

### **Modernist Influences in Marshall McLuhan's *Counterblast***

In *The Interior Landscape* Marshall McLuhan confesses that his encounters with modernism at Cambridge in the early 1930s had a transformative effect upon him, shaping his future output as a media philosopher: "Richards, Leavis, Eliot, and Pound and Joyce . . . opened the doors of perception on the poetic process, and its role in adjusting the reader to the contemporary world. My study of media began and remains rooted in the work of these men."

Reflecting upon the cultural forms born out of technology, McLuhan persistently returns in his writings to his literary heroes, taking what he claims to be "a rear-view mirror perspective" on the modernist achievement. In the process of transforming himself from a professor of English into a media guru, he suggests new ways of reading modernism by exposing and sometimes even trying to resolve its inner contradictions. He sees the movement not as an alternative to the discourse of industrial and consumer capitalism, but rather as its product and reflection. He also draws inspiration from seemingly conflicted authors, for example Wyndham Lewis and James Joyce.

My paper will explore McLuhan's debt to modernism on the basis of his manifesto-like publication entitled *Counterblast*, first produced in 1954 in the form of a hand-made "zine" and subsequently reworked into a fuller, "designer" version of 1969. Formally modelled on Wyndham Lewis's revolutionary pamphlet *Blast* of 1914, it is simultaneously imbued with the spirit of Joyce, Eliot and Yeats as it proclaims the arrival of a new orality, or the return to the primordial "acoustic space". McLuhan's transition from one version of *Counterblast* to the other reveals the direction in which his reflection on modernism progresses. The initial straightforward influences become forged into new shapes, more suitable for and reflective of, the post-literate world of modern communication. The book is gradually liberated from linear order: its fragmentation, flashbacks and sequences mimic the techniques used in film or on TV. Rather than read the pamphlet from cover to cover, we are invited to treat it as a mosaic work, and to assemble pieces in order to create a pattern. This enhanced audience participation and the necessity to think discontinuously, in a non-linear manner, signal the end to the hegemony of print and the arrival of a new era, of which McLuhan's modernist predecessors were only becoming aware.

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