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Marshall McLuhan and the Arts

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*MARSHALL MCLUHAN
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MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S COUNTERENVIRONMENT WITHIN THE STREAM OF DEFAMILIARIZATION

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Abstract: Marshall McLuhan's theory of the counterenvironment is within a larger tradition of defamiliarization that emerges in Romanticism and can be further traced through the writings of Henri Bergson, English literary modernism, Russian formalist ostranenie, *Brechtian estrangement, and more recent institutional critique. Among related Romantic writings, Percy Bysshe Shelley's essay "A Defence of Poetry" (1821) clearly anticipates later theories that both repeat and develop fundamental notions of defamiliarization. Bergson's writings on the comic revive Romantic ideas when he states that the object of the arts is "to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself." English modernists such as T.E. Hulme, T.S. Eliot, and their contemporaries drew on Bergson and were major sources for McLuhan's counterenvironment. Russian formalist and English modernist defamiliarization share roots in Romanticism and Bergson, which account for their sometimes parallel perspectives. McLuhan had some limited exposure to Russian formalism by way of Constructivist cinema as well as the art and writings of László Moholy-Nagy. Later writers sometimes mistakenly view Viktor Shklovsky's* ostranenie *to be at the origin of defamiliarization, although it was a point of departure for Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect." McLuhan began using the term counterenvironment not long before some artists (who were aware of McLuhan's writing on the subject) started to direct the audience's aestheticized attention to the situation's contextual framework rather than to discrete objects alone. Like the counterenvironment, later institutional critique proposed a Gestalt reversal of attention by turning the environmental ground to figure, thereby prompting awareness of what had been earlier ignored. McLuhan's theory of the counterenvironment, and the*

variations of defamiliarization more generally, are historically specific while also partaking in transformative historical processes that involve a fusion of communication, change, continuity, and repetition.

Résumé | La théorie du contre-environnement de Marshall McLuhan s'inscrit dans une perspective plus large de défamiliarisation qui a vu le jour dans le romantisme et peut être retrouvée dans les écrits d'Henri Bergson, la littérature moderniste anglaise, le formalisme russe, la distanciation brechtienne, et la critique institutionnelle plus récente. Parmi les écrits romantiques apparentés, l'essai de Percy Bysshe Shelley, « A Defense of Poetry » (1821) anticipe clairement des théories ultérieures qui à la fois répètent et développent des notions fondamentales de défamiliarisation. Les écrits de Bergson sur la bande dessinée font revivre les idées romantiques quand il déclare que l'objet des arts est de « mettre de côté les symboles utilitaires, les généralités conventionnelles et socialement acceptées, bref tout ce qui voile la réalité, pour nous mettre devant la réalité elle-même ». Des modernistes anglais tels que T.E Hulme, T.S. Eliot, et leurs contemporains, se sont inspirés de Bergson et ont été des sources importantes pour le contre-environnement de McLuhan. La défamiliarisation du formalisme russe et du modernisme anglais tirent leur origine du romantisme et de Bergson, ce qui explique leurs perspectives parfois parallèles. McLuhan a eu une exposition limitée au formalisme russe à travers le cinéma constructiviste ainsi que l'art et les écrits de László Moholy-Nagy. Les auteurs ultérieurs considèrent parfois erronément l'ostranenie de Viktor Shklovsky comme étant à l'origine de la « défamiliarisation », bien que ce soit un point de départ pour « l'effet de distanciation » de Bertolt Brecht. McLuhan a commencé à utiliser le terme contre-environnement peu de temps avant que certains artistes, qui étaient au courant des écrits de McLuhan sur le sujet, commencent au courant des écrits de McLuhan sur le sujet, commencent

à diriger l'attention esthétisée du public sur le cadre contextuel de la situation plutôt que seulement sur des objets distincts. À l'instar du contre-environnement, la critique institutionnelle ultérieure a proposé un changement de direction de l'attention gestaltiste en transformant l'environnement en figure, suscitant ainsi la prise de conscience de ce qui avait été auparavant ignoré. La théorie de McLuhan du contre-environnement, et plus généralement les variations de la défamiliarisation, sont historiquement spécifiques tout en participant à des processus historiques de transformation qui impliquent une fusion de la communication, du changement, de la continuité, et de la répétition.:

Marshall McLuhan's theory of the counterenvironment is central to his understanding of aesthetics. As with every innovative idea, however, its background may be acknowledged, avoided, or reinterpreted according to evolving requirements. As a knowledgeable literary scholar with an interest in modernity, McLuhan drew on a wide variety of sources that at times employed ideas linked to defamiliarization. His counterenvironment is within the historical stream of defamiliarization that appears to emerge in Romanticism and may be further traced through, for example, the writings of Henri Bergson, English literary modernism, Russian formalist *ostranenie*, Brechtian estrangement, and institutional critique.[1] I will provide a brief outline of some of these theoretical and practical relationships as they pertain to McLuhan's work.

Defamiliarization plays a role in the Romantic literary theory of Novalis as well as the theoretical writings of the English poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, among others. Many contemporary writers and theorists situate Viktor Shklovsky (problematically historically, but understandably in ideological terms) as the point of origin for defamiliarization. Though he downplays the influence of

Bergson on Russian formalist literary theory, Douglas Robinson suggests that Romanticism anticipates Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie*, or estrangement. In a late article from 1966, Shklovsky quotes Novalis, who writes: "The art of pleasing estrangement, of making an object strange and yet familiar and attractive: that is Romantic poetics" (qtd. in Robinson 79-80). Robinson further notes: "Novalis is not the only inventor of Romantic estrangement, of course; the concept is one of the central ideas of German and English Romanticism and German Idealism… . The basic idea is that conventionalization is psychologically alienating, anesthetizing, and that the reader therefore stands in need of some sort of aesthetic shock to break him or her out of the anesthesis" (80-81). Walter Benjamin also points to this aspect of defamiliarization (applied to artworks) in Novalis:

> When Novalis says, "What is at the same time thought and observation is a critical germ," he expresses–tautologically, to be sure, for observation is a thought process–the close affinity between criticism and observation. Thus, criticism is, as it were, an experiment on the artwork, one through which the latter's own reflection is awakened, through which it is brought to consciousness and to knowledge of itself. (Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism" 151)

Similarly, Robinson mentions Coleridge's 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, in which he writes:

> Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself, as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the

mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes which see not, ears that hear not, and hearts which neither feel nor understand. (Coleridge 314)

At this early date Coleridge provides some of the fundamental characteristics of defamiliarization as it comes to be known. When Romanticism deals with pantheistic notions of nature, there is a sublimation of religious sentiment. The emergence of defamiliarization in Romanticism may therefore involve a secularization of earlier religious revelation that Coleridge seems to point to when noting that Wordsworth aimed to "excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom."

Shelley's essay "A Defence of Poetry," written in 1821 and published in 1840, anticipates well the later writings of Bergson on laughter; Shklovsky (who appears to have borrowed defamiliarization from Bergson) on *ostranenie*; Bertolt Brecht (who adapted Shklovsky's *ostranenie*) on the alienation effect; McLuhan on the counterenvironment; and various writers on institutional critique (who tend to assert its point of origin to 1968 or refer back to Brecht). Shelley, like McLuhan later, claims that poets (McLuhan refers to "artists") are not only those who work within the disciplinary confines of the arts, but are rather those people in any social role who recognize actuality and direct our attention toward it:

> But Poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music,

of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. (Shelley 482)

McLuhan, for his part, employs a Gestalt point of reference, identifying those people as artists who are able to reverse the figure-ground relation of what he terms the environment by creating a counterenvironment. Doing so directs our attention to the environment's otherwise unperceivable processes and constraints, making us aware of them. This new awareness allows us both to recognize actuality and act upon it in a responsible and informed manner. As with Shelley, the individuals to whom McLuhan refers need not be professional artists, or even have any interest in the fine arts: "The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness" (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 65). These "artists" (broadly understood) create counterenvironments that defamiliarize the original under-perceived environment or context and allow for its genuine appearance to be recognized.

Shelley, following Coleridge, sets forth some of the ideas that come to permeate the literature on defamiliarization when he considers the nature of poetry:

> It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us

the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. (505-06)

Note the phrase "film of familiarity" borrowed directly from Coleridge. Shelley's essay informs later writers on defamiliarization, and perhaps Bergson's thoughts on the critical and illuminating effects of laughter and art, when Shelley writes of poetry: "It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects as if they were not familiar" (487). The subsequent literature on defamiliarization presents many references to removing the veil on appearances, which allows for the creation of new phenomenal perceptions of the everyday. The percipient is thought to have sudden access to a greater understanding of both sensual and social actuality.

Bergson had considerable influence on artists and writers seeking to align their works with new developments in philosophy and science in late 19th– and early 20th-century Europe.[2] McLuhan appears to have drawn theoretical ideas from Bergson both directly and indirectly via the English modernists. Stephen Crocker suggests that McLuhan also drew on a stream of Catholic Bergsonism (Crocker 17), which may suggest further affinities between defamiliarization and spiritual revelation. Bergson's short book *Laughter* lays out the ideas developed more fully by subsequent theorists of defamiliarization. Bergson employs the same veil metaphor and writes about art in a manner reminiscent of Shelley, who had earlier

claimed of poetry that "it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms" (Shelley 505). Bergson for his part asks: "What is the object of art? … . All this is around and within us, and yet no whit of it do we distinctly perceive. Between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed: a veil that is dense and opaque for the common herd—thin, almost transparent, for the artist and the poet" (157-58). Bergson proclaims the essence of his argument when he states that "art, whether it be painting or sculpture, poetry or music, has no other objects than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself" (162). This is one of the definitive statements on defamiliarization, and it can serve as the basis for recognizing later variants of the aesthetic or aesthetic-social-political type.

Bergson's analysis of laughter informs later approaches to art, linked to McLuhan's counterenvironment, that are structurally comedic in nature even when they deal with serious and socially critical subjects. Laughter has an aesthetic element, but it also involves a "social gesture" that "pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement" (73). It is in this utilitarian aspect that laughter's defamiliarization comes to resemble counterenvironmental art's critical dealings with its social framework. Bergson writes, "there remains outside this sphere of emotion and struggle… a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective" (73-74). For

Bergson the comic is a consequence of a lack of personal awareness that may extend to being oblivious toward others and the social context. He calls this inattention "unsociability," linking it to rigidity, automatism, and absentmindedness (155-56).

Just as Shelley maintains that poetry "creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration", Jan Walsh Hokenson suggests that Bergson's notion of the mechanical involves it diminishing individuals' freedom in terms of behaviour and perception. By carrying out the same activity repeatedly, the person is overwhelmed by routine, resulting in a situation where "one ultimately becomes ignorant of the true sources of one's actions" (Walsh Hokenson 44). Walsh Hokenson further writes: "Bergson insists that the comic is a function of the mechanical encrusted *on* the living, which includes society no less than the individual and nature" (44, original emphasis). Paul Douglass identifies the process by which Bergson feels we can be liberated from this mechanical encrustation: "At the same time that we are being consumed in time, 'our living and concrete self gets covered with an outer crust of clean-cut psychic states.' The artist cannot change the nature of this reality, but by 'dissolving or corroding the outer crust' of our lives, art can 'bring us back to the inner core,' restore the awareness of 'real time,' and thereby return us 'back to our own presence'" (Douglass 110). Like Shelley's "veil," references to a "crust" forming on appearances, necessitating disruption, repeatedly arise in the literature on defamiliarization. Douglass explains the technique for carrying out this disruption: "Bergson suggests, then, that the writer 'insinuates' into the reader's mind the perception of truth, 'baffling' the reader on purpose. In Bergson's poetics,

literature employs misdirection, stealing in upon the conscious mind and tricking it into a temporary moment of self-realization" (110). McLuhan takes a similar approach when he writes that one "can never perceive the impact of any new technology directly, but it can be done in the manner of Perseus looking in the mirror at Medusa. It has to be done indirectly. You have to perceive the consequences of the new environment on the old environment before you know what the new environment is" (McLuhan, "Address" 228). Such perception involves memory. Jonathan Crary positions Bergson's view of personal memory in relation to the social operations of laughter. Attention can assist memory in reinforcing and renewing current perception, which can multiply and create a web of related memories. Memory may let us grasp in one intuition many moments of duration, distinguishing itself from the larger flow of phenomena. Regarding the revitalization of perception, Crary explains, "Bergson sought to describe the revelatory vitality, even the shock, of a moment when memory ceases to merely confirm or adjust a perception and instead opens up a reverberating process of 'endosmosis,' of remaking an object of perception, of creating something new" (Crary 322-23). Such a creation of something new is one of the aims of modernism, suggesting that the stream of defamiliarization joins early on with the emergent ideals of avant-garde modernity.

Perhaps because Bergson's popularity as a public intellectual diminished following World War I, he has not been sufficiently acknowledged for his essential contributions to the development of defamiliarization theories. When the extent of his influence in the early-20th century is taken into account, however, it becomes easier to trace his later impact, such as in the works of the English modernist literary

theorists who drew on their own literary heritage while also being influenced by Bergson's almost cult-like appeal at the time. In some ways the popular McLuhanism of the mid to late 1960s was a repetition of the earlier rage for Bergsonism. T.E. Hulme, a Bergson-influenced critic, wrote foundational essays that set the stage for later theoretical developments in English modernism. McLuhan valued Hulme's book of essays, *Speculations*, to such a degree that according to former graduate student Donald F. Theall he assigned it as a required reading for graduate students in the 1950s (Theall 209). His interest in Hulme matters because in the McLuhan literature Bergson is often downplayed as a potential influence due to the supposition that, because McLuhan's early idol Wyndham Lewis railed against him in later years, McLuhan himself must have paid little attention to Bergson. Yet Mary Ann Gillies records that Lewis was a great admirer of Bergson in his younger days and that Lewis typically assimilated what he could from sources and then repudiated them (Gillies 50). Hulme translated some of Bergson's writings and advocated his ideas, such as those related to defamiliarization, found in several essays including "Bergson's Theory of Art," in which he writes:

> The creative activity of the artist is only necessary because of the limitations placed on internal and external perception by the necessities of action. If we could break though the veil which actions interpose, if we could come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, art would be useless and unnecessary… . [T]he function of the artist is to pierce through here and there, accidentally as it were, the veil placed between us and reality by the limitations of our perception engendered by action. (Hulme 147)

Elsewhere in his essay Hulme employs a variant of Bergson's "crust" reference when he states that in every art form "the artist picks out of reality something which we, owning to a certain hardening of our perceptions, have been unable to see ourselves" (156).

Critics such as James M. Curtis have argued that T.S. Eliot draws considerably from Bergson,[3] notably with Eliot's employment of defamiliarization: "[Eliot] wrote in *The Use of Poetry*, 'It [poetry] may effect revolutions in sensibility, such as are periodically needed, may help break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming, and make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it'" (Curtis, "French Structuralism" 373). It could be argued that Eliot is deriving his idea as much from the Romantics as from Bergson, but Douglass identifies Bergsonian elements in many of Eliot's works, including *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* (Douglass 114). In *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), McLuhan adopts one of Eliot's statements on defamiliarization in poetry (without citing it) in an early iteration of the counterenvironment. Regarding modern advertising, McLuhan argues that advertisers have invaded the "collective public mind… in order to manipulate, exploit, control" (McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* v). McLuhan's critical approach operates in a manner that presages the counterenvironment: "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 here used as a means of energizing it" (v-vii). In "The Metaphysical Poets" Eliot employs a similar vocabulary of dislocation when writing: "The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to

force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (Eliot 289). In the above passage McLuhan's referencing of Eliot demonstrates an indirect use of Bergson's defamiliarization during the early stages of McLuhan's formulation of the counterenvironment.

In "It's Alive! Bertram Brooker and Vitalism," Adam Lauder considers McLuhan's relation to Bergson by way of Lewis (who was both indebted to and conflicted about Bergson) and posits a possible connection in the Canadian context through the painter, author, advertising executive, and theorist Bertram Brooker (81-105). In the latter part of his doctoral dissertation, Lauder discusses McLuhan's possible use of Bergson's *Laughter* in creating a template for his counterenvironment. Lauder develops the idea (also suggested by Theall and McLuhan himself) that McLuhan's humour involves Menippean satire. Lauder links this form to Lewis's satirical writing, McLuhan, Mikhail Bakhtin on the carnivalesque, and artist Robert Smithson, who was an admirer of Lewis:

> As in Bergson's earlier commentary, Lewis viewed the mechanized body as a key locus of the comic. But whereas the French thinker identified a utilitarian purpose in laughter—namely as a corrective 'intended to humiliate' unsociable behaviour—Lewis, by contrast, took aim at Bergson's anthropomorphic illusion. Rather than shoring up the humanist delusions of liberal democracy, Lewis's comedic bodies reveal the subject's inherence in posthuman patterns of mechanization that we would now recognize as specifically proto-informatic. The cynical overtones of Lewis's transformation of Bergson's theorization of the comic reveals his indebtedness to traditions of Menippean satire:

> an ancient Greek genre that cast a long shadow on the subsequent development of European literature, which was likewise an enduring inspiration to McLuhan. (Lauder, "Digital Materialisms" 357-58)

Regarding Bakhtin's writing on humour and satire, Larissa Rudova notes that among the many Russians reading Bergson in the early-20th century was Mikhail Bakhtin, whose book *Rabelais and His World* is said to have much in common with Bergson's *Laughter* (Rudova 107n). Elena Lamberti favours the Menippean satire argument, writing that "more than a moral and cynical satire, McLuhan's can be perceived mostly as a Menippean satire, which is devoted to intentionally attacking the reader in order to wake him/her up" (Lamberti 192). It does seem that Menippean satire can involve a form of deautomatizing defamiliarization not unlike that theorized by Bergson, meaning that McLuhan could have employed Bergsonian defamiliarization (at a time when Bergson's reputation had long been in eclipse) as a model for his own counterenvironmental defamilarization, while also understanding himself to be writing in the more esoteric form of Menippean satire.

Though the English modernists and Russian formalists were ideologically distinct from each other in many ways, both Curtis and Ewa Thompson have observed that each group adopted Bergson's ideas on defamiliarization within a short time of each other (Curtis, "French Structuralism" 373; Thompson 67). Many writers cite Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie* as the point of origin for defamiliarization more generally, despite the idea developing for a century or longer by the time he promoted it as a radically new interpretative tool. It may be that Shklovsky is given this

credit largely as a consequence of ideological affiliation in that his place at the origins of the Russian avant-garde may make him a more ideal and convenient ancestor figure than Bergson or the Romantics, who might seem less in tune with the social-political concerns of defamiliarization as it evolved in the later-20th century. It does appear that defamiliarization in Russian formalism and English modernism share similar roots in Romanticism and Bergson. Robinson argues that Shklovsky borrows one of the deautomatizing effects of *ostranenie*, seeing as opposed to recognition, from Bergson in his 1914 essay "The Resurrection of the Word" (Robinson 118-19). Curtis earlier proposed that Shklovsky employed Bergson as a template for "the paradigm, the structural principles" for his own theoretical ideas (Curtis, "Russian Formalism" 110). Shklovsky's *ostranenie* was little known in North America when McLuhan was formulating his notions. However, McLuhan does cite the writings of the Russian Sergei Eisenstein and Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy, both related to Constructivism, as being among his intellectual influences of the late 1940s and 50s. Theall points out that McLuhan read Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* as well as Eisenstein's *Film Form* (Theall 43). Even earlier, circa 1940, McLuhan wrote about his teaching methods at St. Louis University: "I always spend at least two weeks introducing them to the writings of Pudovkin and Eisenstein on film technique and make them adapt a novel to scenario form" (Gordon 97; McLuhan, *Letters* 107). While Eisenstein's (or more suitably Dziga Vertov's) use of montage can be an example of defamiliarization in practice, Eisenstein does not discuss defamiliarization as such in *Film Form*. R. Bruce Elder more recently considers Eisenstein's use of montage in terms of defamiliarization (Elder 290-91), despite the

language of defamiliarization being absent in the discussion of montage in *Film Form*.

Oliver Botar recognizes Moholy-Nagy's indebtedness to the Italian Futurists and indicates a difference between them:

> As early as 1913 F.T. Marinetti wrote of 'multiple and simultaneous awareness in a single individual,' a potentially destabilizing state that the Futurists sought to aestheticize and harness. However, this destabilization was not utopian in impetus. In their responses to modernity, the Futurists sought, for the most part, to instill a sense of discomfort and disorientation rather than adaptation in their audiences. In Moholy-Nagy's scheme, art and artists are accorded the role of educator rather than that of agent provocateur, and it is through this pedagogical prism that art is refracted and projected toward medial experimentation and sensory training/expansion. (Botar 11)

In this scenario, it is the Futurists, more so than Moholy-Nagy, who were interested in the possibilities of defamiliarization. McLuhan makes multiple references to the Futurists in his writings, and it is well known from their various manifestos that they were devotees of Bergson. McLuhan, given his personal relationships with Lewis and Ezra Pound, was even more sympathetic to the Futurist-related English Vorticists. Botar shows that Moholy-Nagy had considerable access to Russian Constructivist ideas in the early 1920s, noting that "in 1922 Moholy-Nagy teamed up with Hungarian art historian Alfréd Kamény, who had just returned from Moscow full of the ideas of Alexander Bogdanov and his Proletkult movement" (21). Moholy-Nagy also knew El Lissitzky and the

Hungarian Béla Uitz, who was familiar with many members of the Russian avant-garde. Moholy-Nagy and McLuhan shared a friend in the architectural and technology historian Sigfried Giedion. Botar recounts that Giedion "remembers Moholy-Nagy lying on the ground and pointing his camera upward from the ground and straight downward from a balcony during a joint vacation at Belle-Île-en-Mer in 1925, shortly after Moholy-Nagy began to use a camera. Moholy-Nagy's obsession with novel viewpoints and visual qualities was part of his effort to 'educate' vision" (Botar 33). Moholy-Nagy's early photography is of a defamiliarizing nature, but his diverse influences and activities make it difficult to situate him within a single tendency. Herbert Molderings writes about Moholy-Nagy's photograph of the Berlin Radio Tower, circa 1928, in a manner that consciously applies Shklovsky's ideas and vocabulary related to *ostranenie*: "The steep view from above alienates the viewer and makes the depicted detail of reality difficult to recognize at first glance. Instead of passively perceiving what the photograph shows, the viewer is expected—as he is when standing in front of a Cubist painting—to piece together the depicted shapes into a recognizable whole. Thus seeing becomes a difficult, delayed and hence conscious process" (Molderings 41). Here Molderings discusses the photographs rather than Moholy-Nagy's texts, making it possible that his defamiliarization references derive more specifically from Shklovsky as well as the later literature on photographer Alexander Rodchenko and filmmaker Dziga Vertov.

Botar points out that Moholy-Nagy was very much involved with theories of "Biocentrism" (12). His own writings about art in *Vision in Motion* sometimes resemble Piet Mondrian's and Theo van Doesburg's writings on De

Stijl, which deal in a philosophical way with relationships:

> This development of the visual arts from fixed perspective to "vision in motion" is *vision in relationships*. The fixed viewpoint, the isolated handling of problems as a norm is rejected and replaced by a flexible approach, by seeing matters in a constantly changing moving field of mutual relationships. This may start a new phase in the history of mankind, based upon the universal principle of relationships. It is the clue to all the changes which took or will take place in the sciences as well as in philosophy, including education and all other fields, in fact, in our whole civilization. (Moholy-Nagy 114, original emphasis)

Moholy-Nagy concentrates more on integration and relationships than defamiliarization, focusing less on revelation than his idea of the Total Work. In one instance, however, Moholy-Nagy echoes Shelley and McLuhan on the nature of creative persons:

> The artist unconsciously disentangles the most essential strands of existence from the contorted and chaotic complexities of actuality, and weaves them into an emotional fabric of compelling validity, characteristic of himself as well as of his epoch. This ability of selection is an outstanding gift based upon intuitive power and insight, upon judgment and knowledge, and upon inner responsibility to fundamental biological and social laws which provoke a reinterpretation in every civilization. This intuitive power is present in other creative workers, too, in philosophers, poets, scientists, technologists.

They pursue the same hopes, seek the same meanings, and—although the content of their work appears to be different—the trends of their approach and the background of their activity are identical. (Moholy-Nagy 11)

Moholy-Nagy emerged as an artist at a time when Bergsonism suffused European modernism, and by the early 1920s he would have had direct contact with the Russian Shklovsky version of it. Hence, his practical and theoretical references to defamiliarization may be associated with multiple sources.

Shklovsky's adoption of Bergson's automatism and defamiliarization is evident when he writes:

In studying poetic speech… we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity. (Shklovsky 27)

In a manner reminiscent of Bergson and the Romantics, Shklovsky dwells on the deadening of response that results from over-familiarization and the necessity of disruption in order to gain clarity of vision:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives

are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (20, original emphasis)

Jurij Striedter outlines Shklovsky's ideas on defamiliarization as follows:

On the one hand, the exclusive focus on the artistic function of defamiliarization (neglecting any extra-artistic reference of implication) now takes the form of a thesis: Changes in art and in artistic forms occur through a process, wholly contained within the realm of art and indispensable to it, whereby automatized forms and devices give way to new ones that defamiliarize them afresh. (Striedter 30)

McLuhan similarly suggests about the counterenvironment: "All the arts might be considered to act as counterenvironments or countergradients. Any environmental form whatsoever saturates perception so that its own character is imperceptible; it has the power to distort or deflect human awareness. Even the most popular arts can serve to increase the level of awareness at least until they become entirely environmental and unperceived" (McLuhan and Parker 2). Importantly, the operations and effects of defamiliarization or the counterenvironment are historical and are not inherent properties of the work. Like a joke that loses its provocative power with repetition, what

defamiliarizes at one time may operate very differently with repeated exposure or when conditions and expectations have changed.

According to the commentary of John Willett, Brecht began writing and speaking about *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the alienation effect, following his visit to Moscow in 1935. Willett reasonably argues that Brecht's notion is derived from Shklovsky (Brecht, "Alienation Effects" 99), despite the fact that formalism was suppressed at that time in the Soviet Union with the institutionalization of socialist realism. Brecht's alienation effect became a great influence in the West at a time when references to earlier Russian formalist and Soviet avant-garde sources were difficult to come by. Brecht's significance is not only for the value of his version of this theoretical idea, but also for his political position with which many later theorists and artists could identify—perhaps more so than with Bergson or certainly the Romantics—if they wanted to maintain their sense of radicalism.

In his essay "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect," Brecht writes:

> The first condition for the A-effect's application to this end is that stage and auditorium must be purged of everything "magical" and that no "hypnotic tensions" should be set up. … The audience was not "worked up" by a display of temperament or "swept away" by acting with tautened muscles; in short, no attempt was made to put it in a trance and give it the illusion of watching an ordinary unrehearsed event. As will be seen presently, the audience's tendency to plunge into such illusions has to be checked by specific artistic means. (136)

Brecht's discussion of the alienation effect prepares the groundwork for McLuhan's counterenvironment and later contemporary art techniques that come to be known as institutional critique because of the insistence on removing the magical, the trance, and the illusion of the setting, resulting in what Shelley terms laying bare or Bergson, Shelley, and Coleridge the removing the veil that suppresses our encounter with actuality. Brecht rephrases the Romantic's understanding of defamiliarization:

> The achievement of the A-effect constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely-practised way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing… . The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. (143-44)

Here Brecht does not essentially add more to what Shelley, Bergson, and Shklovsky had already proposed. Yet these repetitions are paradoxically admired for their theoretical originality, which may call to mind Rosalind Krauss's argument concerning the recurring format of the grid in avant-garde art. (Krauss 54-58) Brecht's truly innovative departure is in the already mentioned focus on the effects of staging on the viewer.

In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin writes about Brecht's epic theatre:

I remind you here of the songs, which have their chief function in interrupting the action. Here—in the principle of interruption—epic theater, as you see, takes up a procedure that has become familiar to you in recent years from film and radio, press and photography. I am speaking of the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted… . The interruption of action, on account of which Brecht described his theater as *epic*, constantly counteracts an illusion in the audience. For such illusion is a hindrance to a theater that proposes to make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements. … Epic theater… does not reproduce situations; rather, it discovers them. This discovery is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences. Only interruption here is not the character of a stimulant but an organizing function. It arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-à-vis the process, the actor vis-à-vis his role. (234-35, original emphasis)

Benjamin characterizes Brecht's montage as a procedure of interruption that "disrupts the context in which it is inserted", thereby prompting the dissolution of the audience's illusion, leading to their recognizing the reality of their situation. This is very like the aesthetic and social operations of McLuhan's counterenvironment as well as institutional critique, which have the capacity to transform awareness, leading to potential change.

Benjamin considers the relation of humour to the epic theater:

To construct from the smallest elements of behavior what in Aristotelian dramaturgy is called "action" is the purpose of epic theater. Its means are therefore more modest than those of traditional theater; likewise its aims. It is less concerned with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives. It may be noted, by the way, that there is no better start for thinking than laughter. And, in particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul. Epic theater is lavish only in occasions for laughter. (236)

Benjamin's reflections on Brecht's theatre are remindful of Bergson and McLuhan, who both identify the comic and the structure of comedy as being models for the defamiliarizing production of revelatory awareness.

The English translation of *Brecht on Theatre*, which outlines the alienation effect, was published the same year as McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. McLuhan formalized the term "counterenvironment" around that time, although he had already outlined the basics of it in *The Mechanical Bride*. The counterenvironment is engaged in a reformation of consciousness; it develops out of a modern tradition in which the role of art is to direct people's critical attention to their context and reawaken their sensibilities so as to enable a fresh engagement with their own immediate situation. This is similar to Bergson's defamiliarization and how Fredric Jameson characterizes Shklovsky's *ostranenie* as "a way of restoring conscious experience, of breaking through deadening and mechanical habits of conduct (*automatization*, as the Czech Formalists will later call it), and

allowing us to be reborn to the world in its existential freshness and horror" (Jameson 51, original emphasis). What is largely new with McLuhan is the focus on the environment as the locus of change and transformation. However, in *Culture and Environment* (1933), McLuhan's Cambridge instructor F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson write about the environment's adverse effects on the citizenry as well as the need to struggle against it and train awareness (Leavis and Thompson 4-5; Marchessault 28). Their use of the term environment resembles McLuhan's because, importantly, they do not use it to refer to space or nature but rather to processes that shape and alter our outlooks and perspectives. As McLuhan argues: "Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible. The groundrules, pervasive structure, and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments, or countersituations made by artists, provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly" (McLuhan and Fiore 68). There is less a sense of repetitive action causing an automatist state than there is a recognition that we are always in an environmental situation that requires ongoing defamiliarization.

McLuhan proposes that

> [t]he function of the artist in correcting the unconscious bias of perception in any given culture can be betrayed if he merely repeats the bias of the culture instead of readjusting it. In fact, it can be said that any culture which feeds merely on its direct antecedents is dying. In this sense the role of art is to create the means of perception by creating counterenvironments that open the door of perception to people

> otherwise numbed in a nonperceivable situation. (McLuhan and Parker 241)

McLuhan's passage on defamiliarizing perception echoes Shklovsky's claim that "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things". McLuhan does not entirely equate conventional or traditional art with the counterenvironment because for him the role of the artist is to readjust the bias of culture rather than to repeat or reinforce it. In some respects, he is restating the idea and role of the avant-garde in modernity.

McLuhan began referencing the counterenvironment around 1964, at a moment of great change in the North American art world with the emergence of Minimalism, Pop Art, Fluxus, and shortly afterwards, Conceptual Art, new media art forms, and institutional critique. It is easy now to forget that the texts of Poststructuralism as well as those of Guy Debord and the Situationists were not readily available in North America at the time. English translations of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological writings on culture were still to come. But McLuhan was a North American cultural phenomenon, with his writings easily accessible and widely read by artists, critics, and others in the artworld. Some of Brecht's theoretical writings were also available, and some artists, especially the more politicized, cite his alienation effect as an influence on their work. However, for the type of artwork that emerged in North America in the mid 1960s to early 70s involving directing one's attention to the contextual framework of one's own situation and activity, McLuhan's theory of the counterenvironment appears to have played a significant and under-acknowledged role in laying down the theoretical groundwork (Allan, "Conceptual" 131; "Counterenvironment" 22-45; Lauder, "Drop-In" 48-49).

The term institutional critique emerges in the mid- to late-1970s and is most closely associated with the writings of Benjamin Buchloh that deal with an art form that, like the counterenvironment, does a Gestalt reversal by turning the ground to figure. Buchloh was the second editor of the German magazine *Interfunktionen*, which specialized in providing space for artists' magazine projects that are artworks employing mass-publication techniques. The first editor was Friedrich Heubach whose initial issue of 1969 originated out of Wolf Vostell's actions in opposition to the 1968 *Documenta* exhibition. This issue includes references to McLuhan in relation to the intermedia approach of Vostell (an artist with Fluxus connections) and his fellow artists (*Interfunktionen* 17). Buchloh states that it is with the rise of Conceptual Art in the late 1960s (he specifies 1968) that the canonical artists whom he associates with institutional critique emerge: Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Dan Graham, and Lawrence Weiner. Buchloh writes: "There I would suggest that only at this time did a radically different basis for critical interventions in the discursive and institutional frameworks determining the production and reception of contemporary art become established" (xxiv). This claim may be largely true of this cohort of artists at this specific moment in contemporary art, but the general theoretical parameters had been set for a very long time.

Authors on institutional critique typically adopt Buchloh's narrative. Paradoxically, however, these authors are often reluctant to use the tools provided by institutional critique to examine its own presuppositions and historical background. For example, Blake Stimson writes: "Institutional critique, as it will be understood here, was a child of 1968" (20), assuming this year of political unrest as the technique's point of origin. Other writers on institutional critique, perhaps partly as a consequence of the increased popularity of Hans Haacke's work in the 1980s, begin stressing the importance of legible political content for such work, often referring to thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Bourdieu, and Debord as new points of reference. Debord and the Situationists employed a form of defamiliarization in work related to their theories of the *dérive* and *détournement* (both seemingly adopted from the Surrealists). Bourdieu, in the introduction to the English-language edition of *Distinctions*, writes of "a sort of estrangement from the familiar, domestic, native world, the critique (in the Kantian sense) of culture [that] invites each reader, through the 'making strange' beloved of the Russian formalists, to reproduce on his or her own behalf the critical break of which it is the product" (Bourdieu xiv). With Bourdieu, the connection to the tradition of defamiliarization is maintained, although it is curious that, as a French writer, he does not recognize the partly Bergsonian origins of the Russian formalist idea that he cites.

In "What is Institutional Critique?" Andrea Fraser states that institutional critique "engages sites above all as social sites, structured sets of relations that are fundamentally social relations. To say that they are social relations is not to oppose them to intersubjective or even intrasubjective relations, but to say that a site is a *social* field of those relations" (Fraser 305, emphasis original). It is not only the visible aspects of the site that are dealt with, but more importantly "their structure, particularly what is hierarchical in that structure and the forms of power and domination, symbolic and material violence, produced by those hierarchies" (307). Fraser appears to be drawing on Bourdieu as well as Foucault, employing a changing

vocabulary to describe defamiliarization. Yet the structural manner in which second-generation institutional critique functions remains remarkably similar to that of McLuhan's counterenvironment and to the work of those artists who were influenced by his writing on that subject. Like institutional critique, the counterenvironment is both aesthetic and social in its revelatory qualities. However, McLuhan had fallen out of critical favour by the mid-1970s, making him an ancestral figure many avoided until the late-1990s. As a consequence, McLuhan remains largely invisible in the literature on institutional critique.

An interesting figure who straddles historical perspectives is the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, a Polish émigré to Canada and subsequently to the United States. Wodiczko's public-monument photographic slide projections of the 1980s were a fascinating form of institutional critique. His work was championed early on by the journal *October*, of which Buchloh is a founding editor. Wodiczko notes the importance of Brecht and Soviet precedents, but he also references McLuhan and the Situationists. He quotes from McLuhan: "In the name of 'progress' our official culture is striving to force the new media to do the work of the old" (qtd. in Wodiczko 59). This quotation introduces an illumination proposal for Philadelphia in 1987. In a fashion that illustrates the continuity of Wodiczko's ideas with the long history of defamiliarization, he writes: "The new task for City Hall will be to transform the sense of the entire public institution and its architectural body into something sensitive, responding, and responsible, to acknowledge the daily rhythm or daily life of the city. Our task is to reattach the public domain's hold on contemporary life and to challenge its alienating, elusive effect" (60). Peter Boswell quotes Wodiczko as saying:

"What is implicit about the building must be exposed as explicit, the myth must be visually concretized and unmasked… . This must happen at the very place of the myth on the site of its production, on its body—the building" (qtd. in Boswell 16). The action must interfere with the physical building itself and its public address. Furthermore, Wodiczko maintains: "This will be a symbol-attack, a public, psycho-analytical séance, unmasking and revealing the unconscious of the building, its body, the 'medium' of power" (qtd. in Boswell 20). In this last statement, Wodiczko seems to link his approach to defamiliarization with the languages of Surrealism, psychoanalysis, and Foucault.

In this brief sketch of the relation of McLuhan's counterenvironment to the larger history of defamiliarization, I have addressed numerous points of continuity. However, because the basic idea is at least 200 years old, emerging in tandem with the historical period of modernity, the temporal frameworks specific to the repetitions of this concept will themselves be transformed in the ever-changing environment. Leszek Kolakowski (a polymath who also wrote on Bergson) identifies a problematic view of historical repetition in which:

> … the only factor of importance is that which constitutes the uniqueness of a particular historical complex, every detail of which—although it may be indisputably a repetition of former ideas—acquires a new meaning in its relationship to that complex and is no longer significant in any other way. This hermeneutic assumption clearly leads to a historical nihilism of its own, since by insisting on the exclusive relationship of every detail to a synchronic whole (whether the whole be an individual mind or an entire cultural epoch) it rules

out all continuity of interpretation, obliging us to treat the mind or the epoch as one of a series of closed, monadic entities. It lays down in advance that there is no possibility of communication among such entities and no language capable of describing them collectively. (Kolakowski 11)

Likewise, with McLuhan's counterenvironment and the stream of defamiliarization more generally, it behooves us to not imagine that the idea emerges out of nowhere in the many instances of its appearance, but to consider its historical specificity, while understanding it in relation to the transformative historical processes that involve a fusion of communication, change, continuity, and repetition.

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Notes

1 I deal with some of these sources in relation to a counterenvironment-related art practice of the 1960s and 70s in my article "Counterenvironment" (22-45).

2 For more detail on the cultural politics surrounding Bergson in early-20th-century France, see Mark Antliff.

3 Gillies suggests that Paul Douglass's *Bergson, Eliot, & American Literature* (1986) makes a convincing case for Eliot's being influenced in his critical writing by Bergson (64).