

MSA Panel:

Modernist McLuhan: Early Twentieth Century Refractions in a Media Age

Hailed in the 1960s as the prophet of a new technological age, and installed as a sort of go-to academic for all things countercultural, Marshall McLuhan appealed to the “turn up, tune in, drop out” generation thanks to his apparently humanistic and primitivist message: that “tribal” existence was more socially harmonious and psychologically healthy than the detribalized existence ushered in by the phonetic alphabet. And yet, that revolutionary vision was contradicted by a profound, instinctive conservatism traceable to McLuhan’s background in modernist scholarship. This panel’s three presenters offer forays into a consideration of the “Modernist McLuhan,” drawing the media theorist’s work into conversation with a range of canonical and avant-garde authors, literary and cross-media texts, and critical approaches. Using McLuhan as a fulcrum, the papers delineate new connections between the modernist ideas and tropes that anteceded and inspired him and the cultural discourse his theories helped initiate.

In the panel’s first paper, “Disdaining the Tribe: The Anti-Humanist Basis of Marshall McLuhan’s ‘The Medium is the Message,’” Guy Stevenson takes the theorist’s friendship with Ezra Pound as a starting point for exploring the Poundian basis of McLuhan’s ideas about language, society and the media. Stevenson’s argument draws our attention to the dialectic of humanist and anti-humanist, of radically inclusionary and retrogressively elitist impulses at the heart of McLuhan’s career defining slogan “the medium is the message.” By pointing to a similar paradox in Pound’s work (particularly in his literary and economic essays of the 1930s), born of the desire for an aesthetics that delineates difference and a politics that abhors it, Stevenson offers a new way of thinking about McLuhan and the ostensibly progressive period he came to represent.

Next, Heather Love presents “Idiosyncratic Meditations on Media: Planes, Papers, and Automobiles from Gertrude Stein to Marshall McLuhan.” Drawing inspiration from Siegfried Zielinski’s notion of trans-historical “media archaeology,” she presents a series of short case studies that read vignettes from McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1964) alongside Stein’s discussions of her unexpected encounters with airplane travel, newspaper reporters, and rental cars during her 1933 tour of the United States. Thanks to both authors’ famously idiosyncratic styles—fragmented, looping, and full of unexpected connections—their meditations on twentieth-century media culture “make new” our perceptions of those media and their roles in our everyday lives.

To close, Seth Morton’s “Toward Verboten Relations: Ideogrammic Methods in Eisenstein, McLuhan, and Flusser” situates McLuhan’s work within a modernist genealogy of emergent multi-media aesthetics that explore how forms of writing and expression create the very possibilities for thinking historically. Morton reads McLuhan’s analogical use of the ideogram against Sergei Eisenstein’s 1929 essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram”; this latter introduces a contrasting dialogical understanding of the ideogram’s relationship to history, writing, and visual culture. Media theorist Willem Flusser’s idea of “the technical image,” Morton argues, helps iron out these differences: placing the ideogram in a post-Gutenberg galaxy, Flusser offers a way to understand modernist interest in ideograms as a media specific theory of twentieth-century historical and temporal experiences.