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## Critical Media Literacy In The Googleburg Galaxy

### ABSTRACT

With the popular and the political competing for our global electronic attention what is often overlooked are questions surrounding access and participation on social media platforms, which have become contested domains of advertising, recruitment, propaganda, and activism. As the very definitions of what it means to be „*literate*“ or what constitutes a „*text*“ continue to change, having the ability to „*read*“ continues to hold significant importance. Marshall McLuhan argues in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that the printing press created a paradigm shift. In removing the mystique from texts and making ideas more accessible not only did literacy rates rise, but for McLuhan, social relations and power dynamics were fundamentally and irrevocably changed. In line with a history of humanity that continually shifts power and social relations through uses of new technologies, this paper explores how new forms of language and social patterns of interactions on social media have created a similarly potent paradigm shift, changing the meaning of existence both online and in person. This is the Googleburg Galaxy.

### KEY WORDS

Critical media literacy. Media. Media literacy. Critical media. Social media. Marshall McLuhan. Discourse.

# 1. The Googleburg Galaxy

Modern society exists in a state of contradiction, awash in both blinding change and defeating repetition. The changes are so frequent, fast, and noticeable that they obscure the repetition, enabling individuals to see everything as new. But to overlook the obscured is to neglect the totality of one's own relationships to the world and others. Marx and Engels knew this all too well, describing the state of affairs in an appraisal of the bourgeois epoch: „*Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.*“<sup>1</sup>

All that is solid melts into air; nothing feels like now; no one can keep up. As such, anxieties around change abound while one feels a lack of control, a diminishing of agency. Modern selves know too much – increasingly so during this Digital Age – but only make sense of it looking backwards.

This is, for the most part, a particularly human state of awareness, given that humans have it in them to devote attention to such matters – ones that tend to rest beyond the cause-and-effect existence of other animals. As Marshall McLuhan observes in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, „*One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in.*“<sup>2</sup> In McLuhan's world view, humans are able to initiate such anti-environments across various mediums of technologies, or media. Change occurs in the type of technology/medium earlier than it does in the content, which always resides in a different, previous medium, because the only way to observe said content is when it is re-contextualized in contradistinction to new media. Framed within the terminology of McLuhan's fish reference, this sort of observation of content and medium – itself part of a discourse which is to be referred to here as critical media literacy – is performed thanks to the emergence of a new environment, or anti-environment, made possible by a new medium that can make human users of media aware of its content like never before, much like if a fish were to be immediately conscious of water. New media grants individuals the opportunity to engage in critical media literacy, riddled with anxiety as it might be, because it allows users to translate and grasp the change by looking at things passed, as opposed to trying to stay ahead of what they cannot. It might sound disorienting, but it is the terrain contemporary individuals must map if they are to be critically media literate, it is a fundamental part of McLuhan's constellation of theories of media, and as such it embodies this attempt to superimpose that cluster of ideas onto digital media – to navigate the Googleburg Galaxy.<sup>3</sup>

As kitschy as the term Googleburg Galaxy might seem, the stakes are high for critical media literacy with a McLuhanesque infrastructure because it is about power. For McLuhan, all media are active metaphors in their power to translate new experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way.<sup>4</sup>

Though the influence each medium has upon greater civilization varies, the advent of the printing press has a similar impact in scale as the spoken word for McLuhan, as detailed in his seminal book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. So does the Electric Age, which brought audio-visual forms of translation with it. Digital media as a technology represents such a change as well.

<sup>1</sup> MARX, K., ENGELS, F.: *The Communist Manifesto*. New York : Penguin Books, 1967, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> MCLUHAN, M., FIORE, Q.: *War and Peace in the Global Village*. New York : McGraw-Hill, 1968, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> The topic of the „*Googleburg Galaxy*“ was first raised as a conference paper at the Canadian Communications Association's annual conference at the University of Waterloo in May of 2012.

<sup>4</sup> MCLUHAN, M.: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Berkeley : Ginko Press, 2017, p. 85.

These changes are tantamount to paradigm shifts, taking the contemporary self, the fish, and placing it out of water, as it were – and into yet another environment that sublimates solids into air. Unprecedented rates of production of both new technology and its obsolescence in the Digital Age means that people are able to perceive the sorts of changes the digital media landscape presents to us, but it is not direct, it cannot be static, and it must always be facing backwards, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history.<sup>5</sup> Applying some tenets of the McLuhan-Gutenberg Galaxy to digital media is required for critical media literacy because the change brought about by digital media, specifically social media, possesses this translational power.

Apart from the parallels in verbal taxonomy with McLuhan's expression Gutenberg Galaxy, using „Google“ in this new term merely stands as an embodiment for greater networks of socio-technological relations in the same way that the proliferation of Gutenberg's printing press does not amount to an adequate description of all that its phenomena entails as well. In other words, McLuhan's account of Gutenberg's influence is not solely an account of Gutenberg's direct influence, but rather an access point to analyse things indicative of its specific era. In the same fashion, an exploration of the Googleburg Galaxy takes on a wider evaluative scope than the eponymous one.

The Googleburg Galaxy is a discursive space about trying to „sense the water“ via critical media literacy that investigates the power dynamics within digital media. The specific sub-discourse examined here concerns one of the more daunting and imposing new technologies – social media – and brings the work of several theorists to bear on the matter. Those texts will be approached from a perspective framed by two McLuhan adages: the medium is the message, and the user is the content. Since the stakes have already been assessed as significant, mapping the Googleburg Galaxy also situates users and/or critical media readers and creators as active democratic citizens with responsibilities.

This task of mapping – and constantly maintaining and re-maintaining orientation – is not a forgone conclusion. For one, there are societal structures, industries of culture, and behavioural patterns that effectively empty media's content of meaning. Secondly, the aforementioned anxiety is even something McLuhan acknowledges, in the form of users' disorientation towards constantly transmogrifying media technologies. Attempting discourse from this position can often evoke anxiety as „the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools.“<sup>6</sup> While it might not be wholly possible yet to look back on social media content in the way McLuhan means proper, some discourse about a case study in social media's virality – one that has largely ran its course – can serve as a starting point, and a trail to circle back to throughout the process to follow.

## 2. From obscurity to domination to virality to being hegemonized – the case study of Kony 2012

First, some context, some articulation of this key constellation of modes of communication in the Googleburg Galaxy, social media. Such context involves mapping social media with critical media literacy, to highlight both social media's immense hold on culture and the emptiness

<sup>5</sup> „A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.“, BENJAMIN, W.: *Illuminations*. New York : Schocken Books, 1968, p. 257-8.

<sup>6</sup> MCLUHAN, M., FIORE, Q.: *The Medium is the Massage*. London : Penguin Press, 1967, p. 10.

with which it maintains that hold. Ecologies – including media ecologies, to evoke another of McLuhan's terms – have collective lives of their own that are not static, so critical media literacy and its pedagogies exist accordingly.<sup>7</sup> Still, despite the relative youth of social media technologies and the dynamic understanding required to stay educated about them, critical media literacy can, in principle, enable access and/or opportunity to an extent similar to traditional literacy. Given the seemingly unstoppable power social media has been gathering over recent years, one can see this appraisal of critical media literacy as exaggeratory – at one's own peril.

Critical media literacy seeks to explore questions about power and justice through understanding media, and how new technologies create media that produces texts, stories, and images often without properly explaining them to the user. Therefore, the user requires some basic understanding of how those texts are created, for whom they are created, and how the texts themselves get taken up by audiences and influence society, often reproducing hegemonic ideologies. This also necessitates inquiry into the ever-changing forms of mediums, structures of media ownership, and human interactions with new media. (In this sense, McLuhan's meaning of the word „*media*“ tends towards that of multiple mediums of technology, as opposed to news media content – though the two terms overlap considerably.) Discourse of this nature amounts to an awareness of how our understandings of the discourse itself get problematized, altered, and even spurred forward by social networking, digital technologies, virtual spaces, and online personalization.

As a form of media that is at once ubiquitous and unavoidably politically charged, social media and more specifically networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become more than just popular culture technologies. They have also become contested domains of advertising, recruitment, surveillance, propaganda, and activism. Youth Climate Activist Greta Thunberg has established a virtual presence, with her online voice reaching over 4 million Twitter followers.<sup>8</sup> In comparison, counternarratives on Twitter from American President Donald Trump resonate digitally to a following of more than 86 million. Yet, both Greta and President Trump lag considerably behind social media czars like 2019's most popular Instagrammers: footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, actress Selena Gomez, and singer Ariana Grande – each with almost 200 million followers or more.<sup>9</sup> However, what is often overlooked are questions surrounding access and participation on social media platforms: who has access and who is denied participation in virtual spaces when the popular overlaps with the political? Critical media literacy is a lynchpin here; being a reader continues to hold importance even as the traditional forms of text and the definition of what it means to be literate change.

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan argues that the printing press created what historians of science regard as a paradigm shift, which suggests technological innovation can fundamentally change and alter the course of human history.<sup>10</sup> In removing the mystique and aura from texts, most notably religious texts, and making ideas accessible at a more reasonable cost to more people, not only did literacy rates rise with the introduction of the printing press, but, for McLuhan, social relations and power dynamics were fundamentally and irrevocably changed. With new practices comes a new understanding of how the world works, which results in changing social roles, changes in human understandings of those roles, and therefore changed power relations in society. Critical media literacy in the Googleburg Galaxy asks the reader/user to explore how new mediums like the iPhone or a Google search engine have created new forms of language and therefore influenced social patterns of interaction whereby liking,

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<sup>7</sup> Media ecology as per McLuhan deserves its own separate discursive space within the Googleburg Galaxy's. For a useful summation, see also: ISLAS, O., BERNAL, J. D.: *Media Ecology: A Complex and Systemic Metadiscipline*. [online]. [2016-10-11]. Available at: <<https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/media-ecology/43968>>.

<sup>8</sup> All social media statistics such as followers and likes are accurate to September 18, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Cristiano Ronaldo: 237 million followers; Selena Gomez: 193 million; Ariana Grande: 202 million.

<sup>10</sup> KUHN, T.: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1962.

friending, following, or trending on social media have resulted in a similarly potent paradigm shift which is changing what it means to exist both online and in person.

Critical media literacy involves active engagement with a text in a way that employs a user's power to construct meaning that is not wholly reliant upon the intended or surface message. When activated, critical media literacy pushes individuals to think beyond themselves to ask questions about how systems of power and ideologies actively participate in our perception of the galaxy we live in. User involvement in the production of meaning also helps individuals fulfill their civic duty as members of a participatory democracy. However, when applied to social media and its locales of power, a committed understanding can be evasive. Participation can be thwarted, resulting in a weakened democracy. Revolving around ephemeral modes such as popularity, trends, manipulated images and video, and even a limited shelf life for some methods of posting content, social media is, by nature, transitory. Without an activated critical media literacy, what should be legitimately influential social media content ends up instead being co-opted into a fad, like the humanitarian cause against Joseph Rao Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army.

In the name of literacy, let's frame this with pedagogy in mind, applying critical media theory to what might have been a user's experience of what became known on social media as Kony 2012. It can be assumed that there was a degree of anticipation for some users for April 20<sup>th</sup> of that year – a day of action proposed by the makers of a viral YouTube video of that same name: Kony 2012.<sup>11</sup> Released on March 5, 2012 by a not-for-profit organization<sup>12</sup> named Invisible Children, the video sought to expose the actions of Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony in the hopes of having him found and arrested for violations of human rights in Uganda. Kony's LRA was originally a guerilla group whose purpose was to combat government oppression in the name of citizens. However, Kony fell stereotypically prone to the trappings of religious edicts, narcissism, and the power they hold. As of present day, Kony is „*accused of brutalising civilians in northern Uganda through murder, abduction, mutilation and the burning of property*,“<sup>13</sup> yet still living in hiding from authorities.

The video also demonstrates the democratic potential of technologies of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to raise global awareness of a local issue by turning an event that would be foreign to casual users into an object to be uploaded, downloaded, shared, liked, tweeted, emailed, and discussed. Indeed, Kony 2012 went viral; in light of new technologies and increasing globalization, messages can spread and/or go viral in less than a minute. Consider that in the eponymous year of Kony 2012 social media was well on its way to ubiquity. In the spring of 2012, according to Rogers Communications (the largest telecommunications company in Canada) every 60 seconds there were more than 695,000 status updates on Facebook, more than 98,000 tweets, more than 66,000 photos uploads to Flickr and more than 600 new videos uploaded to YouTube.<sup>14</sup> The potential for voices and proliferation of critical media literacy was considerable, and Invisible Children pegged April 20<sup>th</sup> for an event called „*Cover the Night*“ to make use of this power and further expose Kony's legacy of savagery in order to pressure international authorities to locate, apprehend, and charge the divisive leader for his atrocities. Supporters were meant to perform local charity work in their community for the morning of April 20<sup>th</sup>, followed by an evening of posting flyers and posters in neighbourhoods, culminating in an

<sup>11</sup> *KONY 2012 (Full Video) HD*. [online]. [2012-03-05]. Available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>>.

<sup>12</sup> *Financials*. [online]. [2020-09-17]. Available at: <<https://invisiblechildren.com/financials/>>.

<sup>13</sup> *Joseph Kony – child kidnapper, warlord, 'prophet'*. [online]. [2018-07-27]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17299084>>.

<sup>14</sup> Social Media in 60 Seconds. In *Rogers Connected: Communication. Entertainment. Information.*, 2012, May/June, p. 11.

online meetup. Leading up to then – barely a month after the video’s release – Kony 2012 had swelled to 88 million views on YouTube,<sup>15</sup> so an event of consequence was widely anticipated.

And yet, when logging onto social media on 4-20-2012, Kony 2012 was virtually nowhere to be found. It was not trending on Twitter, nor was it proliferating through status updates on Facebook. Instead, what was trending on Twitter that morning and continually throughout the day were relatively vapid tweets about April 20<sup>th</sup> or 420 – a number that is largely connected to marijuana use in popular culture. Social media’s potential for positive grassroots social change via new technology had disappointed, proving Kony 2012 to be nothing more than empty activism – and this failure goes beyond the explanation of 420 trending annually. Over 50,000 people signed up online for the event or bought flyer and poster kits, but the global participation was exemplified in places like Vancouver, where „about 17“ demonstrators met downtown at a location disclosed by a Facebook event which 21,000 users had said they would attend.<sup>16</sup> Kony 2012, much like Joseph Kony himself, had become invisible to a public who hunted him, disappearing into the ether as all that is solid melts into air.

What’s more, social media’s waning effectiveness here eventually superimposed itself upon the actual state of affairs much in the way that content catches up to media for McLuhan, not only muting the search for Kony but also allowing Kony himself to be swallowed up by the same systems and environments he had once antagonized. On July 8, 2005, the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for Kony’s arrest – one which has proven to be impotent.<sup>17</sup> Over the ensuing years, the LRA moved from Uganda through South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, eventually ending up in the dense jungles of the Central African Republic. Though shrinking in numbers, the army remained enough of a threat to resurface in the global news cycle again in 2011 when Invisible Children motivated then-US President Barack Obama to send 100 soldiers to the Central African Republic to help locate and defeat Kony. Six years later, some 2,000 total US and Ugandan soldiers sent to the area ended their mission with this report from US army spokesperson Lt. Col. Armando Hernandez: „*The US sees him [Kony] as irrelevant, no longer a threat. When you look at the LRA’s effectiveness it’s no longer what it used to be.*“<sup>18</sup> This decision echoes the lack of commitment across time exhibited by social media users, since Kony and his soldiers still loot and abduct from nearby villages. It also neglects any, let alone adequate, justice for all involved. Healthy but almost 60 years old, Kony and his army have been the victims of mass defections, to the extent that the once-significant LRA, now, in 2020, consists of „*just several dozen people, including Kony’s sons Salim and Ali...the group’s main activities consist of subsistence farming and sometimes selling honey at local markets.*“<sup>19</sup> Social media’s power to subsume and co-opt voices is so strong it can hegemonize both activists and war criminals with the same indifference, rendering either of them into spent-up reaffirmations of what is currently en vogue – all of that to then be washed away by new hashtags.

<sup>15</sup> HAGER, M.: *Kony 2012 campaign fails to go offline in Vancouver*. [online]. [2012-04-21]. Available at: <<https://globalnews.ca/news/236629/kony-2012-campaign-fails-to-go-offline-in-vancouver/>>.

<sup>16</sup> HAGER, M.: *Kony 2012 campaign fails to go offline in Vancouver*. [online]. [2012-04-21]. Available at: <<https://globalnews.ca/news/236629/kony-2012-campaign-fails-to-go-offline-in-vancouver/>>. It is worth noting that Invisible Children did not help matters by explicitly discouraging meetings beyond a local scope, but such pseudo-barriers should not be able to match what was in theory meant to be an important moral stand. See also: MILLER, N.: *Catch Kony campaign loses couch potatoes*. [online]. [2012-04-22]. Available at: <<https://www.theage.com.au/technology/catch-kony-campaign-loses-couch-potatoes-20120421-1xdqc.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> *Kony et al. Case, The Prosecutor v. Joseph Kony and Vincent Otti*. [online]. [2020-09-17]. Available at: <<https://www.icc-cpi.int/uganda/kony>>.

<sup>18</sup> BYARUHANGA, C.: *Has Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony been defeated?*. [online]. [2017-05-23]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39999324>>.

<sup>19</sup> RONAN, P., TITECA, K.: *Kony’s rebels remain a threat, but they’re also selling honey to get by*. [online]. [2020-03-10]. Available at: <<https://africanarguments.org/2020/03/10/joseph-kony-lra-rebels-threat-selling-honey/>>.

This example shows the positives and negatives of social media activism. Kony 2012 demonstrates the potential of social media as a resource for positive social change at the same time as it exposes the challenges in getting people to see the importance of social media messages while they are over-inundated with media and oversaturated with its endless content. Fast-forward to 2020 when movements such as #metoo and Black Lives Matter have continued to demonstrate how technological spaces for resistance and activism rest inside of a Gordian knot of power and privilege, medium and message, whereby the ability to act or be acted upon – a critical tension within responsible democratic citizenship – can be decided by critical media literacy.

A reminder of the stakes involved with critical media literacy is worthwhile here as literacy has a historical connection to power. McLuhan's argument for the impact of the printing press as a transformative technology in the Gutenberg Galaxy only further emphasizes this point. On an explicit level it is simple: those with the ability to read the laws have historically also been the people to write them. On an implicit level, a person cannot exercise their democratic rights if they are denied access, and literacy has historically been a roadblock or access provider for democratic participation. Something as simple and vital to democracy as voting is predicated on the ability of the individual citizen to read a ballot. For many democratic societies, unjustly, literacy tests were used for decades as a tool for disenfranchisement by acting as a barrier to deny marginalized groups the opportunity to exercise their rights as citizens to vote. In America, for example, literacy tests remained a barrier for disenfranchisement of the African American community (especially in southern states) a full century after the conclusion of the American Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. This obstacle was only removed in August 1965 when then-President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. In many ways, reading and literacy have served as an ideological head tax in the West for the last three centuries.

Literacy's historical connection to power can also be seen through what Paulo Freire deems the naming of the word and the naming of the world.<sup>20</sup> In Freire's ground-breaking text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of the greatest struggles for marginalized groups to overcome is to participate in the creation of language, what Freire calls „the naming of the world“ – something denied to them through their oppression. „To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming, Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.“<sup>21</sup> Throughout modern history the ability to participate in language has been essential to community and activism, illuminating the line between inclusion and exclusion. Whether it be Benedict Anderson's notion of the „imagined community“ for Creole people<sup>22</sup>, diasporas, or McLuhan's typographic man who required the printing press in order to have access to the knowledge previously withheld from the everyday individual, language, literacy, community, and power are inextricably linked. For contemporary purposes, one need only look at the present moment to witness the confluence of power, privilege, race, and literacy. The imminent collision of the 2020 US presidential election and raw civil rights movements lay bare the urgency in critical media literacy, as made evident by movements such as More Than A Vote, which was started by star athlete LeBron James and other prominent Black athletes and entertainers in order to mobilize citizens within their roles and responsibilities in their fight for social justice and equality.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> FRIERE, P.: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York : Continuum, 2000, p. 88-90.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> BENEDICT, A.: *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition. London : Verso, 1991, p. 44-45, p. 61-62.

<sup>23</sup> MARTIN, J.: *LeBron James and Other Stars Form a Voting Rights Group*. [online]. [2020-06-10]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/us/politics/lebron-james-voting-rights.html>>.

So, in the Googleburg Galaxy critical media literacy provides a vantage point from which to aptly observe and analyze relationships of power, which relationships thrive, which wither away under competitive pressure, or which ones get assimilated by dominant technologies such as social media and its always-melting-into-thin-air terms of existence. In many cases like Kony 2012, the intersectionality of media, power, user, and content renders typical explanations – that Kony was left to reap the rewards of public fickleness, or that some form of poetic justice was meted out by legal ramifications of exposure – unsatisfactory. Rather, it is as though the system co-opted content in what manifests as a twisted irony.

On the surface, the Kony 2012 example does not appear to be different from any fad unrelated to social media – a common criticism of social media analysis. As mentioned above, for McLuhan, content takes time to catch up to technologies, so this is not surprising. What is surprising, however – and specific to social media – is the sheer speed and volume of users on social media<sup>24</sup>, thus amplifying an impact that is already seismic – that last term somehow putting it mildly still. Which begs the questions: Is anything unrelated to social media anymore? If it is almost impossible to escape the medium, how does this mean that it is equally impossible to escape the message, since said message(s) can be so easily ignored or left behind?

### 3. The medium is the message

In the Googleburg Galaxy one must reconsider what the message is, exactly, given that for McLuhan it is the media. Media in the Googleburg Galaxy – social media, the internet, smart phones, tablets, and/or whichever new technologies humanity will be subject to in the years to come – are nothing short of a manifestation of capitalist modes of consumption. So, it makes an economic sort of sense for ideas that should persist to instead be consumed and forgotten with minimal engagement and minimal literacy. As with capitalism in various degrees of a free market, or as seen with Kony 2012, engagement is about power, and power is consolidated continually underneath a cover of fast changes in new technologies. (This is even more true in the context of COVID-19, during which increased government restrictions upon citizens' behaviour hampers literacy in various ways.) Critical media literacy applied to „*the medium is the message*“ means that attentiveness to the media syntax of ownership and power is central to an understanding of technology.

So, why the need for a new and critical media literacy? In keeping with the self-reflexive nature of critical media literacy, this argument can be made in parallel fashion to some of the characteristics being read – that is, through an intersectional convergence of theorists on the matter. Drawing upon the work of critical theorists Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, critical media literacy is „*a pedagogical approach that promotes the use of diverse types of media and information communication technology (from crayons to webcams) to question the roles of media in society and the multiple meanings of the form and content of all types of messages.*“<sup>25</sup> To practice this requires what Kellner calls „*a three-pronged approach*“ that examines form, content, and uses of media through the prongs of political economy, textual analysis, and

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<sup>24</sup> As of the second quarter of 2020, Facebook had 2,7 billion active monthly users, far exceeding the forecast of 1,7 billion by 2020 made in November 15, 2019. See: CLEMENT, J.: *Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 2nd quarter 2020 (in millions)*. [online]. [2020-08-10]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>>; CLEMENT, J.: *Number of Facebook users worldwide from 2015 to 2020*. [online]. [2019-11-15]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/490424/number-of-worldwide-facebook-users/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in: SHARE, J.: Young children and Critical Media Literacy. In HAMMER, R., KELLNER, D. (eds.): *Media/cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*. New York : Peter Lang, 2009, p. 127.



audience reception studies.<sup>26</sup> To instill continual recency in this sense of media literacy – to make it new – Carmen Luke postulates that a new media literacy must engage in the critical, social, and cultural analysis of representation politics in a new world order.<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Marvin, in her exploration of the light bulb as an early medium of spectacle, points out that understanding new media and new technologies as they penetrate into daily social life requires a more full understanding of how the medium itself is a text.<sup>28</sup> This returns to McLuhan's notion that the medium is the message. If the medium itself is a text, then the medium itself is also a site of contestation, with its own history, its own politics, its own bias, and therefore it is also a space where meaning must be negotiated. In the context of brand name recognition, globalization, and media convergence, to be fully media literate requires more than just an exploration of one's Facebook status that is updated with a smartphone because the smartphone itself is a medium (and a message) and therefore also requires decoding.

Using critical media literacy to decode the medium as message in the Googleburg Galaxy requires an exploration of convergence. For Henry Jenkins, convergence describes „*the flow of content across multiple platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.*“<sup>29</sup> Yet the convergence culture that Jenkins speaks of in 2006 is a precursor to the Googleburg Galaxy and thus limited as a tool for media literacy and the current media landscape. Jenkins argues that „*convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social relations with others.*“<sup>30</sup> This stands in contrast with the stricter notion that the medium is the message, which, when taken too directly, negates that the medium itself was also designed by a person or persons with biases and a world view influenced by their own social relations, and that the medium was produced and marketed by corporations with an economic agenda – this is, in short, political economy as described by Kellner and Share.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of how a text gets taken up by an audience, the political economy and/or power relations cannot be divorced from meaning. To accept Jenkins' notion of convergence culture, to place an emphasis on the audience reception of a text, risks doing so at the expense of political economy, which would thereby hide the economic power and privilege of media conglomerates, such as the elite ones that Scott Galloway refers to as The Four (Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook), effectively allowing their influence on the reception and interpretation of both text and user experience to remain camouflaged.<sup>32</sup> In the Googleburg Galaxy this is precisely the danger: the user is led to believe that what they type into a search engine generates what they – themselves, as individuals – wish to will into existence. Furthermore, this misrepresentation of user impact upon generating meaning in the Googleburg Galaxy poses further questions for exploration. For example, in what ways does

a person's self-perception portrayed through their social media channels obfuscate their own

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the three-pronged approach, including a definition and brief history of political economy, textual analysis, and audience reception see: KELLNER, D.: *Towards a Critical Media/Cultural studies*. In HAMMER, R., KELLNER, D. (eds.): *Media/cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*. New York : Peter Lang, 2009, p. 5-24.

<sup>27</sup> LUKE, C.: *As Seen on TV or Was that My Phone: 'New' Media Literacy*. In HAMMER, R., KELLNER, D. (eds.): *Media/cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*. New York : Peter Lang, 2009, p. 200.

<sup>28</sup> MARVIN, C.: *Dazzling the Multitude: Original Media Spectacles*. In GIDDINGS, S., LISTER, M. (eds.): *The New Media and Technocultures Reader*. New York : Routledge, p. 32. [online]. [2011-08-10]. Available at: <[https://www.academia.edu/2764417/The\\_New\\_Media\\_and\\_Technocultures\\_Reader](https://www.academia.edu/2764417/The_New_Media_and_Technocultures_Reader)>.

<sup>29</sup> JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York : New York University Press, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*, Vol. 2. Boston : BRILL, 2019, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> GALLOWAY, S.: *The Four: the Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google*. New York : Portfolio/Penguin, 2017.

self-concept? How do the postings of others impact our perception of the real lived experiences of others and our own selves in comparison? And – returning to political economy – how are perceptions of our own realities and the realities of others shaped by the mediums through which individuals access social media or the social media sites themselves? Safiya Noble's 2018 work *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* is but one work that recognizes the consequences of such influence, and how they are felt disproportionately by marginalized groups.<sup>33</sup>

Media literacy in the Googleburg Galaxy is better supported by a definition of convergence posited by Luke that sees convergence as a multipronged set of practices: convergence of function, convergence of providers, and expanded synergy in media ownership.<sup>34</sup> In stark contrast to previous media, convergence of function is uniquely central to the increased use of mobile technologies like smartphones and tablets, each of which are immeasurably complicit in the rise of social media. Convergence of function refers to the multiple roles and tasks performed by the medium, in that it simply does more. With existing mobile technology, a smartphone is more than a telephone. For many people, the smartphone is also a calendar, a camera, a home computer inside a handheld device, and even a brand marker for identity status. Media ownership has also expanded, to occupy more roles through a convergence of provider that seeks to bring together previously separate media service providers under one roof. In the previous example of Toronto, Canada and Rogers Cable – used above to contextualize the scope of new media in 2012 – that company allows subscribers to have one account for TV, Home Phone, Home Security Systems, Cell Phone, Home Internet, and Travelling Wireless Access. A merger in services provided is appealing to the consumer for the ease in billing. However, the lack of diversity and options raise media literacy questions surrounding access to information – especially given that said convergence in the case of Rogers and many other conglomerates like it result in consolidation of market power, which raises consumer cost and limits access to the media. Added to this are concerns around privacy and data sharing as a convergence of providers creates a wealth of opportunities for data extraction, surveillance and data mining, as noted by Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, media companies have also expanded their ownership into non-media holdings through the practice of synergy. The movement of media company ownership power across previously disparate industries again demonstrates the importance of a critical media literacy that examines the medium and the message. Returning again to Rogers Cable, its scope of influence is truly daunting. Rogers owns the Major League Baseball Franchise the Toronto Blue Jays and their home stadium The Rogers Centre, which they purchased in 2004<sup>36</sup> – and which provides programming content for their newspapers, television and radio stations and magazines, in addition to providing a venue both at the stadium and via the broadcasts of games for advertising its other aforementioned media products and services.<sup>37</sup> This is just the tip of Rogers' convergence iceberg, however. In 2012, in partnership with Bell-Globe Media (the second-largest media company in Canada),

Rogers purchased Maple Leaf Sports Entertainment and all of its properties, which include

<sup>33</sup> NOBLE, S. U.: *Algorithms of Oppression : How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York : New York University Press, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> For Carmen Luke, the biggest difference between old technologies and new technologies is convergence, which now happens on three levels: convergence of function, convergence of provider, and synergy. See: LUKE, C.: As Seen on TV or Was that My Phone: 'New' Media Literacy. In HAMMER, R., KELLNER, D. (eds.): *Media/cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*. New York : Peter Lang, p. 197.

<sup>35</sup> ZUBOFF, S.: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. First edition. New York : Public Affairs, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> *Rogers buys SkyDome*. [online]. [2004-11-29]. Available at: <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rogers-buys-skydome/article1144212/#:~:text=The%20owners%20of%20the%20Toronto,in%20a%20news%20release%20Monday>>.

<sup>37</sup> LUKE, C.: As Seen on TV or Was that My Phone: 'New' Media Literacy. In HAMMER, R., KELLNER, D. (eds.): *Media/cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*. New York : Peter Lang, p. 197.

the NHL franchise Toronto Maple Leafs, NBA Franchise Toronto Raptors, their individual cable channels, their shared venue the ScotiaBank Arena, as well as surrounding real estate and condominium projects. This indicates a new form of convergence and synergy, what we have called „*mutated media*“ whereby competing media bodies partner to ensure a full-scale convergence of media ownership quite unfamiliar until recent times.

So far, this is an appraisal of media – a necessary precondition for critical media literacy. But before moving on to directly democratic concerns in the Googleburg Galaxy more needs to be fleshed out here in terms of pedagogy, given that literacy is seldom self-taught. In a piece entitled „*Education as a Necessity of Life*“ educational and political theorist John Dewey provides the reader with a three-fold argument: 1) that life is a continual process of renewal by transmission; 2) this transmission happens through communication, which is in itself educational (for all parties communicating); 3) that as societies become more complex, the need for a more formal structure of transmission, communication, and education increases.<sup>38</sup> In the first section, *Renewal of Life by Transmission*, Dewey sets up the reader for the larger point to follow, that education is necessary for life (and not only for life but for democracy, since Dewey was always interested in this one point). Dewey states that what allows human society to evolve is its ability to transmit – top-down, from its elders to its youngsters by way of communication – its habits, customs, and societal expectations. This process of transmission is ultimately educational, both for the elders and for the youth of the society. However, this informational renewal is not automatic, and a failure to maintain this process results in what Dewey fears most: „*the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and into savagery.*“<sup>39</sup> Although the argument made here by Dewey is problematic today because of its racialized language and its reliance upon historical determinism and top-down hierarchal ageism, it does however illustrate that the way in which a person learns how to be a part of their family, a member of their community, and a responsible democratic citizen of their nation, all happens through a training process that is based on the transmission of symbols, signs, and the knowledge they signify. For Dewey, this process of communication is education – an education that is grounded in literacy and is the cornerstone to a democratic life.

Of course, the training of individuals on what to think or feel is also problematic. To wit, Dewey states, „*The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions and requirements.*“<sup>40</sup> Democracy exists to manage the challenges of diversity; if dispositions were as homogenous across citizens as Dewey implies, governance would be a more forgone conclusion than democracy intends for. When one learns one’s culture from their community, they learn how they ought to react to all types of scenarios. For example, it is understood that death is typically met with grief, and a promotion at work with happiness. Although this is an extrapolation of Dewey, when we are trained to have pre-programmed responses to everything we encounter in life, there appears to be little space for individual autonomy.<sup>41</sup> And yet, this is literacy. It is how users learn to unpack

<sup>38</sup> „*Education as a Necessity of Life*“ is the title of the first chapter of Dewey’s ground-breaking work: *Democracy* 1922. All citations in this chapter refer to the e-book/online version of the text. See: DEWEY, J.: *Democracy and Education*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2017. [online]. [2012-06-03]. Available at: <[https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/C5921274480880CAE3A772428B7331DA/9781316492765pre\\_pi-iv\\_CBO.pdf/john\\_deweys\\_democracy\\_and\\_education.pdf](https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/C5921274480880CAE3A772428B7331DA/9781316492765pre_pi-iv_CBO.pdf/john_deweys_democracy_and_education.pdf)>.

<sup>39</sup> DEWEY, J.: *Democracy and Education*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2017. [online]. [2012-06-03]. Available at: <[https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/C5921274480880CAE3A772428B7331DA/9781316492765pre\\_pi-iv\\_CBO.pdf/john\\_deweys\\_democracy\\_and\\_education.pdf](https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/C5921274480880CAE3A772428B7331DA/9781316492765pre_pi-iv_CBO.pdf/john_deweys_democracy_and_education.pdf)>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> This is referred to as the „*Hallmark syndrome*“ in GENNARO, S.: Purchasing the Canadian Teenage Identity: ICTs, American Media, and Brand-Name Consumption. In *International Social Science Review*, 2005, Vol. 80, No. 3 and 4, p. 119-136.

the representations of social norms and expectations from the symbols, rituals, customs, and patterns of behaviour encountered on a daily basis. When they unpack representations, they are actively relating what they see to what they know – sometimes based on cultural myth, fact, experience, or even what a text explicitly conveys. This unpacking happens sometimes in agreement with and sometimes in opposition to dominant understandings of what is considered to be normal. This is why semiotics (sign and signifier) has real value in understanding media representations.<sup>42</sup> More recently, for many scholars, exploring texts within popular culture has become a valuable space for research in understanding patterns of human behaviour and in exploring how messages get encoded with social meanings and decoded through ritual practice and custom in the arena of the popular and mass-produced.

At present, this pedagogy must seem heavy on the hypothetical side, given the hostile environment of convergence, and the synergy of new media technologies detailed above. Always concerned with what is at stake, critical media literacy suffers most when there exists a detachment or tenuous relationship between user and media, and this issue thrives across time in social media if unchecked, leaving users both uninformed and highly impressionable – a combination that has dire consequences for an informed democracy. As Whitney Phillips, a professor at Syracuse who studies online disinformation, says when describing the effect that the recent trend of Trump-fueled conspiracy theories on social media has upon knowledge and a democratic society: They're not on the same epistemological grounding, they're not living in the same worlds... You cannot have a functioning democracy when people are not at the very least occupying the same solar system.<sup>43</sup>

This lack of shared „*epistemological grounding*“ goes against the needs of a participatory democracy, which relies upon the duty of responsibly informed citizens maintaining engagement with the salient issues of the moment.

This expression of pedagogical frameworks used to act out critical media literacy aligns McLuhan's overall project with relationships of power within social media by matching the message of literacy with that of media. In other words, to learn a medium is to take ownership of the message, which brings power and responsibility with it. More discourse about this responsibility as a critically media literate democratic citizen is needed here to bridge „*the media is the message*“ and „*the user is the content*“ with praxis.

Another critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas, asserts that to have a free society there must be a freedom of press, a freedom to associate and dialogue, and a public sphere or space for this dialogue to take place in. The space exists outside the direct influence of organized politics, as well as the direct commercialization and monetization of the market.<sup>44</sup> Freedom between citizen and society is logically a two-way street: for a society to be free there must be rational and critical dialogue between citizens. Critical media literacy recognizes this, allowing citizens engaging in rational critical discourse to situate themselves within a larger community, both as participants in a virtual or imagined community of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, chat room debaters, or forum posters, and also as part of a larger global community of fellow human citizens. This does not mean that critical media literacy equals consensus and agreement. Critical media literacy is about dialoguing across multiple diverse points of view; it is about recognizing that the morning newspaper has a story to tell, an editorial bias, a host of advertisers to maintain solid relationships with, and a readership to please. Because of this network of intersecting

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<sup>42</sup> For a very easy to understand and quick primer on semiotics see: *Semiotics: the study of signs (Full Video)*. [online]. [2007-11-04]. Available at: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEgxTKUP\\_WI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEgxTKUP_WI)>.

<sup>43</sup> ALTER, C.: *How Conspiracies Are Shaping the 2020 Election – and Shaking the Foundation of American Democracy*. [online]. [2020-09-10]. Available at: <<https://time.com/5887437/conspiracy-theories-2020-election/>>.

<sup>44</sup> HABERMAS, J.: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge : MIT Press, 1989, p. 235.

priorities, as well as whom the paper hires to write stories, in addition to how the story gets told, along with which stories get told, media narratives are produced against a horizon of bias. This does not even account for the individual biases of the writers themselves, which is subject to a host of static and fluid variables. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are no different here from more traditional forms of media, except that the lightning-fast speed at which tweets and status updates are received and/or sent via mobile devices at any geographical location at any time means that a user's guard is often down while they engage with the media itself. Along with this disarming immediacy there is a level of comfort as consumers of social media information because, thanks to content filters and control over friends/associations, there is an inherent level of trust in the storyteller – deserved or not. This illuminates the far-reaching scope of the map of the Googleburg Galaxy to include even perceived minutiae such as friend lists, filters and friends' and family's status updates as relevant to critical media literacy.

A new critical media literacy explores the opportunities of social media platforms to house what Henry Giroux calls performative pedagogy and the establishment of a truly democratic education.<sup>45</sup> According to Kellner's reflections on the work of Giroux, Giroux thus sees cultural politics as encompassing education, artistic work, and the pedagogy of social movements. His performative pedagogy attempts to demonstrate how cultural texts enact broader societal and political issues in a pedagogy that makes visible relations of power, domination, and resistance in media culture.<sup>46</sup>

Performative pedagogy is a form of social resistance that pushes practice to match theory, or what some philosophers from Ancient Greece to Paulo Freire would term as praxis.<sup>47</sup> For Giroux praxis is about learning by doing, and it is about the creation of a dialogical learning community where individuals not only collect and connect but create, collaborate and share discourse. The time for alarmist-versus-technophile debates has passed; social networking sites' ability to provide these types of spaces is recognized. It is now a question about how users engage with the media texts and mediums themselves, as critical and active participants in the creation of meaning, the construction of knowledge, the legitimating of play and practice, and the protection of democratic and human rights. Democracy should imply participation, and if there is a desire to have a democratic media and to ensure that technological developments produce democratic media, then as global citizens, everyone bears a responsibility to maintain their critical media literacy. In the interests of continuing to map critical media literacy onto the Googleburg Galaxy, consider it this way: we the people must also be we the media.

## 4. The user is the content

As serendipity would have it, there is another convergence at this point, and that is between the responsibility of democratic citizens as critical media users, and McLuhan's notion that the user is the content – a radical twist on the notion of content, even in the face of how „*content*“ has taken on counterintuitive meaning here already. In other words, the idea that users are and/or determine content dovetails nicely with democracy's need for dutiful citizens. McLuhan is seen as a polemical thinker, and this is in large part due to his delivery of content. While he opens up so much of the world, a common critique of his work is that it verges on the opaque, or at least deeply interpretive. But there is a purpose to that style, to the point of serving

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<sup>45</sup> GIROUX, H.: Cultural Studies as Performative Politics. In *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, 2001, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 5-23.

<sup>46</sup> KELLNER, D.: *Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and Radical Democracy at the turn of the Millennium: Reflections on the Work of Henry Giroux*. [online]. [2012-11-29]. Available at: <pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/henrygiroux.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> For Freire, praxis is „*reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.*“ Through praxis, oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition, and, with their allies, struggle for liberation. FRIERE, P.: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York : Continuum, 2000, p. 36.

as a hermeneutic positioning of authorship in that the user/reader ends up producing meaning. Those who venture into McLuhan's body of work find that there are no easy answers, no direct obvious delineation between user and intended message. (This is part of what made McLuhan so immensely popular in his time, this chimeric mode of presentation.) Instead, his ideas form a mosaic of reflections and statements – ones which tend toward the prosaic at times, due to his economy of language (or, paradoxically, lack thereof) – that can be envisioned as connected referentially by users. What's more, this sense that is made by the user will differ based on the uniqueness of their background or bias. In this way, the reader/user possesses control over production of meaning, not McLuhan, leading him to famously infer that the user is the content.<sup>48</sup> If this is the case, then content is inherently democratic, but this is the key: so long as users are diligent critical media readers exercising their rights as such.

To understand the Googleburg Galaxy requires an understanding of literacy, which recognizes that letters, or the alphabet, are merely a collection of symbols that get encoded and decoded by users. The process of literacy, then, is one where an individual learns to decode the symbol – here an alphabetic letter, such as a or b – through a recognition of the „*sound*“ that such a symbol makes. Of course, the process by which an individual learns the alphabet and then how to sound out letters to make words comes through an active observation of the social world around us and through practice, repetition, and the memorization of key structural elements. So, while in theory the sounds of vowels and consonants are largely recognized as static and fixed, there is a cultural relativity to speech where the geographic location and cultural patterns of the community in which an individual is learning literacy affects their understanding of how to encode and decode letters. The first step to literacy, then, is a basic understanding of the notion that letters and numbers are symbols that stand in for something else, each with its own sound and set of rules governing how it can be used to decode a message. Once a person understands the basic sounds of letters and rules of how those sounds work, the next step is to piece together letters to form words, which are also symbols, which immediately conjure up an image in the mind of the reader upon reading. Traditional literacy is therefore a process of collecting and unpacking symbols to decipher the expressed meaning of their original author. However, since context is vital both to the encoding and decoding process, things do get lost in translation. Media literacy follows a similar process. To understand the Googleburg Galaxy requires an interpretation of literacy that sees any and all texts – that is virtual space, photographic images, advertisements, television shows, film, popular music, code, Tweets, text messages, smiley-faced icons, status updates, and search engine results – as symbols which get encoded by writers and decoded by readers. The question is, how conscious are we of the processes of encoding and decoding that are happening around us, and how active are we in the translation? What cannot get lost amongst all of this theorizing – because it is so often lost this way – is that uninformed choices lead down dangerous paths, and that those choices dishonour the modern individual's democratic duty to help new technologies make possible the discursive space within which a better world can occur.

When all that is solid melts to air, time's relativity distorts. Pair that with humanity's immense ability to adapt and it is all too easy to forget that as recently as 2007 there were no smart phones at all. Now more popular among younger demographics than its parent company Facebook, Instagram has not existed for a decade yet. While these technologies increasingly take hold over the attention and time of almost everyone on earth, it would behoove individuals to learn how to read the space(s) better. Otherwise, without critical media literacy, the modern democratic citizen is disadvantaging themselves in a manner eerily similar to subjects of the pre-industrial age trying to learn the ways of their ruling states without anything to read at all.

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<sup>48</sup> WOLF, G.: *The Wisdom of Saint Marshall, the Holy Fool*. [online]. [1996-01-01]. Available at: <<https://www.wired.com/1996/01/saint-marshal/>>.

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Blair Miller is a contract faculty member in Liberal Arts and Professional Studies (Comm Studies; Film; Humanities; Writing) at York University (Toronto, Canada). He is preparing for PhD candidacy after having once made the Dean's List while graduating with honours in Philosophy at Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo, Canada), and completing his Masters degree in Film at York University in 2006, working closely under Robin Wood for years to follow. His work merges any combinations of critical theory, aesthetics, media theory, the Frankfurt School, Marshall McLuhan, film theory, film production, photography, and writing of all kinds. Twice he's been invited to serve as jury member and awards presenter for Breakthroughs Film Festival, a Canadian not for profit organization dedicated to supporting emerging filmmakers who identify as women or non-binary. Winner of *The Cord* Short Story Contest at WLU, he has also published essays on film for journals including *Cineaction*, self-published three collections of poetry, and is an expert on the work of Stanley Kubrick. He is also co-editor of *Youth & Social Media* (forthcoming 2021).