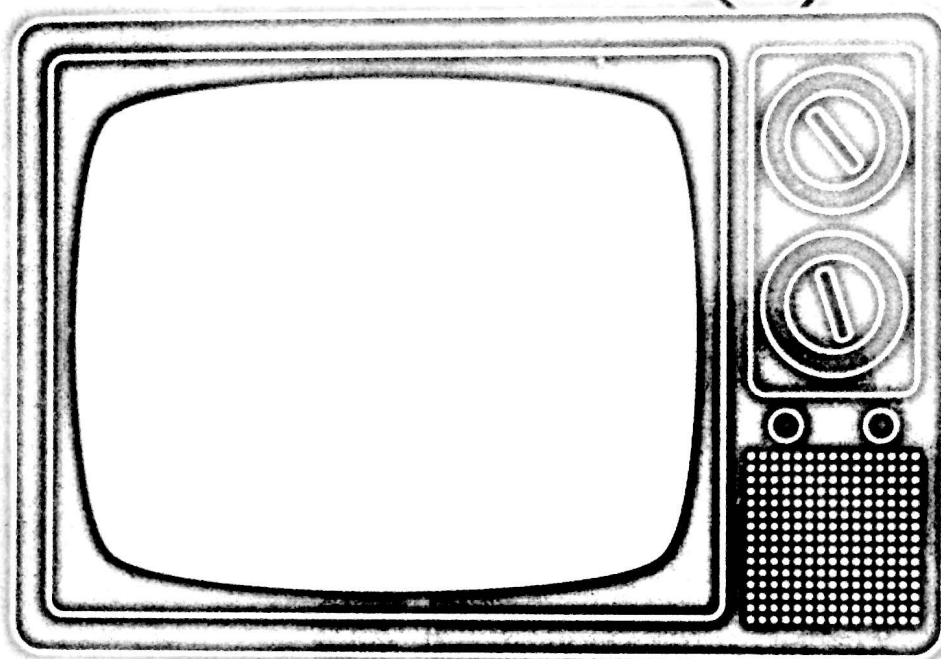


COLLEGE OF NEW CALEDONIA LIBRARY

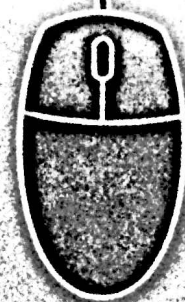


5 1111 002085570



**Marshall McLuhan:  
You Know Nothing  
of My Work!**

**Douglas Coupland**



Copyright © 2010 by Douglas Coupland

"The AQ Test" appears courtesy of Simon Baron-Cohen and originally appeared  
in the 2001 *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*

"Can the Internet Change Your Brain?" by Nick Heath. Copyright © 2010 CBS Interactive  
Limited. All rights reserved. ZDNET is a registered service mark of CBS Interactive Limited.

First published in Canada by Penguin Canada.

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any  
form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, scanning, or  
any information or storage retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher,  
except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Atlas & Co. *Publishers*  
15 West 26th Street, 2nd floor  
New York, NY 10010  
[www.atlasandco.com](http://www.atlasandco.com)

Distributed to the trade by W. W. Norton & Company

Printed in the United States

Atlas & Company books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use.  
For information, please write to [info@atlasandco.com](mailto:info@atlasandco.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN: 978-1-935633-16-7

14 13 12 11 10 1 2 3 4 5 6

## Is He for Real?

As Marshall aged, his eccentricities became more common and more pronounced. He had a massive collection of jokes and cartoons and loved sharing them with almost anyone in almost any situation—the sorts of corny things your parents email you that have a half-dozen FWD tags in the header. Marshall began his classes and his paid speeches with jokes and bad puns, partly because punning is a pathology (so he had no choice but to pun) and partly because starting an event this way unsettled the audience. *Who is this guy? Is he for real? Is he on drugs? Oh, good God, these are the worst jokes I've ever heard. That pun was atrocious. This guy is nuts.* And then he'd hit them with a wall of ideas, swamping his audience with "probes," forcing them to challenge their basic assumptions, often alienating them, frequently disturbing them, and always leaving in his wake lots to talk about at the dinner table.

Most anyone who attended or audited his classes or went to any of his speeches will agree that Marshall became random quickly. He was tangential and self-contradictory, and could really piss people off. With his protective oblivious coating, it all bounced off him. He was out to stimulate people into making up their own minds and stimulating their own ideas, using his thinking as a catalyst. If they

became wrapped up in a specific, it meant they'd lost sight of the big picture. He almost felt sorry for people who took him the wrong way.

There were underlying biological reasons for the acceleration of Marshall's tics and eccentricities. Throughout the early 1960s he began to, for lack of a better word, *freeze* when in public, either teaching or in social situations. He'd be talking and then he would *stop*. His eyes would go blank, and then after a minute or two he'd continue where he had left off. It was disconcerting and worried those close to him. Medically, there were three potential causes for these freezings: perhaps they were mini strokes, or they may have been petit mal seizures (minor epileptic seizures), or they could have been related to a benign brain tumour the size of a lemon found in his brain later on in the 1960s. With each event, Marshall became a bit more of a prisoner of the wiring and plumbing of his head. Biology is not destiny, but it sure sets some boundaries.

## The *Massage* Releases

The years 1967 and 1968 were by far the most frantic, glamorous, bizarre, and exhausting of Marshall's life. In 1967 *The Medium Is the Massage* was published. In the three years since 1964, his signature phrase, "the medium is the

message," had become a cliché; by punning on his own cliché, Marshall reclaimed ownership of it. Marshall loved collaborating on projects, and his sole job on *Massage* was to sign off on the layouts and the text and provide the title. The book was (Warhol-like) actually written by a McLuhan enthusiast, a writer named Jerome Agel, and it was art-produced by Quentin Fiore, a master typographer and designer.

It is this book that turns most young people on to McLuhan, offering a step-by-step tutorial through the major investigations Marshall and his centre had made since 1963. The book is the graphic embodiment of the hippie era's optimistic side, and it is a quick read—a perfect McLuhan 101 for anyone sitting on the fence. *The Medium Is the Massage* turned McLuhan from being popular into being pop, and it sold a cliché-but-true million copies.

## The Bronx

The biggest news of 1967 was in January, when Marshall was named Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York's leading Catholic college, Fordham University. This one-year commitment came with a grant of \$100,000, of which \$60,000 was to cover the costs of personnel and facilities. It was a dream grant that allowed Marshall the

freedom and budget to investigate anything he chose. Oddly, Marshall wasn't at first inclined to accept. He may have been flying off forty or fifty times a year, but that was merely travel. Marshall was a homebody and didn't fancy the idea of being away from his home and family for a year. But, as most of his family would be coming with him, and as he could hire old pals Ted Carpenter and Harley Parker with his research budget, along with his son Eric, Marshall went along with this once-in-a-lifetime gig.

The family arrived in New York in early September 1967 to a huge house in a nice part of the Bronx, and on September 18 Marshall gave his first lecture to two hundred or so staff and students. Its topic was that war is a form of education, that it teaches people the extent to which media inventions have altered our world and our perception of our own identities. As it wove between the sensibly bold and the offbeat, the wacky and the blatantly offensive, it also discussed the notion that TVs are, in some ways, X-ray machines, and that the speed of communication has turned the world into a global village. In addition, he discussed his theory that changes in communication media were producing a new, invisible environment that was having a profound effect on the world. He made the amazing point that "People aren't that fond of education. So war has been

misclassified. It is actually a teaching machine." A few minutes later, he went on to say, "The Negro is turned on by electricity. The old literacy never turned him on because it rejected and degraded the Negro, but electricity turns him on and accepts him totally as an integral human being."<sup>24</sup>

### **A Gross Insult to the Brain**

Students emerged from Marshall's lecture with thousands of little question marks dancing above their heads. This was a dance that would continue throughout the autumn as Marshall's behaviour became odder and odder while a tumour grew in his brain. One evening, at a museum gala, he gave a speech in which he blamed fire trucks for creating ghettos. (Exactly.) His blackouts became alarmingly frequent, but Marshall never wanted to give any indication of weakness, however slight. Finally, in the fall of 1967, Corinne and the family broke through Marshall's fortress of denial and begged him to get help. He went in for brain surgery on the morning of November 25, 1967. The doctor exercised supreme caution, and Marshall's surgery became, at that point, the longest recorded neurological surgery in medical history.

<sup>24</sup> And we're right back to footnote 13.

Corinne and the family had braced themselves for all possible worst-case scenarios (paralysis, profound memory loss, retardation—a terrifyingly long list of possibilities). When Marshall woke up an hour after surgery, the surgeon asked him how he felt, and he replied that it would depend on one's definition of "feeling." He was back again—*phew!*—but he was back in reduced form. He had, in fact, lost swathes of memory; curiously, he had trouble remembering books he'd read many times over. He lived with staggering pain for months afterwards, and he lost some of his ability to be civil to colleagues and students. In addition, his hypersensitivity to noises, always high, became extreme.