

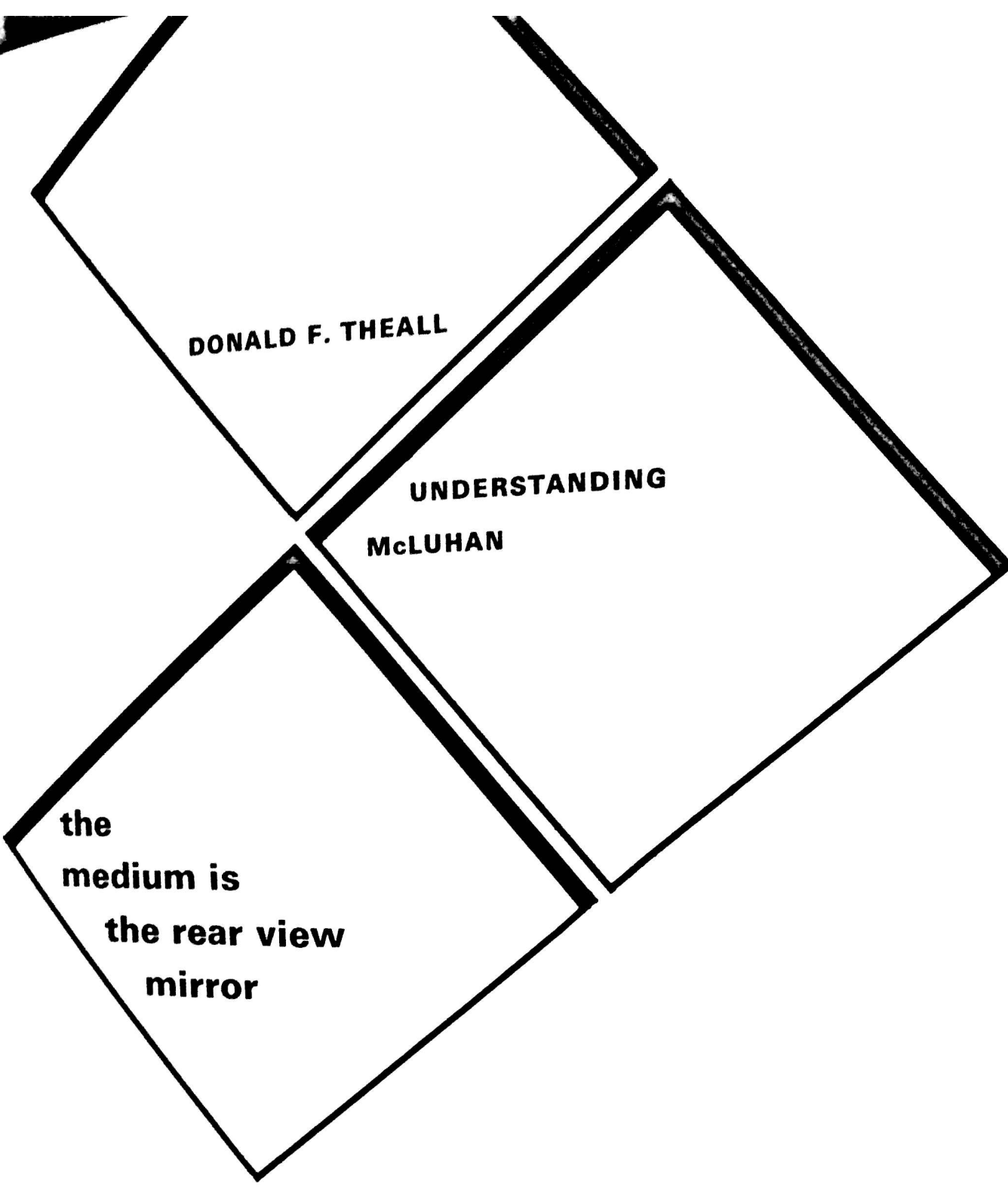
The Medium is the Rear view Mirror

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Understanding McLuhan
DONALD F. THEALL



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**UNDERSTANDING
McLUHAN**

**the
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the rear view
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McGill-Queen's University Press

**MONTREAL AND LONDON
1971**

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© McGill-Queen's University Press 1971
ISBN 0 7735 0093-6 cloth; ISBN 0 7735 0106-1 paper
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 79-135417
Printed in the U.S.A. by
Vail-Ballou Press, Inc.
Designed by Robert R. Reid
and Susan McPhee

McLuhan's world-wide reputation comes from *Understanding Media*, and it is to this book that we must turn to further consider McLuhan the humanist and educator.

Few people remember that the first version of *Understanding Media* was that mimeographed report reproduced for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters under an NDEA contract "to provide an approach to media and a syllabus for teaching the nature and effects of media in secondary schools." In pursuing this earlier project, McLuhan tried to follow procedures from art criticism. In the "Report on Project in Understanding Media" (III 1), he claims his approach was confirmed by Heinrich Woelfflin who held the belief that "*the effect is the thing that counts, not the sensuous facts*" (McLuhan's italics). Woelfflin does say this about the difference between Michelangelo's and Bernini's sculpture, in his *Principles of Art History* (62), but McLuhan elevates a specific difference to a general principle. What began as a curriculum designed to show how to present an understanding of media effects through a type of artistic analysis as part of an educational programme became one of the major books of the sixties. The result firmly fixes McLuhan in the role of a modern-day humanist.

Nothing would seem to confirm more the fact that McLuhan sees himself as an Erasmus of the media world than his analysis of Erasmus in *Counterblast*:

It was very hard at first for the contemporaries of Erasmus to grasp that the printed book meant that the main channel of information and discipline was no longer the spoken word or the single language. Erasmus was the first to act on the awareness that part of the new revolution would be felt in the classroom. He put the old oral scholasticism into his *Adagia* and *Similia*. The same situation confronts us. (CB 132)

To follow *The Gutenberg Galaxy* with a project of curriculum design for educators strongly suggests that McLuhan tried to put

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the old literary humanism into the guidebooks for the "new revolution" (now the old media revolution) in the classrooms of the sixties. What appears to be at its root is a transference of the historical knowledge of language and literary studies and the methodological knowledge of aesthetics and art criticism to a new kind of media analysis, an analysis of the effects rather than the sensuous facts. It is intriguing to see, along with McLuhan's shift in approach, the transference of the major prejudice of I. A. Richards, the founder of the New Criticism in literature, from literary criticism to media analysis, for in *The Principles of Literary Criticism* Richards argues in favour of a criticism based on effects rather than structure or intention.

As the report for the educational broadcasters became transformed into the book which declared "The medium is the message," it retained its close alliance with the arts. Media, in fact, became, according to McLuhan, symbolic translators, an idea which he associated with the Latin term *translatio* (metaphor). "All media are active metaphors" (UM 57). Consequently, the way to approach media is similar to the way one approaches metaphor, as an art form. Any technology could be treated in this way for McLuhan, because technologies metamorphosize or translate nature into human art. Consequently, in approaching the problems of *Understanding Media* an artist's perspective is important, for only the arts can handle the world of contemporary media. "Our conventional response to all media," as McLuhan asserts, "namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numbance of the 'technological idiot'" (UM 18). Therefore, only those interested in form as form and the nature of effects—the serious artists—are "able to encounter technology with impunity" (UM 18).

The role of the artist goes even further than that, for McLuhan follows Wyndham Lewis in arguing that "The Artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present" (UM 65). Now McLuhan broadens the definition of the artist in ways which follow a lengthy tradition and especially suggests a similarity to Renaissance attitudes such as Puttenham's or Sidney's, pointing out that the artist is "the man in any field, scientific or humanistic.

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who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time" (UM 65). Art, therefore, becomes somewhat synonymous with "integral awareness." But it also becomes a protective device against the process of change, for he also claims that art provides "exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties" (UM 66). This still reflects some interesting overtones of I. A. Richards' view that a poem rearranges and reharmonizes the nervous system in preparation for action, though McLuhan's emphasis appears to be defensive rather than neutral as Richards' appears to be.

Obviously after such statements, McLuhan must, in pursuing *Understanding Media*, assume the primacy of art as a mode of understanding. His education theory, like that of the Renaissance, seems to join the arts and the basic educative processes. The artist, after all, is an educator in such a perspective, "teaching delightfully" as Sidney put it, and that view is quite consistent with McLuhan's earlier analyses of Joyce's educative role in "James Joyce: Trivial and Quadrivial." It is with this in mind that the principle "The medium is the message" must be approached and the whole of the analyses of media placed. Raymond Williams and Kenneth Burke can find value in McLuhan precisely because of this close affiliation with the arts and the awareness of the aesthetic component as a vital factor in contemporary society.

"The medium is the message," then, becomes quite comprehensible as a way of approaching the problem of form in media. Art is first of all involved in what Focillon and Read call the *life of forms*, and *Understanding Media* explores the forms of life. To reinforce his artistic approach with more apparently "scientific" or "disciplinary" approaches, he uses the work of Kenneth Boulding in *The Image* where it is suggested that "The meaning of a message is the change which it produces in the image" (UM 26), which is essentially a way of treating meaning in terms of change of form. Yet McLuhan seems to go further than this and to be lured by his own devices—to allow the formula to come to mean that the medium is everything and the message is irrelevant as a way of approaching the meaning. In his earlier report he had said:

... any and all curricula are obsolete with regard to subject-matter. All that remains to study are the media themselves, as forms, as modes ever creating new assumptions and hence new objectives. (Report IV 1)

Now with such a view it becomes important whether or not form and media are synonymous or whether only media themselves are metaphors. But in effect the term "media" itself is also a metaphor for thinking about form in some special ways.

What does McLuhan choose to treat as "media"? His first and now very famous example is the electric light, the "medium without a message." The electric light, he argues, is pure information, and this demonstrates clearly that the content of one medium is always another. Seeing that McLuhan is interested in the arts, there is certainly an intriguing mythic reason for beginning with "light," and with man-made light, for it is the original translation of nature into art at the most basic of levels—"Let there be light." Somewhere the pseudo-poetry of *Understanding Media* surely carries this emotive overtone. But what does it have to do with the concept of media itself? It really stretches the analogical use of the term medium to the utmost and allows the reader to instantly become aware that the wide range of "mediums" participate in that class of things called media in an analogical, and a rather broadly analogical, way.

A glance at the chapter titles of *Understanding Media* Part II confirms this impression, for the list of media includes: The Spoken Word; The Written Word; Roads; Number; Clothing; Housing; Money; Clocks; The Print; Comics; The Printed Word; Wheel, Bicycle and Airplane [all gathered together as one]; The Photograph; Press; Motorcar; Ads; Games; Telegraph; The Typewriter; The Telephone; The Phonograph; Movies; Radio; Television; Weapons; Automation. The list is interesting, for it links things that exist as expressive forms in very different ways. Each of the classes might be regrouped, but what McLuhan does, using his analogy, is insist that we recognize the analogies between them as cultural expressions even at the risk of some considerable confusion about the fact that Speech, Clocks, Motorcars, Ads, The Telephone, and Automation all express cultural messages in rather different ways with rather different intents.

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In the earlier study, he linked this quite openly to what it really is—the study of cultural objects:

We are obliged today to learn the language of objects, and especially those objects that are media. For they can pull the rug out from under your world or pop a new one under you while you are unaware. (Report III 13)

But it is also interesting that in the earlier report he did not include anything that would not normally be described as a medium except possibly the telephone and telegraph, which are still forms of telecommunications. Using the concept media, in a rather broad way, rather than using the concept of cultural objects, forces attention on the latent expressive import possibly implicit in cultural objects. But when it is linked to a principle like “The medium is the message,” it leads to some rather complex and possibly confused developments. To relate together media in all the different connotations involved, McLuhan must adopt the theory that technologies are extensions of ourselves and attribute this character to all of the media. This is so important it forms the subtitle of *Understanding Media*: “The Extensions of Man.”

Now each of these media, according to McLuhan, can be considered as “extensions,” for speech is a kind of outering of the self, and the motorcar, an extension of the foot. Again, of course, the technique depends on the use of a rather extended metaphor or analogy; but granted that, the analogy is comprehensible and can stimulate thought. Yet it is interesting to see how McLuhan actually develops this idea of extension. He relates it to the Narcissus myth. Narcissus’ image mirrored in the pool becomes “an extension of himself” which “numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image” (UM 41). The poetic attractiveness of the Narcissus figure is that somehow it implies alienation while seeming to make the same implication about media and extensions. The result is that this figure of the benumbed, alienated personality adrift in a technological world that McLuhan has vaguely invoked becomes related to a solipsist ensnared by his own beauty, the prototype of any man confronted with the discovery of a new medium. Yet McLuhan naturally stresses that Narcissus falls in love with an

extension of himself, not himself. Possibly in the sixties Narcissus would have worn a black jacket and ridden a motorcycle?

The point to the parable (and the use of such parables is incidentally closely modelled on Bacon's use of allegory in his study of *The Antique Gods*) is that we are servomechanisms of our technologies (UM 46). To use an extension is to accept it into ourselves, upon which it drastically alters our perceptions. But McLuhan is prepared to push the matter much further and to suggest:

Physiologically, man in the normal use of technology (or his variously extended body) is perpetually modified by it and in turn finds ever new ways of modifying his technology. Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. (UM 46)

The concept of "extensions" has led us from Narcissus, who lost his sexual identity in the replication of his image, to a new Narcissus who fecundates his image, the technology that he has generated and that is changing him. Providing one allows McLuhan's first formula to lead him on this path, the end is fairly certain, for McLuhan is merely limiting an account of "the life of forms" in the arts or in the biological world to man's artifacts viewed as forms. Even the image of the bee which he allows to enter comes from the traditional classical image of the poet creating new forms by sampling the older flowers of rhetoric and poetic. Now as a pedagogical device for bringing a man involved in a machine world to a comprehension of the life of forms, the process might have some value, especially if it were to go on to relate forms to society, and art to industry as Herbert Read has done. But here the intent and direction is rather different and the danger might well be in coming to believe that the mental embrace of the machines drained all sexual energy, leaving none for other organic activities.

Since each extension is taken by McLuhan to be an extension of the nervous system or the sensory system, each technology affects the general ratio between the senses. This is a natural enough development of his view in the *Galaxy*. We have seen its relation to the mediaeval doctrine of the *sensus communis* and its involvement with what McLuhan comes to describe as "tactility." In this respect again, the electric light is used as a crucial example:

If the student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives that they touch. (UM 52)

In a similar way, "the press opened up the 'human interest' keyboard after the telegraph had restructured the press medium [and] the movie took over the novel and the newspaper and the stage all at once [so that the phenomenon is really one where] media as extensions of our senses institute new ratios, not only among our private senses, but among themselves, when they interact among themselves" (UM 52-3). Now what really seems to be going on here is that McLuhan is speaking about a social phenomenon as if it were an interior phenomenon. He is studiously avoiding the analysis of social change, while attempting to account for it in terms of media effect on sensory and nervous structures in individuals as well as in some hypothetically extended world of media.

If we sweep aside the pseudo-objectivity of McLuhan's quasi-positivistic pose—his desire to account for effects by formal changes within given structures of physical or physiological organization—and proceed to realize that his artistic mind can simultaneously see these descriptions as analogues of what is happening in society, then his vision is much more tolerable. It may be that his own approach biases him so that, after giving us an account of how a cultural object like an electric light can change social relations and aesthetic perceptions, he fails to be able to relate instruments such as the telephone or television to such questions as what they do to the total social structure.

To digress for a moment, let us examine McLuhan's treatment of the telephone. In his treatment of the concept of "extension" and ratio of the senses he co-opts a Joyce phrase, TELEVISION KILLS TELEPHONY IN BROTHERS BROIL (FW 52), and he suggests that since the telephone extends the ear and voice while television extends touch and sense interplay, this creates a media conflict (UM 265). Apart from the fact that Joyce applies his phrase (which he does not headline or capitalize) to a storytelling situation with a shift towards an evocatively descriptive

style, the phrase suggests an emphasis of eye over ear. Yet surely Joyce's application is to formal considerations different from those which McLuhan invokes in "The Telephone," and telephony contains the pun "phony" to which McLuhan himself calls attention.

But McLuhan goes on from this to build up a mosaic of what the telephone is and how it affects us. Among other effects he suggests: the brothel disappears and the callgirl who is a generalist not a specialist appears; visible speech was a bad name for the phone, since it is impossible to visualize on the phone (according to McLuhan). In fact, he argues that the phone by reducing visualizing (which the TV set paradoxically does as well) increasingly prepares us for the contemporary world and thus it is possible to suggest that the Bell Telephone research departments do not really understand the instrument. From this point he can lead on to questioning the fundamental research of Bell Lab workers:

As already mentioned, the Shanner and Weaver hypothesis about Information Theory, like the Morgenstern Game Theory, tends to ignore the function of the form as form. Thus both Information Theory and Game Theory have bogged down into sterile banalities, but the psychic and social changes resulting from these forms have altered the whole of our lives. (UM 267)

The telephone properly understood then demands complete participation because of its very low definition (technical impreciseness in reproducing the signal), which McLuhan claims forces us to supply more of the completion, thus involving us more, and through such a demand could, if we understood it as a way of teaching math, reform our information theory. "Doodling" while on the phone is a function of this participatory nature of the phone, since "we strengthen and complete it by the use of all the other senses" (UM 267-8). Throughout other parts of the discussion of the phone there are suggestions about the phone and privacy and the phone as creating a situation where "only the authority of knowledge will work" (UM 272). The structure of the phone presumably favours pluralism of centres and decentralization and re-creates the need to play roles rather than occupy delegated jobs (UM 273). In this total analysis of the phone, there are many insights worth thinking about, but in the manner in

which they are presented they appear as little more than that "superior arrogance" that McLuhan so often tells us is necessary when we approach media.

If McLuhan's analysis of the electric light is correct, then the patterns that the phone has created, both in the service industries like the phone company itself and in service industries functioning largely by phone, are an important feature of the way that the phone transforms social relations for some of these affected by it. *The New York Review of Books* (March 1970) recently showed some of the implications of this transformation: the mechanization of individuals; the subtle invasion of privacy and the like. It showed how the organizing of the phone company's service representatives into groups of ten with detailed manuals of instruction depersonalizes their activity. They are also subject to potential monitoring from a number of external and higher managerial level sources. This does not become part of McLuhan's image of the phone, though he does suggest that the phone brought down the walls and eliminated privacy in stock-brokerage firms, and he does hint that the phone is all right because the phone company does not understand it and therefore things will change for the better in spite of the phone company's rigidity.

But this optimism is based on assumptions about the magic of the phone and about its aesthetic nature, which may be only partial truths because viewed only in a partial perspective. It is the cumulative detail of McLuhan's vision that is frightening. The individual aphorisms are often enticing and exciting—suggestive, whether right or wrong—because of the problems they raise. But, in total, if it is assumed that the sensory mechanisms do not work the way McLuhan suggests they do (because in fact the phone as an extension is not really an extension of the sensory system except in a metaphorical way), then there is real danger that the phone does not automatically result in higher participation and decentralization. It may well be that that is how phones should be used for the best ends of man, but it does not necessarily mean that is the way they will eventually be used. Four and one-half centuries of book culture did not necessarily produce all of the optimal uses of the book that its Renaissance praisers might have expected.

But the point of absurdity is definitely reached when McLuhan rejects Information Theory and Morgenstern Game Theory because they ignore "the function of form as form." Here, as he points out earlier, he is really concerned with the inability of the theorists to understand the complexity of variables in the actual structure of a human social or psychological situation, which is not quite the same thing as understanding the function of form as form. In any case, the telephone by presumably favouring theoretical physics of a European variety (though Europeans were far less phone oriented) is not going to automatically change the situation merely by providing a new context for the teaching of mathematics. The fecundity of the McLuhanite imagination is excellent as a source of invention, but the total view of man's creative activity surpasses invention.

McLuhan discussing the phone omits many of the most vital aspects, although we may read them into his account by pursuing its suggestivity to the maximum. When he tells us to think about and study phones as cultural objects, he is doing a major service (though he is not a pioneer in doing it, as he himself would admit citing Mumford and Giedion), but when he will allow us to become hypnotized by features of the phone and its relation to the human person that are possibly accidental or incidental, it seems to me that he is dangerous if taken seriously and foolish if not.

Although he may seem to develop the telephone theme in later writings, the same essential prejudices are part of the way he considers the problem. In the January 1970 *Dew Line* entitled "Agnew Agonistes" he still finds himself involved with the phone and phone networks, for his theme is that the wire service is transforming news into a non-private activity like photography: "You cannot commit photography alone" (DL 3). So, according to McLuhan, the telephone and telegraph become devices for destroying government bureaucracies and business. He cites the example of the total erosion of the Postal System. Satellites, in fact, have carried the process to a point where it is occurring at a "self-liquidating speed." In fact, the whole Agnew phenomenon can be seen in one aspect as drawing attention to the fact that the phone's effect on human life has never been examined "except by

the ad agencies—"Phone Grandma Today" (DL 15). The conclusion is that:

The telephone networks, as shapers of work and decision-making processes, far outweigh the messages conveyed on the wires. It is purest paradox that millions of commuters go to town just to use the phone. The abolition of old time—and space—values in every level of the social and political processes that accompanies the mere existence of the telephone, is merely an instance of the unstudied and unrecognized factors in the current crumbling of all existing bureaucracies of the world. (DL 16)

Now this both says and does not say what we have been discussing above, for while it suggests some knowledge of the nature and extent of what the phone does, it certainly avoids worrying about the bureaucratizing implications by suggesting that they are self-undoing. But is the matter that simple? Anything may affect us psychologically, but the effect is never necessarily analyzable in simple, single-minded directions. And besides, more than time-and-space values are involved in the changes that the value system undergoes. McLuhan makes us aware of the "cultural object," the phone, the possibility it might have "effects" on a massive scale, but he builds an automatic optimism into his mystique of what the phone can do. To see the world in a single phone is an act of creative imagination. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan has plundered the possibilities and produced a Book of Common-places which might be used for exfoliating visions of the world out of a single phone.

But such visions necessarily need to be ordered visions, for even post-Gutenberg Man (Computer Man) has a rage for order (though an awareness that order is not equatable with the rigidities of narrowly conceived laws, moral rigidities, or police states). That order could move out from the formal contingencies of the phone as an instrument: out from the nature of phone conversations; the posture of teenagers and adults on phones; the demands on time that phones impose; the demands on performance that phones impose; the ways that phones accelerate activity; the effect of different modes of phone networks within an organization; the modes of organization that having phones impose on a person, on a

household, on an office, or within the organization of the telephone system itself. From this to the type of business that phones make necessary, the way phones influence other information transfer, and the way that phones change views of privacy and provide threats to privacy and reduce our sensitivity to openness—all might be issues within some massive yet-to-be-written "Phonyad," or some brilliant sociological study of the phone. McLuhan cannot be condemned for suggesting this possibility, but he can hardly be praised for the random generation of a few creative thoughts as notes for a prolegomena to the phone as a cultural object.

If this lengthy digression suggests what McLuhan does with one medium in *Understanding Media*, it is possible to generalize the pattern to each of the media on his list. It is exciting to be reminded that television changes our whole life style by having it described as tactile, meaning the interplay of the senses; but again the important interaction between man and set, at home and in production, disappears in McLuhan's magic media land. What disappoints one is that a socially alert, psychologically tutored, philosophically disciplined use of the art would have provided so much more. The difficulties are further intensified when the level of abstraction of the social object under consideration in relation to the concept of media is not made clear.

A dress is not a phone, and fashion as an industry is not Bell Telephone. From McLuhan's point of view they may both share the disadvantage of not knowing their own business, but their relationships with people are very different. After what Carlyle has managed with clothing in the *Sartor Resartus*, McLuhan is disappointing in restricting his analysis of clothing so radically, and interestingly enough he does not mention Carlyle's philosophy, even though it plays an important role in *Finnegans Wake*.

McLuhan's theme favours a sensuousity which is more totally involving and naturally tactile as against the purely visual modes that he satirized in *The Mechanical Bride*. He suggests that American dress is moving to a more revealing inclusive mode—toreador pants, beehive hairdos (which date *Understanding Media*) and later examples such as minis, net stockings and cut-outs and see-throughs—suggesting that "To a person using the whole sensorium, nudity is the richest possible expression of structural

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form" (UM 122). With this no one can disagree, for it is at the root of the art of the nude and the erotic dance of the body.

Yet clothing is surely involved with a dialectic play between concealment and revelation which has as much to do with the erotic as has sculptured nudity. The real interest comes from appearing with bare breasts one day and in maxi skirts and long sleeves the next. Some genuine trends towards freedom are possibly present, but this is more likely to be found in the persistence of the bikini or the continuing increase of abandoning undergarments or the Brigitte Bardot inspired and Jackie Kennedy approved fashion of going bare-foot. One imagines McLuhan losing himself in his contrast between Europe and America which suggests the transplantation of the mechanical bride from America to Europe just as the freer sensuousness of Europe moves to America. Perhaps so, but where did minis and bralessness and net stockings and bare feet begin as contemporary styles? Certainly partly in America, but certainly partly in France, Italy, and England.

Kroeber and other anthropologists have made fashion a serious index of national states of mind. McLuhan has appropriated part of this insight, but he merely teases the reader by stripping a few American girls to their bikinis rather than examining the whole range of uniforms, alternative styles of dress at different ages, and the like. But just as teenage patterns and postures and manners do not become an intrinsic part of the phone, so too there is no real eroticism in McLuhan's discussion of the erotic revolution in American dress.

What is wrong with specifically discussing the effects on people themselves of textures which are more sensuous; of styles that demand more openness; of exposed skin which receives more sensation of heat and light and dust; and of the way in which the greater variety that this permits refocuses attention on the human image—its eyes and face and neck and breasts and navel and midriff and bikini-triangled pubic area and the legs and the feet? When McLuhan's "Mechanical Bride" shed her high-heeled shoes and took off her corset and her bra, the revolution of which he is prophet had in part occurred. Is not the proper human symbol of his so-called electric age then a sinuously moving, sculptured body with the freedom of a modern dancer undulating across the grass,