

# IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ■ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



## IMAGINATIONS

JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |  
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy  
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imaginations.csj.ualberta.ca>

## Marshall McLuhan and the Arts

Editorial Team: Brent Ryan Bellamy, Dominique Laurent, Andriko  
Lozowy, Tara Milbrandt, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Sheena Wilson

December 6, 2017

To cite this article:

Lamberti, Elena. "Printing a Film to Make it Resonate: Sorel Etrog and Marshall McLuhan's  
*Spiral*." *Imaginations* 8:3 (2017): Web (date accessed) 25-38. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.MA.8.3.2

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.MA.8.3.2>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a [Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/) license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions.

## PRINTING A FILM TO MAKE IT RESONATE: SOREL ETROG AND MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S SPIRAL

ELENA LAMBERTI

**Abstract** | *This essay investigates the collaboration between McLuhan and the Romanian born Canadian artist, Sorel Etrog. In 1975, Etrog's movie Spiral was shown at the Centre for Culture and Technology, established by McLuhan at the University of Toronto. Following that event, McLuhan suggested that Etrog select "stills from the film so that he could provide an annotation to those images – a free form text of quotations from various writers – as well as a commentary". Thanks to another great protagonist of the Canadian cultural scene, Barry Callaghan, that idea became a tangible object a few years after McLuhan had passed away: Spiral. Images from the film. Text by Marshall McLuhan, was in fact published in 1987 by Exile Editions in Toronto. Today, it remains as a memento of an original artistic encounter. It also remains as a tool to reconsider our environment through poetry and images, as words and still-shots are cast to pose an intellectual challenge to an increasingly materialistic society. As a book, Spiral is conceived to make ideas on media and society resonate through a witty juxtaposition of images from the film and literary quotations from a broad Western tradition that encourages readers to navigate the ongoing profound cultural shift. Known but not often investigated when discussing McLuhan's artistic associations, the collaboration between Etrog and McLuhan ought to be delved into for different reasons. It is, in fact, strategic to appreciate how McLuhan has acted as a facilitator of a renewed 20<sup>th</sup> century inter-art dialogue. Then, it helps to consider the conscious shift from modernist avant-garde to new avant-gardes and art forms of the 1970s in relation to McLuhan's environmental explorations. Finally, it also pays homage to an artist that deserves to be remembered as one of the most original voices of the Canadian artistic renaissance.*

**Résumé** | *Cet essai étudie la collaboration entre McLuhan et l'artiste canadien d'origine roumaine, Sorel Etrog. En 1975, le film Spiral d'Etrog a été présenté au Centre for Culture and Technology, créé par McLuhan à l'Université de Toronto. En réponse à cet événement, McLuhan a suggéré qu'Etrog sélectionne « des images du film pour qu'il puisse leur fournir une annotation – un texte libre de citations de divers auteurs – ainsi qu'un commentaire ». Grâce à un autre grand protagoniste de la scène culturelle canadienne, Barry Callaghan, cette idée devint un objet tangible quelques années après la mort de McLuhan : Spiral. Images from the film. Text by Marshall McLuhan fut publié en 1987 par Exile Editions à Toronto. Aujourd'hui, il demeure un souvenir d'une rencontre artistique originale. Il demeure également un outil pour reconsidérer notre environnement à travers la poésie et les images, alors que les mots et les images fixes sont jetés pour poser un défi intellectuel à une société de plus en plus matérialiste. Comme livre, Spiral est conçu pour faire résonner des idées sur les médias et la société par une juxtaposition spirituelle d'images du film et des citations littéraires d'une large tradition occidentale qui encourage les lecteurs à naviguer dans le profond changement culturel en cours. Connue, mais rarement étudiée lors des discussions sur les associations artistiques de McLuhan, la collaboration entre Etrog et McLuhan devrait être explorée pour différentes raisons. Il est, en fait, stratégique d'apprécier comment McLuhan a agi en tant que facilitateur d'un dialogue interartistique du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle renouvelé. Ensuite, il est utile de considérer le passage conscient de l'avant-garde moderniste à de nouvelles formes avant-gardistes et artistiques des années 1970 en relation avec les explorations environnementales de McLuhan. Enfin, cela rend également hommage à un artiste qui mérite qu'on se souvienne de lui comme l'une des voix les plus originales de la renaissance artistique canadienne.*

In Marshall McLuhan's narrative on media and society, the artist is the hero opposing the actions of the "many thousands of the best-trained individual minds [that] have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind ... in order to manipulate, exploit, control" (*The Mechanical Bride* v). Against these invisible forces, the artist is the individual who uses their integral awareness to perceive the emerging subliminal societal patterns and anticipate change. As an explorer, the artist is the interface of juxtaposing environments; their art is meant to keep people awake to the figure and ground interplay. The artist is the antidote to the Narcissus narcissis that numbs perception and kills free will.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, the artist cannot be prudent, nor decorous. McLuhan portrays him as a sham and a mime, a character who "undertakes not the ethical quest but the quest of the great fool" (McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape* xiii-xiv). In McLuhan's *media poetic*, the arts are privileged probing tools precisely because they turn given perceptive rules upside-down and let the artist take different roads. Inevitably, the arts are at once a mirror of their time (hence the artist as a *mime*) and barometer of all that is new, transgressive, and mystifying (hence the artist as a *sham*). For this reason, the "serious artist" opposes and challenges official art and refuses to comply with the established models (McLuhan, "Art as Anti-Environment" 56); in fact, they detect the techniques of manipulation, exploitation, and control through the contemplation of official art. That is the preliminary step to develop a counter-environment and to restore *sensorial and cognitive awareness*. Mannerism numbs because it comforts us, while avant-garde art awakens because it shocks us. Official art preserves the status quo, but experimental art navigates change.

Unmistakably, McLuhan's ideas on art are rooted in his profound knowledge of Modernist artists. He learned from Ezra Pound to consider the artist as "the antenna of the race." Reading James Joyce disclosed to him the probing powers of etymology as a key to sensorial playfulness. T. S. Eliot's poetry and criticism opened up new "doors of perception on the poetic process" (McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape* xiii-xiv). Wyndham Lewis's vortices and spatial philosophy offered McLuhan a conceptual form designed to capture the inner truth of a situation through a distorted and grotesque perspective. McLuhan's intellectual debts to these artists (and others), have been acknowledged, discussed, and investigated.<sup>2</sup> However, being a "serious artist" himself—that is, a mime and a sham—McLuhan did not indulge in "Modernist mannerism." Instead, he *put on* the Modernists and then started new explorations of his own, engaging in original collaborations with contemporary artists. He got along better with artists than with most of his fellow academics because his own *modus operandi* was *intrinsically* artistic; that is, experimental, innovative, and outrageously non-academic. If not *anti-academic*.

McLuhan's works with Harley Parker, Wilfred Watson, Quentin Fiore are well known. His connections with Wyndham Lewis and Sheila Watson have been explored to better understand McLuhan's creative probing method (Betts et al.). We know that a variety of artists and celebrities came to his Centre at the University of Toronto to discuss contemporary trends in society, politics and, of course, the arts, including John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and Keith Carradine. John Cage's *Roaratorio*, first produced at the Paris Festival d'Automne at Beaubourg in January 1980, was presented as a tribute to Marshall McLuhan when brought

to Toronto on the centenary of James Joyce's birthday, two years later. The list is long and interesting because it cross-reads different and inspiring artistic experiences. However, in this brief essay, I want to focus on a collaboration that is not often investigated when discussing McLuhan's artistic associations and which I think ought to be delved into for different reasons. It is, in fact, strategic to appreciate how McLuhan has acted as a facilitator of a renewed 20<sup>th</sup>-century inter-art dialogue. I consider the conscious shift from modernist avant-garde to new avant-gardes and art forms of the 1970s in relation to McLuhan's environmental explorations. This essay also pays homage to an artist that deserves to be remembered as one of the most original voices of the Canadian artistic renaissance. I focus on the brief but meaningful collaboration between Marshall McLuhan and Sorel Etrog, the Romanian-born Canadian artist who passed away in 2014.

#### Sorel, Marshall, and Dada: Changing Perspectives

In 2013, the Art Gallery of Ontario hosted a major retrospective dedicated to Sorel Etrog, showing five decades of his works and art projects. The exhibition closed at the end of September; Sorel passed away a few months later, in February 2014. Born in 1933 in Jassy, Romania, in a Jewish family, Etrog was a young boy when the Germans occupied the city in 1939, followed by the Russians a few years later. The family succeeded in escaping to Israel in 1950; here, Etrog served in the army (doing a period of active duty during the Suez crisis in 1956) and received an Army scholarship to attend a new school of art in Tel Aviv (Heinrich). His first group exhibition was in 1956, but his life took a new turn in 1959, the year he met the Canadian Art critic, Samuel J. Zacks.

That same year, in October, "he held his first one-man show in North America at the gallery Moos. It contained twenty-six new and old painted constructions and some drawings" (Heinrich 98). Etrog became a Canadian citizen in 1963, when he was thirty years old. Coincidentally, that same year on October 24<sup>th</sup>, the McLuhan's Centre for Culture and Technology was also established at the St. Michael College at the University of Toronto. Twelve years later, in 1975, Etrog's experimental film *Spiral* was shown at the Centre (also broadcast on CBC television), an event that triggered a collaboration between the Romanian-born sculptor and the Canadian media guru and literature professor. They worked together on a publication based on that movie: *Spiral. Images from the Film. Text by Marshall McLuhan*, published in 1987 by Exile Editions in Toronto.

Primarily a sculptor and a visual artist though he also wrote plays, non-fiction, and poetry, Etrog already had a history of collaborations with important writers of his time, among them Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Similarly, by 1975 McLuhan had published his most celebrated (and controversial) artistic books: *The Medium is the Massage* and *War and Peace in the Global Village* (with Quentin Fiore, respectively in 1967 and 1968); *Counterblast* (illustrated by Harley Parker, 1969) and *Through the Vanishing Point* (also with Parker, 1969); *From Cliché to Archetype* (with Wilfred Watson, 1970). Inter-art collaboration was very much part of the artistic spirit of time. However, with McLuhan all experiments were associated to his media investigations, meant to perfect a discontinuous form of writing capable of rendering the acoustic dimension of the new electric environment. A form capable of alerting to the ongoing perceptive shift and of making people aware of and even experience

the continuing cultural and societal change: a form that McLuhan called the *mosaic*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Etrog's artistic search intended to explore the invisible cultural patterns underpinning the visible surface. McLuhan and Etrog shared not only the will to experiment with art forms, but also a deep knowledge of Modernist avant-garde experiments with form, as well as of later artistic explorations. The Theatre of the Absurd was also a shared area of investigation. Knowing both Ionesco and Beckett, Sorel Etrog was familiar with their post-war poetics; as an artist who had survived German and Russian occupation he, too, felt that "what is absurd, or rather what is unusual, is first and foremost what exists, reality" (Bonney 127). McLuhan also defined the absurdist theatre movement as penetrating reality through a provocative use of verbal cliché: "Ionesco particularly cultivates the art of the verbal cliché, and he uses the verbal cliché to probe one of the most fascinating phenomena of our age and that is the way in which the Western mind is changing its mind", (McLuhan and Watson 5). For McLuhan, the theatre of the absurd was instrumental to understand that, perhaps, "the universal human condition today in a period of rapid innovation is necessarily that of alienation" (McLuhan and Watson 9).<sup>4</sup>

As an artist, Etrog had grown in the wake of "The Dada Circus" (his term),<sup>5</sup> so much so that his work stands at the cross-road of the historical avant-garde of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century and the more experimental artistic trends of the 1960s-1970s. According to Tristan Tzara, also a Romanian and one of the founding fathers of Dadaism, "The beginning of Dada were not the beginning of art but of disgust" (qtd. in Rubin 12). This disgust was for a materialistic society that had led to a horrible and unprecedented war and was not changing its priorities: élites

over common people and conformism and orthodoxy over creativity and original thinking. Through Dada, art becomes "anti-art," a process of rebellion against "the inconsistency of conventional beliefs" (citation). Like Dada, Etrog too opposed the habits of the public and the intellectuals alike. Similarly, this is what McLuhan intended to do with his first published volume, *The Mechanical Bride*, where he openly stated that he wanted to take his readers inside the revolving picture and make them sort out the behavioural patterns subliminally imposed on them by some of the best-trained minds of the time. In later books, McLuhan was never so explicit again; however, all his work on media, culture, and society was intended to help people acquire awareness of more or less visible cultural and societal phenomena through a disruptive use of language and formal techniques.

Sorel Etrog never doubted McLuhan's Dadaism. I met him in 1997 through Barry Callaghan, a Canadian intellectual who must be acknowledged not only for his own work as a writer and a critic but also for his incessant role as a generous advocate and supporter of literary and artistic causes. Barry Callaghan turned the project conceived by Sorel and Marshall into a book and introduced me to Sorel's work, pointing out the correspondences with some of McLuhan's ideas I was exploring at the time. Thanks to Barry, meeting Etrog became for me a journey into artistic and cultural discovery. His studio was a place where many media theories of the time materialised in front of my eyes: I found myself immersed in a strange wood made of sculptures combining a variety of coloured inorganic elements to shape curious humanoids. Etrog walked me along his creatures, himself a tall man whose long arms continued to move around as if also

translating his words into whirling objects. To follow him into his own creative maze was not only a fascinating but also an enlightening journey into both Etrog's inner landscape and poetic. I could not but think of him as a young boy surviving German and Russian occupation, and of him discovering ways to shape his own "disgust" through artistic patterns. After all, Dada itself started at the outbreak of World War I. Anti-Art was not "art for art's sake" but rather a form of protest against societal conformity, especially against intellectual conformity. This is precisely what brought McLuhan and Etrog together many years later. Acting after another horrible World War, they both operated against the cultural homologations of their time. While sharing his art with me, Sorel was explicit in pointing out what he meant by defining McLuhan as a Dadaist:

For me, I decided that McLuhan was a Dadaist. I tell you why. Because of his literary criticism. Since the first book, he was involved in the absurd, he explored the ads. He conceived the comic and the absurd as an attack. This was Dada! Anti-art. Give bourgeois insomnia to wake them up. Dada liked to put traps. Same for McLuhan. Dada was an art of reaction. McLuhan, too, taught us to react, to change perspective, to look at things in a different way.

To change perspective. To look at things in a different way. Etrog was right. This is what McLuhan taught us when he started to employ the poetic process to "adjust the reader to the contemporary world" (McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, xiv), exploring ads through his literary knowledge. This is also what he taught us when he started to read the global village through artistic patterns, emphasizing the

uncanny through a grotesque (absurd) rendering: he shocked the bourgeois of his own time but attracted many other mimes.

As Sorel told me, "Art is a language" and "artists only have different languages." Sometimes, the different languages contaminate each other and flourish to touch our senses and our minds. This is what happened when Etrog's visual imagery and McLuhan's media poetic met. McLuhan found Etrog's explorations interesting for many reasons: they were rooted in the modernist avant-garde he loved so much; they explored different perceptive modes; they investigated form as a tool to make you see, feel, and hear in a renewed way. The two men met in Toronto where McLuhan accepted to screen Etrog's film *Spiral* at the Centre of Culture and Technology. McLuhan suggested that Etrog select "stills from the film so that he could provide an annotation to those images—a free form text of quotations from various writers—as well as a commentary" (McLuhan and Etrog, back cover). Thanks to another great mime and sham of the Canadian cultural scene, Barry Callaghan, that idea became a tangible object a few years after McLuhan had passed away. Today, it remains as a memento of an original artistic encounter. It also remains a tool to reconsider our environment through poetry and images, as words and still-shots pose an intellectual challenge to an increasingly materialistic society. As a book, *Spiral* is conceived to make ideas on media and society resonate through a witty juxtaposition of images from the film and literary quotations from a broad Western tradition that encourages readers to navigate the ongoing profound cultural shift.

### Moving Printed Images Through Literary Voices

Midway in our life's journey,  
I went astray from the straight  
Road and woke to find my-  
self alone in a dark wood.

These verses open not only Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but also the volume *Spiral. Images from the film*. Chosen by McLuhan, they accompany the first two images taken from Etrog's film and show the face of a man reflected in a mirror: eyes shut in the first image (*Midway in our life's journey*); eyes open in the second (*I went astray from the straight / Road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood*). From the very beginning, the combination of image and text engages the reader in a series of juxtaposing *movements* that alter the linearity and the fixity of the printed page. The first and immediate one is purely mechanical and playful as it consists in the optical illusion if readers quickly turn the first two pages: a short film showing the man on the first page opening his eyes on the second page, suddenly staring at them. In fact, it is a double optical illusion as the man is looking at himself through a mirror. The trickery reflex replicates the opening scene of the film; it becomes here a challenge to the idea of point of view or perspective. At the same time, it retrieves McLuhan's famous image of *the rear-view mirror*, another optical illusion that challenges your way of perceiving an environment while moving. The words by Dante add emphasis to the idea of inner journey and visual/perceptive illusions, as they develop a metaphor also shaping a shifting environment: the main character leaves the straight road and enters a dark wood alone. He leaves the known for the unknown as he embarks in a journey of discovery. We know that Dante's journey proceeds not through straight lines but through

circles, as he moves down and then up again, defining a movement that recalls that of a spiral. Similarly, while marching into the dark and then into the light, Dante meets people and ideas of the past as well as of his present. He inhabits a temporal continuum that blurs traditional perceiving patterns, as he is talking to the dead and to the immortals alike, as well as to himself and to his readers. His final epiphany is therefore reached through a different approach to historical time and space, as if spiraling across ages. According to Etrog:

The Spiral is a single continuous line that creates within itself the parallel that exists conventionally between two lines. Therefore, you can have on this single line moments in time and space that signify the past, the present, and the future - and these moments occur in this unique situation as parallel. Time and space are collapsed. Chronology is obsolete. (McLuhan and Etrog 123)

Certainly, Etrog's fascination with the *spiral* as a form appears to be in line with the visual and conceptual culture of his time, from land art (consider *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson, 1970) to the new industrial design, especially the so-called *psychedelic design* that became a sensation from the 1960s for more than a decade. However, his definition clearly reveals how he goes beyond the mere visual leitmotif in the pursuit of a deeper search, which is at once philosophical and ontological: he is looking for a shared existential meaning within a technologically evolving society. At the same time, he is investigating across art forms to find the most suitable one to serve that purpose. Metaphorically, the spiral perfectly captures a new, universal human condition through the dynamism of a movement that renders

*spacetime* and neither just space nor time (“time and space are collapsed”). Similarly, the storyline of Etrog’s film follows an analogous spiraling movement.

The movie runs for about 30 minutes, with music by Dmitri Shostakovich, and unfolds through parallel visual motifs that divide into two main themes (life and death), which therefore work as the two imaginary lines within the also imaginary spiral (the film sequence). The film narrative is not easily rendered through an ordered telling, precisely because it is conceived as a spiraling montage of symbolic images creating a thematic rather than linear plot. This captured McLuhan’s attention too:

The film *Spiral* was not scripted but iconically drafted, image by image. The structural theme of *Spiral* presents the oscillation of two simultaneous and complementary cones or spirals, constituting the synchronique worlds of birth and death. Spiral is not a diachronique or lineal structure, but a synchronique and contrapuntal interplay in a resonating structure whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. (McLuhan and Etrog 125)

The opening scene of the film, later retrieved as the opening image of the book, introduces the theme of perception and shows the reader how to interplay with its narrative construction. As anticipated, it shows the close-up of a man with his eyes wide closed. Suddenly, he opens them and stares at himself in a mirror. Due to the reflecting illusion, he seems to stare at us too, challenging us to look through things and not at them. Consistently, the story then unfolds along a journey that oscillates between two main leitmotifs: the juxtaposition of images of death and of images of life, and the juxtaposition of natural and mechanical

elements—indeed, the melting of the human body and inorganic components of our civilization. In a sort of *progression d’effet*, Etrog shows a gun extending the human arm; a hand playing with two eggs on a female breast; naked human bodies packed as food in tins; a watch and a human hand taking turns on a plate as nourishment on display; warms and screws blurred together as rotten corpses; a new born baby in an incubator (artificially fed) and a blindfolded man sedated with a pacifier; a naked child drawing the sun on a blackboard; naked adults in prison whose hands tries to break free from the wooden cage; and others. Among all these pictures, a blindfolded nurse and a gravedigger burying a blindfolded man return along the spiraling narrative to represent the passage from one human condition to another (and from organic to inorganic), in an incessant existential dance. The idea of repeated and interrelated patterns reaches its climax through the image of two mouths (of a man and of a woman) connected through a pipe; they create an air circulating system controlled through a faucet positioned at the centre. You live or you die depending on the (mechanical) faucet position (open or closed), but both lives are inter-dependent.

In its montage, Etrog’s 1974 spiraling film recalls Fernand Léger’s 1924 avant-garde film, *Ballet Mécanique*, as it also proceeds with no linear but conceptual plot through a montage which alternates a series of images combining organic and inorganic elements. However, while in Léger’s filmic experiment, the cubist montage creates a dance that transcends the traditional idea of a story, in Etrog’s the *story* remains. *Spiral* points to the numbing process induced by media as environments, something that McLuhan had investigated since the early 1950s. The spiral is precisely that which



provides a discerning direction that orients the audience's psycho-perceptive responses. Therefore, Etrog's filmic experiment goes beyond the cubist urge to overcome a representative (narrative, pictorial) model, as it engages with the human existential and physical condition within the consolidating mass-society, following new wars and cultural revolutions.

In spite of other more cruel (and "real") images already seen by the television audiences of the time (Vietnam was still happening and broadcast and on air), in 1975 when *Spiral* was broadcast on TV, CBC opted for a late evening time. Etrog's film was all but traditional or conformist and the accelerated montage of somewhat disturbing images in the film (including some explicit nudes and some implicit sexual metaphors) risked shocking audiences outside the avant-garde circles. As McLuhan would say, experimental art not only navigates change but also challenges comforting aesthetical models; it is no surprise to know that McLuhan decided to show *Spiral* at his Centre. Etrog's film resonated with McLuhan's explorations of old and new media as extensions of man, as well as with his idea of how those extensions affect the human sensorium. Etrog, too, was pursuing "not the ethical quest but the quest of the great fool" (McLuhan, *The Interior Landscape*, 31). Etrog's *Spiral* made visible the shift from linear into acoustic space, the shift from one sensorial mode to another, something that McLuhan called the passage from the eye to the ear, from the mechanic to the electric age. In the initial part of the film, a woman seems to give birth to a dial and to an adult man; in the final part, a naked baby plays with a broken watch. Humanity is born again in a world where time is no longer measurable along a line, and space needs to be rethought. Etrog's experimental film, too, navigated the environmental change

that McLuhan had been exploring for more than 20 years. The film was the perfect correlative objective to his own ideas on media, art, and society. Both Etrog's film and McLuhan's explorations were meant to awaken their audiences.

Like in the film, the *Spiral* book, too, collapses time and space and chronology is obsolete; the first two pages are meant to alert readers on that. The playful optical illusion and the carefully chosen literary quotations are offered neither as an amusement nor as an introduction to the original film content. Instead, they are assembled to show the perceptive strategy that readers must adopt to start their own journey of discovery, to open their eyes. This book must not be *read*. It must not be *watched*. This book must be *experienced*. Readers are invited to shift their mode of observation from *light on* to *light through*. The inter-art dialogue McLuhan proposed here becomes not a captivating technique simply following the art trends of the time. Instead, it is employed as a strategy to overcome traditional and linear modes of perception that he considers no longer fit for the individuals inhabiting the electric age. Alienation also comes from schizophrenic attitudes to an evolving habitat, from our inability to remodel our sensorium. For this reason, the printed *verbo-voco-visual* version of Etrog's *Spiral* is developed as a perceptive counter-environment consciously conceived to resonate into the readers' inner landscape in more pervasive ways than the original cinematic one.

The paradox is explained once one recalls McLuhan's original definition of film as a form, as "the final fulfilment of the great potential of typographic fragmentation" (McLuhan *Understanding Media* 393); similarly, "movies assume a high level of literacy in their users and

prove baffling to the non literate” (384). Here, the focus is neither on the content nor on the montage technique of films, but rather on their mode of fruition prior to the invention of electronic and digital techniques. Until that moment, films were a manifestation of the civilization of the eye and their mode of fruition was truly *literate*: the audience *looked at* the screen where lights and images were projected. They *looked at* the screen as they *looked at* a written page: words run one after the other creating a *train-of-thought*. Similarly, images run one after the other, creating the illusion of movement, in fact, a *train-of-still-shots*. Therefore, if as a film Etrog’s *Spiral* is considered avant-garde in terms of content and technique of montage, it nonetheless remains traditional in terms of perceptive modes: it engages its spectators mostly conceptually, challenging their standardized understanding of reality. With later technological developments (and starting with television), images and sounds were instead *projected on* the audience, changing the psychophysical dynamics of *watching* a movie. Spectators are turned into screens as images are projected towards them; spectators enter the technological flux and complete the communicative flow physiologically. Electric media induced a new *tactile* form of perception that McLuhan defined as a multi-sensorial and acoustic (that is, non-linear and all-embracing) interplay, something that returns *spectators* to their role of *audiences*. The term *audience* is in fact particularly appropriate for the electronic and digital forms of communication and media, as it returns the communicative process to an auditory dimension as per its original etymology. Spectators (from the Latin *spectator*, viewer/watcher) watch what is in front of them (light on); audiences (from the Latin *audentia*, listening) engage acoustically in a communicative process. As a book, *Spiral* engages the

readers cognitively and physiologically, creating an acoustic (verbo-vocal-visual) montage; readers must fill in the gaps connecting the visual (the images from the film) to the aural (the text chosen by McLuhan) in a process that requires a multisensory approach—indeed, a mobile point of view that helps them to see “the action that is in progress and in which everybody is involved” (McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* 8). As a book, *Spiral* invites the *spectators* of the movie *Spiral* to become an *audience* so as to fully experience a dynamic, interactive communicative process that alerts them on the absurdity of all environmental dynamics.

The collaboration between McLuhan and Etrog translates into an editorial inter-art project that conveys movement to the printed page, giving shape to what McLuhan terms the “concrete essay.” McLuhan, a knowledgeable literary scholar, was familiar with *poésie concrète* and how it had inspired different uses of old printing techniques. His interactive mosaic of words, images, and gaps plays with that tradition to create a new form of essay that does not *narrate* theoretical investigations but rather *renders* them directly on the printed page. At the same time, Etrog’s original movie offers him a series of pertinent *illustrations* to ideas he had been exploring for decades:

In the film *Spiral* the ubiquitous and moving centre intensifies awareness of the fragility and transience of existence. In the uncertainty of the interval between the pram and the coffin, between birth and death, *Spiral* presents many labyrinths and portraits of the human cognitive process. The drama of these two imbalances is portrayed by the action of the two ambulances in the labyrinth of the city streets. The body in the incubator points

to a labyrinth (spiral) of respiration in a blind struggle for survival. The open-heart surgery reveals the spiral of human circulation in a parallel struggle for blind survival. One of the bizarre conceits of the sequence of the sardine can concerns the obsession of a consumer age with packages, whether books or hi-rise or the nuclear family. This witty observation pervades the film as a continuing metaphor, as do the two ambulances. (McLuhan and Etrog, 126)

In the film, the two metaphors introduced here (a “witty observation” and the “two ambulances”) are juxtaposed with a series of visual symbols that immediately reinforce the spectator’s “awareness of the fragility and transience of existence” within what is presented as “a consumer age” where thoughts, people, and ideas are equally turned into pre-packed goods. The list is long: eggs/breast/womb (life) and arms (death); clocks (mechanic and limited existence) and the natural birth of a baby (permanence of the human species); blinded man and books; people in a cage and burning books; a pram and a coffin; cans of worms and cans of people; naked bodies and artificial (mechanically induced) breathing; and many more.

The storyline of the iconically drafted movie spirals to an ending where a naked baby plays with a broken clock and open eyes are painted on the bandage covering the real eyes of a naked man. Elaborating modernist poetics, “In *Spiral* Etrog confronts us with the same Waste Land situation on the wired planet in the form of both a visible dialogue of cinema and the action of symbolist drama” (McLuhan and Etrog 127). In his final comments, McLuhan connects the evident social and cultural denunciation in the film to Etrog’s creative process, here

presented as a form that translates the universal search of many other artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; he confirms that Etrog also belongs to McLuhan’s own sacred wood of conscious artists enlightening on the archetypes of human logic and ingenuity. *Man as the medium* is, in fact, the title of McLuhan’s afterword in the book; it is the final epiphany of an artistic journey meant to trigger awareness of a complex societal process. A journey that has put traps on the readers/audience as the spiraling story has been told to invite them to change perspective, to look at things in a different way. Consciousness of one’s own actions follows a renewed sensorial consciousness, something that can be achieved only if we are ready to leave comforting but numbing intellectual and artistic cocoons; it implies a shift from mannerism to experimentalism.

The journey of initiation conceived by Etrog and McLuhan is not a reassuring one. Contrary to the one that takes Dante to progress from Hell to Paradise “to see again the stars,” our consumerist society makes the individuals spiral upon themselves, as if they were navigating a never-ending cultural maelstrom. Inevitably, the human condition cannot but be one of constant alert and struggle to remain awake and acquire sensorial insomnia because we inhabit a world of constant technological innovation and deep cultural shifts. The request is therefore to overcome habits and embrace (artistic) challenges. Virgil guides Dante out of his ignorance and takes him to Beatrice, the woman representing pure love and honesty of intents, the woman who will lead him to reach the highest pick. Through *Spiral*, Dante’s search becomes not only the poet’s and the philosopher’s quest but *everyman’s* search. It acquires a different meaning because human ignorance mainly reflects environmental ignorance, as the film

and the book came after not only Dante and his natural and theological “world architecture”: they came after World War II and Sputnik<sup>6</sup>. The world Etrog and McLuhan inhabited was a new manmade environment built on “an electronic interdependence” that recreated the world “in the image of a global village” (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 36). McLuhan and Etrog lived and rendered a passage from a given environment to a new and evolving one. Consistently, to accompany Etrog’s spiraling symbols, McLuhan selected texts from writers and artists who had experienced and rendered ages of passage, that is, ages marking the making of new cultural and technological environments. Dante himself was a poet who lived at the end of the Middle Ages and at the dawn of Italian Renaissance. McLuhan also quoted Shakespeare, the bard who blurred the auditory into the Gutenberg Age. He quoted Joyce, Eliot, and Yeats, the Modernist masters who retrieved the aural while the Gutenberg’s mechanic age shifted into the electric age. He quoted Etrog’s favorite authors, Ionesco and Beckett, who used the grotesque to unveil the absurd of intellectual conformism. In the book, these voices—altogether forming a sort of perceptive leitmotif of McLuhan’s discourses on media as environment—combine with those of other writers and philosophers, (Thomas Hardy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Blaise Pascal, Elizabeth Akers Allen, David Herbert Lawrence, Fyodor Mikhailovich ), poets (Geoffrey Chaucer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wystan Hugh Auden, Robert Frost), and theorists (Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver, Alfred Tomatis) to accompany the journey unveiling *man as the medium*. These voices too are collapsed to shape the continuous movements of the human consciousness. Together, images and texts are used as fragments shored against intellectual conformism and cultural hypnosis,

portable still-shots that move beyond the fixity of the printed page to enter the audience’s interior landscape and alert them to new knowledge of their time.

## Works Cited

Barilli, Renato. “L’estetica tecnologica di Marshall McLuhan.” *Tra presenza e assenza*, Bompiani, 1974.

Betts Gregory, Hjartarson Paul, and Smitka Kristine (eds). *Counter-Blasting Canada. Marshall McLuhan, Wyndham Lewis, Wilfred Watson and Sheila Watson*. The University of Alberta Press, 2016.

Bonnefoy Claude. *Conversations with Eugene Ionesco*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

Cork, Richard. *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age*. U of California P, 1976.

Dasenbrock, Reed Way. *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.

Eliot, T.S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Faber & Faber, 1955.

Etrog, Sorel and John Cage. *Joyce and the Dada Circus: A Collage / An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*. The Black P/The Dolmen P, 1982.

Gordon, W. Terrence. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding: A Biography*. Basic Books, 1997.

Granata, Paolo. “A Return to Magic: the (Go)Spell of Technology in Marshall McLuhan’s Thought.” *McLuhan. Social Media Between Faith and Culture*, edited by Domenico Pietropaolo and Robert K. Logan, Legas Publishing, 2014, pp. 97-110.

- Heinrich Theodore Allen. "The painted constructions." *Five Decades*, edited by Ohor Holubizky. Art Gallery of Ontario, 1968, pp. 94-99.
- Lamberti, Elena. *Marshall McLuhan's Mosaic. Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies*, University of Toronto Press, 2012.
- . "Not Just a Book on Media: Extending the Gutenberg Galaxy." *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*. University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. xxv-xlv.
- Fernand, Léger and Murphey, Dudley, *Ballet Mécanique*, Produced by André Charlot, Written by Fernand Léger, Music by George Antheil, Cinematography by Dudley Murphey and Man Ray. Silent Movie, France, 1924
- Liska, Vivian and Astradur Eysteinnsson, editors. *Modernism. Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages Series*, John Benjamins, 2007.
- Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. Ticknor & Fields, 1989.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. 1951. Gingko Press, 2002.
- . *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*. 1962. Centennial edition. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2011.
- . *Counterblast 1954 edn*. Foreword by W. Terrence Gordon. Afterword by Elena Lamberti, Transmediale / Gingko P, 2011.
- . *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. 1962. Centennial edition, with new essays by Terrence Gordon, Elena Lamberti, Dominique Scheffel-Dunand, U of Toronto P, 2011.
- . *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 1964. Edited by W. Terrence Gordon, Gingko P, 2003.
- . *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan, 1943-1962*. Selected, compiled, and edited by Eugene McNamara. McGraw-Hill, 1969.
- . "Art as Anti-Environment", *Art News Annual*, XXXI, (1966), pp. 55-8
- . "Verbo-Voco-Visual", *Explorations in Communications*, 8 October 1957, p. 11.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Sorel Etrog. *Spiral. Images from the Film. Text by Marshall McLuhan*, Exile, 1987.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Massage*. Bantam Books, 1968.
- . *War and Peace in the Global Village*. Bantam Books, 1968.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Parker Harley. *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*. Harper & Row, 1969.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Wilfred Watson Wilfred. *From Cliché to Archetype*. 1970. Pocket Books, 1971.
- Moos, Michael A. *Marshall McLuhan Essays: Media Research, Technology, Art, Communication*. Amsterdam OPA, 1997.
- Moss, John and Linda M. Morra, editors. *At the Speed of Light There Is Only Illumination: A Reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*. U of Ottawa P, 2004.
- Powe, Bruce W. *Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. Apocalypse and Alchemy*. U of Toronto Press, 2014.

Rubin William S. *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*. The Museum of Modern Art. Distributed by New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1968

Theall, Donald F. *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2001.

—. *The Medium Is the Rear-View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan*. McGill-Queen's UP, 1971.

*The Video McLuhan*. Written and narrated by Tom Wolfe. Set of six VHS video-tapes. McLuhan Productions, 1996.

Willmott, Glenn. *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse*. U of Toronto P, 1996.

## Notes

1 “The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image... He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system.” (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 63).

2 See: Marchand; Theall; Willmott; Moss and Morra; Barilli.

3 “*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 practical means of revealing causal operations in history.” (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 7). On the idea of McLuhan's mosaic see also Lamberti, *Marshall McLuhan's Mosaic*.

4 Concerning McLuhan and the Theatre of the Absurd, it is interesting to recall what writes Philip Marchand in his biography of McLuhan: “On December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1980, in the company of Corinne and Teri, McLuhan visited an exhibition of sculptures by Sorel Etrog at a local gallery. Etrog, an admirer of the works of Samuel Beckett as well as of McLuhan's writings, had infuriated McLuhan earlier that month by comparing him to Beckett. McLuhan, who regarded the absolute godlessness of Beckett's work with something approaching horror, grew so red in the face that one of his vein stood out” (275). This vehement reaction did not compromise the friendship between McLuhan and Etrog, who spent part of McLuhan's last Christmas vigil together. Nonetheless, this reaction may surprise the reader, as McLuhan often referred to the Theatre of the Absurd to exemplify the societal contemporary *malaise*. For instance, in the introduction to his *Understanding Media*, McLuhan writes: “The Theatre of the Absurd dramatizes this recent dilemma of the Western man, the man of action who appears not to be involved in the action. Such is the origin and appeal of Samuel Beckett's clown” (20).

5 See: Etrog, *Joyce and the Dada Circus: A Collage / An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*. This work was first published together with John Cage's *About Roartorio. An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, edited and with an Introduction by Robert O'Driscoll for the The Dolmen Press in 1982.

6 “When Sputnik went around the planet, nature disappeared, nature was hijacked off the planet, nature was enclosed in a manmade environment and art took the place of nature. Planet became art from” (*The Video McLuhan*).