

# Commentary on “Modern Media and Ancient Greeks”

Where is the importance of a paper written twelve years ago referring to a thesis based on “modern media?” That paper, “Modern Media and Ancient Greeks,” was written in 1994 by Professor Robert Mayberry. The paper was part of a series, “Messages From the Media: How Are We Shaped by Media Sources of the 90s.” Mayberry specifically focused on “The Urgency of Critical Thinking in the 21st Century.” It is the purpose of this commentary to provide an understanding of a contemporary relevance of Mayberry’s work.

It would seem a reasonable expectation that readers acknowledge the timelessness of the premises represented by the reference to the “ancient Greeks.” In this sense Mayberry is referring to the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato. More specifically, their particular philosophy of rhetoric. As Mayberry (1994) points out regarding Aristotle:

In the logical tradition, which stems from the application of logic to argument on contingent subjects in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, one examines the validity of the arguments that support opinions. Is the conclusion proven, does it follow logically, that is, without contradiction or fallacy in reaching it? Aristotle defined rhetoric as the study of the available means of persuasion in any case, and as he observed, proof is actually the most powerful means of persuasion—hence the weakness, ultimately, of the skeptic’s demand for proof—which Aristotle described as a weapon of attack, and self-defense in adversarial proceedings more appropriate than fisticuffs to humans.

In the case of Plato, Mayberry (1994) offers that:

In the tradition I shall call dialectical, following the sense of the term to be found in Plato’s Socratic dialogues *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, one examines the relevance of arguments to the truth by questioning their premises and especially the taken-for-granted and perhaps hidden assumptions behind the adop-

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tion of those premises in that argument or in that specialized field.

While many scholars of the ancient Greek philosophers may argue the validity and credence in the notions of the ancient Greeks, few will argue the timelessness of these notions. In that sense, Mayberry's infusion of Greek philosophy into an understanding of critical thinking and "modern media" appears to also be timeless.

It is in the realm of "modern media" that the question of timeliness is raised. In a number of references we are left by Mayberry to the perception that he is referring to the media of 1994. When compared to the media of 2006, considerable evolution has occurred. If read in that perspective the work would appear quite stale. If the focus is on the term media in reference to the business of delivering a media product, e.g., television programming, filmmaking, or the Internet, then I suggest that the focus is on the wrong figure.

When we focus on the notion of the media as a particular moment it is vital to keep an eye toward the thoughts of de Saussure; in particular, his notion of the sign and the signified. He told us that the meaning of the sign was arbitrary and that no necessary connection to the referent could be made outside of specific context. In this case we make reference to the understanding of the sign, "modern media." It might seem flippant in that sense to infer that there is an arbitrariness of Mayberry's "modern media," that we could easily apply today's context to his sign and the work regains relevance. However, it would not be totally wrong to do so. While it might produce connotative results, it would be bereft of any denotative function. Particularly when our reference might well be focused on the comparisons of broadcast television and VCRs to high-definition television and DVDs.

The basis of this commentary lies in bringing Mayberry's work into relevance with an appreciation of media that contemporizes it. This can be done by showing that while we find the philosophy of the Greeks timeless, we ought to also find the notion of "modern media" to be timely. To appreciate this we must look to the work of Marshall McLuhan, an historically renowned media critic.

In his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan proffered the notion that “the medium is the message.” In regards to that McLuhan said, “the personal and social consequences of any medium...result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs...by any new technology.” This is best illustrated as McLuhan did it himself, by using the example of the electric light bulb. The light bulb, says McLuhan is “pure information” and as such its introduction changed the way we live. It moved outside inside, we built buildings without windows, we played ball games and drove our cars after the sun had gone down. The light bulb as a medium has had vast consequences on our personal and social lives. The same case can be made for electric media, the thesis of McLuhan’s work.

In order to gain an understanding of McLuhan’s work in this area we must come to understand how he perceived the concept of figure-ground. This “concept is a theme that runs through almost all of McLuhan’s books” (see Stadler, 1998). McLuhan adopted the view from the concepts of Gestalt psychology. A means of perceiving organization. The figure-ground perception is one also familiar with painters and photographers. Filmmakers see it as *mise-en-scène*. Explained as such, the eye cannot take into focus the entire composition of the canvas or frame. Yet, the balance of the image is not lost as the eye focuses on the central figure. This figure appears against the background which sets the context for the figure. In this way we come to understand that the ground sets the foundation for understanding the figure. It is at this juncture that the ground becomes invisible. Even though we do not see the ground in specificity, were it to change, our understanding of the figure would also change. Using the automobile as an example: if we were to take the car as a medium that extends the foot in the medium of travel, the quickly passing landscapes are not the focus of our attention. The roadway is the ground and we understand the figure in the speed which we travel. If we were to change the ground, i.e., roadway turns to ice, our understanding of figure would change.

To further the comprehension of McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” we need to review it from this

figure-ground perception. In presenting this Stadler says:

This distinction between that which is perceived and that which is blocked out in order to focus perception is central for McLuhan. A great deal of his work is the result of shifting attention from the area of attention, the figure, to the area of inattention, the ground. McLuhan used different sets of words to describe the figure-ground relationship, for figure he used content, for ground he used environment, or more often, medium. The study of media, then, is the study of ground, the study of the area of inattention. This area of inattention, however, is where the pervasive influence of media unfolds, rather independent in the figures that appear easily visible (Stadler, 1998).

While McLuhan sensed the content of media as the figure and the medium as the ground he also tells us that every message represents another medium, e.g., the wheel extends the foot and the automobile extends the wheel. In that sense the message can be in a constant state of flux. Its importance as the figure is only in as much as the ground is understood. Much of McLuhan’s thesis is based on electr(on)ic media. This presents itself as the ground for the figure of such products as television programming, filmmaking, or the Internet. As we can see from this, the electric medium as the ground is invisible to the figure which could be the programming to which we are attending.

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It has often been said that McLuhan was profoundly prophetic with his work in media. While this is mostly true, much of the prophecy of McLuhan is based in his timeless proposition of the role the electric medium plays in our lives. This medium remains in much the same status today as it was in when it was first presented. McLuhan's electric medium has as its foundation the telegraph. Over the years since the inception of the telegraph the figure over the ground has evolved through numerous manifestations. In the twelve years that have elapsed since Mayberry wrote his piece, our figure-media has evolved to a plethora of alphabet-named technologies, e.g., HTTP, IM, SMS, USB, MP3, HDTV, IEEE, and more. Yet the electric medium remains unchanged. We continue to find the electric medium as the ground extending our senses and while the figure in our focus has changed the impact remains founded in this ground.

It is this understanding that makes Mayberry's work as modern in 2006 as it was when he first penned it in 1994. The "modern media" to which he referred were figures above the same ground present today. The arguments a propos Aristotle's rhetoric or Plato's dialectic dialogues withstand the frame of electric medium as these apply to critical thinking be it 1994 or 2006.

**Resources:**

Mayberry, R., (1994), Paper given at *Messages From the Media: How Are We Shaped by Media Sources*, Grand Haven

McLuhan, M., (1964), *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Stalder, F., (1998), Paper given at the Many Dimensions: The Extensions of Marshall McLuhan Conference, Toronto.