Beyond the organicist metaphor: Media ecology through assemblage theory

Além da metáfora organicista: ecologia da mídia através da teoria assemblage

Más allá de la metáfora organicista: Ecología de los medios a través de la teoría del ensamblaje

Laureano Ralón
Figure/Ground (Argentina)
ralonlaureano@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article conducts a speculative analysis of the media ecology framework and, in particular, of Marshall McLuhan’s media philosophy, through the prism of assemblage theory – a Deleuzian-inspired philosophy of multiplicities systematized over the last decade by Mexican-born thinker Manuel DeLanda. Through an interventionist approach seeking to push McLuhanism beyond its very limits, the article is concerned with a certain dimension of its conceptual body which cannot be accommodated by its own parameters. Specifically, we identify McLuhan’s substitution of the term “global theater” for his well-known “global village” as an indication of a paradigm shift in his late thinking – a transition from a metaphysics of identity to a philosophy of differences and multiplicities. By developing this hidden dimension through the tenets of assemblage theory, new untapped forces are unleashed from the McLuhan corpus, providing important clues for a potential reassessment of his media philosophy and, more generally, the media ecology framework.
Keywords: McLuhan, DeLanda, media ecology, assemblage theory.

Resumen
Este artículo contiene un análisis especulativo respecto del enfoque de la ecología de los medios de comunicación y, en particular, de la filosofía mediática de Marshall McLuhan, a través del prisma de la teoría de ensamblaje, una filosofía inspirada en Deleuze de las multiplicidades, sistematizada en la última década por el pensador mexicano Manuel DeLanda. A través de un enfoque intervencionista que busca empujar al McLuhanismo más allá de sus límites, el artículo se refiere a una cierta dimensión de su cuerpo conceptual que no puede ser acomodada por sus propios parámetros. En concreto, identificamos la sustitución de McLuhan del término "teatro global" por su conocida "aldea global" como la indicación de un cambio de paradigma en su pensamiento tardío, una transición de una metafísica de la identidad a una filosofía de diferencias y multiplicidades. Al desarrollar esta dimensión oculta a través de los principios de la teoría de ensamblaje, nuevas fuerzas no explotadas se desatan del corpus de McLuhan, proporcionando pistas importantes para una revaluación potencial de su filosofía mediática y, más concretamente, del marco ecologista de los medios.

Palabras clave: McLuhan, DeLanda, ecología de los medios, teoría de ensamblaje.

Resumo
Este artigo realiza uma análise especulativa da estrutura de mídia ecologista e, em particular, da filosofia de mídia de Marshall McLuhan, através do prisma da teoria de assembléia - uma filosofia de multiplicidade sistematizada na última década pelo pensador mexicano Manuel DeLanda, de inspiração deleuziana. Através de uma abordagem intervencionista que busca empurrar o McLuhanismo além de seus próprios limites, o artigo trata de uma certa dimensão de seu corpo conceitual que não pode ser acomodada por seus próprios parâmetros. Especificamente, identificamos a substituição de McLuhan do termo "teatro global" por sua conhecida "aldeia global" como uma indicação de uma mudança de paradigma em seu pensamento tardio - uma transição de uma metafísica de identidade para uma filosofia de diferenças e multiplicidades. Ao desenvolver essa dimensão oculta através dos princípios da teoria da assembléia, novas forças inexploradas são desencadeadas a partir do corpus McLuhan, fornecendo pistas importantes para uma potencial reavaliação de sua filosofia de mídia e, mais geralmente, a mídia ecologia quadro.

Palavras-chave: McLuhan, DeLanda, media ecology, assemblage theory.
Introduction

Instead of “media ecology”, let us provisionally use the term “ecologies of media” as our operational concept. For there is a fundamental difference between the well-known theoretical field that sprung out of New York University in the 1970s and the concrete areas of intensity where different media tend to converge, forever executing their powers to affect and be affected in a complex web of relationality. At first, this may appear as a merely perspectival distinction, but in the pages that follow, I will labor to show that the difference is truly ontological. To be sure, any ontology demands an epistemology; however, if our means for accessing the world are to effectively disclose the intricate associations among things, which are in constant flux, they must be immanent to the plane of consistency under examination. Therefore, instead of defining the entire field in advance and then applying the various ‘commandments’ passed down by the forefathers (Innis, McLuhan, Postman, etc.); and instead of formulating yet another interpretation and/or diagnosis about the state of the ecology, understood as a pre-existing domain which forces us to stay still, we are required as analysts to go ‘where the action is’ and follow the “traces” left by the various media (Latour, 2005, p. 29).

The word trace here functions as a substitute for the word effect. In the media ecology framework, an “effect” can be defined as the diachronic consequence of a given medium upon the human sensorium or some other medium; as such, it is revealed analogically thorough a counter-environment and can be subjected to more systematic analysis through the tetrads. By contrast, we are making a call to abandon our detached, theoretical stance – our “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986) – and submit to the “executant reality” (Ortega y Gasset, 1975; see also Harman, 2002) of the ecologies themselves: always concrete, multiple and real. What exactly these ecologies consist of, and whether it is convenient to keep our provisional concept, “ecologies of media,” shall become clearer as our investigation progresses. For the time being, a sense of direction is already provided by the title: the general aim of this article is to introduce a series of basic principles for potentially reassessing the media ecology framework and, in particular, McLuhan’s media philosophy, through the tenets of assemblage theory – a deleuzian-inspired, radically constructivist philosophy of multiplicities which, over the past decade, has been systematized by Mexican-born thinker Manuel DeLanda.¹

Before we begin, however, we need to conduct a brief survey of the existing media ecology domain, and evaluate the ground covered thus far form a philosophical perspective. Given the extension of this article, such a preparatory task will consist of a McLuhan-style overview, aimed primarily at identifying a number of resonating intervals and lateral connections from a generalist viewpoint. We shall focus specifically on McLuhan and the philosophical resonances of his corpus; more particularly, we shall concentrate on his late coquetting with the possibility of a theory of differences and multiplicities. Our underlining hypothesis is that the introduction of the term “global
theater” – a performative concept which has received relatively little attention amongst media ecologists – marks the beginning of a paradigm shift in his late thinking which, in a sense, preconfigures the so-called “post-humanist” movement in philosophy. In approaching McLuhan’s media philosophy through the prism of assemblage theory, we hope to extend its corpus beyond the boundaries set up by McLuhan himself. We believe that this kind of interventionist ‘strong reading’, in which the empirical author tends to become obsolescent and environmental (Meyrowitz, 2001, p. 8), is much more conducive to advancing McLuhan than the uncritical regurgitation of ready-made formulas. Above all, it is by thinking with and through, rather than about, McLuhan that we may begin to construct his philosophical relevance for the XXI century.

The field and its resonances

As a scholarly field of inquiry, media ecology broadly defines itself as the study of “complex communication systems as environments” (Nystrom, 1972, p. 3). As such, it claims to be concerned not with concepts but precepts; not with products but processes; not with the impact but the effects of media. The notion of “effect”, in particular, is of paramount importance to McLuhan. In a 1966 interview with the CBC, he spoke in the following terms about the difference between impact and effect, associating his work with the latter:

Suddenly, if you noticed, the mood of North America has changed very drastically. Things like the safety car couldn't have happened ten years ago...it's because people have suddenly become obsessed with consequences of things. They used to be obsessed with mere products and packages, and launching these things out into markets and into the public; now they've suddenly become concerned about what happens when these things [cars] go out on the highway, what happens when this kind of program gets on the air, what happens? They want safety air, safety cigarettes, safety cars, and safety programming. This need for safety is a sudden awareness that things have effects. Now, my writing has for years been concerned with the effects of things; not their impact, but their consequences after impact (McLuhan, 1966).

Defining an effect as a diachronic consequence-after-impact already presupposes an “expansive” notion of media (Babe, 2000; see also Theall, 2001, p. 52), understood as something which transcends –and is therefore irreducible to– the object of engineering which supports it as a material infrastructure. This expansive conception, in turn, implies that a medium is nothing physical, but tantamount to the environments that are disclosed by human extensions. In McLuhan’s own words: “[t]he meaning of meaning is relationship” (McLuhan, 1972, p. 86) and reality is “something we make in the encounter with a world that is making us” (p. 3).

On a metaphysical level, a “correlation” emerges as a result of this formal, expansive and relational account of media. The medium, understood as an ‘inventory of effects’ acting upon the sensorium, surges up through the interval between self and tool.
The encounter is structured as an intentional nexus, which may be configured in various ways depending on the equilibrium between what the early McLuhan called “structural impact” and “subjective completion”. Moreover, an immediate metaphysical consequence of this self-tool-world “correlational circle” (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 19) is that the human being can no longer be conceived in an empiricist fashion, i.e., as an atomistic, synchronic subject whose defining function is to unify – through the power of habit – the chaotic bombardment of sensory impressions originating in the external world. Instead, the self now actively selects and organizes stimuli in such a way that its syntheses of apperception can no longer be accommodated in terms of a correspondence between two independent substances, as in Cartesian philosophy.

In order to overcome the dualism of modern, dogmatic metaphysics, McLuhan imported the notion of synesthesia – “the splashing over of impressions from one sense modality to another” (Gombrich, 1960, p. 366) – to the study of media, mediation and sensory arrangement. More specifically, he used synesthesia as a devise to account for the indirect, selective and counter-environmental apprehension of sensory materials by a self who no longer passively absorbs input through the compartmentalized vessels of the senses. Among other things, this meant that the individual senses, far from being isolated conduits, interact with, and influence, one another. Through synesthesia, McLuhan managed to overcome what Lakoff and Johnson, following Michael J. Reddy, later called the conduit metaphor: an ontological concept which conceives of language and, more generally, the senses, in purely spatial terms, as a unidirectional canal for the delivery of atomistic data to an observing subject. More particularly, the conduit metaphor consists of four basic assumptions: a) that language is a conduit; b) that speakers insert thoughts into words; c) that words contain thoughts, and d) that listeners extract thoughts from words.

Interestingly, in his public lecture entitled, “Living in an acoustic world”, delivered at the University of South Florida a decade before the publication Lakoff and Johnson’s oft-cited and highly celebrated book, McLuhan was openly rejecting the presuppositions of this conceptual metaphor, which he associated with transportation and information theory:

I want to mention, by way of explaining my own approach to these matters, that my kind of study in communication is a study of transformation, whereas information theory and all the existing theories of communication that I know of are theories of transportation. All the official theories of communication studied in the schools of North America are theories of how you move data from point A to point B to point C with minimal distortion. That is not what I study at all. Information theory I understand and I use, but information theory is a theory of transportation, and it has nothing to do with the effects which these forms have on us. It’s like a railway train concerned with moving goods along a track. The track may be blocked, may be interfered with. The problem in the transportation theory of communication is to get the noise, get the interference off the track and let it go through. Many educators think that the problem in education is just to
get the information through, get it past the barrier, the opposition of the young, just to move it and keep it going. I don’t have much interest in that theory. My theory or concern is what these media do to the people who use them. What did writing do to the people who invented it and used it? What do the other media of our time do to the people who use them? Mine is a transformation theory, how people are changed by the instruments they employ (McLuhan, 1970).

McLuhan seems to be favoring ontology over epistemology here. He also appears to reject the kind of soft constructivism which places an excessive emphasis on the social and symbolic dimensions of world and self, thus neglecting other pillars such as embodiment or temporality.

According to Corey Anton (2000), these four ontological pillars – sociality, simbolicity, embodiment and temporality – anchor the lived-body onto a world from which s/he is separate yet inseparable. For years, Anton has labored intensely to radicalize media and social constructionism through phenomenology: “I have argued that phenomenology and media ecology give the rigorous historical and embodied ground for how social construction is possible”, he stated in an interview with Figure/Ground. “Taken together, they could be called, “social constructionism with teeth”” (Ralón, 2010a). Anton’s call is indeed compelling, and I have discussed some of its implications elsewhere (Ralón, forthcoming). Since 2009, my own work in the field of media ecology has revolved around McLuhan’s general media theory (Striegel, 1978) and its points of contact with phenomenology (Ralón, 2009; Ralón & Vieta, 2012; Vieta & Ralón, 2013). Nevertheless, I have recently come to realize that there are limits to what phenomenology and existential philosophy can offer as a supplement to media ecology and social constructivism. For reasons that shall become clearer as we progress, I am more inclined as of late to think that a “social constructivism with teeth” is one which is reconciled with realism – albeit not a naïve version, but a speculative one.

When considering the limitations of phenomenology as a supplement to constructivism, we must necessarily return to the “correlation” alluded to earlier, that is, a face-to-face or primordial rapport between self and world, thinking and being. From a philosophical standpoint, the four pillars Anton refers to resonate with what philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2008) calls the “media of the correlation”, by which he means primarily “consciousness and language” (p. 6), though other correlational media such as perception and praxis could be added to the list. To Meillassoux, following Francis Wolff (1997), these media amount to a “world-object” (p. 11), that is, a unique object insofar as it makes world. The fundamental difference between Anton’s phenomenological line of inquiry and Meillassoux’s post-finite approach is essentially that the former contemplates the four pillars as absolutely necessary, albeit not in a substantial or dogmatic sense, whereas the latter regards them as obligatory contingent. This distinction is, of course, intimately related to their respective understandings of being; whereas Anton is influenced by a philosophy of identity (phenomenology), Meillassoux operates within the
framework of a *philosophy of multiplicities* (speculative realism/materialism), which is much more compatible with the assemblage theory systematized by DeLanda.

Briefly, Meillassoux’s speculative thesis concerning the “necessity of contingency” entails that not even being – understood in a broad, heideggerian sense as “that which determines beings as beings, that on the basis of which beings are already understood” (1962, p. 25-26) – is necessary. In his view, Heidegger is a *strong correlationist* whose fundamental ontology manages to overcome the logic of representation, but nevertheless (and despite his repeated attacks on metaphysics) maintains intact the *principle of identity* as well as the fundamental *anthropocentrism* that characterizes the philosophical tradition from Plato onwards. As Meillassoux (2008) puts it,

On the one hand, for Heidegger, it is certainly a case of pinpointing the occlusion of being or presence inherent in every metaphysical conception of representation and the privileging of the present at-hand entity considered as object. Yet on the other hand, to think such an occlusion at the heart of the unconcealment of the entity requires, for Heidegger, that one take into account the co-propriation (*Zusammengehörigkeit*) of man and being, which he calls *Ereignis*. Thus, the notion of *Ereignis*, which is central in the later Heidegger, remains faithful to the correlationist exigency inherited from Kant and continued in Husserlian phenomenology, for the 'co-propriation' which constitutes *Ereignis* means that neither being nor man can be posited as subsisting 'in-themselves', and subsequently entering into relation - on the contrary, both terms of the appropriation are originarily constituted through their reciprocal relation… (p. 17-18).

In other words, while the latter Heidegger introduces the notion of “event” into his philosophy, thus suggesting a “turn” [*die Kehre*] towards difference based on the historical becoming of being, according to Meillassoux, the correlation or face-to-face between being and *Dasein* (which remains at all times an “exemplar being”) is kept intact in this process of mutual appropriation. Ultimately, Heidegger and his followers (Derrida included, albeit prioritizing difference over being) think difference *through* the ontological difference, but fail to think difference *in itself* (Rae, 2014, p. 121).

For Meillassoux, on the other hand, there are no fixed forms or invariable structures, no point of reference whatsoever which can provide the world with a permanent, stable order. This means that, at any given time in history, a specific correlational medium can take precedence over others. For instance, during the first half of the XX century, the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty dominated philosophy on the continent, with its tendency to prioritize consciousness (Husserl, Sartre), temporality (Heidegger), the lived body and perception (Merleau-Ponty), with each reduction giving way to a specific subfield. By contrast, during the second half of the XX, as the structuralist revolution in continental thought posited language as the correlational means *par excellence*, new theoretical paradigms came into being, including post-structuralism and deconstruction. These, in turn, were
subsequently challenged by new historicism, social praxis and cultural studies during the 1980s and 1990s. For Meillassoux, the order of this historical sequence is neither necessary nor accidental. It is necessarily contingent.

**Further resonances with the tradition**

In modern philosophy, the idea of a “third term” supporting the correlational circle, that is, mediating the encounter between world and self, goes back to the transcendentalism of Immanuel Kant. The main question raised by Kant’s critical project was: under which forms does a determination determine the indeterminate? With Kant, a triadic project began to emerge for the first time in modern philosophy, effectively replacing the dualist, dogmatic metaphysics of Descartes and the problem of how two independent substances (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*) were to communicate. In this context, the question was no longer metaphysical but epistemological, and the emphasis was placed on the formal conditions of possibility of human experience. Following Kant’s “Copernican revolution”, the transcendental subject effectively replaced God as the guarantor of our accessibility to the world. In a sense, the existence of the external world, which Descartes had attempted to save through the *res extensa*, the intervention of God and mathematics, was now conceived as something completely unknown—in fact, quite mysterious—in the hands of British empiricism, whose philosophy no longer committed itself to metaphysical issues. Hume’s skepticism, in particular, paved the way for Kant’s transcendentalism and the notion of the constituting subject. However, according to Meillassoux (2008), Kant’s revolution was in fact a “Ptolemaic counter-revolution” (p. 119). For, while Copernicus rejected the geocentric thesis in favor of a heliocentric paradigm, Kant reinstated the human subject at the center of philosophy, thus positing a different kind of anthropocentrism.

As we shall see, the latter McLuhan appears to reject Kant’s anthropocentrism, and in a sense foreshadows the post-finite movement in recent contemporary philosophy. However, he also maintains a certain affinity with Kant’s transcendental idealism; specifically, his notion that the faculties are not always neutral but often conflict with each other: underneath the *de facto* harmony of common sense (and let us remember that McLuhan called “common sense” the sum of all senses), the Kantian faculties actually engage in what are known as free and indeterminate accords. This free play, to which we shall return further ahead in connection with DeLanda’s assemblage theory, leads to what Kant himself called “internal illusions”, that is, operations which stem from “illegitimate uses” of the faculties. What’s interesting here is that Kant’s notion of a free interplay among the faculties appears to foreshadow the idea of synesthesia and sensory arrangement. Moreover, we know that McLuhan (echoing Kant) contemplated the possibility of an imbalance among the senses, which he described not as internal illusions but in terms of *hallucinations* or the “endless power of men to hypnotize themselves into unawareness in the presence of challenge” (1964, p. 70). The notion of *hallucination*
already suggests that there are limits to the powers of the modern autonomous subject and its ability to proceed as a rational actor or a phenomenological subject.

But McLuhan goes even further in decentering the modern (Cartesian) subject. In spite of the similarities, the Kantian faculties remain an immanent formal demarcation of the conceptual apparatus of the transcendental subject, whereas the senses are conceived by McLuhan as embodying a special form of intelligence which is grounded in sensibility, rather than cognitive processes, categorical thought and pure forms. Moreover, McLuhan often claims that the senses do not stop at the surface of our skin, but radiate outwards and lie outside the organism, beyond its fleshy boundaries. For example, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he writes that “our technologies, like our private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes rational co-existence possible…A ratio of interplay among these extensions of our human functions is now as necessary collectively as it has always been for our private and personal rationality in terms of our private senses or ‘wits’ as they were once called” (p. 5). In light of this distinction, it would be a mistake to consider McLuhan a critical philosopher upholding the image of a constituting subject. In fact, McLuhan’s abandonment in later years of the “structural impact” versus “subjective completion”6 dualism suggests a transition from the anthropocentrism of (post)critical philosophy to a kind of “flat ontology”7, which effectively overcomes the correlational face-to-face between world and self that characterizes the tradition. This becomes particularly evident when considering his powerful statement that, in the electric age, we have extended our nervous system in a global embrace, in such a way that we are now *inside* the nervous system:

> In this electronic age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness…. By putting our physical bodies inside our extended nervous systems, by means of electric media, we set up a dynamic by which all previous technologies that are mere extensions of hands and feet and teeth and bodily heat-controls – all such extensions of our bodies…will be translated into information systems.8

In this passage, McLuhan sounds like an idealist, albeit not a subjective idealist in the style of Berkeley, who believed that there were only minds. Rather, the key to understand his assertion is to take the idea of being “inside” the nervous system not ontically but ontologically.

One way to explicate this distinction is through Heidegger’s contrast between “being-in” (an existential category) and “insideness” (the being in space that we commonly associate with containment). In *Being and time* (1962), Heidegger takes “insideness” to mean that “an entity which is itself extended is closed round by the extended boundaries of something that is likewise extended,” adding that “[t]he entity inside and that which closes it round are both present-at-hand in space” (p. 101). In other words, there seems to be a fundamental difference between insideness and *Dasein*’s
distinctive form of lived-through spatiality (i.e., being-in-the-world). The distinction becomes even clearer when Heidegger, in his later work, discusses the notion of nearness. In the essay called “The thing” (1973), published at around the time when McLuhan was becoming a sensation in Europe, Heidegger argues, in what appears a direct response to McLuhan from across the Atlantic, that the absence of distances does not bring nearness. The resonance with McLuhan is so powerful in this text that it is worth reproducing Heidegger at length:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. The germination and growth of plants, which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly in a minute, on film. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today’s street traffic. Moreover, the film attests to what it shows by presenting also the camera and its operator at work. The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication (p. 163).

Heidegger then appears to confirm the McLuhanite notion that, under electronic (village) conditions, time has stopped and space has ceased: “Man puts the longest distances behind him in the shortest time,” he writes, “he puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range” (p. 163). However, he immediately goes on to challenge the notion that an ontic shrinking can produce nearness and, therefore, constructive integration under village conditions:

Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness, for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote form us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness (p. 163).

There is no evidence to suggest that Heidegger was addressing McLuhan in these passages, nor do we know whether he actually read McLuhan. On the other hand, McLuhan certainly knew of Heidegger, as a number of statements scattered throughout his work demonstrate (Ralón & Vieta, 2012; Vieta & Ralón, 2013). Additionally, we should bear in mind that he became an overnight sensation in France in the late 1960s, where his philosophy received the name of McLuhanism, catching the attention of Heidegger’s most influential disciple: Jacques Derrida. It is, therefore, quite likely that Heidegger at least heard of McLuhan’s “global village”. Still, what matters for our purposes is the fact that the later McLuhan was well in line with Heidegger on one fundamental point: that ontic shrinking does not bring meaningful integration. And yet, I believe Heidegger’s own notion of existential nearness – centered on Dasein’s intentional (anthropocentric) powers of de-distancing and founded on its primordial relationship with
being – is not enough to account for the kind of integration that the latter McLuhan is hinting at through his notion of “global theater”.

To be sure, McLuhan’s nervous system, once extended on a global scale by means of electronic media, appears like the ultimate source of individual entities and the final destination of history. If all this sounds like monism, it is neither a substance monism (which posits that only one kind of stuff exists) nor an existence monism (which posits that there is only a single thing – a rumbling apeiron which is artificially divided by consciousness into many things). Rather, McLuhan’s pluralistic monism seems to involve a movement which appears fundamentally historical, and whereby the nervous system – understood as the seat of the sensorium – can no longer be contained within the human organism. To the degree that the sensorium is no longer shaped after the image of the empirical subject, but appears to take on a flight of its own, it suggests a certain Hegelian flair. In recent decades, this has led a number of scholars to read McLuhan as a “dialectical” thinker (Grosswiler, 1998; Babe, 2000). This critical line of inquiry yielded some interesting and novel results at a time when reductive readings of McLuhan abounded in the mainstream media: most notably, a neo-liberal, instrumentalist, futurist reappraisal which sought to align his thinking with technological innovation and progress (Shachtman, 2002; Federman, 2003). Among other things, Paul Grosswiler and Robert Babe convincingly showed that McLuhan was not entirely an apolitical figure, and that despite his personal rejection of Marxism, important aspects of his media philosophy remained compatible with the Marxist doctrine.

Nevertheless, when considered more closely, there is an irreducible sense of concreteness in the McLuhan corpus which exceeds any characterization in dialectical and historical terms. The expansion of the sensorium on a planetary scale, which McLuhan claimed would result in enlarged audio-tactile sensibilities, is not the flight of a “spirit” that knows itself though an abstract movement fueled by negativity. Likewise, one should be cautious of the claim that, as consciousness is extended outside fleshy boundaries, human beings become translated into information. While something rings true about this, we should be careful once again not to take it literally. Above all, the term “information” should not be interpreted in mechanistic terms, or as tantamount to binary digital data or some other code.

According to McLuhan, the expansion of the sensorium reached its most critical momentum in the XX century with the introduction of electronic media. In the early 1960s, he was suggesting that this enveloping effect would result in a shared sensibility (a transition from individual to collective consciousness), attributable in part to the TV environment and the hippie culture. Decades later, media ecologists such as Paul Levinson and Robert K. Logan extended this claims, arguing that its expanse was being accentuated by the advent of the Internet in the 1990s and digital interactive media in the new millennium. However, McLuhan himself remained suspicious as to whether this new
global consciousness, understood as the worldly communion of individual sensibilities, would lead to a more peaceful and tranquil epoch. In a well-known interview with Gerald Stearn (1969), McLuhan stated that,

…the more you create village conditions, the more discontinuity and division and diversity. The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquility were the properties of the global village…Village is fission, not fusion, in depth…The village is not the place to find ideal peace and harmony (p. 279).

McLuhan’s characterization was timely. By the end of the 1960s, the naïve hippie youth was mutating into a powerful force, as the student movements in France and North America took on the streets and demanded radical changes: l’imagination au pouvoir.

Disregarding his remarks in favor of the ready-made probes of the early 1960s, the 1990s reappraisal of McLuhan was very much based on a neo-liberal vision in which science and technology – the great equalizers – promised to eliminate linguistic and cultural barriers and restore peaceful village conditions. They completely neglected the fact that the later and wiser McLuhan became increasingly skeptical about the redemptive powers of media. Time proved to be on his side: globalization, understood as ontic shrinking, was overall a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the possibility of meaningful, constructive and harmonious integration (Ralón, 2009). In a way, this was already being perceived in the early 1980’s, with at least one commentator noticing that “since the time of McLuhan’s initial insight, the world has become less a tribal village and more an urban apartment building, where people in adjacent flats cannot recognize one another” (Blake, 1982, p. 433-434). In fact, as the later McLuhan (1970) became increasingly aware of this trend, he effectively replaced the term “global village” with “global theater” to shed light on the challenges of integration. Surprisingly, this important concept has received little attention within the media ecology community. As we shall see further ahead, this subtle move implies a profound shift in his media philosophy, that is, a transition from an ontology of identity to an ontology of multiplicities, fueled in part by the realization that globalization could not be understood in terms of an organic holism.

**Organic holism and technological determinism**

Despite this apparent shift, many commentators continue to uncritically approach McLuhan against the background of the *organicist metaphor*, a metaphor very much akin to pragmatism, functionalism and other holistic philosophies. No surprisingly, the accusations of technological determinism are very much linked to this organicist metaphor – a stumbling-block which, in its least sophisticated form involves making a superficial analogy between society and the human body, or in the words of DeLanda (2006), “postulate that just as bodily organs work together for the organism as a whole,
so the function of social institutions is to work in harmony for the benefit of society” (p. 8). That this raw version of the organicist metaphor informed the charges of technological determinism lay upon McLuhan becomes particularly evident in light of the rather uncritical appropriation of his most fundamental dictum: “We become what we behold. We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us” (1964, p. xxi). The meaning of this basic premise has been seriously misinterpreted by critics. Andrew Feenberg, for instance, arguably the premier philosopher of technology in North America, dismisses McLuhan on account that, “[t]he thesis that technologies extend the body and the senses is associated historically with the deterministic views of Gehlen and other early thinker” (Ralón, 2010d). Yet, paradoxically, Feenberg (2002) recognizes that “[w]hat it means to be human is thus decided in large part in the shape of our tools” (p. 19). What to make of this tension?

Elsewhere, I have systematically exposed a number of misperceptions on the part of North American philosophers of technology (Borgmann, Ihde, Feenberg, Heim and Kellner, among others) concerning McLuhan’s media philosophy (Ralón, forthcoming). Relatedly, the charges of technological determinism are also being challenged by younger generations of philosophers. For instance, Yoni Van Den Eede (2012) points out that this classical notion can be said to go back as far as Aristotle, probably one of the first philosophers to introduce the idea that instruments and tools extend the human body and soul, just as the body is the instrument of the soul (p. 140). Historically, the extension idea was carried forward by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ernest Kapp and Henri Bergson, and in present times it has been adopted by none other than Don Ihde and further developed into a theory of the extended self by philosophers such as Andy Clark and David Chalmers.

The key word in the controversy surrounding McLuhan’s determinism is, of course, the verb “to shape”. Interestingly, while McLuhan used it as a verb, Feenberg turns it into an adjective in an attempt to relativize the powers of media. However, as we shall see momentarily, the only true way to account for the agency of media while avoiding determinism is to keep the verb as reference to an event: not an event of mutual appropriation in the Heideggerian sense, but an event in the sense of an emergence that defies lineal causality and points to the “under-determination of action” (Latour, 2005, p. 45). In other words, whereas the heideggerian event posits Dasein as “the-there” of a mutual appropriation, thus maintaining the anthropocentrism of the tradition, a philosophy of multiplicities would define an event by resorting to the anonymity of action. This does not mean that there are hidden anonymous forces operating behind the scene, like a puppeteer pulling strings from above, but that we do not quite know who is acting when we act. As Latour (2005) puts it in the context of his actor-network theory, 

Action should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event. It is for this reason that we should begin, here again, not from the ‘determination of action by society’, the
‘calculative abilities of individuals’, or the ‘power of the unconscious’ as we would ordinarily do, but rather from the under-determination of action, from the uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when ‘we’ act—and there is of course no way to decide whether this source of uncertainty resides in the analyst or in the actor (p. 45).

To be clear, the theme of determinism is dependent on lineal causality, which, in turn, is tied to an atomistic conception of the human self as an autonomous organism, that is, a substantive core from which the extensions supposedly radiate in an ecstatic flight of transcendence.

Against the charges of technological determinism, media ecologists are quick to remind critics that McLuhan’s basic proclamation involves a dialectical relationship: we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us. However, this is not enough in my view to overcome the conception of a self-identical subject which precedes his or her entering into relations with anything or anyone else. Media ecologist Robert K. Logan (2013) has labored intensely to “set the record straight” regarding McLuhan’s alleged determinism. To this end, he developed the notion of an “extended mind”, which parallels similar developments in philosophy (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). Essentially, an extended self is an attempt to overcome the atomistic conception of the human being posited by modern philosophy and to find a way around determinism. The self could not possibly be determined by media, because both media and self – through a kind of adhesive intentionality – create an extended organism that does not stop at its fringes and is no longer a passive receiver. The idea is not new, of course. In Being and time, the early Heidegger had already introduced a prototype of this kind of extended configuration of the human being, which he understood as a “thrown projection” [geworfen Entwurf]. For Heidegger, Dasein is not a permanent substance, but an extended self who is past its fleshy boundaries: thrown into the world, amidst things and pressing towards future possibilities. In the 1980s and 1990s, in a context where praxis became the primordial medium of the correlation between world and self, this extended configuration was systematized by the field known as post-phenomenology: authors such as Mark Okrent, Hubert Dreyfus, John Stewart combined phenomenology and North American pragmatism, conceiving of Dasein as skillfully/mindlessly coping with everyday dealings within a network of instrumentality.

Once again, it is tempting to compare and contrast McLuhan and Heidegger on a number of levels, as Graham Harman and Yoni Van Den Eede, among others, have done. In particular, the emancipation of the sensorium from the human subject and its propagation around the planet could perhaps be compared to Heidegger’s later conception of being as historical becoming. There is undoubtedly a historical dimension both in McLuhan and in Heidegger. To McLuhan, the electric age would bring about “retribalization” and restores village conditions (from a dialectical perspective, the village appears to be the synthesis of the clash between pre-modern and modern periods).
Likewise, for Heidegger, although he distinguishes more than three historical periods as concerns the apprehension of being, the history of metaphysical thought seems to come to an end in our age of technological rationality. More importantly, both thinkers stand out for by their ability to self-transcend: they both speculate about and leave open the possibility of a going beyond their respective systems, the consequences of which they themselves never fully sketch out. This going-beyond is nothing more than the excess or horizon of their respective oeuvres: on the one hand, Heidegger’s notion of a “meditative thinking” [das besinnliche Denken] and of a “free relationship” with technology suggests, despite his ultimate fatalism, a possible reconciliation with being; on the other hand, McLuhan’s “global theater” – as an alternative configurations geared toward multiplicity rather than unity – offers the possibility to overcome the “juggernaut” of progress and the negative effects of technology under village conditions. And yet, in spite of these resonances, Heidegger remains a correlationist, whereas the later McLuhan, as we shall see, breaks free from the anthropocentrism of the tradition.

From identity to multiplicities

We pointed out at the outset that the notion of “global theater” has received relatively little attention amongst media ecologists. The most common reading is that the transition from “global village” to “global theater” signals a shift from passive reception to active production, which is taken as predictive of the emergence of digital interactive media, with its “user participation” affordances. However, such a shift is not enough to fully capture the significance of the “global theater”. The reason, as Harman shows in the context of his object-oriented philosophy, is that both detached theoretical contemplation and situated practical action equally fail to capture the reality of things. In Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects (2002), Harman argues – against the neo-pragmatist appropriation of Heidegger – that the “tool analysis” in Being and time (1962), arguably one of the most important moments in the history of philosophy since Plato’s allegory of the cave, does not oppose praxis to theory. Harman believes that both forms of human intentionality fail at reaching deep enough into the being of things, which lies beneath the surface of experience. In other words, both ways of access only give us a partial and imperfect translation (a façade or caricature) of the real object which exceeds both its accidents and relations. For Harman, the real object or “tool-being” is, borrowing Ortega y Gasset’s term introduced at the outset, an irreducible “executant reality” – something quite different form its accidents or relations.

Following this line of argument, I believe McLuhan’s “global theater” is likewise irreducible to a kind of intentionality; nor is the theater made up of a community of producing human agents, however sophisticated their tools may be. In the remaining pages, I shall attempt to expose the theater in its execution. Its disclosure will bear little relation to McLuhan’s legacy as an empirical author; rather, it will be concerned with the progressive tendencies of his media philosophy. Methodologically, our approach will
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consist of an interventionist ‘strong reading’ which, rather than paying tribute to a specific text, regurgitating ready-made labels or worshipping McLuhan’s public persona, aims to push his work and thought beyond its very limits. A strong reading, of course, does not mean that anything goes. Indeed, we will try to remain as faithful as possible to the McLuhan corpus, but in a way that his figure and thematic insights becomes less obtrusive and more obsolescent, as Meyrowitz (2001) would want it. To the degree that 1) we are not primarily concerned with what McLuhan the man explicitly had to say, and 2) we do not content ourselves with yet another interpretation which pays tributes to his work as such, we are in a sense marginalizing the empirical author. This, however, should not be confounded with the postmodern dictum about “the death of the author”, which, as Corey Anton so aptly put it, was “a premature death sentence” (Ralón, 2010a). The author should in fact be heard and consulted as often as necessary, but the main focus should be placed upon its corpus.

At first, all of this may sound like a return ticket to some kind of formalism, requiring a close reading of McLuhan’s thinking, considered a finished product – a collection of books, articles and second-hand commentary, in short, a canon which is readily available for inspection – to be approached hermeneutically. We reject this conception, the notion of unity, the principle of self-identity and the metaphysics of presence it presupposes. The McLuhan corpus, understood as an excessive reality, is not necessary but contingent. It is the plane of immanence where insights – both actual and virtual – reside and are actively maintained through constant effort of actualization by the actors involved (critics, commentators, etc.).

The first step towards advancing McLuhan in the direction of a philosophy of multiplicities is to relativize the so-called relational ontologies, which, despite their presumed extended configuration in the style of Heidegger – the notion that the subject emerges in the contexture of a totality of references – maintain intact the human-world correlation as the primordial space of meaning in the universe. The problem with this kind of “relationism” is that it leads to a kind of postmodern relativism where everything points to something things (Harman, 2009, p. 75). The result is a procession of simulacra, a forward-progressing chain of signifiers, or a series of successive interpretations (and interpretations of interpretations) but without something interpreted. Another problem with relational ontologies is that they do not manage to overcome the anthropocentrism that characterizes the tradition. Heidegger’s referential totality, for instance, despite its extensive/expansive configuration, ends up in one place: Dasein and its purposes. Hence, an asymmetry remains very much in place as the human being animates the relational whole.

Another obstacle to be overcome is the kind of holism where everything seems to connect with everything else in a seamless kind of web. The organicist metaphor alluded in the title denotes, precisely, this tendency to conceive of totalities in terms of an organic
unity, whereby the whole is more than the sum of its parts and the parts find their function, meaning and value by virtue of the place they occupy in the pre-existing whole. In the following paragraph, Manuel DeLanda (2006) traces the origins and development of the organicist metaphor that we identify with organic holism:

In its sophisticated form this stumbling-block involves making a analogy between society and the human body, and to postulate that as bodily organs work together for the organism as a whole, so function of social institutions is to work in harmony for the benefit society...In the late nineteenth century the organismic metaphor achieved its first systematic development in the work of Herbert Spencer and reached its pinnacle of influence a few decades later in the work of Talcott Parsons, the most important figure of the functionalist school of sociology. After this, the use of the organism as a metaphor declined as sociologists rejected functionalism, some because of its emphasis on social integration and its disregard for conflict, others because of its focus on social structure at the expense of phenomenological experience. But a more sophisticated form of the basic metaphor still exerts considerable influence in most schools of sociology, and in this form it is much more difficult to eliminate. This version involves not an analogy but a general theory about the relations between parts and wholes, wholes that constitute a seamless totality or that display an organic unity (p. 8-9).

In order to reconfigure the media ecology framework taking McLuhan’s concept of “global theater” as starting point, we need a theory capable of overcoming the organicist metaphor just described.

**Multiplicities as social assemblages**

For Manuel DeLanda, an assemblage is a kind multiplicity (individual organisms, interpersonal networks, institutional organizations), which, unlike totalities, constructs and perpetuates itself through “relations of exteriority”, as opposed to “relations of interiority”. In an organic whole regulated by relations of interiority, “the component parts are constituted by the very relations they have to other parts in the whole. A part detached from such a whole ceases to be what it is, since being this particular part is one of its constitutive properties. A whole in which the component parts are self-subsistent and their relations are external to each other does not possess an organic unity” (p. 9). According to this conception, wholes possess an inextricable unity in which there is a strict reciprocal determination between parts. On the other hand, assemblages are wholes regulated by “relations of exteriority”. DeLanda writes:

These relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different. In other words, the exteriority of relations implies a certain autonomy for the terms they relate...Relations of exteriority also imply that the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute a whole...although they may be caused by the exercise of a component’s capacities (p. 11).
In other words, the reason why the properties of a whole cannot be reduced to those of its parts is that they are the result not of an aggregation of the components’ own properties but of the actual exercise of their capacities. DeLanda adds that

…these capacities do depend on a component’s properties but cannot be reduced to them since they involve reference to the properties of other interacting entities. Relations of exteriority guarantee that assemblages may be taken apart while at the same time allowing that the interactions between parts may result in a true synthesis (p. 11).

The terms “exteriority” and “interiority” can be misleading. To be sure, they do not refer to relations that lying outside and inside the whole, but relations that are extrinsic and intrinsic to it. Unlike organic holisms, assemblages prioritize the free play among its component parts by virtue of its individual capacities (or powers to affect and be affected). These capacities are neither some present-at-hand properties, nor are they hidden force lying behind our apparent reality. For this reason, assemblage theory rejects essences as well as totalities. While it prioritizes the individual components of a given whole rather than the whole itself, this implies that the individual parts do not withhold a metaphysical excess.

In addition to the exteriority of relations, DeLanda defines assemblage theory in terms of the roles that its components play within the whole, from purely material to purely expressive ones. He writes:

The components of social assemblages playing a material role vary widely, but at the very least involve a set of human bodies properly oriented (physically or psychologically) towards each other. The classic example of these assemblages of bodies is face-to-face conversations, but the interpersonal networks that structure communities, as well as the hierarchical organizations that govern cities or nation-states, can also serve as illustrations. Community networks and institutional organizations are assemblages of bodies, but they also possess a variety of other material components, from food and physical labour, to simple tools and complex machines, to the buildings and neighbourhoods serving as their physical locales. Illustrating the components playing an expressive role needs some elaboration because in assemblage theory expressivity cannot be reduced to language and symbols. A main component of conversations is, of course, the content of the talk, but there are also many forms of bodily expression (posture, dress, facial gestures) that are not linguistic. In addition, there is what participants express about themselves not by what they say but by the way they say it or even by their very choice of topic (p. 12).

Something to bear in mind is that the term “expressive” should not be reduced to language or symbols. Expressivity can be embodied linguistic as well as behavioral resources.

Lastly, these components play an active role in the territorialization or deterritorialization of the assemblage – two deleuzian terms which have an interesting McLuhanite ring to them. DeLanda first explains that
One and the same assemblage can have components working to stabilize its identity as well as components forcing it to change or even transforming it into a different assemblage. In face one and the same component may participate in both processes by exercising different sets of capacities…Processes of territorialization are processes that define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories. Territorialization, on the other hand, also refers to non-spatial processes which increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage (12-13).

Throughout the remainder of his book, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006), DeLanda goes on to sketch a detailed picture of his theory of multiplicities. For our purposes, the three elements just outlined will suffice: an assemblage is a multiplicity regulated by relations of exteriority, by it’s the free play among its component’s capacities, and by processes of territorialization and deterritorialization which increase or decrease its internal homogeneity or endo-consistency.

Above all, what needs to be clear is that assemblages are not a chaotic aggregate of parts. A multiplicity is not opposed to identity as *the multiple* is opposed to *the one* in the philosophical tradition. In fact, the relation one-multiple treats the real as realized possibilities of a concept, and does not question the metaphysics of identity which – from Plato to Heidegger – perpetuated the correlation between thinking and being in all its different modes (logical, analogical, emanative, etc.). By contrast, a multiplicity has its own identity as difference: it is an intensive area of consistency which is constructed and maintained through a complex web of relationality. Unlike necessity, the contingent character of multiplicities implies that relationality must be constantly maintained in order for a given assemblage not to disintegrate into a loose bundle of relations. Lastly, the term “social” which usually accompanies the term “construction”, does not necessarily refer to some kind of preexisting domain which has been posited in advanced by prioritizing some privileged kind of material over others (rational actors, structures, powers relations, anonymous social forces, to name a few). In our context, the term social simply means a collection – a collective – of different component parts operating *transversally* as part of a non-hierarchical flat ontology. This implies that all objects – whether concrete or abstract, real or fictitious, human or non-human – must be treated equally as component parts of overlapping assemblages. A flat ontology entails a definitive overcoming of the metaphysical chiasm that has defined philosophies of identity in their various gazes: not a reconciliation of the subject/object split through some sort of dialectical stratagem or the adhesive powers of intentionality, but an overcoming of the dualist rift itself in favor of a fabric of assemblages operating at different levels but on a single plane of immanence. Finally, to think of multiplicities is tantamount to embracing a *non-lineal* form of causality, where assemblages interact obliquely with other assemblages through the free play and selective interaction of their individual, detachable component parts. According to DeLanda, components often function as *catalysts*, which indirectly trigger unforeseen consequences by altering the internal
consistency of the whole through selective interplay. In other words, an entity only catalyzes an effect; it does not cause it. Hence, as lineal mechanistic causality gives way to a contingent non-lineal causality, the problem of determinism appears to be solved.

The imbroglio of the theater

How are we to characterize the global theater in light of assemblage theory? How can the theater – a promising substitute for the organicist metaphor – clear the path to a potential reassessment of the media ecology framework which emphasizes the execution of the ecologies (assemblages) themselves? Clearly, McLuhan’s theater is neither a physical infrastructure, nor a holistic empire of references, nor even an “inventory” of relational effects. But neither is it an empty stage waiting for the actors to step in and perform a pre-existing play. When we suggest that the global theater is a *performative* concept, we do not simply allude to a repertoire of human acts, not even to an emphasis on action over contemplation. Interestingly, Latour (2005) speaks of theater in general as a complex “imbroglio” where action dissolves into some kind of mystery, since we never quite know *who* is acting:

To use the word ‘actor’ means that it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting. Play-acting puts us immediately into a thick imbroglio where the question of who is carrying out the action has become unfathomable. As soon as the play starts, as Irwin Goffman has so often showed, nothing is certain: Is this for real? Is it fake? Does the audience’s reaction count? What about the lighting? What is the backstage crew doing? Is the playwright’s message faithfully transported or hopelessly bungled? Is the character carried over? And if so, by what? What are the partners doing? Where is the prompter? If we accept to unfold the metaphor, the very word actor directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action, warning us that it is not a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair (p. 46).

It is at this precise juncture – as concerns the spreading of action – that McLuhan connects with both Latour and DeLanda.

Entering now into a speculative domain concerned with the progressive tendencies of the McLuhan *corpus*, we can suggest that his “global theater” could perhaps be thought as an attempt to account for the rather unpredictable effects brought about by the expansion of the sensorium and the spreading of action across multiple elements. Although the early McLuhan was somewhat enthusiastic about the “global village”, speaking of retribalization in rather enthusiastic terms and linking this phenomenon to the social and technological developments of the 1960s, the McLuhan of the 1970s became much more skeptical, as we have already seen. Historically, his skepticism coincided with the economic crisis of the early 1970s: slowly but surely, the village was turning out to be very different from what he had anticipated (even its full-fledged realization following 1990s globalization evaded all predictions by futurist gurus). There was a clear sense in which the conquering of space and time, as Heidegger showed, did
not bring nearness. And yet, existential nearness – i.e., dwelling in the vicinity of being and meditatively awaiting the disclosure of its mysteries – was not a satisfactory alternative. Rather, as Harman (2009a) has argued, McLuhan was convinced of the power of individual things as opposed to an overarching system of references culminating in the human Dasein. But if that were the case, how could we account for the contingency of ontic shrinking and the free play of individual components? As we have seen through DeLanda’s assemblage theory, the only way to return some dignity to individual things is to break with the anthropocentrism of the philosophical tradition in favor of a “flat ontology” where all things stand on equal terms and in the same plane of immanence. This, however, does not mean, to paraphrase Harman, that all objects are equal; it simply means that they are all equally objects.

In a context defined by the emergence of multiplicities, the transition from “global village” to “global theater” no longer appears as a simple name change, but signals a radically different configuration of the McLuhan corpus: so radical, I fact, that an alternative theoretical framework may be needed in order to drive it home. Ontologically, the space opened up by the theater can be said to be, following the insights of assemblage theory, a plane of immanence which must be populated by fresh concepts, sufficiently malleable to follow the sinuosity of being in its perpetual becoming. McLuhan, of course, left this task unfinished, but we shall labor to complete it ourselves in a creative advance that requires, above all, metaphysical speculation. Our guiding question shall be: What is there in McLuhanism which cannot be accommodated by its own parameters? In the remaining pages, we will provide some basic pointers for a re-reading of McLuhan as a philosopher of multiplicities, as well as a number of clues for a potential reassessment of the media ecology framework through the prism of assemblage theory.

To recap, we already established that McLuhan’s insight that under electric conditions the sensorium is extended outside the body – with the puzzling consequence that we are now inside the nervous system – should not be taken literally. Through the existential phenomenology of Heidegger, we discovered an alternative approach to this problem: interconnectivity and ontic shrinking does not bring meaningful and harmonious integration, but “meditative thinking” and a “free relationship” with technology may provide the basis for an alternative reading. Nevertheless, there was a sense in which existential nearness – dwelling in the vicinity of being – remained an anthropocentric stance dependent on the mutual appropriation of being. In light of this, Dasein was the passive protagonist of a complex system of references, forever awaiting the disclosure of being and its mysteries. Alternatively, McLuhan’s theater signals a less mystical alternative. Unlike the village, the theater is no longer an overarching totality or a pre-existing domain. Rather, there is a sense in which the configuration of the theater is deeper than any stable structure or system and, moreover, the spreading of action across multiple actors appears to solve the problem of determinism. Furthermore, in McLuhan’s
In McLuhan’s theater, the sensorium – understood as the scattered components of multiple and overlapping assemblages – now lies on the same plane of immanence alongside countless material components. As dualism is finally overcome, a constructivism “with teeth” is realized through a flat ontology where all parts stand on an equal footing. The result is a contingent, free play of components conforming multifarious webs of associations: an ongoing relationality of individual alliances which provide assemblages with consistency and durability. Only then, once the assemblages have emerged as an intensive area of consistency, the human being may be solicited to make use of its affordances. This intrinsically human activity, however, is secondary to the more primordial relationality of material and expressive components that give rise to assemblages. True, the formation of such assemblages – especially in the case of social institutions such as marriage, money and the European Union – may very well not be independent of our minds; but they are surely independent of the contents of our minds and our conceptual schemes. Hence, in the framework of a post-anthropocentric ontology where the human subject is neither a permanent substance nor an extended self, but is herself an assemblage made of a multiplicity of components, a number of McLuhanite concepts are in need of reappraisal. In particular, the central notion of “extension” must be revised if we are to start thinking about a potential reassessment of the McLuhan corpus and, more generally, the media ecology framework. We shall also take issue with McLuhan’s “hot” and “cool,” a controversial distinction which philosopher of technology Don Ihde has considered “foolish” (in Ralón, 2010b).

The notion of extension

The reason we must seek to upgrade this concept is rather simple: once we move beyond the organicist metaphor, an “extension” can no longer be conceived in terms of human intentionality, i.e., as the ecstatic transcendence of an extended subject powered by the amplification of a given sensory or bodily power. In other words, to conceive of an extension as the expansion of the human self over a pre-existing spatial domain, understood as a pure form, is no longer permitted in a flat ontology that favors differences and multiplicities. Now, against such a bold attempt to redraw the existing McLuhanite framework, some may claim – paraphrasing McLuhan – that such an expansion is not mere additive, but transformational. However, the problem with such transformation is that it is not radical enough, inasmuch as it does not question the centrality of the human
as an exemplar being, that is to say, as the “zero point” from which all extensions radiate and around which a holistic empire of instrumental references organizes itself according to human purposes. In a contexture of assemblages, the concept of extension must come to terms with the radical, contingent decentering of an ontology of multiplicities: it is not enough to ditch the modern, substantive subject and replace it by pure forms, invariant structures, pure nothingness, the unconscious, or else a non-replaceable existential center, as long as the human being maintains a privileged position as an originary locus of identity. To the degree that everything – including the human being – must be constructed through a process of converging parts, nothing in an assemblage contexture can be said to be truly “extended” in a transcendental sense. At the very outset, we propose the word “trace” as a substitute for the word “effect”. Now, let us replace altogether the notion of “extension” for the concept of creative advance. In a flat ontology characterized by emergences as opposed to representations, impressions, appearances or disclosures, a creative advance can be defined as the dragging along of materials that converge over the course of an immanent trajectory. This creative advance may be initiated by a single component that creates alliances along the way, summing up other parts – both expressive and material – and eventually giving rise to an intensive area of consistency with a more or less stable and durable character. An extension, therefore, is no longer an intentional nexus or anthropocentric, correlational medium, but a contingent trajectory that gives rise to a particular assemblage through a creative advance.

**McLuhan’s hot and cool**

The fact that assemblages can be more or less consistent, stable, durable and homogeneous enables us, in turn, to rethink another instance of the McLuhan corpus which has proven particularly problematic for media ecology scholars: the notion of “hot” and “cool”. Among media ecologists, Corey Anton has gone the furthest in trying to clarify this controversial notion. In his interesting article, “‘Heating up’ and ‘Cooling down’: reappraising McLuhan’s hot and cool distinction” (2014), Anton argues that the distinction should not be taken as a pair of universal and mutually exclusive categories, where different media would be placed by an external analyst depending on whether each medium delivers high or low levels of information. Against this detached analytical stance, Anton argues that the hot-and-cool divide amounts to contextual categories that need constant delineation, and whose main value is “to heighten awareness of the differences between the senses, to comprehend the kind of differences different media forms make, and to help people grasp how particular forms are naturally adapted for certain kinds of content and/or are suited to certain structures of interaction” (p. 347-348).

Anton’s reappraisal is committed to the existential principle of embodied, praxical and situated intelligence. There is, of course, no denying that these categories have a certain use value and can function as a diagnosis to shed light on different situations. However, I shall like to dig deeper and reassess the distinction against the post-
anthropocentric background of assemblage theory. Whether a medium is “hot” or “cool” cannot be determined in terms of the “effects” it produces on the sensorium and other media – not if both sensorium and media are defined in atomistic terms, against the metaphysical (dualist) divide between self and world, culture and nature. On the other hand, if we attempt to rethink the distinction from the vantage point of a flat ontology, we quickly discover that there is something about “cool” media which forces thought to compensate for the lack of information. The key, once again, is not to think of information in mechanistic terms, thus restoring a conduit metaphor whereby a “straw man” subjectively completes for the lack of information, filling in the gaps, as it were. Let us, instead, reconsider the notion within a single plane of immanence: rather than fixed or even contextual categories, let us think of the distinction as designating components in a process of emergence, as pertaining to the internal consistency of a given assemblage. We already know from DeLanda that, the more homogeneous the area of intensity, the more stable and durable; the more heterogeneous the area of intensity, the more unstable and ephemeral. Hot and cool, I believe, do not designate media in the traditional sense, but these two processes that regulate the life of assemblages. Instead of high and low information, we have homogeneous and heterogeneous assemblages, consistency or inconsistency among individual component parts that either succeed or fail at perpetuating alliances.

Final remarks

Reassessing the media ecology framework through a philosophy of multiplicities such as “assemblage theory” is no doubt an enormous task that exceeds the bounds of this article. Our humble aim has been to provide an overview of what is at stake, and to introduce some basic pointers as to what exactly that task might entail. In general, it is important to become conscious of the distinction between “media ecology,” understood as a theoretical field, and the “ecologies of media”, understood as assemblages that are independent of our mental content and conceptual schema. In the context of DeLanda’s philosophy, it would make sense to think of ecologies as being constructed by a network of overlapping assemblages. Such a network would be “social” inasmuch as it would gather a vast array of components to actualize its own construction, converging towards an intensive area of consistency marked by contingency, the spreading of action across multiple parts and an ongoing of relationality involving material and expressive parts interacting in a single plane of immanence. The end result, I believe, comes as close as it gets to a “constructivism with teeth”, that is, a constructivism which is once and for all reconciled with realism in the context of a flat ontology. Such a constructivism must decisively move beyond the organicist metaphor in the direction of multiplicities with detachable parts. McLuhan’s global theater points in that direction: it suggests neither a seamless whole where individual parts are fused together as in a furnace, nor a metaphysical back-stage harboring mysterious essences, not even a repertoire of human
acts. Rather, the “global theater” unfolds as a complex imbroglio where determinism is finally overcome in favor of a plan of immanence to be constructed and reconstructed anew through a contingent web of renewable alliances by material and expressive elements.

Bibliography


**Notes**

1 Manuel DeLanda is a PhD graduate and professor at the European Graduate School. He is partly responsible for the recent weave of reappraisals surrounding the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.

2 In *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970), McLuhan began to compare media to performance: "Since Sputnik [launched in 1957] put the globe in a 'proscenium arch,' and the global village has been transformed into a global theater, the result, quite literally, is the use of public space for 'doing one's thing'" (p. 12).

3 We refer primarily to speculative realism, new materialism and object oriented ontology.

4 The term will be used here in the sense of Quentin Meillassoux’s *correlationism*: “Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object in itself, in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always already be related to an object” (2008, p. 13). According to Meillassoux’s, correlationism is the principal obstacle facing the philosophical tradition from Plato to Heidegger.

5 Marchand (1998) notes that when McLuhan first began to explore the basic dynamics of sensory experience and sensory balance – the idea that the senses interact – he started out by postulating that any extension of a sense via a medium (what he called the “structural impact” of a medium) was not the same as the altered pattern of the senses as a whole that resulted from that extension. “The altered pattern was the combination of structural impact and subjective completion of that impact within the sensorium,” says Marchand (p. 150).


7 Manuel DeLanda introduces this term in his book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* to oppose hierarchical (anthropocentric) ontologies: “[While] an ontology based on relations between general types
and particular instances is hierarchical, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.”

8 McLuhan, Understanding Media, 57.

9 The term is used in its deleuzian meaning. It does not refer to virtual reality, but to differentiated lines of flight which have not yet become fully differentiated through a process of synthetic actualization.

10 In contrast with Harman’s object-oriented philosophy DeLanda does not believe that the individual parts withdraw into a vacuum-sealed domain; there is no unreachable core, in his view, which executes itself in isolation, communicating with its sensual facades through a micro-emanative model that regulates – through indirect causality – the relationship between its real and the sensual spheres, and whereby the latter is a degradation of the former. Instead, DeLanda believes in emergent qualities of the whole, which are not logically necessary but result from an obligatory contingent encounter of individual parts.

11 By contrast, a constructivism without teeth would be one where one type of component part takes precedence over others, for instance, John Searle’s theory of speech acts, which reduces all constructions to language games and speech acts.