A brief note to the reader.

Umberto Eco defines poetics as the operative project which pervades a specific work and that leads to a given "form", at once original and "traditional", that is linked to other pre-existing "forms" (Eco 142-143). According to this definition, it can be argued that Marshall McLuhan’s poetics is much more complex than normally considered, especially as far as "form" is concerned. Whereas his project is quite clear (to investigate the impact of new media on human consciousness and environment so as to counterbalance the inevitable side-effects), the "form" which shapes and gives heuristic potentialities to such a project is a bit more complex: McLuhan’s writing is discontinuous, constantly pervaded by countless literary references and exempla derived from different artistic expressions. Not only that: literature and the arts played a pivotal role in the shaping of McLuhan’s well-known writing technique, “the mosaic” (Lamberti 203). Among the admitted literary influences, it is easy to recall E.A. Poe’s tenets as expressed in “The Philosophy of Composition”, the French symbolism and the Modernist avant-garde movements. Nevertheless, James Joyce is the artist whose name and achievements could be taken as a primary leitmotiv in McLuhan’s works. This is so true that McLuhan’s eldest son, Eric, who worked with his father and who helped to elaborate their still too neglected Laws of Media, writes:
He [Marshall McLuhan] once remarked to me, as I know he did to many others, that his work on media and culture was, in the main, “applied Joyce”. (“Joyce” 157)

McLuhan’s (acknowledged) debt to Joyce can be perceived not only by reading any of his literary essays, but also by opening any of his books on media. It is the case, for instance, of War and Peace in the Global Village, the book McLuhan wrote together with Quentin Fiore in 1968: little aphorisms taken from Joyce’s Finnegans Wake work like “acoustic” marginalia on almost each page of the book, itself written with the clear intent of presenting “an inventory of some of the current spastic situations that could be eliminated by more feedforward”(1). Given these premises, McLuhan’s quotations from Joyce perform a precise function:

The frequent marginal quotes from Finnegans Wake serve a variety of functions. [...] The Wake has many meanings, among them the simple fact that in recoursing all of the human pasts our age has the distinction of doing it in increasing wakefulness. (McLuhan and Fiore 4-5)

Joyce’s puns and aphorisms are therefore turned into a heuristic passe-partout condensing the simultaneous experiences discussed by McLuhan and Fiore into carefully conceived warning epiphanies. A brief discussion of McLuhan’s The Mechanical Bride will help to introduce the more evident correspondences between McLuhan’s and Joyce’s writing strategies, showing how the epistemological value of their aesthetics is deeply imbued with ancient exegetical modes.

“Warning alarm”: The Mechanical Bride (1951)

In 1952, Marshall McLuhan wrote to his mother commenting about his first book, The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of the Industrial Man, which had been published by Vanguard Press the previous year:

[The Mechanical Bride] is really a new form of science fiction, with ads and comics cast as characters. Since my object is to show the community in action rather than prove anything, it can indeed be regarded as a new kind of novel. (Letters 217)
In a few lines, this brief comment sums up what could easily be defined as McLuhan’s poetics, something that the Canadian critic started to elaborate and develop following his years at Cambridge University (2). In this book, a first version of McLuhan’s well-known “mosaic-like technique”, a sort of “collage” or juxtaposition of images, aphorisms and ideas, which more than one scholar criticized sharply as “nonsensical McLuhanese” (Finkelstein), is used to give shape to the “new kind of novel” he had been working upon since the late 1940s. The book consists of forty-nine essays McLuhan uses to discuss different “myths” pertaining to the new mass-culture (the “Front Page” of The New York Times; “The Ballet Luce”; “The Market Research”; Superman; the car; the comic strips; etc.) by juxtaposing icons, puns and more serious comments and quotations. The effect of such a “broken” technique on the standard format normally reserved to critical and academic essays can be compared to the disrupting impact that the Modernist formal discoveries and achievements had on late Victorian literary tradition at the beginning of the century. Just like Modernist writers, McLuhan stands for a new sensibility and for a new aesthetic; just like Modernist writers, McLuhan has no “pre-packed” truth for his readers. On the contrary, his book is aimed at “[showing] the community in action”, that is at showing a dynamic world then in progress. And, just as in the Modernist writers’ works, the writing process is itself part of the show.

In his first book, McLuhan presents the “folklore of the industrial man” precisely when the passage from modern to contemporary age, which according to McLuhan’s analysis had started in the XIX century with the discovery of electricity, becomes more and more evident. The quick development of new mass media would first of all speed up communications between nations and cultures, turning what McLuhan called “mechanic age” (modern age) into “electric age” (contemporary age), which means to turn a literate society into a “post-literate” society (3) where traditional geographic and cultural boundaries are more and more elided, and where space and time paradigms are quickly subverted (4). A passage that Modernist writers, especially James Joyce, had subtly perceived and rendered in their works. Significantly, McLuhan takes Joyce’s Ulysses and Finnegans Wake as true “warning alarms” capable of alerting the reader as to the shift taking place in the contemporary concept of sensibility because of the development of new techniques of communication
and, consequently, of a newly shaped society. What McLuhan would later call “electric tribalism” or even “global village”, or “information age”, had already been anticipated by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*:

> The West shall shake the East awake
> While you have the night for mom

This same quotation will later appear in McLuhan’s *War and Peace in the Global Village*, (1968). A similar pun by Joyce (“In that eapone end meets Ind.”) had already been quoted by McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in 1964, as an example of a “mimetic form” capable of immediately rendering the effect of the new media impact on world communications (263): all geographical boundaries and related cultural implications are suddenly bypassed by the new electric flux which unites all realities into a new *continuum*. It is not unusual for McLuhan to take Joyce’s writing as a fundamental “feedforward” enlightening on various implications concerning the present situation through witty and complex aphorisms. In particular, McLuhan ponders over Joyce’s puns and aphorisms in order to grasp original hints for investigating new strategies of discovery leading to a new heuristic for the present age; all this could be defined as “applied Joyce”, a “technique” McLuhan had already displayed in *The Mechanical Bride*.

Following Joyce’s and the Modernist writers’ examples, in *The Mechanical Bride* McLuhan starts to recompose the new “landscape” in which the above mentioned shift is taking place. Therefore, he progresses towards the revealing of that hidden environment he will further explore in his later books. Earlier than Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco (5), McLuhan perceives the complex pattern of forces affecting human consciousness in a new mass-society and gives an early account of several “signs” or “myths” belonging to what could be defined as “pop culture”. Not only that: he turns those same “signs” and “myths” into witty weapons for revealing hidden social, anthropological and cultural implications. Similarly to Modernist writers, he therefore starts from the assumption that “reality” is often an “elusive” and ambiguously conceived idea.

McLuhan’s great novelty in *The Mechanical Bride* lies in the fact that he neither uses the traditional “essay format”, nor writes within a “true” literary genre. He intentionally chooses to apply “the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society” (*Bride* vi). McLuhan starts
from the idea that the environment is an extreme artefact made by men and women themselves, a complex "effect" deriving from different overlapping experiences (and processes) which can be better perceived through an artistic approach. According to McLuhan, the artistic perception offers a more objective possibility of observation of both "ground" and "figure", especially of the former, which could be otherwise defined as the overall, but often hidden, effect of different interacting forces: "A whirling phantasmagoria can be grasped only when arrested for contemplation" (Brìde v). Therefore, the artistic perception facilitates a special "estrangement", a witty aloofness that McLuhan often turns into comic or humorous juxtapositions that enable him to satirically underline the distortions and problems of a system still in progress. As provocatively suggested by McLuhan himself, the result is "a new form of science fiction" in which the landscape seems to have more than an affinity with other science-fiction landscapes, especially with the landscape in J.G. Ballard's The Atrocity Exhibition; a landscape where human and mechanical shapes melt and overlap in situations at once grotesque and apocalyptic, situations which end up by seriously numbing all critical attitude and perception. Nevertheless, compared to Ballard's, McLuhan's "exhibition" appears to be much more amusing, though alarming: a quality embedded in most of McLuhan's writing, and inspired by Joyce's linguistic model in which witty puns and paradoxes end up by lending a playful tone to the presentation of an otherwise nightmarish society.

The new "Frankenstein's" presented by McLuhan's new form of "critical science fiction" are the "manipulators of the psyche", those who work in order to "get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control" (Brìde v). The "social body" is in danger, and human beings must counterbalance the attack of "many thousands of the best-trained individual minds" that want to generate "heat not light" (Brìde v). Given the danger, it is necessary to counter-attack:

The present book [...] makes few attempts to attack the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising. It does attempt to set the reader at the centre of the revolving picture created by these affairs where he may observe the action that is in progress and in which everybody is involved. From the analysis of that action, it is hoped, many individual strategies may suggest themselves. (Brìde v)
In his preface, McLuhan quotes from E.A. Poe’s short-story, “A Descent into the Maelstrom”, in which a mariner manages to escape death by attentively observing the pattern of the vortex which threatens to drown him. Similarly, men and women in a mass-society must retrieve their personality not by resenting the environment, but by critically observing and penetrating it. It is necessary to get into the system in order to finally grasp its hidden mechanism. Therefore, Marshall McLuhan sets out to vivisect the given “collective mind”: he amplifies single aspects in order to let the ground, that is the invisible net of mechanisms aimed at the manipulation of people’s consciousness, emerge by contrast. “Comic strips”, “ads”, “images” from the popular press are used by McLuhan as metonymical icons standing for a much more complex and ominous reality. Although he starts from what could be seen as a clear moral bias, his intention is not to “judge” society, but to dig into a complex and dynamic reality through what he defines as a “mobile point of view” which leads him from one fragment to the other. The “moral bias” which the reader finds in the introduction to The Mechanical Bride is an almost unique episode in McLuhan’s writing: in his later books, he will simply continue to explore and to probe his environment without embracing any ethical or moralistic bias.

The idea of “vivisecting” society, also a topos in the Science-fiction genre, has an illustrious antecedent when it is adopted by Marshall McLuhan, who was a well-read professor of English: namely, James Joyce. McLuhan’s analysis of Joyce’s idea of vivisection occurs in an essay where he comments on Joyce’s aesthetics, noting that Joyce has developed a new artistic form combining ancient rhetorical strategies with the new possibilities of expression offered by the new mass-media:

A passage in Stephen Hero suggests the direction in which Joyce has modified the superficial cross-section of the popular press: “The modern spirit is vivisective. Vivisection itself is the most modern process one can conceive....All modern political and religious criticism dispenses with presumptive states...It examines the entire community in action and reconstructs the spectacle of redemption. If you were an aesthetic philosopher you would take note of all my vagaries because here you have the spectacle of the aesthetic instinct in action. The philosophic college should spare a detective for me (186)”. The key terms here, vivisection, community in action, reconstruction, detection, are related to every phase of Joyce’s aesthetic. (Landscape 17)
In *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan’s aesthetic recalls, in addition to E.A. Poe’s, precisely this Joycean aesthetic, so that the very same terms “vivisection, community in action, reconstruction, detection” can be used as “key-words” in approaching McLuhan’s first book.

Following Stephen’s idea of “modern spirit”, in *The Mechanical Bride* McLuhan observes a “community in action” and tries to reveal the “hidden” environment pervading it; in order to accomplish his task, McLuhan uses the technique of “vivisection” as it perfectly works as a device combining different forms of “serious” art with popular art, as well as with new forms of mass communication. If “much popular art would seem to be a mere repetition of the environmental effects created by new technologies” (“Art” 56), then to break this standardised repetition through a vivisective technique which, on the one hand, is capable of dismantling the whole and, on the other, allows to amplify, by contrast, single parts of it, can help to re-create the whole itself and to see it under a new, revealing light. In other words, it can be said that vivisection helps to deconstruct the given patterns and leads to epiphany; and this is itself another topos of Joyce’s aesthetic.

This technique of juxtaposing is necessarily shared also by many modernist aesthetics, such as the cubist “collage”, the impressionist “juxtaposition of situations”, the expressionist “grotesque”, or Eisenstein’s idea of film “montage”. Similarly, by juxtaposing images offered by the mass media with learned quotations and with witty and provocative aphorisms, McLuhan’s aim is to reveal the perverse process of subliminal manipulation of the human mind which seems to turn people into spare parts of an increasingly machine-like collectivity. The result is an original book of criticism which differs from all previous sociological, or cultural analyses, and which displaces traditional readers who are used to being guided by the author; in reverse, it stimulates and positively challenges those readers who accept to joyfully play with the author’s puns. This is precisely the kind of interaction Joyce’s works require: to read a work like *Finnegans Wake*, the reader must revise a “logical approach” and be prepared to work out each neologism and pun so as to grasp the various implications in the polysemous linguistic structure. Therefore, what Joyce defines as our “abcedmindedness” (an expression which can be interpreted as “absent-minded”, that is inattentive or careless, or as “ABC-minded”, that is alphabetically biased) is constantly challenged by McLuhan’s and Joyce’s new forms of writing.
Therefore, McLuhan turns the new mass-media, ads, comics into important signs belonging to an articulated world in progress, signs that people do not easily perceive as they are already established as a "ground", as a comprehensive wrapping, a sort of mental and physical "space" which is taken for granted. McLuhan operates his dislocating "verbo-voco-visual" technique on such a ground and uses bold associations of contrasting signs as enlightening paradoxes, thus arousing his readers from the numbing process:

This book reverses that process by providing typical visual imagery of our environment and dislocating it into meaning by inspection. Where visual symbols have been employed in an effort to paralyze the mind, they are used as a means of energizing it. (Bride vi)

This "proto-semantic" vivisection is easily rendered through, and inevitably leads to, a "grotesque" effect: scanning and juxtaposing images belonging to an evolving mass society creates a distorted amplification of different icons which are condensed in what could be described as a disturbing, yet ironic, expressionist-like mosaic. As previously suggested, this proves to be a new form of critical writing that, through an intentional disharmony, forces the reader to reconsider what was previously perceived as a uniform and harmonic ground. It is precisely through the "grotesque" element that popular art and "serious" art meet and cross-fertilize one another. As regards this, McLuhan quotes from Ruskin:

In Modern Painters Ruskin discusses the discontinuous picturesque techniques in medieval and modern art under the term "grotesque", noting it as the avenue by which popular and democratic expression enters the serious levels of art: "A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any other verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself [...] Ruskin in describing the grotesque gives the very formula for "vivisection" or the community in action, though he hadn't the faintest idea of how to adapt this ideal to contemporary art. (Landscape 17-18)

Unlike Ruskin, McLuhan emphasizes that James Joyce succeeds in combining the two terms in what may be considered fundamental, epoch-making works: Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. In Ulysses, the character of Leopold Bloom and the city of Dublin metonymically stand for a univer-
sal community, which is more and more characterized and shaped by the new mass media; and, technically, the novel can be approached as an immense newspaper, itself a grotesque and parodic amplification of the mock-heroic epic of an everyday man living an everyday life, and symbolically representing all men. In *Finnegans Wake*, the grotesque element pervades the peculiar linguistic construction which englobes different aesthetics belonging to both classic and popular traditions, and explores the new intriguing possibilities the new forms of mass communication had been offering to modern artists for almost a century. As Joyce writes in *Finnegans Wake*, “The war is in words and the wood is the world”: therefore, it is precisely through a disruption of traditional syntax and the hybridization of language, form, and artistic codes that both the artist and the critic can find new meanings and new epiphanies leading to the rendering of the true spirit of their time. In one of his most interesting essays, McLuhan shows how Joyce clearly went on to experiment with language and artistic forms expanding the symbolist poets’ achievements (*Landscape* 5-21); similarly, McLuhan developed a new “media poetics” (6) by following Joycean strategies.

Despite his legendary erudition (or maybe because of it) Joyce did not resent the new media; on the contrary he perceived them as possible epistemological tools and, combining his knowledge with the possibilities offered by these new forms of communication, turned “the superficial cross-section of the popular press” into a powerful heuristic model. As an artist, Joyce was ready to face the new cultural implications of his time. Not surprisingly, McLuhan considers the artist (and, therefore, Joyce) as “the man of integral awareness”, who “grasps new implications of knowledge” (McLuhan, *Media* 71) and turns them into a new aesthetic and sensory experience. In doing this, the artist anticipates both critics and academics:

It is strange that the popular press as an art form has often attracted the enthusiastic attention of poets and aesthetes while rousing the gloomiest apprehensions in the academic mind... Every medium of communication is a unique art form which gives salience to one set of human possibilities at the expense of another set. (*Landscape* 5-7)

The modern newspaper offered a new aesthetic model to modern artists like James Joyce: on the pages of the newspapers different and heteroge-
neous events, news, and images overlap and are brought simultaneously together hic et nunc; the page of a newspaper naturally turns into a sort of cathartic space presenting the whole human experience through an objective, estranging technique bypassing all previously established aesthetic canons. Both Joyce and McLuhan looked to the French symbolist movement as a pivotal moment in the development of a modern aesthetic:

[…] it was Mallarmé who formulated the lessons of the press as a guide for the new impersonal poetry of suggestion and implication. He saw that the scale of modern reportage and of the mechanical multiplication of messages made personal rhetoric impossible. (McLuhan, Landscape 11)

According to Marshall McLuhan, Stéphane Mallarmé is “the fabulous artificer, the modern Dedalus” of the new aesthetic as it began to be shaped at the turn of the century; it was the first to grasp all “the aesthetic consulsences and possibilities of the popular arts in industrial man”:

Mallarmé sees this impersonal art of juxtaposition as revolutionary and democratic also in the sense that it enables each reader to be an artist. (Landscape 16)

The “ impersonal art”, which Mallarmé rendered through the “reportage-like” technique that was subsequently developed by Joyce, became more and more an aesthetic need, a new epiphany deeply rooted in the grotesque and paradoxical estrangement that the new forms of mass communications had contributed to reveal to the artist. As McLuhan wrote: “With its date-line June 16, 1904, Ulysses is, newspaperwise, an abridgment of all space in a brief segment of time, as the Wake is a condensation of all time in the brief space of ‘Howth castle and environs’ “(Landscape 16).

“You never thought of a page of news as a symbolist landscape?”; “Why is a page of news a problem in orchestration?” These are the kind of questions that McLuhan addresses to his readers in his first book, The Mechanical Bride. Therefore, the Canadian critic amplifies the grotesque in the popular myths of everyday life through a parodical and humorous presentation aimed at unmasking the hidden patterns (ground) conditioning all single visions (figures). The “divertissement” enabling aloofness and a detached observation once more makes the reader think of E.A. Poe’s mariner in “A Descent into Maelstrom”. Also in his preface, McLuhan recalls how the mariner manages to survive the most dramatic
moment of his dreadful adventure thanks to his capacity to use humour as part of his survival strategy:

'I must have been delirious, for I even sought amusement in speculating upon the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below'. It was this amusement born of his rational detachment as a spectator of his own situation that gave him the thread which led him out of the Labyrinth. (*Bride v*)

Humour is a *leitmotiv* in *The Mechanical Bride*, although, in the end, the tone of the book appears to be more satirical than humorous: indeed, the comic and parodic amplification of the new mass mythologies ends up by becoming a clear statement set against the social and cultural forces of the time. Nevertheless, more than a moral or cynical satire, McLuhan’s can be perceived mostly as a Menippean satire, as it is devoted to intentionally attacking the reader in order to wake him/her up. Once more, a direct influence of Joyce on McLuhan’s writing is revealed, as humour and Menippean satire are two elements both evident in the works of the Irish writer, wittily displayed through his peculiar and sophisticated use of language (7).

The new forms of writing achieved by both McLuhan and Joyce can be defined as a sort of “verbo-voco-visual” structure capable of increasing the heuristic potentialities of each linguistic “sign” so as to turn each line into a “warning alarm” monitoring modern sensibility. As it is for Joyce’s writing, if the reader approaches McLuhan’s writing simply according to a Western, rational and linear mode of reading, he/she cannot grasp the intrinsic depth and potentialities of what should be perceived as a “complex” form: the morphology of McLuhan’s writing reveals, in fact, the combination of “classic”, “oriental”, “modernist” and “electric” paradigms and heuristics (8).

McLuhan’s mosaic-like form of writing has often been perceived as a superficial and nonsensical collage of different items and experiences, a witty strategy which uses artistic expedients in order to disguise a lack of well rooted knowledge. Detractors failed to recognise that first and foremost McLuhan was a professor of English, who had studied at Cambridge where he attended seminars by Richards, and who wrote an articulated Ph.D. dissertation on “The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time” (1943). Therefore, the development of an aphoristic form of writing, inevitably reshaped also by the major modernist achievements, is
much more than a tricky, time-serving formal device; on the contrary, it is
to be seen as a feature which connects McLuhan’s investigations to the
learned and encyclopaedic tradition, inevitably opposed to modern,
mechanical specialisation. According to McLuhan, in the age of the infor-
mation flux (that is, in our present age), knowledge cannot be mastered
through a specialist (that is, through a linear and rational) approach,
because everything intersects and overlaps so quickly that it is necessary
to find both a technique of investigation and a form of writing capable of
immediately rendering the simultaneity of different experiences, that is,
capable of revealing complex epiphanies through the bold association of
single verbal fragments (9). This is the aesthetic pervading McLuhan’s
idea of the “mosaic” as a precise formal technique for exploring his time,
a technique McLuhan presented at the beginning of one of his most cele-
brated books:

The *Gutenberg Galaxy* develops a mosaic or field approach to its problems. Such
a mosaic image of numerous data and quotations in evidence offers the only prac-
tical means of revealing causal operations in history. The alternative procedure
would be to offer a series of fixed relationships in pictorial space. Thus the galaxy
or constellation of events upon which the present study concentrates is itself a
mosaic of perpetual interacting forms that have undergone kaleidoscopic transfor-
mation — particularly in our time. (*Gutenberg 7*)

Here emerges the epistemological value of McLuhan’s writing technique,
which clearly recalls Joyce’s poetics, and which appears to be inevitably
linked to an ancient exegetical tradition which, in turn, is indebted more
to an inductive than to a speculative mode of observation, closer to the art
of grammar than to the art of dialectic.

Indeed, the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic) is precisely what
McLuhan discusses in his Ph.D. dissertation on Nashe: in order to focus
on the *querelle* between Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey in the English
Renaissance, the Canadian critic undertakes a comparative study of the
three liberal arts as they originated and developed from ancient to modern
age. He declares that his analysis is carried out from the point of view of
the grammarian, as grammar “concerns the interpretation of written texts
and the ground patterns in words, etymology” (9). This is the reason why
McLuhan’s search can be perceived also as a careful study of the ancient
doctrine of the “logos”, or doctrine of names, that he carries out through a
retrieval of the Thomistic tradition of the Middle age, of Bacon’s and Vico’s lessons in the Modern age, and of James Joyce in his time respectively.

In “The Advancement of Learning”, Francis Bacon exalts the potentiality of the “aphorism” as opposed to “the method”: in the aphorism, the paratactic association leads to what Bacon defines as “a knowledge broken” which forces the reader “to inquire farther”, and which can be perceived only by “he that is sound and grounded”, whereas “method” is “more fit to win consent, but less fit to point to action”. In the early 1920s, Joyce retrieves the aphoristic *dictum* and succeeds in combining the learned tradition with the new heuristic potentialities the new mass media offered to the alerted artists: Joyce’s investigations into language retrieves its etymological patterns and turns the “pun” into a new form of art and, therefore, into a renewed heuristic tool. Despite their apparently humorous and ironic tone, Joyce’s puns (as displayed, for instance, in the *Wake*) are characterised by a complex formal search and by a “serious” and “precise” linguistic intention:

When Joyce quipped to a critic, “Some of my puns are trivial and some are quadrivial,” he was being, as always, precise. When my critics imagine I am being vaguely metaphorical, I, too, am trying to be literal and precise. (McLuhan, *Landscape* ixv)

Following Joyce’s example, McLuhan investigates language and looks for a “literal and precise” form capable of taking advantage from the intrinsic metaphorical value of words, that is from their evocative power:

Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translates experience into our uttered or outered sense. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols, the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant. (*Media* 64)

Another *leitmotiv* in McLuhan’s writing is his constant attention to words polysemous references, in turn linked to a new interest in etymology and, therefore, in grammar perceived as the art which stands at the basis of the ancient doctrine of the logos. Words are re-discovered, perceived as metaphors, or “technologies of explicitness”, evocative of the whole
human experience, and their heuristic potentiality is renewed in every sentence, in every verbal association.

Therefore, the intrinsic epistemological value that pervades both Joyce’s and McLuhan’s aesthetics clearly emerges: in both authors, the search for a new form capable of enlightening while exploring the world in progress is constantly addressed towards a new heuristic, in turn retrieving tenets belonging to an ancient epistemological tradition preserved all along the Middle Ages by the Patristic school through the *translatio studii*. It is through the witty retrieval of an ancient science, etymology, that two “docti grammatici” of our age tried to alert their readers and, consequently, humanity to the shift in sensibility transforming Gutenberg fragmented man into the new “electric tribe man”; it is by means of works such as *The Mechanical Bride* or *Finnegans Wake* that McLuhan and Joyce wished to awaken their contemporaries from what was defined by William Blake as (a still persisting) “Newton’s sleep”.

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This essay is part of a work in progress focused on the literary ascendencies on McLuhan’s critical writing. The work intends to analyse the morphology of McLuhan’s “mosaic-like” form of writing in comparison with the technical discoveries and achievements of four Modernist writers: Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis.

1 See also Eric McLuhan’s account of Marshall McLuhan’s use of quotations from Finnegans Wake (“Joyce”). In his article, Eric McLuhan discusses the important theme of “the ten hundred-letter word ‘thunders’ of the Wake” introduced also in M. McLuhan and Q. Fiore as “a cryptogram or codified explanation of the thundering and reverberating consequences of the major technological chances in all human history” (5). On this theme see also Eric McLuhan’s The Role of Thunder in Finnegans Wake (1997).

2 Marshall McLuhan got his MA at the University of Manitoba with a dissertation on George Meredith. A IODE Postgraduate Scholarship enabled him to be accepted at Cambridge University in 1934, where he attended, among others, courses with I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis.

3 On this, see Havelock’s Preface to Plato (1963) and Ong’s Orality and Literacy (1982).

4 The Mechanical Bride is the first of a series of books in which McLuhan intended to study man’s relation to the environment as shaped by new technologies. McLuhan hints to this “series” in a letter to Harry J. Skornia written in 1964: “Am finishing up the successor to the Mechanical Bride”. According to the editors of the volume of letters, McLuhan refers to Culture is our Business (1970)—on electronic man (McLuhan had previously studied industrial man in The Mechanical Bride and typographic man in The Gutenberg Galaxy). The editors describe Culture is our Business as “a graphically arresting anthology of advertisement, paired with a series of statements and quotations that they evoked for McLuhan” (Letters 306).

5 Both Barthes and Eco discuss several “myths” of mass society (Barthes, Mythologies; Eco, Apocalittici and Superuomo). It is interesting to recall here that McLuhan’s The Mechanical Bride was translated into Italian only in 1984. In his introduction to the Italian edition, Roberto Faenza polemically suggests that such a long delay in translating this important book could have been intentional (“editorial omissions do have a meaning, too”) in order to be able to present as “original….cultural positions which are instead borrowed ones” (Sposa 7-10).
On the idea of “media poetics”, see Marshall and Eric McLuhan (Laws). The now constantly referred to expression of “media ecology” can be seen as an extension of McLuhan’s original idea that “new media are new languages, their grammar and syntax yet unknown” (Laws 229). On the implications of “media ecology” see, among others, Neil Postman’s Teaching as a Conservative Activity (1979) since Postman has often acknowledged his “debt” towards McLuhan.

On this, see also E. McLuhan, Thunder.

See also Michel A. Moos, “McLuhan’s Language for Awareness under Electronic Conditions” (1997).

It is a kind of “epiphany” which clearly retrieves the metaphysical poets’ rhetorical strategy. Claude Bissell, Dean of the University of Toronto when McLuhan was a teacher at the local St. Michael College, put it well: “Marshall liked to describe his ideas as ‘probes’, not firm convictions, although he always seemed to express them with conviction. They were attempts to force a reconsideration of accepted ideas. These probes were like the ‘conceits’ of metaphysical poets, who delighted in yoking two disparate things together, with illuminating results for each part of the conceit and for the conceit as a whole. These probes would often emerge in conversation or in the give and take of an informal group setting” (Nevitt and McLuhan 188).
     . La definizione dell’arte, Milano: Mursia, 1990
Joyce James. Finnegans Wake. London: Faber and Faber, 1939