

REVIEW ESSAY

Marshall McLuhan: Double Agent

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MARSHALL MCLUHAN began as a literary scholar, an English professor, a free-roving speculative intellectual. His writings were to be found in the best intellectual quarterlies. The range of his erudition and the brilliance of his ideas were beyond cavil.

His first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, published in 1951, consists of 50 glosses on texts taken from the mass media, nearly all advertisements from magazines. The glosses are charged with intelligence, but also with moral outrage. "That man counts himself happy today whose school training wins him the privilege of getting at once into the technological meat grinder. That is what he went to school for. And what if he does have the consistency of hamburger after a few years? Isn't everybody else in the same shape? Hamburger is also more manageable than beef cuts." In 1962 he published *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. The book is the best of his three for several reasons. In it he contemplates such literary texts as *Don Quixote*, and the notions these texts stimulate in him are a good deal more interesting than the notions provoked by, say, the table of contents of *The Reader's Digest* for August, 1947 (one of the texts glossed in his first book). It employs his scholarship coherently; at least a fourth of it consists of quotations from other speculative scholarly intellectuals of the first order, so that you have the reassuring feeling that McLuhan is adding to a substantial body of intelligent opinion rather than exploding on his own. In it, he also cleared his prose of his earlier too easy tone of moral outrage. ("Value judgments have long been allowed to create a moral fog around technological change such as renders understanding impossible.") Perhaps most important, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* he contained the messianic fervor which he later gave way to. The ideas (and a lot of the examples) are much the same as in the first book; his moral intentions are unmistakable ("Is it not possible to emancipate ourselves from the subliminal operation of our own technologies? Is not the essence of education civil defense against media fall-out?"), and while his tone is often prophetically arrogant ("Cultures can rise far above civilization artistically but without the phonetic alphabet they remain tribal, as do the Chinese and Japanese."), what he intends to accomplish in this book is still, for him, modest. "A few decades hence

it will be easy to describe the revolution in human perception and motivation that resulted from beholding the new mosaic mesh of the TV image. Today it is futile to discuss it at all." (Two years, not two decades, later, in his next book he discusses this subject at great length.) One result of the relatively calm qualities of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is that, when he drops one of his idea-bombs, it has a more or less rational context to qualify it, to give it meaning, and it does not lose its distinctiveness by being only one of dozens of block-busters scattered about promiscuously. "The unconscious is a direct creation of print technology, the ever-mounting slag-heap of rejected awareness." An idea like that needs room to blow up in, lots of pages on both sides to cushion its effect in the reader's mind. This idea is not given nearly enough room, but it gets some; and anyway the book isn't boobytrapped with so many loaded notions but what you can manage to get through it in one piece, if you're lucky.

Then in 1964 came *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Scholarship dwindled, messianism magnified, and the book sells like crazy. Marshall McLuhan has become a power in the land. There are a good many intellectual messiahs among us these days, none of them very impressive; Norman O. Brown, for example, is faddish. But McLuhan is in my opinion much the most powerful. Brown's nostalgia for Innocence (polymorphous perverse sexuality for everybody), free from the incursions of the Devil (inhibition), is hardly worth mentioning except as one more instance of Rousseauistic utopianism. That he has a following is mildly interesting, but I doubt that his teachings will lead to anything much graver than programmatic fondling, than which we have more disturbing prospects now before us; besides, it's good material for satire. McLuhan's teaching, however, is radical, new, animated by high intelligence, and capable of moving people to social action. If he is wrong, it matters.

IT IS not possible to give a rational summary of McLuhan's ideas, for two reasons: the attitude and tone of his writing is at least as important as the ideas themselves, and to systematize these ideas, even in outline, would be to falsify their nature and impact. His writing is deliberately anti-logical: circular, repetitious, unqualified, gnomic, outrageous. "It was thanks to the print that Dickens became a comic writer." Absurd! Still, maybe there's something to it? It's worth thinking about at least. — Good McLuhan.

Though his ideas do not compose a system, they are a recognizable complex. They are about the ways in which the media — a term he stretches until it includes language and technology — extend and alter our means of perception and communication and thereby affect our nature. In his earlier writings, he, the good English professor, was appalled by what he observed in the mass media. But gradually he came to believe that the vulgarity, immorality, and imbecility which characterize so very much of what the media (apparently) communicate to the masses are really of secondary importance. "The

medium is the message." That is to say, what is communicated has much less effect on us than the means by which it is communicated. For example, he attributes to the introduction of movable type a "galaxy" of changes in Western man's consciousness, making it possible for us to act without reacting and thereby engendering extreme specialization of social function and a sort of cultural schizophrenia; his argument in support of this thesis is formidable, illuminating albeit extreme, and all his own. He attributes equally extensive changes to the electronic media, especially TV; in gauging the effect of TV on our nature, he says, the fact that TV images are made mosaically and simplify their subjects to cartoons is incomparably more important than whether the program content is intelligent or stupid, in good taste or bad, honest or meretricious. His TV argument is as brilliant and original as his movable-type argument, and it stirs one to thought about a subject which needs to be thought about. For this one is grateful to him, as one is grateful for many isolated insights. But one is not grateful for the argument as a whole; pretending to be a forecast based on solid fact, it is mostly a wishful prophecy deriving from apocalyptic vision.

Things are changing so fast, he says, that we must control the media right now, not a moment to lose, if they are not to destroy us:

The mark of our time is its revulsion against imposed patterns. We are suddenly eager to have things and people declare their beings totally. There is a deep faith to be found in this new attitude — a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being. Such is the faith in which this book has been written. It explores the contours of our own extended beings in our technologies, seeking the principle of intelligibility in each of them. In the full confidence that it is possible to win an understanding of these forms that will bring them into orderly service, I have looked at them anew, accepting very little of the conventional wisdom concerning them.

Exactly how these forms are to be brought into "orderly service" is never made clear. The omission of this *how* becomes enormously important: we are being altered by TV and the other electronic media; all we have to do is to control them (but *how*?) in order to achieve the wholeness we have long lacked.

It is easy to see why McLuhan is listened to so eagerly: with the highest of intellectual credentials, he sounds like a Future-salesman assuring us that there are great days ahead and that what seems to be so terrible now arises only from resistance to change. What if admen do use TV as a way to spread lies and distortions and idiocy? It doesn't matter much anyway: the medium is the message, and a medium is neither moral nor immoral. All in our culture are being changed by TV, those who don't watch as well as the addicts, so why not watch? Don't resist, don't be obsolete before your time, move with the age. In plain words, Progress, with Utopia in view. An electronic Chiliasm. The Millenium now.

In itself, McLuhan's vision matters little more than Norman O.

Brown's. It is not hard, really, to say, "I'm for civilization, growing up, heterosexual love-making with and without orgasms, cities, and language," then shove those two mantics into their earthly paradises and lock the gates on them. But McLuhan is carefully listened to by admen (who never expected it would be an English professor that would justify them!), and he has followers in education, some of whom are influential. Two that I have met are Sister Jacqueline, President of Webster College in St. Louis, and Father Walter Ong, professor of English at the University of St. Louis, where McLuhan taught for seven years. Sister Jacqueline is a very active member of a committee which advises the Office of Education and the President. This committee is under the chairmanship of Jerrold Zacharias, the physicist in good part responsible for the reforms in the teaching of physics and mathematics in the schools, and it is now engaged in devising experiments for the improvement of every sort of teaching. One subcommittee consists of writer-teachers; it divided into conservatives like me who believe that the schools can and should primarily be concerned to teach writing and reading, and progressives who believe that the schools should build upon the children's own oral language, each child making a tradition of himself, and should use all possible electronic audio-visual aids. Two of the progressives are the novelists John Hawkes and Albert Guerard, Jr., who are presently engaged in an oral-tradition experiment at Stanford under a grant from the Office of Education. The conservatives proposed no experiments, certainly no electronic ones, but smaller classes and more teachers, extra training for the teachers, and better texts; they were shunted aside. There are a good many other progressivistic, Rousseauistic, McLuhanite innovators in education now, churning out notions. We shall be hearing a lot from and about them. They accept, or agree with, McLuhan's view: "We are entering the new age of education that is programmed for discovery rather than instruction. . . . We would be foolish not to ease our transition from the fragmented visual world of the existing educational establishment by every possible means." This idea sounds fine, and it would be fine, if one could just ignore the complex of ideas which it is part of, and the narcosis which is their goal.

MY contention is that McLuhan has become a double agent. He originally went out among tribalizing Media as a spy from civilization. (Spy is mine, but the tribal-civilization dichotomy is his, and useful.) But he stayed there too long; in Blake's words, which McLuhan tirelessly quotes: "We become what we behold." Now, in his last book and in his lectures since then, he continues to be an agent reporting back to civilized (literate, literary) people what the tribes are up to; but he also functions among us as an agent of the Media, proclaiming the destruction come and to come. To support this charge that he is a double agent, let me cite two statements he made before a meeting at the P.E.N. international conference in New York in June, 1966. Challenged by the critic John Simon with having deserted literature for advertising and TV, he said that, on the con-

trary, he saw it as his mission to save literature from the media. He also said he did not believe a lot of the ideas he threw off; he was using them to "probe the environment." However, six months before, in the grand ballroom of the Waldorf, he addressed (for a star fee, I am told by a man who sells advertising and who was there) an assemblage of business and advertising executives. He did not tell them he was probing the environment or saving literature from the media. He told them pretty much what he had already said in *Understanding Media*. A sincere double agent: both sides are right. He often speaks, quite plausibly, of "point of view" as being a result of print and of how he is true to the electronic age because he writes mosaically. No fixed point of view? Why shouldn't one be working for both sides at once? The only reason I can think of why one shouldn't is neither mechanical nor electronic but moral, and though McLuhan refuses to fog himself up with moral concerns, he can't stop me from applying moral criteria to him. I am civilized and maybe I'm foggy, but I don't want either myself or my world to be retribalized. Tribalization may be inevitable, as McLuhan says, though I doubt it. But whether it is inevitable or not, and whether he is sincere or not, I do not like defectors. He is not an open enemy. He is not even an ally who sneakily opens the gates of the city to that enemy. He is an ally who sets about to persuade *me* to open the gates, using the arguments that our common enemy is stronger than we and bound to win, that we have terrible faults which succumbing to our enemy may cure if we handle him right (but *how?*), and besides the enemy can't help being barbarous, it's the environment he lives in, he's bringing this environment with him, it's irresistible and will get us, no matter what.

I wish I could confound him with erudition, but since that would require an extensive knowledge of history (both political and cultural), economics, sociology, philosophy, literature, psychology, and anthropology, to say nothing of a really exhaustive knowledge of the history and practice of technology, and since I have nowhere near the scholarship for the task, I am perforce content to write a short essay instead of a monograph and to cite one instance of an error in a subject I know well, the one standing for the many. McLuhan writes:

In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, which is almost completely devoted to both a psychic and social study of communication, Shakespeare states his awareness that true social and political navigation depend upon anticipating the consequences of innovation.

The statement in the which-clause and the one in the main clause are both untrue as they stand, and by the time they had been modified into truth they would be unrecognizable. (It is obvious that I think his famous message, "the medium is the message," is only a partial truth; in the language media, at any rate, the message too is part of the message.) Not only is his interpretation of *Troilus and Cressida* untrue, but the five lines he quotes in support of his interpretation do not in fact support it.

The providence that's in a watchful state
 Knows almost every grain of Plutus' gold,
 Finds bottom in the uncomprehensive deeps,
 Keeps place with thought, and almost like the gods
 Does thoughts unveil in their dumb cradles.

Of course, like other thinkers, McLuhan could have quarried Shakespeare for ideas and expressions of attitudes to offer in evidence for his own thesis. Instead, he inserts, with monomaniacal intrusiveness, his own idea into this play, attributes the idea to Shakespeare, and claims that the whole play is about that idea. In this he is like a psychological nut who sees *Hamlet* as a study of the Oedipus complex or a linguistic nut who can't see the poetry for the morphemes. A few such extravagances in a book don't matter much, but *Understanding Media* offers an accumulation of errors — distortions, contradictions, projections, simplifications, limit-smashings — so considerable that finally one says, "No, I don't trust ideas which have this infirm a foundation." McLuhan-civilized used to offer evidence which supported his insights; but McLuhan-barbarian does not deign to answer critics who point out the errors which riddle his prophecies. The arrogance is the message.

I ALSO wish I could confound him rationally, by refuting his complex of ideas. But the complex is repetitive, "mosaic," hortatory, apocalyptic, as impervious to the discriminations of logic and common sense as to the corrections of scholarship. Worst of all, it is self-justifying. If you apply logic to it, he disposes of you by saying that you are a print-formed mind who has been made obsolete by Hume and electricity. If you say man is being changed all right but not so drastically or so fast as he maintains, he counters by telling you to wake up, you are still in the nightmare of print-induced unconsciousness, "consciousness will come as a relief," and he quotes *Finnegans Wake* at you (*he* understands it, *you* don't), saying that he takes his prophecies from the "radar feedback" of great art since great art constitutes a sort of "early warning system" for society. If you judge his ideas morally, he says he is not prescribing but describing. This statement may be valid intellectually but it is not valid emotionally, and it is certainly not true of McLuhan's own practice. In *Understanding Media*, he describes less than he prophesies, and what he admonishes us to do manages to be at once vague, capitulatory, and appalling.

The last sentence of the book is an opinion — a valuable opinion — expressed as a truth: "Panic about automation as a threat of uniformity on a world scale is the projection into the future of mechanical standardization and specialism, which are now past." But the sentence before this one betrays the Reader's Digesty sentiment that *really* we are all creative and mass leisure will release our creativity: "The social and educational patterns latent in automation are those of self-employment and artistic autonomy." Pardner, when you say that, laugh. He substitutes, and his rhetoric urges us to substitute, electricity for divine grace: ". . . since with electricity we extend our

central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience. . . . We can now, by computer, deal with complex social needs with the same architectural certainty that we previously attempted in private housing." Finally, having put his trust in consciousness, he makes it clear, at the end of the chapter on "The Spoken Word," what the new, electronically expanded consciousness is good for.

Electric technology does not need words any more than the digital computer needs numbers. Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. . . . Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. The condition of "weightlessness," that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.

Maybe this is one of those idea-clusters he doesn't really mean; maybe he is just probing the environment with it. Well, as part of the environment, let me respond: I don't like the idea (I don't like being probed with it either). The electronic heaven-on-earth of his vision is a world village of mute mindlessness, a parody of harmony and peace because the possibilities of disharmony and conflict have been lobotomized. He wants, and wants us to want, to turn most of the work of our minds over to the computers. I know — even with my foggy, unexpanded consciousness I know — that there are disadvantages to being human. But at least it's interesting, it's various. I'm for going on with it.