

bits of passage

In the *Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan quotes George Poulet's "Studies in Human Time." He does it right after he talks about the Baroque shifting "the periphery of vision." Poulet's passage is about bits of passage and bits of us. While other thinkers and tinkers have said more or less the same, this helps decode McLuhan's itinerary.

"But to renounce the depiction of being for the depiction of Passage is not only an enterprise of unprecedented denudation; it is a task of extreme difficulty. To depict Passage is not simply to seize oneself in an object which fades away and by its own blurring, self appears more distinctly; it is not to paint a portrait of oneself which would be all the more faithful by the disappearance of all the traces of occasions which had led its creation. It is to seize the self at the instant when the occasions remove from it its old form and impose upon it a new one."

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steven pinker

the language instinct

recursion. A procedure that invokes an instance of itself, and thus can be applied repeatedly to create or analyze entities of any size.

These rules embed one instance of a symbol inside another instance of the same symbol (here, a sentence inside a sentence), a neat trick— logicians call it “recursion”—for generating an infinite number of structures.

Human language is an embarrassment for evolutionary theory because it is vastly more powerful than one can account for in terms of selective fitness. A semantic language with simple mapping rules, of a kind one might suppose that the chimpanzee would have, appears to confer all the advantages one normally associates with discussions of mastodon hunting or the like. For discussions of that kind, syntactic classes, structure-dependent rules, recursion and the rest, are overly powerful devices, absurdly so.

how the mind works

Educated understanding is an enormous contraption of parts within parts. Each part is built out of basic mental models or ways of knowing that are copied, bleached of their original content, connected to other models, and packaged into larger parts, which can be packaged into still larger parts without limit. Because human thoughts are combinatorial (simple parts combine) and recursive (parts can be embedded within parts), breathtaking expanses of knowledge can be explored with a finite inventory of mental tools.

the blank slate

A fourth is recursion: the ability to embed one thought inside another, so that we can entertain not only the thought that Elvis lives, but the thought that the National Enquirer reported that Elvis lives, that some people believe the National Enquirer report that Elvis lives, that it is amazing that some people believe the National Enquirer report that Elvis lives, and so on.

The possible combinations quickly multiply out to unimaginably large numbers. Indeed, the repertoire of sentences is theoretically infinite, because the rules of language use a trick called recursion. A recursive rule allows a phrase to contain an example of itself, as in *She thinks that he thinks that they think that he knows* and so on, ad infinitum. And if the number of sentence is infinite, the number of possible thoughts and intentions is infinite too, because virtually every sentence expresses a different thought or intention.



Father William McCabe, the Jesuit who pushed Marshall McLuhan out on a St. Louis stage, wrote about the Jesuit baroque theater. His 1929 Cambridge University dissertation was posthumously published in 1983 as “An Introduction to Jesuit Theater.” An excerpt from the preface follows.

“This is the first work on the Jesuit theater to appear in English; it opens up a chapter in the history of drama whose existence has been almost unknown in these lands, its significance hardly suspected.

But nowhere has anybody attempted the project I undertake at the outset of the present work, of furnishing a general account of the origins, the rise, and the purpose of the Jesuit theater throughout Europe, its actors, dramatists, and audiences, the nature of the plays produced, the sources for a detailed study of the whole movement and of its significance in the history of drama.”

Then later:

“Elsewhere in this theater the employment of miraculous and preternatural elements, the introduction of scriptural, mythological, and medieval allegory called for scenic effects that must have required an amazing amount of stage machinery.

I can best illustrate the whole subject, perhaps, by a play produced at Rome in 1622 for the canonization of St. Ignatius.” p 58.

the canonization of St. Ignatius

Act I, Scene i:

A boy speaks as he drops from a cloud to the stage.

ii: Europe, Asia, Africa, America, borne through the air in chariots, enter from the four corners of the earth.

iv: Here is performed, after Indian fashion, a sportive dance.

II, ii: Ignatius enters the church of the Virgin, and the scene changes to a theater.

iii: Here is a scene of fighting on foot.

IV: The scene changes to the council room of hell.

vi: Enter the Evil Genius of Luther, borne through the air in a chariot.

vii: The scene changes to Montserrat.

IX: A chasm opens, and the Vices come forth one by one, as called.

III, iii: The Church, Michael the Archangel, the Good

Genii of Europe, Asia, Africa, America appear in

the heavens. . . . The church of Montserrat is

opened, and Ignatius is seen within before the

Virgin's altar, hanging up and dedicating his arms.

ix: A sound is heard, and a Specter appears in the air,

surrounded by a great light . . . the Specter disappears.

IV, iv: A cave is disclosed, in which Ignatius is praying.

v: A whistle is heard, and the Moors emerge from ambush.

. . . after a short conflict, the Spaniards feign

flight, to draw the Moors into ambuscade. . . . A

Spanish reinforcement rushes on unexpectedly and

renews the fight. The Moorish leader, seeing his

men outnumbered, challenges the enemy to single

combat. ' One pair engages . . . another pair

engages then other pairs together . . . finally

the Moorish leader falls. . . . Enter a Moorish

army to the rescue. . . . After a brief fight, all

• mingle fighting at close quarters, and so leave the stage.

v

vi: A voice is heard from heaven: “Strike! strike!” . . .

Here a cloud appears, and from the cloud thunder

and lightning. . . . While Ignatius prays, a Chorus

of Centaurs comes on and tries by its dancing to

disturb the Saint in ecstasy. . . . At the Name

JESUS, the Centaurs disappear.

ix: Heaven opens, disclosing singing Angels forging arms.

V, i: Ignatius is borne aloft. . . . Heaven opens and

Angels appear in the clouds.

iii: The scene changes to the royal court. . . . Scene

changes to Montserrat. . . . Scene changes to the

sea, with pirate ships and a passenger vessel.

iv: The pirates attack and take the lone vessel. . . .

Azevedo produces an image of the Virgin Mary,

which all the efforts of the pirates cannot wrest

from his grasp. They cast him overboard with it.

Neptune, bearing in his hand the Virgin's

image, rises from the depths, accompanied by a

Chorus of Playful Waves, some dancing, some

riding on the backs of dolphins. . . . The Waves

dance and crown the image with corals. . . .

Scene changes to Montserrat. . . . Scene changes

to a private room.

v: Scene changes to a field on which are two armies.

vi: The Turkish army advances, while Xavier prays

apart. . . . The fight goes on until Xavier intervenes,

leaving his prayer. . . . The Turks flee,

terrified by the apparition of Ignatius above

Xavier's head while he fights.

vii: Heaven opens, disclosing Christ in the background.

x: A ray of light from heaven falls on the Queen.

xi: The Vices fall into a chasm that opens in the 'I

and do not reappear. . . . Michael the Archangel

with the Good Genii, is borne aloft to heaven.

The four Continents, each in her own chariot,

depart by air routes for home.

The chair of the English department, Father William McCabe, offers Marshall McLuhan a research sabbatical. Recently married McLuhan leaves with his bride for Cambridge, England. On his return to St. Louis McLuhan discovers that Father McCabe is assigned to another Jesuit College, and Bernie Muller-Thym has gone to do service in the U.S. Navy. Father Norman Dreyfus replaces McCabe as department chair. McLuhan and Dreyfus are not compatible. McLuhan and family leave for Canada, not to return. Walter Ong goes off in search of Peter Ramus. Father McNamee finishes his thesis on Francis Bacon. He then takes a St. Louis leave but comes back and eventually becomes chair of the University's English department. Later "the Baroque beckons,"



Another of Father McCabe's courses exposed an entirely new horizon for me. It was a course on the Jesuit theater as it had developed at St. Omers, a Jesuit school on the continent for English Catholic students during the years of persecution in England. It revealed to me for the first time what an important part the Jesuits played in the cultural life of the continent before the suppression. The course was the fruit of Father McCabe's doctoral dissertation at Cambridge. He showed that the theaters were an integral part of an education in the traditional Jesuit collegium. They centered specifically on the annual production of a spectacular dramatic performance, which sometimes involved most of the students in the college and many of the city population. It was the duty of the rhetoric teacher to write the text of the play and to oversee its production. The settings for these plays were elaborate, demanding the work of expert designers in the baroque manner.

Andrea Pozzo was a Jesuit brother and a world-famous theorist on perspective, as well as an accomplished baroque artist himself. Among other things, he designed the fabulous baroque fresco St. Ignatius in Glory on the ceiling of the San Ignazio Chapel of the Roman College. He devoted some of his time to designing sets for the spectacular Jesuit theater productions. The performances included musical accompaniment and formal dance, so training in both areas was part of the curriculum in the pre-suppression Jesuit schools. I was to learn later how completely involved the early Jesuits were in promoting the arts. They commissioned churches all over Europe designed in the elaborate baroque style, so much so that baroque is sometimes called the Jesuit style. The Jesuits certainly did not invent it, but they used it so extensively that it became identified with them.

Fr. Maurice McNamee, "Recollections In Tranquility"

a posse dissolves, more passage

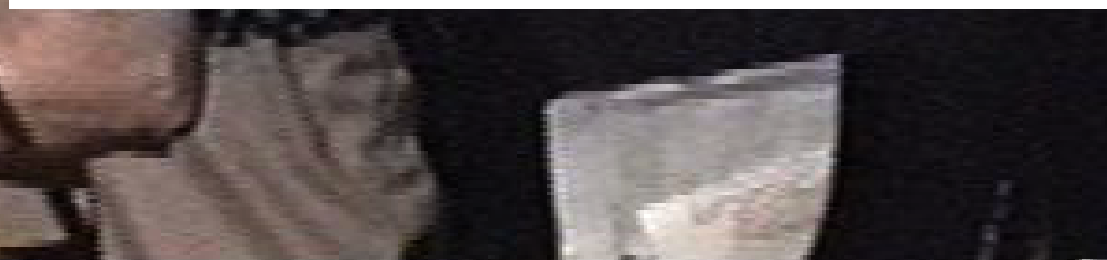
and McNamee becomes an art historian. He publishes, curates and honors a family of glaziers. McNamee traces much to Father McCabe, the Jesuit who set the passage. This is from Father McNamee's autobiography "Recollections In Tranquility."



The exhibition ran from February 19 to May 15, 2010. It was an overview of Baroque churches found in Italy, Czech Republic, Mexico, Austria and the United States. The venue was a place once mocked by an art critic for off sync sight-lines, cheap parquet floors, and small fussy spaces. It was the Sheldon Gallery.

Included in the exhibition were more than thirty five photographs from the book, "The Jesuit Influence on Baroque Architecture." The book was by Father McNamee. The exhibition was in his memory. Father McNamee died in 2007. He was ninety-eight. When he died, Father McNamee was completing his survey of baroque church architecture.

Father McNamee and those Catholic boys were on to something. But the exhibition missed it. It's not found in pictures of big relics. It's off in the staging notes, in the margins. It lies somewhere in the tableaux that mark passage. It's out there on the set that blends our tools and ourselves.



tools and selves

