

*Material related to The Presence of the Word
(from earlier drafts of the manuscript)*

LECTURE COPY

Perhaps it is best to think of each new medium as giving a "style" to all, or nearly all, the activity, especially intellectual activity, of the culture which it has thoroughly penetrated, or as being one of the faces of a "style," which can be described by certain features of the media in question and the sensory world which they establish. Thus, with habits of auditory synthesis there goes a feeling for simultaneity and centrality. McLuhan has made a great deal of this. A hearer receives sounds from all around him, not from just in front. Hearing can present--with some confusion--a diversity of things happening all at once. Vision presents its material only from the direction toward which the eyes are turned which, for man, means from a frontal plane (it would be different for a crustacean with eyes on stalks or for an insect with compound eyes). To see what is in back of me, I must turn around. Thus to sight, the world is disjointed, segmented, and this fact leads sight to favor "linearity"

or succession of item after item in space. A report I recently heard from a graduate student on the behavior of Sioux Indian children as contrasted with whites is informative. The child, asked to walk along a two-by-four laid on the ground first forward and then backward without looking around, typically moves backward or forward with almost equal ease. The white child has trouble moving backwards--older white children more trouble than younger. The same Dakota Indians habitually locate objects around them or others not by "to the left" or "to the right," but rather by reference to the points of the compass. "You will find the book by you toward the east." "I am sitting south of her." The Dakota thus situates himself "orally": He feels himself not "confronting" actuality but in the middle of it. More than the child in the more visualist white tradition, he maintains awareness of his entire surroundings, not specializing so much in what is in front of him.

There is no doubt that the complex programming made possible by electronic high-speed devices has pretty effectively counteracted the "one thing at a time" patterns which marked the age of typography and are typified in the primitive assembly line, of which the printing press itself was the first instance. Automation entails planning with so many interacting patterns simultaneously that it effectively establishes a kind of simultaneity once more, a new "auditory" world (computers have "languages"--that is the usual term).

The fact that the printing press was the first assembly line should alert us to another pattern in the development of the media. When the break-through occurred which was to revolutionize material production, it occurred on a front which was the least material front of all: on the front of words, ideas, communications. That is to say,

when man first made objects which were mass-produced, in the sense that they were identical objects resulting from a series of relatively complicated operations, what he first made were not wagons or spades or swords but representations of his own thoughts. Operations effecting major break-throughs from one kind of sensory specialization to another are likely to occur in the media of communications themselves. The media are the active centers of revolution in the restructuring of the psyche through the course of history. They restructure the self-other-object world. This fact is complicated now by the further fact that we know that this is true--which means that evolution here becomes self-conscious. One of the patent instances is the tremendous amount of basic research going into the construction of computers, business machines, and teaching machine.