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A Priest in Jester's Clothing

Donald F. Theall. *THE MEDIUM IS THE REAR VIEW MIRROR — UNDERSTANDING McLUHAN*. Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971. 261 pp. \$8.75.

Donald Theall's recent book, *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror*, has been seen by some critics as an attack on Marshall McLuhan. James Ferrabee in *The Gazette* of Saturday February 20th says, "The pupil has taken dead aim at his former professor, Marshall McLuhan, and McLuhan's widely accepted theories on the media and communications." Certainly Theall's language is strong, "McLuhan often approaches areas with the stance of the huckster, the techniques of the propagandist and the strategies of the con man" (xviii), but Theall admits that this may be deliberate, after the style of Mann, Melville and Joyce who see the artist as liar or counterfeiter. The book overtly essays an impartiality and balance in which Theall attempts two things: to help the reader understand what McLuhan is saying and to analyse his method; and to examine critically the validity of his theories and his technique. Until the publication of this book, most critics have taken sides in widely divergent opinions on Marshall McLuhan's work.

Using McLuhan's own terminology (e.g. "McLuhan is a medium and quite possibly a medium with a message" - p. 9), and to a small degree his methods of probe and interface, Theall examines each of McLuhan's books in chronological order, starting with *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), and closing with *Culture is Our Business* (1970). Through these

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works, an interview for *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969), and some biographical material, Theall traces McLuhan's development, his importance and his weaknesses. *The Medium is The Rear View Mirror* sets out to show what makes McLuhan "successful and partly valid" (p. 35).

Theall acknowledges the power and persuasiveness of the man; the depth, ability and insight of the scholar; the wit, erudition and ability to cross both professional and academic fields; the genius of the innovator and creator of form (the *essai concrete*). He modifies his statement by claiming that McLuhan is more a popularizer than an innovator. Theall says that McLuhan's historical importance is beyond question as he is the first man to have successfully "turned society on to the effect of different technological modes of transmission on our relationships" (p. 27). McLuhan is popular because of his formula for uniting two things that trouble us today: self-alienation, and the alienating influence of technology. Theall refers to McLuhan's own statement in the *Playboy* interview that his purpose is the pragmatic one of trying to understand "our technological environment, and its psychic and social consequences." McLuhan focuses our attention on vital issues often overlooked by scholars and specialists, and "makes manifest the theme of our times" (p. 237), functioning much as a court jester whose wisdom is cloaked in foolishness. "McLuhan on communications is McLuhan at his best" (p. 28).

At the same time, Theall questions McLuhan's methods of extrapolation saying that he "trivializes important methods of discovery" (p. 84), and allows fallacy. His conclusions are often too facile. Theall faults the nicety of McLuhan's terminology, and points out the slippery way he avoids criticism by denying the validity of detractors who approach him "in a linear way." He says that McLuhan sometimes has no respect for the sense of fact, and that "his insights need hardly be achieved at the expense of other people's equally valid work" (p. 64). However, he gives only one example of this weakness by referring to a difference with Bloomfield. By McLuhan's method,

he can establish by assertion without actually manifesting the process. His level of analysis insists upon correspondence between external phenomena . . . and internal processes. (p. 84)

He seems "hostile to logic" (p. 66) and his inadequacies are "great and serious" (p. 22).

Theall examines McLuhan as poet-artist *manqué*; as tech-

nical determinist in philosophy; as a myth; as a Catholic, and as a Canadian. The inclusion of these last two categories shows Theall's bias in presenting McLuhan in as conservative and parochial way as possible. He sees McLuhan as one of the last Victorians — an aesthete concerned with the form and style of art rather than its meanings and significance. Theall is at pains to distinguish McLuhan from his young *avant-garde* followers, and places him firmly in the tradition of literary didactic figures, tracing his lineage from Bacon, Pope, Chesterton, and Joyce. McLuhan worships the master punster, James Joyce, from whom he borrows extensively. McLuhan is “a paradoxical Janus of the media world, one face like Paul Goodman, the other like Wyndham Lewis” (p. 60). There is a perceptive analysis of McLuhan's dictum, *the medium is the message* and the pun on it, *the medium is the massage*, revealing the function of form as form, and implicitly suggesting that any message is also a massage especially in the mass age, which, environmentally, is also a mess age (p. 8). If the overt message means less than the form or medium, then McLuhan's message is not its content, but his method.

To make sense of the paradox implicit in “the medium is the message” one is forced to meditate upon the complex relationship between medium and message, form and content — even about the nature of the code in which messages are *informed* or communicated. (p. 7)

This insight does not prevent Theall from criticizing McLuhan's content as well as his method. Theall describes McLuhan as “an industrial folklorist” (p. 55), saying that he is at the same time both brilliant scholar and historian, and a *make-up* man. In *Culture is Our Business* McLuhan confronts directly the images of violence, unrest, fear and tension and thus “illuminates most vividly the values of McLuhan... and his weakness in deceptively being all things to all men, a priest in jester's clothing” (p. 237).

In naming this book, Theall has himself adopted one of McLuhan's cybernetic metaphors,

where one of the vital safety factors in a car and the process of utilizing it are compared to the way in which we examine present cultural phenomena. (p. 13)

For this reviewer, the validity of Theall's insight lies in his recognition of McLuhan as a present day Mr. Spectator drawing attention to our environment, how our lives are shaped by the media, and how out of date the tools are with which we try to cope. Donald Theall had hitherto maintained he

would never write a book on McLuhan, a personal friend who had been his own thesis advisor. He changed his mind partly because he decided that McLuhan's insights were "less startling than some think" (xiii), but chiefly because of his belief in the immediacy of McLuhan's vision. Although "his quixotic conclusions may ultimately mislead and do harm," Theall says, "the basic body of knowledge to which he [McL] points is vitally important to survival today" (xiii). Theall makes no final judgement on McLuhan's work. Whether his declared intentions in writing this book have been realized is for each reader to decide, but to this reviewer there seems to be an underlying, more insidious aim, as Theall debunks the myth, reducing McLuhan to his human, and therefore fallible state. However, *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror* is as yet the most comprehensive single volume by any one writer for scholars and laymen wishing to understand Marshall McLuhan.

McLuhan attempts to find a form of expression which blends print with the new electric age techniques of expression. (p. 239)
In doing so, he is, as Theall describes him, "an index to our age" (xvi).

Formally, *The Medium is The Rear View Mirror* starts with a bang and ends with a whimper. Most of the more salient points and relevant comments appear in the early chapters — many in the introduction. The following chapters, dealing with specific books and illustrating Theall's opinions, contain more generally dialectical argument. The final chapter is almost pure speculation and of dubious value. The style is mixed. In parts the literary references and pedantic diction make for slow reading; elsewhere the McLuhanesque jargon must make for difficulties for any reader not previously well-versed in Marshall McLuhan's work.