Does McLuhan Destroy Leavis?

Marshall McLuhan's lifework - fusing message and medium - radically connects technology with the transformation of significance and expression.
Likewise, the Eliot/Leavis concept of the 'Dissociation of Sensibility' radically implies that *civilisation changes expression*. Civilisation does not change merely purely spiritually, and so that must surely also imply that *technology changes expression* (as we find recognised in, for instance, *Middlemarch*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Anna Karenina*.)
Is, then, the whole of Marshall McLuhan implicit in Leavis?

No, McLuhan does not destroy Leavis. But If we allow each of them to illuminate the other, profound connections, and reciprocal alteration of perspective, unfold, and new questions arise. McLuhan was associated with Leavis for the years of his studentship at Cambridge, and then through his doctoral work, and the underlying connections between them are profound.

McLuhan's work, in conjunction with some of the more unfortunate effects of a watered down deconstruction, might be taken, from perhaps one Leavisian point of view, to encourage a shallowly anti-canonical and relativistic tendency in media studies, and similar. It is often Utopian and neglects the downside. And, to be sure, McLuhan is not a man to fully qualify either his views or his vigorous antitheses, which sometimes makes one wince when reading him. But nevertheless, he is a profound dialectical thinker who instinctively understood the principles of the internet and related phenomena, long before they came into existence.

I am not at all a McLuhan expert, but I believe I can see, and see the importance of, what he is up to. That is what I am going to briefly try to bring into view today. I am going to draw on two works: the later *Understanding Media* (1964), which is, so to say, his manifesto; and his much earlier doctoral dissertation (1943), *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time.* In the earlier, remarkable, work, the Classical Trivium - of Grammar, Dialectics and Rhetoric - , is pursued over 2000 years: through the Ancient world up to Augustine; from Augustine to Abelard; and from Abelard to Erasmus; before finally, at last, in the fourth part, reaching Thomas Nashe, in terms of those canons.

Making sense of all this: McLuhan, - like Lawrence, like Jung, like Eliot, - is ultimately a Herakleitian. "Wisdom is one thing; it is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things." (Burnet's translation)
http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/burnet/egp.htm?chapter=3#65
This reveals deeper implications already, in that Herakleitos is, first, the basis of the 'grammatical' dimension of the *logos*, which is the non-nominalistic intelligibility of the universe through the medium of the language by which we interact with it, and leads on to Stoicism. But he also opens ways to dialectic, as the logical testing of evidence. "Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men if they have souls that understand not their language." "Men do

not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre." Both dialectic and rhetoric are also here in embryo, and, indeed, the 'dialectical' relationship, in the Herakleitian-Hegelian sense, between the three dimensions, continues for the whole 2000 year period he is discussing.

Thus: "And yet, as we shall see in the next section on dialectics, the codifiers of Canon Law, working with the grammarian's techniques over their discordant texts, helped to bring about the great dialectical activity of the twelfth century. Thus law, which shuns logic, but needs grammar and fosters rhetoric, paradoxically helped to produce the renaissance of dialectics. This emphasises once more the complex bonds which join together the rival sisters of the trivium." (*Trivium*, p. 123)

But, as such, as a post-Hegelian, like Karl Marx, McLuhan evolves his position into a *dialectical process based in actualities*. In the *Trivium*, McLuhan invokes the three dimensions, effectively, as *operators* whose mutual struggles define roughly 2000 years of civilisation up to 1600 or so. And their collapse thereafter defines, for him, what Eliot and Leavis were happy to call the '*dissociation of sensibility*'. When we come back to FR Leavis, in this light, certain things stand out more starkly, very starkly.

But, first, here are epitomes of the concretely dialectical process, driven by technologies, not primarily money (though money too is a technology, of course), in contrast to Marx, which McLuhan invokes:
"Each new technology creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading. Yet the new one turns its predecessor into an art form. When writing was new, Plato transformed the old oral dialogue into an art form. When printing was new, the Middle Ages became an art form. 'The Elizabethan World View' was a view of the Middle Ages. And the industrial age turned the Renaissance into an art form as seen in the works of Jacob Burchardt. [we could add, Nietzsche too] Siegfried Giedion, in turn, has in the electric age taught us to see the entire process of mechanization as an art process." *Understanding Media*
"The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy, and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology. The age of mechanical industry that preceded us found vehement expression of private outlook the natural mode of expression. Every culture and every age has its favourite model of perception and knowledge that it is inclined to prescribe for everybody and everything. The mark of our time is its revulsion against imposed patterns. We are suddenly eager to have things and people declare their beings totally. There is a deep faith to be found in this new attitude - a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being. Such is the faith in which this book has been written. It explores the contours of our own extended beings in our technologies, seeking the principle of intelligiblity in each of them." *Understanding Media*
The passage just quoted evokes themes which connect deeply with the *Trivium*.

"....men are never aware of the ground rules of their environmental systems or cultures. Today technologies and their consequent environments succeed each other so rapidly that one environment makes us aware of the next. Technologies begin to perform the function of art in making us aware of the psychic and social consequences of technology."
Understanding Media

And here he is, writing as far back as 1964, as if the internet had already been invented:
"....in the electronic age data classification yields to pattern recognition…" *Understanding Media*
"The student today lives mythically and in depth. At school however he encounters a situation organised by means of classified information….. The student can find no possible means of involvement for himself, nor can he discover how the educational scene relates to the 'mythic' world of electronically processed data and experience that he takes for granted."
Again: "TV is only one component of the electric environment of instant circuitry that has succeeded the old world of the wheel and nuts and bolts. We would be foolish not to ease our transition from the fragmented world of the existing educational establishment by every possible means." *Understanding Media*

Once more, he says, of it all:
"It explores the contours of our own extended beings in our technologies, seeking the principle of intelligiblity in each of them." *Understanding Media*

Let us now consider the tension of grammar and dialectics, which in the *Trivium* McLuhan considers the fundamental tension, since the position of rhetoric, which is associated with Cicero, occupies a kind of mediatorial position in the Christian epoch, from Augustine and Alcuin to Erasmus. I shall use Wittgenstein as a graphic modern instance who is illuminated by the connections McLuhan makes, both the earlier and later McLuhan, and this will then lead me on, in turn, to where Leavis stands in all of this.

In terms of McLuhan's conceptions in the *Trivium*, Wittgenstein moves from *dialectic* in the *Tractatus* to *grammar* in *Philosophical Investigations.* And, in terms of the conceptions of *Understanding Media*, Wittgenstein moves from the *Tractatus*'s *objectivism* of the industrial scientific epoch, to the *inclusivity of medium* of the electrical epoch, in the *Investigations*. Of course, there is still a lot of dialectic, and deep residual conflict between dialectic and grammar, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as there also is in Leavis. Deconstructive methods, shared by Wittgenstein and Leavis, as well as Derrida, are dialectical. Nevertheless Leavis and the later Wittgenstein are still essentially *grammarians* in McLuhan's terms. The *Philosophical Investigations* , seen through McLuhan's eyes, should have been called by the name of Derrida's book, *Of Grammatology.* Its invocation of an embodied potency of language, through which language exists as creative force in its own right, not as merely replicative, expresses, like Vico, Johann Georg Hamann, William Blake, and Coleridge - whether inadvertently or not inadvertently, - something of the ancient conception, especially

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the Hebrew conception, of language and names as vehicles of cosmic creation and cosmic existence.

The essence of *Philosophical Investigations* is that significance is wholly bound up with the form, the linguistic form, which constitutes it. Language *creates* meaning. The medium *is* the message. Language is pure process and enactivity. It does not relate, as pure representation, to an other which is simply apart from it; rather, it incorporates into itself an 'other' which cannot be conceived of without its social multiplicity of forms and processes:
"We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; *in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions.* [my italic] (Understanding a poem.)"
Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, §531).
The essence of *Philosophical Investigations*, and its incessant Socratic-Zen exposures of implications, is that *all language is actually of the second kind*, even when it appears to be of the first kind.

And this is Leavis's implicit message also, since Leavis ever more fully and comprehensively recognises the enactive-performative dimension of *all* language, - iconically in his riposte to Snow. Likewise JL Austin, in his evolution in *How to Do Things with Words* towards the ubiquity of performativity in all sentential communication.

I now turn to Leavis in relation to McLuhan. Leavis, and Denys Thompson, of *Culture and Environment*, and Mrs Leavis, of *Fiction and the Reading Public*, in the context also of the radical developments in process analysis of poetry associated with the names of Mansfield Forbes and IA Richards, and William Empson, were pioneers in media studies and the recognition of media instrumentality. McLuhan's affiliate student time at Cambridge, and his doctoral studies on the *Trivium*, were saturated in this ethos.

Now, when Leavis turns to the University, he turns to the 17th Century, the 'Dissociation of Sensibility'; the pioneering model of interdiciplinary studies, in *Education and the University* uses the 17th Century as his template. Charles Winder's notes, in *Essays and Documents*, give us the striking remark that:
"In C17 a great transition occurred; *England was mediaeval in 1603 and modern in 1700.* Economic, political revolution. The economic reality deployed by Jonson in his satires is anti-capitalist." (and then a very McLuhanesque kind of comment) "It is the imminence of the change which produces the awareness in Jonson and the general nostalgia. "
In the words of *Dombey and Son*, "The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre." [the coming of the railway, there, here the impact of the printing press]

The general statement in *Education and the University* (pp. 48-49) puts a very similar line of argument.

"The reason for choosing the given period are contained in that phrase thrown out above, 'key passage in the history of civilisation'. The Seventeenth Century is pre-eminently that; and, (with, of course, some reference outside) it lends itself admirably to study - integrating study - in terms of England. It is at one end in direct and substantial continuity with the world of Dante, and it shows us at the other a world which has broken irretrievably with the mediaeval order, and committed itself completely to the process leading directly and rapidly to what we live in now. In the course of it capitalism 'arrives', finally overcoming the traditional resistances, so that its ethos becomes accepted as law, morality, and controlling spirit in the economic realm; the age of parliamentary rule begins, as does that of economic nationalism; crucial issues in the relation between Church and State, the spiritual and the secular, religion and the individual, are decided in a spirit going against the tradition of centuries - the principle of toleration is established along with that of 'business is business'; the notion of society as an organism gives way to that of society as a joint stock company [RH Tawney referenced in the footnote]; science launches decisively on its triumphant accelarating advance.

The mention of these main heads is enough to enforce the point that the study of the Seventeenth Century is a study of the modern world;...."

In the Clark Lectures, *English Literature in our Time and the University*, Leavis ties all this profoundly to a synthesis of the emphases of Eliot and Lawrence, in relation to this movement of civilisation as designated by the notion: 'dissociation of sensibility'. In the process, he connects it to the *dramatic* and *ordinary speech*, the *process* character of integrated poetry, as opposed to the linear movement of 18th Century verse, which he has elsewhere illustrated by reference to Johnson's criticism, and the chasm between *Antony and Cleopatra* and *All For Love.* In the twentieth century, this becomes the difference between Swinburne, and Eliot's *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Hollow Men*, and *Ash Wednesday.*

The complexities here are intensified when we recognise that Coleridge, Keats, and Byron, in both prose and poetry, not to mention Boswell and Jane Austen in prose, and the nineteenth century novelists, have a profound grasp of process, and of the living interwoven dramatic immediacy of thought and language. In the *Trivium* McLuhan himself relates Nashe across the centuries to the process master, James Joyce. So, is the recognition of process more connected to the historicity of moments of transition, rather than simply to a change in media? Is the recognition of the reality of 'the medium is the message' and 'the global village' also, in the world of Facebook and Twitter, a recogntion of a truncation, not only an opening (being the reverse of Leavis's tendency towards cultural nostalgia)? Does McLuhan's dialectic, too, have something of the oversimplifying effects that Marx and Freud may have upon us?

To reconcile all this, we need to consider how the deep awareness of temporality, which is involved in awareness of historicity, could be combined with the emphasis upon immediacy which the electric world can bring.

I end with two advertisement clips which will bring the problem home to us.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7waiVCP-io
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Om15TM7t9g
In the Heineken advert, from the early eighties, still just possible in Margaret Thatcher's time, we have a delightfully skilfully managed appeal to deep English historical-cultural values, embodied in the Wordsworth poem of the daffodils, and the accompanying music of the *Nimrod* variation from Elgar's *Enigma Variations*; the parody is so delicate and humorous as not to be at all offensive but, rather, successfully to make us laugh out loud at both the lead up, and the final pun on 'poets' and 'parts'.

Now, historicity is the unique state and realisation of historical consciousness at a given moment. Therefore, already, the Heineken advert is in itself a very rich illustration of historicity. And if we further take account of the fact that that degree of seriousness about the cultural-historical heritage very soon afterwards became well-nigh impossible to sustain, in ironical post-modern Britain, because of the advance of technocracy, and of post-modern awareness, we have an even stronger illustration of historicity.

So already in the Guinness advert, after 10 years of Thatcherism, and with ten years of Blairism shortly to come, the scale of cultural parody and dissociation has gone way beyond the serious appeal to cultural-historical meaning of the Heineken advert. It is completely post-modern. As such it is pure enactment. It has a mere illusion of a message. It is pure medium. As such, McLuhanesque, it implies a radical shift of consciousness in mass psychology.

In the world of 'the medium is the message', can our civilisation find a way to come to hold in mind such shifts in awareness, with all they imply, simultaneously, - hold them together at the same time?

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