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War as education/education as war

Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, Bantam, New York, 1968, pp. 192 (reissued by Gingko Press, Richmond, CA, 2001).

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Civilization, the mother of war.
Marshall McLuhan

"Bad news concerns few, but good news can upset a whole culture" (p. 152). The year after the publication of *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) that started the collaboration with the graphic designer Quentin Fiore, Marshall McLuhan published *War and Peace in the Global Village*, a brilliant and quite controversial typographical experiment dedicated to the relationship of media innovation, social effects and war strategies, "with special references to education, war, clothing, games, and a few of the other more promising aspects of the other books" (Theall 2005, p. 116). Through the clever combination of images, literary fragments from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and the abundant quotation of philosophical and sociological essays, McLuhan investigates

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the semiotic development of war as it concerns the human craving for power and dominion.

The first page of the book shows a globe plugged into a socket. The quote inserted above the globe can be considered a programmatic introduction to the book: "Globes make my head spin. By the time I locate the place, they've changed the boundaries" (p. 1). The metaphor of globalization matches the tenet of tribalization as the growth of our means of transport and communication supported rapid and reliable portability of knowledge. This is one of McLuhan's favorite epistemological insights which is in line with the thesis of media as human extensions developed in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964). The description of the Machiavellian mindset that opens the first volume is probed through the well-known quote from Shakespeare's *King Lear* proposing "our darker purpose", namely "an extremely modern idea of delegation of authority from centre to margins" (p. 11).

Every attempt to delve into *War and Peace in the Global Village* must consider the processes of decentralization, delegation and transportability that characterize any single historical phase, from the ancient Greeks to the Vietnamese War, as civilization can be considered "the mother of war" (p. 24). From the very beginning, the reader can recognize the unmistakable McLuhanian epigrammatic style and the rhapsodic structure of his argumentations, so closely inspired by the aphoristic flair of Senecan writings (Lombardinilo 2020). Furthermore, McLuhan pays homage to his master, Harold Innis, whose main works provide such an insightful and pioneering perspective on the convergence of social organization and communicative patterns (Patterson 1990). This is the case of papyrus, unavailable to the Greeks but available to the Romans: "The equally spectacular gap between Roman and medieval culture may have been occasioned by the disappearance of the supplies of papyrus and the ensuing slumps in visual values. A large wave of Egyptian nationalism submerged the papyrus industry and forbade its export to the Romans. The only person who seems to have paid much attention to this is Harold Innis in his *The Bias of Communication*" (p. 25).

According to McLuhan, war is closely linked to civilization, as communicative proficiency depends on rapidity, secrecy and accuracy. This is why war and peace are mutually connected to the reliability of private information. To the fore is the transition from the medieval solitary knight to the contemporary well-equipped soldier, as McLuhan emphasizes in the first half of the book, to analyze the impact of technologies on the Machiavellian *Art of War*. In this sense, McLuhan dwells on "clothing as weaponry" (p. 22), on "the stirrup as a way up in the world" (p. 26) and especially on "the invention of gunpowder" (p. 34), in order to highlight the central role played by human cleverness in the management of conflicts, including the wheel and the computer, "by all odds the most extraordinary of all the technological clothing ever devised by man, since it is the extension of our central nervous system. Beside it, the wheel is a mere hula-hoop, though that is not to be dismissed entirely" (p. 35).

Such aphoristic statements are in conjunction both with lateral quotes from *Finnegans Wake* and Quentin Fiore's images and pictures that include advertisements, engravings, photographs, paintings, photographs evoking the technological and social dimension of war, even in a metaphorical way. McLuhan supports his argumentations with some long quotes retrieved, for instance, from: Otto Lowenstein, *The Senses* (1966); Ashley Montagu, *The Human Revolution* (1967); Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (1962); Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (1967); James Reston, *The Artillery of the Press* (1967). Many other scholars help investigate the relationship between war and peace throughout history, including philosophers such as Mircea Eliade (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1949) and Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens*, 1938), sociologists such as Jose Ortega y Gasset (*Man & People*, 1957; *History as a System and Other Essays Toward a Philosophy of History*, 1962), poets and writers, not only James Joyce, but also T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*), Alexander Pope (*Essay on Man*), Herman Hesse (*Siddharta*), William Butler Yeats (*The Second Coming*).

The convergence of primary and secondary sources is framed within a typographic pattern that exploits the iconic and metaphorical impact of images attuned to the flow of argumentations. The philosophical background supporting this diachronic analysis is not the least of the literary and historiographic references, shoring up the discourse, as in the case of the battles of Hastings (1066) and Nasby (1645), analyzed to remark on the transition from chivalry culture to gunpowder civilization. Starting from the "indifference of military historians to the effects of technology" (p. 37), the social scientist has the task to revolve around the complexity of human organization throughout the communicative innovation shaping urban individual and collective equilibrium, especially when emperors, dictators and powerful leaders employ a profound mass influence functional to the achievement and management of power.

The images of Napoleon and Hitler are icons of a mass mesmerizing power ignited by the press (Napoleon) and the radio (Hitler). Consequently, the reproduction of the advertising of the Courvoisier Cognac, "The Brandy of Napoleon", showing the well-known Jacques-Louis David painting of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, provides the reader with an effective semiotic effect that highlights the role played by the French Emperor in the military and social fields, maintaining that he wanted to be the heir of Julius Caesar and of his military brilliance. In this sense, McLuhan gives the reader a piece of advice: "Before launching into the more complicated aspects of war as education, a few notes on Napoleon as educator may be relevant" (p. 102). To demonstrate that "the aspect of war as education appears in any life of Napoleon" (p. 102), McLuhan quotes from John Holland Rose, *The Life of Napoleon I* (1901) and David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (1966), so as to emphasize the educational dimension of war intended as discipline, behavior and organization.

This is what the American Civil War shows to be the point of contention, since it "delayed the abolition of slavery" (p. 111). According to McLuhan, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* can inspire the study of war as a social medium to be investigated through the past and to foretell

human organization. Terence Gordon points out: "Through puns, through all the linguistic inventiveness of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce shows the way to transcending numbness and making a breakthrough into new types of awareness. His constant objective in *Finnegans Wake* of making language physical matched up completely with the overriding objective of all McLuhan's teaching: to provide a program of training in perception" (Gordon 2010, p. 38).

While on the subject of puns and linguistic conundrums, it might be important to recall that in *War and Peace in the Global Village* McLuhan retrieves from *Finnegans Wake* the technique of portmanteau, which he adapts to the description of the Ten Thunders representing – in the novel – different phases in human history. In McLuhan's essay, each Thunder is explained by a 100-character portmanteau of other words without leaving room to reproduce the effects produced by each technology. The reader must break the portmanteau to grasp the meaning of the single words, also considering that many of them are themselves portmanteaus of words belonging to different languages. This means that the reader is hardly capable of penetrating the meaning of these weird propositions, and that the graphic and phonetic impact of the portmanteaus depends on their semiotic connotation. It is sufficient to recall the list of the Thunders, without the related portmanteaus: 1) Paleolithic to Neolithic; 2) Clothing as weaponry; 3) Specialism; 4) Markets and truck gardens; 5) Printing; 6) Industrial Revolution; 7) Tribal man again; 8) Movies; 9) Car and plane; 10) Television.

Civil wars and world wars are characterized by an immanent effort to overlap cultural patterns and remove identity legacies through the exploitation of all the available military tools, including media. War is a form of education compelling citizens and governments to get used to technological innovations and to reap benefit from scientific research, as happened during World War, II when the Nazis employed the use of the Enigma machine, the well-known cipher device the Germans considered secure to encipher top secret messages. If we consider that Arpanet, the technical foundation of the Internet, was established by the United States Department of Defense, the insight of war as

education will be clearer as it deals not only with discipline, security and innovation, but also with the cognitive and scientific mindset.

Media education is a considerable issue, as McLuhan indirectly underlines through Joyce's opinion: "Television kills telephony in brothers' broil. Our eyes demand their turn. Let them be seen! FW 52" (p. 76). McLuhan aims at demonstrating that the artist "is the man of integral awareness" (McLuhan 2011, p. 96) and can foresee the social effects of cultural innovation and expressive experimentation connected to the improvement of media, thanks to a "critical awareness" stemming from a smooth sensorial and representative prowess: "The artist has been an alien and an outcast in the Western world until recently" (p. 20). This statement is fostered through quotes from Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Blake, Pope, Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Pound, Dante (and others) that McLuhan inserts both into his books and into critical essays, according to a close connection between literature and media studies. In reference to *War and Peace in the Global Village*, Elena Lamberti argues: "McLuhan proved that literature, being a function and not simply a subject, contributes to knowledge and understanding of evolving mediascapes, that is, of our own actualities. The truly active digital citizen cannot but be a literary literate" (Lamberti 2011, p. 56).

In this sense, Joyce's verbal experimentation reflects the consequences of electrification and mass urbanization, along with the communicative syncretism triggered by media complexity. The portmanteaus explaining the Ten Thunders exalt the semiotic patterns of *War and Peace in the Global Village*, as the typographic construction of the book is inspired by a semiotic effort rooted in the interconnection of language and design. This is an aspect featured in other words in McLuhan's works, as Richard Cavell points out: "The disruption of visual space became McLuhan's methodology in *The Mechanical Bride* (and more radically in works such as *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations*, *The Medium is the Massage*, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, *Counterblast*, *Through the Vanishing Point*, and *Culture is Our Business*" (Cavell 2002, p. 182). By means of his literary knowledge, McLuhan gains a full awareness of the social determinism that

every new technology implies from a relational, economic and educational perspective. This is a Futurist legacy coming specifically from Windham Lewis's poems, as noted in *Understanding Media*: "The percussed victims of the new technology have invariably muttered clichés about the impracticality of artists and their fanciful preferences. But in the past century it has come to be generally acknowledged that, in the words of Wyndham Lewis, 'The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present'. Knowledge of this simple fact is now needed for human survival" (McLuhan 2011, p. 96).

The artist is the best interpretor of social changes, since the artist has the power to observe and express social change coping with the functional revolution ignited by media innovations. In other words, the task of the artist is to express the contradictions and the potential conflicts lurking in human environments to understand the impact of new technologies on human organizations. Indeed, this is an educational target: "To prevent undue wreckage in society, the artist tends now to move from the ivory tower to the control tower of society. Just as higher education is no longer a frill or luxury but a stark need of production and operational design in the electric age, so the artist is indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms and structures created by electric technology" (McLuhan 2011, p. 96). The way education and culture can oppose war and its bloody impact is accurately described in the second half of *War and Peace in the Global Village*, where McLuhan underlines that education is not an accessory but a need: "There was possibly a time when show biz was a bigger business than education. Today, education is not only by far the biggest business in the world, it is also becoming show biz" (p. 85).

The construction of the "society of the spectacle" implies the transformation of higher education into a marketplace in which competition may turn into conflictual relationships, inside and outside the educational environment. This is even truer in our time, in consideration of the effects of globalization and digitalization on military, communicative and geopolitical dynamics. "Education as war" (p. 148) is

more than an engaging aphorism laced with an intriguing metaphorical flavor: "Every new technology necessitates a new war" (p. 98). This is a maxim that ancient, modern and contemporary conflicts demonstrate, since technology determines social organization, human communication and mass control. The rise of the Gutenberg Galaxy has demonstrated that any spatial, visual and perceptive change is closely related to the functional impact of new technologies, especially when they improve management and rapidity. "Another case in point is the radar and its development" (McLuhan M., McLuhan E. 2017, p. 16), Eric and Marshall McLuhan point out in *The Lost Tetrads of Marshall McLuhan*, referring to the "lost" tetrads not included in *The Laws of Media: The New Science*, published in 1974 as a revised and expanded version of *Understanding Media*.

McLuhan elaborated the tetrads as a new scientific basis for media studies, testable and able to allow for prediction. On the one hand, his "new science" evokes Giambattista Vico's eponymous masterpiece, quoted in the conclusion of *War and Peace in the Global Village*; on the other hand, it provides a circular analysis of media inspired by four effects (laws): every new medium enhances, retrieves, reverses, obsolesces. "A 'tetrad' is a group of the four laws governing all human innovations. The four laws concern what any particular technology or device will obsolesce, retrieve, enhance or amplify, and reverse into – in no particular order" (McLuhan M. McLuhan E. 2017, p. 7). War is one of the tetrads first developed by McLuhan and his son Eric, as it "(A) intensifies passions, and goals; (B) obsolesces leisure and luxuries; (C) retrieves camaraderie; (D) reverses into research, social science, and double-agentry" (McLuhan M., McLuhan E 2017, p. 16). The heuristic paradigm of the tetrads provides a surprising cognitive tool to understand the circular influence of media throughout history, from the "innovation of papyrus" (25) to the "Television war" (p. 134).

In conclusion, McLuhan emphasizes that every new technology has a strong impact on social actors and their environment, in line with a constant adaptation of senses to the new perceptive shifts. The consequences are predictable, and it is possible to foresee the role played by

the media in the management of war and the consequent search for peace. Fragmentation and individualization are the main effects of the electronic age driving us back "into a world of mythic vision" of the eighteenth century: "The poet painter William Blake was one of the forerunners of this awareness, but Giambattista Vico, the darling of James Joyce, preceded Blake in this awareness" (p. 185). The dialectic between peace and war is rooted in the cyclic fluctuation of conservation and innovation, liberalism and conservatism, apocalyptic and integrated, especially from a media perspective. Regarding the cycle of history, we still wonder whether there can be a link between the eighteenth-century critique of books and gazettes and the much feared 'fall out' of the media in the mainstreaming age. Derreck de Kerckhove provides a very McLuhanian suggestion: "That might have something to do with Vico's theory of chaos at each end of a cycle and with *Finnegans Wake*'s ten Thunders. Check them out" (Lombardinilo 2017, p. 345).

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