

**Marshall McLuhan**

# **COUNTERBLAST**

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**1954 Edition**

Foreword by W. Terrence Gordon  
Afterword by Elena Lamberti



## COUNTERBLAST 1954

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# From *Blast* to *Counterblast*

## Foreword

V

*"I should prefer the States for personal reasons. But my work is in Toronto. It's to be a fight all the way."*

— MARSHALL McLuhan (1946)

*"It is very salutary to have a daily charade of human malice and stupidity mingled with warmth and insight."*

— MARSHALL McLuhan (1971)

*"'Toronto?' grunted a New York editor of my acquaintance, soon after I'd moved back. 'Why would anyone want to live there?'"*

— MARGARET ATWOOD (1982)

Whenever Toronto may have finally stopped being a "bush-metropolis of the Orange Lodges" – Wyndham Lewis's phrase – it was certainly not in 1954, the year Lewis published *Self Condemned* and McLuhan produced this first version of *COUNTERBLAST*. Thinly disguised, if at all, as Momaco,<sup>1</sup> the Toronto portrayed by Lewis would still be recognizable to the spirited English traveler Anna Jameson, who found it mean, smug, and complacent, more than a century before Lewis was compelled to endure its grim embrace. Now, with *Self Condemned*, he had prepared salvos to shake the city out of its spiritual torpor and Marshall McLuhan, probably the first person in Canada to get his hands on *Self Condemned*, was giving its citizens fair warning: "Toronto has been alerted and has begun to tremble."<sup>2</sup>

McLuhan was also preparing a few salvos of his own in the pages of *COUNTERBLAST*. McLuhan, by now teaching at the University of Toronto, relished fresh contact with the ogre of Bloomsbury. They were reacquainted after McLuhan published an essay in *Shenandoah* called "Wyndham Lewis: His Theory of Art and Communication," which met with Lewis's seal of approval. *Self Condemned* was in press, and McLuhan had already ordered his copy. Lewis having been a source of McLuhan's views on "freemasonry of the arts,"<sup>4</sup> he welcomed the opportunity to linger with him over a topic that he had exhausted in his correspondence with Ezra Pound. McLuhan would soon be busy synchronizing the appearance of *Self Condemned* with his own, handmade, *COUNTERBLAST* – eighteen mimeographed pages in baby-blue wrappers, held together by three staples. It is published here for the first time in book form.

McLuhan's tone as he had explored the mind-numbing effects of advertising in *The Mechanical Bride* had been whimsical rather than judgmental. By way of explanation, his intro-

duction noted that "the time for anger and protest is in the early stages of a new process. The present stage is extremely advanced. Moreover, it is full, not only of destructiveness, but also of promises of rich new developments to which moral indignation is a very poor guide."<sup>5</sup> The paradox of creative and destructive changes issuing from the same social forces had also been noted by Lewis, though he took a high moral tone that repelled McLuhan and served him as a model to avoid in *The Mechanical Bride*. But Lewis also gave McLuhan an attractive model in *BLAST*, the journal he had launched in 1914. Lewis's recognition of the paradox noted above dictated the *BLAST/BLESS* framework of the Manifesto in its opening pages, and the importance of that paradox compelled McLuhan to adopt it for his complementary *COUNTERBLAST*.<sup>6</sup>

Lewis's title was a complex pun, derived from the technical term *blastoderm* in embryology, echoing the name of the then current art magazine *Germ*, and foreshadowing World War I. Hostilities broke out only a few weeks after the appearance of the first volume of *BLAST*. When Lewis published *Self Condemned*, he was still blasting – this time at the Toronto that McLuhan, like Lewis, found so stultifying. The combined appeal of Lewis's publications, spanning forty years, inspired McLuhan to produce *COUNTERBLAST*. He stresses that the title *COUNTERBLAST* does not deconstruct Lewis's *BLAST*, but that it indicates instead the need for a counter-environment as a means of perceiving the dominant and unnoticed environment.

Lewis, who poured his prodigious energy in equal parts into painting and writing both novels and essays, was the most prominent artist in the British movement known as Vorticism. The term derived from Ezra Pound's use of *vortex* as an epithet for the art world of London in the period preceding World War I. Lewis too found it apt as a description

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## BLAST HUMOUR

Quack ENGLISH drug for stupidity and sleepiness.  
Arch enemy of REAL, conventionalizing like  
gunshot, freezing supple  
REAL in ferocious chemistry  
of laughter.

## BLAST SPORT

HUMOUR'S FIRST COUSIN AND ACCOMPLICE.

Impossibility for Englishman to be  
grave and keep his end up,  
psychologically.  
Impossible for him to use Humour  
as well and be persistently  
grave.  
Alas! necessity for big doll's show  
in front of mouth.  
Visitation of Heaven on  
English Misa  
gums, canines of **FIXED GRIN**  
Death's Head symbol of Anti-Life.

**CURSE** those who will hang over this  
Manifesto with **SILLY CANINES** exposed.

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**6**

## BLAST

years 1837 to 1900

**Curse** abysmal inexcusable middle-class  
(also Aristocracy and Proletariat).

## BLAST

pasty shadow cast by gigantic Boehm  
(imagined at introduction of **BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS**).

**WRING THE NECK OF** all sick inventions born in  
that progressive white wake.

**BLAST** their weeping whiskers—hirsute  
RHETORIC of EUNUCH and STYLIST—  
**SENTIMENTAL HYGIENICS**  
**ROUSSEAUISMS** (wild Nature cranks)  
**FRATERNIZING WITH MONKEYS**  
**DIABOLICS**—raptures and roses  
of the erotic bookshelves  
culminating in  
**PURGATORY OF PUTNEY.**

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## MANIFESTO.

### I.

- 1** Beyond Action and Reaction we would establish ourselves.
- 2** We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure of adolescent clearness between two extremes.
- 3** We discharge ourselves on both sides.
- 4** We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the **SAME** cause, which is neither side or both sides and ours.
- 5** Mercenaries were always the best troops.
- 6** We are Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World.

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**7** Our Cause is NO-MAN'S.

**8** We set Humour at Humour's throat.  
Stir up Civil War among peaceful apes.

**9** We only want Humour if it has fought like Tragedy.

**10** We only want Tragedy if it can clench its side-muscles like hands on it's belly, and bring to the surface a laugh like a bomb.

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of the swirling energy that characterized the emerging forms of art in that period. Typically, his paintings feature bold and dramatic geometric forms.<sup>7</sup>

In McLuhan's one-page introduction to *COUNTERBLAST* he gives prominent mention to Lewis's Vortex and stresses that it was intended to be one of "thought and feeling, consistent with the *changed conditions of life, work and society*." (emphasis added) The link to McLuhan's overriding concern and the framework for his media studies, the inseparability of culture and technology, is clear. The purpose of that framework is equally clear in the accompanying reference to Lewis's objective of redressing the "imbalance of thought and feeling in the technological world of [pre-World War I] England and Europe." The source and the consequences of that imbalance are eloquently and starkly compressed into the final line of the last page of *COUNTERBLAST*, quoted from Dylan Thomas: *Hands have no tears to flow*. The intervening pages challenge readers at every line to understand what is still a story without an ending for McLuhan: the "fortunate" escaped the blasting and shelling of their trenches in 1914, only to return to a world where the energy, hope and vision of Lewis's ideal Vortex were not to be found; *Self Condemned* ends with its protagonist escaping a Momaco that has turned into the Cemetery of Shells, only to live out his days in an unnamed city where people "had no idea that it was a glacial shell of a man who had come to live among them," (page 407); even his given name (René – *reborn*) is reduced to emptiness; what fate awaits the still infant New Man? McLuhan confronts the reader with this question, implying that Lewis's Cosmic Man may not grow to his full potential unless he masters his environment through the salutary counter-environment set by *COUNTERBLAST*: "The dust gets in our eyes. *COUNTERBLAST* 1954 blows aside this dust for a few moments and offers a view of the cradle, the bough, and the direction of the winds of the new media in these latitudes."

Lewis worked in collaboration with Ezra Pound to ensure that *BLAST* would not fail to deliver the effect promised by its title. Its pages filled with "Blast" and "Bless," echoing the "Merde" and "Rose" of Guillaume Apollinaire's *L'Antitradition futuriste*, the journal proclaimed the demise of British provincialism and heralded the international environment of the new art in dark symbiosis with the internationalism of technology. T. S. Eliot (whose portrait Lewis painted) and I. A. Richards considered Lewis the supreme living master of English fiction. Like his paintings, Lewis's imaginative prose focused on the artist's role in an age engulfed by technological

change, inevitably making compelling reading for McLuhan.

A satirist, above all an inquirer, at his best form in dialogue, committed to exposing the inadequacies of Naturalism and Symbolism alike, steadfastly refusing to articulate a canon that could only have undermined Vorticism, Lewis had boundless interests that embraced sculpture, architecture, cinematography, and what he called the visual revolution. In *Time and Western Man* he analyzed the world of advertising. Little wonder that McLuhan, assembling material for *The Mechanical Bride*, would come looking for Lewis. Lewis had said in *Time and Western Man* that "we want a new learned minority as sharp as razors, as fond of discourse as a Greek, familiar enough with the abstract to be able to handle the concrete. In short we want a new race of philosophers, instead of 'hurried men,' speed-cranks, simpletons, or robots."<sup>8</sup> Lewis was also looking for McLuhan.

Lewis's profound influence is indelibly stamped on McLuhan's work. The conception of media as extensions of the physical body, the use of the myth of Narcissus to illustrate media effects, among other fertile ideas, find a source in Lewis's writings. Years later, Margaret Atwood would say: "Sometimes I suspect that the new narcissism is merely the old smugness re-upholstered."<sup>9</sup>

Lewis served McLuhan as a model for avoiding categorical judgments. McLuhan's impetus toward the principles of integration and synthesis in all his work resonates with Lewis's ideal of reintegrating the arts of sculpture, painting, and architecture. In the first volume of *BLAST*, Lewis, as editor, articulated the principle that the Vorticist is not the slave of commotion but its master; McLuhan, the navigator of the electronic maelstrom, would teach the principle that understanding media provides the means of keeping them under control. Lewis understood the fragmenting effects of technology and spoke of them in terms that would be closely paralleled in McLuhan's writings, beginning with *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Lewis's concept of space contains the core of the idea that McLuhan would develop as the distinction between visual and acoustic space. Like Lewis, McLuhan would move beyond his original interests in the world of the arts to understanding the relationship between art and technology. McLuhan shared Lewis's concept of the artist being inextricably linked to the inevitable encroachments of technology. Both men accepted the necessity of facing the effects of technological advances as detached observers of their causes. Lewis's notion of the vortex as a mask of energy in relation to both art and technology was applied by McLuhan to language *as both art and technology*.

In spite of so many parallels between their work, and McLuhan's clear recognition and acknowledgment of them, he did not hold Lewis above criticism. In terms of the analytical framework for understanding culture and technology that McLuhan grounded in the interplay of our physical senses, he saw Lewis's work as falling short: "Another person to whom I owe a good deal in terms of structural awareness is Wyndham Lewis, the painter. He spent his life defining what he considered to be the values of the eye by which he meant the audible, tactile, boundary line of abstract and sculptural form. He, by the way, did not understand that cartoon and sculpture are not visual forms. Since Lewis never got this straightened out, it is not surprising that students of his have trouble too."<sup>10</sup> Such criticism does not undermine the value of Lewis's achievement for McLuhan, who enthusiastically embraced Lewis's deflation of the twentieth century myth of progress and his identification of shamanistic tendencies in science and philosophy beginning with Newton and Kant.

The opening of McLuhan's essay on Lewis's theory of art and communication cites the passage from *Time and Western Man* where Lewis states: "For me art is the civilized substitute for magic; as philosophy is what, on a higher or more complex plane, takes the place of religion. By means of art, I believe Professor Whitehead and M. Brémond wish to lead us down and back to the plane of magic, or mystical, specifically religious, experience."<sup>11</sup>

It is pertinent to note that in spite of Lewis's deprecating reference to mystical experience here, McLuhan will, within a few pages, refer to him as a mystic, but in so doing he makes a crucial distinction and qualification: "[Lewis] is a mystic or visionary *of the comic*, moving toward the pole of intelligibility instead of that of feeling." (emphasis added)<sup>12</sup>

McLuhan establishes a qualified resonance between Lewis and Joyce and dissonance between them and Eliot: "Joyce tends like Lewis to reject the way of connatural gnosis and emotion favored by Bergson, Eliot, and theosophy, in which the emotions are used as the principal windows of the soul."<sup>13</sup> The Lewis-Joyce link is further strengthened by Lewis's view of time: "There is no need to immerse ourselves again in the destructive element of the Time flux or to return to that 'Primitive Past saturated with blood and incest so generally favoured.' We have, as *Finnegans Wake* also proclaims, the means to awake permanently from the repetitive nightmare of history."<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, he casts his net wider still to encompass Pound and offer an insight into the Vorticism movement:

"But Joyce, Lewis, Eliot, and Pound are perhaps nearer in agreement on the subject of the vortices of existence. If 'the world of the "pure present" of the Classical Ages is obviously the world that is born and dies every moment,' it is clear that it is such a world that Lewis seeks to arrest in his paintings (and novels) ... If we can elucidate the vortex concepts in Lewis we shall be finally in a position to see his grounds for rejecting the thought and work of the Time and Flux school of this century."<sup>15</sup>

Like all of the authors from whom McLuhan distilled insights that took him beyond literature as literary production purely for esthetic appreciation, Lewis eventually took his place in McLuhan's *Understanding Media*: "Mental breakdown of varying degrees is the very common result of uprooting and inundation with new information and endless new patterns of information. Wyndham Lewis made this a theme of his group of novels called *The Human Age*. The first of these, *The Childermass*, is concerned precisely with accelerated media change as a kind of massacre of the innocents. In our own world as we become more aware of the effects of technology on psychic formation and manifestation, we are losing all confidence in our right to assign guilt."<sup>16</sup>

Quoting Lewis's observation that the artist is always writing a history of the future because he alone is aware of the nature of the present, McLuhan adds: "Knowledge of this simple fact is now needed for human survival. The ability of the artist to sidestep the bully blow of new technology of any age, and to parry such violence with full awareness, is age-old."<sup>17</sup>

This ability in Lewis, and in all the writers to whom McLuhan paid particular attention, is precisely the ability that McLuhan seeks to jumpstart in the readers of *COUNTERBLAST*.

The three-part structure of *COUNTERBLAST* progresses from an opening line – "BLAST england ..." – that deliberately echoes the start of Lewis's Manifesto of the Great Preliminary Vortex in Blast – "BLAST ... ENGLAND ..." – to a closing line from Dylan Thomas's "The hand that signed the paper." In the intervening pages McLuhan modulates the rhetorical dialectic<sup>18</sup> of Lewis's prose formula of BLAST/BLESS and Thomas's poetry, appropriating both to his purpose of staking a territory between prose and poetry with his evolving technique of the cultural probe.

Forty years before Lewis blasted myopic Momacoans, he had blasted the citizens of London for allowing a gloomy Victorian circus in Piccadilly Circus: WE WHISPER IN YOUR

EAR A GREAT SECRET. LONDON IS NOT A PROVINCIAL TOWN.<sup>19</sup> Lewis's protagonist in *Self Condemned*, René Harding, is more indulgent with the people of Momaco, saying: "If you criticize them you criticize the average population of Belfast, of Bradford and Leeds, and Glasgow. If you deplore the materialism and the humble cultural level, you are merely criticizing Anglo-Saxon civilization."<sup>20</sup> McLuhan shows no such indulgence, launching *COUNTERBLAST* with a BLAST against Canadians who defer to Anglo-Saxon civilization without being able, as René is, to distinguish between its humbler and higher aspects (Shakespeare is invoked), and who unquestioningly attribute spiritual legitimacy to that civilization without considering that the spirit may be nothing more than a ghost.

If it appears, merely one page further on, that McLuhan is moderating his critique – "BLAST (for kindly reasons) CANADA" – it must be noted that the parenthesis is there essentially as a counterpart to the first line of the first article of Lewis's MANIFESTO: "BLAST First (from politeness) ENGLAND"<sup>21</sup>

James Joyce, the most frequently quoted author in all of McLuhan's later major works, is mentioned only once in Media Log in these pages, but the spirit of Joyce imbues McLuhan's verbal creativity amid the volleys of BLAST and BLESS: "haavatyaleprinceton, nurseries of the ivy-claawed adolescent, the creeper mind." He offers *haavatyaleprinceton* like a *Gaudeamus igitur*, suggesting at the same time that this new drinking song will fall on ears that are deaf to its invitation (have at your ale), the creeper mind being clawed and awed to the point of hearing little more than the Harvard accent to be slavishly imitated. (Lewis again: The Vorticist, he said, is not the slave of commotion but its master.) The invitation to McLuhan's particular ale, he intimates, is beyond the pale at Yale and Princeton.

The "nets of the BIG GAME hunters, lairs of the new BABBITTs" refers to the networks named (CBC, BBC, NBC, CBS) and their dual capacity to trap television viewers even as they connect them to the world and to each other. To this McLuhan adds the ambiguity of big game hunting and game shows that trap the mindless. The reference to pressure to conformity, implicit in the reference to Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, would surely have pleased the other Lewis. It is reinforced by the ironic echo between the name of the big game hunter, Babbitt, and the small game hunted: rabbit.

Still amid the riches of McLuhan's opening page, we find a passage (comparable ones are to be found in his major

writings and public pronouncements) that explains why he was accused of a contradiction, namely writing books that heralded the end of the book: "[BLAST] the printed b(oo)k moth-eaten STRAIGHT-JACKET of the Western mind." A close reading of McLuhan's writings as a whole reveals why no categorical negative judgment of the book as medium is to be inferred.<sup>22</sup> Yet it is not necessary to go far beyond the present pages to see that the crux of the matter is not a contradiction but a paradox that would eventually find its fullest expression in McLuhan's posthumously published *Laws of Media*. Here Media Log opens with "Lamartine pointed to the newspaper as the end of book culture: 'The book arrives too late.'" In the series of Media Logs, published in *Explorations*, just two years later, we discover: "But the book will acquire, has already acquired, a major new role as tool of perception. It has long lost its monopoly as a channel of information. It can never lose its usefulness as a means of arresting thought and language for study."<sup>23</sup>

In the playful reversals from BLAST to BLESS, the blasted become blessed *if* they provide grist to McLuhan's media mill. "USA COLOSSUS of the South" is blasted for flattening the Canadian imagination but blessed for offering a "cornucopia of daily SURREALISM" to the imagination that will scrutinize the symbiosis of culture and technology and recognize the surrealism for what it is. (If no such effort at scrutiny of the environment is made, the imagination is self-condemned to remain a "submarine symbol of the SLOW UNHAPPY subintelligentsias," mired irredeemably among the blasted.) The Massey Report<sup>24</sup> blasted for sheltering ("damp cultural igloo") those who should themselves be blasted ("canadian devotees of TIME & LIFE") but blessed "for derailing Canadian kulcha while it is absorbed by American ART & Technology." McLuhan himself takes on the task at which the Massey Report failed: "OH BLAST nursery politics and Henry Goose on the Loose." Nursery rhymes, media politics, and *Time/Life* publisher Henry Booth Luce are similarly conflated in Media Log (page 14).

On the final page of *COUNTERBLAST* McLuhan declares that "NOBODY yet knows the language inherent in the new technological culture." The passage anticipates *Understanding Media*, subtitled *The Extensions of Man*, where McLuhan's framework of analysis is the notion that all media, all technologies, are extensions of our bodies, of our five physical senses. There we read that "the spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way" (page 85).

*COUNTERBLAST* already hints at McLuhan's view that technologies are languages in the passage that moves from the MASSEY REPORT to MASSEY-HARRIS farm machinery, the latter declared to be "Canada's REAL contribution to CULTURE" (read *agriculture*).

The closing page of BLAST/BLESS looks back to *The Mechanical Bride* and forward to and even beyond *Understanding Media* with a seamless tapestry of references to "HOMERIC CULTURE, the comic strips, pantheon of PICKLED GODS and ARCHETYPES," while the closing lines lead into the Media Log discussion of photography, print, visual and acoustic space.

Wyndham Lewis had a new conception of what art is: "Life with all the humbug of living taken out of it."<sup>25</sup> McLuhan had a new conception of what media could be when put into the hands of artists: "The media are not toys; they should not be in the hands of Mother Goose and Peter Pan executives ... The wild broncos of technological culture have yet to find their busters or masters. They have found only their P.T. Barnums" (Media Log, page 14). McLuhan's vision, fully realized, could also realize Lewis's ideal of a society that has progressed far enough to be spared a blast for sitting agape at a provincial circus in the heart of London.

Media Log itself offers a sweeping historical survey of the evolution of technology from 1830 to a future that was still uncharted in 1954: "We can win China and India for the West only by giving them the new media." If this declaration sounds uncharacteristically political in tone for McLuhan (it was omitted as early as a 1960 reprinting), we do well to remember that what was at stake from his point of view was not in fact politics in the narrow sense, or even the wider international sense (where technology and politics were inseparable issues for both the program and the fate of the New Man, referred to in McLuhan's introduction to the present work), but educational reform as the training of perception. Because of this overriding objective, there are increasingly frequent references to language as a technology; technology as languages, the language of poetry, and the inseparability of these that will emerge in its clearest form when McLuhan turns from Lamartine to Dylan Thomas in *Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed the Breath*.

Here is the complete text of the Dylan Thomas poem from which McLuhan quotes three lines and revises two others:

## THE HAND THAT SIGNED THE PAPER

—The hand that signed the paper felled a city;\_Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,\_Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;\_These five kings did a king to death.\_The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,\_The fingers' joints are cramped with chalk;\_A goose's quill has put an end to murder\_That put an end to talk.\_The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,\_And famine grew, and locusts came;\_Great is the hand that holds dominion over\_Man by a scribbled name.\_The five kings count the dead but do not soften\_The crusted wound nor stroke the brow;\_A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;\_Hands have no tears to flow.

In the extensive literature analyzing and commenting on this poem, one stands out for the accuracy with which it integrates Thomas's theme and McLuhan's purpose and evolving method:

"[McLuhan's] use of Thomas's poem in this brief key essay has another aspect, for the essay itself is a prose poem playing poetically with Thomas's poem. In a first anticipation of the "global village," McLuhan begins by declaring "The city no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost," for it is, as Thomas's poem dramatizes, writing that established civil society, so now McLuhan can say "The INSTANTANEOUS global coverage of radio-tv makes the city form meaningless, functionless." His prose poem circumscribes Thomas's stanzas on the power of the written word both referring back to the pre-written era when McLuhan declares that:

**SPEECH** structures the abyss of mental and acoustic space, shrouding the race; it is a cosmic, invisible architecture of the human dark. Speak that I may see you.

**WRITING** turned a spotlight on the high, dim Sierras of speech; writing was the visualization of acoustic space. It lit up the dark. *These five kings did a king to death.*

and McLuhan then also juxtaposes to the pre-written, the later move that would lead beyond writing for:

A goose's quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery, gave architecture and towns, brought roads and armies, bureaucracies. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of **CIVILIZATION** began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled a paper built a city."<sup>26</sup>

The step from the dark into the light of the mind can only be taken when we realize that it depends on embracing the implicit program of educational reform that fills the pages of *COUNTERBLAST*. Without taking that first step, do we

not deserve to be labeled by the same epithet that Wyndham Lewis applied to Hester Harding on the first page of *Self Condemned*: “expertly unreceptive?”

Robert (“Rotter”) Parkinson, the colleague of René Harding in *Self Condemned*, tells René that men “do not turn their lives upside down in response to the summons of a professor of history.”<sup>27</sup> If, as legend has it, Marshall McLuhan hawked copies of *COUNTERBLAST* 1954 on the street corners and in the cigar shops of Toronto, it was in the hope that men would do just that in response to a professor of English.

W. TERRENCE GORDON / Halifax, N.S., 2010

1 McLuhan favors the explanation that the name suggests Mom & Co. Lewis may also have drawn inspiration in part from the Toronto suburb of Mimico.

2 *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, William Toye, eds. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.242. (henceforth *Letters*)

3 Lewis had published a novel under this title in 1951.

4 *Letters*, page 235.

5 *The Mechanical Bride*, page 5.

6 “*Blast*, in tune with the examples of Futurist typography and Lewis’s own painting, emphasize its own status as a material object by means of its shocking colour, cheap paper and the punchy display typography both of the cover and the manifestos ...” Paul Edwards, Foreword, *BLAST*, page ix.

7 Though their canvases were often abstract and nonrepresentational, the Vorticists also depicted highly stylized machinery and cityscapes dominated by sprawling industry. Long after Vorticism had ceased to absorb even Lewis’s painterly energies, he was asked to define it and replied: “There is no such thing. For years I thought I had discovered a form that was not in nature; then one day I discovered it in looking through a catalogue of deep-sea fish.” Reported in Marshall McLuhan to Sheila Watson, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, William Toye, eds. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.481.

8 *Time and Western Man*, page xii.

9 Margaret Atwood, “The City Rediscovered,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1982.

10 National Archives of Canada, Marshall McLuhan, volume 166, file 23.

11 Eugene McNamara, *The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), page 83.

12 *Ibid.*, page 91.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Eugene McNamara, *The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), page 84.

15 *Ibid.*, page 92.

16 *Understanding Media* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), page 29.

17 *Ibid.*, page 96.

18 McLuhan notes in *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time* (Gingko Press, 2006) that writing in aphorism was part of the Stoic technique of dialectics and rhetoric. It interested the Hippocratics from a scientific point of view; it interests McLuhan from the point of view of a scholar concerned with developing a teaching style effective enough to counter the invisible effects of all media from the printed page to celluloid film.

19 *BLAST*, page 19.

20 Wyndham Lewis, *Self Condemned* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), page ix. In his Introduction, editor Rowland Smith notes: “Parochialism grew out

of ignoring the great works of past ages and other cultures, as well as by overvaluing the present. To believe that all change meant progress, to surrender to a cult of ‘the modern’ or the ‘revolutionary’ was to abandon the concept of lasting values in art. These views led Lewis to criticise the mass-values and mass-culture of the increasingly democratic world in the nineteen twenties. (page vi)

21 *Blast*, page 11.

22 Though McLuhan likened television to bacteria and poison and prescribed the antidote of reading, journalists could confidently report that he excoriated print, and some commentators were confident enough in their misreadings of McLuhan to publish them amid absurd flourishes. He must have said something with the potential to make readers misconstrue his meaning, and in *Understanding Media* (Gingko Press, 2003) we discover and expanded version of the “straight-jacket” passage from the opening page of *COUNTERBLAST*: “The printed book had encouraged artists to reduce all forms of expression as much as possible to the single descriptive and narrative plane of the printed word. The advent of electric media released art from this straitjacket at once, creating the world of Paul Klee, Picasso, Eisenstein, the Marx brothers, and James Joyce.” (page 79)

23 “The Media Fit the Battle of Jericho” was printed originally in *Explorations* 6 (1956), the journal that grew out of the interdepartmental seminar in culture and communications led by McLuhan at the University of Toronto sponsored by a Ford Foundation grant in 1953 and the forerunner of the Center for Culture and Technology established under McLuhan’s direction in 1963. This essay is his first to be styled entirely around the thrusting and questing convention of the cultural probe. Like Joshua’s trumpet, a McLuhan probe is a clarion call ... it sabotages the traditional conventions of prose, offering “paragraphs” as short as half a line; like all media, whose operation McLuhan explores here with its help, the probe is a technology or extension.

24 The Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949–1951, known as the Massey Report, warned that Canadian culture had become invisible and for all intents and purposes indistinguishable from that of the United States. Though sympathetic in part to the Report in these pages (it is both blasted and blessed), McLuhan’s agenda privileged teaching about the invisibility of environments created by all media and gave far less importance to the cultural content of media of communication.

25 Wyndham Lewis, *Self Condemned* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), page vii.

26 Donald Theall, *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), page 11.

27 Wyndham Lewis, *Self Condemned* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), page viii.

# COUNTERBLAST

1954

## C O U N T E R B L A S T

1 9 5 4

In 1914, a few weeks before the War, Wyndham Lewis the painter put out BLAST. He set out to create a new vortex of thought and feeling consistent with the changed conditions of life, work, and society. He was too late. The imbalance of thought and feeling in the new technological world of England and Europe was extreme. The explosion of 1914 did not do the work of BLAST. BLAST was full of energy, hope and new vision. Those who crept back from the battlefields had none of these. The work of reorientation of technological man was left to America in the twenties. America was not ready. America Botched it.

In 1954 Wyndham Lewis blasted Toronto in the novel SELF-CONDEMNED. His René (reborn) seeking his true spiritual self selects Toronto, Momaco: (Mom & Co.) as a colonial cyclotron in which to annihilate his human ego. He succeeds.

In AMERICA AND COSMIC MAN Lewis saw North America as a benign rock crusher in which all remnants of European nationalism and individualism were happily reduced to cosmic baby powder. The new media are blowing a lot of this baby powder around the pendant cradle of the New Man today. The dust gets in our eyes. COUNTERBLAST 1954 blows aside this dust for a few moments and offers a view of the cradle, the bough, and the direction of the winds of the new media in these latitudes.

**B L A S T**

england ancient GHOST of culture  
POACHING the EYES of the  
canadian HAMLETS

**U S A**

COLOSSUS of the South, horizontal  
HEAVYWEIGHT flattening the  
canadian imagination

**CBC BBC NBC CBS**

nets of the BIG GAME hunters, lairs of  
the NEW BABBITTS

THE NEW YORKER whimsical sycophant  
of CREAM PUFF culture

haavatyaleprinceton, nurseries of the  
ivy-claawed adolescent, the creeper mind

the printed b(oo)k moth-eaten  
STRAIGHT-JACKET of the Western mind  
abstract art linked with

**ABSOLUTE ZERO**  
and 1914

B L A S T (for kindly reasons)

C A N A D A

The indefensible canadian border

The SCOTTISH FUR-TRADERS who haunt  
the trade routes and folkways of the  
canadian psyche

B L A S T all FURRY thoughts

The canadian BEAVER,  
submarine symbol of the

SLOW

UNHAPPY

subintelligentsias.

The woodcraft of all beaver minds devoted  
to CANADIAN PONDS AND STREAMS

The UNBLASTABLE scottish psyche of  
CANADA

BLAST its canny flint-eyed MYOPIA

Oh BLAST

The MASSEY REPORT damp cultural igloo  
for canadian devotees of

T I M E  
&  
L I F E

Oh B L A S T nursery politics and  
Henry Goose on the Loose. The cring-  
ing, flunkey spirit of canadian culture, its  
servant-quarter snobbishness

resentments

ignorance

penury

OTTAWA tomb of talent  
fount of dullness  
snorkel centre of underwater  
thought and orders-in-council

## **The MARITIMES**

**impoverished little empire that breeds**

**EAGER EXECUTIVES for all the**

**RAMPANT EMPIRES: Daily Express**

**Imperial Oil**

**Bank of Montreal**

## **WESTERN CANADA**

**for its meekness in filling the coffers  
of Bay Street**

## **FRENCH CANADA**

**locked in the double-talking seventeenth-  
century bosom of Pascal**

**B L E S S**

**The MASSEY REPORT,**

**HUGE RED HERRING for**

**derailing Canadian kulcha while it is  
absorbed by American ART & Technology.**

MASSEY-HARRIS farm machinery, Canada's  
REAL contribution to CULTURE

BLESS

Our Sense of Our Density

The Canadian JACKPINE, hardy citizen  
of the WORLD'S MOST ANCIENT ROCK.

The Laurentian Shield, TROJAN HORSE  
bringing American capital to Canada.

TORONTO home of Victorian  
PANIC & SQUALOR

urgent reminder of the  
DESPERATE CONDITION  
of man

The on  
TELEVISION TOWER Jarvis St.  
elegant scoffer  
at Toronto's architecture

The bi-focal bi-lingual  
tower of French-English culture foe of  
Babel friend of Janus

B L E S S

B L E S S USA cornucopia of daily  
SURREALISM. THE HEARST PRESS  
locked in the (embrace) of  
intoxicating numbers

36 – 21 – 35

Miss America's split T  
FORMATION

The practical communism and cosmic conformity achieved by American

M A S S – P R O D U C T I O N

Bless the fast-talking illiterate American  
his face-to-face  
ear-to-ear  
methods of learning

The crafty cubist J I  $\sqrt{\phantom{x}}$  <sup>E</sup> of the daily  
press awakening the political appetite of  
**COSMIC MAN**

The starched SHIRT-FRONT symbol of the  
printed page  
of mass production and commercial  
elegance

**B L E S S**

French Canadian **HOCKEY PLAYERS**  
for keeping art on ice  
for our one contribution to  
**INTERNATIONAL CULTURE**

## THE MARITIMES

**for exporting: bushels of apples**

## brains

# drive

## BLESS FRENCH CHINESE

# FRENCH CANADA

**for not**

## running elevators on UNION DAY

# ASCENSION DAY

# OTTAWA for cornering crowds of raucous

**careerists in its sound-proof womb.**

# English SLOTH that saves CANADA from

# imitating the Germanic INDUSTRIOUSNESS

## of the USA

**BLESS the USA for SAVING canada from**

# the fate of AUSTRALIA

**B L E S S**

**BLESS** the sports page, upholder of  
**HOMERIC CULTURE**  
the comic strips, pantheon of  
**PICKLED GODS** and  
**ARCHETYPES**

advertising art, for its pictorial  
**VITALITY**  
and verbal **CREATIVITY**

**BLESS** the locomotives **WHISTLING**  
on the prairies proclaiming  
the **SEPARATENESS**  
Of Man

**BLESS FOTOPRINT** able to modulate  
the printed visual image to the  
full range of acoustic space.

## MEDIA LOG

About 1830 Lamartine pointed to the newspaper as the end of book culture: 'The book arrives too late.'

At the same time Dickens used the press as base for a new impressionist art which D. W. Griffiths and Sergei Eisenstein studied in 1920 as the foundation of movie art.

Robert Browning took the newspaper as art model for his impressionist epic *The Ring and the Book*; Mallarmé did the same in *Un Coup de Dés*.

Edgar Poe, a press man and, like Shelley, a science fictioneer, correctly analysed the poetic process. Conditions of newspaper serial publication led both him and Dickens to the process of writing backwards. This means simultaneity of all parts of a composition. Simultaneity compels sharp focus on *effect* of thing made. Simultaneity is the form of the press in dealing with Earth City. Simultaneity is formula for the writing of both detective story and symbolist poem. These are derivatives (one 'low' and one 'high') of the new technological culture. Simultaneity is related to telegraph, as the telegraph to math and physics.

Joyce's *Ulysses* completed the cycle of this technological art form.

The mass media are extensions of the mechanisms of human perception; they are imitators of the modes of human apprehension and judgement.

Technological culture in the newspaper form structures ordinary unawareness in patterns which correspond to the most sophisticated manoeuvres of mathematical physics.

Newton's *Optics* created the techniques of picturesque and Romantic poetry.

The techniques of discontinuous juxtaposition in landscape poetry and painting were transferred to the popular press and the popular novel.

In 1830, due to this technological revolution, English popular consciousness was structured in ways which French and European intellectuals did not acquire until a later generation.

Average English and American unawareness has been ahead of official culture and awareness for two hundred years; therefore the English and American intellectual for two hundred years has automatically thrown in his lot with the average man against officialdom.

The Swiss cultural historian Sigfried Giedion has had to invent the concept of 'anonymous history' in order to write an account of the new technological culture in Anglo-Saxondom.

The professoriat has turned its back on culture for two hundred years because the high culture of technological society is popular culture and knows no boundaries between high and low.

The children of technological man respond with untaught delight to the poetry of trains, ships, planes, and to the beauty of machine products. In the school room officialdom suppresses all their natural experience; children are divorced from their culture. They are not permitted to approach the traditional heritage of mankind through the door of technological awareness; this only possible door for them is slammed in their faces.

The only other door is that of the high-brow. Few find it, and fewer find their way back to popular culture.

T. S. Eliot has said he would prefer an illiterate audience, for the ways of official literacy do not equip the young to know themselves, the past, or the present.

The technique of an Eliot poem is a direct application of the method of the popular radio-tube grid circuit to the shaping and control of the

charge of meaning. An Eliot poem is one instance of a direct means of experiencing, under conditions of artistic control, the ordinary awareness and culture of contemporary man.

Photography and cinema have abolished realism as too easy; they substitute themselves for realism.

All the new media, including the press, are art forms which have the power of imposing, like poetry, their own assumptions. The new media are not ways of relating us to the old 'real' world; they are the real world and they reshape what remains of the old world at will.

Official culture still strives to force the new media to do the work of the old media. But the horseless carriage did not do the work of the horse; it abolished the horse and did what the horse could never do. Horses are fine. So are books.

Technological art takes the whole earth and its population as its material, not as its form.

It is too late to be frightened or disgusted, to greet the unseen with a sneer. Ordinary life-work demands that we harness and subordinate the media to human ends.

The media are not toys; they should not be in the hands of Mother Goose and Peter Pan executives. They can be entrusted only to new artists, because they are art forms.

Harnessing the Tennessee, Missouri, or Mississippi is kid stuff compared to curbing the movie, press, or television to human ends. The wild broncos of technological culture have yet to find their busters or masters. They have found only their P. T. Barnums.

Europeans cannot master these new powers of technology because they take themselves too seriously and too sentimentally. Europeans cannot imagine the Earth City. They have occupied old city spaces too long to be able to sense the new spaces created by the new media.

The English have lived longer with technological culture than anybody else, but they lost their chance to shape it when the ship yielded to the plane. But the English language is already the base of all technology.

The Russians are impotent to shape technological culture because of their inwardness and grimness. The future masters of technology will have to be light-hearted and intelligent. The machine easily masters the grim and the dumb.

At the present moment America is shaping every phase of Russian life and policy by virtue of technological ascendancy.

Russian austerity is based on fear of the new media and their power to transform social existence. Russia stands pat on the status quo ante 1850 that produced Marx. There culture ends. The Russian revolution reached the stage of book culture.

Russian politicians have the same mentality as our professoriat: they wish technology would go away.

We can win China and India for the West only by giving them the new media. Russia will not give these to them.

Television prevents communism because it is post-Marx just as the book is pre-Marx.

## **FIVE SOVEREIGN FINGERS TAXED THE BREATH**

The CITY no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists. Any highway eatery with its tv set, newspaper, and magazine is as cosmopolitan as New York or Paris.

The PEASANT was always a suburban parasite. The farmer no longer exists; today he is a 'city' man.

The METROPOLIS today is a classroom; the ads are its teachers. The classroom is an obsolete detention home, a feudal dungeon.

The metropolis is OBSOLETE. Ask the Army.

The INSTANTANEOUS global coverage of radio-tv makes the city form meaningless, functionless. Cities were once related to the realities of production and inter-communication. Not now.

Until WRITING was invented, we lived in acoustic space, where the Eskimo now lives: boundless, directionless, horizonless, the dark of the mind, the world of emotion, primordial intuition, terror. Speech is a social chart of this dark bog.

SPEECH structures the abyss of mental and acoustic space, shrouding the race; it is a cosmic, invisible architecture of the human dark. Speak that I may see you.

WRITING turned a spotlight on the high, dim Sierras of speech; writing was the visualization of acoustic space. It lit up the dark.

*These five kings did a king to death.*

A goose's quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery, gave architecture and towns, brought roads and armies, bureaucracies. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of CIVILIZATION began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled a paper built a city.

The handwriting is on the celluloid walls of Hollywood; the Age of Writing has passed. We must invent a NEW METAPHOR, restructure our thoughts and feelings. The new media are not bridges between man and nature: they are nature.

The MECHANIZATION of writing mechanized the visual-acoustic metaphor on which all civilization rests; it created the classroom and mass education, the modern press and telegraph. It was the original assembly-line.

Gutenberg made all history SIMULTANEOUS: the transportable book brought the world of the dead into the space of the gentleman's library; the telegraph brought the entire world of the living to the workman's breakfast table.

PHOTOGRAPHY was the mechanization of the perspective painting and of the arrested eye; it broke the barriers of the nationalist, vernacular space created by printing. Printing upset the balance of oral and written speech; photography upset the balance of ear and eye.

Telephone, gramophone, and RADIO are the mechanization of post-literate acoustic space. Radio returns us to the dark of the mind, to the invasions from Mars and Orson Welles; it mechanizes the well of loneliness that is acoustic space: the human heart-throb put on a PA system provides a well of loneliness in which anyone can drown.

Movies and TV complete the cycle of mechanization of the human sensorium. With the omnipresent ear and the moving eye, we have abolished writing, the specialized acoustic-visual metaphor which established the dynamics of Western civilization.

By surpassing writing, we have regained our WHOLENESS, not on a national or cultural but cosmic plane. We have evoked a super-civilized sub-primitive man.

**NOBODY** yet knows the language inherent in the new technological culture; we are all deaf-blind mutes in terms of the new situation. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us by referring to the previously existent, not to the present.

We are back in acoustic space. We begin again to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us.

*Hands have no tears to flow*

## Blowing Off the Dust: On Marshall McLuhan and Counterblasting

*The new media are not bridges between man and nature: they are nature.*<sup>1</sup>

Marshall McLuhan has become what we have made of him. We have put various masks on him and we have looked at him through those masks: the *media Oracle*; the *media Guru*; the *techno Enthusiast*. But each of these masks only reveals one side of his more complex *persona* which, in fact, we still have to bring together. Rediscovering the first edition of *Counterblast* brings a new light on another yet unfortunately still neglected mask: Marshall McLuhan the *Modernist*. Under that mask, we found the English Professor who studied at Cambridge with I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, who met and corresponded with Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, who probed the world through language, and who innovated literary criticism by suggesting new ways to read the Modernist avant-garde as a point of departure for observations on media. Modernist literature and arts were keys to understanding cultural and technological change.

*It is strange that the popular press as an art form has often attracted the enthusiastic attention of poets and aesthetes while rousing the gloomiest apprehension in the academic mind.*<sup>2</sup>

*The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness.*<sup>3</sup>

*Integral Awareness.* The artist is inside and outside society, at once *figure* and *ground*. "He must become all things in order to reveal all. And to be all things he must empty himself."<sup>4</sup>

McLuhan was an artist, a Modernist artist. Not because he knew Pound and Lewis, not because he mimicked Lewis's *Blast* through his *Counterblast*. He was an artist because he left the ivory tower of the academic world and plunged into the world. He moved to the control tower and did so after having put on the most important tenet of all modernist poetics: *form is as important as content*. Yes, the medium was the message and *Counterblast* is a case in point.

McLuhan was not the first to play with heavy headline types. First came Lewis, who in 1914 blasted the London of the Great Vortex throwing verbal bombs against a sleeping society. Two years earlier, the Italian Futurist writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti had invented the expression *parole in libertà*, literally "words in freedom."<sup>5</sup> On Marinetti's futurist page, words were free to move and combine in a myriad of

ways resulting in a colourful montage of forms, dimensions and sounds capturing the 'speed' and the 'accelerated pace' of the new environment; readers were invited to plug in and play through all their senses and not only through their eyes. McLuhan understood that these new strategies to render movement and three-dimensional experiences on a flat surface were more than an artistic game or provocation. Though he was not the first to play with typographic renderings, he strove to "apply the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society."<sup>6</sup>

McLuhan worked with the language at his disposal, which he started to deconstruct and reassemble in creative ways. He did not elaborate a linguistic theory, nor did he develop models for textual analysis similar to those later conceptualised by other schools of criticism, such as structuralism, deconstruction or post-structuralism (all of them suggesting a renewed attention to both language and structure). Instead, he experimented with language in the wake of new avant-garde interfaces – all experiments mediated through his solid humanistic tradition. In *Counterblast*, as in all his other works, words are used as "*complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered or outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols, the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant.*"<sup>7</sup> When reading *Counterblast* do not play only with the pages with heavy headline types; the "Media Log" session, as well as the "The Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed the Breath" are also to be read in depth: each paragraph is conceived according to the principle of Francis Bacon's 'knowledge broken' and, like in an aphorism, readers are asked to provide connections between juxtapositions and through the paratactic montage.

*Counterblast* is McLuhan's Canadian vortex, conceived in the wake of the vortex activated four decades earlier in London by Wyndham Lewis, a native Canadian. McLuhan considered Lewis's works instrumental to his explorations of communication in culture and technology. Lewis's spatial philosophy, which considers art as "that experience of arrest in which we pause before a particular thing or experience", offered McLuhan a conceptual form of writing, which is designed not as a flow, but as a *mosaic*; that is, as a juxtaposition of pauses or intervals in turn blasting the numbing acceptance of actuality. As a Modernist scholar, McLuhan always considered Lewis's productions as counter-environments determined to detect and express cultural, societal and technological change.

In McLuhan's explorations, media became art forms: "*All new media, including the press, are art forms which have the power of imposing, like poetry, their own assumptions.*"<sup>8</sup> The medium was the message just like the form of modernist productions was the message: a medium, just like a poem, works on you while you are distracted by its content. It is a simple yet a

phenomenal idea that changed forever our way of looking at our own technological landscape, an idea McLuhan developed reading Lewis, Joyce and Eliot.<sup>9</sup>

"*Technological art takes the whole earth and its population as its material, not as its form*",<sup>10</sup> Planet Earth was, therefore, a unique landscape to be probed and rendered in its complexity as an art form, individuals being one among many other figures of a more complex mosaic. "*The Age of Writing has passed. We must invent a new metaphor, restructure our thoughts and feelings.*"<sup>11</sup> Wyndham Lewis provided the perfect metaphor to render the new depth-involving newness and its inhabitants: the global village.<sup>12</sup>

It is through language that McLuhan taught us how to understand the way new media reconfigure our world in the *form* of a global village. Through language, he probed how cultural, societal, and communicative dynamics shift inside a highly technological environment. Through language, he tried to awaken us and alert us to the difficulties of grasping the long-term effects of all technological innovations on our senses and on our realities. How was McLuhan able to 'see' and to 'understand' ahead of others, from the 1950s, situations that are all too obvious to us today? What turned him into a sagacious visionary, Heraclitean gadfly or media oracle? It was his humanistic background, his passion for literature and his capability of developing a way of simultaneously *looking at* and *through* things based on his life-long training in the humanities, on his passion for artistic quests.

As an artist, Wyndham Lewis put on the mask of the enemy; his blasts were satirical attacks. McLuhan, too, wanted to blow aside the dust that 'gets in our eyes' as new media began reducing previous forms like nationalism or individualism 'to cosmic baby powder'. His various masks turned him into a pop icon, a less troublesome role than Lewis's. From Lewis, McLuhan retained the verbal playfulness, drawing on the most bombastic vorticist experimental art. While Lewis moved from 'Classicism to Satire',<sup>13</sup> McLuhan shifted from satire (*The Mechanical Bride*, 1951, *Counterblast*, 1954) to humor as a strategy to apply his own method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society.

McLuhan combines Lewis's works of 1914 (*Blast*), 1948 (*America and Cosmic Man*) and 1954 (*Self-Condemed*) to work out his own approach to media studies: "I have coming out a new version of BLAST which takes *Self-Condemed* (1914–1954) as a focal point. As theme for Blast for forty years later I have taken in place of abstract art and industrial culture, the new media of communication and their power of metamorphosis."<sup>14</sup> That passage is followed by a discussion of his idea of acoustic space. And yet, in his first short pamphlet, McLuhan still writes as a satirist in Lewis's wake, his blasts aiming at arresting the flux and grasping the genesis and direction of the related movement:

In AMERICA AND COSMIC MAN Lewis saw North America as a benign rock crusher in which all remnants of European nationalism and individualism were happily reduced to cosmic baby powder. The new media are blowing a lot of this baby powder around the pendant cradle of the New Man today. The dust gets in our eyes.

Fifteen years later, in the new edition of *Counterblast* (1969) he replaced the final sentence with some remarks presenting his new approach as a media theorist: his focus is no longer on the final goal, but mostly on the technique he intends to adopt to make the observation possible:

The term COUNTERBLAST does not imply any attempt to erode or explode BLAST. Rather it indicates the need for a counter-environment as a means to perceive the dominant one.

Consistently, McLuhan's *verbo-vocal-visual mosaic* places an environment inside another through its paratactic elaboration; it merges literacy and oral tradition, and offers a newly conceived ecological approach to a series of issues: technology (media), knowledge (perception), and society (environment). The mosaic is the embodiment of McLuhan's *integral awareness*, it is what makes us understand the function of his own *storytelling*, of his role as an *artist*; it is what engages us into a reading process which cannot be separated from our communal existence.

*The artist, because he uses all his faculties, is always at leisure, and always merging.*

ELENA LAMBERTI / Toronto, 2010

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (1954).

2 Marshall McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape. The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan. 1943–1962*, selected, compiled and edited by Eugene McNamara (New York-Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1969), page 5.

3 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

4 Marshall McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, page 32.

5 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's preface to his *Antologia dei poeti futuristi* (Edizioni Futuriste di 'Poesia', 1912).

6 Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*.

7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

8 Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (1954).

9 Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan. The Medium and His Messenger*.

10 Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (1954).

11 Ibid.

12 "A World Art and Tradition" (1929), quoted in Fox, C.J., "The Wild Land: A Celebration of Globalism", in *Wyndham Lewis in Canada*, edited by George Woodcock, with an introduction by Julian Symons (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Publication Centre, 1971), page 45.

13 Gasiorek Andrzej, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Horndon, Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2004), especially the chapter "From Classicism to Satire", pages 58–76.

14 Marshall McLuhan, *Letters*, December 28 1954.



**HERBERT MARSHALL McLUHAN**  
(1911–1980)

Marshall McLuhan received his M.A. in English Literature from Trinity Hall, Cambridge. His doctoral thesis on the Trivium (Cambridge, 1942) is a critique of communication through 2000 years of history, recounting the rise and fall of poetics, rhetoric, and dialectic in every era. Forms of disquisition, McLuhan believed, ultimately influence perception itself, and determine the very content of discourse and learning, unconsciously framing the character of entire cultures.

Marshall McLuhan has written more than twenty books, including *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). His books are translated into 18 languages.

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**W. TERRENCE GORDON** is the author of the critically acclaimed biography *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*, *McLuhan for Beginners*, *Everyman's McLuhan*, *McLuhan: A Guide for the Perplexed*, and *Everyman's James Joyce*. He prepared critical editions of McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and *The Classical Trivium* for Gingko Press. He is currently preparing a multi-media production on the life and work of McLuhan for the McLuhan centennial year.

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