

Riding Range with Marshall McLuhan

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I don't know how many of you recall McLuhan from the '60s, but he had for a very brief period of time, about five or six years, an extraordinary influence on American culture. You couldn't pick up a magazine or turn on the TV without hearing McLuhan, McLuhan, what he said, what he thought, what he predicted. He was consulting with Madison Avenue, with politicians, with Hollywood, so forth and so on, and he died in the early '70s and his influence died with him. Even though he had founded the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto in Canada, he really seemed to spawn no highly visible successors. He was a unique personality and breakthrough, much in the same way that Joyce was a unique personality and spawned very few imitators. The irony of all this is that McLuhan did his journeyman work — before he burst onto the world stage as this mysterious savant of media — he did his work as a Joyce scholar. That's what he was, a literary critic, Joyce scholar, medievalist, that sort of thing, and then in the early '50s he wrote a book which I never read, it's very hard to find, called *The Mechanical Bride*, that was his first testing of his ideas.

McLuhan is primarily understood as a communication theorist or a philosopher of media, and that's what he talked about. He turned the analytical, Western, deconstructionist method on the technologies of communication: printing, film, photography, dance, theater, even such things as money he thought of as forms of media, and he carried out and analyzed these various forms of media and reached very controversial conclusions. One of the things that was puzzling to me as I went back through and read all this is that McLuhan was synonymous with incomprehensibility in the '60s. I mean, the whole thing was, "Who can understand this guy? He's like Buddha, he speaks these words but we can't understand." Now, 25-30 years later, it reads pretty straightforwardly, and most of what he predicted has come to pass. I think even McLuhan would be amazed at the speed with which the Gutenberg world has been overturned. There's no hint in here of home computers, let alone interactive networks, virtual reality, phone sex and so forth and so on, but this was all grist for the McLuhanist mill

and, had he lived, he would have had much to say on all this. It surprised me in reading this stuff how demanding it is on your own literacy. He assumes, basically, that the people he's talking to have read everything and have understood it, from Homer to Rabelais to Chaucer to *Mad Magazine*. He assumes that you have a complete knowledge of modern film, popular print journalism and popular culture. All of this was grist for his mill.

I'll show you the books I'm reading from and talking about, and then I'll actually read you a section of McLuhan, because like Joyce, it's a stylistic thing that you can't really encompass without getting your feet wet. This was his best known book, probably, and this is the original paperback edition. This book was immensely discussed when it came out, and probably very little read, judging by the quality of the discussion. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, this is how most people heard of McLuhan, and he followed it up with *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. These are all first editions, I don't think these books are in print. Few intellectuals in this century have fallen so totally through the cracks as McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is very interesting, I'm going to read from some of it tonight. It's organized around chapter headings such as, "Does the interiorization of media such as letters alter the ratio among our senses and change mental processes?" or, "Pope's *Dunciad* indicts the printed book as the agent of a primitivistic and romantic revival. Sheer visual quantity evokes the magical resonance of the tribal horde. The box office looms as a return to the echo chamber of bardic incantation," that's a chapter heading. "Typography cracked the voices of silence," and one of my favorites, "Heidegger surfboards along on the electronic wave as triumphantly as Descartes rode the mechanical wave."

So there's a lot of fun in McLuhan and this comes out of him being a Joyce scholar. You just can't mess with that without fun. This is his third book, with Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*. I guess I should say, a few years ago somebody asked me to review McLuhan's letters which had been published, which I did; it was *Gnosis* or somebody. Anyway, it brought back to me — he was a convert to Catholicism and an extraordinarily complex intellectual, a medievalist who became a Joyce scholar who became a communications expert, and in McLuhan there's a very deep strain of nostalgia for the essence of the medieval world, of what he called manuscript culture. Essentially his entire output is a critique of print and of the impact of print on culture. I think, though he attempted to be fairly even-handed, his final resolution of all this was that it had had many, many detrimental and distorting effects on the Western mind. This is another little book that he published back in the heyday, and he experimented with typographic layout, somewhat harkening back to the surrealists, who he discusses a great deal. It was his fascination with typographic layout that also brought him into such congruence with the *Wake*. Let me read you a section from *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that is both interesting to think about, or if you can't understand it, then an interesting example of what McLuhan's style was like and what I mean by that he was an extraordinarily demanding intellectual — he doesn't cut you much slack. This is a short section called, "Only a fraction of the history of literacy has been

typographic.”

’Til now we have been concerned mostly with the written word as it transfers or translates the audial-tactile space of “sacral” non-literate man into the visual space of civilized or literate or “profane” man. Once this transfer or metamorphosis occurs, we are soon in the world of books, scribal or typographic. The rest of our concern will be with books written and printed and the results for learning and society. From the 5th century B.C. to the 15th century A.D. the book was a scribal product. Only one third of the history of the book in the Western world has been typographic. It is not incongruous, therefore, to say as G. S. Brett does in *Psychology Ancient and Modern*:

The idea that knowledge is essentially book learning seems to be a very modern view, probably derived from the medieval distinctions between clerk and layman, with additional emphasis provided by the literary character of the rather fantastic humanism of the 16th century. The original and natural idea of knowledge is that of “cunning” or the possession of wits. Odysseus is the original type of thinker, a man of many ideas who could overcome the Cyclops and achieve a significant triumph of mind over matter. Knowledge is thus a capacity for overcoming the difficulties of life and achieving success in this world.

Brett here specifies the natural dichotomy which the book brings into any society, in addition to the split within the individual of that society. The work of James Joyce exhibits a complex clairvoyance in these matters. His Leopold Bloom of *Ulysses*, a man of many ideas and many devices, is a freelance ad salesman. Joyce saw the parallels, on one hand, between the modern frontier of the verbal and the pictorial, and on the other, between the Homeric world poised between the old sacral culture and the new profane or literate sensibility. Bloom, the newly detribalized Jew, is presented in modern Dublin, a slightly detribalized Irish world. Such a frontier is the modern world of the advertisement, congenial, therefore, to the transitional culture of Bloom. In the 17th or Ithaca episode of *Ulysses*, we read, “What were habitually his final meditations? Of some one sole unique advertisement to cause passers to stop in wonder, a poster novelty, with all extraneous accretions excluded, reduced to its simplest and most efficient terms not exceeding the span of casual vision and congruous with the velocity of modern life.” In *The Books at the Wake*, James S. Atherton points out:

Amongst other things *Finnegans Wake* is a history of writing. We begin with writing on, “A bone, a pebble, a ram-skin... leave them to cook in the mutthering pot: and

Gutenmorg with his cromagnon charter, tintingfats and great prime must once for omniboss stepp rubrickredd out of the wordpress.” The “mutthering pot” is an allusion to alchemy, but there is some other significance connected with writing, for the next time the word appears it is again in a context concerning improvement in systems of communication. The passage is, “All the airish signics of her dipandump helpabit from an Father Hogam till the Mutther Masons.” “Dipandump helpabit” combine the deaf and dumb alphabet’s signs in the air, or airish signs, with the ups and downs of Irish Ogham writing. The Mason, following this, must be the man of that name who invented steel pen nibs. But all I can suggest for “mutther” is the muttering of Freemasons which does not fit the context, although they, of course, also make signs in the air.

“Gutenmorg with his cromagnon charter,” expounds by mythic gloss the fact that writing meant the emergence of the caveman or sacral man from the audial world of simultaneous resonance into the profane world of daylight. The reference to the masons is to the world of the bricklayer as a type of speech itself. On the second page of the *Wake*, Joyce is making a mosaic, an Achilles shield, as it were, of all the themes and modes of human speech and communication: “Bygmester Finnegan, of the Stuttering Hand, freemen’s murer, lived in the broadest way immarginable in his rushlit toofarback for messuages before joshuan judges had given us numbers.” Joyce is, in the *Wake*, making his own Altamira cave drawings of the entire history of the human mind, in terms of its basic gestures and postures during all phases of human culture and technology. As his title indicates, he saw that the wake of human progress can disappear again into the night of sacral or auditory man. The Finn cycle of tribal institutions can return in the electric age, but if again, then let’s make it a wake or awake or both. Joyce could see no advantage in our remaining locked up in each cultural cycle as in a trance or dream. He discovered the means of living simultaneously in all cultural modes while quite conscious. The means he cites for such self-awareness and correction of cultural bias is his “collideorscope.” This term indicates the interplay in colloidal mixture of all components of human technology as they extend our senses and shift their ratios in the social kaleidoscope of cultural clash: “deor,” savage, the oral or sacral; “scope,” the visual or profane and civilized.

These people, Joyce, to some degree Pound, McLuhan, they were the prophets of the world in which we now stand: the world of integrated, interactive media, extraordinary data retrieval that erases the 17th century notion of the unconscious — nothing is now unconscious if your data search commands are powerful enough — and the remaking of the human image that required centuries

for print. The transition from scribal culture to true book culture occupied 500 years; the transition from book culture to electronic culture has occurred in less than fifty years. It's eerie to read his examples of contemporaneity because they're stuff like Marilyn Monroe, Perry Como, James Dean; he's writing from another era, and yet, from his point of view, he's firmly embedded in a kind of super future that we are now able to look back on. Here's another section that I think makes some of this more clear. The name of this section is, "The medieval book trade was a secondhand trade even as with the dealing today in "old masters."

Then, from the 12th century onwards, the rise of the universities brought masters and students into the field of book production in class time, and these books found their way back to the monastic libraries when students returned after completing their studies: "A number of these standard textbooks, of which approved exemplars were kept for copying by the *stationarii* of the universities, naturally found their way into print quite early, for many of them continued in undiminished request in the 15th century as before. These official university texts offer no problems of origin or nomenclature." Goldschmidt then adds, "Soon after 1300, the expensive vellum could be dispensed with, and the cheaper paper made the accumulation of many books a matter of industry rather than wealth." Since, however, the student went to lectures pen in hand and, "It was the lecturer's task to dictate the book he was expounding on his audience," there are a great body of these *reportata* which constitute a very complex problem for editors.

Like for Joyce, for McLuhan the book is the central symbol of the age, the central mystery of our time. In a sense I share that notion. It's a very Talmudic notion, it's a very psychedelic notion, it's the idea that somehow the career of the word is the central overarching metaphor of the age. Naturally, if the book is the central metaphor for reality, then reality itself is seen as somehow literary, somehow textual, and this, in fact, is how I think reality was seen until the rise of modern science. We're always taught how the roots of modern science go back to Democritean atomism, which is of course true, but the number of people who knew that a thousand years ago was probably very few. The real notion out of which science had to divest itself is the notion of a book, or if that seems too concrete, a story, a narrative, the story of man's fall and redemption. That was what the Christian exegesis of post-Edenic time was all about. With the rise of modern science the idea of narrative has become somewhat overthrown. McLuhan would say that narrative persisted far beyond its utility because the biases of print kept it in place for such a long time.

Everyone assumes that tools are tools and you use them and that's that. For McLuhan, the entirety of the toolkit of modern Western man can be traced to the unconscious assumptions of print. For example, the idea of the individual — which is a pretty personal notion, right there in close to the heart — is a postmedieval concept, legitimized by print. The idea of the public, this concept

did not exist before newspapers, because before newspapers there was no public, there were only people, and rulers very rarely bothered to pass on their thinking to anybody other than their closest associates, and then only for utilitarian reasons. The notion of an observing citizenry somehow sharing the governance of society is a print-created idea. The idea of interchangeable parts — without which our world would hardly function, there would not be automobiles, buildings, aircraft — that’s an idea that comes from the interchangeability of letters in a printer’s block. That was the first industry to ever utilize the concept of easily reformulated subunits. It’s strange, the Chinese get credit for inventing printing thousands and thousands of years before Europe, but they would carve a single block of wood and print it, they didn’t get the notion of moveable type; and moveable type, the distribution of books becomes the paradigmatic model for the distribution of any product. It’s produced, it’s edited, it’s manufactured, it’s sold and then sequels are spawned. All products have followed this model, but books were one of the earliest mass-manufactured objects to be put through this cycle.

Modern city planning, the linearity of it, the way in which land surveys are carried out, these are all unconscious biases imbibed from the world of print, and they make sense if you’re a printhead. But one of the peculiar things about this — notice that animals do not possess language. Many human societies do not possess writing, and very few human societies, only two on earth, invented printing, and yet once invented it feeds back into the evolution of social structures and defines everything. It’s an extraordinary artificiality, and we have been imprisoned in it for hundreds and hundreds of years now. Now it is breaking down and we are changing to a different sensory ratio, and you might suppose, if you hadn’t given this a lot of thought, that the new electronic media, television and so forth, would carry us into an entirely different sensory ratio. McLuhan felt differently, he felt that it was restoring us to a medieval sensory ratio. He felt that a television screen is much more like an illuminated manuscript than a page of print. The distinction may seem subtle at first, but if you’re looking at an illuminated medieval manuscript — notice that I said looking — you must look in order to understand.

Reading is not looking. Reading is an entirely different kind of behavior. As a child you learn what a printed lowercase *e* looks like. After seeing twenty, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, you know what it looks like. You have an expectation of the gestalt of the lowercase *e*. Nobody opens a book and looks at print unless there’s some extraordinary abstract discussion going on. We read print but we look at manuscript, because manuscript carries the intrinsic signification of the individual who made it and his or her idiosyncrasies have to be parsed through to get the meaning. Similarly, television is a very low-resolution media: these are little pieces of light, pixels, flying back and forth. They must be looked at, they cannot be read, and it’s an extraordinarily engaging process. That’s why it creates an entirely different set of social biases than print does. McLuhan called these biases — and this was the one distinction or idea of his that made its way into popular culture — he distinguished between what he called hot and cold media. Usually people botch this every time, because no-

body really to this day understands what he meant. So let me read you a little bit about this distinction. This is in Chapter Two of *Understanding Media*, and Chapter Two is called “Media Hot and Cold”:

“The rise of the waltz,” explained Curt Sachs in the *World History of the Dance*, “was a result of that longing for truth, simplicity, closeness to nature and primitivism which the last two thirds of the 18th century fulfilled.” In the century of jazz we are likely to overlook the emergence of the waltz as a hot and explosive human expression that broke through the formal feudal barriers of courtly and choral dance styles.

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in “high definition.” High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, “high definition.” A cartoon is “low definition,” simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information, and speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone.

A cool medium like hieroglyphic or ideogrammic written characters has very different effects from the hot and explosive medium of the phonetic alphabet. The alphabet, when pushed to a high degree of abstract visual intensity, became typography. The printed word with its specialist intensity burst the bonds of medieval corporate guilds and monasteries, creating extreme individualist patterns of enterprise and monopoly; but the typical reversal occurred when extremes of monopoly brought back the corporation, with its impersonal empire over many lives. The hotting-up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism and the religious wars of the 16th century. The heavy and unwieldy media, such as stone, are time binders. Used for writing, they are very cool indeed, and serve to unify the ages; whereas paper is a hot medium that serves to unify spaces horizontally, both in political and entertainment empires.

And he just goes on like this endlessly. This was his *métier* or his media, to connect and comment on this stuff. Television really was his own medium for reaching a very large audience, in fact I remember the excitement that swept through. I didn’t even have a television; I was living in Berkeley at the time,

and somebody said, “We have to go up to the student union at 6 o’clock because Mike Wallace is interviewing Marshall McLuhan,” and it seemed an incredibly freaky notion that McLuhan would be on TV. It shows you what a stultified, categorically different world we were living in at the time.

Here’s just a little bit of McLuhan on television. This is Chapter 31 of *Understanding Media*, “The Timid Giant”:

Perhaps the most familiar and pathetic effect of the TV image is the posture of children in the early grades. Since TV, children, regardless of eye condition, average about 6.5 inches from the printed page. Our children are striving to carry over to the printed page the all-involving sensory mandate of the TV image. With perfect psychomimetic skill, they carry out the commands of the TV image. They pore, they probe, they slow down and involve themselves in depth. This is what they had learned to do in the cool iconography of the comic book medium. TV carried the process much further. Suddenly they are transferred to the hot print medium with its uniform patterns and fast lineal movement. Pointlessly they strive to read print in depth. They bring to print all their senses, and print rejects them. Print asks for the isolated and stripped-down visual faculty, not for the unified sensorium.

Often very unexpected, paradoxical insights emerge from this stuff, and in this book that he did with Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*, it’s an interesting technique. They take a number of works of art, either literature, such as the song from *Love’s Labours Lost* by William Shakespeare, or the *Balade de Bon Conseyl* of Geoffrey Chaucer, or the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám*, and then comment on it; and also visual arts, because McLuhan really felt that the art historical and technological and architectural output of Western civilization could be essentially psychoanalyzed, could be seen as the tracings of the mass consciousness, and he felt that the evolution of sensory ratios within historical time had been very rapid. For example, he talks about how Saint Augustine was a person of great piety and learning, and people doubting this would show him an open page of scripture or theological disputation, and he would look at it for a few minutes, and then they would close the book and he could tell them what was written there. This was taken as proof of his piety. He was, as far as we can tell, the only man in Europe who could read silently at that time. This was a period when the auidial pre-scribal culture was still being assimilated.

McLuhan spends a lot of time analyzing this episode in the 14th century when the laws of perspective spring suddenly into being, somewhat in the way that fractal mathematics have introduced us to a new superspace. For the Renaissance, spatial perspective was essentially a filing system for visual data: at last they knew where to put everything and where to look for it once they had put it there. If you have a pre-perspectivist arrangement of space, you have to look, not read, *look* at each painting in order to locate where the information is. This is again this read/look dichotomy. McLuhan never discussed psychedelics,

but psychedelics clearly are an extension of these kinds of media that you have to engage with, that you have to look at, that you cannot read, that you cannot take for granted, and these give back a much more complex world. Notice that the world created by print is a world of gestalts: buildings, highways, bridges. We know how these things are supposed to look; we don't experience astonishment every time we enter a home or an institutional edifice. There is a built-in set of syntactical expectations in linear space, and when those are violated this is very noticeable and becomes the basis for architectural or design innovation.

I think that what's happening — and I think this would be McLuhan's take — is that all of these new media that attempt to suppress the appurtenances of media are in fact having the effect of returning us to an archaic sensory ratio. McLuhan was onto this, he's the one who coined the phrase "electronic feudalism." He felt that we were headed back toward a medieval sensory ratio, because he saw television as like manuscript, but I think had he lived into the era of VR, psilocybin, HDTV and implants, he would have seen we are not reaching back to the medieval, that was simply a stepping stone to the archaic, and that we are going beyond the entire domain of scribal humanity and actually reaching back to a shamanic, feeling-toned kind of thing. All of the breakdown of linearity that you see in the 20th century — abstract expressionism, Dada, jazz, rock 'n roll, non-figurative painting, LSD — all of these things on one level can be seen as harking back to the archaic, but on another level they can be seen as new behaviors emerging as the cloud of print-constellated constipation is lifted. An interesting question that we would put to McLuhan if we had him here tonight is to what degree can what he said about television not be applied to HDTV? It seems to me that HDTV is television without the biases of TV. A perfect medium is an invisible medium, and print is the least invisible of all media. Print is an incredible Rube Goldberg invention for conveying information.

Here's McLuhan on this same subject, rather than me dwelling on it. This is from *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. This is from a section called "A theory of cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the changing sense ratios effected by various externalizations of our senses."

It is very much worth dwelling on this matter, since we shall see that from the invention of the alphabet there has been a continuous drive in the Western world toward the separation of the senses, of functions, of operations, of states emotional and political, as well as of tasks — a fragmentation which terminated, through Durkheim, in the *anomie* of the 19th century. The paradox presented by Professor von Bekesy is that the two-dimensional mosaic is, in fact, a multidimensional world of interstructural resonance. It is the three-dimensional world of pictorial space that is, indeed, an abstract illusion built on the intense separation of the visual from the other senses.

There is here no question of values or preferences. It is necessary, however, for any other kind of understanding to know why "primi-

tive” drawing is two-dimensional, whereas the drawing and painting of literate man tends toward perspective. Without this knowledge we cannot grasp why men ever ceased to be “primitive” or audial-tactile in their sense bias. Nor could we ever understand why men have, “since Cézanne,” abandoned the visual in favor of the audial-tactile modes of awareness and of organization of experience. This matter clarified, we can much more easily approach the role of the alphabet and of printing in giving a dominant role to the visual sense in language and art and in the entire range of social and of political life, for until men have upgraded the visual component communities know only a tribal structure. The detribalizing of the individual has, in the past at least, depended on an intense visual life fostered by literacy, and by literacy of the alphabetic kind alone; for alphabetic writing is not only unique, but late. There had been much writing before it. In fact, any people that ceases to be nomadic and pursues sedentary modes of work is ready to invent writing. No merely nomadic people ever had writing any more than they ever developed architecture or “enclosed space,” for writing is a visual enclosure of non-visual spaces and senses. It is, therefore an abstraction of the visual from the ordinary sense interplay; and whereas speech is an uttering (utterance) of all of our senses at once, writing abstracts from speech.

That’s very interesting, isn’t it, this association of nomadism with the inability to create architectonic space, and therefore writing. That a word is a structure, and that therefore no nomad would ever do such a thing. Interesting. I think he is saying that reading is not seeing, and those who read do not see. Even when they lift their eyes from their books they carry the attitude of print into the world. They attempt to read nature, and you can’t read nature, you must look at nature, you must see nature. I was thinking about this a few months ago, and it surprised me. I was trying to think of the books that really influenced my life, and I thought of *Moby Dick* and Huxley’s *Doors of Perception*, but then when I really got down to it I realized that a little tiny book that Huxley wrote, that my mother pushed on me when I was about 12 years old, called *The Art of Seeing* probably shaped me as much as anything. It’s a very McLuhanesque rap without McLuhanesque terminology, and in there he says that the way to overcome the print bias is freehand drawing, and I think this is very intelligent and simple advice. Draw. Train your eye. Draw nudes, draw seashells, draw insects, go into nature and train the eye to see, and you will cease to read the world. A seeing person does not want to form a relationship with a reading person.

This conflict that we get between men and women and between people, which we call the head/heart conflict, is really a reading/seeing conflict. It isn’t the head and heart, it’s that readers and seers cannot relate to each other’s emotional life because they seem to come from such different worlds. The permission to abstract from nature that print created is why we have such a terrible culture

crisis. A trivial example: it was said by Marshall McLuhan, strangely enough, that the Vietnam war could not be won the way an ordinary war is won, because the citizenry of this country couldn't tolerate the sight of what war was, and that warfare became impossible when it could be televised into the living room, because war is something that you must read about. You must not see it, it must be this grand thing of the distant clash of armies and young heroes being created, but when it turns into amputation and maggots and screams of pain, the political fun goes out of it. War is therefore a literary activity, and the one argument that can be made in television's favor is that people don't like to see images of violence. If we have to show so much violence on television, let it always be real. The violence is only indefensible when it's vicarious. If it's real violence, you need to see it, because it's happening in a world for which you bear a partial moral responsibility. I think warfare has been remade by media in that sense. A lot of politics has been remade, because imperial doings are usually ugly, brutal, and not something that you want to exhibit before the populace, and yet modern media makes that very difficult to avoid.

You get the notion of public morality, or, "The people won't stand for this, we have to get this story out!" The people won't stand for this: now this is a moral dimension inconceivable in medieval or Roman times. I mean, what would it mean to say, "The people won't stand for this"? So there's an attempt to create, through the collectivity, a kind of community of moral judgment. "The medium is the message" means that the medium is the thing which is making the difference. Every discussion you ever hear since the '60s about TV — is it good, is it bad, terrible, wonderful — always the discussion hinges around what's on TV. People say, "Television is terrible, it just shows violence," and then somebody else says, "No, television is wonderful, these nature shows, and news from far away and masterpiece theater." This is a stupid argument. What McLuhan meant by "The medium is the message," is that it doesn't matter what you put on TV. TV is TV; it has an intrinsic nature, and whether you're showing National Geographic specials or slasher movies, TV will do what it does. It has certain qualities; just like driving a car or skiing, certain muscles are going to be exercised, certain perceptual systems enhanced, others suppressed. It's very hard for us to understand this because we have accepted this media so thoroughly into our life, but in fact it is shaping our value systems in ways that are very hard for us to suspect or even detect.

Television, for example, is a drug: it has a series of measurable physiological parameters that are as intrinsically its signature as the parameters of heroin are its signature. You sit somebody down in front of a TV set and turn it on. Twenty minutes later, come back and sample their blood pressure, their eye movement rate; blood is pooling in their rear end, their breathing takes on a certain quality, the stare reflex sets in. They are thoroughly zoned on a drug, and when you think about the fact that the average American watches 6.5 hours of television a day, imagine if a drug had been introduced in 1948 that we all spent 6.5 hours per day on average watching. The one thing about drugs, in their defense, is that it's very hard to diddle the message. A drug is a mirror, but television isn't a mirror, television is a billboard, and anybody who pays their

money can put their message into the trip. This is an extraordinarily insidious situation. What McLuhan wanted to become was the founder of a general new sophistication about media, and he was essentially parodied to death by, guess what? Media. They made of him an icon of cultural incomprehensibility. Not since Einstein have you been so preprogrammed in advance to believe, “You ain’t going to understand this guy.” That’s what they said about McLuhan and consequently his message and his insight failed. We will have to reinvent McLuhan around the turn of the century because we are producing forms of media of such interactive power and potential social impact that we’re going to have to go back and rethink all of this.