

# McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy

Symbol and Imagination in Writing Culture

## McLuhan's claim

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- ▶ McLuhan (1911-1980) *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man, 1962:*
- ▶ "Printing ... created the public ... What we have called 'nations' ... did not and could not, precede the advent of Gutenberg technology ... isolation of the visual faculty from other senses ..."



# The function of symbols

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- ▶ Man's first affirmation of himself, and expression of his own newness--when, by the ways and means of art, he entered into contact with the power, brilliance, and joyful mastery of a force that is essentially the force of a beginning. . . ." --**Maurice Blanchot**
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## Language and History

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- ▶ “Looked at in the perspective of time , man’s biological evolution shades into prehistory when he becomes a language-using animal; add writing and history proper begins.”—**Ian Watt**





Does the interiorization of media, such as letters, alter the ratio among our senses and change mental processes?



## Altered Senses?

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- ▶ McLuhan's Man: "When the perverse ingenuity of man has outered some part of his being in material technology, his entire sense ratio is altered. ... In beholding this new thing, man is compelled to become it." --MM Gutenberg Galaxy
- ▶ For McLuhan, technological advancement has lead to **the end** of the age of Gutenberg.



# Key terms

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- ▶ “Sense ratios”
- ▶ Imagination: careful definition
- ▶ Fragmented perception
- ▶ The grotesque
- ▶ Persistence of myth, evidence that the claims of the Gutenberg age were greatly exaggerated.



## McLuhan's major (historical) periods

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- ▶ Period of rational organization and measured distribution of knowledge in which figures such as Gutenberg and Newton are representative.
- ▶ 19<sup>th</sup> Century: comodification of these tendencies in culture; Romantics elaborate another “vision” in the history of sensibility.
- ▶ Modernism: stream of consciousness and other literary techniques “rediscover” ordinary transactions between the self and the world.





# McLuhan's modernism

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- ▶ Emphasis on literary experimentation that has classical and even pre-modern points of reference (myth and symbol school)
- ▶ “broken” or “syncopated” manipulation of a diversified field



## McLuhan's Modernism (2)

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- ▶ Symbolism that represents insight by carefully established ratios, but “without a point of view or lineal connection or sequential order.”
- ▶ What about this “rediscovery”?--a return to the categories of symbol-making that Marshack, Robinson, Blanchot, and Watt are all invested in?



## New electronic age

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- ▶ Mechanical technology that emerged from the alphabetic language gave rise to ways of perceiving the world.

Therefore...

- ▶ The electronic age will bring new configurations, new mechanisms, new forms of literacy, as the old forms collide with the new.



# Consequences of this Collision

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- ▶ “These multiple transformations which are the normal consequence of introducing new media into any society society whatever, need special study...”

