

## Herbert Marshall McLuhan 1911–1980



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HERBERT MARSHALL MCLUHAN was born in Edmonton 21 July 1911 and died in Toronto on 31 December 1980. He had been active as scholar and teacher until the fall of 1979, when he suffered a severe stroke.

McLuhan graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1934, and took an M.A. degree there in 1935. He spent the next six years at the University of Cambridge, where he took a PH.D. in 1942. His thesis, 'The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time,' inaugurated a life-long concern with the study of rhetoric. Just before his death, the thesis was being prepared for publication, and would no doubt have given essential clues to the development of his subsequent critical work. He was in Cambridge during the heyday of I.A. Richards and F.L. Leavis, who were advocating and demonstrating a disciplined and rigorous approach to the analysis of literary texts, and, at the same time, insisting that the critic should see literature in a broad social and cultural context. It was an environment that McLuhan found congenial and stimulating. During his Cambridge days he became a Roman Catholic convert, and he was throughout his life a devout member of the church. In 1939 he married Corinne Lewis, who was a graduate of Texas Christian University, and had done advanced work in the drama at the Pasadena Playhouse. The McLuhans had six children, several of whom were to make their mark in literature and the arts. Marshall and Corinne were generous hosts. Gatherings at the McLuhan home were relaxed symposia, in which representatives from many disciplines, from within and outside the university, joined in free-ranging discussion.

After Cambridge, McLuhan taught English at the Universities of Wisconsin and St Louis, and at Assumption College in Windsor. He joined the Department of English at St Michael's College in 1946, and remained a member of the department throughout his subsequent career. His scholarly interests shifted from the Renaissance to the Modern, with a special interest in T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, and, in particular, James Joyce. Although he did not publish extended studies of any of these writers, his books are full of shrewd critical comments of them, and his theories on the media and communication often have literary sources. To McLuhan, the great artist is also the prophet. 'The artist picks up the message of cultural and technical challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs. He, then, builds models or Noah's arks for facing the change that is ahead.'

During the forties McLuhan established himself as a fine literary critic who had a sensitive response to a wide variety of writers. He wrote about Poe, Keats, Hopkins, Pound, John Dos Passos, Tennyson, and Coleridge. (Critical articles on these poets and other writers were later collected in a volume: *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan* 1969). But the key article of the forties was a discussion of rhetorical patterns in contemporary prose that, to McLuhan, indicated a basic division in attitudes toward the nature of man and society ('An Ancient quarrel in Modern America (Sophists vs Grammarians).') It appeared in the *Classical Journal* in 1946).

McLuhan contrasted the position of Robert Hutchins at Chicago with the popular ideology of liberalism. Hutchins, said McLuhan, stood for the Ciceronian ideal – a wide basis for learning, with the end of producing a citizen alert to the problems of man in society who would express himself with learning and eloquence. Hutchins emphasized the whole man, whereas the liberal spokesmen celebrated the individual as ‘a technological functional unit in the state’ and opposed specialism to Hutchins’ generalism.

Certain poets, McLuhan found, also celebrated an inclusive wholeness, and sought to immerse the reader in a world of many levels. Such poets were T.S. Eliot and Hopkins and, supremely, Joyce, although he wrote technically in prose. They created worlds that were full of discontinuous sights and sounds that demanded the active involvement of the reader. They were symbolists who worked ‘backwards from the particular effect to the objective correlative or poetic means of evoking that precise effect.’

At the end of the fifties McLuhan had adopted a strongly moral, almost Swiftian attitude to industrial society. This attitude was embodied in his first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), a study of the ‘folklore of industrial man.’ ‘Technology,’ he wrote ‘is an abstract tyrant that carries its ravages into deeper recesses of the psyche than did the sabre-toothed tiger or the grizzly bear.’ But then, he reflected, the symbolist poets had found it easy to absorb into their work the effects of technological change, as expressed in the newspaper, radio, and television.

At this time, McLuhan found in the later works of Harold Innis ideas that helped him to understand the kind of world that the symbolists were creating. In these studies Innis was examining the relationship between forms of communication and political organization. He argued that the invention of the phonetic alphabet, and then the use of printing and paper, enabled empires to develop, ruling from urban centres through specialized groups of priests and bureaucrats. An oral culture, on the other hand, such as had flourished in the golden age of Greece, encouraged an intimate, tribal society with high participation. ‘My bias,’ wrote Innis, ‘is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilization, and with the necessity of recapturing something of its spirit.’

Here was a key to understanding the triumph of symbolism. The symbolists had recovered some of the spirit of the oral tradition – its inclusiveness, its sense of multiple perspective, its delight in colour and sound. That had come, McLuhan argued, by their awareness and acceptance of the new electronic technology, which was an extension of man’s entire nervous system, and returned him to a tribal world of instantaneous information and dialogue. They had thus broken away from, or at least modified, the technology that had been dominant for four centuries, and which had had the printing press at its very centre.

The invention of the phonetic alphabet had made a break between eye and ear, ‘between semantic meaning and visual code.’ But as long as the means of

spreading the written word was limited, man still lived in an auditory world. It was only with the invention of the printing press that speech was visualized and the principles of continuity, uniformity, and repeatability made the basis of our civilization. Print culture, by elevating the visual sense, broke up the balance of the senses, and created that dissociation of sensibility to which T.S. Eliot referred. Yet, it would be wrong to draw simple contrasts between oral and visual culture, to exalt the former and belittle the latter. The most vivid periods are those that come when one culture is about to yield to another, when we have the tensions of the interface.

This argument was presented in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) with copious illustrations of his thesis from literature. The very form of the book – short sections preceded by arresting and dogmatic summaries, long quotations from a wide variety of sources, puns and verbal play – embodied the qualities of discontinuity, simultaneity, and multiple association to be found in an oral culture.

McLuhan’s next book, *Understanding Media* (1964) was the book that made him a central figure in the sixties. As Harold Rosenberg wrote: ‘*Understanding Media* is McLuhan’s goodbye to Gutenberg and to Renaissance, “typographic” man: that is, to the self-centred individual. As such, it takes its place in that wide channel of cultural criticism of the twentieth century that includes writers like T.S. Eliot, Oswald Spengler, D.H. Lawrence, F.L. Leavis, David Riesman, Hannah Arendt.’ In *Understanding Media* McLuhan seemed to embrace the new technology, whose watchwords were inclusiveness, identity, the dominance of the audile-tactile, and whose essential creature was the electric circuit. Technology was still a ‘tyrant,’ but he was a much more benign one. Indeed, at times McLuhan wrote as if the new technology would recover our lost paradise, which would not be a garden, but a global village. ‘The immediate prospect for literate, fragmented western man encountering the electric implosion within his own culture is his steady and rapid transformation into a complex and depth-structured person emotionally aware of his own total interdependence with the rest of human society.’

*Understanding Media*, written with verve and explosive wit, brought McLuhan great fame, but, among many academics, a kind of infamy. He had, they said, deserted the sacred word and allied himself with the infidels. He had become the sworn enemy of the book, a strangely learned exponent of pop culture. And his bias toward the oral and his questioning of the benevolent role of the printing press give some support for the cliché of criticism. Yet few writers are so persistently (often overpoweringly) bookish. When he talks about the individual book, it seems to transcend its medium – often triumphantly so in the symbolists – whereas for the favourite children of the electronic age – film, radio, and television – the medium is indeed the message, a powerful, subliminal message, that can, however, be understood and controlled, especially if one diligently reads the dozen or so books that McLuhan has written.

*The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* had emerged from a seminar at the University of Toronto in the late fifties. The seminar was outside the formal academic structure, and was essentially a meeting between colleagues and graduate students with a common interest in communication. McLuhan was now sensationally launched on his career as the philosopher of communications, and he needed an academic basis. In 1963 the University responded to the need, created a Centre for Culture and Technology, and made McLuhan the Director. The Centre had little need of 'hardware.' The physical centre was an old coach house behind a nineteenth-century mansion on Queen's Park Crescent. Here McLuhan wrote, conducted seminars, and maintained by telephone his associations with kindred spirits throughout the world. There were occasional associates and collaborators at the Centre, but for the most part the centre was McLuhan, and its program was reflected in a regular succession of his publications.

With the establishment of the Centre, McLuhan devoted himself to studies of the effect of electric technology on the human community. In *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970) the concern is to follow the patterns of human cognition as they appear in language and in the arts. He examines the process by which worn-out and conventional themes and perceptions are habitually 'flipped into resplendent new form.' *Culture is Our Business* (1970) and *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (1972) are studies of the impact of the electronic age on business. The world of simultaneous and instantaneous information requires that all business activities, particularly those of large multinational firms, be synchronized and interrelated. The administrative process no longer requires large centralized plants; there has been a shift from 'hardware' to 'software.' Specialization has been outmoded: 'At electric speeds of information, whether telegraph or computer or telephone, specialism and comfortalization of work and jobs have become impractical, and more and more people become aware of the work and function of other people around them, with the result that everybody becomes capable of a variety of functions and roles, and job-holding yields to role-playing.' Just before McLuhan's final illness, he was working on a study of *The Laws of the Media* and a preliminary manuscript had been prepared. In brief, the argument is that a new medium tends to intensify, enhance, or promote something (radio, for instance, promotes an aural type of communication). At the same time, the medium tends to antique or obsolesce a previously intensified process (radio detracted from the importance of print). It also tends to retrieve yet another process (radio brings back the old oral, pre-literate world), and finally, to reverse itself, or to engender a fundamentally different medium. (The 'hot' medium of radio, concentrated on the aural creates the 'cool' medium of television, 'an extension of the sense of touch, which involves maximal interplay of all the senses.')

No academic of our generation was more widely known than Marshall McLuhan. He believed that the engaged humanist had a broad social responsibility to carry his perceptions to a wide audience, and to do so with care

and humour (jokes, he said, revealed the besetting grievances of today). In his last active year, he gave the Ezra Pound lecture at the University of Idaho, a close study of Pound's rhetorical devices; and a general discourse on the problems of the electronic age to a conference of bankers meeting at Monaco. He had many opportunities to take senior posts in the United States. (He accepted one: as Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at Fordham University, but only for one year, 1967-8). He was, however, devoted to Canada and happy in his Toronto position, a member of a small college within a large federated university. He wrote amusingly and provocatively on the standard theme of Canadian identity. 'Canada,' he said, 'is a land of multiple borderlines, psychic, social and geographic. Canadians live at the interface where opposites clash.' Canada was then a good observation post, where one could early observe and appraise the mighty clash of opposites.

To many readers McLuhan's generalizations, although shakily founded, were enunciated with an irritating dogmatism. To McLuhan, however, they were 'probes,' designed not to give ultimate answers, but to shed light on dark places. He was unhappy, too, at the criticism that he had revealed a deterministic world in which man was at the mercy of his own technology. He maintained that, by understanding the effects of the media, we could control them, 'even as the Greeks chose to alter the Dionysian fury with Apollonian detachment.'

Marshall McLuhan was an informal, generous-spirited man, happiest in small groups at his coachhouse or in the living room of his home, which, blot out a few distracting high rises visible to the south, could have been an English country house on the southern downs. It was in his living room that I visited him during the last months. He sits close to the big fireplace, rising from time to time to make sure that the flames have not died down, as if he were at the same time rekindling the fire of his own spirit. Despite the sad deprivations of the last months, I believe that the inner forces always burned brightly, and that he continued to live in the glow of the ideas that had so powerfully illuminated his age.