

Scott L. Weiss

**Human Consciousness and the Construct of Meaning
in the Communication Theories of
Marshall McLuhan and Vilém Flusser**

Two of the most original and influential communication theorists of the past century, Canadian Marshall McLuhan and the German-Jewish-Czech-born Brazilian Vilém Flusser, expounded the view that the knowledge-giving dimensions and perceptions of consciousness are recurrently modified through the adoption of new forms of media intervention to acts of human communication. For these two theorists the technical context of communication acts play the decisive role in the forming and re-forming of identity insofar as identity is the reflection of the rhetorical perception of phenomena. In this respect both theorists stand against the grain of much social science research into media effects, particularly popular in America, which usually sees only ‘limited’ consequences to human behavior from media exposure. Looking for ‘direct effects’, such as connections between television or video game violence and consequent violence in society by inspired viewers, media theory has largely limited itself to various overt, content-driven research and theorizing. Instead, McLuhan’s and Flusser’s writings carry on the critical tradition of communication theory, based primarily on the ontological studies of orality and literacy in periods of media evolution in the ancient and modern worlds. In essence, the critical tradition scrutinizes communication from a rhetorical standpoint, based on social truths and the interweaving of contextual behaviorism, individualized perspective and social ritual.

The disparity between historical epochs is foundational to the broader observations of communication theory found throughout their works, making both McLuhan and Flusser as among the most astute social chroniclers of the growth and expansion of technology in the post-war era, the frenzied acceleration of information

flow, and the emergent field of communication studies wherein the efficient transmission of messages and media social effects were among the newest fields of inquiry. Coming across most pronouncedly in an evaluative contrast of the criteria and conclusions of their communication theories is their shared belief that the communication process is a supplementary adjunct to external or, using Flusser's term, *natural* human experience. Implicitly *unnatural* refers to the creatively constructed denotational and connotational variance of linguistic form. Nonetheless, communication, however signified, plays the vital interior *rôle* of shaping the self-constructed perceptions of our consciousness, thereby extracting meaning from the world.

The often intellectually intersecting and detailed evaluations of the psychological and social effects of modern communication dynamics finds a legacy of influence for McLuhan and Flusser in subsequent communication scholarship. In particular, the relatively recent socio-cultural scholarship of Cultural, Communication and Media Studies focuses primarily on how messages are 'encoded' with meaning and the broader social consequences attributable to the subjective decoding of meaning in areas as the perception of audience, the workings of industry, identity politics, ideology and hegemony, and 'authenticity'. This however, is not limited to content analysis, but more significantly takes into account how the experience of various media shapes the consciousness of man and his relationship to his environment.

Flusser was influenced deeply by continental literary theory (the difficult and obscurely philosophical nature of which probably accounts for his relative low profile in American academic circles), and he demarcates his 'types' of communication after de Saussure's semiology (compare Flusser, p. 15). These 'types' are of three categories, which he qualifies as *diachronical* (linear sequenced communication, i.e. writing and spoken language), *synchronical* ('signs' or surface-oriented communication such as a character-oriented language like Chinese and painting), and *tridimensional synchronical* (ordering 'space' such as music or architecture).

Synchrony and diachrony describe two aspects of language and two approaches to the study of language. First, synchrony looks at language contextually. It focuses on a stage of its evolution and emphasizes the ephemeral or the ‘snapshot in time’ and epoch-bound circumstantial relationships between signs. Conversely communication encoded diachronically, as in speech or alphabetic language, is dependent upon narrative to contextualize its meaning. The reflection *on* and *of time and distance*, as occurs in a linear-based media such as writing, is a causal characteristic of any narrative as is the consequent self-awareness inherent to the perception generated. The burden, one might say, of higher consciousness is a necessary alienation, a highly attuned self-awareness that belies the exclusivity of literacy as the human being’s progressive liberator. Literacy, because of its select extension of the visual sense, can only ever fall short of a pure and balanced synthesis of all the senses as long as the human is grasping for information s/he can presently only mine through multiple, disparate sensory powers.

At the same time synchronic-encoded communication can still, in its auditory incarnation, represent what McLuhan describes as “that magical resonating world of simultaneous relations that is the oral and acoustic space” (McLuhan p. 117). The ear, for McLuhan, is ‘magical’ because time is either subverted in such ‘space’, thereby providing an instantaneous and balanced comprehension of code. Unlike the reverse consequences put upon his literate and consequently individualistic successor, the literate ‘historical man’, for the oral and acoustic ‘man’ *time becomes space*. Space has a homogeneous textural quality, redundant in its consistency. Signs and symbols regenerate themselves in continuous coiled patterns of circular reasoning constructing a closed system of meaning. Each sign communicates each other, much like a system of computer terminals producing a singular, immediate, powerful and yet ultimately transient meaning.

Synchronical code, then, represents a high level of successful communication as it conveys little “information” (Flusser, p. 54). Successful communication and transmission of information are judged in proportional discrepancy. Effective communication, both human and technological, is founded on redundant action.

Any act of information increase is entropic action or 'noise' and is a break in that progression which is ultimately of unique cognitive significance. The break is a jarring event and pregnant with meaning, that can potentially spawn new meanings such as might be found in the reaction of feedback.

McLuhan, with respect to media, observed similar phenomena although one could say he approximated the relative distinctions between linear and spatial communication referring to them as "hot" and "cold" (McLuhan, p. 162). Hot medium extend a single sense in 'high definition', in other words hot medium are 'well-filled with data.' Cold medium are more abstract and require concentrated completion by the audience. Hot medium, like television, would therefore be synchronic, as so much of the decoding, by the contextualizing of individual signs, is done instantly and on the surface, though linear codes are also apparent. Because of this often novel and confusing fusion of code types, one which he understood would have unprecedented consequences on the general psyche of a populace, McLuhan famously observed the "medium is the message" and prescribed paying attention to the *effects* of media rather than *meaning* (McLuhan, p. 164).

Sharing a roughly monistic determinism in explaining sense perception, both theorists, at least insofar as the senses approximate *meaning* in communication, see identity as joined to social dynamics. Consciousness experience, then, becomes a sort of kinetic *meaning-seeking* subversion of objective experience with the ultimate allocation of significance measured by the balance of sensory ratios and the ensuing "disturbances" (McLuhan p. 100). Significantly, McLuhan sees a kind of loss of identity as a consequence of the ratio imbalance, positing that the integrity of identity, the human orientation point of meaning, is a construct of the dynamics at play in communication acts.

McLuhan's belief in identity as a construct of communication has some mirroring in Flusser. Flusser, for example, offers two definitions of communication: a "wide" and a "strict" sense. The "wide" sense he defines as "a process by which a system is changed by another system." (Flusser, p. 8) This sparse definition emphasizes communication as an organizing and rule-generating act; one which contex-

tually determines meaning through an ordering and re-ordering of experience (what McLuhan represents as ratio disparities). The “strict” sense, though, requires a change in the system “in such a way that the sum of information is greater at the end of the process than at the beginning.” Communication is therefore not only functional but also efficient: if the information is greater, it must imply that what was conveyed was *recognized as being in-form*, that is, in a “readable” code. The extant structure of code finds its origin in a universal “metacode” (Flusser, p. 12), “[...] the convention that establishes a code,” he writes, “must be prior to the code both historically and logically.” This fixes language and communication as a recurring socially determinate force. The ultimately mysterious “metacode” from which subsequent codes evolve remains unexplained in Flusser, although by inference it would seem to suggest the existence of a natural equilibrium which creates and is perceived by consciousness. Communication itself, though, Flusser calls *unnatural*.

This becomes a particularly difficult disconnect in Flusser. If the specter of the original blue print for language is encoded and passed on from generation to generation, then the constructing elements of communication cannot be ‘unnatural’. Yet it is the act of communication itself, the particular *reaching* and *grasping*, whether through the encoding of signs and symbols in language or through the transmission of the code itself, which Flusser seems to indicate as ‘unnatural’: not to be found operating within a solitary enclosed system (of nature) left to its own apparent devices. Flusser sees a gap between the man and the world as pinpointing the ‘alienated’ state of humanity. Humanity must bridge this gap with language; in other words, it needs invented codes to assign meaning to objects. Alienation becomes defined as a lack of self-sufficiency; an inability to be replete *as-is*.

Man, the “tool-making animal” to use both McLuhan’s and Flusser’s phrase (McLuhan p. 100, Flusser, p. 3) create media as extensions of the senses which give heightened pitch to one or another sensory perception. The extension of the senses indicates a dual, physiological and psychological phenomenon. Physically, man is capable of ‘making over’ his sense apparatuses for keener, less generalized sense perception which he will do progressively better throughout history. ‘Tools’

become a metaphor for bridging 'man' with his innate striving to control his environment and give it a fathomable meaning: the human being as altogether and ultimately alienated from the world.

At the same time, however, the 'back end' of the communication act, the cognitive processing and appropriation of speed and inter-sensory coordination is, unlike the pragmatic physical construction of 'tools', self-revising and mysterious in that the changes remain hidden for some time until they can be charted through behavioral patterns. This delay indicates an unbridgeable alienation perceived in real time. These tools, "mediations" (Flusser, p. 36), come as imperfect connectors between man and the world, a perhaps necessary illusion for which it is grasping.

Mediations are the human being's technical striving to construct meaning, to interfere with nature and to rebel against her or his limitations. This is a notion that finds its heritage in the sophist wisdom 'man is the measure of all things.' At once, this liberated him from primitive authoritarianism. Further on in history, in our own time, the human being finds itself again in a struggle of liberation, but it is now, inversely, to liberate one's self from the low-charged slowness of the previous generation's concept of data flow and the consequent alienations betraying even a professional or personal digital divide. For the current generation, hard-wired consciousness and meaning might be best expressed in the Cartesian pun: 'I connect, therefore I am'; a return to synchronic culture off the glow of computer screens.

In conclusion, I would suggest both McLuhan and Flusser are essential references of any contemporary analysis of media. Conveying the fundamental importance of perspective and the systematizing character of media, both theorists contributed much of the groundwork for the current interest in media studies, as it is understood to be an integral part of social influence, not only in the 'agenda-setting' quality of media content but, more vitally, in the hegemonic absorbing of media content and the pre-determining meta-character of how such content is delivered. Recognizing the subjective, individual nature of consciousness and having the perception to inquire into its construction, they were a key dynamic in establishing a complementary route of inquiry adjacent to the strict empirical and beha-

vioral inquiries into the nature of mass media, whose effect is just beginning to receive its due credit.

References

Flusser, Vilém (2004). *Writings*, St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press.

McLuhan, Marshall (1996). *The Essential McLuhan*, New York: Basic Books.