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"Vanishing Points at the Center, Edge, and End of *The Known Universe*"

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Note: The author has the six-minute film, *The Known Universe* (2010), on a laptop. If possible, he would like to screen the film as part of the paper presentation.

(<http://www.amnh.org/news/2009/12/the-known-universe/>)

"Space Telescopes and Social Media: Electronic Consciousness Extended, Overheated, and Reversed?"

Angela Cirucci, MA

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"Roaming the Cosmos: Explosion and Implosion in the Electronic Consciousness?"

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ABSTRACTS

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COSMIC MCLUHAN: SPACE AGES, SPACE TELESCOPES, SPACESHIP EARTH

At the end of his 1969 interview in *Playboy*, Marshall McLuhan was asked if he was pessimistic or optimistic about humanity's future. After describing his pessimism, McLuhan concluded with an expression of his optimism:

"I feel that we're standing on the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos. I have a deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depths of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe.

McLuhan's utopian conclusion was expressed at the penultimate moment of the "space age," the moment between Apollo 8 and Apollo 11. 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's space flight and President Kennedy's "moon speech" that launched the Apollo program. In 2011, humans are living in a very different kind of "space age" — we extend our electronic consciousness deep into outer space and cyberspace. We have extended Voyager, Hubble, and Kepler into deep space, while we have created Google, Facebook, and Wikipedia in cyberspace. In these space ages, we have mapped billions of galaxies with space telescopes and mapped Spaceship Earth within Google Earth.

Drawing from McLuhan's key ideas, this speculative panel will explore the parallels between the "space age" in outer space and cyberspace? What is the "message" of the space telescope? Are there metaphysics that connect the big bang and "media implosion"? Has our electronic consciousness "overheated" with the space telescope and effected a "reversal" that is social media? What does it mean that media technologies have removed Spaceship Earth from the center of the universe, peered to the edge of the universe, and mapped the known universe?

PAPER 1

Vanishing Points at the Center, Edge, and End of *The Known Universe*

In the six-minute film *The Known Universe* (2010), scientists at the American Museum of Natural History have mapped the cosmos and uploaded it in cyberspace, where it is "scientifically rendered for all to see" (<http://www.amnh.org/news/2009/12/the-known-universe/>). Like *Powers of Ten* (1968) by Charles and Ray Eames (<http://www.powersof10.com/>), *The Known Universe* features a journey to the edge of the observable universe, with Spaceship Earth disappearing into the vanishing point at the center of everything. Drawing from McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964) and *Through the Vanishing Point* (1968), this paper will speculate about possible meanings of this film and what it reveals about: the space ages, space telescopes, and the power of media technologies to peer to the edge of the universe, model the end of the universe, and remove humanity from the center of the universe ... only to return us again ... through the vanishing point.

PAPER 2
**Space Telescopes and Social Media:
Electronic Consciousness Extended, Overheated, and Reversed?**

In the 1969 *Playboy* interview, Marshall McLuhan hoped that “man’s consciousness can be ... enabled to roam the cosmos.” Since McLuhan’s interview, humanity has extended its electronic consciousness deep into outer space and cyberspace. Is there a profound parallel between space telescopes and social media, between Hubble and Facebook? Can this parallel be explained by McLuhan’s notion of media “overheating” and triggering “reversals”? Consider the following parallels: Apollo 8 captured the Earthrise image during the same month that hypertext made its public debut (December 1968) and the Hubble Space Telescope completed the Ultra Deep Field the month before the launch of Facebook (February 2004). This paper explores these parallels (and others) to suggest that cyberspace and social media represent reversals triggered by space images (Earthrise) and space telescopes (Hubble) in the quest to return humans to the center of the universe, even if it is mediated.

PAPER 3
Roaming the Cosmos: Explosion and Implosion in the Electronic Consciousness?

In the 1969 *Playboy* interview, Marshall McLuhan poetically suggested that electronic media would break geographical boundaries, usher in a new era of global consciousness, and liberate our minds to “roam the cosmos.” In 2011, our electronic consciousness now encloses the entire planet and extends into deep space — thousands of kilometers above Spaceship Earth, satellites are transmitting signals to the ground stations all over the world, while space telescopes extend the human antenna to the faraway galaxies. We are living amidst a 24/7 culture aglow with electronic information, a media culture simultaneously experiencing explosion and implosion. Drawing from McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1964), this paper will explore media explosion and implosion in relation to space telescopes, the big bang, and the effects of the deep desire for our electronic consciousness to “roam the cosmos.”