

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village"

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I.

There is a sense in which Nathaniel Hawthorne anticipates Marshall McLuhan. In McLuhan's view, electric technologies were extensions of our nervous system and the world was destined to become an interconnected society through improved technology. In his book *Understanding Media*, he named his vision of this the "Global Village." The idea for this is derived from a passage in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which one of the characters, Clifford, exclaims that the world of matter will become a great nerve with the spread of electricity. In his book *Laws of Media*, McLuhan acknowledges the strong influence from Hawthorne on his own view of the media: "Nathaniel Hawthorne was particularly sensitive to the implications of electric information and not infrequently remarked on them, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*."

At the time of the novel the idea may have sounded fanciful, but today it seems perfectly possible, for signs of it are apparent in electrical developments of media such as facsimile machines, cellular phones, compact discs, high definition TV and the Internet. According to McLuhan, the world is undergoing a vast material and psychic shift from the values of linear thinking in visual space to those of multi-sensory experience in acoustic space. Hawthorne's

writing is rich in ambiguities which produce a holistic view of the word very like McLuhan's multi-sensory, integral awareness and "Tetrad" thinking. This paper inquires into the kind of influence the novel had on McLuhan's work *Understanding Media*.

II. Clifford in *The House of the Seven Gables*

There are few public catchphrases that have stirred up as much discussion as the prediction of "Global Village" of Marshall McLuhan. He is one of the leading prophets of the electronic age. A Canadian born in 1911, McLuhan wrote twelve books and hundreds of articles. The subject that would occupy his career was the task of understanding the effects of technology on the lives of human beings. Concerning the new status of man in the new technological and media-dominated society, he said:

If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness? (McLuhan, 1964: 61)

The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village." (McLuhan, 1962: 36)

In these statements, he affirms the existence of a "global village," which he had been developing all through the early 1960s. In the "global village," our technologies are fundamentally extensions of ourselves. Machines are extensions of the human body. The wheels are extensions of the feet. The telescope is an extension of the eye. A loudspeaker is an extension of the voice. Our machines allow us to reach out beyond the limits of our flesh. And in a

similar sense, these days, electric technologies have developed as extensions of our nervous system. The world is destined to become an interconnected society, a “global village”, through the advantage of technology.

Where did McLuhan get the idea for this prediction?: “The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village.” According to his cooperative researcher, Bruce R Powers, McLuhan obtained a hint from the novel, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) in 1851. The kernel for McLuhan’s vision can be found in chapter 17, “The flight of Two Owls.” Before becoming known as an authority Media Studies, McLuhan had already lecture on the “symbolism” of Hawthorne in Wisconsin University where he began his teaching career. McLuhan generally supported multifaceted and nonlinear thinking in a position he shared with Hawthorne.

Many early readers of Hawthorne complained that he did not come to definite conclusions. Some of his novels have inconclusiveness endings. Most modern critics have found the romance form unsatisfying, while his characters seem insubstantial. But in McLuhan’s view, Hawthorne’s ambiguity is deliberate and can be made meaningful to the suitably prepared modern reader. Modern critics err when they analyze Hawthorne’s works as if they were just novels. They must be read as “romances” as Hawthorne intended. Hawthorne uses ambiguity to reveal the complexity of humanity and the dilemma man faces in achieving a unified view of existence.

Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The House of the Seven Gables* in 1851. This novel includes fantastical occurrences, improbabilities, and attempts to connect the past with the present. The connection between the past and the present is the most pressing of Hawthorne’s concerns in *The House of the Seven Gables*. The story goes like this: The House of the Seven Gables, in New England, was built in Puritan times by the respectable Colonel Pyncheon, on land acquired

by dubious means. He had had the previous owner charged with witchcraft and then bought the property for himself. The Colonel was later found dead with a bloody hand-print on his throat, giving rise to a rumor that the house was cursed. More recently, this pattern of events has repeated itself. The head of the house has been found dead, and his nephew, Clifford, imprisoned for years for his murder, on rather poor evidence. As a result, another nephew, known in the story as Judge Pyncheon, has taken his place as owner of the property. At the start of the narrative, the house has just two other inhabitants: Clifford's elderly and impoverished sister Hepzibah, and a young lodger, Holgrave, who later turns out to be the descendant of the falsely accused original landowner.

Into this household comes a 17-year-old country cousin, Phoebe Pyncheon, who has just been orphaned. Shortly afterwards, Clifford also returns home after his release from prison, a frail and broken old man, but still receptive for ideas of social progress and improvement. Around Phoebe's bright good nature, these wronged characters begin to recover some of their old energies. But Judge Pyncheon tries to repress this, until one night he is found dead. Fearing that Clifford will be accused of murder again, Hepzibah flees with him to the town's new railroad station where they embark, without any fixed destination, on a train—which at that time was still a technical novelty. This is the episode which Hawthorne humorously calls “The flight of two owls.”

Reenergized by this train escapade, Clifford eagerly chats with the conductor and passengers, although his grasp of the technical realities is quite tenuous. In the end, the episode fizzles out, as he and Hepzibah get off, pointlessly, at a desolate station in the middle of nowhere.

Meanwhile, the plot resolves itself without them. It becomes clear that the Judge's death was a natural stroke, suggesting that the same was probably true of the earlier death of Clifford's uncle. The young lodger then declares his love for Phoebe Pyncheon, and reveals his own identity as the ancient heir to the

property, in proof of which he easily retrieves the title deeds from their ancient hiding place.

One highlight of the action is in the ‘The Flight of Two Owls’ (Chapter 17): Hepzibah and Clifford set off on their strange escapade away from the house. They attract a great deal of attention as they arrive at the train station. Hepzibah wonders if this is a dream, but Clifford says that he has never been so awake before. Clifford chats with the conductor on the train, and says that the railroad is destined to do away with outdated ideas of the home and fireside, replacing them with something better. When Clifford talks to an old gentleman, Hepzibah tells him to be quiet, for others will think that he’s insane, but he continues his conversation. The old gentleman becomes vexed by Clifford’s enthusiastic reflections on such modern inventions as the telegraph. Clifford indulges in dreams of social progress for which he is entirely unqualified.

As the escape from ‘the House of the Seven Gables’ brings Clifford to life once more, in this bizarre kind of way, he draws energy from the rush of new experiences. But part of the energy is also due to the way he wants to do away with the past, represented by ‘The House of the Seven Gables,’ which is associated for Clifford with Judge Pyncheon. To Clifford, the house represents the decrepitness of the Pyncheon legacy.

In his talk with the old gentleman, Clifford praises the steam locomotive as the embodiment of modern science.

My impression is, that our wonderfully increased and still increasing facilities of locomotion are destined to bring us around again to the nomadic state. You are aware, my dear sir,—you must have observed it in your own experience, —that all human progress is in a circle; or, to use a more accurate and beautiful figure, in an ascending spiral curve. While we fancy ourselves going straight forward, and attaining, at every step, an entirely new position of affairs, we do actually return to something long

ago tried and abandoned, but which we now find etherealized, refined, and perfected to its ideal. The past is but a coarse and sensual prophecy of the present and the future. (Hawthorne, 1851: 259)

This remark by Clifford is matched by a description in McLuhan's book, *Understanding Media*.

"The medium is the message" means, in terms of the electronic age, that a totally new environment has been created. The "content" of this new environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age. The new environment reprocesses the old one as radically as TV is reprocessing the film. For the "content" of TV is the movie. TV is environmental and imperceptible, like all environments. We are aware only of the "content" or the old environment. (McLuhan, 1964: ix)

"The medium is the message" is no doubt McLuhan's best-known aphorism. Its fundamental meaning is that any communications medium has a far greater impact on us than the content of any communications that the medium may convey. However, his critics and casual readers have often mistaken that for a claim: the content—what it is we read in newspapers or watch on TV—is relatively unimportant. But obviously this cannot be the main point that McLuhan is making. After all, there is no such thing as a medium without content, for if it had no content, it would not be a medium. So, McLuhan prepares another explanation: "The 'content' of medium is always another medium. For instance, "The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print and print is the content of the telegraph."

McLuhan explains "The medium is the message" through the metaphor, "rear-view mirror."

When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the

future. (Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, 1967: 74–5)

The content of any medium is never anything else than a prior medium, taken up from its former wild, invisible state, and brought before us in full view. Not only is the content important, but also it may be the best way of examining a medium and its impact. McLuhan stresses that the content of a particular medium can aid our understanding of media in general. He points out that media suddenly become more visible and more attractive as objects of study when they are superseded by newer media, and become transformed into new content. The rear-view mirror is, like the global village, among McLuhan's easiest to understand and most powerful insights. We move into the future with our sight on the past. The telephone was first called the talking telegraph, the automobile the horseless carriage, the radio the wireless. Even the Internet is a combination and transformation of books, television, and other media such as telephone. McLuhan's notion of the "global village" is itself of course a rear-view mirror, or an attempt to understand the new world of electronic media with reference to the older world of villages.

Thus, with this observation that the "content" of medium is always another medium, McLuhan may be saying that because of the invisibility of any environment (medium) during the period of its first introduction, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has preceded it; an environment becomes fully visible (content) only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world.

This reflection helps to shed light on Clifford's observation quoted above: "While we fancy ourselves going straight forward, and attaining, at every step, an entirely new position of affairs, we do actually return to something long ago tried and abandoned, but which we now find etherealized, refined, and perfected to its ideal," McLuhan describes a similar implication in the preface to *Understanding Media* (Paperback Version):

When machine production was new, it gradually created an environment whose content was the old environment of agrarian life and the arts and crafts. This older environment was elevated to an art form by the new mechanical environment. The machine turned Nature into an art form. For the first time men began to regard Nature as a source of aesthetic and spiritual values. They began to marvel that earlier ages had been so unaware of the world of Nature as Art. Each new technology creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading. Yet the new one turns its predecessor into an art form. When writing was new, Plato transformed the old oral dialogue into an art form. When printing was new the Middle Ages became an art form. (McLuhan, 1954:, ix)

When McLuhan observes that “The machine turned Nature into an art form,” he is referring to a fundamental consequence of the competition between media: new technologies do not so much bury their predecessors as put them upstairs to a position from which they can be admired, if no longer used.

III. Teilhard de Chardin and McLuhan

Hawthorne lived during a time when the American version of Romanticism still pervaded intellectual thought; and he participated in the Transcendental Movement led by Emerson. In this sense, his formative environment was rich in reactions against rational and scientific views of nature. However, unlike many Transcendentalists who saw their connection to nature in individualistic ways, Hawthorne’s view seems to have been a more universal one that connects all parts of nature into one. It is the holistic reaction to “rational and scientific thought” that made Hawthorne (even though he was a Protestant) a figure of enduring constancy as a kind of counterpoint to prevailing moods and

narratives.

In Hawthorne's view, the artist is an individual who sets himself or herself apart from others and, as a consequence, is in turn isolated from the larger society. But in Hawthorne's cultural background, this separation was combined with specifically religious ideals such as "secular calling." For Hawthorne, America, the New Eden, is replete with uneducated citizens antagonistic to the arts and culture. At the same time, there are also characters of another kind like Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables*, who work in new ways or in new media (Holgrave is a photographer), allowing Hawthorne to introduce questions about the way technology influences art in addition of how the artist may feel distanced from his culture and its values. Hawthorne explores the relationship between artists and their surrounding culture, and arrives at larger, more general overview.

When Clifford and Hepzibah finally alight from the train at the end of their 'Flight of Two Owls' (Chapter 17), they are physically and metaphorically isolated, alone in an empty, abandoned town. While chatting with the old man, the ideas that Clifford proposes do not suit him in his spirit; his musings about the future indicate emotions contrary to those of Holgrave. While Holgrave approaches a changed future as a great thing, Clifford feels that there is the sense of chaos and confusion to the future, as if he does not truly understand what he is saying. Clifford is a McLuhan and a Hawthorne.

Those familiar with McLuhan will also know that McLuhan was a Roman Catholic. McLuhan was influenced by the thought of a relatively fringe Catholic paleontologist, theologian and philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955, who, in *The Phenomenon of Man*, spoke of technology creating "a nervous system" for humanity. McLuhan cites this part entirely.

As though dilated upon themselves, they each extended little by little the radius of their influence upon this earth which, by the same token, shrank

steadily. What, in fact, do we see happening in the modern paroxysm? It has been stated over and over again. Through the discovery yesterday of the railway, the motor car and the aeroplane, the physical influence of each man, formerly restricted to a few miles, now extends to hundreds of leagues or more. Better still: thanks to the prodigious biological event represented by the discovery of electro-magnetic waves, each individual finds himself henceforth (actively and passively) simultaneously present, over land and sea, in every corner of the earth. (McLuhan, 1962: 37)

Teilhard de Chardin's view McLuhan cites on the culture of electrical technology matches the remark of Clifford in *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Is it a fact—or have I dreamt it—that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence! Or, shall we say, it is itself a thought, nothing but thought, and no longer the substance which we deemed it! (Hawthorne, 1851: 264)

Clifford is usually calm. Why does he talk with enthusiasm? Clifford has been framed for murder by his vicious cousin, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon. Clifford hates the past or “the old” accompanied by misfortune, so he anticipates “the new” instead of “the old.” He calls the electric telegraph “A spiritual medium.” (264) The core argument of McLuhan—our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve in the whole of mankind—has already appeared. McLuhan has accepted and speaks in *Understanding Media* as follows:

By putting our physical bodies inside our extended nervous systems, by means of electric media, we set up a dynamic by which all previous technologies that are mere extensions of hands and feet and teeth and bodily heat-controls—all such extensions of ore bodies, including cities—will be translated into information systems. Electromagnetic technology

requires utter human docility and quiescence of meditation such as benefits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide. (McLuhan, 1963: 57)

Thus, the chain of Clifford, Chardin and McLuhan has been completed.

IV. Transition of Clifford and “Global Village”

Clifford also speaks of the transition. “Global Village” is made up when the world becomes like the tribe, and we obtain the metaphor, “Global Village”, on the level of the planet. In a time when “Global Village” has been achieved, the rapid transition such as from the fixed house to the mobile dwelling, from substance to spirit, and so on is available in a flash. McLuhan is enlightened by the words Clifford shouts:

Transition being so facile, what can be any man’s inducement to tarry in one spot? Why, therefore, should he build a more cumbrous habitation than can readily be carried off with him? Why should he make himself a prisoner for life in brick, and stone, and old worm-eaten timber, when he may just as easily dwell, in one sense, nowhere,—in a better sense, wherever the fit and beautiful shall offer him a home?”.... It is my firm belief and hopes that these terms of roof and hearth-stone, which have so long been held to embody something sacred, are soon to pass out of men’s daily use, and be forgotten. (Hawthorne, 1851: 260)

The reflection of the transition like this leads us to realizing the meaning of “Angelism” or “discarnatism.” E. Carpenter says that electricity has made angels of us all. In this case, Angels are not in the Sunday school sense of being good or having wings, but spirit freed from flesh, capable of instant transportation anywhere. “Discarnatism” is derived from McLuhan’s “discarnate

man.” McLuhan says:

Discarnate men are as weightless as an astronaut but can move much faster. He loses his sense of private identity because electronic perceptions are not related to place. (Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, 1989: 97)

“Discarnate man” by being spiritual has the godlike attribute of being everywhere at once, which leads to the growth of centers everywhere. The notion of centers everywhere obviously relates the “global village,” McLuhan has got a hint from *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was particularly sensitive to the implications of electric information and not infrequently remarked on them, as in The House of the Seven Gables: “Is it a fact that ... by means of electricity the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence! Or, shall we say, it is itself a thought, and no longer the substance which we deemed it!” When people are on the telephone or on the air, they have no physical bodies but are translated into abstract images. Their old physical beings are entirely irrelevant to the new situations. The discarnate user of electric media bypasses all former spatial restrictions and is present in many places simultaneously as a disembodied intelligence. (Marshall and Eric McLuhan, 1988: 71)

McLuhan recognizes the contributions of artists to human beings ahead of his times. For him artists are prophets. The idea of “Global Village” is also given a hint by the artist, Hawthorne. We have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. The underlying concept of McLuhan’s view of electronic technology is that it has become an extension of our senses. McLuhan suggests is that a new ability to experience almost instantly brings about the effects of our actions

on a global scale, just as we can supposedly do in our physical situations. Thus, “The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village”.

V. “Novel” and “Romance”

The 19th century Hawthorne writes *The House of the Seven Gables* saw the tremendous scientific advancement. Technological revolutions such as telegraph, telephone, railroads, electricity generated a kind of blind faith in the promises of science and technology to solve our ills. The furiously energetic march of progress also engendered the alienation of the individual in the face of social conformity or the religious crisis of faith. At the time, Hawthorne endeavors to restore the traditional religious belief. He admits not only the “progress” amenable to scientific technology but also divine “providence.” The idea of nineteenth-century “progress” persisted is that even religion has the operation of divine laws through unexpected agencies and conflicting events.

Hawthorne’s chief accomplishment was his ability to impress “the idea of original sin upon a nation which would like to forget it. By reminding Americans of the power and influence of original sin, Hawthorne maintained that the first and foremost real reform should be the “moral reform,” and such reform is not possible until one had remembered original sin. This position placed Hawthorne in direct disagreement with the increasingly influential Transcendentalists, whose optimism about human nature had erased sin as a check to man’s appetites and behavior. Although Hawthorne would eventually lose his battle with the Transcendentalists, he believed that the “Progress” in society is possible, but that it must be accompanied with “Providence,” where religious imagination works. His spiritual inspiration scares away a large class

of sympathies. Although his strictly New England atmosphere seems to chill and restrain his dramatic fervor, he continues to be novelist who penetrates or far into individual conscience.

Hawthorne with religious imagination writes his novels in a way cherishing symbolism rather than character, that is, "Romance." Hawthorne distinguished between the novel and the romance in his well-known Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form [Novel] of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former [Romance]—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.

(Hawthorne, 1851: 1, Preface)

Although both "Novel" and "Romance" aim at the grasp of "the truth of the human heart," but the romance achieves its goal by representational means of "the writer's own choosing or creation," while the novel describes "the probable and ordinary course of man's experience." Therefore, writing the "Novel" is restricted to "a very minute fidelity" to man's daily realistic activities. On the other hand, writing the "Romance" can employ the improbable and extraordinary with "a certain latitude." Hawthorne keeps the ideal and the real as his fixed points of reference in determining his artistic distance. Besides, he remarks "Romance" aims at connecting the "past" with "present".

The point of view in which this Tale comes under the Romantic definition

lies in the attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us. (Hawthorne, 1851: 1, Preface)

Hawthorne seeks to create an attitude of reverence for the past, so that men may look backward their ancestry and by corollary look forward to their posterity. In the case of Puritanism, at least the memory of Puritanism, transformed in art, would serve as the new intellectual foundation for New England conservatism. In this respect, Hawthorne keeps a remembrance of the past for the future to come. Apprehension of the past ought to be fundamental to the projecting of any social reform. In fact, he wants to reform Puritanism foremost of social reform, for there is a crucial difference between his Protestantism and his ancestors' Puritanism. The former contains repentance. The latter contains penance. Hawthorne's doctrine of forgiveness requires repentance and asking a pardon from God Himself. In that case, the past, the present and the future are unified into one. In other word, all times come together at the present. As Romance has the attempt to connect the past with the present, it resembles a "rear-view mirror" McLuhan says. From the point of view of reality, for Hawthorne, the essence of reality could not be discovered by scientific materialism, but only human charity.

Hawthorne points out that "Romance" is characteristic of the nature of the past. Hawthorne is unique in the transcendentalists who always break away the past. Hawthorne says that men cannot leave the past so easily. The thought of Hawthorne is obviously similar to McLuhan's in this respect. The "Novel" "consists of rough divided segments without intuition connecting fragments. The "Novel" belongs to the left hemisphere of the human brain is the world of visual world—a world of linearity, connectiveness, logic, rationality, analysis, classification and so on. "Novel's image" is equal to Judge Pyncheon of the characters in *The House of the Seven Gables*. He is very satisfied with the money earned by exploiting his knowledge of laws. The law itself works into

the external world rather than the inner world. He is interested in extra money, dominated by the commercial greedy, and overwhelms the others.

We can contrast between prosaic Judge Pyncheon in the commercialism and poetic Clifford having artistic mood, between “Novel” and “Romance,” between the law and the literature. Hawthorn himself worried about lacking gradually of the imagination for creation for the sake of working for the Custom House. Those who have practical faculty can earn money and get a proper reputation. “Progress” belongs to the left hemisphere of the human brain’s world. McLuhan says:

Because the dominant feature of the left hemisphere is linearity and sequentiality, there are good reasons for calling it the ‘visual’ (quantitative) side of the brain; and because the dominant features of the right hemisphere are the simultaneous, holistic, and synthetic, there are good reasons for indicating it as the ‘acoustic’ (qualitative) side of the brain. The visual space is the result of left-hemisphere dominance, and its use is restricted to those cultures that have immersed themselves in the phonetic alphabet and thereby suppressed the activity of the right hemisphere.... The lineality of the left hemisphere is supported by an alphabet-based service environment of roads and transportation, and by logical or rational activities in social and legal administration. Dominance of the right hemisphere, however, depends upon a cultural milieu or environment of a simultaneous resonating character. (Marshall and Eric McLuhan, 1988: 69–72)

Hawthorne wants to enquire “the truth of the human heart” containing the darkness of the mind, and appeals the importance of imagination. He has desire to go and explore into the human deep inner life. So, he prefers to the “Romance” abundant with imagination in writing the novel. The spiritual forces of good—in particular, the frankness and rejuvenating sunshine of Phoebe embodying

<i>Left Hemisphere (Right side of body)</i>	<i>Right Hemisphere (Left side of body)</i>
<i>Speech/Verbal</i>	<i>Spatial/Musical</i>
<i>Logical, Mathematical</i>	<i>Holistic</i>
<i>Linear, Detailed</i>	<i>Artistic, Symbolic</i>
<i>Sequential</i>	<i>Simultaneous</i>
<i>Controlled</i>	<i>Emotional</i>
<i>Intellectual</i>	<i>Intuitive, Creative</i>
<i>Dominant</i>	<i>Minor (Quiet)</i>
<i>Worldly</i>	<i>Spiritual</i>
<i>Active</i>	<i>Receptive</i>
<i>Analytic</i>	<i>Synthetic, Gestalt</i>
<i>Reading, Writing, Naming</i>	<i>Facial Recognition</i>
<i>Sequential Ordering</i>	<i>Simultaneous Comprehension</i>
<i>Perception of Significant Order</i>	<i>Perception of Abstract Patterns</i>
<i>Complex Motor Sequences</i>	<i>Recognition of Complex Figures</i>

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(The Laws of Media, 68)

“Providence” and “Romance”—score in the end if less than total triumph over the forces of evil, represented in the villainy and false smiles of Jeffery (Judge) Pyncheon embodying “Progress” and “Novel.”

VI. “Acoustic Space” in *The House of the Seven Gables*

There is a scene which Holgrave and Phoebe talking each other in the mysterious moon light. Maiden Phoebe like a sunshine are taught descriptivism by Holgrave, so she does not come to be shining bright, and have to behave consciously through acquiring the habit of thinking without intuition. On the contrary, in this scene, Phoebe is superior to Holgrave. Needless to say, Holgrave is prosaic and Phoebe is poetic.

By this time, the sun had gone down, and was tinting the clouds towards the zenith with those bright hues which are not seen there until some time after sunset, and when the horizon has quite lost its richer brilliancy.... These [The moon's] silvery beams were already powerful enough to change the character of the lingering daylight. They softened and embellished the aspect of the old house; although the shadows fell deeper into the angles of its many gables, and lay brooding under the projecting story, and within the half-open door. With the lapse of every moment, the garden grew more picturesque ... The common-place characteristics—which, at noontide, it seemed to have taken a century of sordid life to accumulate,—were now transfigured by a charm of romance. A hundred mysterious years were whispering among the leaves, whenever the slight sea-breeze found its way thither and stirred them ... It seems to me [Holgrave] that I never watched the coming of so beautiful an eve, and never felt anything so very much like happiness as at this moment. (Hawthorne, 1851: 212–4)

The word “romance” appears above. The effect of Romance makes this scene attractive. There is a shift from a “Visual Space” of daytime to an “Acoustic Space” of evening, which McLuhan emphasizes.

The entire world was in the grasp of a vast material and psychic shift between the values of linear thinking, of visual, proportional space, and that of the values of the multi-sensory life, the experience of acoustic space. (Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, 1989: Preface ix)

The reason why McLuhan also supported Hawthorne’s in the special feature of *The House of the Seven Gables*. The novel has the characteristic of Romance, Acoustic Space and Imagination. Simultaneous acoustic space is a projection of the right hemisphere of the human brain, and is built on holism, the idea that there are many centers instead of a cardinal center. Our culture has nearly completed the process of shifting its cognitive modes from the left to the right

hemisphere of the brain through the electronic technology.

McLuhan saw “Acoustic Space” as the very basis of human communication, injured or at very least damaged by the ascendance of written “linear” modes of discourse, and recaptured by electronic media. Simultaneous understanding or “integral awareness” can be seen in the “Tetrads,” an exploratory probe.

VII. “Tetrads” in *The House of the Seven Gables*

Towards the end of his life, McLuhan and his son Eric embarked on a project to establish frameworks for analyzing media environments. One of the frameworks is “Tetrad.” It consists of four questions:

1. **[ENHANCES] What does it enhance or intensify?**
2. **[OBSOLESCE] What does it render obsolete or displace?**
3. **[RETRIEVES] What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?**
4. **[REVERSES INTO] What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?** (Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, 1988: 7)

This “tetrad” of the effects of technologies is not sequential, but rather simultaneous. All four aspects are inherent from the start, and all four aspects are complementary. That is to say, the “tetrads” are right-hemisphere in character, and have each tetrad comprises two figures and two grounds. ([ENHANCES]: figure/ [OBSOLESCE] ground/ [RETRIEVES] ground/ [REVERSES INTO] figure) McLuhan invented the tetrad as a means of assessing the current cultural shift between “Visual Space” and “Acoustic Space.”

The term figure and ground were borrowed from “gestalt psychology” by the Danish art critic Edgar Rubin. All cultural situations are composed of an area of

attention (figure) and a very much larger area of inattention (ground). McLuhan explains the difference between “Visual Space” and “Acoustic Space.”

It was visual space in its aspect of container that was reflected in thinking of an ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ world. Prior the alphabet there was no ‘outside world,’ no apparent separation of inner and outer, only the metamorphic flux of modes of being.... With the return of acoustic space through the ground of electric technology, the visual forms of detachment and of separation of inside and outside were dissolved. (Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, 1988: 59)

The world of electronic technology is described as “Acoustic Space” which is holistic, spherical, discontinuous, no-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic. It is always penetrated by other senses. On the other hand, “Visual Space” is structured as static, abstract figure minus a ground; acoustic space is a body in motion in which figure and ground transform each other through the power of resonance and interplay. When we think the relationship between figure and ground, McLuhan says like this:

In the order of things, ground comes first and the figures emerge later.... ‘The medium is the message.’ Once the old ground becomes content of a new situation it appears to ordinary attention as aesthetic figure. At the same time a new retrieval or nostalgia is born. The business of the artist has been to report on the current status of ground by exploring those forms of sensibility made available by each new mode of culture long before the average man suspects that anything has changed.” (Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, 1988: 5)

As we consider this novel, Hawthorn plays role the artist above. In the light of “tetrad,” what does the tetrad analysis the novel?

1. **Progress, Novel, Law [ENHANCES]**
2. **Imagination, Providence, right-hemisphere of the brain, Romance,**

literature [RETRIEVES]

3. Electronic technology, Holistic world [REVERSES INTO]

4. Progress. Visual Space, Left-hemisphere of the brain, Linear-thinking [OBSOLESCE]

The reason why Enhances and Obsolesces have “Progress,” is that Progress is apparently enhanced and Providence obsolesces, but the Progress obsolesces in fact. Technology developed and developed, so the science is enhanced. [ENHANCES] But the excessive value to the science brings about the barren mind. The technology has developed, so that electronic technology appears, we gain the “Acoustic Space.” At a glance, the “Visual Space” prospers, but the linear thinking by the left-hemisphere of the brain is on the decline.

The House of the Seven Gables is the story that the progress gradually decays and the providence restore although the providence seems to fall The superficial reading regards Hawthorne’s novel as abundant with ambiguities. Hawthorne restores the weakness and darkness of human beings as the “ground.” As a result of it, “Progress,” “Novel,” and “Visual Space” decline, then the trust to “Providence,” “Imagination,” and “Acoustic Space” is reinforced.

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