured semiology stand apart from McLuhan's struggle for an apolitical objectivity, despite his occasional lapses into cultural critique and his regrets about the sense of regret that slipped through the analyses of the *Bride* – the feeling for what is lost and the consequences of loss differs with each thinker. Hoggart is strongest on this point. For him, what is lost in the bargain is the cultural character of a class that defined itself in terms of tradition, ritual, myth, community, speech, and economic status. Although Hoggart believes that working class people are remarkably resilient, he places resistance to massification in-between passivity and positive response. The British working class endures, Hoggart (1957: 32-3) thinks, because working class people are not so

badly affected by massification as is often thought. This is so 'because with a large part of themselves they are just "not there", [they] are living elsewhere… .' But as the faceless culture expands and becomes more invasive, such other psychical sites become fewer and fewer. This was one of the implicit lessons of McLuhan's nautical metaphors: a safe harbour simply couldn't be found. If McLuhan hoped that the study of the mediatic maelstrom would suggest personal strategies for enduring the storm, the more such strategies followed from one's initial capitulation to the very thing with which they sought to deal, the closer endurance moved to the side of passivity borne of identification and dependency. Barthes's lessons were even more abstract. The depoliticised speech of myth enables the social class that does not want to be named to naturalise and eternalise itself. Barthes warned that this was an active political process. He further stipulated, however, that the writing of mythologies, understood as ideological criticism, is not revolutionary since the mythologist is condemned to metalanguage (the seven principle rhetorical forms of myth) while revolution must in the end abolish myth.

Although the work of Barthes is undeniably central to the way we think of cultural studies in the 1950s – this is especially the case with regard to the issue of finding McLuhan's fellow travellers – Barthes was often the odd man out of the trio I have constituted. In other words, French readers of McLuhan such as Pierre-Yves Pétillon (1969) thought of Hoggart rather than of Barthes in the context of assessing McLuhan's contributions to and place in the field of analyses concerning the impact of the mass media on contemporary consciousness.

As surprising as this may now seem, it was no more so than what Hoggart himself experienced upon discovering how he was introduced to a French readership. The following passage from the third volume of Hoggart's memoirs, *An Imagined Life: Life and Times* is worth quoting at length as a

point of entry to the French constitution of the Hoggart-McLuhan relationship:

One English critic, friendly but slightly regretful, described my way of going on as 'deceptively descriptive to the point of casualness'. I expect he wished to find an explicit pattern of hypotheses, a set of linked generalisations which the individual descriptions supported (as one commonly finds in French writings). But it was a French sociologist, J.-C. Passeron, who, in the introduction to the French edition of The Uses of Literacy, suggested – to my surprise – that his countrymen look again at their predilection for theoretical structures and learn something from this English commitment to 'phenomenological' detail. He did not think my procedure 'casual' but, rather, 'extraordinarily precise'. He even found an 'underlying organisation that amounts to an ethnographic inventory'. Hoggart (1992: 95-6)

Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* appeared in French in 1970 under the title of *La culture du pauvre: étude sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre.* The title evokes Passeron's impression of detail, precision, and ethnographic inventory. The culture of the poor was for Hoggart, one may recall, richer than the emerging classless culture that was transforming English working-class life; comparatively, this new culture was emotionally impoverished. As the economic pressures faced by working-class people were lightened by diverse achievements such as hard-won battles over wages, working conditions and benefits across the bargaining table by the unions for their members, workers faced a new kind of cultural and community 'impoverishment' of meaning against which Hoggart hoped they would endure. What doubly surprised Hoggart was that the English critic was looking for French-style theorizing while the French critic found even less casualness and more inherent structure than Hoggart was prepared to admit – precisely against English cultural expectations!

McLuhan's only advance on the Leavisite strategy of the critique of everyday life through the critical anlysis of the literature of the canon, was parody (Pétillon 1969: 510). It was a risk that McLuhan took, Pétillon thinks, and lost since as he descended into the maelstrom he suffered from an attack of vertigo that disabled his critical faculties. According to Pétillon, in England during the 1950s the study of popular culture displayed a relevance and vibrancy beyond McLuhan's reach in the work of Raymond Williams and others. But for Pétillon, the 'grand nom' in this field was Hoggart. The research results of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies are just as important, but in quite different ways, as those produced at John Culkin's Centre for Communications at Fordham where McLuhan had accepted the Albert Schweitzer chair in 1967-8, bringing along his entourage of Harley Parker and Edmund Carpenter. In a moment of rhetorical excess, Pétillon states that as far as analyses of the impact of the mass media on contemporary consciousness are concerned, 'we would give all of McLuhan (except *The Mechanical Bride)* for one chapter of a book by Hoggart' (1969: 510). McLuhan's 'intuitions, flashes and fusions' are, on this view, only marginal notes to British cultural studies, and that 'it remains to hope … that when the dust has settled after its passage, the McLuhan cyclone will have at least been the occasion in France to better discover what there was before and what probably will be after McLuhan' (Pétillon 1969: 511).

Pétillon's approach enables him to place McLuhan in the context of critical moments in the development of cultural studies, but only in order to marginalize his accomplishments by a strategy of exclusion and the rhetorical diminishment of everything he wrote (except the *Bride)* that is not connected to the Birmingham school. As we have seen, McLuhan's readers knocked on the door of structuralism and sought entry for him on the basis of, I tried to show, the vaguest of reasons. McLuhan was shut out in both

instances. Still, it is McLuhan's *Bride* that serves as a two-sided signpost, pointing toward both Paris and Birmingham from, of all places, St. Louis.