Marshall McLuhan

*Understanding Media*

The importance of *Understanding Media* has nothing to do with worth. Marshall McLuhan is now a power in more than one land, and not only as Director of the Centre for Culture and Technology at Toronto. Since a great many people are concerned about the effects of TV, films, advertisements and the press, they will turn more and more to a praised expert. And there is, too, a market for heady prophecies, especially those which skilfully and at the last moment substitute a sermon for a forecast. Like Jacques Barzun, Mr McLuhan has the suspenseful air of being about to lift the veil. Does Telstar bode? Yes, indeed, and we may expect (excitement mounts), we may expect that

the time factor in every decision of business and finance will acquire new patterns. Among the peoples of the world strange new vortices of power will appear unexpectedly.

'Unexpectedly' is about right, for all the help we actually get from Mr McLuhan's clutch of crystal balls. The car has altered everything, 'and it will continue to do so for a decade more, by which time the electronic successors to the car will be manifest.' Nostradamus redivivus? A reader who crosses Mr McLuhan's palm with two guineas may feel gullled.

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Three themes cohabit, not very fruitfully. First: electronics and ‘electric speed’ are different in kind from the mechanical (which is linear, typographic, uniform and repeatable). Our present culture partakes of both. The mechanical or typographic culture necessitated sequence, fragmentation and specialisation; but the new electronic culture ‘retribalises’, makes the world a village, and is organically instantaneous.

Man can now look back at two or three thousand years of varying degrees of mechanisation with full awareness of the mechanical as an interlude between two great organic periods of culture.

The second theme is ‘The Extensions of Man’:

Whereas all previous technology (save speech, itself) had, in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system itself, including the brain.

Third:

Political scientists have been quite unaware of the effects of media anywhere at any time, simply because nobody has been willing to study the personal and social effects of media apart from their ‘content’.

These are important themes, but they are altogether drowned by the style, the manner of arguing, the attitude to evidence and to authorities, and the shouting.

Any medium has an effect qua medium, over and above its content. To have said so would have been to have written a sadder and a wiser book (and a shorter one). But Mr McLuhan’s contempt for people who attend to the ‘content’ leads him to deny that content plays any part at all. ‘The medium is the message,’ he intones again and again. ‘The effects of technology’—and by technology he means all ‘extensions of man’—‘do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.’ If he had said ‘do not occur only at the level of opinions’—but no, for him the sole effect is that of the medium itself. Literacy creates individualism, and ‘this fact has nothing to do with the content of the alphabetised words.’ ‘The effects of radio are quite independent of its programming,’ TV creates ‘total involvement in all-inclusive nowness’, and ‘this change of attitude has nothing to do with programming in any way.’

All of which means that Understanding Media cuts off its extension of man to spite its face. How can Mr McLuhan possibly use the medium of the book (typographic, linear, fragmented) in order to speak in this way about the electronically instantaneous? On his own terms, a book cannot but enforce the typographical attitudes which he insists are cramping Western man. If his arguments are true, how silly to annul them by using a medium which has no option but to annul them.

He wriggles in this unmentioned predicament, and does his best to escape by abandoning all the sequential virtues of a book. He says the same thing on every page, and repeats whole chunks when he feels like it—which is perhaps one kind of instantaneous. He praises the Eastern (‘oral’) mode of thought: ‘The entire message is then traced and retraced, again and again, on the rounds of a concentric spiral with seeming redundancy.’ But if this ‘oral’ tradition could be incorporated in a book, his arguments would all collapse. The attempt may be pluckily preposterous, but the outcome is not just ‘seeming’ redundancy. The moral position, too, is shaky, and not even the quotation from Pope Pius XII about media quite manages to shore it up. Mr McLuhan may insist that he is withholding all value judgments when studying these media matters, but in fact his terms are about as neutral as a bigot. Who will be found to speak for literacy (which has ‘fragmented’ and ‘mutilated’) when the electronic culture is described in these terms—humble involvement and deep commitment, participation, heightened human awareness and unifying the life of the senses? ‘Contemporary awareness had to become integral and inclusive again, after centuries of dissociated sensibilities’—does that withhold value judgments? And is it an act of neutrality to give a chapter to each of 26 media, but no chapter to the theatre?

Very well—people were wrong to ignore the nature of a medium. But that doesn’t beautify the airy hauteur to which the arguments rise
whenever they confront facts, earthy political facts. Possibly radio does inevitably inflame, and TV does cool, but the authorial tone is too epigrammatically Olympian. 'Had TV occurred on a large scale during Hitler's reign he would have vanished quickly. Had TV come first there would have been no Hitler at all.' Vanished? Like a Walt Disney ogre? So confident a magic wand does not like the fact that there are facts. Can we be quite so sure that Nazi TV would have had no choice but to intervene so coolly and so effectively? Is 'content' (even anti-semitic content) really a matter of total indifference in comparison with 'the medium proper'? Mr McLuhan may perhaps be right, but Hitler seems to me a subject where too serene a confidence in one's own theories can easily look unfeeling. After all, there are those of us who would have traded all of Pope Pius's words about mass media for just a word or two about the massacre of the Jews.

Mr McLuhan's confidence, quite without irony, sees the computer as a type of the Holy Ghost: 'The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity.' So much for greed, crowding, hunger, and all the hard facts which make universal understanding and unity a matter of intractable things as well as of language and media. When Mr McLuhan invokes his Pentecost, there is no doubt about the mighty rushing wind, but where are the tongues of fire?

It seems that we have been fools, but now at last we will be put right about it all, though our patient teacher can't quite prevent his eyelid from drooping disdainfully. 'It is not the increase of numbers in the world that creates our concern with population,' rather it is 'our electric involvement in one another's lives'. Our 'concern' may well have been pricked by the media, but it is not entirely evolved from them, since there remains the grimly subjective fact of the increasing population, a fact which to any man who wants to live as something more than 'a student of media' is in itself a cause of concern. Could it be that Mr McLuhan averts his eyes from the fact because the Catholic Church wishes it weren't a fact? When the facts would be embarrassing, Mr McLuhan passes by on the other side. It seems that 'literate man' is a warped creature, 'quite inclined to see others who cannot conform as somewhat pathetic.' And then, without a pause: 'Especially the child, the cripple, the woman, and the coloured person appear in a world of visual and typographic technology as victims of injustice.' But in this world, the world of facts as well as of media, coloured people do not merely appear (thanks to tricky typography) to be victims of injustice, they are such. Not every single individual, of course, but quite enough for Mr McLuhan's enlightened detachment to get tarnished. He long-sufferingly cut-tuts—how naive of people to be upset by circumstances, instead of realizing that it is all just the built-in preconceptions of media.

Media, apparently, and not moral convictions, get things done: 'the real integrator or leveller of white and Negro in the South was the private car and the truck, not the expression of moral points of view.' Notice 'was', as it were, all thing of the past, so that now the historian can bask in equanimity. Notice, too, that it isn't said that the truck was in the end the most effective or most important integrator or leveller—no, it was 'the real' one, which leaves 'moral points of view' (a prettily placid piece of phrasing) as merely unreal. As if there weren't enough people willing to be told that justice in the South (a) has been achieved, and (b) is no moral concern of theirs, without our author handling them warrant (don't worry, the truck'll change all that). This may all be unwitting, in which case it is the consequence of Mr McLuhan's furious rebound. Since everybody else will talk about nothing but 'content', he will talk about nothing but media—nice, neutral, omnipotent media.

There is a similar stoniness when he discusses 'labor-saving' devices, toasters or washing-machines or vacuum cleaners: 'Instead of saving work, these devices permit everybody to do his own work. What the 19th century had delegated to servants and housemaids we now do for ourselves.' Oh no we don't. When we switch on the automatic washing machine, Mr McLuhan and I are not in any meaningful sense doing the same work as servants used to do. There is something unimaginative about a dearness that is so very interested in 'devices' and so little interested in how 19th-century servants really did work. 'Today, in the elec-
Electronic age, the richest man is reduced to having much the same entertainment, and even the same food and vehicles as the ordinary man. Try telling that to the many ordinary men who live in ‘the other America’, let alone three-quarters of the globe. Mr McLuhan may claim the licence of a prophet, but even a prophet will be the more humane if he does not state as today’s fact what may perhaps one day come to pass.

Such indifference to fact is not always politically disagreeable, but it is always absurd. Literate societies don’t like B.O.? That must be because the odour ‘is far too involving for our habits of detachment and specialist attention.’ But why shouldn’t it just be that we don’t like the smell? Ah, but what about ‘the strange obsession of the bookman with the press-lords as essentially corrupt’? That must, it seems, be due to the antagonism of the book to the newspaper as a medium. Yet what if it weren’t a strange obsession, but a fact, that press-lords are corrupt?

The style is a viscous fog, through which loom stumbling metaphors. And Mr McLuhan’s subject, after all, is the imagination and the emotions. Nothing could be less imaginative than all this talk of ‘a complex and depth-structured person’, especially as the depth resembles a sump: ‘people begin to sense a draining-away of life values.’ What we need is ‘the mosaic of the press’ which ‘manages to effect a complex many-levelled function of group-awareness.’ Fortunately ‘the tactile mesh of the TV mosaic has begun to permeate the American sensorium’—hence the ‘complex togetherness of the corporate posture’. What makes it all so grisly is that this unfelt, unfeeling and nervous style is forever insisting on how media grip, how they touch, how they create.

The tastes are of a piece with the style. He asserts that ours is ‘one of the greatest ages of music, poetry, painting, and architecture alike.’ Later he comes to think that this was a bit half-hearted, so he steps it up: ‘the arts of this century’ have an ‘ascendancy over those of other ages comparable to that which we have long recognised as true of modern science.’ And the justification for such a claim? Well, there is the ‘extraordinary intensity’ of Agatha Christie’s Labours of Hercules. And there are advertisements.

The ads are by far the best part of any magazine or newspaper. More pains and thought, more wit and art go into the making of an ad than into any prose feature of press or magazine.

Anybody who thought that advertisements have as much ugly lying as witty art would simply be exposing himself as one of the ‘media victims, unwittingly mutilated by their studies’. ‘Ads are ignored or deplored, but seldom studied and enjoyed’—as if enjoyment could not but follow study, as if it weren’t even a possibility that one might study and then deplore. Since he so admires advertisements, it is not surprising that he uses them as evidence. Is Mrs Krushchev’s plain cotton dress an icon of thrift? Yes—a ‘very ingenious ad’ has said so. Are the Greeks more sensuously involved? Yes—a travel guide has said so. *Vogue* proves one fact (and I don’t mean about *Vogue*), and *Life* another, as if they were irreproachable works of history.

Mr McLuhan uses his authorities about as convincingly as his evidence. No doubt there is still a lot to be said for Bergson and Toynbee, but it is not now possible to plonk down their names as if they settled a matter. Mr McLuhan invokes Lynn White’s *Medieval Technology and Social Change* for its argument that at a particular time the stirrup profoundly affected ways of life—but he does not mention that there are unscrupulous historians who believe that the arguments are important but the evidence (especially as to dating) far from complete. Similarly, great play is made with that dread ‘dissociation of sensibility’ which at some unspecified date overtook Western man—as if any scrupulous cultural historian now thought the phrase anything but a faded bright idea. It is not only those who have been twisted by literacy who will find all these arguments short on evidence. Perhaps Mr McLuhan’s history is more accurate than are his literary quotations. The audacity is impressive, as when he takes E. E. Cummings as a type of the poet whose work is for the ear and not for the eye: Cummings must be ‘read aloud with widely varying stresses and paces’, since ‘people who feel that poetry is for the eye and is to be read silently can scarcely get anywhere with Hopkins or Cummings.’ I would like to hear Mr McLuhan rendering
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Cummings's 'gRrEaPsPhOs'. But even so great a vocal skill would not be a substitute for cogency or clarity of argument. Or for an accurate text of Cummings—Mr McLuhan does not give us Cummings's spelling, capitalisation, hyphenation, lineation or spacing. The masters of the subtle schools are controversial, polymath. Mr McLuhan shifts from ham to ham, stirring the water in his bath.

Richard Whelan  
*Robert Capa: A Biography*

By 1943 "The Greatest War-Photographer in the World" had reached his third war. After the Spanish Civil War and the Chinese-Japanese War, Robert Capa was with the US Army in Tunisia; snatching a moment for a call of nature in the desert, he suddenly realised that he was in the middle of a minefield. More than ever he needed to relieve himself but didn't risk even that movement; it seemed an age till the mine removal squad relieved him. In 1954 Capa was on his fifth war: after Palestine/Israel in 1948, he was with the French troops in IndoChina. He stepped on a Vietminh mine. He was 40.

He was a brave man, skilled, wily, charming and ruthless—though his photographs are full of that old-fashioned quality for which we have mislaid the word: ruth. He stands with Wilfred Owen as one whose art was itself able to distil "the pity of war, the pity war distilled". The soldier falling in Spain, shadowed by death; the fighter ace in Tunisia, with his sidelong glance and his direct notches swastika'd on the fuselage; the D-Day landings, awash and beached; the shaven heads of French collaborators, shamed, shameful; General Omar Bradley with his nose comically (not ridiculously) plastered for the miniature wound of a lanced boil: these are the witnesses to Capa's greatness as a witness.

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