

Article

Mind as Medium: Jung, McLuhan and the Archetype

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Abstract: The Greek notion of archetype was adopted and popularized in the context of the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. Marshall McLuhan used the concept archetype as a formal perspective rather than the content of an alleged “collective unconscious”. In his book *From Cliché to Archetype*, the idea of archetype is presented as the ground where individual action is the figure. This article, departing from the notion of archetype, explores some convergences between the thought of Carl Jung and Marshall McLuhan and some of its developments for Media Ecology studies.

Keywords: archetype; Marshall McLuhan; C. G. Jung

1. Introduction

The Greek notion of archetype was adopted and popularized in the context of the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. Marshall McLuhan used the term archetype as a formal perspective rather than the content of an alleged “collective unconscious”. In his book *From Cliché to Archetype*, the idea of archetype is presented as the ground where individual action is the figure. This article relates the notion of archetype in the perspective of Marshall McLuhan and its correlate in the approach of Carl Gustav Jung.

A discussion of McLuhan’s position vis-à-vis psychological theory is followed by a discussion of the notion of archetype. We then turn to the Jungian and McLuhanesque perspectives regarding archetypes, which are considered both in terms of content and form, i.e., in terms of McLuhan’s notion of figure and ground.

2. Marshall McLuhan and Psychology

Throughout McLuhan’s work, there is a concern for the psychological, cognitive and individual effects of technologically mediated environments. Several references are made by McLuhan to the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud’s work [1] and to the work of Carl Jung. McLuhan’s theory of archetypes is discussed in the book *From Cliché to Archetype* [2].

McLuhan was influenced by a number of theorists, writers and artists. He appropriated knowledge from various different fields to develop his creative exploration of the impact of technology on the individual and the society to which they belong.

His use of the psychological concepts of Jung and Freud, among others, is rather freestyle and does not involve a deep study of the theories of these two psychiatrists. His mundane use of the Freudian term ‘unconscious’ is a good example.

The unconscious for Freud is the foundational concept of his whole theory, which was developed throughout his career. For McLuhan, the unconscious/subliminal represents the fact that the ordinary users of media are unaware of its effects. This element plays an important role in McLuhan’s model of the effects of media and technology as in the distinction between figure and ground [1].

Even if later the psychological approach would represent an important part of his theory, McLuhan used the terms subliminal, subconscious and at times unconscious (as is the case in the McLuhan quotes below) as synonyms.

McLuhan argued that electric media created the effect of bringing the unconscious level of the psyche to the surface where it could become conscious.

Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy. But it is strikingly the age of consciousness of the unconscious, in addition. With our central nervous system strategically numbed, the tasks of conscious awareness and order are transferred to the physical life of man, so that for the first time he has become aware of technology as an extension of his physical body. Apparently this could not have happened before the electric age gave us the means of instant, total field-awareness. With such awareness, the subliminal life, private and social, has been hoicked up into full view, with the result that we have “social consciousness” presented to us as a cause of guilt-feelings. Existentialism offers a philosophy of structures, rather than categories, and of total social involvement instead of the bourgeois spirit of individual separateness or points of view. In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin [3] (p. 58).

McLuhan [3] (p. 363) asks, what possible immunity can there be from the subliminal operation of a new medium such as television?

The electric changes associated with automation have nothing to do with ideologies or social programs. If they had, they could be delayed or controlled. Instead, the technological extension of our central nervous system that we can call the electric media began more than a century ago, subliminally. Subliminal have been the effects. Subliminal they remain. At no period in human culture have men understood the psychic mechanisms involved in invention and technology. Today it is the instant speed of electric information that, for the first time, permits easy recognition of the patterns and the formal contours of change and development [3] (p. 388).

McLuhan used the theories and ideas of other scholars freely to compose his unique approach to understanding the effects of media and technology. He regarded all of his ideas as probes or explorations rather than explanations. His personal literary and research style eventually earned him some rather harsh criticism, with accusations by some who claimed his work lacked scientific rigor [4,5]. To develop his own definition of archetype—as ‘unconscious’ or ‘subliminal’—McLuhan quotes from the work of Carl G. Jung, along with Plato, Shakespeare, James Joyce, Northrop Frye, T. S. Elliot and W. B. Yeats.

3. On Archetypes

The word archetype derives from the Latin noun *archetypum*, which is an adaptation of the Greek word *archétypon*, which in the adjective form is *archétypos*. The word is formed from the verb *archein* (beginning, origin) and the noun *typos* (model, form). In ordinary language, the term means “the original form.” In Philosophy, the term archetype was originally deployed in Plato’s works with the meaning of “the perfect example or ideal form.”

The Platonic notion of ‘idea’ refers to a pure mental form, imprinted in the soul before appearing in the world. In this sense, an idea embodies the fundamental characteristics of a thing rather than its specific peculiarities. The prefix *archein* is also related to the idea of commandment and superiority, as in the terms “archbishop” and “archduke”. Thus, literally, the word archetype refers to a process of ruling, of controlling the forms, as a perfect standard and an ideal. Platonic ideas are considered archetypes, as they are the ‘models’ for things existing in the real world. The neoplatonic thinker Plotinus (204 AD) considered the archetypes as the ideas present in God’s mind, the perfect and original model for all things. The adoption of the philosophy of Plotinus by Saint Augustine brought

the notion of archetype to Christianity. In *De deversis quaestionibus*, Augustine speaks of “ideas...which are not yet formed...which are contained in the divine intelligence” [6]. McLuhan’s notion of electric media were admittedly influenced by the Augustinian notion of God, “a power whose center is nowhere and presence is everywhere” [7] (p. 6).

In modern Philosophy, the notion of archetype is employed literally by Francis Bacon and John Locke, referring to it as a ‘model’; the notion of archetype as the ideal or models for thought can also be related to Immanuel Kant’s notion of ‘categories’ and Arthur Schopenhauer’s ‘prototypes’, a significant philosophical influence to Carl G. Jung.

In the late XIX Century, the works of the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt concerning the Greek civilization employ the term archetypes, referred to as ‘primordial images’. This is the sense from which Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung drew one of the paramount concepts of his theory, as we shall see below. McLuhan, in his turn, uses a rather distinct, multidisciplinary framework as a reference to depict his notion of archetype.

4. Archetype as Content: A Jungian Perspective

The early volumes of The Collected Works of Carl G. Jung present some essays with the fundamental ideas for the organization of his work. In 1912, in a paper entitled *Neue Bahnen der Psychologie*, Jung discusses Freud and Adler’s conceptions about the unconscious. In doing so, he elaborates an introduction of his psychology of the unconscious, based on the archetypes of the dream. This study attracted lots of attention from the public. As a result, Jung re-elaborated it over the years, and finally gave it its definitive title *The Psychology of the Unconscious*. In 1928, a second study on the same matter was published under the title *Die Beziehungen zwischen dem Ich und dem Unbewussten* later translated as *The relations between the ego and the unconscious*.

Departing from the notion of primordial images, adapted from Jakob Burckhardt, Jung developed his theory in opposition of the idea that the human psyche is solely built upon a biological body, from birth throughout life, through social and cultural experience. Jung believed that some pressures of evolution could predestinate the individual fates with its archetypes. Jung explains the phenomenon of some figures and motifs repeated around the whole world in identical forms with the idea that we humans have an inherited ability to be as it was in the beginning.

The Jungian notion of archetype is complex and was defined many times throughout Jung’s extensive career. In a letter originally written in 1954, Jung states the controversial nature of the archetype, at once “conservative” and “dynamic”:

Archetypes, in spite of their conservative nature, are not static but in a continuous dramatic flux. Thus the self as a monad or continuous unit would be dead. But it lives inasmuch as it splits and unites again. There is no energy without opposites! [8] (p. 165).

Although Jung claims that archetype is an ability or capacity of the psyche, the term is used as both an entity and a process, with “interchangeable senses”, as McLuhan observed, when defined as below:

The archetype is a psychic organ present in all of us. A bad explanation means a correspondingly bad attitude to this organ, which may thus be injured. But the ultimate sufferer is the bad interpreter himself. Hence the “explanation” should always be such that the functional significance of the archetype remains unimpaired, i.e., that an adequate and appropriate relationship between the conscious mind and the archetypes is insured. The archetype is an element of our psychic structure and thus a vital and necessary component in our psychic economy. It represents or personifies certain instinctive data of the dark primitive psyche; the real, the invisible roots of consciousness. (...) There is no “rational” substitute for the archetype any more than there is for the cerebellum or the kidneys [9] (pp. 109–110).

According to his theory, fantasies do not lay in personal reminiscences but in a deeper layer of unconscious where the original and universal human images lie, which he called *archetypes*.

Using the metaphor of a mind composed of layers, Jung splits the unconscious in two parts, a personal and a suprapersonal or collective one. While the personal (and superficial) unconscious contains memories and repressed perceptions, the collective (and profound) unconscious contains the archetypes, which are autonomous, independent, having a life of their own, and thus are represented in mythic, gnostic or philosophical thinking.

In such a perspective, archetypes are the content of the dark unconscious, figures of universal significance: messages, if we take the mind as a medium. In Jung's terms:

Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of "complexes", the content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of "archetypes". The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them 'motifs'; in the psychology of primitives they correspond to Levy-Bruhl's concept of "representations collectives", and in the field of comparative religion they have been defined by Hubert and Mauss as 'categories of the imagination' (...) My thesis, then, is as follows: In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals [10] (pp. 42–43).

Jung sees the archetypes as the most ancient and universal motifs of human mind. Such human capacity is revealed in the universal repetition, across cultures and ages, of the same mythic ideas. Rituals, myths and religious systems are built upon the archetypes, they are an effect that compels individuals to action [11]. Although, in Jungian terms, the archetype should be seen as a "form" rather than a "content", there are many mentions in Jung's writings regarding the archetype as an "image", a "figure":

The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure—be it a daemon, a human being, or a process—that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure. (...) In each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history [11] (p. 81).

According to Jung, archetypes are active existences of the collective unconscious, which confronts the individual psyche through the personal unconscious. Gods and demons were not identified as projections of mind or unconscious contents but unquestionable realities. At the times of the Enlightenment, when the real existence of God was questioned, and taken as human projections, the end of the gods did not end their psychological function, according to Jung. The devaluation and repression of religious zeal in modern societies impacts the psychology of the individuals. Thus, their unconscious is strengthened, influencing the consciousness through its collective archaic contents, the archetypes. Thus, in a sense, gods still exist as archetypal images within our collective unconscious [11].

5. Archetype as an Old Cliché: A Formal Perspective

From Cliché to Archetype [2] was considered by McLuhan himself as "his most important book since *Understanding Media*" [12]. In this book, McLuhan presents a quite distinct perspective regarding the archetypes, an idea that has been developed before [3]. A quote of Northrop Frye at the very beginning of the introduction presents the starting point for McLuhan's perspective, defining archetype as "a symbol which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary

experience as a whole” [2] (p. 94). McLuhan and Frye were both interested in literature and language; for McLuhan, media is even considered inseparable from literature, as language is a medium, and his definition of archetype-cliché in language studies are equally applicable to media studies.

To McLuhan, there is a relation of interdependence between cliché and archetype, a relation in which the extensive use of a cliché through time turns the old cliché into a new archetype and vice versa, as noted by several authors [13,14]. Defined in this way, as human artifacts produced by recurrence, the archetypes are forms, ground, medium or environment for human action.

Old verbal clichés, like discarded products, form an archetype with the potential to reverse into new clichés. Both old and new clichés are products—fixed, stable, static; the archetype is process—fluid, unstable, dynamic. Conceived in this way, with the notion of retrieval at the core of the process, the interplay of cliché and archetype complement each other and complete McLuhan’s integrated laws of media [15] (p. viii).

The term cliché is related to the mechanical printing activity. Originally, the term cliché refers to a sentence or group of types that were kept together due to being used very often. McLuhan believes that the technology of impressing by means of repetition of fragmented units resulted in the mechanization of the society in its social, educational and political features. With all the technologies that succeeded print, it has become the privileged *locus* of the archetypes. Thus, archetype and cliché are inseparable and related notions, where cliché is an analytical tool for exploring human consciousness. For McLuhan, only the humankind’s first technology can be useful for this purpose, that is language.

McLuhan also considers the cliché-archetype process in its nonverbal forms as “gestures, cadence and rhythm”.

We have taken for granted that there is at all times interplay between these worlds of percept and concept, verbal and nonverbal. Anything that can be observed about the behavior of linguistic cliché or archetype can be found plentifully in the nonlinguistic world [2] (p. 18).

A description of the relation between the verbal and nonverbal cliché or archetype provides the understanding of this complex dynamics:

The most masterful images, when complete, are tossed aside and the process begins anew. Language is a technology which extends all of the human senses simultaneously. All the other human artifacts are, by comparison, specialist extensions of our physical and mental faculties. Written language at once specializes speech by limiting words to one of the senses. Written speech is an example of such specialism, but spoken word resonates, involving all the senses [2] (p. 18).

Being integral and inclusive are features of the spoken word. However, for the specialist, the artifact form is possible to intensify and amplify far beyond the limits of a word or phrase.

The archetype is a retrieved awareness or consciousness. It is consequently a retrieved cliché—an old cliché retrieved by a new cliché. Since cliché is a unit extension of man, an archetype is a quoted extension, medium, technology or environment [2] (p. 18).

Terrence Gordon [2] points out that these three definitions of archetype as retrieval processes emphasize (i) a strategy against the dulling effects of the cliché; (ii) a starting point for the formation of an archetype; (iii) an act of consciousness. McLuhan’s concept of archetype is a three-part definition, which is inseparable from cliché.

To explain the psychological process and its relationship to archetype and consciousness, McLuhan attributes to both, Freud and Jung, indistinctly, the notion of “archetypal unconscious” [2] (p. 19). However, McLuhan recognizes that Frye’s definition is un-Jungian “in suggesting that archetypes are human artifacts produced by much repetition—in other words, a form of cliché” [2] (pp. 94–95). See also Powe [16].

McLuhan considers that the production of some metaphors is applicable to the entire human situation. In giving examples of those metaphors, he sets Darwin, Spencer, Marx, Jung and Freud, side by side. However, he recognizes the “eternal forms” of Plato as the beginning of the Western literate culture:

...the roots of the Western literate culture, beginning with Plato, are in the discovery of the ‘eternal forms’ as an ideal norm. With Plato and the onset of the Euclidean age arose the desire for absolute fixity of geometric form in art and architecture [2] (p. 49).

McLuhan recognizes some limits to the Jungian perspective. He is aware that, although for Jung archetype is a human capacity of the psyche, Jung justified his position by showing a number of examples of similar effects of the archetypes in different cultures and ages. In doing so, Jung reminds “literary critics to consider the archetype as a primordial symbol”.

Jung accounts for his theory of archetypes by means of the hypothesis of a collective race memory, although he is well aware that there is no scientific acceptance for such an idea. His justification, however, for using the concept of a collective memory is based on the recurrence over a wide area of archetypal patterns in artifacts, literatures, arts, etc., apart from the shaky scientific basis [2] (p. 20).

Besides that, McLuhan goes further regarding the metaphysics present in the Jungian position, in this quotation of Lauriat Lane Jr:

The crux of Jung’s statement lies in the phrase “psychic residua”, which seems to imply the presence of inherited characteristics in the mind. Complete scientific proof of such an assumption would be impossible, but it is important to recognize that just as Jung’s psychology is continually on the point of becoming philosophy so this scientific-sounding statement of what Jung feels to be true is essentially metaphysical and must be judged as such [2] (p. 17).

The concept of archetype was popularized by the work of Jung. However, McLuhan created his conception of archetype from a wider background. He drew upon Plato’s “world of ideas”, and employed the literary works of poets and writers such as James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and William Shakespeare as examples to demonstrate his point. According to its index, each of the poets and writers mentioned had an average of 30–40 citations in *From Cliché to Archetype*, while Jung is mentioned only five times.

Jung locates the archetypes in the deepest layer of the mind, at the collective unconscious, as its content. It is a rather metaphysical entity, living inside each individual. McLuhan, on the other hand, refers to a metaphor by W. B. Yeats, the “rag-and-bone shop”, considered as “the home of the archetypes”, and abandoned clichés as the source of new forms. Thus, a cultural artifact, that exists in the world of culture. By the term rag-and-bone shop, McLuhan refers to the fact that old technologies and artifacts do not disappear when obsolete. After discard, these old forms, artifacts and technologies are reunited, and form a common cultural ground available for retrieval [2] (p. 104).

According to McLuhan, Giambattista Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova*, argues that ancient tales and fables are ways to register episodes of technological breakthroughs, as they were also recorded in writing through patterns of speech and sensibility [2] (p. 102). Every new technology, instead of adding to culture, “ruins” whole societies, tossed to the heap or “rag-and-bone shop”, which may be retrieved by future generations. Thus, technological breakthroughs create successive environments, that, bringing back all our past at once, turn everything into the present.

McLuhan provides many examples of processes of retrieval of the archetype.

Examples of retrieval systems occur in the Phoenician alphabet, dictionaries, indexes, computers, tables of engineering standards, etc. What these forms retrieve are archetypes or old processes. It has been observed that civilization has to be recollected by every citizen. Education, whatever guise it takes, is retrieval of the archetype [2] (p. 19).

Northrop Frye named as ‘archetypal criticism’ the work of finding the principles of the mythological framework. For Frye, this technique “awakens students to successive levels of awareness of the mythology that lies behind the ideology in which their society indoctrinates them” (Stingle 4). Although this perspective would not be accessible through our own experience, it expands and transforms this experience, providing, through the poetic model, a model to live by. The convergence of these ideas with the development of McLuhan’s theory is notable, since the cliché is also understood as an act of consciousness:

As the hand, with its extensions, probes and shapes the physical environment, so the soul or mind, with its extensions of speech, probes and orders and retrieves the man-made environment of artifacts and archetypes. A cliché is an act of consciousness: total consciousness is the sum of all the clichés of all the media or technologies we probe with [2] (p. 122).

The peculiar dynamics between cliché and archetype is an example of the early development of the ideas that would lead to McLuhan’s tetrad theory. In his conception of the archetype, McLuhan takes a different path to Jung: to literacy, and from Plato to everyday life.

6. Archetype: Form or Content?

Both Jung and McLuhan made use of the notion of archetype in their work, although, to Jung, this concept orients his work and is the core of his career, his psychotherapeutic technique, and what distinguishes his approach from that of Freud’s. For McLuhan the concept of archetype seems to be a step, used in a specific moment, in developing his later theories. The idea of retrieval, one of the elements of the tetrad theory, has an important probe in the description of the relation between cliché and archetype, on the way the new is made out of the retrieval of the old and abandoned.

Although the notion of archetype or its idea was used in different periods by different authors, Jung treated it as an innate structure, a psycho-physical organ, a morphological construct which arose through human evolution. In his turn, McLuhan understood it as “more than a catalogue of symbols” [15] but inseparable from cliché in a complex dynamics of metamorphosis.

Although the Greek notion of archetype has been popularized in the context of the analytical psychology of Carl Jung, McLuhan has depicted it in a very particular approach. The term archetype defies any definition. For McLuhan, archetype is a dynamic process, instead of the conservative nature of the Jungian conception. While for Jung the archetypes are the contents of the collective unconscious, for McLuhan they are forms defined by repetition and retrieval [17].

Jung describes the archetypes as images, primordial universal images, such as gods and demons; the hero; the great mother or the wise old man [18]. All these figures are articulated to some moral principle, one that would confront the individual, constraining their action. For McLuhan, the archetypes are abandoned forms of language, material to fashion new clichés, independent of any moral concerns. Thus, Jung adds values and moral principles to his notion of archetype, while McLuhan understands it as encultured habits.

Jung and McLuhan were explorers of the unknown territories of the mind and the media. McLuhan and Jung were both interested in understanding the phenomenon of mind and how the past affects the present. McLuhan was interested in understanding how media would affect the human psyche, culture and social interactions. Jung, on the other hand, wanted to understand how his patients would negotiate their psychic symptoms with the primordial images of the past.

However, whereas Jung’s archetype is the figure, available content inside the individual’s mind or in their ‘collective unconscious,’ orienting individuals to action, to McLuhan the idea of archetype is presented as the ground where individual action is the figure. In choosing his path, Jung takes the way to metaphysics while McLuhan develops his ideas in a cultural perspective.

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