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Tertiary Orality: Developing a Digital Chautauqua Performance

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Oral interpretation of literature restored a kind of secondary orality to the print medium of literature, an orality still indelibly saturated and marked by literacy. Might digital performances of literature take this secondary orality a step further, into a tertiary orality that transforms it yet again? At the risk of overstating such an extrapolation of Marshall McLuhan's insights into media as extensions of "man" [sic], what are the implications of this orality twice removed from its primary, preliterate state? The turn to digital performance of literature resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to explore these ramifications in the case of a digital Chautauqua performance I presented in 2021.

Modern-day Chautauqua entails humanities scholars impersonating historical figures to engage audiences with questions posed by primary texts in the humanities. In costume, scholars deliver first-person monologues devised from primary sources followed by question-and-answer sessions both in character and out. It is an extension of the original Chautauqua movement, educational programs that began in the latter part of the nineteenth century and grew into a loose national network with enormous cultural impact until their decline in the 1930s. The National Endowment for the Humanities revived the concept in the 1970s, and it continues today (Frein). The primary sources from which Chau-

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tauqua performances are devised include the nonfictional literary genres of autobiography, memoir, letters, diaries, and interviews.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020, I was devising a new presentation as media guru Marshall McLuhan for June 2020 for the Oklahoma Chautauqua in the towns of Tulsa, Enid, and Lawton. The pandemic caused those live presentations to be postponed and moved online. The result was the reimagining of face-to-face interactive humanities experiences as digital ones, orality at least twice removed.

The annual Oklahoma Chautauqua grew out of one in Tulsa that began in 1992. The theme for the planned 2020 live three-week Oklahoma Chautauqua (chosen several years in advance) had been "20th Century Visionaries." I was competitively selected to perform as Marshall McLuhan (along with other scholars as Gene Roddenberry, Gertrude Bell, Marie Curie, and Frank Lloyd Wright). The five scholars researched for two years and wrote essays on their characters for a companion reader to the planned Chautauqua series. Thus, audiences could read about these figures before or after hearing the performances and learn about sources for further exploring them *(Twentieth Century Visionaries Companion Reader)*.

Because of the COVID pandemic, the Oklahoma committee decided to postpone the series for a year and shift for the first time to an online format in 2021 ("Twentieth Century Visionaries" website). The weeklong series included two informative "workshops" or lectures by each scholar in addition to nightly featured Chautauqua performances in character. The online format required the five scholar performers to film their approximately 40-minute in-character monologues so they could be streamed online and then followed by a "live" online Q&A session. I presented McLuhan digitally in this way for three weeks in June 2021, with the help of Jen Myronuk, our digital humanities technical coordinator.

Shifting to a digital medium required a steep learning curve. To create the McLuhan film, I was responsible not only for research, scripting, acting, costuming, and makeup as with a live Chautauqua performance, but also sound, lighting, set, and technical direction. Filming the monologue fell into place with the help of an experienced documentary film director, Fermín Rojas, and a talented cameraman/videographer/editor, Michael Cestaro. Shooting in one day, we captured most of the monologue in a series of single-take segments, using a teleprompter, with only a few short retakes. Rojas and Cestaro edited the footage in about three weeks.

Much of the monologue was memorized. While I found that I still needed a teleprompter, it presented certain challenges and unexpected benefits. The speed of my delivery was determined by the teleprompter, which helped me sustain the momentum of McLuhan's heady rush of ideas. I was also aided in realizing McLuhan's oral conversational style by having compiled the bulk of the monologue from interviews, some on video, some on audio recording, and some in print. I learned, though, that one print interview that I relied on quite a bit was presumably heavily edited by the interviewer ("Playboy Interview"). Thus, my performance was a hybrid of the oral, the literate, and the electronically oral.

Visually, the filmed performance was influenced by one particular CBC television interview with McLuhan ("Questions for Marshall McLuhan"). In the black-and-white video, McLuhan swivels in a chair facing an audience sitting in raked stadium-style seats while the camera moves around him. In the film of my performance, the camera also moved around me. This created a dynamic visual effect evocative of McLuhan's point about acoustic space inhabiting no stable point of view.

Cestaro, in editing, inserted some shots of the audience from the CBC interview and a few laugh tracks. Rojas' directorial concept was to move stylistically, as the film progresses, through a series of visual styles that parallel changes in how television was shot, most notably in a shift from black-and-white to color in the latter part of the film and only having me speak directly to the camera in the last segment. In these ways, Rojas added the language of film and television to McLuhan's words to create another layer of meaning.

McLuhan famously (and controversially) categorized media as relatively hot or cool. He claimed that hot media are characterized by high definition, i.e., the filling in of data through a single sense by the medium without intense audience participation, such as radio, film, or a lecture. Cool media, by contrast, such as television, telephone, or a seminar, he argued, provide relatively lower amounts of data with correspondingly higher levels of audience participation to fill in or complete the image.

My filmed performance as McLuhan seems "hot" in McLuhan's sense. This is consistent with his observations about film versus television, though perhaps not for the reasons McLuhan articulated—which are related to the amount of visual data provided by the two media. "The TV image is a mosaic mesh not only of horizontal lines but of millions of tiny dots," McLuhan observes. "Each viewer is thus an unconscious pointillist painter like Seurat," assembling the image in their perception of it ("Playboy Interview"). Rather, my McLuhan performance

may seem "hotter" not due to visual data but because of the density of verbal information it includes.

The performance, though, contained both relatively hot and cool elements through the addition of the question-and-answer segments. Just as McLuhan contrasted the relative heat of a lecture with the coolness of a seminar, the McLuhan monologue is "hotter" than the Q&A, in which there is much more for the audience to fill in. The recorded Q&A session provided here was a live extemporaneous event that followed immediately after the streaming of the film of my McLuhan monologue from Enid, Oklahoma, the second of the three participating towns. I was in my home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, wearing my McLuhan costume and makeup, positioned at my laptop in front of a shelf of McLuhan's books. The moderator, Karen Vuranch (the West Virginia scholar who played the travel writer/archaeologist Gertrude Bell on another night of the 2021 Oklahoma Chautauqua), fed me questions sent in from participants in an online chat.

The goal of the Q&A portion of a Chautauqua performance is to be as accurate as possible in answering the audience's questions and augment the humanities content in an extemporaneous dialogical way. In theory, scholar/performers should be able to footnote everything they say in character, but inevitably they extrapolate from their research in the available primary (or at least secondary) sources, but—importantly—without resorting to inventing. For example, in the Enid Q&A, I was asked as McLuhan, a devout convert to Catholicism, to reveal the sign he had prayed to be given in answer to his quest for faith. Since McLuhan did not reveal that sign, in character as McLuhan I said that it was private. On the spot, I was extrapolating that answer from something his son Eric had written: "As to just what the signs consisted in and what happened next, well, some things must remain private" ("Introduction," p. xiv). My oral answer was an extrapolation of what I had read in a written text, mediated by the digital forum in which someone posed the question by typing it in a chat box, it was read to me by a moderator, and an audience watched and heard our interaction via computers. To call this form of orality tertiary understates the layers of mediation involved.

Another notable aspect of this digital Chautauqua performance as opposed to face-to-face ones is the nature of the audiences. Digital audiences are not restricted geographically. This was particularly significant in the case of my McLuhan performance as a result of its being publicized to an online network of McLuhan scholars. Among the audience members across the three online per-

formances were a number of distinguished experts on McLuhan, including two of his children and a grandchild! It is highly unlikely they would have seen the performance live in Oklahoma and thus been able to ask me questions both in character as McLuhan and as myself. These digital performances thus significantly expand the reach and depth of the Chautauqua humanities experience, as well as adding a tertiary layer of orality.

Distinctions between primary, secondary, and tertiary orality are based in an evolutionary metaphor. In considering the implications of this metaphorical evolution for performance practice in the time of COVID-19, I think of another set of productive metaphors discussed in the scholarship of the field of Performance Studies: Wallace Bacon's "dangerous shores" and Michael LeVan's "digital shoals." In a series of essays over 26 years, Bacon explores the implications of navigating between the shores of text ("the thing read") and delivery ("the person reading") in hopes of charting a "tensive path between flattering and risky alternatives" ("A Decade Later" 221-22). In Bacon's metaphor, he advocates a depth of immersion in a liminal, in-between space that he identified as a matching of text and performer ("One Last Time" 356-57). "On either side of the deep channel are shoals," Bacon warns, implying a risk of shallowness if the performer drifted too far toward either shore ("A Decade Later" 223). LeVan elaborated upon Bacon's metaphor by exploring how digital media have expanded its implications such that "Shores are the least of our dangers now. Now we navigate among shoals" (LeVan 211). One particular aspect of LeVan's exploration that I find helpful in reflecting on my experience performing Marshall McLuhan is the notion of finding productive potential in the *friction* of working in the shoals, where waves constantly redefine shifting boundaries of land and sea.

Citing Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, LeVan argues "With each give and take of waves, the zone of contact and encounter is reformed," resulting in a "frictional relationship of affect and transformation" (211). This metaphorical friction describes well how my performance of McLuhan was transformed by tertiary orality. I navigated between digital recordings of McLuhan speaking and his written texts to find a sense of becoming McLuhan's mediated persona. I felt a tensive "matching" of myself with McLuhan as media text while I was filmed on a stage, talking to a prompter scrolling my monologue, and then again in my home in front of my laptop, re-

sponding on a screen to questions from across the United States and Canada.[1] "Productively frictional" aptly captures how the performance felt and how it appears to me watching it now. The primary implication of tertiary orality is this transformative friction, created between traditional methods and forms of oral interpretation and the affordances and limitations of digital mediation.

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[1] One final caveat: The implications of tertiary orality in my performance of Marshall McLuhan are perhaps intensified in digitally performing a media personality who himself was a performer in person as well as on television. He liked to "put on" his audiences, acting as a trickster and playing with them. It was a talent he learned in part from his elocutionist mother, Elsie Hall McLuhan, who "put on whole plays single" (Anderson 114), yet another aspect of orality McLuhan himself manifested as a performer and a performed text.

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