

TV is an environmental force, we are free to be nostalgic about the glorious artistic achievements of the movie.

When the Middle Ages had departed, the Elizabethan world picture became a medieval one. When the mechanical industry, and railways, had created a new environment around the old arts and crafts and the agrarian world, nostalgic image of the departing society became the basis of the Romantic Movement. The more mechanized and urbanized America became, the more flamboyant became its Bonanzas, and its Westerns. But human power to deal with any present reality is minimal. To have discovered this is a huge step toward by-passing this human limitation. In the jet age there are some indications that the rear-view mirror as a notification device is losing its monopoly.

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## BOOK REVIEW

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, 359 pp.

### The Tyranny of Literacy

For more than a year, the critics have had their innings with this most recent of McLuhan's books. From the rather spiteful summary by Dwight Macdonald in *Book Week* (June 7, 1964), through the appreciation, "Born Under Telstar," which appeared in the *Time's Literary Supplement* (Aug. 6, 1964), to the more recent accolade in the November, 1965, *Harper's*, the reviewers have not ignored *Understanding Media* or its author. Neither can the educators.

Although some professors of English may consider their former colleague a renegade from literature and the academic disciplines in general, they cannot afford to dismiss him as irrelevant. Marshall McLuhan, now Director of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, has some provocative things to say about literacy as well as about education — pronouncements that the literate and the literary may neglect only to their own disadvantage. Consider:

The American stake in literacy as a technology or uniformity applied to every level of education, government, industry, and social life is totally threatened by the electric technology. *Understanding Media* (p. 17)

Or

Just as we now try to control atom-bomb fallout, so we will one day try to control media fallout. Education will become recognized as civil defense against media fallout. The only medium for which our education now offers some civil defense is the print medium. The educational establishment, founded on print, does not yet admit any other responsibilities. (p. 305)

Such statements, even taken out of context as they are, should arouse the curiosity of the reader — especially the reader who is a teacher. They should also create a desire for a fuller acquaintance with *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

This remarkably persuasive and exciting book, written by a Canadian, allays once and for all the popular criticism that Canadians are imitators, always copying ideas from their neighbors to the South. *Understanding Media* has a fresh insight on every page. Its area of reference is Communication Theory, the concern of every teacher who stands before a class. Reading it is itself an educational experience, a trauma of sudden awareness, a turbulence of the imagination which matches the frequently apocalyptic style of its pentecostal message. And “the medium is the message,” according to McLuhan. In short, — and in this era of instant information, it behooves us to be brief, if we are to be heard at all — the way of presenting the message is at least as important as the message itself, “because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”

The social and psychological implications of the author’s formulations are hinted at in some of the chapter headings:

Telegraph: The Social Hormone

The Typewriter: Into the Age of the Iron Whim

The Telephone: Sounding Brass or Tinkling Symbol?

Movies: The Reel World

Radio: The Tribal Drum

Television: The Timid Giant

For all their seeming glibness, these are merely tags for what turn out to be thought-provoking and often profoundly disturbing explorations of our uncritical acceptance of the “blessings” of technology. With the mass media and the overall

cybernetic revolution impinging more and more on the role of the teacher, as the radio, movie and T.V. become the "classroom without walls," educators will want to be — will have to be — more concerned with the kind of questions that McLuhan raises. As a teacher himself, the author is alert to the involvement of teachers.

The electronic age is literally one of illumination. Just as light is at once energy and information, so electric automation unites production, consumption, and learning in an inextricable process. For this reason, teachers are already the largest employee group in the U.S. economy, and may well become the only group. (p. 350)

If one interprets correctly such an authority as C.P. Snow, (speaking on a recent television interview, taped in the U.S.) that by the end of the century only ten percent of the population in the technologically advanced countries will need to work and these will be the best educated segment of the population, one can safely predict that the greatest proportion of this ten percent will have a teaching function.

But Marshall McLuhan needs no support from such impressive figures as Lord Snow. His own arguments are self-sufficient.

The very same process of automation that causes a withdrawal of the present work force from industry causes learning to become the principal kind of production and consumption. Hence the folly of alarm about unemployment. Paid learning is already becoming both the dominant employment and the source of new wealth in our society. (pp. 350-1)

Such a view will surely please those who advocate abolition of university fees and claim allowances should be provided for students. Indeed, in spite of the reviewers' reiteration of McLuhan's "infuriating" ideas, many readers of various sorts will find gratification as well as stimulation between the covers of *Understanding Media*. For example, the linguists will find much to agree with.

The content of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech. (p. 18)

Or

In our time, study has finally turned to the medium of language itself as shaping the arrangements of daily life, so that society begins to look like a linguistic echo or repeat of language norms, a fact that has disturbed the Russian Communist party very deeply. (p. 49)

Again in the chapter entitled "Clocks: The Scent of Time":

Modern linguistics studies are structural rather than literary, and owe much to the new possibilities of computers for translation. (p. 147)

Speaking of the limitations of the literate man:

Similarly, literate man can learn to speak other languages only with great difficulty, for learning a language requires the participation of *all* the senses at once. (p. 267)

It is precisely this complete activism — this participation of the whole man in the cosmic consciousness — that McLuhan is examining. He says in his Introduction:

We actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age. Western man acquired from the technology of literacy the power to act without reacting. . . . It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner. (p. 4)

*Understanding Media* — published in the same year as the first volumes of the Parent Report — adds to the ferment of the Canadian intellectual scene, it shatters conventional modes of thought, and it surely should provoke educators to reassess the subtleties and powers of their business of communication.

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