When artists paint the same object repeatedly, no one complains. It is silently assumed that aesthetic objects have a density and depth that allow for multiple angles of treatment. Picasso’s guitars can appear celebratory or melancholic, and differently in charcoal, gouache, cardboard, and oil. Cézanne’s apples or his Mont Saint-Victoire can emit red, yellow, and traces of green in different paintings. Monet’s haystacks endure through every season of the year, aging gracefully in both sun and snow. Such repetitious treatment of the same entity is somehow never annoying, but feels like a tribute to the object, as if it were a problem no solution has ever solved completely. Perhaps philosophers also have their favorite mountains or bowls of apples, addressed repeatedly as something lying just beyond their power of comprehension as well as their power to resist.

Over the years, I have found myself “painting” two scenes repeatedly. One is Heidegger’s famous tool-analysis in *Being and Time*, which I regard as the inexhaustible thought experiment of twentieth-century philosophy — the Plato’s Cave of our time. My other favorite scene is Marshall and Eric McLuhan’s much less famous “tetrad,” which describes all human artifacts as composed of a fourfold structure of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal. Though
I have not yet written an entire book on this theme, I have returned to it several times over the years. This article is an effort to weave together these two obsessions: Heidegger’s hammer and McLuhan’s tetrad. Initially I attempted to entitle it “Portrait of Marshall McLuhan with Hammer,” in the same spirit as “McLuhan with Clay Pipe” or Heidegger comme Arlequin, since it constitutes yet another attempt to paint an adequate portrait of McLuhan, who has resisted adequate treatment thus far by me or anyone else. Despite McLuhan’s celebrity, it is still possible for a talented philosopher of technology like Don Ihde to describe him as “interesting, popular, but ultimately somewhat superficial.” My own verdict, by contrast, is that McLuhan is interesting, popular, and ultimately as deep as it gets.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is more to Husserl than idealism. The result is full-blown idealism. But, as I described him as “interesting, popular, and ultimately as deep as it gets.”

Phenomenology has fallen out of fashion. Yet it remains the most important school of twentieth-century philosophy and still contains unexploited treasures. Husserl made an excessive sacrifice when he bracketed the external world from consideration and reduced it to its appearance in consciousness. It hardly matters that intentionality is always already outside itself in aiming at an object, since the object thereby becomes nothing but a correlate of the consciousness that observes it. The result is full-blown idealism. But, as I have argued elsewhere, there is more to Husserl than idealism. Notice that when we read his books, it often feels like Husserl is a realist, even though he is not. The reason for this is the respect he pays to the carnal density and opacity of individual objects, in a manner foreign to both Berkeley and Hegel. In Husserl’s work, mailboxes, volcanoes, and blackbirds never offer themselves at a glance, but must be rotated, inspected, and analyzed to find the underlying intentional object that manifests itself in different ways at different moments, thereby rendering it irreducible to its presence in consciousness at any given moment, even if it has no real existence outside of consciousness. This is why I have called Husserl the first object-oriented idealist. Every object exists only as the possible target of some observer, yet every object is clothed at each moment with costumes and jewelry that distract us from the underlying core of the thing.

These remarks amount to nothing more than a passing attempt to be fair to Husserl. For if Husserl is an object-oriented idealist, he is still an idealist, and it is for this reason only that Heidegger’s radicalization of phenomenology is both possible and necessary. Against Husserl’s method of reducing reality to its phenomenal appearance for the observer, Heidegger famously notes that, for the most part, objects do not appear to us as something present-at-hand (vorhanden) in consciousness. If we consider the case of tools, we find that they are relied upon quietly rather than obtrusively present before our eyes. Only rarely do we think of the sidewalk on which we stroll, the municipal water infrastructure on which we rely to drink and shower, or the tanks and minefields that guard our nation’s borders. We take these entities for granted, insofar as our conscious activity is focused on a tiny range of details built atop an invisible bedrock of silently functioning equipment. It is usually only when this equipment fails that we notice it at all.

This assault on presence, developed in his famous tool-analysis, is Heidegger’s signature insight. It was shared first with his students in the 1919 War Emergency Semester, but published first in 1927 in Being and Time. It is one of the great works of philosophy ever composed. His tool-analysis is not just an interesting regional description of jigsaws, screwdrivers, and keys, as if some things are useful tools and others are not. Instead, his analysis tells us something about all entities. Contra Husserl, no entity is exhausted by its presence to consciousness. All things are at work silently in the depths of the cosmos, and only through rare disruptions do they erupt into explicit and accessible view. Here, we approach Heidegger’s renewal of the question of the meaning of being as that which withdraws from all presence. We also find the root of Heidegger’s historicism, since conscious knowledge of this or that thing is always shadowed by a deeper layer of conditions to which we do not have adequate access.

As I have argued elsewhere, the lesson of Heidegger’s tool-analysis is not just that real objects lie deeper than any theoretical access, as if the unconscious practical sphere had direct contact with reality in a way that consciousness itself does not. Even when I sit in a chair unconsciously, without noticing it, the act of sitting does not exhaust the reality of the chair, as proven by the fact that the chair can crash to the ground. There is always a surplus in things that is not exhausted by either theoretical or practical activity. Objects withdraw from every form of human activity, not just the perceptual and theoretical kinds. There is also the more surprising aspect of my interpretation of Heidegger — objects themselves must do this to each other no less than humans must do this to objects. The chair is not exhausted by its touching of the floor, nor is the floor used up by the chair. Even if inanimate objects are not conscious enough to be “surprised,” they nevertheless reduce one another to caricatures no less than human consciousness translates and distorts them in turn.

But this global drama of inanimate contact is of no importance to the present article. We are interested instead in Marshall McLuhan, whose work is focused on human-centered media and lacks the sweeping, cosmic scope that I believe Heidegger’s tool-analysis entails, which is rather obtusely present in a thinker such as Alfred North Whitehead. At issue here is the simpler point that Heidegger both revives and overturns phenomenology by paying heed to a simple dualism between the concealed background of tools taken for granted, the ready-to-hand (Zuhanden), and the visible figures shifting and swining in consciousness, the present-at-hand. The difference between surface and depth and the conditions of their possible interplay are major themes in both Heidegger’s philosophy and Marshall and Eric McLuhan’s laws of media.

THE TETRAD

McLuhan was a professor of literature at the University of Toronto who achieved lasting fame with his 1964 book Understanding Media. Its central idea is that the content of various media is less important...
than the way in which each medium structures the background conditions of experience. The difference between good and bad, violent and peaceful, or liberal and conservative television shows means little compared to the way our perception is restructured by the very fact that we are watching television rather than listening to the radio or attending a vaudeville act. When the publisher asked him to prepare a revised second edition of Understanding Media, McLuhan focused on complaints from certain critics that the book was "not scientific." After asking around for a definition of scientific statements, McLuhan finally settled on Karl Popper's famous dictum according to which a scientific statement is one that can be falsified. Although McLuhan's theories are largely devoid of significant Popperian influence, Popper acted in this way as an important spur towards developing the tetrad. For it was precisely by asking themselves about the effects of media that they might be falsified that Marshall McLuhan, along with his son and co-worker Eric, spent three weeks one summer in the 1970s discovering their four media laws, said to hold for all media without exception.

The first law is enhancement: "What does the artefact enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate? This can be asked concerning a wastebasket, a painting, a steamroller, or a zipper, as well as a proposition in Euclid or a law of physics." Second, with every enhancement, there must be an equal and opposite obsolescence: "If some aspect of a situation is enlarged or enhanced, simultaneously the old condition or unenhanced situation is displaced thereby." Third, this yields a basic polarity in McLuhan's model between visible figure and hidden ground, which he identifies with both another "morphological" (figure) and "archaic" (ground) pair. Together, these terms describe the morphology of an artifact in figure/ground terms. By figure, he means an item produced exclusively by humans: "The tetrad is only applicable to human artefacts, and not, for example, to birds' nests or spiders' webs" (127). The credit card enhances the status and freedom of the user while obsolescing money (98). The washing machine enhances the speed of doing laundry while obsolescing the scrub board and tub (190-91). The Copernican Revolution enhances the sun and obsolesces the earth (184-85). Radio enhances global access to everyone at all times while obsolescing wires and physical connections more generally (172).

But there is an important problem with how the McLuhans conceive of enhancement and obsolescence. Consider the following definition of enhancement: "[I]t consists in intensifying some aspect of a situation, [...] of turning an element of ground into figure or further intensifying something already figure" (227). The latter part of this statement runs counter to McLuhan's entire theory of media, in which a medium is always regarded as more enhanced and more powerful the less it is visible: "The medium is the message." As for the point about "intensifying something already figure," this is something completely different from enhancement; in fact, the McLuhans already describe it elsewhere as the "overheating" of media, which I will discuss below. As for obsolescence, the McLuhans make the reciprocal error on the one hand defining a former situation impotent by describing it as an obsolesced ground, while nothing is more invisible than the enhanced medium of the present moment, which enjoys a position of silent dominance, shaping the background conditions of consciousness while we humans dispute such trivia as whether specific text messages and emails are sexy, funny, or rude.

From the "morphological" pair of enhancement and obsolescence, we now turn to the "metamorphic" terms retrieval and reversal. As the McLuhans ask, "What recurrence or retrieval of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?" Just as the McLuhans get things backwards in saying that enhancement makes things more visible and obsolescence makes them less so, so too do they get things backwards here, since it is summoned back to consciousness in retrieval is not a previously obsolesced ground, but a previously enhanced one. After all, the obsolesced ground is visible to begin with and, thus, cannot be retrieved into a figurative space it already occupies. This means that the visible realm is already split in two between obsolescent and retrieved elements. And while the McLuhans do not discuss this in sufficient detail, they are well aware of this duality, as reflected by the key words in the title From Cliché to Archetype, the 1970 book coauthored by McLuhan and the poet Wilfred Watson. Both obsolete clichés and retrieved archetypes belong to the sphere of visible, figurative access — or, more simply, the world of content. Above all, it is the artist who converts clichés into archetypes by relating them to the tacit, hidden ground of our time.

As for reversal, the McLuhans suggest the following: "When pushed to the limits of its potential [...], the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. What is the reversal potential of the new form?" This tends to happen through "overheating," as we will see below. The new medium becomes so packed with indigestible detail that it eventually reverses into its opposite. One obvious example of this is cars, which begin as a medium of greater speed and mobility, but eventually, with the increase in their numbers, lead the medium to flip into slow-motion traffic patterns and hour-long searches for a parking space. Whereas enhancement and obsolescence are static poles of a dualism, with everything one side and nothing on the other, reversal and reversal address the way in which these poles mirror one another. That is why they are called "metamorphosis": They form the root of all possible media change. We will deal with this problem below, but one of its consequences is already clear. Although McLuhan seems to have little regard for the content of a medium, choosing instead to focus on its tacit background conditions, it turns out that the realm of content is the trigger for all change: "Lack of retrieval must be performed by artists who reconfigure the visible and, in so doing, put it into a relation with the ground, while reversal occurs through overheating at the level of content — not at the level of hidden background media themselves, which are simply always what they are, without hope of variability. Before moving on to a consideration of metamorphosis, however, we should briefly consider a well-known critique of McLuhan's tetrad from a scholar rather familiar with it.
Eric McLuhan has never yielded on the point that the tetrad must be a tetrad — the laws of media must be exactly four in number. Referring to his work on the tetrad with his father, McLuhan fils writes, “We found these four [laws] ... and no more. [My father] spent the rest of his life looking for a fifth, if there be one, and simultaneously trying to find a single case in which one of the first four does not apply” (viii). Gradually, he continues, “as we searched for the fifth law, other discoveries and implications began to emerge. The single largest of these was that of an inner harmony among the four laws — that there are pairs of ratios among them — and of the relation between that and metaphor” (ix). In the introduction to their work, father and son push the necessity of foursome even further:

Over more than twelve years of constant investigation, alone and with the help of colleagues, we have been unable to find a fifth question that applies to all media or to locate a single instance in which one of the four is clearly absent or irrelevant. We issue this challenge to the reader: Can you find a fifth question that applies in all, or even a significant many, instances? Can you locate an instance in which one of the four questions does not apply? Your answer is of the first importance as it determines the kind of our science. If one question is eliminated, if the tetrad is reduced to a triad, then, as will be discussed, we have merely Old Science tricked out in new clothes, not formal but efficient cause, and familiar Method. If five questions apply, we are in other, but again new, territory. [...] Whatever the outcome, once the number of laws is known — and it will be four — then we can be certain that every human artefact will occasion exactly these transformations. (7-8)

This passage is worth quoting as evidence of just how seriously the McLuhans adopt four as the number of their media laws. Nevertheless, these claims have been subject to a number of challenges from both inside and outside the inner circle of McLuhan studies.

Among the most prominent of these challenges came from the late Frank Zingrone, in his widely read 1991 article “Laws of Media: The Pentad and Technical Syncretism.” Here, Zingrone is bothered by the McLuhans’ insistence on the quadruple structure of media laws: “why four operations? Why this particular four?” The annoyance in these questions persists, burns. This is not foursome on the scale of the atomic structure of Beryllium, is it? And why does it matter that there are only four? (109) In fact, Zingrone is so bothered that he claims, “If only four are promulgated, or only four are allowed, everything Marshall McLuhan stood for, is vitiated” (109; emphasis added). Why would anything be vitiated? Because “laws, of any sort, delimit,” and “the appearance of a lack of openness to chance occurrence plays into the hands of those who accuse McLuhan, groundlessly, of technological determinism” (109). Laws, then, stand for rigidity and determinism and, therefore, must not be fixed in number. Moreover, Zingrone is troubled by the air of finality in the McLuhans’ postulation of a quadruple of media laws: “One person’s slate of laws [...] is a beginning for extensions by others, as Newton’s laws of motion in his Principia were added to by Einstein” (109-10). Finally, Zingrone sees the number four as no more inherently praiseworthy than the number five: “every time I look at my fingers and toes, or the number of apertures in my head I’m pressed to favour the pental, but my four limbs tell me not to be exclusive about it; even they can unexpectedly become five, as Oedipus learned from the Sphinx” (110). Zingrone also expresses a general worry that “numerologies of this sort quickly risk becoming silly” (111). And numerologies of this sort are no less pedantic than silly, since there is no way to decide whether to favor four because of “the fourfold method of exegesis of Aquinian theology,” or the fact that “Joyce did Finnegans Wake in four books,” or three because of the classical Trivium (rhetoric, dialectic, grammar) and “trinitate Augustinianism,” or perhaps even five, due to the number of fingers or toes on each of our limbs and the five holes in our heads (counting the nose as two) (111). It also seems to Zingrone that, if the McLuhans establish four media laws, the best way to further their work is to discover yet another law: “The tetrad can only be a beginning. Doesn’t everyone say so? What comes after it? The pentad, I believe” (112). And while Zingrone claims to appreciate the metaphoric proportions the McLuhans find in the fourfold structure, he also views these metaphoric proportions as a danger to be avoided: “When metaphor is hedged with rules, it quickly loses its power to create rich meanings. Used too precisely (as in a system of laws?) metaphor reverts to a new type of technical terminology, rather like what happens to poetic devices in advertising” (115); emphasis added. Moreover, “adding a [fifth] function to the tetrad at least stabilizes it against the vagaries of imprecise meaning associated with metaphor” (115). After lodging several grave reservations against the tetrad structure, Zingrone ends his article with a weaker declaration than one might otherwise expect: “This inquiry, into a rich subject, aims simply to stimulate others to make their own assessments of the Laws and perhaps to contribute additions to their increasingly manifold elements and operations” (115).

What, then, is Zingrone’s proposed fifth law of media, his proposed “addition to the increasingly manifold elements and operations” of the tetrad? His proposal is the law of “syncretism”: “Technologies usually combine with each other. That is, any new technique is the result of two or more existing techniques coming together and fusing into another more useful and powerful third. There are many examples of such pairing” (112). The fork combines teeth with fingers; a chair allows humans to blend the two positions of squatting
and standing, Zingrone adds that “[this] synthetic fusion of technologies is rooted in physiological extension: it is a sort of concrete dialectic which synthesizes body parts, increasingly extending them for action at a distance.” We now have a good stage point on Zingrone’s move beyond the McLuhans’ fourfold theory. As he sees it, the number four is arbitrary, rigid, and nothing more than a raw beginning. The fourfold is much improved by insight into the synthetic nature of technologies, which it supposedly overlooks.

Nonetheless, Zingrone’s attempt to improve the tetrad fails entirely and must be rejected. Indeed, there are serious problems with the attempt to add syncretism to the list as a fifth law of media. No sooner does he broach this new principle than he concedes that it is a technology that he becomes wishy-washy about whether it is even a law. He initially says that technologies “usually” occur in pairs, before upping the ante, claiming that “any” new technology results from the fusion of two earlier ones. He then tells us that there are “many examples” of such fusion, which is not the sort of thing one says about a genuine law. No one would say, for instance, that there are “many examples” of the angles of a triangle adding up to 180 degrees, or “many cases” in which masses are drawn together by gravitation. So, which is it? Does syncretism define all media or only “many” media? If the latter is the case, then it may be a fascinating historical fact that syncretic technologies exist in abundance, but it cannot be a law that holds for all media, as the McLuhans rightly claim of their own four laws. But there is an even bigger problem with Zingrone’s argument, an almost staggering lapsus for someone as familiar with McLuhan’s work as Zingrone seems to be. I refer to his admission that “the synthetic fusion of technologies is rooted in physiological extension” (112). Far from escaping the McLuhans’ attention, extension is already present in the tetrad under the name enhancement. As Eric McLuhan defines the term in his useful preface to Laws of Media, “every technology extends or amplifies some organ or faculty of the user.” There may be some value in accepting Zingrone’s historical thesis or acknowledging that this “often” happens due to the synthetic fusion of two initially separate technologies, but to discover interesting cases of enhancement hardly counts as establishing a new law. If we were to say, for example, “planetary orbits often result from the tension between two distinct gravitational forces,” we would not be challenging the law-like character of universal gravitation. At stake here is an application of the law, just as Zingrone concedes that his law of syncretism is rooted in enhancement. It is difficult to see how he could have overlooked a point so basic to his own article.

This leaves us with Zingrone’s rather feeble complaint that the McLuhans’ tetrad is arbitrary, rigid, and excessively raw. Let us deal with these points in reverse order. There is no question that the tetrad theory, like all new theories, is somewhat raw. As Eric McLuhan admits, “To the charges that some [of the tetrad’s] phases are pretty lame, or that some work better than others, we can only plead, ‘It’s new to us too,’ and invite you to help us improve them where you can.” But the question is how such improvement ought to occur. Zingrone merely assumes that it should take place by means of a quantitative increase in the number of media laws, and this assumption is obviously false. To insist that hidden information is obvious is as much as to say that the standard model of particle physics also has four forces: gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. Physics has unified the second and fourth of these in Glashow, Weinberg, and Salam’s “electroweak” theory and has more or less unified the electroweak with the strong nuclear force in what is called “quantum chromodynamics” (QCD). However, no one has been able, thus far, to unify these three forces with gravity. As such such imagination in theory and empirical observation does to do so. But it would be bizarre to suggest that, unless a fifth and sixth fundamental force are added, physics will make no progress beyond its theory of four forces. But this is precisely Zingrone’s assumption with regard to the McLuhans’ tetrad laws.

Zingrone also claims that the McLuhans’ tetrad laws are rigid and deterministic, leaving no window open for chance occurrences. But this point is just as bizarre as the previous one. First of all, the question of whether or not McLuhan’s theory is deterministic has nothing to do with the question of whether his work is rigid and deterministic. As Zingrone claims, the McLuhans are extremely raw with regard to what the McLuhans discover with their tetrad. Although Eric McLuhan tells a nice story about joining his father in brainstorming possible laws, it is merely an anecdotal history of the tetrad, not an explanation of why and how it works. The point is not that the tetrad contains all possible empirically verifiable laws of media; if that were the case, Zingrone would be right to suggest that there is no way to limit the list to four. But the tetrad is not primarily an empirical theory, even if it has empirical applications. Far more important is the discovery of ratios between the four, which is hardly surprising: Like most fourfold structures in the history of thought, the tetrad is built on two intersecting dualisms.

The most important of these is the primary McLuhanian difference between figure and background. The meaning of “the medium is the message,” as every reader of McLuhan knows, is that the surface content is nothing and hidden background is everything. While the surface ends up being more important to McLuhan than he might wish to admit, the difference between figure and background is fundamental to all phases of his thinking. The content of television shows is unimportant compared to the way that television as a medium structures our most hidden conditions of perception. The appearance of the alphabet or the meaning of “the medium is the message,” as every reader of McLuhan knows, is that surface content

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that makes up one of the pillars of Laws of Media. The other is the distinction the McLuhans draw between “morphology” and “metamorphosis.” Enhancement and obsolescence tell us that every medium makes some things more visible (enhancement) while placing others in a hidden background (obsolescence). But retrieval and reversal show us that figure and background are always somehow intertwined; Retrieval means that a former background medium is now visible as figure, while reversal shows us how overheated figures flip into background. In short, there is nothing at all “arbitrary” about the number four once we realize that the tetrad is not primarily a brainstorming session hunting for media laws on a piecemeal basis. The McLuhans did in fact begin by brainstorming, but this led to a media ontology according to which figure and background stand in opposition (morphology — enhancement and obsolescence) and mirror one another (metamorphosis — retrieval and reversal). Obviously, there is no possible room for a fifth term in this structure. Nor does the McLuhans’ fondness for the threefold Trivium contradict their fourfold in any way. In their interpretation, the Trivium actually turns into a dyad, in which dialectic is responsible for dealing with surface figures while both rhetoric and grammar are twin brothers watching over the concealed background behind all figures. In this way, the McLuhans treat the so-called Trivium as equivalent to their familiar opposition between figure and background. Insofar as this opposition is doubled by the mirror play of “metamorphosis,” there are only four seats in the car, leaving no room for the pentad.

THE PUZZLE OF METAMORPHOSIS

McLuhan is often described as a “technological determinist.” Here, for once, I agree with Zingrone — the charge is groundless. Yet it is not difficult to see why the charge is so often made. McLuhan’s most basic thesis is that the explicit content of consciousness matters little when compared to the deep background transformation that makes up one of the pillars of McLuhan’s “metamorphic” terms is that metamorphosis always occurs not in the deep background medium, but at the most superficial layer of figural content. Deleuze speaks of “sterile surface effects,” such that causality is stripped from individual bodies and transferred to the realm of the virtual. One might expect McLuhan to do exactly the same thing, given his infamous assertion in a Playboy interview that “the content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.” Instead, transformation takes place, according to McLuhan, only on the surface, as if the stenciling on an atomic bomb were responsible for activating or deactivating the bomb itself.

Let us consider both forms of metamorphosis. As a reminder, this is what the McLuhans say about reversal: “When pushed to the limits of its potential […] the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics.” Reversal is a matter of what McLuhan calls “ overheating.” This is a crucial theme, even in Understanding Media, the third chapter of which is entitled “Reversal of the Overheated Medium.” The reference to heat points us back to the second chapter, “Media Hot and Cold.” Although Ihde contends that the difference between hot and cold media is “foolish,” McLuhan treats it very seriously. He explains this difference as follows:

As I suggested above, what is most remarkable about McLuhan’s “metamorphic” terms is that metamorphosis always occurs not in the deep background medium, but at the most superficial layer of figural content. Deleuze speaks of “sterile surface effects,” such that causality is stripped from individual bodies and transferred to the realm of the virtual. One might expect McLuhan to do exactly the same thing, given his infamous assertion in a Playboy interview that “the content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.” Instead, transformation takes place, according to McLuhan, only on the surface, as if the stenciling on an atomic bomb were responsible for activating or deactivating the bomb itself.

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While I do not agree with Ihde that this distinction is foolish, it does lead to a paradox. On the one hand, McLuhan describes various media as inherently hot or cold, depending on how much information they provide: Telephone and speech are cool media; radio is a hot medium. In the coolness of television, Kennedy’s calm charisma defeats the shabby-looking Nixon; in the heat of radio, Nixon’s debate performance leads listeners to judge him the victor. Hitler’s screaming tirades are perfect for hot radio, but the Hitler phenomenon would have looked ridiculous on television. In this respect, heat and cold seem to be properties inscribed in the nature of specific media themselves. On the other hand, McLuhan also treats heat as a variable continuum along which something can become hotter through an increase in detail and information, leading eventually to a reversal. But this leads to a double problem: If television is a cool medium, how can it ever heat up? And if radio is already a hot medium, how can it get hotter?

Retrieval leads to different sorts of paradoxes. Recall McLuhan’s comments on retrieval: “What recurrence or retrieval of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?” On the one hand,
the McLuhans decree that every medium, without exception, retrieves some older medium as its content. On the other hand, retrieval is said not to be the automatic result of a new medium, but the labored result of the work of artists: “One of the peculiarities of art is to serve as Anti-Environment, a probe that makes the environment visible.” Here, the visibility of the environment is the result of conscious work rather than a foreordained outcome. Yet, in the very same passage, the McLuhans assert that breakthroughs in media perform this work for us automatically: “Where railway and machine created a new environment for agrarian man, the old agrarian environment became an art form. Nature became a work of art. The Romantic movement was born. When the electric circuit went around the mechanical environment, the machine itself became a work of art. Abstract art was born.” There is a second paradox as well. Not only is retrieval the result of automatic media changes and difficult artistic labor, but the realm of content is also split between obsolete cliché and retrieved archetype. McLuhan’s well-known dictum according to which “Every medium has a previous medium as its content” is ambiguous, insofar as it can mean that either a now abandoned medium has become visible, obtrusive, and useless (obsolescence), or we have re-adapted some formerly abandoned medium and made it relevant once more (retrieval). But what is the exact relation, for example, between cars and horses? Do cars reduce horses to a relatively minor part of society, thereby obsolescing them? Yes. But do cars also hark back to the days of jousts and heraldry, as a sort of retrieval of the days of horse-based knighthood? Yes again. Then it seems to be the case that the same medium can be both obsolesced and retrieved in the same stroke.

ADDRESSING THE PARADOXES

We can summarize the paradoxes of these metamorphoses as follows. The paradox of reversal is that, for McLuhan, “media heat” is both a static property of certain high-definition media (such as radio and print) and a continuum along which media gradually become hotter until they eventually reverse. Retrieval, however, entails two separate paradoxes. The first is that, in one sense, it is said to happen automatically whenever the background medium changes, while, in another, it requires hardworking artists and visionaries to bring the old medium back, making it serviceable again. The second is that McLuhan depicts figural content as made up of both obsolete clichés and retrieved archetypes. We should now consider how these paradoxes might be resolved. For the reader’s convenience, we can list them in a handy chart:

A. The “heat” of media is both a fixed property of certain media and a continuum along which any medium can be heated;

B. Retrieval is both the automatic result of any new medium and the contingent result of hard work by artists and other visionaries;

C. The realm of content/figure consists of both obsolete clichés and retrieved archetypes.
Let us proceed in reverse order.

If there were a law requiring us to condense each thinker's thinking into a snappy, one-sentence summary, the following principle might serve for McLuhan: "Background media are profound and important, while their surface content is superficial and unimportant." Nonetheless, McLuhan concedes that not all content is equally superficial. His sarcastic commentary on the "rag and bone shop" of dismissal, obsolete clichés obstructing the landscape of the world is countered by his equal enthusiasm for the retrieval of archetypes from the hidden background. This dualism between cliché and archetype is remarkably similar to the dualism between kitsch and avant-garde first proposed in 1939 by the art critic Clement Greenberg — one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, despite his still unredeemed fall from fashion in the early 1970s. Closely related to kitsch is Greenberg's concept of "academic art," which he defines lucidly in a late-career lecture in Sydney, Australia:

Academicism isn’t a matter of academies — there were academies long before academicization and before the nineteenth century. Academicism consists in the tendency to take the medium of an art too much for granted. It results in blurring: words become imprecise, color gets muffled, the physical sources of sound become too much dismissed.

For Greenberg and McLuhan alike, "the tendency to take the medium of an art too much for granted" is a sin. What this principle tells us that content is never just content. Instead, it can have stronger or weaker relations with the medium it inhabits. When people with advanced tastes are bored by yet another television sitcom, yet another postmodernist text, yet another transgressive art installation, yet another grungy, flannel-clad indie band from the Northwest, yet another holistic ontology of flux and dynamism opposed to rigid inert substances, yet another scientific denunciation of Christians and New Agers, what bores them is a hollow, robotic formula. The external rituals of a once living breakthrough are mimicked, the internal content of media is always a matter of "overheating." A situation begins to pile up with unmanageable levels of detail, such that the basic pattern of the situation becomes more important than its explicit content. As we saw earlier, the car begins by enhancing speed and mobility, but eventually reverses into the nightmarish slogs of traffic jams and quests for parking spaces. The computer begins as a laborsaving device, but reverses into the tyranny of keystroke-counters counting each minute of office productivity. The paradox is that McLuhan also defines media as inherently hot or cold, and this seems to leave no room for heating. If radio is inherently hot, there is no need to heat it further, and if television is essentially cold, there is no way it can be heated.

The only solution possible is that content must be split in half yet again: in other words, content must be split not only between isolated clichés (obsolence) and archetypes set adrift in tension with their backgrounds (retrieval), but also between "form" and "content." Television is a cool medium, which means that its content is low-definition, requiring a great deal of viewer participation, dominated by understated, cool personalities — and all of this has a hypnotic effect. The content of television cannot obstruct the landscape of the world is countered by his equal enthusiasm for the retrieval of archetypes from the hidden background. This dualism between cliché and archetype is remarkably similar to the dualism between kitsch and avant-garde first proposed in 1939 by the art critic Clement Greenberg — one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, despite his still unredeemed fall from fashion in the early 1970s. Closely related to kitsch is Greenberg's concept of "academic art," which he defines lucidly in a late-career lecture in Sydney, Australia:

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be heated. What can and does get heated are aspects of media other than their content that still belong to the figural realm. In the case of television, the number of available channels explains thanks to cable and satellite systems, so that television reverses into something like the library it was once believed to threaten. Instead of choosing discrete television programs, we may focus instead on a certain network “style” to fit our mood, be it one characteristic of ESPN, Fox, Al Jazeera, or Lifetime. In the case of cars, we have seen that what heats up is their sheer numerical mass, which happens only by way of their previously irrelevant material bulk. The fact that cars have a certain moderate size and are made of dangerous glass and metal is the reason their “heating” becomes relevant, though, at the pre-heated stage of the medium, these features are unimportant byproducts.

In each case overheating leads to an impasse, and there is no inherent reason for the impasse to be overcome. We might continue indefinitely into the future with an ever-greater proliferation of thousands of television channels. The booming cities of the developing world may fail in their urban planning and descend into a permanent morass of stalled traffic and pollution. Instead of holding with the McLuhans that every medium reverses automatically into its opposite, we might suggest that every medium’s benefits reverse eventually into deficits, providing the motive for the creation of a new medium. Perhaps the plague of television channels surveyed in suburban cocoons will lead to a backlash, giving rise to a local and regional resurgence in live entertainment. Or perhaps systems will be developed to keep the flood of channels manageable by identifying viewers’ tastes and “pushing” them onto their flat screens and iPads. Perhaps the plague of traffic jams and the specter of climate change will lead to the construction of metros, light rail systems, and more eco-friendly local supply chains. Or perhaps we will be persuaded to go for tinier cars able to fit into smaller places. Or maybe we will swing the other way, towards massive, Hummer-like monstrabilities able to intimidate lighter traffic into giving way. Conspiratorial corporate greed may play a role with regard to which option we choose, but only as one strong player among others, not as an evil, all-powerful matrix controlling the world like a puppet show. Existing conditions may favor one option over another, but it would be a wild exaggeration to suggest that there is no role for surprising innovations from individuals or small groups. It was not inevitable that keyboards were placed on computers, not inevitable that Hegel’s philosophical principles emerged triumphant rather than Schelling’s, and not inevitable that English rather than German became the language of the United States.

We have looked briefly at McLuhan’s two “metamorphic” terms, retrieval and reversal. Since there are numerous ways to retrieve an old medium and reverse into a new one, the repeated charge that McLuhan is a technological determinist is clearly groundless. While it is true that, for him, the background medium always conditions the world of visible figure, the realm of content is paradoxically where everything happens. No one can predict when and where culture will suddenly spring to life, escaping kitsch or academicism by bringing visible experience into vibrant relation with its background conditions. And nothing automatically determines that an overheated medium must reverse into one thing instead of another. In this sense, retrieval and reversal are brothers in the abundant opportunities they provide for decision: The wheels of history do not continue without pause, but periodically grind to a halt and allow for intervention.

But, in another sense, retrieval and reversal are polar opposites. Retrieval brings the figure into productive tension with the ground, transforming cliché into archetype. In this way it merely links figure and ground without transforming the ground. In this sense, retrieval is just as conservative as its name suggests. Despite the dogma of recent decades that art ought to be “political,” its mission turns out not to be political at all, since retrieval is about breathing new life into obsolete forms. By contrast, reversal turns out to be the political mode par excellence. When a medium overheats a decision must be made and, although some decision-making agents are “more powerful” than others, there are generally several different ways a struggle can be resolved. If retrieval can be identified with art, reversal may be the special province of design. And design will always be political, since it sets down the background conditions that govern the next phase of overt activity, which is doomed in turn to grind to a halt someday.
HARMAN

Information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.” [Ed.]


Ibid., xi.

Ibid., viii.


Ibid., 22-29.


13. Ibid., 99.


18. Ibid., xi.

19. Ibid., viii.


22. Greenberg, *Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minneso-.