

POSTMODERN *Display*: STAGING THE MIND OF MARSHALL MCLUHAN¹

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Creatively commingling the life and theories of Canadian media icon Marshall McLuhan may yield robust material for negotiating and staging postmodern performance. This article considers certain of McLuhan's theories that have parallels to influential postmodern theoretical constructions and the ways in which these parallels are ripe for performance. It considers the uneasy relationship between dramaturgies and dialectics, and deals with frequent criticisms leveled at postmodern thought, including a hectic rejoicing over consumerism, a cacophony of signs, and the dangers of incorporating into performance the mixed-media environments inherent to McLuhanism and postmodernism alike. Finally, the article considers the potential for mixed-media performance to engage with social objectives linked to producing alternative theatre. But it begins and ends by asking the question: Do artists who attempt to stage theory risk allowing the theory to distract from and overwhelm the performance? In order to probe these effects, the sprawling Edmonton science-fiction "Alt-Rock Opera," *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*, is offered as a case study.

Associer de façon créative la vie et les théories de Marshall McLuhan, célèbre figure canadienne des médias, voilà une démarche qui promet de produire du matériel solide qui permet de penser la négociation et la présentation d'une performance postmoderne. Whittaker s'attarde dans cet article à quelques-unes des théories de McLuhan qu'on peut inscrire en parallèle à des constructions théoriques d'une grande importance en postmodernisme; l'auteur cherche ainsi à voir comment ces parallèles peuvent servir à enrichir une représentation. Whittaker examine le rapport précaire qu'entretiennent la dramaturgie et la dialectique et aborde quelques-uns des reproches formulés à l'égard de la pensée postmoderne, y compris sa réjouissance fiévreuse à l'égard de la consommation à outrance, sa cacophonie de signes et le risque que représente le recours aux environnements multimédia si essentiels aux tenants de la pensée de McLuhan et du postmodernisme. Enfin, Whittaker voit comment la performance multimédia peut servir à aborder des enjeux sociaux liés à la production d'un théâtre alternatif. Sa contribution part d'une question à laquelle elle revient à la toute fin : l'artiste qui cherche à montrer la théorie risque-t-il de voir son public distrait et

sa performance monopolisée par la théorie? Pour examiner ces effets, l'auteur propose une étude de cas d'un opéra tentaculaire « alt-rock » science-fiction d'Edmonton, *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*.



Marshall is everywhere. He sees everything; he knows everything.[...] Look, there he is, on the screen! Isn't he the greatest? When I grow up I want to be just like Marshall.

—children, in *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan* (36-37)²

In the perpetual dialogue between theory and performance there seems to exist a point at which performance becomes saturated by theory such that the performance is denied the presence that allows the audience to freely engage in the immediacy of the event. The Derridian play of signifieds—the endless chain of presence disrupted by absence disrupted by presence—can cloud reception when theory, in its turn, overwhelms performance. To stage theory in mimetic space is a problematic proposition for the playwright: Is it more desirable to relegate theory to diegetic space encased in layers of performance sign systems to prevent it from distracting from the play's dramatic action?³ Patrice Pavis has argued that “postmodern art uses and reinvests theory in the process of producing meaning at every place and moment in the *mise en scène*” (19), but while attempts at staging “theory” on stage remain popular as playwrights flirt with seemingly endless reconsiderations of postmodern performance aesthetics, such flirtations risk obscuring the presence of the performance text by the theory itself. An examination of the play of theory and performance should go some distance in illuminating the study of the works by theatre *auteurs* who consciously attempt to engage their (imagined) audiences in acts of theory so that “everyone's circadian rhythms will be tuned to the machine” (Charrois, qtd. in Sharplin).

Conversely, the theory of presence and absence in play is held under scrutiny by the act of performance. Bert O. States has gone so far as to say that theatre is the “paradigmatic place for the display of the drama of presence and absence” (371). In this important statement, States's choice of the term “display” can be taken further to acknowledge not only Derrida's position that “play is the disruption of presence” (292), but also to acknowledge a refiguring of

“play” to view it from the dual optic of presentation/observation: to represent play is an act of theatre. While the verb “display” in this sense means “To open up or expose to view, exhibit to the eyes, show” (*OED2*), the “dis-” prefix comes before “play” carrying the sense of “undoing or reversing the action or effect of the simple verb” (*OED2*). “Dis-” problematizes the alternation of presence and absence in the act of play; indeed, it has already problematized this alternation before play. This shift in the discourse of play takes us from the point of view of an observer/critic commenting on performance material to the point-of-view of the theatre-makers showing the material, and back again. The *display* of theory and performance on stage brings into focus the continuous chain of the *presencing* and *absencing* of both, as well as the problematic negotiating space in between these symbiotic acts, as fundamental to an understanding of the metaphysics of being onstage.

It is the intention of this paper to “probe” the *display* of inherent theatrical elements behind the theories of Canada’s eminent media icon, Marshall McLuhan, with special attention to post-modern and mixed-media production aesthetics.⁴ Michael Charrois and The Baffin Island Party Band’s “Alt-Rock Opera,” *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*, provides a test case for the *display* of theory and performance. It is my contention that in drawing from relations between McLuhan’s theories and theories of postmodernism as they relate to issues of “human performance” and “mediatized performance,” an improved understanding will arise with respect to how postmodern theatre presences (and absences) its own conceptions, performances and receptions; that is, how postmodern theatre *displays*. By way of conclusion, co-op and “low budget” mixed-media performance in the postmodern context are considered as potential forms of material protest against the theatre “establishment.” *Illumination* serves as a particularly apt test case for exploring “McLuhan” in performance because it represents him biographically and through his theories, both in the play’s dramaturgical structure and in the production’s *mise en scène*.

Character: “McLuhan” and His Potential for and in Postmodern Performance⁵

McLuhan’s work had, for some time, fallen off the map of “legitimate” scholarship. During much of the 1970s and even into the 1980s, many scholars shunned McLuhan’s writing as trivial, misguided and worse.⁶ But as poststructuralist criticism gained greater prominence, some scholars began to see McLuhan—in the

rear-view mirror—as one who, as Glenn Willmott vigorously attests, “provides a precedent” to the “more performative, subjective, and textual-poetic critical practices” of postmodern scholarship, with his “ongoing critique of abstraction or generalization from particularity” (xii). In situating McLuhan as (the) one who is “valuable to critical ideology today as an unprecedented and unrepeated experiment—a self-experiment—in the postmodern powers of criticism, and the search for a historically adequate form or medium for those powers” (xv), Willmott argues that McLuhan was not only a pre-postmodern critic, but in fact *was the postmodern experiment personified*. Theory was more than an abstract structuring principle in his life: theory was embodied in the lived life of the man himself.

In outlining McLuhan’s influence on critical theory during and after the twentieth century, Willmott stresses the presence of McLuhan in his own criticism: McLuhan symbolizes “the problem of the critic itself—of the critic’s body and medium.[...] He represents the historicity of postmodern critical practice itself—as a social problem for which he invented the mask of an apparently ideal but impossible, social individual” (207). By placing himself into his own critical discourse and into the public view, McLuhan became the medium behind a character-mask of “McLuhan” the public personality. Performance was integral to the delivery of McLuhan’s messages. For example, according to Willmott, McLuhan’s employment of the term “global village” was always “hyperbolic, contradictory, and satiric,” a

rhetoical mask which McLuhan used to *put on*—in both senses of the phrase—the audience of the day.[...] According to this postmodern critical aesthetic, the author McLuhan must disappear altogether behind the mask of “McLuhan,” and critical knowledge itself behind critical form. (119, 120, italics in original)

In McLuhan’s hands, then, the rhetorical “mask” is a polyvocal tool because it embodies the “collective being” (130) of often-contradictory voices. To incorporate it as metaphor (or for that matter, as a literal artifact) into performance is to grapple with an array of identities, at once including and excluding that of the performer/character, McLuhan / “McLuhan.”

McLuhan’s views on the time/space implosions of communication in our media-saturated culture are effective lenses through

which we may investigate mixed-media performance in a post-modern context.⁷ McLuhan's proposition that time and space implode in the "electric age" provides us with a theatrical landscape, a virtual *mise en scène*. Says McLuhan,

our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind [*sic*] and to incorporate the whole of mankind [*sic*] in us.[...] As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed [is] bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion. (*Understanding* 20)

This landscape breaks us loose from the consecutive temporality and the distant spatiality of the print age. In terms of performance, McLuhan's notion of the "global village" is analogous to the post-modern notion of the stage as locus of "an avalanche of discourse" (Pavis 17). In postmodern dramaturgy, time and space are no longer restrictive boundaries but pliable raw materials. For McLuhan, the move from the print age to the electric age made communication faster (time) and closer (space); for this study, the move from modernism to postmodernism has shifted the priorities of performance conventions from progression to simultaneity (time), and "focus" to multiplicity (space). To read this move another way, McLuhan speaks of the "medium as the massage" when, at moments when we perceive a media shift—as from the print age to the electric age—our senses are "massaged" by the new medium, at which point we are "numbed" to its effects until the numbing wears off over time. As well, "probing"—McLuhan's well-known method of exploring our media-saturated and commercial culture—is analogous to the postmodern approach to theatre, wherein offering events to pose questions is closer to the point than providing (dramaturgical) resolution. In postmodern theatre, the text(s) and the *mise en scène* are offered as probes, each as Pavis's "obscure object of desire" (19) performed in the context of "playful activity" (20).

Plot, Structure and the Illumination of Three Postmodern Elements

The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan: An Interactive Multi-Media Performance Event is a science-fiction "Alt-Rock Opera" conceived in the early 1990s by members of the Edmonton progressive-rock group The Baffin Island Party Band and "assembled" during the

course of the 1990s by performer/playwright Michael Charrois. Premiering in Edmonton 27 April 2000, *Illumination* ran for ten days at the Arts Barns' TransAlta Open Space and was produced by Baffin Island Productions. The production carried with it an entirely original premise, phrased in the question: What would happen to humanity as we know it if the expansive mind of Marshall McLuhan were combined with the all-powerful body of H. P. Lovecraft's sea-god Lord C'Thulu? The combination is explicitly referred to in the play as Thesis—McLuhan's mind—plus Antithesis—C'Thulu's body—equaling Synthesis: “a massive extension of mind, resulting in the coordination of [humanity's] collective extended nervous systems and contact with all [beings] here in the three-fold omniverse” (13). Directed by Sandra Nicholls and Lynda Adams, with music written and performed live by The Baffin Island Party Band along with multimedia and set design by Tim Folkman, *Illumination* was nominated for two Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards that year⁸ and quickly gained (limited) cult status⁹ for three reasons: *Illumination's* science-fiction-inspired content, its impressive involvement (and therefore audience-drawing power)—nearly fifty cast and production team members are listed in the program credits (including professional actors, high school students, alt-rock musicians) and over seventy individuals and groups are listed in the program acknowledgments (“*Illumination*”)¹⁰, and the play's unapologetic agenda of staging McLuhan's theories *via* a metaphorical and literal staging of his mind.

At the heart of *Illumination's* narrative is a project called the Urantia Rising Program, carried out by the three omniscient alien beings of the Orvonton Divine Triad Council: the money- and power-hungry Consequent, the tender renegade Ameliorate and their politically libidinous leader Primus. It is they who have manipulated humanity's evolution from tool-users to separate literate cultures to an electric technology-using global society (here we begin to see how McLuhan's theories are inscribed into *Illumination's* dramaturgy). The Triad executes this, the final stage of their project, with the aid of a former graduate student of McLuhan's, the brilliant and industrious Maya McMann, who has preserved McLuhan's head for further study in her “Coordinated Universal Mind Machine.” However, by the end of the first act, the Triad's plan has gone horribly awry: C'Thulu is resurrected from the bottom of the North Sea and combined with McLuhan's mind by the Triad, using a machine known as the Illuminator 2000. But the new C'Thulu-McLuhan entity becomes, in its own words, the

“Beast of Consumer Society” (33)—the emphasis being on “consume”—and it successfully tempts Earth’s children to *buy, buy, buy* in “an endless cycle of production and consumption, a perpetual motion machine” (35). Subsequently, at the Baffin Island Concentration Camp, children are turned into “compliant servants to the machine”—in other words, “Citizens” (44). In the end, the Triad is able to contain the C”Thulu-McLuhan entity and their goal is achieved: humans are converted into perfectly enlightened Urantians with four-dimensional awareness: “Urantia has risen” (69). Throughout, songs such as “Lover With My Machine,” “Mom’s on the Side of Evil,” “Pining for My Body” and “Human Grease” are played by the live alt-rock band in concept-album fashion and sung by the play’s characters.



Child-leader Y2K (Chris Fassbender) and the power-hungry Consequent (Don Schmidt) survey their earth-bound flock on Tim Folkman’s mixed-media set in *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*. Costume design by Marissa Kochanski, lighting design by Tanya Lampey.

Photo: Baffin Island Productions Cooperative.

Illumination presents a number of unavoidably postmodern elements, particularly the exploitation of multiplicity and simultaneity, multiple sign systems and self-reference in the proposed set design, staging and dramaturgical structure. First, the prescribed set encourages multiplicity and simultaneity in its very

stage space. The delineation of several spatio-temporal areas is primarily achieved *via* lighting and directorial indication, not by physical barriers or cumbersome set changes. Charrois's opening notes to the script include the following description of the proposed playing space:

The Performance space is big and open.[...] There is no traditional seating for the audience, but there are lots of places to sit on the styro-nooks and cranies along the walls and pillars. There is lots of room for movement and for "machines" on wheels to move around and connect. (3)

For the premiere, the playing space proper had four general areas: Maya's office, a geodesic dome within which the band played, a giant satellite dish on which images were projected, and an open playing area. These physically adjacent areas allowed the alien Triad to move fluidly from one area to another as they "transcended time and space," while the yet-to-be-enlightened humans remained confined to their individually lit times and spaces. The audience for the premiere, despite Charrois's description, was not incorporated into the playing space but rather sat separate in two raked seating areas on the periphery of the stage. Performer and audience space was blurred only once, when the Triad's alien helpers ran through the audience spreading newspaper insert advertising before intermission.

Second, Charrois's script makes no attempt to confine the story to a linear dramatic structure. The play's multiple sign-systems—the live rock band, the video projections, the machinery, the functional computers, the diverse characters and the teenage chorus—tended not to lead to a singular narrative effect at any moment, nor a cause-and-effect narrative overall. Instead of converging like feathers on an arrow, these signs remain parallel like lines on a musical staff. Thus, at the play's opening a number of actions occur simultaneously: Maya projects, writes and speaks various texts that follow McLuhan's life using an overhead projector; McLuhan wheels himself around in a wheelchair until he suffers his stroke; the alien Triad, in a live feed from backstage, is video-projected onto the onstage satellite dish; and the onstage band plays a rock adaptation of "Pachelbel's Canon." The effect is analogous to McLuhan's use of the term "simultaneity," for which "The past *is* and haunts the present" (Willmott 125, italics in original). Linearity is implausible because experience is timeless. Simultaneity and performance *presence* and *absence* one another in *display*.

However, the execution of such a view of simultaneity in performance can be problematic. In reviewing the production in the *Edmonton Sun*, Colin MacLean comments on this simultaneity and the resultant open-ended reception: “[I]t’s an imaginative, helter-skelter assault on the senses, an electronic witches’ brew in which tasty morsels of thought bubble to the surface only to be sucked back into a miasma of noise and fragmented perception” (“McLuhan”). MacLean concludes, “Multimedia is a tough thing to pull off because the powerful elements tend to absorb the more delicate ones. But co-directors Lynda Adams and Sandra Nicholls have made it work.”¹¹ Focus is of the audience’s own choosing, and meaning results both from the text and “from the combined efforts of audience and *mise en scène*” (Pavis 11-12).¹² The fact that not all audience members see the same play within a single performance, and that each audience member constructs a different “take” on the play is not ignored but rather emphasized in *display*.

Third, the play’s self-referential thesis-antithesis-synthesis theme is both inherently theoretical and overtly theatrical. It is a recipe for dramatic conflict that is at no point hidden in the text:

PRIMUS. [The humans] are locked into time-space reasoning which makes them perceive the simultaneous events of eternity as sequential dialectical transactions; thesis-antithesis-synthesis becoming thesis in an endless cycle moving forward through time in evolutionary spasms.[...] The most effective method of affecting change here is to allow a dialectical vortex to ensue in which thesis and antithesis battle to synthesis. (12-13)

Charrois’s play takes the dialectic into which neo-Aristotelian plays are locked,¹³ overtly admits its exploitation of the dialectic in the very narrative of the play and appropriates the dialectic’s ideology to achieve a polyphonic worldview in which the dialectic is obsolete. To stage the thesis-antithesis dialectic in performance, the two opposing forces are represented by characters. Explains Consequent to McLuhan “You are the Mind to the Body, the Man to the Machine, thesis to the antithesis” (28); and to C’Thulu, “The power of pre-conscious life as machine” (30). This heavy-handed foregrounding of the play’s dramaturgical structure provides a staging of the clash between the dramatic forces that are buried in traditional neo-Aristotelian dramaturgy. A postmodern probe of dramaturgical conventions ensues, with dialectical structure as its target.



Marshall McLuhan (Michael Charrois) is “illuminated” by bumpy-headed aliens in *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*.

Masks by Michael Charrois.

Photo: Baffin Island Productions Cooperative.

Thought as Structure: The *Display* of the Dialectic

Postmodernism deconstructs the edicts of the dialectical process on the grounds of the process itself. For Hegel, the dialectical process, though it is always in a dynamic state of becoming, leads to a synthesis that is ultimately Platonic (truth, nobility, goodness); for Marx, the dialectical process leads to a synthesis derived from material production and scarcity; and for Brecht, the goal of his post-World War II theatre practice was “to found a dramaturgy of contradictions and dialectical processes [that would] induce the new positive critical attitude proper to the new productive audience” (Brecht 240). In *Illumination’s* postmodern deconstruction of dialectical dramaturgy, the “synthesis” is polyvocal and essentially indeterminable because Platonic ideals are obsolete (they can never dialogically serve diverse points of view). The materialist notions of production and scarcity are replaced by “a consciousness

of need” (Willmott 33); and Brecht’s idea of “the new positive critical attitude proper to the new productive audience” is replaced with the idea of pluralistic critical fields in and around which spectators converse dialogically. In *Illumination*, even though the qualitative aspects of the humanist dialectic are not as readily determinable under a postmodern apparatus as they are under Hegelian, Marxist or Brechtian apparatuses, the “endless cycle” still works, according to Primus, in “evolutionary spasms.” The rhetoric of dialectical “enlightenment” is the only rhetoric with which to engage humanity because it is all that humanity has heretofore known.

For his part, McLuhan’s critical relationship to dialectic thought is a controversial subject in contemporary scholarship. Traditionally, Marxists, post-Marxists and non-Marxists alike have viewed McLuhan as operating in opposition to the dialectic for various reasons, not the least of which is McLuhan’s own rejection of Marx and his followers for “[not] understanding the dynamics of the new media of communication” (*Understanding* 49). Paul Grosswiler, however, argues unrelentingly, in the broadly titled *Method is the Message: Rethinking McLuhan through Critical Theory*, that McLuhan’s methodology was similar to humanist and Western Marxism(s), as found in the writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as well as in a “generation of cultural studies scholars, postmodernists and more generally, in Canadian media theory” (5). Willmott, for his part, sees McLuhan as reappropriating the Marxist project beyond Marxism. For McLuhan, says Willmott,

[t]he basis of need was not scarcity (a condition he thought solved by technology and its ‘service environments’) but rather a consciousness of need, that is, a consciousness of the formal limits (imposed by a commercialized popular culture, imposed by its naturalized media) to the social construction and communication of values of welfare and survival. (33)

If Marx saw the bourgeoisie as taking more than their fair share, then McLuhan, arguably, believed that technology could provide everyone with the products that they needed and that popular culture—particularly advertising culture—redistributed desire for its products. Importantly, this “new” conflict among consumers, as directed by the mechanisms of advertising culture, is staged in *Illumination* before its intermission when, according to the script, “the Children encourage the patrons [spectators] to buy

production souvenirs” (37). No less *à propos*, for the premiere the Children instead distributed to the spectators random advertisements, particularly newspaper inserts for supermarkets, electronics stores, etc. Popular culture’s plentiful material wealth was played up, as was the consumer’s “consciousness of need.”



The Children, with names like corporate tags (Y2K, Y9A, Y5T and X5C), learn to sing the praises of the all-powerful C’Thulu-McLuhan entity, “The Beast of Consumer Society,” and to perpetually produce and consume in *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*.

Photo: Baffin Island Productions Cooperative.

The strength of *Illumination*’s dramaturgy lies in its *display* of the known thesis-antithesis-synthesis theoretical material and the performance of this material as a deconstructed classical structure. The dialectic is exploited to new ends: theoretical and performance-based. It is viewed by *Illumination*’s agent-characters (the Triad) as an outdated system that ought to be replaced by one that allows for four-dimensional awareness, and it is both the obstacle and the means to achieving this enlightened state. In other words, the implicit goal of the play’s dramaturgy is the explicit goal of the play’s agent-characters. In moments of *display*, theory generates praxis, raising it “to the rank of playful activity”

(Pavis 20) and “respond[ing] to and construct[ing] new ways of seeing and thinking that render inherited forms and structures obsolete or ineffective” (Knowles 214). Postmodern theatre is theatre that foregrounds its own ideology of exposing and exploding preceding ideologies by the deconstructionist apparatus of *display*.

Diction and Tone: Traps, Panic, Sex, McLuhan

There are, however, certain postmodern “traps” into which *Illumination* falls. The play takes as its style the hypertextual, polyvocal, a-linear presentation attributed to the outbreak of MTV and its so-called Generation. But it might easily be accused of perpetuating, rather than interrogating, the negative effects of this style. Gary Genosko has situated McLuhan “between postmodernism and late capitalism,” and he notes that McLuhan’s “famous phrases”—including “global village” and an early use of the phrase “surfing the Net” (in McLuhan and Fiore)—have simultaneously served and resisted consumer capitalism (10). Similarly, some of the negative criticism that *Illumination* received pointed out the apparent affirmation of—and even a rejoicing over—the ferocious consumer culture presided over by the McLuhan-C”Thulu entity. Postmodern performance, at the same time that it allows for polyvocality of presentation, risks confusion of the sort that reconfirms late-capitalism as a socio-economic system run amuck—a system out of control, wrenched from human hands.

A second criticism *Illumination* received lay in the very multiplicity offered by its text and its *mise en scène*. Charrois’s play blends and exploits genres such as the musical, the rock concert, opera, science fiction and biography. Genosko sees parallels between postmodern phenomena and McLuhan’s “confusion of genres and disciplines, the depthlessness of [McLuhan’s] writing, the poverty of his categories, and impoverishment of his thematics by his own incessant punning” (38). In representing generic diversity, *Illumination* inherits the very probing method McLuhan advocated, and does not draw conclusions. Overall, the play tends to favour the exuberance of its younger characters over its heavier political and cultural themes, even to the extent that ideological messages remain veiled within the medium. In the *display* of postmodern theatre, the medium is very much the message, but also the trap.

These disparate aspects of postmodernism lead to a “panic” culture in which life is seen as “overwhelming, an emergency” (Genosko 65). This panic is the very tone of *Illumination*, as

emphasized in the play's climax. Over the band's breathless song "Mission Implausible," the alien Triad sings in alternating lines:

PRIMUS. Quickly now, we haven't much time.

AMELIORATE. The Urantia Rising Program is back on track.

CONSEQUENT. I said you could leave everything to me.

PRIMUS is at C'Thulu's control panel.

PRIMUS. We need more power.

The nanotech's not taking.

AMELIORATE. We need more power

CONSEQUENT. I've got it covered.[...]

PRIMUS. We need more power!

The nanotech's not taking![...]

PRIMUS. Oh yes, I think it's going to work out. Give me more, yes, give me more, give me more, give me more power! (63-64)

Here we see that the stakes are high in a world that acknowledges its own multiple sign systems. Charrois's play dramatizes this notion in the sexual analogy at work here: the following moment has the projected images of McLuhan and C'Thulu combining as they say together, "Yes, yes of course! I see everything now;" then McLuhan, "I need you;" and C'Thulu, "You need me" (64). The effect is the numbing massage resulting from the over-stimulus of signs. That this effect is couched in a sexual analogy explicitly reappropriates the obvious inference of the McLuhanesque "massage," but also implies that even the thesis-antithesis combination at the play's moment of climax produces an initially satisfying, if subsequently troubling, synthesis. The notion of heightened (sexual) awareness at the moment of media-influenced recombination is, for McLuhan, a product of "the new tactility" of the "electronic age" in which "The electric media, by stimulating all the senses simultaneously, also give a new and richer sensual dimension to everyday sexuality" ("Playboy" 252). The experience, of course, is troubled because "a kind of psychosexual *Weltschmerz*" (253) results, in which the cultural experience of sexual synthesis is "jarring." Ultimately, sensuality is lost. McLuhan's repeated usages of sexually-laden terminology such as "massage" fair particularly well when applied in public forms such as advertising, television and, of course, theatre where "sex sells." In the case of the latter, neo-Aristotelian rise-climax-denouement structuring mirrors the male sexual experience in a *display* of theory and performance.¹⁴

Spectacle: *Display in Mediatized Environments*

We may now turn to the *display* of McLuhan's theories and performance in the context of *Illumination's* mediatized environment. Just as McLuhan's principles are present in the dramatic structure of *Illumination*, they are also present in its mediatized *mise en scène*.¹⁵ In live theatre performance the visual and aural elements represented on television screens and projection surfaces convert mediatized performances—such as *Illumination's* projected newsclips, prerecorded scenes or live off-stage action—into raw material “ordered” into a *mise-en-scène* by the production team, and further reordered into narrative patterns by the audience to constitute a postmodern “performance text” and the play's dramatic action.

The effects of building technologies into a play's sign systems deserves further consideration by juxtaposing “human performance” with layers of mediatized performance. Bare human performance is performance stripped of technology-based mediatization: no working television monitors or video projections, for example, only the actor's performance mediated by non-technical filters such as theatrical convention and ideology. By incorporating the technologies of live video projections, a live “plugged-in” band and so forth, the *mise en scène* points up liveness by adding various live performance layers. Liveness infuses the combination of the McLuhan-brain's theories (diegetic, absence) and the C'Thulu-body's physical eminence (mimetic, presence) in a *display* of the new, live ideas of the Orvonton Divine Triad and the old, represented dialectic of the humanity of recent (modern) history. The dialectic deconstructs the dialectic. And similarly, just as postmodern consumer culture consumes culture—that is, consumes itself—so too can live mediatized performance overwhelm live human performance such that, as MacLean says in his review, “the powerful elements tend to absorb the more delicate ones.” In a state of panic, postmodern live performance sounds its own death-knell, thereby sounding the end of all death-knells. Mediatized performance amplifies the cry.

The moments in which the members of the Orvonton Triad are projected *via* a live video feed from backstage to onstage provide us with an example of the effects of *Illumination's* mediatized performance. In McLuhan's hypothesis that the content of the new media environment is the old media environment—“the ‘content’ of TV is the movie,” for example (*Understanding ix*), we may understand the inverse as old media being transmitted to us by the new. Language is made available to our senses by film, film by television, television by

the internet, the internet by our powerbooks, our powerbooks by our iPods and so forth. (The consumption is theoretically endless!) When watching a film on television, for example, though we say we are watching a film we know it is literally distorted by the television screen and experientially distorted by our awareness of having “rented” a video or “flipped” through the channels; a different sort of distortion occurs when watching a videoclip on the internet. In both cases, one technological environment is made the filter of another.

But at every stage the old medium suffers a distortion by the new: “All media, from language to TV, alter the patterns of perception such that all experience becomes a pseudo-event” (McLuhan and Watson 198). Mediatized experience becomes simulacrum to the point that what we consider to be “real” in our lives is a self-referential hyperreality. The referent of lived experience fades away in self-replication, now transmitted to us electronically, many times over. If, for example, what we are watching is a newsclip, the pre-prepared, pre-recorded information enters into our understanding of our world; it stands in for our experience such that, over time, our “experience” of the world is at least second-hand, filtered and distorted by each technological medium that separates us from the event. In a *display* of undoing and reversal, multiple mediatized environments replace presence. With the projection of the Triad, there is “distortion” because we do not know at first if the projection is prerecorded or live until the moment the members of the Triad interact (verbally or through their gazes) with the onstage *mise en scène*. The realization, at this moment, that the projected actors are live forces the audience to reevaluate, first, the grounds on which communication in this performed “world” may be carried out and, second, the technological capabilities of the production itself. This moment of reevaluation is the same moment that, for McLuhan, our extended senses are numbed: the moment of massage. The grounds of theory/performance *display* are renegotiated.¹⁶

Postmodern theatre frequently incorporates technological layers not only as medium, but also as message. This can create a fascinating theatrical effect, an infinite *matryoshka* of mediatizations. For example, when a live or prerecorded video feed is projected onto a satellite dish in *Illumination*, a sensory feedback loop is created wherein it appears as though the technology that transmits the message is simultaneously made to function as the receiving medium (a screen) onto which the message is projected. The effect is at once a metaphor for postmodern theatre: a theatre that admits, emits, and transmits its own projections of itself, a self-referential artform that refers to itself on McLuhan’s terms.



Michael Charrois as “post-stroke” Marshall McLuhan, in *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan*. Upstage, the medium (satellite dish) self-reflexively screens the very message that it transmits. Set and multimedia design by Tim Folkman, lighting design by Tanya Lampey.

Photo: Baffin Island Productions Cooperative.

Conclusions: Mixed-Media Performance in/on Display

What are the boundaries of mixed-media theatre performance in a technology-hungry society? Philip Auslander has asserted that “audiences now expect live performances to resemble mediated ones” (25) but this may go too far, even as he cites a well-attended mainstream musical like *Miss Saigon* in which “[t]he celebrated helicopter effect [...] represents a direct importation of cinematic or televisual realism into the theatre” (25). It would seem more appropriate to suggest that for some, a media-saturated *mise en scène* is desirable, and may even be considered as improving, the spectacle; but for others regarding the same spectacle, it is unwelcome because it can obscure, or even overwhelm, their apprehension of the actors’ craft. In his review of *Illumination*, for example, MacLean states bluntly, “Performances? Well, who knows?” and he characterizes the relationship between the actors and the media-saturated set—particularly in relation to the band on the set—as “a constant (and often losing) battle” (“McLuhan”). In this sense,

then, competition in a socio-economic milieu between live theatre and mediated forms of entertainment is reflected in microcosm on the stage itself in plays like *Illumination*.

But at what point is highly-saturated mixed-media performance, like that offered in *Illumination*, no longer a leap too close to the edge of the public's horizons of expectations? In other words, at what point does the *display* of theory and practice on a mixed-media stage no longer cloud reception? Importantly, the incorporation of mixed-media—from co-op ventures like *Illumination* to productions at established theatres and touring commercial musicals like *Miss Saigon*—has been characterized by some in terms of a social statement. Gordon Peacock asserts that in 1969 there were conscious social objectives in the staging of another media-infused, McLuhan-inspired play. Wilfrid Watson's *Let's murder Clytemnestra according to the principles of Marshall McLuhan*, which premiered at the University of Alberta's student-centred Studio Theatre was, according to Peacock, a social statement:

Watson jolted the complacencies of middle-class theatre in Alberta and the blithe optimism of entrepreneurs in the newly endowed professional centers who put their trust in such palliatives as Canada Council grants and the inclusion of an obligatory “new” ultra-realistic play in each imitative season. (10)

Peacock's (barely) veiled swipe at the Canadian regional theatres' highly-funded refusal to stage experimental work suggests that mixed-media theatre in co-op, Fringe and student-production environments can be viewed as a form of protest against the “establishment” elements of a theatre culture. In a similar vein, Scott Sharplin in Edmonton's *SEE Magazine* wrote in his preview article for *Illumination*'s premiere that

the scope of *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan* is so huge, it would seem to belong in the Citadel, or on the Andrew Lloyd Webber touring circuit. Except, of course, that Citadel subscribers and Webber fans aren't accustomed to retro-futurist rock musicals that feature Cthulhu [*sic*] and the Bavarian Illuminati.

Charrois's agreement follows: “This would be a \$100,000 show if it were done in a big house” (qtd. in Sharplin).

A further division therefore arises within the medium of live

theatre between mainstream uses of mixed-media to court media-savvy audiences (as with *Miss Saigon*) and experimental uses of mixed-media to protest those very “complacencies of middle-class theatre.” In the case of *Illumination*, MacLean asserts that enjoyment of the play will follow “for those willing to embrace its many pleasures,” concluding that *Illumination* “is not for everyone” (“McLuhan”). If theatre, as Virginie Magnat says, “is a collective phenomenon that requires a particular quality of presence and perception from performers and spectators alike” (157), then the Derridian *display* of the “being” of the performance, relying as it does on the dynamic disruption of its own presence by absence and new presences *ad infinitum*, implicates not only theatre artists in its *display* but also spectators (not excluding critics), theatre producers and funding bodies. Each is always already implicated in the creation, *display* and reception that illuminate the *becoming* of the performance experience. ❁

NOTES

- 1 Adapted from a paper presented at the Association for Canadian Theatre Research/Association de la recherche théâtrale au Canada Conference on 26 May 2000 at the University of Alberta. The author wishes to acknowledge Michael Charrois, Lynda Adams, Sandra Nicholls and Tim Folkman for lending their time and archival material in preparation for this study.
- 2 Page numbers for *The Illumination* of Marshall McLuhan correspond to Draft 6 of the script (Charrois).
- 3 Here I use Michael Issacharoff’s definition of “diegetic space” as that which is “described, that is, referred to by the characters,” as opposed to mimetic space or “that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage” (215, italics in original). This use of “diegetic” should not be confused with diegetic sound in film, for example: “sound whose source is visible on the screen or whose source is implied to be present by the action of the film” (“Diegetic”). The two uses are, evidently, at odds.
- 4 Philip Auslander defines “mixed-media” as “events combining live and mediatized representations: live actors with film, video, or digital projections, for instance” (36fn18).
- 5 I have partitioned this study into parts that fall under Aristotle’s classical taxonomy of the elements of drama in order to point up elements of their staged *display* in the post-modern context. (Music/melody is absorbed into spectacle).

- 6 For summaries of such accusations see Willmott (xii), Grosswiler (1-4), and McLuhan and Zingrone (2), among others who have written at length on McLuhan.
- 7 Grosswiler, in discussing his views on McLuhan's relationship with postmodern thought, notes that nowhere in his published work does McLuhan use the term "postmodernism" (155). Here, I argue that this by no means precludes an explication of important similarities between McLuhan's theories and postmodern scholarship as they relate to performance.
- 8 The nominations were for Outstanding Score of a Play or Musical (Bill Damur and Alex Reno, composers) and Outstanding Production of a Collective (Baffin Island Productions) ("Elizabeth").
- 9 In his year-end review of the Edmonton theatre scene in the 2000 calendar year, Colin MacLean in the Edmonton Sun dubbed *Illumination* "the strangest production of the year" ("Surge").
- 10 My own involvement with *Illumination* was as one of three dramaturges involved in the project. The performative possibilities of Marshall McLuhan's ideas are what initially drew me to the *Illumination* project. I provided "third-eye" dramaturgy, specifically with respect to traffic patterns (some scenes boasted nearly twenty-five cast members on stage acting in a number of separate performance areas); a presentation to the cast regarding McLuhan's theories; script dramaturgy; and program notes on McLuhan.
- 11 Though taking exception to the band—"Punk lyrics are an oxymoron" (30)—MacLean's review generally applauds the multiple stagings and sign systems of the play, at least in principle if not in execution.
- 12 It is worth noting, however, that despite a proclaimed emphasis on allowing for a multiplicity of meanings and responses to the *mise en scène*, Charrois's script is remarkably prescriptive. For example, the opening pages (4-9) delineate the content and precise order in which Maya is to lay down the projections, write down her text and speak her dialogue; and amongst these activities is delineated specifically when McLuhan will appear, the Triad will be projected, etc. Further examples exist of prescribing blocking and choreography in the script as well (my edits are in square brackets):

MAYA manages to separate McLUHAN from the mob.
 [PRIMUS and children sing...]
 CONSEQUENT leads McLUHAN away from MAYA.
 [PRIMUS and children sing...]
 MAYA intercepts them.
 MAYA. Professor McLuhan, please, you said you would
 help me with my research
 CONSEQUENT holds back MAYA. (28)

It may be that the more a playwright—or in this case, an assembler—insists upon multiplicity, the more he or she must prescribe the opportunity for it in the script.

- 13 Ric Knowles has shown that so-called canonical Canadian plays, such as David French's *Leaving Home* and *Of the Fields Lately*, employ neo-Aristotelian deep structures such that "the ideological coding of the form [functions] hegemonically" (33). My point here is that *Illumination* digs this ideological coding out of the deep structure of the play and deposits it across the landscape of the text and the *mise en scène*.
- 14 Further to this point, the acronym for the "Coordinated Universal Mind Machine" that melds the McLuhan-C'Thulu entity together reflects the script's pointing up of the sexual analogies embedded in McLuhan's theories.
- 15 I borrow the term "mediatized" from Philip Auslander (who appropriates it from Jean Baudrillard) to "indicate that a particular cultural object is a product of the mass media or of media technology. 'Mediatized performance' is performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction" (5).
- 16 A second example of distortion in mediatized performance in *Illumination* is the ubiquitous "Female Voice in the Dark," whose dialogue with the onstage characters in the Edmonton production was spoken by the play's Stage Manager and heard over the auditorium's speakers (12-13). In fact, at one point in the play the two distortions are combined such that the live video-projected Triad converses with the live speaker-amplified Female Voice in the Dark, while the onstage activity is minimized. At this moment, the borders between mimetic and diegetic stage space are blurred by the production's mediatizations. Significantly, the Female Voice in the Dark refers to Primus as "Chief Hidden Master" (13).

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