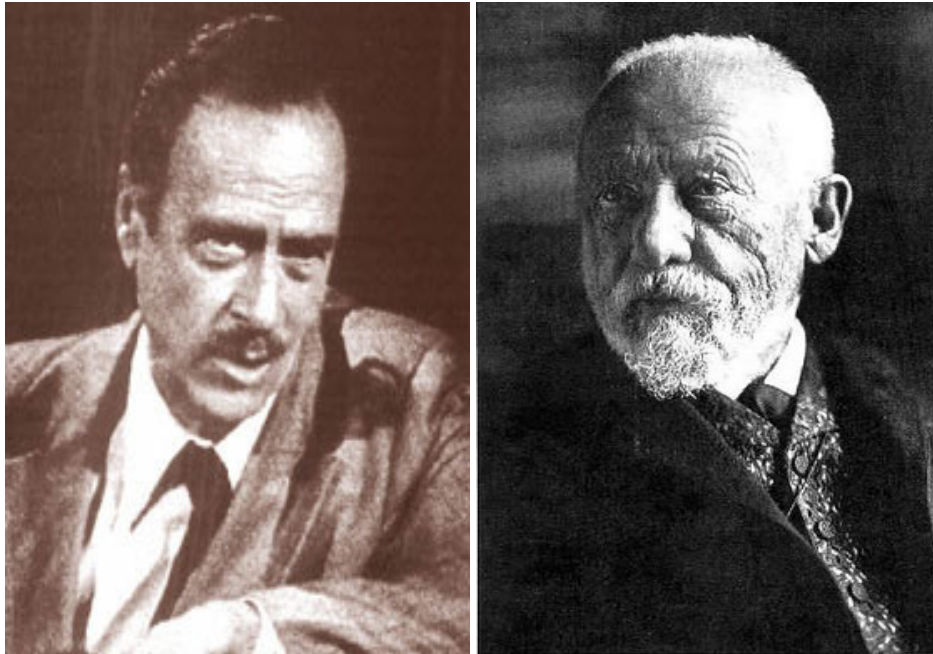


McLuhanism from a Diltheyan perspective



An exploration through the field of Media Studies

**Koen Leurs, 0225304
Research Ma Media Studies
Fundamentals of the Humanities
Convenor: Berteke Waaldijk
2nd reader: Joost Raessens
Student reader: Frans de Liagre Bohl
Semester 1, block 1, sept-nov 2005**

Contents

1. Media Studies and its originators	2
2 McLuhanism	3
2.1 Diltheyan perspective	4
2.2 Research question.....	5
3. Digital McLuhan	5
3.1 Erklären.....	6
3.2 Verstehen	6
4. McLuhan & Kuhn	7
5. McLuhan and understanding new media.....	8
5.1 Hypermediacy	9
5.2 Transparent immediacy	10
6. McLuhan and computer games	11
7. Conclusions.....	12

1. Media Studies and its originators

Generally speaking, the two halves of the academic *globus intellectualis* are formed by the sciences and the humanities. The broad field of academia has experienced a splintering up into a great number of individual scientific disciplines, however, according to Dutch linguistic Reuland, a perceived separation between on one hand the natural sciences, the life sciences and the social sciences and on the other hand the humanities remains existing (2005; p. 1).

Media studies, a relatively new but rapidly expanding discipline, can be seen as such a splinter. It aims at studying human aspects of the world, thereby, gazing upon the world from a media perspective. Roger Silverstone explains the significance of studying media in Why study the media?.

“The spaces we live in, in our inner as well as outer worlds, are complicated by the lives we lead and the press of media on our minds and souls. [...] The press of information, its noise, its intrusion. The endless demands to choose, to decipher, to discriminate. What do we do with our media and how do we do it? How do we manage?”

(Silverstone, 1999, p. 57).

Media scholars focus on the culture, nature and effects of (mass) media, its theory, content and representation. These topics are studied from an array of different viewpoints which explains its cross-disciplinary nature, since media studies encompasses, incorporate and uses both theories and techniques from communication, cultural, gender, film and television studies and in addition also from sociology, geography, psychology, art history and information sciences.

German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”, is now understood as one of the first principal investigations on the relationship between culture and (new) technologies. Other media pioneers include Jean Baudriallard, a cultural theorist and philosopher from France foremost known for his work on hyperreality; Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist from the United Kingdom, focusing on culture, media and politics introduced the encoding decoding model and directing the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham; Dennis McQuail, well-known for his communication theories, Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher,

introduced the famous, often quoted media theory under the name of: “the medium is the message”; Neil Postman, from the United States, educator and media critic and John B. Thompson, who is also from the US, and uses a sociologist approach to media phenomena.

The heterogeneity in the backgrounds of the originators of media studies brought along diverseness within the constituted field. Its multifariousness can raise doubt on the positioning of the discipline media studies within the academe. This article will focus on the position of media studies within the academe by taking into account Marshall McLuhan’s conceptualization of media and it’s interlard within later formulated media theory. The wide inner coherence as well as its broad positioning within the academe can be illustrated in this way.

2 McLuhanism

Critics have dubbed Marshall McLuhan “the doctor Spock of pop culture”, “the guru of the boob tube”, a “Canadian Nkrumah who has joined the assault on reason”, “a metaphysical wizard possessed by a spatial sense of madness” and “the high priest of pop think who conducts a Black Mass for dilettantes before the altar of historical determinism”. Amherst professor emeritus of English Benjamin De-Mott stated “He’s swinging, switched on, with it and NOW. And wrong”. For this inquiry, the assumption of fictional chronicler Tom Wolfe, “What if he is right? Suppose he is what he sounds like – the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov?” (McLuhan, 1960, p. 162) will be accepted.

The essence of the argument introduced by McLuhan is “that society has always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). McLuhan, however, wraps a deeply serious argument, within a “chaotic combination of bland assertion, astute guesswork, fake analogy, dazzling insight, hopeless nonsense, shockmanship, showmanship, wisecracks, and oracular mystification [...] in an endless and random monologue” (Schlesinger Jr, cited in McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). These edge phenomena, however, will not be dealt with.

McLuhan’s knowledge of the world was mainly constituted by looking at the new technology, on which he drew generalizations, which he saw as applicable for the whole medial spectrum. The revolutionizing key concept, the basis for many other connecting ideas was the idea of the “Medium is the message”. This refers to the idea

that outcomes of a medium are triggered by the possibilities that are introduced by a new medium. He stated that “Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1969, p. 26). The content of writing is speech, like speech is the content of the press and press is the content of the telegraph. In fact, the contents of media tend to blind us of seeing its real nature, however looking from a social perspective; the medium is the message, since every new medium creates an extension and thereby influences the complex of psychic and social factors. The arrival of (electronic) technology created extensions of man, beyond its physic constraints. When a wheel is seen as a medium, a new intensity of movement is introduced, since the narrow function of rotating feet when walking can be broadened (McLuhan, 2002, pp. 29-67).

2.1 Diltheyan perspective

The two halves of the field of academia as understood by Reuland above were divided in similar fashion by German historian, sociologist, student of Hermeneutics and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Generally speaking, in his vision, the sciences are aimed at explaining from the outside, which he labeled as *Erklaeren* or explaining. The humanities, however, are aiming at understanding from within, which he describes as *Verstehen* or understanding (Burke, 2005, p. 7). Illustratively he says that “In understanding we proceed from the context of the whole (*Zusammenhang des Ganzen*) as given in its vitality, in order to make the parts comprehensible on the basis of it” (Dilthey, cited in Makkreel, 1992, p. 135).

At the basis of the distinction, two different modes of experiencing reality can be seen: “inner lived experience” (*das Erleben, Erlebnis*, or occasionally *erlebende Erfahrung*) and “outer sensory experience” (*äußere Erfahrung*). Thereby, students of the natural sciences employ the vocabulary of causality, building constructs and laws upon abstractions from sensory experience while students of the humanities speak the language of lived experience and constantly have reference to this language (Ermarth, 1978, p. 97).

Different “attitudes of the mind” are fundamental to the distinction between *Erklaeren* and *Verstehen* and are “stemmed from two different ways of experiencing the world and the manner in which that experience is elaborated in consciousness” (ibid, p. 96) Although the distinction is showed to be neither ultimate nor absolute (Ermarth, 1978; pp. 303-10), it will be accepted as a starting point for investigating

McLuhanism. The analysis of McLuhan by taking into account Dilthey's notion can be fruitful, considering the central aim of both Dilthey and McLuhan was to gain knowledge on the human world.

2.2 Research question

Dilthey grasped the global perspective as “the social-historical history”, and this “attempt to construct a broad theoretical framework for the objective study of man is his most original achievement” (Rickman, 1976, p. 5). By looking at McLuhan from a Dilthey-an perspective, McLuhan's generalizing understanding of media can be theoretically framed more broadly, in an objective understanding of the world. Twenty-five years after his passing in 1980, the core of his argument will be used and assessed to grasp the more recent scholarly investigation within media studies. Therefore the following research question can be derived:

Are McLuhan's concepts nowadays understood as grounds for the Erklären or rather the Verstehen of media?

The research question will be answered by looking into the utilization (or rejection) of McLuhan's concepts within four media theoretical publications. Two of those incorporate McLuhan's thinking in general and the other two make more specific applications of it. Throughout the chapters it will be discussed whether McLuhans thinking is either seen or applied as a possibility for outsider explanation or rather as a mode for understanding from within. In chapter 3, McLuhanism in the digital age will be investigated. In chapter 4, it is discussed whether McLuhanism can be seen as paradigmatic. In chapter 5, the link between McLuhanism and remediation is examined. Chapter 6 deals with McLuhanism and computer games. Concluding, there will be an assessment on which approach is dominant. A contextual embedding within the *globus intellectualis* will be derived from this evaluation.

3. Digital McLuhan

In 1999, Paul Levinson, who is a professor in communication and media studies in New York City, wrote the book Digital McLuhan, A Guide to the information millennium. In this work, Levinson applies McLuhan's work to facets of modern communication like the Internet, cell-phones and virtual reality. In the chapter on the

Internet, he focuses on McLuhan's "the medium is the message" and "the user is the content" statements. The first notion is understood as an example of Erklären, the latter is comprehended as Verstehen.

3.1 Erklären

"What medium serves as content for the Web, the equivalent of the novel for movies, or movies and the radio serial for TV? Actually the answer is not one media, but many media, for the Web has taken as its content the written word in forms ranging from love letters to newspapers, plus telephone, radio and moving images with sound which can be considered a version of television" (Levinson, 1999; p. 38-39).

It shows that the outsider perspective, as taken into account by interpreting "the medium is the message" in this manner, according to Levinson enables grasping of the medium Internet and its components as such. Levinson underlines this by stating that the contents detract us from comprehension and perception of the medium "much as the flood of sunlight on even cloudy days blinds us to the stars that also inhabit the sky" (1999; p. 39). The focus is shifted away from the content of the medium. By not trying to understand the contents of the medium, but looking from the outside, this proposition can be seen as a way for Erklären. This way, by taking an outsider glance, the medium is not experienced, but can all the same be defined.

3.2 Verstehen

"McLuhan's notion of the user as content admits to at least a three-part hierarchy in which (a) humans serve as (determine) the content of all media by virtue of our inextricable interpretation of all that comes before us, (b) the human perceiver travels "through" one-way electronic media such as radio and television, and therein becomes their content, and (c) the human conversant literally creates all of the content in older interactive media such as the telephone, and much of the content in the Internet" (Levinson, 1999; p. 40).

By close reading this statement it could be said that the Internet is actually a mind-created structure, since the contents are said to be determined by humans. Humans have given expression to (and through) the medium Internet. This way the expression of inner lived experience makes their way into cyberspace. Dilthey states that "all of which men use to communicate with each other [...] also includes permanent mental creations which reveal their author's deeper meaning". These expressions can be

understood only by penetrating that world and looking at “the special characteristics of individual persons, as their relations, attitudes, conduct, their effect on things and people, and what they suffer from them” (cited in Rickman 1976; pp. 175-178). Hereby the apprehension of the unique and the individual, in this example seen as the content provider within the Internet, becomes a goal in itself. Understanding of the unique and individual are clear-cut characteristics of the Verstehen perspective (ibid.). This can also be seen in the light of its aim which is generally not to explain, but to portray (Hodge, 1952, p. 227).

4. McLuhan & Kuhn

Professor Eugene Marlow, of City University of New York, claims in his 1993 article “Media and Culture” that new scientific frameworks, thereby directly referring to McLuhan’s assumptions, either helped or forced scientists to deal with anomalies, eventually causing the development of new, explanatory paradigms.

“The concept of equilibrium voiced [...] by McLuhan is expressed by Kuhn in the term of “anomalies”, i.e. a scientific paradigm (monopoly of knowledge) may exist for a time, but sooner or later anomalies appear and cause disequilibrium (crisis) which leads to the development of a new paradigm (a new monopoly of knowledge)”
(Marlow, 1993; p. 306).

Thomas Kuhn, a physicist living in roughly the same era as McLuhan, focused on the history and philosophy of science. He described the character of academic progress as “paradigmatic”. Fundamental underpinnings of paradigms are agreements on what is to be observed and scrutinized, the kind of questions that are supposed to be asked and probed for answers in relation to this subject, how these questions are to be put and how the results of scientific investigations should be interpreted (Kuhn, 1964; pp. 10-13). He argued that “science in one period is characterized by a set of ideas and practices that constitute a paradigm, and when problems or anomalies begin to accumulate in a given paradigm, there often was introduced a new paradigm which, in fact and in logic, repudiated the old and supplanted it” (Machamer, Silberstein, 2002, p. 7).

According to Marlow, the McLuhan initiated paradigm (equilibrium), thereby assuming one single theorist can cause paradigm shifts, can serve as an explanatory model, which is in line with Erklären. He sees McLuhan’s perspective not simply as

observatory, but as an investigation of the order of things by explanation and an intention to make plain from the outside. However, since Kuhn emphasizes “that science is not cumulative, because in episodes of major scientific change some content of rejected theories is lost. These are retractions” (Kelly and Glymour, p. 100) this notion loses its validity. Namely, the concept of paradigmatic understanding of Kuhn can be seen as controversial for scholars who do not necessarily aim at solely Erklären, but also at Verstehen, because understanding from within depends upon a fundament of prior understanding and can be characterized as an ongoing process. “Verstehen shows neither an absolute beginning nor ending” (Ermarth, 1978; p. 251). In sharp contrast with Marlow’s notion on McLuhan, McLuhan describes his actual (initiated) process of understanding new technologies as explorative:

“My work is designed for the pragmatic purpose of trying to understand our technological environment and its psychic and social consequences. But my books constitute the process rather than the completed product of discovery [...] As an investigator, I have no fixed point of view, no commitment to any theory”
(McLuhan, 1969).

From this statement, it can be derived that exploring implications of media phenomena can, according to McLuhan, best be done without having to worry about the limited boundaries that paradigms pose. This way, McLuhan’s perspective, which he himself understands as the ongoing process of exploration, becomes Verstehen. The process of exploration has no final end-goal, in line with understanding as Dilthey perceives it “we understand life only in a constant process of approaching [...] all understanding remains always relative and can never be fully completed” (Dilthey, cited in Ermarth, 1978, p. 246). Since McLuhan does not want to commit himself to any fixed standpoint, thereby implicitly rejecting paradigmatic apprehension, a flexible perspective is guaranteed by that means. By exploring the interpretative situation, an indefinite range of meanings can be touched.

5. McLuhan and understanding new media

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin theorized the representation of one medium in another, in terms of new media, in Remediation, Understanding New Media (2001). In standard work on new media Bolter, professor of Language, Communication, and Culture at the Georgia Institute of Technology and Grusin professor of the

Department of English, Wayne State University, take a snapshot of the present state of media and investigate that which constitute it, similar in many ways to McLuhan's investigation of media. This parallel becomes explicit when looking at the subtitle which directly refers to McLuhan's 1964 work: Understanding Media.

Bolter and Grusin call the representation of one medium in another remediation, and argue that this is a defining characteristic of the new digital media (2001, p. 45). They derive this notion on their thoughts on McLuhan's remark that "the content of any medium is always another medium", which they believe he understood as "complex kind of borrowing in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium". They illustrate the process of remediation by describing two principal strategies, "the twin preoccupations of contemporary media: the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves" (2001, p. 23). The hypermediacy notion resembles McLuhan's "the medium is the message" concept, the immediacy notion denotes it. Let's focus on the resembling theory at first.

5.1 Hypermediacy

The importance of focusing on the nature of the medium while studying media is stressed in the practice of hypermediacy. For Bolter and Grusin "it's most evident in the heterogeneous "windowed style"" of World Wide Web page's, the desktop interface, multimedia programs, and video games" (2001, p. 31).

"Hypermediacy expresses itself as multiplicity [...] the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible [...] contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on the world, but rather as "windowed" itself—with windows that open on to other representations or other media. The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience"

(Bolter & Grusin, 2001, pp. 33-34).

The windowed character of representations can be conceived as offering an outsider glance on media. By looking at representational generalities from the outside, media can be explained. Thereby its task of generating "explanatory laws of style" (Dilthey, cited in Ermarth, 1978, 305) becomes fulfilled. The way of understanding human

experience of media from this perspective, can thus be seen in line with Erklären, since a sensorial experienced rule is formulated that can hold its ground over time for different media.

5.2 Transparent immediacy

Transparent immediacy is contrasting with hypermediality and the idea that the medium is the message. It is a concept which stresses the importance of the invisibility of the medium. This idea has only implicitly been referred to by McLuhan, most prominently in the book The Medium is the Massage (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) in which is stated that “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive” (1967, p. 26). This, however, has a much broader meaning for McLuhan when contrasting it with the idea of hypermediacy. For McLuhan, the media environments massage users because they are pervasive and have “personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences” (ibid). The transparent immediacy concept focuses on one single aspect out of this enumeration provided; namely the aesthetic one.

The desire for immediacy is described by analyzing the apparent transparency of current digital techniques:

“The desire for immediacy itself has a history that is not easily overcome. At least since the Renaissance, it has been a defining feature of Western representation. To understand immediacy in computer graphics, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which painting, photography, film and television have sought to satisfy this desire. These earlier media sought immediacy through the interplay of the aesthetic value of transparency with techniques of linear perspective, erasure, and automaticity, all of which are strategies also at work in digital technology” (Bolter & Grusin, 2001; p. 24).

From an historical perspective, Bolter and Grusin found that the transparent immediacy was constructed by using techniques that showed their effectiveness in earlier periods. This was understood by the process of deconstructing medial representations from the inside, focusing on perspective, erasure and automaticity. The historical process of understanding these (new media) representations can be seen as Verstehen. Peter Burke, namely, illustratively underlines that from that outlook, the language of experience is spoken (Burke, 2005; 7). Dilthey’s idea of understanding is namely “not an act a without content, nor a result without a process of arriving there”

(Ermarth, 1978, p. 246). The historical process perspective on aesthetic values can be seen as a particular form of such experience-based vocabulary. In this way history works as creator by providing tools and in connection with that enabling a particular understanding of new media.

6. McLuhan and computer games

In “Cognitive effects of video games” a chapter in Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldsteins’ Handbook of Computer Game Studies, professor Sandra L. Calver, director of the Children's Digital Media Center accentuates the incompleteness of McLuhan’s the medium is the message concept for understanding computer games. Video games incorporate audiovisual elements that were introduced in older media, but the present interaction component is different.

“Video games are also presented in the unique audiovisual forms that first appeared with film and television. However, there are new ways of getting the content in video games that were not part of early media experiences. More specifically, children must now interact with content, not just observe it. This shift to interactive experiences provides very direct ways for children to control and to receive responsive feedback from media [...] Through experience, children construct schemas, learned expectations that guide perceptions, memories and inferences about content. [...] As they grow older, children develop meta-memory skills that enable them to know about their knowing” (Calvert, 2005, p. 127).

The interaction component is stated to be not directly graspable by taking into account McLuhan’s notion of the medium is the message. However, we saw earlier that the medium is the *massage* theory has personal consequences among others.

The interaction with content in computer games can have such personal consequences.

We can understand interaction characteristics of computer games as a immersional form of transparent immediacy. This is a form of mediality that can be understood by Diltheys account of inner lived experience, which was characteristic for Verstehen. “Das Erleben” of interactional patterns plunges the playing child within the medium. The medium massages the child. Calver stated that this can lead up to meta-memory skills, which can be seen in accordance with the awareness of immediate apprehension of experience which according to Dilthey (Ermarth, 1978, p. 97) can be constituted by Verstehen. He states that “we live through (erleben) [and, KL] lived experience is the originary way in which we perceive reality. As living

persons we have an awareness of things and ourselves” (ibid).

7. Conclusions

By looking into four different utilizations of the thinking of Marshall McLuhan, it was found that key concepts could both be utilized as prospects for outsider explanation as well as modes for understanding from an insider perspective. If Dilthey’s distinction between science and humanities, based on the fundament of the separation between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* can be perceived as valid, one could argue that the positioning of Media Studies within the academe is not evident. Or, one could say that Media Studies is in a luxury position, since it’s able to utilize concepts from both distinctive fields.

Joost Raessens, associate professor of New Media Studies at Utrecht University, the Netherlands underlines the importance of accepting the “co-existence of competing frameworks of interpretation, in accordance with the tradition of the humanities” for Game Studies, an approach within Media Studies (Raessens, n.d.). This statement is applicable for the whole field of Media Studies, since the discipline itself encompasses, incorporates and uses theories, concepts and frameworks from different approaches. So to say, the heart of Media Studies is broad by incorporating both *Verstehen* and *Erklären*.

The principle aim of this study was to gain insight into the fundamental groundwork of the multiple approaches, lookouts and perspectives that Media Studies incorporate on the borders of both *Erklären* and *Verstehen*. As Dilthey states “between explanation and interpretation there is only a graduated difference, not a fixed boundary (cited in Ermarth, 1978, p. 309) this fundament is in its essence open to broad interpretational frameworks. Media Studies gain their strength by its broad character. The assumption “At the extreme limit understanding is not separate from explanation; explanation has as its presupposition the full accomplishment of understanding” akin to German economist and sociologist Max Weber’s notion of a “*verstehende Eklaerung*” (Ermarth, 1978, p. 310).

When taking McLuhan back into account, “the medium is the message”, the essential constituent of his theory can be seen as a description of a *verstehende Eklaerung*. In stead of solely in-depth content analyses, the form of media by which men communicate can be looked into and at, can be both understood as well as explained. Namely, McLuhan states that the medium is the message, which refers to

the importance of trying to explain media phenomena from the outside, with disregard to the content of the message, and on the other hand he states that the medium is the message. By looking at the nature of the media by which men communicate one could come to both understanding and explanation. By understanding the message as the medium, one can explain the medium as the message.

8. References

- Bolter, Jay David., Grusin, Richard. Remediation. Understanding New Media. Fourth Printing. Cambridge: MIT press, 2001.
- Burke, Peter. History and social theory. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.
- Hodges, H.A. The philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1952.
- Ermarth, Michael. Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Kelly, Kevin T., Glymour, Clark. "Why Probability does not Capture the Logic of Scientific Justification" Ed. Hitchcock, Christopher. Contemporary debates in Philosophy of Science. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Levinson, Paul. Digital McLuhan. A guide to the information millennium. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Kuhn, Thomas. The structure of scientific revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Machamer, Peter., Silberstein, Michael. The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Science. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- Makkreel, Rudolf A. Dilthey. Philosopher of the Human Studies. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Marlow, Eugene. "Media and Culture". Et cetera. A review of General Semantics. Vol. 50-3. fall 1993. 296-309.
- McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. Fourth Edition. First published 1964. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- McLuhan, Marshall., Fiore, Quentin. The Medium is the Message. An inventory of Effects. Middlesex: Pinguin Books, 1967.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan". Playboy Magazine, edition march 1969. November 3d. 2005.
<<http://heim.ifi.uio.no/~gisle/overload/mcluhan/pb.html>>.
- Raessens, Joost. "Playful Identities, or the Ludification of Culture". 2005. n.p.
- Reuland, Eric. "Linguistics and the humanities: The study of language and the investigation of the mind" . Paper based on presentation at the symposium on Linguistics and the Humanities, UiL OTS, 27August 2004. n.p.
- Rickman, H.P. (ed) Dilthey, Wilhelm. Selected writings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Silverstone, Roger. Why study the media?. London: Sage Publications, 1999.

8.1 Illustrations

No Name. "Who was Marshall McLuhan. Portrait: Marshall McLuhan". McLuhan Global Research Network. No date. November 9, 2005. <<http://www.mcluhan.ca/mcluhan.phtml>>.

Wildman, Wesley. "Wphil: Gallery: Early Modern Western Thinkers. 2005. November 9, 2005. <http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/media/galleries/philosophy/philosophy_gallwmodearly.htm>