GEORGE, I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT ENJOY THIS REPORT IF A FUNDAMEN... QUANTIFIER CROSSES YOUR PATH! I APPRECIATED YOUR ABC INTERVIEW. THANKS FOR EVERYTHING. TOM COOPER

Marshall McLuhan died in Toronto on December 31, 1980.

The McLuhan Galaxy

MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S television set, placed in the decent obscurity of a comfortable basement room, was the most out of tune I have ever seen. It straddled the border between function and breakdown; only the dimly perceived stability of the image declared it to be at all in working order. I often thought that Marshall must have begun his quizzical inquiry into the nature of modern media by trying to square the obvious general popularity of television with his own difficult domestic experience of it. This led me to speculate that all his notions about the new ways of seeing required by television related specifically to his own set.

Tactile television, like all McLuhan's ideas, had a complex provenance—more complex, that is, than my hypothesis. His theories had an essential elegance and wit. Even when they were most eccentric, they could not be shrugged off. They needed to be addressed, dealt with. Work was required to respond to his probes. More work was needed to reject them. In his own terminology he was (in a Puckish way) a very "cool" man indeed, demanding a maximum of interaction from followers and critics alike.

Marshall McLuhan enjoyed a measure of fame that seldom comes to anybody in the academy. That fame was in part due to his work. But it was also due to the efforts of others, mainly in advertising, who sought to bring McLuhan, and what they thought were his ideas, before the largest possible public. In the sixties, it was they who marketed this otherwise shy and somewhat dour Canadian professor of English. When "discovered," he was certainly distinguished, but no more than many others—except that, crucially perhaps, his wonderful openness of mind had led him into unexpected areas.

I remember then seeing his image for the first time on a screen in a London advertising agency. He was being unveiled as a sort of master—a man who, from the irreproachable sanctity of a university chair, could justify the advertising industry by seeming to say that the final product of our civilization was the television commercial.

WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

And the advertising industry returned what it saw as a compliment by making McLuhan television's Aristotle. McLuhan was interested in television commercials without particularly liking them. But this intellectual interest was somehow not enough. A personal endorsement was needed in these years; by a public relations sleight of hand which had little to do with McLuhan, it was obtained.

A curious smokescreen was created as advertisers' needs for self-justification collided with McLuhan's lines of inquiry. This smokescreen caused his rapid rise to celebrity—which in turn caused the rejection by his most fervid admirers.

What was obscured in the smokescreen, of course, was his work, his distaste for television commercials, and much else. A Canadian Westerner and a Catholic convert, McLuhan was not the apostle of sixties media chic he was made out to be. His favorite show starred Bob Newhart, a man of goodwill, struggling to make sense of a crazy world much as Marshall was. McLuhan watched Newhart only in the basement. The proper method of communication for Marshall remained face-to-face discourse, upstairs in the living room before a roaring fire. He seemed to be a man in that Celtic tradition that honors "the crack"—hard talk and lots of it, jokes, and flights of fancy at least as elegant as they are plausible. It was this Celtic tradition that suggested to him a new and better methodology for examining interesting cultural phenomena. What had the work of media sociology and related fields produced? McLuhan once said of a media studies doyen that if you asked this man to define measles he would start to count the spots on a patient's face. This entire tradition had failed to understand the way in which the world was changing under the impact of media, and it had done nothing to alert people to those changes.

McLuhan wanted to find an appropriate vehicle for his thoughts about these things. And the aphorism was a particularly Celtic, poetic solution. Even when wrong, it can give pleasure by dint of verbal virtuosity. To McLuhan it may have seemed mass communication was, for all its crucial centrality, too slight to bear the burden of normal academic inquiry. And reading what passes for media studies, who is to say he was wrong?

Yet the price of this radical approach was not small. History suffered, and elaborate arguments were often founded on very little data. The result was sometimes nonsense—but it was always "impure nonsense ... nonsense adulterated by sense."

There was precious little nonsense in the main thrust of McLuhan's work. He attracted the attention of many people—far more than did the small band of academics and practioners whose interests antedate his own—to the importance of media and to their effects on our sensorium. And he made people actively think about all this. That there are errors and quirks in his theories is unimportant. That this agenda should be created and publicized by a professor of English at a time when most such were still threatened by the very ideas Marshall sought to embrace and understand is an astonishing intellectual feat. It means that when the definitive book (or video disk or whatever) on twentieth century media comes to be written (or made or whatever) it will have to say: "In the beginning, or at any rate very near it, was Marshall McLuhan."

—Brian Winston

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