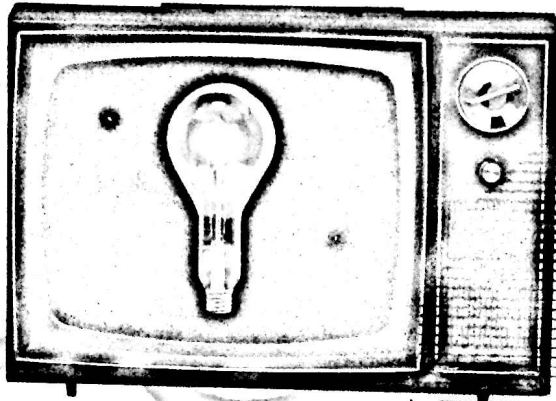


Marshall McLuhan

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PHILIP MARCHAND



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almost "down to earth.") McLuhan began his talk by saying, "Greetings from the DEW-line." The Distant Early Warning line — a fixture of the Canadian-American defense system in the north of Canada — was then becoming a persistent McLuhan analogy for the activity of the artist and the man with ESP in clearly perceiving the present. His audience, of course, was mystified. "DEW-line?" whispered one vice-president. "I thought this guy was an English professor from the University of Toronto."

McLuhan then announced, "No longer will I say that the medium is the message. I've changed my thinking." He paused, with practiced timing, while his listeners waited, their pens poised above their notebooks. "From now on, I believe that the medium is the *massage*." The pens remained poised, and the faces of the audience assumed a vacant look, tinged with annoyance. McLuhan then let loose with a barrage of jokes and aphorisms, not excluding his Alexander Graham Kowalski joke. "We don't know who discovered the water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't a fish. . . . A newspaper without a deadline is a surrealist poem. . . . Kids don't have goals anymore; they want to know what's going on. . . . In this all-at-once world, everybody's involved in everything. Kids make movies. Soon they'll be making books. . . . Our generation is observers. The young today are participators. Your young workers aren't satisfied with slots. They want to participate in depth in the operation. . . . Why can't you get ten million people on prime-time TV to work on cancer research? Some kid is sure to say: 'Hey, why don't you do it this way?' and discover the cure."

The last suggestion, of course, had first been hatched by McLuhan in the days of Idea Consultants. No one had listened to it in 1955. But McLuhan's speculations and the appetite of businessmen for clues to the nature of change had now, at last, come together. "A few years ago, he'd have been kicked out bodily," one executive at the conference remarked. "But business has changed. You've got younger, more aware men at the helm." He then added, echoing Tom Wolfe, "I don't pretend to understand him, but I want him around just in case he's right."²⁶

To nearly all of his corporate audiences McLuhan offered one important suggestion. If they wanted to avoid confusion, he said, they should ask themselves what business they were really in. It was not an obvious question. Bell Telephone, for example, was unaware that it was not in the business of telephones. IBM did not know, for a long time, that it was not in the business of business machines. Such companies, McLuhan told them, had to look at what changes they actually made in the human environment. Only after looking at such changes could IBM, for example, begin to perceive that it was really in the business of information. Only then could it begin to come up with adequate strategies for operating in the present. Like many McLuhan techniques, this one had little immediate practical application for corporate executives, but it was useful in shaking up their attitudes and broadening their appreciation of reality.

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Corporate groups continued to seek out McLuhan. In November 1966 McLuhan gave two lectures for the Container Corporation in San Francisco at \$2,500 apiece. In these lectures he barely concealed his contempt for the products of his host. Its plastics and nonreturnable containers had contributed a great deal to the littering of the landscape, which thoroughly repulsed him. Once in an interview he had referred to the "massive garbage apocalypse" created by the Container Corporation.²⁷ On this occasion he told its executives, in his most inscrutable and oracular fashion, to get into another line of business.

He also tried to enlighten reporters at a press conference in the city's St. Francis Hotel, where he announced, "People make a great mistake trying to read me as if I were saying something. I poke these sentences around to probe and feel my way around in our kind of world." He also ventured a prediction. "Color TV will mean more involvement," he told the reporters.

You know, we see color with the cone of our eye, black and white with the edges, and color is more in demand in a primitive society. So are spiced dishes. I predict a return of hot sauces to American cuisine. With color TV the entire sensory life will take on a whole new set of dimensions.²⁸

(McLuhan believed that the cone of the eye — the photoreceptor in the retina — was much more "tactile" than the edges of the retina. Hence color was more "involving" than black and white.)

That same year McLuhan also addressed the American Marketing Association, the American Association of Advertising Agencies, and the Public Relations Society of New York. He gave a talk in Washington, D.C., before approximately twenty assistant secretaries in the Johnson administration, under the auspices of the United States Civil Service Commission. He gave numberless interviews to magazine and newspaper reporters, appeared on television and radio talk shows, spoke at various colleges, and, as part of his continuing campaign to annoy the literati, addressed the annual meeting of PEN (the international association of writers and editors) in New York City. One French delegate spoke for many in the audience when he told a reporter that, after hearing McLuhan's remarks, "I was amazed, baffled and rather sickened."²⁹

The following year McLuhan began speaking to an entirely new kind of audience: Canadian politicians. Several prominent members of Canada's Liberal party, then in power under Prime Minister Lester Pearson and anticipating another federal election in one or two years, began a series of informal talks with McLuhan in the summer of 1967. The first talk occurred in the penthouse apartment of a Toronto lawyer, Gordon Dryden. "I wasn't married at the time and there was nobody living with me to interrupt us and tell us to shut up and go home or go to bed," Dryden recalls. "This was just as well, because McLuhan could stay up and talk all night."³⁰ It was primarily for the joy of talking all night that McLuhan began these

consultations. McLuhan himself had no partisan affiliations; indeed, three years earlier he had given an address at a conference sponsored by the other major Canadian party, the Progressive Conservative. Certainly, McLuhan was allergic to Marxism, while at the same time retaining a general antipathy toward mega-corporations. His own work he considered a satirical examination of the monstrous, swollen institutions beloved, it seems, by both big business and socialism.³¹

Politics itself, as a process, he tended to view the way Poe's sailor viewed the maelstrom. Nonetheless, McLuhan would have been happy to work with virtually any government. He felt that his insights were true and important (despite what he occasionally said about the tentative nature of his "probes") and should therefore be brought to the attention of the powerful. If the powerful misused them, the responsibility for that would lie on their souls, not on McLuhan's.

The talks with Dryden and his Liberal colleagues — Boyd Upper, Robert Stanbury, and a handful of others — were reasonably lively. McLuhan provoked an argument from Dryden when he proclaimed, with his typical assurance, that political parties were a thing of the past. McLuhan also railed against the deterioration of Toronto's comfortable cityscape. He was particularly incensed by the building of a huge hotel overshadowing the public square in front of Toronto's new city hall. On the whole, McLuhan's conversations with these men were not very different from his talks to businessmen, academics, and students. "Most of the session would start with a general discussion and then veer off into a McLuhan monologue which would go on as long as he wanted to talk and we wanted to listen," Dryden recalls. "We would start off raising questions and batting them around and arguing them and then he would take off."³²

One of these political sessions was interrupted by an event that was altogether unexpected to McLuhan's host but that McLuhan himself had come, from experience, to know and dread. In the course of McLuhan's monologue his listeners, sitting in a hotel room, noticed that he occasionally hesitated, a blank look in his eye, as if his train of thought had been broken by some fleeting memory or association. Then he would shake his head in an effort to recapture his train of thought and proceed with the monologue. This happened two or three times in a half hour. McLuhan excused himself to go to the bathroom, and a moment later the men heard a dull, unsettling noise from inside. When they opened the door McLuhan was lying on the floor. He had lost consciousness momentarily and collapsed. He seemed to recover immediately, however, and they took him home, where Corinne received him with concern but with no evident surprise at what had happened. (In retrospect, Upper, a medical doctor, wondered if McLuhan had been suffering from a petit mal epileptic seizure.) In fact, McLuhan had been suffering from blackouts since the late

1950s. His tense, apoplectic and the black 1966 was ty

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1950s. His coloring in those years had taken on its characteristic pale, tense, apoplectic hue. As the sixties wore on, his coloring became worse and the blackouts became more severe and more frequent. An episode in 1966 was typical.

He had been invited to appear before a class in bibliography taught by a colleague at St. Michael's, Sister Geraldine. When McLuhan, sitting at a desk, was asked a question by a student and he did not respond, Sister Geraldine turned around to see him with his head rolled back, one arm raised stiffly in front of his head as if to ward off a blow, and one of his legs stuck out at an awkward angle. Sister Geraldine stood closely in front of him, to shield him from the curious gaze of the students, and as she stood there she heard him sigh almost imperceptibly. Then a silence. She thought for a moment that he was dead. Then a light reappeared in his eyes, and the stiff arm and leg relaxed.

He looked at a stack of papers piled on the desk in front of him. "What are we going to do with these papers?" he asked, with the confusion of an extremely fatigued child. Sister Geraldine, trying to get him out of the classroom, said, "Didn't you tell me you had an appointment for 2:30?" He looked at her, made an effort at thought, and replied, very slowly, "Yes, I guess so." Sister Geraldine helped him out of the classroom and down a flight of stairs, but he refused to let her go with him back to his office.

McLuhan did his best to ignore these blackouts. If anything, he became even more active in 1966 and early 1967 and placed more demands on his mind and body. He was determined to capitalize on his sudden vogue before it disappeared. To that end, he worked simultaneously on at least six books. McLuhan considered this to be a perfectly sensible procedure, feeling that the insights derived from working on one subject stimulated related insights into other subjects.³³

One such project was a book commissioned in the early sixties by Clay Felker, then a consulting editor with Viking Press. Another book was commissioned by Harcourt, Brace and World on the subject of business management. McLuhan was supposed to collaborate on this book with Ralph Baldwin, who had acted throughout 1966 as McLuhan's unpaid agent in New York City.³⁴

A third book was to be a collaboration between McLuhan and William Jovanovich, president of Harcourt, Brace and World, on the future of publishing. (Jovanovich had suggested the project to McLuhan in the fall of 1965.) A fourth book was *Culture Is Our Business*, a study of advertisements on the order of *The Mechanical Bride*, but with a series of one-liners instead of essays accompanying each advertisement and with a completely altered tone and approach. McLuhan had been working on this book since the late fifties. A fifth project was a book, later published under the title *Through the Vanishing Point*, that McLuhan had been working on for several years in collaboration with Harley Parker. This book consisted of a

series of reproductions of paintings—also accompanied by one-liners and aphorisms—in which McLuhan and Parker attempted to illustrate the nature of acoustic versus visual space.

In addition to books, McLuhan poured out a series of articles. No longer were these limited to scholarly journals such as *Renascence* and the *Sewanee Review*. In 1966 and 1967 McLuhan produced articles, or articles in the form of interviews, for the periodicals *TV Guide*, *McCall's*, *Family Circle*, *Glamour*, *Look*, *Vogue*, and *Mademoiselle*. (In the two years after that, he would add *Playboy*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Harper's Bazaar* to the list of improbable publications carrying his byline.)

The quality of the writing, in this torrent of prose, did not boost McLuhan's reputation, even among those sympathetic to his ideas and willing to overlook the absence of conventional style. Overproduction was particularly unfortunate for McLuhan, who did not enjoy writing pieces of any length and considered that writing articles interfered with his thinking, since most of them retraced old ground. To facilitate the process, he dictated his work to his secretary, Margaret Stewart, or even to his wife. Often he did so while reclining on the green mattress of his chaise longue or on the floor. (He claimed that lying on the floor helped his back.) On one of the first occasions he dictated to Stewart, he startled the woman by disappearing behind his desk and speaking from somewhere near the region of the wastepaper basket.

From 1966 he could have used at least half a dozen secretaries, as he worked simultaneously on books, articles, and correspondence, suddenly switching from one to the next as his mood dictated. Margaret Stewart, who revered McLuhan and protected his time and energy as much as she could—often shielding him from bad news or problems in connection with the center—was invaluable. It was she who corrected the grammar and untangled some of the rougher syntactical knots in McLuhan's dictated sentences. Since the sentences were obscure enough—like many of McLuhan's statements in the classroom, they assumed that everyone had been present at the birth of McLuhan's ideas and had assisted with the midwifery—any help Stewart could give McLuhan's prose was welcome. Her help could extend only so far, however. McLuhan was being entirely candid when he told a friend that he was not very proud of his books.³⁵

The selling of McLuhan was most clearly demonstrated in two articles he wrote with *Look* editor George Leonard for that magazine in 1967. The first one, on the future of education, was an interesting specimen of McLuhan's prose simplified, as it were, for the reader by Leonard. The article itself was full of the breathless predictions of sweeping change characteristic of the sixties—"By the time this year's babies have become 1989's graduates (if college 'graduation' then exists), schooling as we now know it may be only a memory"—and a kind of progressive, New Age optimism that was far more characteristic of Leonard's mentality than McLuhan's.³⁶

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The second article, on the future of sex, contained some rather good predictions. The authors clearly saw that the image of the he-man and the John Wayne type of masculinity would continue to decline and that gender roles would blur and meld, with men having to make the more wrenching adjustments. They saw that the pill would have a devastating effect on romantic love and sexual reticence. They even predicted marriage contracts.

The article also contained some rather bad predictions. McLuhan's hopefulness that the Dagwoodian male would finally disappear prompted a prediction that homosexuality, which McLuhan had viewed in the forties as an inevitable by-product of Dagwood and his aggressive mate, would also fade. Clearly McLuhan did not relish, or predict, any feminist revolution that would result in "a brittle feminist dame" — as opposed to a "womanly woman" — becoming the president of the corporation or the secretary of state. Like the education article, "The Future of Sex" was full of a dreamy, progressive optimism: "It is possible that the family of the future may find its stability in constant change, in the encouragement of what is unique in each of its members; that marriage, freed from the compulsions and restrictions surrounding high-intensity SEX, can become far more *sensual*, that is to say, more integral."³⁷ Eight years after its publication, in response to a request to reprint the article, McLuhan asked that his byline be removed since he said he had no part in writing it.³⁸ This was only a slight exaggeration. In the mid-sixties McLuhan was entering a period of his life when he was willing to have others turn out material, more or less related to his thought, under his name, particularly if the money was good.

McLuhan was extremely poor at establishing priorities. In many ways, he seemed to lose control of his schedule and was constantly engaging in projects that even he felt, after a while, were a waste of time. At one point, he made efforts to cut down on distractions by setting aside mornings at the center for writing, kicking out all the hangers-on and visitors walking in off the street so he could get some work done. But McLuhan could never discipline himself to any remotely tight schedule. For one thing, he hated to wear a wrist watch and it was years before he broke down and put a clock in his office. His sense of time was decidedly pre-Gutenberg. Corinne frequently had to act as his schedule patrol, coming into his office with her tilting "Where's my Marshall?" and hauling him off to some appointment.

Throughout 1966, as the great North American publicity machine continued to promote his reputation, the demands on his time increased tremendously. In the space of a year — from February 1966 to March 1967 — lengthy profiles and treatments of McLuhan appeared in *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *Life*, the *Saturday Review*, *Esquire*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. It was becoming impossible for a literate person to avoid hearing or reading his name. The great majority of intellectuals and academics, it is safe to estimate, remained hostile to McLuhan, despite the flurry of public-

ity and his intense following among a minority of their class, not to mention his following among intellectually inclined journalists, advertisers, businessmen, entertainers, and cultural revolutionaries like Abbie Hoffman and John Lennon. For every Susan Sontag who proclaimed her admiration of McLuhan, there seemed to be a dozen Dwight MacDonalds and Christopher Rickeses straining to achieve the definitive put-down of the man.

"An obscure professor of English from the Canadian provinces has succeeded in perpetrating a hoax so gigantic that it shows every sign of becoming an international intellectual scandal," wrote the editor of the *Journal of Existentialism*. In doing so, he spoke for legions of McLuhan detractors in the universities and in the cultural journals.³⁹ The cry of scandal usually boiled down to three points. The first was that his prose style was deplorable. The second was that he was ignorant and totally fanciful, as proved by his cavalier treatments of facts. (It didn't help when McLuhan defended himself by saying of his works, "If a few details here and there are wacky, it doesn't matter a hoot.")⁴⁰ The third was that he was complacent about the phenomena he described and indifferent to matters of social justice.

McLuhan's response to the last criticism was simple. He maintained that if people allowed their senses to be walked all over by private manipulators of the media, they really had no rights left worth talking about. He did not, however, attempt any convincing counterattack against his critics or detailed rebuttal of their arguments. Such an attempt would have been foreign to his entire approach. Instead, he did his best to ignore the criticism. He knew that if he took it seriously he would end up paralyzed by it. Moreover, he felt, with considerable justification, that a great deal of the criticism was intensely personal. Something about McLuhan drew forth astonishing venom from that class of individual that T. S. Eliot described as "the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter."

In the midst of this vortex of talk and writing, McLuhan was from time to time reminded that he was head of a family. As the pressures of McLuhan's celebrity increased, they threatened to turn his private life into a shambles.

In quieter times, McLuhan was perfectly sensible of what constituted a restful home life. A friend who had been having great trouble selling a house once approached him for advice, and McLuhan told her to have baroque music playing on the stereo, a fire roaring in the fireplace, and cookies baking in the oven when prospects came. This multisensory ploy worked; within two days the house was sold. As far as his own home was concerned, however, any attempts to create a cheery domestic haven were undermined by the extreme demands on his time, by the terrifying recurrences of his blackouts, and by the turbulence of having three teenagers and one young adult (Eric, age twenty-four in the fall of 1966) still living at home.

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The two eldest daughters, the twins, twenty-one years old, had left home to pursue their own careers. Teri was studying sociology as an undergraduate at the University of Ottawa and was working for the Company of Young Canadians, a government-sponsored volunteer organization devoted to social work projects. Mary was secretary to the dean of the Golden Gate University Law School in San Francisco and was apparently living a rich version of the California life, with summer vacations at Lake Tahoe, winter treks to Squaw Valley, and New Year's Eve parties with Frank Sinatra.

The two youngest daughters, Stephanie and Elizabeth, as well as Eric and the youngest child, Michael, remained at Wells Hill Road, ensuring that the household remained reasonably lively.

Occasionally, McLuhan made his presence felt in a more or less benign fashion. When the daughters brought home their dates, for example, McLuhan would sometimes summon them to the living room, where he lay stretched out on the floor in front of the fireplace, so he could talk to them. This friendly invitation usually succeeded in making the young men extremely nervous.

In 1965 Eric became a paid assistant to his father. He had spent three years, from 1961 to 1964, in the U.S. Air Force and had returned to study at the University of Toronto. Always the most troublesome and rebellious of the McLuhan children, Eric began a remarkable transformation at this time that led to his becoming, on and off for the rest of McLuhan's life, a virtual slave to his father. His early passions had been model airplanes and electronics. Now he discovered a passion for his father's literary patron saint, James Joyce. He immersed himself in the depths of *Finnegans Wake*, to the point where his pleased father began telling people, in the late sixties, that his son was the world's best interpreter of *Finnegans Wake* and possibly the best Joyce critic there was.⁴¹

In 1965, with some advice from his father, Eric began writing a book on *Finnegans Wake* that, not surprisingly, showed this arcane masterpiece to be a complete guide to the media, just as McLuhan Senior had insisted all along. With his father's help, Eric "deciphered" the key to *Finnegans Wake*: the ten "thunders" that announce the beginning of new cycles of human history. Joyce had predicted that no one would decipher the key for three hundred years, McLuhan informed one correspondent; he and his son had just proved the great man wrong. To another correspondent he predicted that Eric's book would have great impact on Joyce studies: it was an incomparable contribution to the field.⁴²

The manuscript was submitted to Viking Press. Alan Williams, then an editor at Viking, recalls that the manuscript received a reasonably warm response, including a favorable report from one reader, Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of mythology and co-author of McLuhan's old standby, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*. Evidently, the response was not quite warm enough for Viking to publish it. In December 1967 Eric signed a