

The New Middle Ages: Medievalism in McLuhan and Vacca

Abstract. A very successful book formulated years ago in its title, *The Coming Dark Age*, (from the original Italian, *Il medioevo prossimo venturo*, by Roberto Vacca, published in 1971) a sense of anxiety over planetary end-of-the-second-millennium problems, such as "nuclear holocaust, overpopulation, pollution and ecological disaster". What is interesting in these short-range prophecies is that one may live long enough to recognize their fallacy. Vacca predicted that we would be right in the new Middle Ages by the end of the millennium. Marshall McLuhan also spoke of the reappearance of the Middle Ages, but in totally different terms, indicating how medieval our contemporary world really is, because of the shift from a visually biased to a multisensorial perception, imposed on us by the passage from the mechanically oriented culture of the past to the one, based on electronics, in which we live.

I would like to begin with an apology. I am not really a person that can speak with an acceptable level of academic authority on medieval culture or on Medievalism, especially when the discussion, as seems inevitable, turns to the rapport between Medievalism and Classicism. Indeed, does the first *oppose* the latter, simply *follow* it, or perhaps in some form *coexist* with it? They are not easy questions and, as happens with all questions implying historical and cultural generalizations (that is, with words that mean different things to different people), to clarify and define key terms may turn into an interminable discussion, which is not my goal here.

What I can say, however, with a fairly strong sense of confidence, is that the mere mentioning of Medievalism as a possible definition of a series of contemporary cultural phenomena is a clear indication of something extremely relevant in our

attempt to understand our present condition: it indicates, in fact, that we are dealing with, or rather, we are immersed in a cultural retrieval of gigantic, epochal dimensions. A cultural retrieval is undoubtedly a fundamental aspect of the process of cultural transformation to which no one, in my opinion, more than Marshall McLuhan, one of the greatest scholars of St. Michael's College, devoted more fruitful attention in modern times. Having read and meditated on his works, I am afraid, does not make me an expert on a newly coined discipline (specifically, the so called Cultural Studies: it is hard to become a specialist preaching the end of specializations), but it gives me some assurance that I could come up with original and useful insights into Medievalism as a form of contemporary reality.

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I choose to proceed with a comparison between the essential axioms of two very prominent figures in academic circles in the 1960s and 1970s, Roberto Vacca and Marshall McLuhan. Both were firmly convinced that society had already become, or was about to become 'medieval' again.

Of Vacca's most famous book *The Coming Dark Ages*, we have to recall also the original title in Italian, *Il medioevo prossimo venturo* (1971), which is quite different from the English. To be sure, there is no *darkness* in the original title. The negative connotation (that is, of the Middle Ages as a dark period of human history) is certainly present throughout the book, and so the title, as an interpretation rather than a literal translation, is acceptable. I would like to indicated, however, that the easiness with which the translator interpreted the title is indeed a reflection of an automatic linguistic association of two quite different syntagmatic expressions: *Middle Ages* and *Dark Ages*. The implication, in historical terms, is that from the end of the Roman Empire to the retrieval of Roman culture with the Renaissance, something bad or wrong, or sinister, or in any case *dark*, must have happened. Something that was, thank God, of a transitory nature, something in the *middle* of the normal course of history. This is, fundamentally, the common prejudice that informs Vacca's writing, and that is, instead, vehemently opposed by McLuhan.

Vacca's book, that the author himself categorizes as "doomwriting literature" is pervaded by a sense of anxiety over planetary, end of the millennium problems (or pseudo-problems) such as overpopulation, nuclear holocaust, pollution and ecological disasters. McLuhan also spoke of the reappearance of the Middle Ages, but in totally different terms (I won't mention any books specifically, at this point, since this was one of his fundamental principles present everywhere). There is, for him, in the twentieth century, a retrieval of medieval values just as real and as significant as the retrieval of classical culture in the Renaissance.

In McLuhan's terms, we could actually speak of today's culture as the renaissance of the Middle Ages to recall and suggest a series of periodical, epochal retrieval that seems to have occurred with disquieting regularity every four hundred years from the dawn of recorded history. I mention this (a topic on which Eric McLuhan has devoted particular attention in line with Marshall's enthusiastic reading of Vico's *Scienza nuova*) because it describes the large scope of McLuhan's historical vision, and gives a particularly dense meaning to his saying that we have *re-entered* a world of multisensorial perception that recalls the world of our pre-modern forefathers. A first little certainty seems to appear at this point: if McLuhan's theory makes any sense at all, we know that we have been here before, and that there is no reason to panic. Panic, instead, best describes the feeling of Vacca's book. Of which I shall describe a few essential passages now, before returning to McLuhan.

To begin, *The Coming Dark Age* opens with a quote from the *Apocalypse* of St. John the Divine. The general apocalyptic feeling is the following,

There are several factors indicating that the present rate at which human numbers are growing and human structures developing may soon slow to a stop and go into reverse.

It is not necessary for a few kilomegatons of hydrogen bombs to explode for hundreds of millions of people to be killed. The same result may occur by less violent and more intricate means: that is, by virtue of the fact that vast concentrations of human beings are involved in systems that are now so complicated that they are becoming uncontrollable.

This hypothesis—of an apocalypse that is impersonal, casual, and unpremeditated—is more tragic than the other. (3)

We must remember the "human numbers... growing" because they are the most relevant aspect of Vacca's logic. "My thesis," he continues, "is that our great technological systems of human organization are continuously outgrowing ordered controls..." (4). This leads him to a "threefold assumption": first of all, that we are heading straight to an era of disorder and destruction; secondly, that this era is very near (or, perhaps it has already begun); and finally, that after the destruction, there will be a period of rebirth. Living in the eye of the storm, does not allow one to see the beginning of the storm itself, and so, Vacca continues,

We cannot know whether future historians will fix on 1960, 1970 or some later date for its beginnings. It would seem that the era of breakdown might have started already. (6)

But the coming *Dark Age* will not last as long as the Dark Ages of early medieval times, now long past: it will last perhaps a century. (6)

(This last idea, of a *century* of darkness, recalls Isaac Asimov's legendary *Foundation* trilogy. I don't say this to take any credit away from Vacca's imagination; I simply mention it to underline the coincidence of the *centennial* theme which, if expanded could take us into the regions of the unconscious where we apparently tend to make sense of reality with the decimal system).

Now that we know *when*, we want to know *how* doomsday is coming. It will come soon, Vacca promises, with the breakdown of the established systems: with one pulling down the others. The result will be a massive destruction of human life as well as a complete fragmentation of the remaining systems. A "system" is for Vacca a comprehensive entity that includes people, tools, natural resources and goods of a particular area of human activity. He speaks of five major systems: 1) production and distribution of energy; 2) transportation; 3) food supply; 4) garbage disposal; 5) communication and information.

The systematic chain destruction, in Vacca's view, will be preceded by a series of "overshoots." The overshoot is the abnormally fast development of one system followed by its collapse, then by a new abnormal growth and by a new collapse. Imagine one month of this at the stock market. It would just level it. Vacca insists that this is not simply the scenario of a crisis, but of a combination of several crises.

By far the most disquieting prophecy, however, comes from Vacca's vision of demographic explosion. Simply put, there won't be enough room for all, and thousands upon thousand will die of famine or any other man made disaster following the collapse of our life sustaining, modern systems.

It is by going to the opposite direction that we encounter McLuhan. In fact, if Vacca's logic (specifically, his *linearity* of thought—a narrow sequence of *ifs* and *therefores*) can be trusted as a reliable intellectual tool to recognize the end of an era (in which such *linearity* was indeed the servo-mechanism of every human construct), it is with McLuhan's gestalt perception of the electric reality that we may gain a better understanding of the new world we are now immersed in. But, how to proceed? How to extricate ourselves from easy flowing paradoxical formulations such as, electricity is medieval in nature, anti-modern in spirit, and anti-mechanical in practical experience, a plain and simple statement (my own, *bien entendu*) for readers accustomed to McLuhan's prose, but pure gibberish for others? How to select, from a crowded warehouse of examples, or "media effects," the ones that can help us to summarize McLuhan's thought in a scholarly assembly? He called his most celebrated book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, "an inventory of effects" (effects of print on the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages), and with such inventory he did, in fact, revolutionize the rules of logic or, rather, he reinvented medieval logic. A brief summary of McLuhan's methodology may be a good starting point, and an introduction to his prophecies of the new Middle Ages.

Dealing with media and their effects, McLuhan had to learn how to attribute a particular effect to a particular medium. So he had to learn how to deal with "causes". There are two kinds of causes—coming to him straight from Thomas Aquinas—he soon became acquainted with and started to use in his research, the efficient and the formal causes. We have *efficient cause* when dealing with the immediate cause of a very specific event, very limited in time and space. If I drop a dish while drying it up, the slipping of the dish from my hands is the efficient cause of the broken dish. We have *formal cause* when dealing with the wide cause of an entire environment which generates a condition that makes certain things happen. If my mind is altered by my continuous fights with my wife and I drop a dish while drying it up, the formal cause for the broken dish is the lack of harmony in my family (a condition that makes several other things happen). Formal causes are always generating a variety of effects, and that is why McLuhan spoke of retracing the formal causes through the inventories of their effects.

And now, with enough theoretical luggage, we can start our little trip in McLuhan's territory commenting on the following:

The manuscript was to the Middle Ages
what Electricity is to the *New Middle Ages*.

From this perspective, surprisingly perhaps, it is print culture that appears to be *in the middle*, breaking the perennial continuity of the Middle Ages. It is print, in fact, the *motor* of the Renaissance ('revolution' or 'restoration'?) that propelled Western culture toward Modernity. And so, in order to understand where we are, after the culture of Modernity that for both McLuhan and Vacca is doomed (in the age of Postmodernism, or Postmodernity to use absolutely hideous but useful terms these days) we only have to reverse the effects of print as they are described in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*. Here are some of the most obvious ones.

CULTURAL EFFECTS OF PRINT

Democratization of culture. Did democracy, the way we intend it, really exist before print? Certainly not. It is actually safe to say that in the Middle Ages there was no democracy of any kind. As McLuhan sees it, it was print that created modern nationalism and made the *enlightened* ideas of equal rights and democratic parliamentary representation possible for all individuals of the all nations:

Print in turning the vernaculars into mass media, or closed systems, created the uniform, centralized forces of modern nationalism. (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 199).

Nationalism insists on equal rights among individuals and among nations alike. (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 22).

The modern notion of the individual is derived from the new presence of the solitary reader. Manuscripts, of course, are read aloud, first of all because they mimic the spoken word (which must be re-created), and because they are read for the benefit of the community of listeners.

The medieval monk's reading carrel was indeed a singing booth.
(*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 92)

says McLuhan referring to the following passage from Chaytor's *From Script to Print* (19):

The reading-room of the British Museum is not divided into sound-proof compartments. The habit of silent reading has made such an arrangement unnecessary; but fill the reading-room with medieval readers and the buzz of whispering and muttering would be intolerable.

In this kind of culture literature was *physically* made of sounds and rhythm more than lines and graphics.

The stress on oral fidelity was to medieval man the equivalent of our own visual idea of scholarship as involving exact quotations and proofreading. (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 22)

And so "the manuscript," as a medium and as a *formal cause* of a culture "shaped literary conventions at all levels" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 86). And, of course, the manuscript is not just a tool of communication that involves a writer (a sender) and an individual reader (a receiver), since manuscript culture implies a physical relation between writer and audience: a form of "publication as oral performance" (cf. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 84).

The notion of the individual in religion. Is the *protest* of Luther thinkable without print? without the word of God addressed directly to every single solitary reader of a newly printed Bible?

The notion of the individual in human rights. Print created the modern notion of human rights as individual rights rather than community rights. One may just wonder at the depth of the implications of this shift by considering millennial issues such as abortion and capital punishment. A "medieval" (in the broadest sense of pre-modern) perception of human rights as community rights would condemn abortion as a crime against the unity and the continuity of the social body, but it would accept capital punishment as a well deserved punishment for those who revolted against the social body. With this in mind it is easy to see how a cultural retrieval of medieval principles and values may affect deeply our present social life.

Various other cultural effects of print (or examples of cultural transformation from medieval to modern culture) could be listed here from the works of Marshall McLuhan. I will mention a few more to stress the fact that in the present (again, "post-modern") condition the direction of the change is the opposite: we are moving ahead by returning to the Middle Ages. And so, just like the Middle Ages ended with the birth of specialization in all forms of organized knowledge and teaching (and with the great divide between arts and science), the New Middle Ages, in McLuhan's terms, would

Bless Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* for bridging art and science beyond the hopes of C.P. Snow. (*Counterblast* 121)

Moreover, just as the print medium ended the Middle Ages by creating specializations in schools, arts, academic disciplines, and literary genres, electric media bring back the opposite: multidisciplinary, all-encompassing, multi-faceted expressions of hybrid culture everywhere in the arts (with contemporary cinema, for instance), and in the academic world (with the creation of the 'new' Cultural Studies discipline, as well as with the support of multidisciplinary initiatives of all kinds).

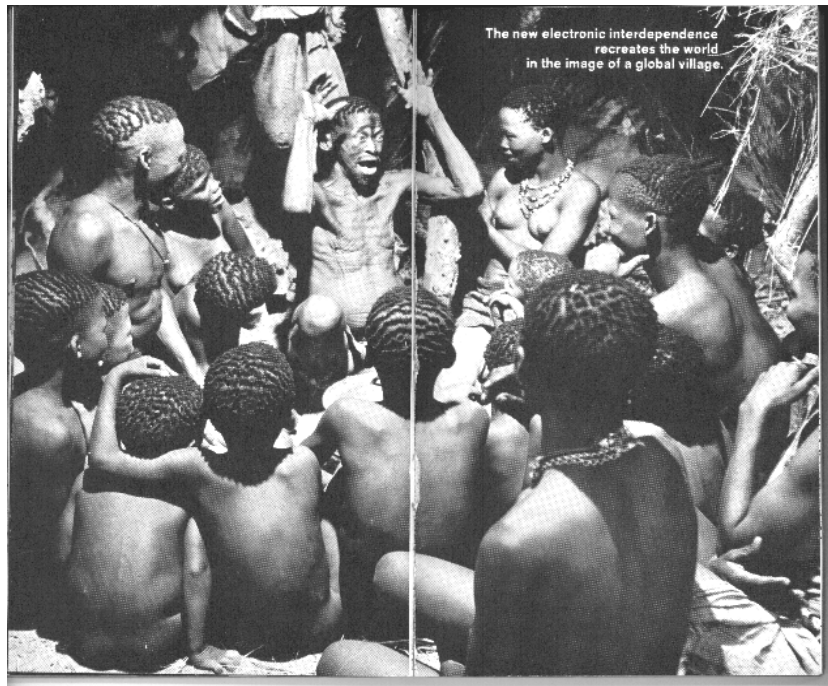


Finally, the most upsetting and far reaching cultural effect of print was the shift in our perception imposed by the emerging sense of sight which determined our modern *vision*, our modern environment, and our modern

space. Well, with electric culture we are back in acoustic space.

In what sense, one may ask, do electric media (such as radio, telephone, TV and computer) bring us back in acoustic space? A short answer to this question could be the following. It is not founded on new principles of human physiology, but on practical, heuristic observation. In cultural terms (and not simply in a physical manner) our sensorial system does not have five, but only two channels: one is exclusively reserved to sight, while the other is for the remaining senses which cooperate more 'naturally' among themselves than with the sense of sight. The 'aural' sense is often indicated as the representative of the group. And that's why we just mentioned "acoustic space"; but often it is the sense of touch that assumes the command, so to speak. McLuhan, for instance, preferred to call television "a

tactile medium" making some eyebrows raise. Had he decided to call it "acoustic" the ensuing confusion could have been even bigger.



From Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (1967)

A final question. Why do we still speak of Medievalism or of the return of the Middle Ages when orality and acoustic space seem to be ingrained in human nature, and in fact were with us not only before print, but also before the creation of the first alphabet?

A final (possible) answer. We speak of Middle Ages, obviously, because our 'modern' culture has preferred to identify itself with classical antiquity and with its retrievals, especially with the Italian Renaissance. 'The age in between,' however, seems to be not only longer, but also more stable; and its present return could certainly be viewed without fear and as a renewed opportunity to exercise our unbound human creativity.

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