



# The Outsider and the Feudal Man: on McLuhan's Don Quixote

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## Abstract

This proposal provides an insight into the role played by Cervantes within McLuhan's mediology, inspired by the social impact of the literary imaginary and narrative processes. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan focuses on *Don Quixote* along with the communicative shifts engendered by the transition from manuscript to the printed word. The rise of printing leads to individualism, autonomy and new forms of nationalism, as Cervantes outlines in presenting "the case of the feudal man confronted with a newly visually quantified and homogeneous world" (McLuhan, 2011: 242). McLuhan identifies Don Quixote as an outsider and a kind of alienated man whose contemporary complexity stems from the incompatibility between the linear organization of printing culture and electric simultaneity. Don Quixote is the emblem of such a social imaginary engendered by the evolution of communicative patterns. Hence the reference to Riesman's "inner direction towards remote goals", thus considering the "print culture and the perspective and vanishing point organization of space that are part of it" (McLuhan, 2011: 244).

## Keywords

Mediology | Communication | Imaginary | Literature | Complexity

## 1. Introduction: McLuhan and the Gutenberg imaginary

**M**cLuhan's analysis of the age of print revolves around the communicative and cultural shifts produced by the rise of the typographic medium, whose semiotic impact determines the transformation of human perceptions (Borrelli, 2018; Gamaleri, 2013). The transition from the oral world to print civilization involves the interpretative skills of human beings, inasmuch as decentralization and bureaucratic organization imply the organizational dimension of human communication. In line with such an epistemological approach, writers and artists can be interpreted as "the antennae of the race", as Ezra Pound (1991: 81) highlights in the *ABC of Reading*, whose literary heritage rests upon the social relevance of literary expressions. In this account, artists can be seen as the forerunners of cultural innovation, insofar as social evolution has to be related to new representative solutions (Eisenstein, 1973). While exploiting Pound's legacy, McLuhan (2005b) reinforces his concept of media perception through literature, especially in reference to the relationship between communication and literary invention. Ezra Pound can be considered the prophetic interpreter of this cultural revolution:

A nation which neglects the perceptions of its artists declines. After a while it ceases to act, and merely survives. There is probably no use in telling this to people who can't see it without being told. Artists and poets undoubtedly get excited and 'over-excited' about things long before the general public (Pound, 1991: 82).



McLuhan's mediology deals with these literary tenets which are closely related to the skill of writers in probing and representing social reality (Ragone, 2014). Every new medium has the power to reshape reality and reinvent social functions, thus complying with the multiform variety of social dynamics. This is why McLuhan's mediology is closely embedded in the literary webs which mould the public sphere:

The passage *from ear to eye* indicates the passage from the ancient acoustic mode of perception – inclusive and simultaneous – typical of tribal society, to a sequential and linear one pertaining to literate Western society, now obsolete or no longer adequate to (at odds with) the electric environment (which, through its re-tribalization, is rediscovering acoustic and tribal dynamics) (Lamberti, 2012: 53).

The dialectics of orality and literacy investigated later on by Walter J. Ong (2012) tend to outrun the ordinary course of human civilization, due to the recurrent oral and written patterns within digital society. Thanks to Innis's critical deterministic research (Lombardinilo, 2017: 95-100), McLuhan can investigate the literary tenets inspiring every different historical phase and moulding the social imaginaries related to the need to narrate and describe psychological complexity.

Nations cannot neglect their main artists, if they wish to avoid symbolic decline and cultural obsolescence. Consequently, nations need to celebrate their own national authors whose literary genius is widely recognized. Cicero, Dante, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, Blake, Joyce and T.S. Eliot belong to the limited group of writers whose creative effort is inspired by the communicative



fervour of their age, as McLuhan constantly highlights in his major works and essays (Lamberti). Reading their works allows us to probe the transition from manuscript to electric era from the Middle Ages to the post-war age, thus investigating the role played by the Catholic humanist down the centuries (McLuhan, 2010). Linearity and simultaneity emphasize the social impact of literary paths in history, as Elena Lamberti points out: "Consistently, his form of communication was *humanistic*, at once *eclectic* and *electric*: he borrowed from literary and artistic traditions, and elaborated his findings into an original discourse whose fuzzy syntax puzzled those who could not chew on his aphorisms" (Lamberti, 2012: 29). In other words, the aphoristic style turns into a cognitive medium whose function complies with the new electric dimension of life. Thanks to Seneca, McLuhan (2005a) can dwell on the process of adaptation of writing to oral patterns of daily life, as happened in ancient Rome when the Republic was replaced by the Principate (Lombardinilo, 2018).

The main endeavour of the Catholic humanist is to bring back together the fragments composing our mental activity, often dealing with the inextricable complexity of the mind. Symbolist communication is a heuristic practice, permanently founded on the metaphorical and analogical force of language. From Seneca to Joyce, through Augustine, Thomas, Cervantes, Blake, Poe and Mallarmé, symbolist communication stems from the constant attempt to shape the interior psychic activity in line with the analogical dynamics of modernization, especially when considering the differentiation between oral and print relations. This is what McLuhan underlines in a meaningful essay published in 1954, *Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters*:

Be it said in passing that this same symbolist art and speculation had also the effect of stirring the most ancient roots of Spanish and Latin culture. Symbolism made Seneca alive and lancing once more in the Latin world, giving us the astonishing poetic Renaissance of Spain and Latin America in the past eighty years (McLuhan, 2010: 172).

McLuhan mulls over Seneca's Spanish origins (he was born in Cordova) and the Spanish poetic Renaissance, when poetical works seem to foreshadow Gongora and De Quevedo's poetic flowering and Cervantes' narrative engagement (Bell, 1984). According to McLuhan, *Don Quixote's* immortal allure resides in its paradigmatic social representation, in which realism and imagination converge to depict the unavoidable transition from the feudal world to modern civilization. From Seneca to Cervantes, symbolist communication deals with the functional shifts related to political and civil transformations, so closely embedded in the media webs influencing human action. In this account, Cervantes' symbolism reveals the analogic and metaphorical impact of the modern novel, the communicative priority of which is to interpret reality through the construction of a literary imaginary, so insightfully connected to the start of modern civilization. From this perspective, the rise of modernity is closely related to the introduction and improvement of well-planned institutions whose efficiency depends on the enhancement of communicative and transport devices. According to McLuhan, both Macbeth and Quixote embody the essence of men who are compelled to cope with the decentralization of political and



military power, in a world that can no longer postpone the interiorization of the print mindset. This is a process insightfully described by Cornelius Castoriadis:

Once created, both imaginary social significations and institutions crystallize, or solidify, and that is what I call the *instituted social imaginary*. It provides continuity within society, the reproduction and repetition of the same forms, which henceforth regulate people's lives and persist as long as no gradual historical change or massive new creation occurs, modifying them or radically replacing them by others (Castoriadis, 2007: 73-74).

This "instituted social imaginary" highlighted by Castoriadis deals with the change of communicative and representative paradigms whose sudden or progressive replacement leads to the growth of new imaginaries destined to take root in the public sphere through collective recognition. The institutionalization of social imaginaries is preceded by a symbolic discontinuity or media revolution, as Don Quixote realizes in the presence of the vanishing symbolic process before the rise of modernity. In Cervantes' novel, as well as in Shakespeare's plays, tradition and innovation seem to clash and generate the prototype of a new modern man whose imaginary tenets are inspired by the search for new symbolic and metaphorical solutions. This is why McLuhan, Schutz, Foucault and Adorno dwell on Cervantes' narrative skill, inasmuch as literary media often interlace with the evolution of social organization and cultural patterns. McLuhan cleverly states that "it was Aquinas who enabled Joyce to surpass all the Pre-Raphaelites" (McLuhan, 2010: 172). Furthermore, it was Cervantes who enabled Poe to surpass Scott and all the Romantic novelists. This literary evolution entails the communicative innovation destined to revolutionize social and cultural habits which the Catholic humanist has the duty to investigate through recourse to intelligence and knowledge.

McLuhan underlines that it is the Machiavellian mind that laid the foundations of our Western identity, inasmuch as rationalization complies with political strategy and a secular existential approach. The proposal of a "practical Christianity as a sort of Machiavellian strategy of culture and power" (McLuhan, 2010: 173) reveals the need to interpret modernity as an outstanding literary engagement which has deeply changed since the arrival of the Gutenberg galaxy. Hence follows the analysis of Rabelais' and Cervantes' works as the expression of a symbolic imaginary stemming from the sedimentation of typographic impulses. To the fore is the tenet of "retrieval" that – according to Wilmott – should work ironically against chaos and confusion, since "all artists and authors are, like Macbeth, inventors in the imaginary" (Wilmott, 2010: 55). Assuming that every artist lives in a specific temporal and spatial environment, writers have to be considered as creative archeologists, thus not neglecting the chance to exploit history as a repository of fantastic narrations: "McLuhan conceives of history as the real residue of imaginary *praxis*, the hidden, unimaginable ground of its exploits, taking whatever form – the junkyard, the waste land, the middenheap, the garbage, the repressed, the anonymous, the unconscious, the forgotten, the dirt" (Wilmott, 2010: 55).

The phenomenology of pale, downtrodden people belongs to a literary imaginary which closely interlaces with the social background inspiring every sort of narration,



as Richard Sennett (2011), for instance, highlights in *The Foreigner*. Cervantes' novel inevitably refers to the Christian exaltation of poverty and sacrifice, in a world increasingly encumbered by egoism and individualism, as Machiavelli and Aretino cleverly denounced. The transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance entails the visual shift from the amanuensis skills ruling monastic scriptoria to the synesthetic flair of perspective revolution, in line with the pressing need to probe the effects of political decentralization and communicative innovation. Marchand properly emphasizes this religious and cultural standpoint: "For McLuhan, Catholic culture had produced Cervantes and Chaucer and peasants dancing around the Maypole. Protestant culture had produced Milton, Tennyson, and Winnipeg, Manitoba" (Marchand, 1998: 44). Thanks to Northrop Frye's critical legacy, McLuhan assumes that Don Quixote is the product of the same Catholic culture that engendered Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Powe, 2014).

McLuhan is profoundly convinced that our cultural modernity derives from the Renaissance invention of the self-made man who finds his ideal place in the court. One century later, Cervantes presents "the case of the feudal man confronted with a newly visually quantified and homogeneous world", as McLuhan points out, referring to the iconic and psychologic effects of the print era. His considerations on Don Quixote, seen as the prototype of the "outsider" and "alienated man" produced by typographic logic, concerns the imaginary of a reinvented world that has replaced mysticism with immanentism and transcendentalism with realism. The only way to probe this epochal revolution is to acknowledge the heuristic power of literature, in a time lacking any potential to reproduce reality technically. This process is related to the construction of that Gutenberg imaginary that Marchessault refers to:

The most substantial accounts of the Gutenberg transformation of society come from literature: Rabelais's *Gargantua*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the *Dunciad* by Pope, and *Finnegans Wake*. These literary works each in their own way recount the manner that print came to transform and mediate experience (Marchessault, 2005: 140).

In Cervantes' masterpiece, the representation of a declining world is inspired by the clash between the feudal knight and the modern diplomat who realizes that force must be replaced by shrewdness. Thus, Don Quixote turns into the prototype of the alienated man who can no longer fight against progress and civilization. Don Quixote's obsolete world can only exist in the fantastic spaces of the mind, as happens when a great writer's character permeates the public sphere while going down in history, thus embodying the prototype of the "antennae of the race".

## 2. From the feudal man to the outsider

"There is no need to go into Cervantes' novel in detail, since it is well known. But Cervantes, in his life and in his work, presents the case of the feudal man confronted with a newly visually quantified and homogeneous world" (McLuhan, 2011: 242). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan dedicates a whole chapter to Don Quixote's attempt



to cope with the decline of his own obsolete world. The chapter is meaningfully entitled “Cervantes confronted typographic man in the figure of Don Quixote”, the character earning his creator a prominent place in literary history. Don Quixote, indeed, is more than a narrative insight, since he has always symbolized the indestructible but sterile will to struggle against anything that can set aside tradition and habits. The development of the Machiavellian mind and Cartesian tenets, along with the diffusion of Gutenberg’s knowledge and Newton’s science, lead to the apparent fading away of imagination and fancy, increasingly blurred by calculation and rationalization. The new modern civilization shaped by decentralization is ruled by the “visually quantified and homogeneous world” constructed by perspective and by printing, the easily reproducible linearity of which made possible the rise of modern Baroque man. This is a heuristic principle shrewdly described by McLuhan in the central section of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:



It is not entirely self-evident today that typography should have been the means and occasion of the individualism and self-expression in society. That it should have been the means of fostering habits of private property, privacy, and many forms of «enclosure» is, perhaps, more evident. But most obvious is the fact of printed publication as the direct means of fame and perpetual memory... Most of the Renaissance megalomania from Aretino to Tamburlaine is the immediate child of typography which provided the physical means of extending the dimensions of the private author in space and time (McLuhan, 2011: 150).

Ahead of the electric revolution arising in the second half of the Nineteenth century, the typographic printing has accelerated the process of technical reproducibility of thought, knowledge and contents destined to foster temporal and spatial simultaneity. In other words, the making of typographic man entails the construction of a symbolic imaginary which is founded in the representative power of writing, in line with the narrative skills rapidly achieved by poets and novelists. While confronting the typographic man in the figure of Don Quixote, McLuhan probes “a stadial narrative of human communicative developments, with particular attention to the development of alphabetic literacy and the spread of print” (McDowell, 2021: 1404). Through the study of Cervantes’ writing, McLuhan assumes that both the Baroque and the Enlightenment produce a new sensorial awareness engendered by print and perspective, thus making all history simultaneous especially thanks to the invention of transportable books. Don Quixote and the other figures in the novel are the paradigms of this multifocal world which is going to shelter both feudal men and outsider characters. McLuhan’s analysis of Don Quixote’s anti-realistic imaginary exploits Lowenthal’s analysis of Cervantes’ world:

Lowenthal gives an excellent account of the new alienated man who refused to join the consumer rush and remained on the old feudal and oral margins of society. To the new crowd of visually and consumer-oriented society these marginal figures have great appeal (McLuhan, 2011: 241).

Leo Lowenthal's *Literature and the Image of Man* (1957) belongs to the wide circle of works which form McLuhan's theoretical framework, especially if we consider the great number of studies inspired by the literary dimension of social communication (McNamara, 1969; Lamberti, 2014). More specifically, Frye and Innis' critical legacy intertwines with Riesman's sociological work which McLuhan deals with while focusing on the relationship between society and communication. To the fore is the appearance of the "lonely crowd" suspended between decentralization and inner direction. In this account, the frequent references to Don Quixote found in Lowenthal's work highlight McLuhan's attention to the social background of literary media, while assuming that, as Czitrom points out, "Leo Lowenthal, pondering the historical perspectives of popular culture, outlined the dissatisfaction with the alleged objectivity of communications research" (Czitrom, 2010: 143). Don Quixote embodies the existential oxymoron of the exiled man living in his own solitary world, unfailingly condemned to transformation by new economic, political and communicative dynamics. Hence follows McLuhan's reading of *Literature and the Image of Man*, whose acute references to Don Quixote fit the heuristic framework of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:



Cervantes presents an array of such marginal figures and situations. These are, first, the mad people – Don Quixote and the Man of Glass – who though still operating in the social world are in continuous conflict with it by word and deed (McLuhan, 2011: 240).

Don Quixote is the prototype of the feudal man embodying the imaginary of the irrational man fraught with desperation and inadequacy. This conflictual phenomenology resides in the unbearable clash between reality and imagination, in line with the exaltation of those marginal characters that Scott, Manzoni, Disraeli, Dickens and Zola celebrate in their novels. The social effects of typographic revolution lead to the vanishing of the medieval mindset and humanist flair whose communicative identity is founded in the handcrafted reproduction of reality, as John Ruskin points out (Anthony, 1983). In other words, Don Quixote's immortality rests on his sense of impending destiny, which he tries to contrast while feeding the distressing phantoms haunting his mind. The knight can no longer fight against the merchants, politicians, statesmen, artists crowding the public sphere in the modern age, when political decentralization and technical reproducibility are required to accelerate the social process and collective renewal. McLuhan's reading of Cervantes' novel is openly founded on Lowenthal's sociological interpretation:

Fundamentally the themes of his novel are those of an old way of life being replaced by a new order. Cervantes stresses the resulting conflicts in two ways: through the struggles of the Knight, and through the contrast between him and Sancho Panza. Don Quixote lives in a phantasy world of the vanishing feudal hierarchy (McLuhan, 2011: 241-242).

Don Quixote's meta-temporal fight against his invisible enemies is fed by the immanent force of an ancient world that tries to resist in spite of its incumbent demise. The "new order" constructed by the typographic mind engenders the social

obsolescence of feudality and its experimented behavioral habits, whose rudimental style no longer complies with the aesthetic refinement of the great modern European courts. Furthermore, Don Quixote's "phantasy world" is juxtaposed with the "vanishing feudal hierarchy" symbolizing the transient and unstable condition of post-modernity, as Bauman (2001) states in his "individualized society". In this perspective, Baudrillard's metaphor of the "vanishing point of art" contributes to reinforce the imaginary of a new aesthetic and semiotic phase, as it is fueled by the dialectics of old and new communicative patterns (Baudrillard, 2005: 98-110). Don Quixote fights indeed against the unfathomable simulacra of his real world that is the mirror of his psychic and experiential inheritance. Cervantes' modernity stems from the attention paid to the stunningly precarious condition of human beings when undergoing a rapid, unforeseen change.

While reading Lowenthal's words about Don Quixote, McLuhan focuses on the social background of his encounters: "the people with whom he deals, however, are merchants, minor functionaries in the government, unimportant intellectuals - in short, they are, like Sancho, people who want to get ahead in the world and, therefore, direct their energies to the things which will bring them profit" (McLuhan, 2011: 243). The dialectics of real and imagined worlds are imbued with a high social sensitivity that enables Cervantes to draw on the inner contradictions of the human race. The knight as a misfit and unimportant intellectual is the emblem of a civil decay which neither the church nor the government can arrest. Nonetheless, the reader might wonder whether Quixote's visions belong to fantasy or reality, as the latter seems to derive from his experiential shortcuts. His social system is closely related to the perception of those multiple realities probed by Schütz:

The theory of multiple realities vis-à-vis a shared social reality based on the experience of intersubjectivity is the starting point for Schütz's analysis of Cervantes' novel. Within his frame of reference, Don Quixote is living in his private sub-world of chivalry, and Sancho Panza lives in the paramount reality of common sense (Schlembach, 2019: 12).

Don Quixote's intersubjectivity recalls the defensive struggle fought by amanuenses and copyists against the mechanization of writing, when the diffusion of typographic men was about to wipe out monastic scriptoria and studies. Quixote's sub-world is both private and obsolete, inasmuch as his world can exist only in his hypnotized mind.

Unlike Schütz's phenomenological approach, Lowenthal emphasizes the role played by the new social order which Don Quixote has to fight against to claim his freedom and autonomy. Is he inspired by an excess of realism or by an overwhelming imagination? McLuhan is convinced that this immanent hypnosis blurring Quixote's brain is not related to a strange form of folly, but to the intrusion of print culture within the social sphere. Cervantes' irony is founded on his corrosive description of human contradictions deriving from the contrast of roles and frames. Inadequacy is the result of such a technical outburst fueled by print and perspective which determined the decline of the Latin language under these new expressive pressures. Don Quixote is one of the brightest inventions of the Gutenberg Galaxy,





the cultural impact of which supports the construction of modernity and hastens the decline of the Medieval mindset:

In choosing the great folios of medieval romances as his *reality*, Cervantes establishes an ambivalence of the utmost use. For print was the *new* reality and it was print that made the old reality of the Middle Ages popularly available for the first time. Thus, in our day, movie and TV have given a dimension and reality to the American frontier in all our lives, such as it had for very few people in historical fact. Next to the Books of Hours, medieval romances were by far the biggest item on the market. And whereas the Books of Hours were preferred in pocket editions, the romances came in folio (McLuhan, 2011: 243).

The transformation of medieval romances into in folio novels emphasizes the functional shifts produced by print in educational and cultural environments where history can be conceived as an exciting symbolic repository which writers can contaminate through their imaginative inspiration (Findlay-White, Logan, 2016). The Romantic debate focusing on the alleged juxtaposition of true and untrue would not have been possible without reproducible typographic techniques. Hence follows the contrast between reality and imaginary engendered by the replacement of the old manuscript craftsman, rapidly transformed into typographic man:

Once technical information could be conveyed directly by unambiguous numbers, diagrams, and maps, the esthetic experience became increasingly autonomous. Although books on the memory arts multiplied after printing, the need to rely on these arts decreased. Scribal systems, elaborated in print, ultimately petrified and are only now being reassembled, like fossil remains, by modern research (Eisenstein, 1983: 98).

Don Quixote is the solitary fragment of the chivalry civilization and scribal system which modernity has relentlessly made obsolete. The Great Renaissance poems, as in the case of Pulci, Ariosto and Tasso's masterpieces, along with Rabelais, Shakespeare and Cervantes' works, highlight the rapid evolution of aesthetic imaginaries connected to the representation of a modernity. The latter is rooted in the dialectic of old and new communicative techniques, inasmuch as the latter are destined to improve bureaucratic and political practices. This is why Don Quixote is the emblem of the outsider clinging to his obsolete knowledge of the world and thus sanctioning a new principle that "consists, basically, in the autonomy of individual thinking and feeling" (McLuhan, 2011: 243).

### 3. Quixote and the imaginary of remote goals

Quixote is a man both rational and idealistic, living in a society that is rapidly changing thanks to the typographic revolution and visual innovation fostered by maps and perspective. His fantastic visions are indeed the product of his existential legacy constructed through the interiorization of tradition and respect. In quoting Lowenthal, McLuhan aims to demonstrate the social and communicative background



of Cervantes' narrative creation as being pivoted on the clash between imagination and reality:

The dynamics of society have come to demand a continuous and active transformation of reality; the world must be perpetually constructed anew. Don Quixote recreates his world though he does so in a phantastic and solipsistic fashion. The honor for which he enters the lists is the product of his thinking, not of socially established and accepted values. He defends those whom he considers worthy of his protection and assails those he believes to be wicked. In this sense he is a rationalist as well as an idealist (McLuhan, 2011: 243).

Lowenthal emphasizes the social conflict stemming from the cohabitation of diverging perspectives, as Quixote shows well while coping with evil and cruelty. His world is the comfort zone provided by his own environment which is paradoxically fantastic and solitary, in line with the imaginary of a decaying world. He publicly embodies the prototype of the misfit whose attributes do not match the predefined stereotype of the social actor. Goffman would refer to the social stigmatization implying the clash of values and cynicism (Riggins, 2011). McLuhan wonders what kind of reality the new typographic world might have constructed, thus collectively sharing the problematic issues provided by Quixote's struggle against his altered reality. Alfred Schutz would reply that Don Quixote's sub-universes belong to the existential sphere of errant knights shelved by progress when new rules and behaviors are to be complied with (Endreß, 1998). The end of the medieval age entails the disappearance of the ancient autonomy which can still be practiced in a fantastic world or, according to Schutz, in multiple sub-universes: "We mentioned before that the world of phantasy is not a unified realm, that there are phantasies within phantasies, sub-universes within sub-universes, which may conflict with one another and both with the reality of daily life" (Schutz, 1976: 149).

While reflecting on *Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality*, Schutz dwells on the phenomenological background of Cervantes' literary invention, the symbolic flair of which is inspired by the eternal conflict between fantasy and reality. Ahead of his analysis, McLuhan improves his mediological interpretation of the novel and its characters while shedding light on the psychic effects of the typographic revolution and its symbolic consequences. In other words, Quixote's reality is the fragmented portion of a solipsistic condition made ever more rigid by social change and bureaucratic pressure. The rise of the typographic age implies the change of cognitive and heuristic patterns, in line with a new epistemological approach to science and knowledge. This is a fundamental feature of print technology, as McLuhan highlights while retrieving David Riesman's tenet of "inner direction" (2001: 109-125), as developed in *The Lonely Crowd*:

Inner direction towards remote goals is inseparable from print culture and the perspective and vanishing point organization of space that are part of it. The fact that no such organization of space or culture is compatible with electronic simultaneity is what has involved Western man in new anxiety for a century. In addition to the solipsism and solitude and uniformity of print culture, there is now the immediate pressure for its dissolution (McLuhan, 2011: 244).



The keyword of such a transformative process is dissolution, inasmuch as dissolution is a prelude to the reshaping of daily life through social and communicative re-organization. Through the metaphor of inner-directed and other-directed men, Riesman comments on the social shifts engendered by electric technologies, about five centuries after the appearance of the typographic man. While emphasizing the solipsistic condition of the inner-directed man, Riesman deals with “an increased consumption of words and images from the new mass media of communications” (Riesman, 2001: 20). He remarks on the growth of new forms of literacy and loquacity: “For the other-directed types political events are likewise experienced through a screen of words by which the events are habitually atomized and personalized – or pseudo-personalized. For the inner-directed person who remains still extant in this period the tendency is rather to systematize and moralize this flow of words” (Riesman, 2001: 20).

Don Quixote is the paradigm of the inner-directed man who claims the right to live in his own world as it discovers new forms of visual linearity and verbal literacy. His remote and unseen goals deal with a value imaginary that is no longer a public legacy. On this count, Machiavelli’s recommendations lead to the rise of the Renaissance diplomat capable of burying emotions and scruples in the name of the interest of the state. Conversely, the invention of typographic technology revolutionizes both visual and acoustic skills of social beings, as Logan points out: “McLuhan used his notion of acoustic space to characterize communication within the oral tradition. He contrasted acoustic space with space that characterized literate communication with writing especially alphabetic writing and then print” (Logan, 1991: 162).

The construction of an acoustic space closely related to the shaping of quantitative print and linear uniformity triggered the decay of the medieval eschatological mindset and the appearance of the Renaissance diplomat, whose social flair is exalted by Castiglione, Della Casa and Aretino. In this perspective, Cervantes seems to react against the rapid fall of the good errant knight, whose endeavor concerns man’s autonomy and freedom. This is why Quixote’s imaginary deals with literacy, education and culture, in a world ruled by a hideous “homogenizing hopper”. While quoting Edgar Z. Friedenberg’s *The Vanishing Adolescent*, casting “the adolescent in the role of Don Quixote” (McLuhan, 2011: 244), McLuhan dwells on the unconscious influence of the school system and mass media messages undermining individual opinion skills: “The inherent conflict that Friedenberg defines so well is at the centre of print technology itself, which isolates the individual yet also creates massive groupings by means of vernacular nationalism” (McLuhan, 2011: 244).

Don Quixote is the perfect embodiment of the feudal man fighting against the outsider created by typographic logic, whose target is linearity, standardization, reproducibility and quantification. The outsider matches the alienated man, inasmuch as he can be situated within integral, intuitive and irrational paradigms. His social achievement depends on the political and communicative opportunities



provided by the new typographic civilization. Quixote's sub-universe collides with the macro-universe shaped by print and perspective, ahead of the scientific revolution supported by Galileo, Descartes and Newton. The clash between reality and unreality revolves around the incessant fluctuations of rational and irrational impulses, as well as referring to the decline of the chivalry imaginary. Hence follows the portrayal of Don Quixote as the forerunner of our media alienation, in an era ruled by symbolic obsolescence and communicative consumption: "The same consumer urge is not only now reaching Europe and England after the Second World War. It is a phenomenon that goes with high-intensity visual stress and organization of experience" (McLuhan, 2011: 245).

#### 4. Conclusion. The outsider and the irrational man

McLuhan's analysis of Cervantes' novel focuses on the close relationship between literature and society, in line with the construction of a literary imaginary connected with the rise of new media, both in modern and post-modern times (Guardiani, 1991). Printing techniques influenced Rabelais, Machiavelli, Aretino, Shakespeare and Cervantes, as McLuhan ponders in reference to the radical changes going on within society and the ever-growing circulation of books, the portability of which triggers that cult of individualism ironically depicted by Cervantes in his novel. From this viewpoint, literature may provide some useful sociological insights (Parini, 2017; Longo, 2016; Szakolczai, 2016; Tarzia, 2003). McLuhan investigates the connection between print culture and the process of mechanization giving rise to our electric modernity. In line with his sociological mindset, McLuhan points out that "the typographic logic created THE OUTSIDER, the alienated man, as the type of integral, that is, intuitive and IRRATIONAL, man" (McLuhan 2011: 241).

In other words, Don Quixote can be interpreted as the prototype of the alienated man featured in the bulk of the twentieth century literary production as he struggles to comply with the contradictions rooted in our consumer society (Latouche, 2012). This is why McLuhan refers to Lowenthal's statements on the effect of such a new visual and homogeneous world. The dynamics of society demand a permanent transformation of reality, since the world has to be perpetually constructed anew through ever-changing symbolic patterns and existential experiences. Hence follows the image of Don Quixote as the inhabitant of his unrealistic sub-universes, as Cervantes depicts him while recreating his obsolete world "even though he does so in a phantastic and solipsistic fashion" (McLuhan 2011: 243).

While taking advantage of the works of Harold Innis and David Riesman and retrieving Lowenthal's insights, McLuhan assumes that the transition from feudal society to print culture entails a new form of decentralized authority from the center to the periphery. Don Quixote appears as the paradigm of the knight coping with the sudden transformation of his world, thus generating an indirect but hilarious parody of a declining civilization. Print technology accelerates the creation of a "new order" pivoted on visual linearity and graphic standardization in order to innovate



communicative strategies. In this sense, Don Quixote's ephemeral struggle is for individual freedom and behavioral autonomy, despite the rapid decay of feudal values. This is why McLuhan (2005c) can juxtapose his alleged folly with modern rationalism fed by science and technology.

Don Quixote can be interpreted as the ultimate barrier against the advance of new forms of social consumption supported by the technical reproducibility of images, contents and thoughts. On this count, both Benjamin and McLuhan have the merit of probing the relationship between media and narration, as Baudrillard cleverly states: "Benjamin and McLuhan saw more clearly than Marx, they saw that the real message, the real ultimatum, lay in reproduction itself. Production itself has no meaning: its social finality is lost in the series. Simulacra prevail over history" (Baudrillard, 1993: 56). To us, Don Quixote is the contradictory simulacrum of a bygone civilization swept away by modernization and technical reproducibility, in line with the rise of the outsider, seen as the type of alienated, intuitive and irrational man.



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