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Realism in Art
How Music Expresses Ideas
Jazz: A People's Music
Art and Society
Composer and Nation

Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan

by SIDNEY FINKELSTEIN

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CONTENTS

1

The Revolution in Media and a Revolutionary Kind of Book

PROPHETS ONCE cried out in a wilderness, but there is no such inattention to the brilliant prophet of our own time, Marshall McLuhan. His theory that a revolution is taking place under our nose without our being aware of it, namely the "media revolution" of radio, television, electronics and automation, and his novel way of writing known as "McLuhanese," have made him in recent years the most quoted personality in American cultural life. Hardly a publication exists dealing with either the fine arts or the mass media in which his name is not regularly mentioned or some statement of his not cited. He has added phrases and terms to popular currency such as "the medium is the message" and his description of all media as either "hot" or "cool." A magazine cartoon shows a store with a sign in the window, "McLuhanese spoken here."

He has been honored by the publication of a book of essays, *McLuhan: Hot and Cool—A Critical Symposium.* Among the 30-odd pieces are some sharp objections to his thinking, but the general tone is adulation. He has bridged successfully the gap between the practical business and academic worlds. Once a modest Canadian professor of English, he now holds a munificently endowed professorial chair of the humanities at Fordham University, and is widely read, studied and quoted by television and advertising executives.

McLuhan's book largely responsible for the fame and furor is *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,** which made a sensation in 1964, when it was first published, and has more recently been a paperback best-seller. Two earlier books, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), for which he used his full name, Herbert Marshall McLuhan, raised nothing like the excitement of *Understanding Media,* but they have gained a new lease on life, riding on the wave of popularity of the later book. Their main interest is as stages in the development of the author's thought, and of its style, or McLuhanese.

Many reasons can be given for the appeal of *Understanding Media.* Its scope is impressive, like H. G. Wells' *Outline of History* redesigned and restructured for the electronic age. For to expound his view of the "new electronic era" of today and the glowing future it upholds, McLuhan draws for support upon the entire history of humanity, with its social upheavals and its growth of languages, techniques, inventions, arts and sciences. He presents this history in a fantastically jumbled form, with widely separated ages and subjects jostling each other, as if produced by a time machine that had gone haywire.

McLuhan calls this kind of approach to writing history a "mosaic," thus linking it with the television technology. For the image coming from the TV picture tube, he explains, is really a swift succession of dots which the viewer actively puts together into a simultaneous picture, as with a mosaic. Accordingly, he has written a historical "mosaic," abandoning the outmoded "linear" or logical presentation of events in favor of "simultaneity." And out of what would formerly have been considered disorder, now advanced as the new way of thought, McLuhan projects an impressive image of himself as a man who knows almost everything.

* New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964; second edition, New York, New American Library, 1966. All citations and quotations in this study are from the New American Library edition, unless otherwise noted.

A basic reason for the appeal of McLuhan's book is its central subject of television. An increasing number of Americans feel that television, far from being simply another form of entertainment which they can take or leave at will, has insinuated itself into their lives and is affecting their minds with the ineradicability of a drug habit. It offers expensive galaxies of glamorous entertainers at no cost to the viewer. And the price it exacts is to treat its audiences as a subject for manipulation, bombarding their minds incessantly with sales messages inseparable from its entertainment. It has altered the motion picture industry, as seen in the number of movie theaters that have closed, the empty seats in those that remain, the high prices that have become forbidding for a family outing, the spectacular panoramas and sensationalism that movies have adopted to hold part of the public. More important, television seems to have stolen their children away from parents, shaping the childrens' minds, tastes, moralities and concepts of life more decisively than any parental teaching, example or discipline.

By appearing to really understand the mysterious secrets of television not only in its techniques but also in its psychological and "environmental" changes, and by linking TV to radio, computer machines and automation as comprising the new "electronics era," on which he is the bold authority and prophet, McLuhan has won a strong hold on the public attention. That he writes on this in a technical-sounding language of his own invention only adds to his already impressive image as a cultural historian and a scientist. It furthermore enhances his attraction to a host of people either engaged in or hoping to enter the super-industries of advertising, television and publicity, because of the clues he gives them to how they can appear to be scientific craftsmen in making these media work to affect the mind. His appeal, furthermore, crosses artistic borders, for his theories about the effect of the medium itself, regardless of content, go far beyond television. They interest a stream of artists or would-be

artists who devote themselves to the invention of new styles (an unkind critic would say, to the discovery of increasingly novel and experimental methods of saying less and less) and who find that McLuhan's summary law, "the medium is the message," talks their language.

There is still more to the appeal of the book. McLuhan offers answers to a great many other questions. And if the answers are debatable, the questions are real enough. McLuhan is aware of the widely shared feeling among the American people that they are in highly disturbing times, if not in a crisis. He knows of the growing anxiety over whether what is called "progress in technology" is really progress for human beings, or a threatened destruction. He is aware of the growing demand of people for knowledge and control over the forces that are affecting their lives. And his book creates an image of a man who, knowing what is disturbing people, is their adviser and comforter.

Thus, the ingratiating image that emerges from the book is that of a professor who blithely kicks into the gutter the old-fashioned image of the scholar as one who assembles minutae about the dead past. McLuhan not only embraces the entire field of popular culture, including radio, television commercials, sports, comic strips and newspaper advertisements, but also declares this to be the real, important art of today. All the traditional arts which do not transform into the new media are moribund hangovers of a vanished world. And he answers forebodings with the cheery optimism of a physician who tells a patient that instead of looking for a cure, he needs to understand that what he thought was health is really illness, and the apparent illness is really a leap to a new kind of health.

Are people worried about the abysmal cultural level of television? Be brave, McLuhan cries; this is the new environmental "implosion" that is transforming people from fragmented human beings to rounded, many-sided human beings, all of whose senses are working at the same time. It doesn't

matter what the program is. It is the "medium" itself that does it. In England and America, he writes, "the TV image has exerted a unifying synesthetic force on the sense-life of these intensely literate populations, such as they have lacked for centuries . . . . Synesthesia, or unified sense and imaginative life, had long seemed an unattainable dream to Western poets, painters and artists in general" (p. 274).

Are people worried about their children's inability to read? Be glad, he cries; the children are really ahead of you, and they are entering the new world. "The young pople who have experienced a decade of TV have naturally imbibed an urge toward involvement in depth that makes all the remote visualized goals of usual culture seem not only unreal but irrelevant, and not only irrelevant but anemic" (p. 292).

Are people worried about losing their jobs through automation? Be happy, he cries; think of all the good things everybody can do when nobody has to work. "The electric age of servomechanisms suddenly releases men from the mechanical and specialist servitude of the preceding machine age. . . . We are suddenly threatened with a liberation that taxes our internal resources of self-employment and imaginative participation in society" (p. 310).

Are people concerned about the arms race, the threat of nuclear war, the grisly picture of a great industrial country like the United States of America raining bombs and fire down on the peasants of a small country in Southeast Asia? Be joyous, he cries. All great industrial technological advances come about through militarism and war. By warring on a backward country, we help it to make progress. "War is never anything less than accelerated technological change . . . militarism is itself the main route of technological education and acceleration for lagging areas" (pp. 101-2).

This cheery welcome to a new world being born, moreover, does not make any onerous demands upon its readers, like urging them to study economics, history, social structure and politics. To McLuhan there is no longer any need for

knowledge and study, or for any rational thinking at all. These have gone out with the outmoded "Gutenberg" or "print" age. The new electronic media, to McLuhan, are not subject to social planning for they are more powerful than society and themselves reshape it. They move ahead by themselves, blithely altering the world, and people with it. "The electric changes associated with automation have nothing to do with ideologies or social programs" (p. 305). These new electronic media are nothing but extensions of our central nervous system, so that what they know, we know. These extensions of our central nervous system have always been, and always will be, subliminal, that is, below the level of consciousness. "Subliminal have been the effects. Subliminal they remain" (*ibid*).

Just as we do not need any conscious knowing, we do not need any rational thinking. Electronics will do this for us. "Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness" (p. 19). In his preceding book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* McLuhan had been quite emphatic about the destruction wrought upon the human being by rational thought making him a fragmented individual. In various chapter headings he proclaimed that the "integral" man is "intuitive and irrational man," and that "the stage has been cleared of the archetypes or postures of individual mind, and is ready for the archetypes of the collective unconscious." In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan goes further, showing how the new electronics will guarantee an end to all wars, and establish eternal peace on earth. There is no need to study the conflicts in society, the patterns of economics, the social sources of competitiveness and rivalry, or any other possible causes of war. Not only does the new electronics do away with the need for the printed word and book. He further sees these electronic media as promising a kind of extra-sensory perception, so that even speech will be done away with. Since the electronic media are extensions of the central nervous system, each person's central

nervous system will merge with that of every other person. Electronic computer machines, he says, can already translate instantly any code or language into any other code or language. "The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to bypass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamed of by Bergson . . . the condition of a speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace" (p. 84).

Even in his attitude to matters of factual truth and untruth, McLuhan shows a bold new approach characteristic of the TV age. In *Understanding Media,* all history is portrayed as a series of technological revolutions, each of which aroused forebodings similar to those of today, and each of which was really a transformation of life leading inevitably to the brave new world represented by the computer machine and the television picture tube. The data McLuhan offers may jar some readers who believe that a professor writing non-fiction should pay some attention to whether what he says is true or not, and to whether things happened the way he says they did. But according to the McLuhanese theory of media, such complainants are only hopelessly addicted to the laws of the "Gutenberg" or print medium, with its "lineal structuring of rational life" (p. 87). Translated out of McLuhanese, this means that the old book or print medium involved statements that had some agreement with reality and were put in rational sequence. McLuhan's is a new kind of book, which might employ the old print technology but is written in the spirit and style of the new electronic media. A perfectly apt foreword to the book would be: *"No statements in this book are necessarily to be taken as true. The author is not concerned with whether they are true or not. Any agreement between what this book says about history, and what happened in history, is purely coincidental. The statements are only probes of the reader's mind."*

There is no such foreword, of course. But an article by

Ralph Tyler, "McLuhanism: Is the Medium Getting the Message?" in the magazine *Television* (December 1966), quotes this reply by McLuhan to some questioning of his statements by Professor Robert K. Merton of Columbia University: "You're not trying to explore anything with me. You're exploring my statements, not the situation. I'm not interested in my statements. I don't agree with them. I merely use them as probes."

Often, before a national advertising campaign is set in motion, pilot projects are set up in chosen localities, to test the effect; in other words, to "probe" the impressionability of the potential consumers. It is in this sense that the McLuhan statements can be considered "probes," with their free-wheeling generalizations on the most varied areas of history and thought. They probe the reader's gullibility. McLuhan has accomplished the brilliant feat of writing a book which raises the discussion of technology, sociology, the arts and history to the level of a TV commercial.

2

McLuhanese History vs. Real History

McLuhan's real subject is the modern electronic media. For most of his book, however, he weaves a "mosaic" around it by zig-zagging up, back and around the whole history of human society and culture. The underlying pattern of this "mosaic" is a full-fledged theory of historical change as a succession of historical explosions. It can be summarized as follows: A new medium creates a new environment and thus assaults and changes the human senses; changed senses make for changed man; changed man makes for historical explosions. To help him argue his theory he casts the net of media wide, lumping together arts, sciences, alphabets, sports, language, crafts, tools, machines, books, printing, roads, rivers, canoes, railroads, clocks, computers, radio microphones and television picture tubes. An example of how a new medium has an explosive impact is the effect of the phonetic alphabet, as it supplanted ideograms or picture writing. According to McLuhanese history it changed the human senses and thus created Euclidean geometry.

McLuhan writes, "the invention of Euclidean space is, itself, a direct result of the action of the phonetic alphabet on the human senses" (p. 107). However, the Phoenicians developed the phonetic alphabet about 1000 B.C., and Euclid lived about 300 B.C. It appears then that McLuhan either doesn't

know Euclid lived about seven centuries after the phonetic alphabet began or has an odd idea of the meaning of the word "direct." The statement might also puzzle some school teachers who find that little Johnny or Dorabelle might have learned the alphabet pretty well, and even managed to read and write, but could be quite stupid when it came to geometry. After all, the mere impact of the alphabet on their senses should have created Euclid's geometry for them.

To McLuhan, not only did the medium of the phonetic alphabet kindle an environmental explosion. An even greater explosion was touched off when the alphabet could be applied to papyrus: The Roman Empire was brought into being! "The alphabet was one thing when applied to clay or stone, and quite another when set down on light papyrus. The resulting leap in speed and space created the Roman Empire" (p. 134).

Does McLuhan mean that the Roman generals were able to dash off quick papyrus messages to their soldiers like, "Don't hurl your javelins until you see the whites of their eyes?" Or that the Roman Empire was built not on military conquests and slave-holding but on an early papyrus-back book industry? And why did the Romans beat the Greeks, who had both the alphabet and papyrus? Why didn't the Egyptians, who also had both, create the Roman Empire before the Romans? In fact, the Egyptians invented papyrus.

To McLuhan, not only did paper create the Roman Empire, but the lack of it destroyed the Empire. "With the cutting-off of the supplies of papyrus by the Mohammedans, the Mediterranean, long a Roman lake, became a Muslim lake and the Roman center collapsed. What had been the margins of this margin-center structure became independent centers on a new feudal-structural base. The Roman Empire collapsed by the fifth century A.D. as wheel, road and paper dwindled into a ghostly paradigm of former power" (p. 100). Aside from the internal collapse of Rome's slave-holding economy and the invasions of the Germanic tribes, who re-

fused to be enslaved or exploited, having something to do with the fall of Rome, McLuhan makes Mohammed a powerful miracle worker who was able to destroy the Roman Empire a century before he was born. McLuhan says the Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century, yet Mohammed was born in the following century, 570 A.D.; moreover, nothing that could be called a Muslim Empire existed until another century after this.

Another great media revolutionist to McLuhan was Johann Gutenberg, who printed a Latin Bible from moveable type in Mainz in 1437. Awesome are the wonders that McLuhan ascribes to this inception of the printed word. "Print created individualism and nationalism in the sixteenth century" (p. 34). A few pages later, we read: "The hotting up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism and the religious wars of the sixteenth century" (p. 37). Many chapters later: "Let us not forget that nationalism was a mighty invention and revolution that, in the Renaissance, wiped out many of the local regions and loyalties. It was a revolution achieved almost entirely by the speed-up of information by means of uniform moveable types" (p. 306). But McLuhan neglects the fact that the Chinese printed from moveable type in the eleventh century. Why didn't the revolution start with them? And in the sixteenth century, with its upheavals such as the Protestant Reformation, the German peasant revolt, the rise of national states, just how many people knew how to read? The answer is, very few, and among the masses of poor, practically nobody.

By writing that the sixteenth century "revolutions"—the Reformation, religious wars, and rise of independent national states—took place through the "speed-up of information by means of uniform moveable types," McLuhan appears to suffer from the odd delusion that newspapers existed a couple of centuries before they actually did; that Luther's nailing of his theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517 made

headlines all over Germany; or that in 1588, newsboys went running through the London streets calling: "Come read all about it! Sir Francis Drake defeats the Spanish Armada!" The fact is that the first publications which could be called glimmerings of newspapers did not begin to appear until well into the seventeenth century, and it was not until the nineteenth century that they attained mass circulation. It is true, of course, that the demand for Bibles in the vernacular languages was an important element in the developing Reformation. But here too, the printed word came after the event it was supposed to have set off. Luther's German Bible was completed in 1534, *after* the Reformation and the German peasant revolt. In England, the King James Bible appeared in 1611, close to a century *after* Henry VIII's break with the Papacy and Church.

Following McLuhan's history in historical order, which is quite different from his own order, we come upon the machine as the next explosive environment-creating "medium." Here, some people may rush to agree that the machine and the factory have certainly changed our environment, thinking of smoke-stacked landscapes, smog-filled air, polluted waters. But this is not at all what McLuhan means by environment. One of his theories holds that the machine created nature painting: "This older environment was elevated into an art form by the new mechanical environment. The machine turned Nature into an art form. For the first time men began to regard Nature as a source of aesthetic and spiritual values. They began to marvel that earlier ages had been so unaware of the world of Nature as Art" (p. ix). The first two sentences are sheer McLuhanese, or nonsense. How can a machine turn nature into an art form? One might think of landscape gardening, but a hedge clipper is not McLuhan's notion of "the machine," and a great age of landscape gardening was the Renaissance, long before the machine age. Probably McLuhan means that in revulsion against a factory environment, people for the first time looked nostalgically at the country-

side, found it beautiful, and expressed their perceptions in art works. And there are some art works in this mood, such as Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village,* Keats' *To Autumn,* perhaps Constable's landscapes. But to make a historico-technological revolution out of this meager data requires the words, "for the first time." This merely ignores the wonderful cave paintings of animals of about 20,000 B.C., the beautiful nature images in Homer's epics, the extraordinary Chinese nature paintings and poetry, and breath-taking nature images in Shakespeare's sonnets, like:

> *That time of year thou mayst in me behold*
> *When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang*
> *Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,*
> *Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

And the greatest period of landscape painting, drawing and etching in Europe was that of 17th century Holland, before the machine age. The only machine that seems to have come within Rembrandt's ken was the windmill.

Another revolutionary effect of the machine, to McLuhan, is that it ended human toil, with the result that visionary dreamers like Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris and Marx had to persuade people to go back to work. "In the first great age of the substitution of machine for human toil, Carlyle and the Pre-Raphaelites promulgated the doctrine of *Work* as a mystical social communion, and millionaires like Ruskin and Morris toiled like navvies for esthetic reasons. Marx was an impressionable recipient of these doctrines" (p. 51). McLuhan here, typically, gets his dates mixed up. Carlyle started writing early in the nineteenth centry, the Pre-Raphaelite movement rose at about the midpoint, and William Morris wrote largely in the latter part of the century. Morris couldn't influence Marx because Marx came first, and it was through the influence of Marxist thought in England that Morris became a socialist. Morris was something less than a millionaire, and he didn't so much "toil like a navvy" as try, with con-

siderable success, to revive creative craftsmanship as against the alienating effect on labor of the capitalist factory. What is most inane, however, is McLuhan's description of the age —so well documented by Marx—in which factories and industrial slums were growing like mushrooms, the working day was from 12 to 16 hours, workers died like flies from inhuman conditions, and any attempts at working-class organization were brutally suppressed, as "the first great age of the substitution of machine for human toil."

The samples given here of McLuhan's bizarre substitution of fiction for history are by no means cited to charge him with ignorance. On the contrary, he is highly erudite and well-informed. What happens is that he invents his history backward. His starting point is today: the assertion that we are in the midst of the "media revolution" of the television picture tube, which is willy-nilly changing our whole sense equipment, our whole mentality along with it, and our total environment. Demands for a better quality of television programs, criticisms of existing programs, are futile and misguided. It doesn't matter what is shown. "The medium is the message." To strengthen this assertion, he makes technological creation of environment into an eternal law. "The section on 'the medium is the message' can, perhaps, be clarified by pointing out that any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment" (p. viii). To support this "law," he then theorizes backwards in history, creating a kind of historical tail to the TV "revolution," inventing an entire succession of previous "revolutions" in "media," which created new human environments. We have seen samples of this progression; the impact of writing on the senses which created "Euclidean space," the union of writing with papyrus which allegedly created the Roman Empire, the "Gutenberg medium" or printed word which created nationalism and national states. By presenting this history out of any historical order, simply creating what he calls a "mosaic," he both dazzles the innocent reader and prevents the disparities from

showing, between his history and real history. After all, he is not offering his book as a history book, so why examine it as one?

Then, in expounding his historical examples, McLuhan undercuts and ignores the entire creative activity of human labor in changing the world, making it more adaptable to human needs, discovering its secrets, cooperatively altering its environment, periodically changing the formation of society itself. He is not interested in how scientific knowledge was slowly accumulated, in how technologies were really developed, in the changing social conditions which enabled them to make their impact. He is not interested in the growth of the human being, the increasing development and awareness of human powers and potentialities, the increasing ability to imagine changes and carry them out. Instead he emphasizes a kind of "backlash" of technologies, or of what he calls "media." How these technologies came, he doesn't care. They come, mysteriously, and lo! the poor human being is caught in their grip. They alter his environment and his mentality. This fits McLuhan's view that human beings today are helplessly in the grip of the new "environment" which the electronic technologies created, and had best adjust themselves to the inevitable. They cannot control them even socially, for these technologies rise above society. All people can do is be aware joyfully of what is happening to them.

Let us go back to McLuhan's theory that the invention of "Euclidean space" was a direct result of the "action of the phonetic alphabet on the human senses." Human beings have lived in the same space from time immemorial. It is true that in the course of history, they have changed their concepts of space. But this was not due to the sudden creation of a new medium (in McLuhanese terminology), like the phonetic alphabet, and its impact upon the human senses. What happened is not at all that space changed, or new kinds of space, like the "Euclidean," were invented. What really happened

is that human beings changed their spatial relations to one another, and to outer nature, along with their ability to manipulate or control these relations. Thus, when early man developed hunting missiles that could be hurled accurately through the air, and beyond this, invented the bow and arrow, spatial relations took on a new aspect.

New problems of space rose with the need to divide the land, allot pieces of it, and therefore to survey it. Still further problems, marvelously handled before the invention of the phonetic alphabet, rose and were solved with the creation of massive walls and buildings, like temples and pyramids. Controlled agriculture brought about attention to "space in the sky"; that is, the examination of the movements of stars, and their connection to the seasons. More new problems arose with ships and navigation, turning further attention to the stars and their movements.

Euclid was the ripe product of a revolutionary surge in intellectual life that rose with a revolutionary upheaval in social life. At about the sixth century B.C. a class of people who combined "head and hand," being manufacturers, traders, ship-builders, merchants, navigators and organizers of mining operations, assumed control in the Greek seaport cities, breaking the power of the old tribal and clan aristocracy. Out of their very needs for furthering their ways of life, exploring the world, and colonizing, and their boldly revolutionary creation of early democratic institutions, they brought about historic changes in concepts of human powers, concepts of art, religion and philosophy, along with equally historic developments of science and of philosophy based on this science. And, as with Euclid, they coordinated a mass of discoveries made by earlier societies.

This is only the barest, schematic outline of what happened to produce the great intellectual life of ancient "classic" Greece. It suffices, however, to indicate how many complex factors, particularly human creative labor, lay behind the appearance of what McLuhan calls "Euclidean space." The

least of these factors was the phonetic alphabet. It is true enough that without the phonetic alphabet, which the Phoenicians transmitted to the Greeks (McLuhan apparently believes that the Phoenicians didn't have as impressionable senses as the Greeks), Euclid could not have written his *Principles of Geometry*. It is furthermore only as writing replaced purely oral transmission that any kind of logically structured treatise could be planned and carried out. But this is quite different from saying that the alphabet "caused" the geometric concepts to be born, or that—another pet McLuhan theory—literacy created logical and therefore fragmented man.

Human beings collectively work with nature or their environment, change it in the process of work, develop tools and media for changing it further, and discover that in the use of these media they develop sensitivities that had not formerly existed. Often, in their environmental changes, and in the operation of the media they themselves have created, they set forces into motion that have unpredictable or unexpected results. And so unforseen problems arise, even disasters, with which they have to cope. But people remain the active agents. McLuhan however must present the media as the active agents, human beings as the passive recipients. And so in his pseudo-history both the real activities of life and the real environment in which these activities occur have no place. Environment itself to him is not a real existing world consisting of nature and human alterations of it, but a creation of media. Thus instead of writing "Euclidean geometry," he uses the impressively nonsensical, "creation of Euclidean space." According to the McLuhanese history, at first people lived in no space. Then the impact of the phonetic alphabet upon the human senses caused "Euclidean space" to be invented, and people continued to live in this "Euclidean space" until electronic technology created Einsteinean or "curved" space, in which they have since been living.

"Einstein pronounced the doom of continuous or 'rational' space," writes McLuhan, "and the way was made clear for Picasso" (p. 150). But we still live and operate quite comfortably with Euclidean geometry, and so does McLuhan, so long as the spatial relations we are dealing with are those to which Euclid's postulates apply. If McLuhan had a house built, he would think a carpenter crazy who told him: "Sorry, Mr. McLuhan, I can't give you the straight walls you ask for because Einstein says there are no straight lines; space is curved." Of course, when it comes to studying the inside of the atom, or the movements of stars and galaxies in the vast reaches of outer space, the Euclidean postulates no longer apply. But it is a little silly of McLuhan to believe that this is why Picasso draws slanted and lopsided tables. Cezanne did this before Picasso, and before Einstein's theory. The reasons in both cases involved problems of organized space on a flat canvas. Picasso still eats from flat tables, and so does McLuhan.

McLuhan is an expert in setting the half-truth to work. To get back to papyrus and the Roman Empire, the fact is that to administer such an empire, or the Egyptian Empire, for that matter, would have been impossible without a mass of records, chronicles, and numbers of scribes, or in other words without some form of writing on paper. And so it would be perfectly valid to say, "without papyrus, there would not have been a Roman Empire." But this is quite different from saying that papyrus "created the Roman Empire." A real fact turns into a generalized untruth. Similarly there was a period when the Mediterranean could almost have been described as a "Muslim lake," and it did affect all Europe. But this was much later than the date McLuhan ascribes to it, and the effect was not at all the collapse of the Roman Empire, or its successor, by cutting off papyrus. It set off the Crusades, one of which, the Fourth Crusade (1202–4), was subverted by the trading Venetians to capture the rival ports of Zara and Constantinople. It then spurred

the search for new trade routes to the East that led to the discovery of the Americas and an influx of gold which gave a historic impetus to capitalist manufacture.

Real history, then, although there is so much still to be known about it, is much more interesting than McLuhan's fantasy history. The human changes of environment are a fascinating study, but environments are not put on and discarded like old clothes and new. To a great extent, the human race has lived in the same environment from its beginning; earth, seas, rivers, mountains, day, night, vegetation, animals, air, sky, stars. Within this general framework there have been, not the sudden and dazzling transformations that McLuhan hints at, but slow alterations, putting the human stamp on the outer world. Such alterations were the creation of tools, domestication of animals, agriculture, fire making, the smelting of metals, the invention of the wheel and sail, the building of houses, dams, dikes, cities, bridges, boats. Out of the process of purposefully altering elements of nature, grew knowledge and technologies. It was not the technology that altered the environment. The process, rather, was two-way. A technology could be developed to carry out better the changes that were already under way through human labor. Once this technology was put to work, it could rapidly alter the conditions of life, with the very changes then creating a need and possibility for further technologies. As important in change as the technology was the human imagination projecting a world that could be differently shaped.

A technology did not automatically bring about changes. There had to be a society able and willing to put it to work. Another form in which human beings have altered their environment is the organization of social relations and the constant changes of them, with the rise of private property, the various forms of ownership and servitude, states, governments and other social institutions. When social conditions are ripe, the technology is taken up and put to work, for better or worse, and in turn its use brings about changes

in the society, or "social environment." The Chinese invented gunpowder and used it for firecrackers, while the "Western world," five centuries later, found it useful for wars. Leonardo da Vinci's remarkable scientific and technical explorations were a century ahead of their time because the Renaissance city-states of his own day had no use for them. And so it is with the "Gutenberg" or print medium. Its basic techniques were long available in Europe, but it was only in the late fifteenth century that the social conditions were ripe to begin to make it an effective change of environment.

McLuhan, of course, is resolutely opposed to any such social concepts, because they would jar his entire theory of the television "revolution" today, along with computers and automation. One might think the problems these "media" raise are at least partially due to the kind of profit-making institutions that have seized them and are operating them. McLuhan is unalterably opposed to any such thought. "The medium is the message," the environment-changer, the alterer of the senses.

Certainly human senses have changed over the centuries, in the form of increasingly rich and more subtle, distinctive perceptions. But this has not taken place through a new technology or "medium" creating a totally new "environment," which in turn envelops and assaults the human sense equipment. Rather, a constant, slow process of human beings altered nature with their labor, manipulating it, and in turn developing new sensitivities to the qualities disclosed in nature. In other words, the senses always develop in response to an outer reality. A technological invention may help penetrate that reality, but it is the disclosed reality, not the invention, that changes the senses.

So it is with even a seemingly "subjective" art like music. People are not born with ears that can recognize musical pitch. It was through musical instruments that a fine ear for pitch was developed. But it was not simply the instrument as a "medium" that altered the ear-perception. It was the human

process of music-making, developing instruments to support or imitate the voice, then finding new possibilities opening up for human expression in music, discovering that, through finger and tool-making skills, instruments could produce various levels of pitch with finer accuracy than the voice, then using the instrument to train the voice. And underlying this growth was the development of music as a form of relationship among people.

What we call a change of the senses, or of the perceptions, is really a matter not of the physical change of the sense equipment itself, but rather of changing knowledge of, and relationships to, things. People looking up at the stars today see them much the same as did people 3,000 years ago, when the movements of the stars were pretty accurately charted because of the needs of agriculture and navigation. They see the same pinpoints of light in the night sky. But we say that we see the stars differently, because we know that the earth is a planet of the sun, which is a star in space among other stars. We have a different relationship to them from that of 3,000 years ago when people saw them as the abode of the gods. That both knowledge and a relationship are involved, not a matter of sense-equipment, was dramatically displayed in the struggle with the Church and the Inquisition, touched off by the Copernican view of the skies. Nor can it be said that the new way of seeing the stars was due to the medium of the telescope. Certainly the telescope has helped form the picture of the stars that we have today. But Copernicus, who founded modern astronomy, did it before there was a telescope.

As for the rise of modern nations and nationalisms, the roots have to be looked for long before the "Gutenberg medium," which McLuhan declares played the explosive role; in fact, back to the rise of the feudal system itself, about four centuries after the fall of Rome. The tribal peoples who toppled Rome could take over some of its technology, but they could not reconstitute the centralized Roman economic machine

built on militarism, slave-holding and tribute-collecting. Their invasion was a revolt not merely against the masters, but against their machine. In the feudal Europe that slowly took shape, the relationship of lord and serf predominated over that of slaveowner and slave. Economic life became decentralized, based on the land, villages, local artisans, and technical developments that served agriculture, unlike those the Romans had created to serve their cities; better harnesses, iron ploughs, looms, water and windmills. So local languages developed, some combining tribal language with Roman, and local cultural traditions, that became national traditions. The wars carried on by the feudal lords, and their needs both for arms and luxuries, spurred the growth of cities as trading and manufacturing centers. There both a middle class developed, and a working city proletariat, many of them serfs that had escaped from the land. The wars of the feudal aristocracy began to put unbearable burdens on the common people. There were revolts of peasants and artisans. The middle class in the cities, growing in wealth and power, needed a free market in their countries, unencumbered by independent feudal barons. The search for trade routes brought the discovery, plunder and influx of gold from the Americas. So, long before there was an actual affirmation of independence of nations from the flimsy unity of the Holy Roman Empire, the lineaments of the future nations were already established, in language, culture and economic life.

McLuhan ignores all these factors, insisting that all such historic social changes come about through the magic-working, environmental-altering medium, in this case that of Gutenberg. Of course it is true enough that without the aid of printing, widespread literacy, books, periodicals and newspapers, the nations and their industrial economies could not have arrived at their full development, as in the nineteenth century. But this is quite different from saying that the print medium made the revolution.

McLuhanite history, then, makes technological media the

decisive force in change with a one-sidedness that far exceeds the economic determinism advanced by the worst vulgarizers of Marx. And it is not a misguided history, or a provocative theory of history that could be thrown into the hopper for serious discussion of whatever insights might be offered by it. It is a fake history. For McLuhan has as little interest in truth as a modern public relations expert or a creator of TV commercials. His concern is with the "message," the thought he wants to implant in the readers' mind. This is that in the modern electronic media, headed by television, lies the technological "revolution" that has opened up a new world, making all previous media, including print, books, novels, poetry and all the arts, particularly in their humanist forms of the past, outmoded. To serve this aim, his history extracts media out of their social context, banishing any study of the real forces that created and governed them.

Here is one last example of McLuhanese history, illustrating how media struggles are the hidden forces causing wars and revolutions. The event is the American revolution of 1776–81. With awesome, almost x-ray penetration, McLuhan looks behind such façades as the Declaration of Independence, "taxation without representation," thoughts of democracy, and finds lurking "media." The "media" in this case are canoes, roads, rivers and fishing schooners. "For three centuries Europe invested in America for its fish and its furs. The fishing schooner and the canoe preceded the road and postal route as marks of our North American spatial organization. The European investor in the fur trade naturally did not want the trapping lines overrun by Tom Sawyers and Huck Finns. They fought land surveyors and settlers, like Washington and Jefferson, who simply would not think in terms of mink. Thus the War of Independence was deeply involved in media and staple rivalries" (p. 101). Apparently the annoyance of the British over the Boston Tea Party was due not to the colonists' refusal to pay the tax but to the Britishers' fear that the tea dumped into Boston Harbor

might poison the fish. And how right the colonists were in building roads, against the British interests! How else could Paul Revere have galloped along, shouting "The British are coming!" But McLuhan omits a few trivial facts. Fishing could be carried on quite successfully from English ports. The fur trade was primarily carried out, not by trappers propelling canoes in the lonely wilderness, but by trading posts (with roads) where merchants could give the Indians glass beads, cheap fabrics and other geegaws for their accumulated furs. And of course McLuhan seems to believe that Africa was depopulated, and hundreds of thousands of slaves impressed and brought to America—to catch fish! He seems never to have heard of the plantation, or of such important colonial commodities as sugar, rum, tobacco, lumber and cotton. His is truly a fishy history.

And it's a thrill-packed concocted history, with battles, murder and sudden death. For McLuhan's "media" are remarkable sorcerers, that slay one another. He can be said to replace the famous opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*—"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"—with his own radical improvement, which can be summarized as "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of media struggles." And these media struggles, he points out, are also devastating internal wars of the senses.

3

The Mythical War of the Senses

IT IS through the deliberate confusion of technological invention with artistic sensitivity that McLuhan carries his concept of the war of media, as the material core of all human history, into aesthetics and psychology, inventing a war of the senses that tears apart the human psyche.

Here, in typical McLuhanese, is a battle-report from the media war: "When the press opened up the 'human interest' keyboard after the telegraph had reconstructed the press medium, the newspaper killed the theater, just as TV hit the movies and night clubs very hard" (p. 60). What does the sentence mean? That with the press rose the drama critic, who killed the theater with his venomous reviews? But the theater isn't dead, people still go to plays. And if the theater has died in many communities, it is not because people prefer to read the human interest columns in newspapers.

The trouble with the living or legitimate stage is economic, not its being an outmoded medium that forward-looking people must discard the same way that women have discarded cotton stockings for nylons. The living theater does not fit the marketplace and profit system. McLuhan prefers to ignore this because he is all for the new "revolutionary" media which not only happen to fit but are of primary use to the capitalist marketplace.

McLuhan approvingly quotes another writer, Donald McWhinnie: "Civil War has been raging in the world of art and entertainment . . . moving pictures, gramophone records, radio, talking pictures." (p. 57). Nowhere in his discussion of this does McLuhan give an inkling that the apparent war among media is due to the operation of these media for nothing but profit and their consequent engagement in the marketplace war.

An internal war, disastrous to art and entertainment is raging within TV. McLuhan will point happily to comments which declare that the one-minute advertising spots are now the most interesting events on television. To him this represents a triumph for those who truly grasp the psychological possibilities of a new technological medium. And it is true that the fantastic expenditure of money and skills to produce these commercials has to bring some results. It is extraordinary, for example, how an entire "boy meets girl" or "wife regains love of husband" drama can be concentrated into 60 seconds with some cigarette, perfume, beer, deodorant, hair oil or soap adroitly placed among the accessories. But the emptiness of McLuhan's praise can be seen if we imagine how many people would watch a program made up of nothing but a string of commercials. The advertisers need the surrounding show for their setting, and often shape its character for this purpose. The commercials, however cheery their tone, are shots fired in a deadly serious war among rival producers for the public's mind and money; a war in the course of which artistic and entertainment values are trampled. The disastrous drop in intelligence, honesty and imagination of television programs in the United States, so glaring by the middle 1960's, has been in direct ratio to the fantastic rise in costs of the commercials. The reason is not only that honesty, controversy and the sparkle of ideas are anathema to the producer who wants a sure audience based on the lowest common denominator of acceptance, or tolerance. It is also that the intelligence, taste and thoughtfulness of the

viewer is in inverse ratio to the viewer's susceptibility to the advertiser's cajolery. Light begins to shine on one of the real, underlying meanings of McLuhan's, "the medium is the message." It is the advertiser's proclamation: "There shall be no message on television but that of the advertising commercial!"

The truth, as against McLuhan's "eternal war of the media" thesis, is that when the media really operate as extensions of man, by helping explore reality and making knowledge of it a social possession, they are not at all antagonistic to one another, and to the arts. Rather, their normal mode of operation is cooperation for the mutual growth of each. This is markedly true of the social novel and the news press, which rose and flourished hand in hand. The same force moved both ahead; the democratic political revolutions (not "media revolutions"), the spread of literacy, the involvement of increasing strata of the population in trying to understand their society and reshape it. There was even a physical involvement between the press and creative literature. The press printed novels as serials. Defoe, Balzac, Dickens, Poe, Whitman, Mark Twain, Dreiser, grew up in the news press. Any basic conflict between the two is a McLuhan invention. People have never been afflicted by a problem of whether to read newspapers or novels. There are some who read novels and no newspapers, and some who read newspapers and no novels, but they both lose. Newspapers and novels do not challenge one another. It is precisely because their functions are different, that they collaborate, and are both necessary. Newspapers present the data of events, day to day. Novels go inside the human mind, and explore what it means to live in a certain age. There was no better documented war, in the press, than the Second World War. Yet novels, during the war itself, began probing the human and moral repercussions and issues, and have been doing so ever since.

McLuhan's concept of the arts is that being simply technological media representing different senses, they must fight each other just as radio, newspapers and television fight each

other for their share of the advertiser's budget. Therefore he spins a theory that when poetry was simply oral, it was a medium using sound, just like music, and so poetry and music got along fine together. Then came that old revolutionist Gutenberg, or "print." This created poetry books, whereupon poetry became "visual." The result was, he says, that poetry and music parted ways for four centuries. In pursuing this thought, his attitude is that if history tells otherwise, then to hell with history. "Even more notable were the effects of print in separating poetry from song, and prose from oratory, and popular from educated speech. In the matter of poetry it turned out that, as poetry could be read without being heard, musical instruments could also be played without accompanying any verses. Music veered from the spoken word, to converge again with Bartók and Schoenberg" (p. 159). This view of music history merely leaves out some minor composers like Dowland, Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Verdi, Wagner, Mussorgsky and several dozen others, all of whom used the "spoken word" prolifically.

The actual relations between music and poetry offer a fascinating picture of how various "divisions of labor" or specialized techniques develop, but being genuine "extensions of man," or foliations of human sensitivity, they recombine fruitfully on ever new levels. First, contrary to McLuhan's history, there was instrumental music, distinct from song, for centuries before the appearance of the printed book. Then the printed book did not cause a cleavage between music and poetry in the sixteenth century when, according to McLuhan, it had so revolutionary an effect. On the contrary, it brought about a rich flowering of a poetic-musical form, that of the part-song and madrigal, which became a prolific and popular music in Italy, England, and almost all of Europe. Printing made this rich production possible, because it produced books of songs and madrigals, so set up that people could sit about

a table and perform them, each singer being able to read his or her own words and music.

The seventeenth century saw the rise of a new, great, poetic-musical form, that of opera, which became by far the most popular musical form of the next two centuries. It is true that this period also saw an extraordinary development of musical instruments and instrumental techniques, with the flourishing of "pure," or strictly instrumental music. But this did not veer music away from the word. Not only was the modern orchestra born in the opera house, but the "pure" instrumental forms helped inspire new vocal, or word forms. The great age of the musical instrument became also the great age of the human voice.

Bach, in the early eighteenth century, wrote great masterpieces of instrumental music, and also wonderful vocal works, like his cantatas and Passions, in which his instrumental forms played a stimulating role. Handel wrote splendid instrumental music, and also operas and oratorios. In the late eighteenth century, the greatest master of instrumental music, like the symphony, quartet and concerto, was Mozart, who was also the greatest composer of opera. And a knowledge of his operatic style helps the understanding of his instrumental works. The nineteenth century was a big age of instrumental music, with symphony, tone poem, sonata, chamber and piano music. The concert hall became a major center for listening to instrumental music. But here again, a new poetic-musical form flourished; the art-song, in the hands of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf. And national and romantic opera also flourished, as with Verdi, Wagner and Mussorgsky. Wagner's operas achieved their special quality because of the composer's deep study of the instrumental symphony. So much for McLuhan's statement that because of print, "music veered from the spoken word."

McLuhan forgets also that printing meant not only printed words, but printed music. In this sense, "print" did have an

important effect upon music. In the late eighteenth century, and the nineteenth century, the sale of his printed music could help the composer escape from confinement to aristocratic servitude. But here too, the decisive factor was not the print technology itself, so much as the social transformation which brought into being an active middle-class public for the arts. Again, real history is better than McLuhan history, not only because it is real. It is also more interesting.

As we have seen in McLuhan's view of history and technology, his muddle comes from theorizing backwards. And so it is with the arts and senses. Like the war-hawk or militarist who proclaims, "war is deep in the human heart, and always was, and always will be," so McLuhan starts (in mind, not in orderly procedure) with the real warfare going on among the commercially operated media of today. He then universalizes this by embracing every form of human creation and sense expression within the term "media," and inventing similar wars.

McLuhan's terminology here is a little gruesome. Writing of the appearance in the "closed world" of the primitive tribe, of the "technology of writing," he says that this meant "exchanging an ear for an eye" (p. 130). Does he mean that as soon as people learned to read and write, they stopped listening? Don't we now, long after we have learned to read, still talk to one another, listen to music, go to lectures or to the theater, turn on the radio?

McLuhan expands on this. "A single generation of alphabetic literacy suffices in Africa today, as in Gaul two thousand years ago, to release the individual, initially, at least, from the tribal web" (p. 86). It is a queer notion on McLuhan's part that in one generation, ancient Gaul changed from the tribal system to the feudal system. But as far as Africa and Asia are concerned, in more recent times, it is true that instruction of certain individuals in reading and writing dislocated them from their tribe. Much of this education was carried on by missionaries, who also taught the individuals

Christianity, which was itself a break with the tribal beliefs. Furthermore, it was a practice of colonial powers to educate a select few in "Western" skills and outlooks, after which these few found themselves unable to put their knowledge to work in the tribe, and had no other recourse than to serve the colonialists as clerks and servants. But McLuhan is not interested in this real picture of the impact of a dominating culture upon a subject one. He asserts emphatically that it is the pure interrelation of the alphabet and the senses that does the trick. He follows with: "This fact has nothing to do with the *content* of the alphabetized words; it is the result of the sudden breach between the auditory and the visual experience of man. Only the phonetic alphabet makes such a sharp division in experience, giving to its user an eye for an ear, and freeing him from the tribal trance of resonating word magic and the web of kinship" (p. 86).

McLuhan's is a particularly erroneous, tendentious view of both tribal society and the human senses. As for the tribal society, it was not "oral" and "auditory." It had its speech "magic," incantations, poetic rituals, music, and also its "magic" paintings, sculpture, masks, and dances, as well as its tools and shapely utensils. There are extraordinary cave paintings dating back 20,000 years. The tribesmen had keen, observant eyes and skillful hands as well as sensitive ears. More developed civilizations, like ancient Egypt, produced tremendous sculpture before the phonetic alphabet. But McLuhan does not regard painting and sculpture at all as "visual" arts. Only phonetic writing, the alphabet, and the printed word are "visual." His explanation for this is that painting, sculpture and the like embody many different senses. They are, for example, "tactile," a favorite word. So he says of Chinese script, with its ideograms, that it really does not operate like the phonetic alphabet. Ideogram-writing "enables them to retain a rich store of inclusive perception in depth of experience that tends to become eroded in civilized cultures of the phonetic alphabet." The ideogram, he

says, "is an inclusive *Gestalt,* not an analytic dissociation of senses and functions like phonetic writing" (p. 87). And it is this that again shows McLuhan's misunderstanding of the senses.

For the human senses are complex and cooperative, not the pure individualists that McLuhan makes of them. They grow in connection with human activity: work, probing, exploring, reshaping nature, moving in society, forming human relationships. Hands, touch, eyes, ears, constantly collaborate. The rhythmic movement of a painter's or sculptor's hand turns into a "visual" rhythm in the art work, and the viewer feels this rhythm as a movement. This is but one small example of how painting and sculpture are primarily visual, but also tactile. Even written and printed language, despite what McLuhan says, is not purely "visual," in an exacerbating conflict with the "oral," or the world of sound. Written and printed language are also "oral." The writer, and also the reader, hear the sounds of speech in their "inner ear," so to speak; even muscular speech movements take place when people read "silently." In both poetry and prose of any artistic sensibility, the reader is aware of the speech rhythms and word sounds. That is one of the reasons that great writers are so moving to their readers.

McLuhan holds that the printed word set up a division between educated and "popular" speech. This is only playing about with another fragmentary truth. Creative writing has always broken down this division. A good writer generally has a keen ear for the sound and color of popular speech. This is particularly and strikingly shown in American literature, by Mark Twain, Sandburg, Hemingway. Dickens had a fine ear for speech, and this was one of the glories of the Irish literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, from Synge and Yeats to James Joyce and Sean O'Casey.

McLuhan is completely ridiculous in his contrast between "picture writing," such as hieroglyphics or ideograms, and writing with the phonetic alphabet. He can appear to prove

his point, that "the phonetically written word sacrifices worlds of meaning and perception" (p. 86), only by comparing an ideogram to a *single printed word.* Of course phonetic writing sacrifices these perceptions in the single word, only to gain them back, and much more, when words are built into phrases and clauses. Literature written with the phonetic alphabet, both poetry and prose, is perhaps the richest in appeal to and evocation of all the senses, of any "medium," to use McLuhan's terminology. That is why the word "imagery" is so often used in discussions of writing. And it refers not only to pictorial imagery, or the evocation of visual memories and experiences in the reader, but also to evocation of sound and touch. Take a random sentence from Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*: "As we sat up, we heard at intervals foxes stepping about over the dead leaves, and once a musquash fumbling among the potatoes and melons in our boat, but when we hastened to the shore we could detect only a ripple in the water ruffling the disk of a star." A central aspect of the art of writing is the evocation of a host of sense-memories in the reader. If it does not evoke them, it tends to be dead writing.

There is of course a vast amount of dead writing. It proliferated especially with the rise of the "age of technology" that McLuhan hails triumphantly, as having taken the ground away from the printed word, or the "Gutenberg" medium. This highly abstract, academic, colorless, often machine-sounding, semi-scientific or pseudo-scientific writing, may have some uses in highly specialized functions, perhaps even in text books. But a good deal of it is also jargon, an obscurantist gobbledygook. McLuhanese is a good example with its pseudo-technical verbiage, like "when the press opened up the 'human interest' keyboard after the telegraph had restructured the press medium." The uses and abuses of such abstract writing are a matter of specialization, and highly specialized tasks. But it is not necessarily an attribute of scientists and philosophers. Scientists like Dar-

win, and philosophers like Santayana, have written humanly and beautifully. McLuhan's charge that phonetic writing and print "extend the visual function" thereby diminishing "the role of the other senses of sound and touch and taste," is not leveled against this jargon. It is leveled against the entire use of the written and printed word, or "any literate culture" (p. 87). It is scandalous that a professor once attached to the humanities, should so set himself to attack or destroy the entire humanist heritage, in the name of fostering a new kind of "rounded" human being (the television man).

As the herald and prophet of the "new electronic technology" and the "new media," it is necessary for McLuhan to make this attack. For as we have seen, these new media are particularly run by and tools of the competitive business world. And so McLuhan must generalize this phenomenon into an "eternal truth" of the human race, with its arts and its senses. He carries his view of the struggle between the arts to the point of cannibalism. One "medium" eats up another. "The 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (p. 23); later, "the content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera" (p. 32); still later, "the movie took over the novel and the newspaper and the stage, all in one" (p. 61). The aim of this line of argument is to convince the reader that the heritage of past art works is useless, for anything of value in it has been digested by the new media. Since each medium creates a totally new environment, why should we be interested in preserving some old art works (like Shakespeare or Rembrandt or Beethoven) who simply embodied an old, now past, environment?

But it is not in the nature of the arts to war with or devour one another, any more than it is in the nature of the senses to do so. Just as the senses cooperate, like the hand (or touch) and the eye, precisely because they have different functions and potentialities, so the arts can live together and even cooperate precisely because each represents a different bundle of sensibilities, a different mode of exploring the outer

world, a different way of probing inner troubles and conflicts.

When the prose narrative rose to become a major art form, with the short story and the novel, it did not do away with poetry. It may have seemed for a while to make poetry less popular. Yet there was no real rivalry, since each found that it could do certain necessary things that the other couldn't. Thus the 1920's, in the United States, was a productive period for the novel, with works of Sinclair Lewis, Dreiser, Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cabell, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather. The decade was also one in which American poetry of high quality became remarkably popular, with Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Robinson Jeffers, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, Elinor Wylie, William Carlos Williams.

The camera proved to be no rival to painting, and even the theory that it helped impel painting into an abstract direction is made too much of. The development of non-objective and expressionistic painting took place for psychological reasons, and there has been and continues to be great realistic painting in the age of the camera. The camera may be said to have eliminated the journeyman painter who simply did routine portrait likenesses. But as an art, painting was not disturbed. An artist like Thomas Eakins made use of the camera, and his painted portraits have insights and depth that no camera portrait could attain. This does not mean that photography is necessarily an inferior art. It is only that photography has its own "aesthetic," its own particular complex of sensitivities and skills.

The motion picture did not take over "the novel and the newspaper and the stage, all in one," as McLuhan says in one of his typical grandiose sweeps of misinformation. Novels have continued to be produced in vast numbers, throughout the movie age, and if there are lamentations these days about the sad state of the American novel, this is not the motion

picture's doing since the movies are even worse. The motion picture theatre certainly hurt the stage, just as TV has hurt the motion picture theater, but this is a matter of marketplace or commercial cannibalism, which is a different matter from the imaginary "war" of the technologies themselves. The loss was certainly not that of a fresh medium driving out an outmoded or antiquated one. Each means of artistic expression is its own kind of "window" open on the world, and cannot be replaced by another. The novel is an art of the printed word. The stage, despite its often elaborate settings and color, is also primarily an art of the word, the spoken word. The motion picture, despite the fact that McLuhan insists that only the printed word is visual, is a visual art, an art of the eye, and this is true even with the entrance of the sound track. The motion picture camera is a great, unique expressive tool, with its ability to move in space, to open up great vistas and close down on fine details, to play with light and shade, to create its own rhythms, to put disparate images in sharp contrast, to create expressive symbols and imagery with its own "camera poetry."

It is true enough that with the mushroom rise of the motion picture industry, and the insatiable need for story ideas, novels and even plays were adapted. But this does not mean that the novel, for example, became the "content" of the movie. This peculiar use of the word "content" is another McLuhanese mystification. The "content" of a novel is its insights into people and the movement of life, its views of life as depicted in human action and imagery, the light it brings to the readers on what they themselves are or yearn for, their relationships to other people. This may also become the "content" of the movie, if recreated with imagination and sympathy in terms of the particular art of the camera. But great novels have been made into bad movies, which means that the "content" of the movie is not that of the novel, but something much shallower, and tawdry. Nondescript novels have been made into outstanding movies,

which means that director, screenwriter, actors, camera man, have contributed a rich content of their own, which was not in the novel. Among the greatest movies are those which were "pure movie" from the beginning, a camera conception. And if novels make good movies, this does not mean that one medium has swallowed up another. It means that one independent art can collaborate fruitfully with another, like the hand, speech and eye.

A means of artistic expression cannot die, in the sense of its becoming outmoded. Such a means of artistic expression can change its tools, conventions, and schemes of construction. Thus the forms of classic Greek drama, with its music, chorus and masks, passed away, but drama itself didn't. Shakespeare and the Elizabethans reconstituted the drama with a totally different kind of stage, and totally different structural conventions, making a rich use of poetry. In the nineteenth century, a different kind of stage developed, and prose, as with Ibsen and Chekhov, was used more than poetry. But drama itself remains. And so it is with other modes of art creation like music, pictorial art, prose, poetry, dance, sculpture, architecture, and their subdivisions. The proliferation of branches of these arts has been considerable. And each, to the extent that it develops a new power of human sensibility, a new "open window," becomes a human necessity. It is never outmoded. It can be crushed by social brutality, like marketplace competition which makes one or another art means uneconomic, or fanaticism, as when the English Puritans in the seventeenth century practically did away with the theater for a while. But the foremost creative mind among them, John Milton, wrote one of the greatest of English plays, *Samson Agonistes*. And the drama itself recovered its life.

In the marketplace-dominated society of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the arts tended to be thrown into competition with one another, under the unwritten law that no phenomenon of human life had any

reason for existence if it could not be turned into some profitable commodity. But this was not the technological progress that McLuhan makes of "media war." In terms of art (or "media," if McLuhan wants to call art that) it was sheer destructiveness, just as the engagement in this avid competition destroyed human beings, turning them into profit-hungry machines. The harm this brought to the arts can be seen in the fact that fierce competition came to be engendered within each art. So today painters compete with one another for the approval of purchasers, composers compete with one another to get their operas produced, pianists resent the fact that others get to be known as "the best commodity for the money" and attract the biggest audiences, novelists may rival each other to make the best-seller lists. The living find themselves competing with the dead; the young with the aged. Inventors of new experimental forms or styles often rest their appeal not on the intrinsic merits of their art, but on the proclamation (abetted by some critics) that their art is the new "real" art of the times and has demolished the pretensions of the generation that preceded them. It is a competitive concept that fits neatly into McLuhan's thesis of the war among media, and the fancied replacement of one "environment" by another.

Of course, the greater creators in art, people of integrity and confidence in their powers, do not indulge in this petty effort to cleanse the field of any "competition" from the present or past masters. Each fresh creator illuminates the entire art of which he is a part, and makes it more exciting. But the arts do not operate in a world of their own, uncontaminated by the atmosphere of the commercially-run media, where the internecine war is waged so violently. Here armies of skilled "technicians"—so a commercial producer calls his hired artistic hands—have to be marshalled to fight their rivals for control over the consumer's mind and pocketbook.

McLuhan almost scares the daylights out of the reader with

his view of the war among the senses. "The ultimate conflict between sight and sound, between written and oral kinds of perception, is upon us" (p. 30). He enters abnormal psychology, with a theory of neuroses rivalling Freud's. "It could well be that the successive mechanizations of the various physical organs since the invention of printing have made too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system to endure" (p. 53). He even becomes gory. "Any invention or technology is a self-amputation of our physical bodies" (p. 54).

There is a partial truth buried within these McLuhanese pronouncements; namely his translation of the special conditions of modern television into a universal theory of the senses. For this reason McLuhan ignores the active, exploratory role of the senses, and emphasizes the "backlash" as the only truth. The fact is that with the twentieth century technological media, the audience is reduced as much as possible to passivity. It is warred over. Its very openness of the senses is made into a vulnerability to calculated propaganda and "subliminal" advertising appeal.

In other words, the human role of the senses is an active one. When people search for discoveries, they make them, and grow with them. But the assault of the propagandist and commodity-seller tries to create a passive recipient whose senses can be, so to speak, manipulated. Here we have the elements of an internal conflict being created, but it is not a conflict among the senses and perceptions, or between "sight and sound." It is a conflict between falsehoods and a real grasp of reality. That this conflict can cause nervous storms is an unfortunate fact.

McLuhan emphasizes this passivity, and "backlash" or "assault" by declaring that "electric technology" has become an extension of the central nervous system. "It is ridiculous to talk of what the public wants played over its own nerves" (p. 73). He does not give blanket approval to the advertising assault. "Leasing our eyes and ears and nerves to commercial

interests is like handing over the common speech to a private corporation, or like giving the earth's atmosphere to a company as a monopoly" (*ibid.*). Were McLuhan to pursue this thought, however, he would be producing a different kind of book. In the book he has written, an isolated statement like this comes almost as a bitter joke. For it is like portraying human beings as robots, and then suggesting that something other than commercial interests should be pressing the buttons that send them messages. He provides no possibility for breaking "the lease," since his universal theory of "media" depicts human beings as eternally passive victims of their own technology. And the culmination of this theory is the dictum, "the medium is the message." It denies the ability of the human being ever to distinguish truth from deception.

4

The Medium and the Deceptive Message

"THE MEDIUM is the message" means, to McLuhan, that, in any form of communication or artistic expression, what is consciously or purposefully "said" is of no importance. Equally unimportant is "the way it is said." Important only is the medium through which it is said. A medium is also a technology and creates a new environment. Thus it alters the mind and senses of the people in that environment. This alteration is the real message, the only message that counts. And this message, as he describes it, is brutally physical. By concentrating on one or another of the senses, it extends that sense, and could "amputate" it, creating a hypnotic shock.

So McLuhan sneers at General David Sarnoff, of the Radio Corporation of America, for remarking in an address: "We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them," and laces into the General with a fancy display of McLuhanese. "This is the voice of the current somnambulism. Suppose we were to say, 'Apple pie is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the way it is used that determines its value."

If we withstand the shock of suddenly discovering that apple pie is also, to McLuhan, a "medium," we might consider that apple pie might very well be judged in itself, neither good nor bad. True, some silly publicity during the

Second World War claimed that the American soldier was fighting, not against fascism, but for apple pie, but a doctor advising a diabetes patient might think apple pie to be not at all good. But McLuhan, having blitzed Sarnoff with this paper airplane, concludes: "There is simply nothing in the Sarnoff statement that will bear scrutiny, for it ignores the nature of the medium, of any and all media, in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form" (p. 26). To McLuhan, what affects people decisively is not what they see on television, but the process of looking at television. And he asserts this as a law of all media in all history.

The kind of communication in which "the medium is the message" is by no means new. It was observed by Shakespeare with alarm, as a rising form of deceit in human relations; a way of lying, without directly telling lies, a way of using some means of expression—in his case, words —so that what is really intended to be communicated is contained not in what is said but in the manner or style or tricks of speech. It is an adroit way of manipulating a victim's psychological reactions so that he thinks that what has been implanted in his mind is his own idea.

Thus, in the play *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare shows Mark Antony as such a master mind-manipulator and demagogue. Caesar has been assassinated by a group of senators, who are from the patrician, or "upper crust," of Roman society; jealous of their privileges, they despise and fear the common people, or plebians, whose admiration for the victorious general, Julius Caesar, might have made him emperor, and a power over them. Now in Act III, Scene 2, Brutus makes a speech to the assembled people in the Forum, telling them the reasons for the assassination, and departs, allowing Mark Antony to make his funeral oration over Caesar's body.

Antony begins his famous "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech with a touch of hypocrisy;

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar.

The effect that Antony plans is the opposite of what he says. For his words must arouse the listeners to think, why shouldn't we remember the good Caesar has done? With this as a start, he plays upon his listeners' fears and cupidity so adroitly that by the tenth time he has reiterated that Brutus and Cassius "are all honorable men, of course," the crowd is ready to tear them apart. Then he is ready to spring Caesar's will on them, telling them that there is such a will, hinting that it bequeathed all kinds of good things to them, and declaring that he will not read it to them, he must not read it, it would be wrong to read it. Of course, they insist that he do read it. And so he works them up to an insane rage and fury. At the climax, all he has to say is,

Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up
To such a sudden flood of mutiny,
They that have done this deed are honorable. . . .

for them to start a mutiny. They think they have defied Antony, that this is their own idea, and don't realize that it is he who has put the very thought of mutiny in their mind.

The style of this speech had been carefully planned by Shakespeare, a consummate master in every way of handling language. He gives Brutus an entirely different style of speech. Brutus is a man of acknowledged honor, unselfish public spirit, and great naivete. It was because of these qualities that the conspirators had schemed to win him to their side, giving them status with the public. And he makes a straightforward, logical, prose speech. There are some turns of rhetoric, but they sharpen the logic and emphasize the thought: "As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was

fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him; but, as he was ambitious, I slew him."

Thus Shakespeare puts two different styles of writing and speaking in opposition. One, that of Brutus, is what McLuhan would call "rational," "lineal," or "sequential." The style assists the conscious thought. The other is the kind in which "the medium is the message." It avoids logic, it plays upon intuitions and feelings, its appeal is solely subliminal or below the level of conscious reason. Its explicit thought or content does not matter, for what is important is only the way things are said, and the buried fears and yearnings this draws upon.

Fascinated by this kind of mental deception, and aiming perhaps to warn the public against it by exposing its methods, Shakespeare devoted a large part of another play to it, *Othello*. Here the victim is not an unstable citizenry, alarmed because of the outbreak of violence in high office, but a "big" man, Othello, commander of Venice's army and navy, appointed Governor of Cyprus, recognized as a person of unexceptional rectitude, courage and principle. The perpetrator, Iago, does not have Mark Antony's justification, that of loyalty to a murdered leader. Iago is a schemer and cynic, out to further his own advantage at everyone else's expense, trying to convince himself that the rest of the world is really as depraved as he is. In the third act, Othello's former aide, Cassio, who has fallen into disfavor through Iago's trickery, is seen talking to Desdemona, Othello's wife, and then walking away as Othello and Iago enter. Cassio has done this by Iago's advice. There is then the following dialogue:

IAGO: *Ha! I like not that.*
OTHELLO: *What dost thou say?*
IAGO: *Nothing, my lord: or if—I know not what.*
OTHELLO: *Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?*

IAGO: *Cassio, my lord; No, sure, I cannot think it,*
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing you coming.

So Iago plants in Othello's mind the thought that Cassio is having an affair with his wife. But Othello is convinced that this is his own suspicion. Iago has said nothing about this; just a shrug, a surprised exclamation, a mutter half to himself, a hit that a thought has entered his mind too ugly to consider, a denial, and the loaded words, "steal away" and "guilty-like." Iago's speech says nothing at all, taken logically, and even seems to attempt to say the opposite of the real message. This message is all in the images Iago has implanted, including that of himself as a blunt, honest fellow who hates to think evil of anyone else. They set baited traps for Othello to leap into. The medium is the message.

To say that two kinds of expression are constrasted, one rational and appealing to the conscious mind, the other irrational and drawing upon the hidden fears or desires, below the level of consciousness, is not to say that one lacks emotion while the other is emotional. Every kind of human expression and inter-human communication involves emotions and feeling-tones. Rationality of expression or communication is not a matter of "pure logic." It draws upon a host of experiences and memories, with all their emotional evocations, but at the same time it makes the "unconscious" more or less "conscious." It links the internal feelings to a pattern of outer reality. Thus when at the end of the play, Othello discovers how he has been tricked, and turns his sword against himself, his speech is heart-rending, and perfectly rational:

I have done the state some service, and they know't;—
No more of that.—I pray you in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;

The kind of expressive communication in which the "medium is the message," is that which skirts rationality, conscious thought and awareness, stirs up a different kind of emotional storm, a conflict between internal life and outer reality. The victim seems to be at war with himself, for he has been utterly unaware of how the thought has been implanted in his mind; that is the secret of "the medium is the message." He must think that he himself has invented it. So Iago, who knows very well what he is doing, calls his method "poison," and anticipates the unrest it will bring:

The Moor already changes with my poison. . . .
Look, where he comes! Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou owedst yesterday.

And Othello is torn in two. Iago has touched upon his most vulnerable spot, his self-respect and pride. He is a black man who has risen to trusted leadership in Venice. There were mutterings that an unhandsome person like himself could not keep a young woman's love, when there were so many gallants around. Could this really be true? There is the awareness that his position itself, as representative of the state, is no longer tenable, if he becomes a subject for laughter, gossip and scandal. So he leaps to Iago's cleverly arranged bait.

Deception of the kind Iago practices is never purely "subliminal" or below the level of conscious thought. This adroit playing upon internal anxieties is one half of the method, another necessary half being some "factual" data, which the psychological manipulation gives a significance far greater than what it would normally have. So Iago, along with his stirring up of Othello's suspicions, concocts little bits of

evidence, that otherwise would be brushed aside. Having prepared the ground, he can now say, in effect, "Can you doubt the testimony of your own senses?" Yet the result is still not total conviction, but a conflict; accumulated past experience of reality versus the seemingly undeniable immediate fact. Othello expresses this conflict. He has been made "certain" of Desdemona's faithlessness. And the unwritten, but powerful law of Renaissance society demands that one especially in his kind of public position must kill an adulterous wife. Yet one outrage is in conflict with another:

> *Nay, that's certain:—but yet the pity of it, Iago!*
> *O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!*

Essential to rational expression and communication is that it does not rest upon naked, isolated fact, or sense-data. This is rather combined with knowledge, individual and social experience, and wrought into a pattern of reality. A tool of irrational or subliminal communication is however the seeming fact; a form of naturalism, the fact out of any context of understanding. An example from recent times can be cited: the rise of the Nazis in Germany in the 1920's and early 30's, sponsored by the great banks and trusts. Of course there were ideological arguments for the Nazis, weak ones. An influential argument, however, was the marching array of brown-shirts, the hobnailed boots, the truncheons and guns, the leeway given them by the police and government to beat up any dissenters. The medium is the message. So a form of naturalism became a powerful tool for deception. The image, which frightened so many people into submission, was that the forces of fascism and reaction were all-powerful.

What Shakespeare, the penetrating psychologist, saw as a rising form of adroit psychological deception carried on by individuals, has now become organized and systematized on a mass scale. Whole industries are devoted to it, like advertising and publicity. Shakespeare saw the method in which "the medium is the message" as something to be warned against,

something to be explained, a bid for irrationality that had to be put into a rational context by showing the kind of people and motives responsible for it. McLuhan asserts "the medium is the message" as a universal law.

To the advertising and publicity industry, as to the industries purveying commercial mass entertainment or pseudo-art, truth or any approach to it is not only exiled, but wiped out of mind as a concept. Thus, the key method of modern publicity and advertising is that a "message" must be implanted in the mind of the public without its realization that it has been thus manipulated. If advertising were simply aimed to tell the truth about a product, it would not be a multi-million dollar industry turning hordes of talented writers and artists into well-paid serfs, with the function of creating beguiling images; forms of "media" that are also innate messages. The process has invaded politics. A candidate for office, including the highest, does not present his real views but has a staff of publicity experts and ghost writers who debate what "image" to create. Even the terminology is that of commercial victimizing. He must be "sold" to the public. And in both cases, there is not only the calculated assault upon the public, but an internecine war among the "media" manipulators.

The process has invaded diplomacy, international affairs and the operation of wars. So in the Second World War, behind the fakery about a seemingly miraculous bomb sight and the pretense that bombing would win the war—a fakery that cost many lives—was a hidden build-up for the aircraft industry. In the war in Vietnam, the hidden message within all the forms of publicity and news is that we are fighting, not a people who have risen in anger against a foreign-supported, murderous dictatorship, but a "communist conspiracy." And so it has been an unwritten law for all news media that the Vietnam National Liberation Front must never be mentioned, as leading the fighting. The people we are fighting are always "Vietcong," and the dead bodies on

the battlefields or bomb targets are invariably "dead communists." The real message lies not in what is said—the information the public looks for on the actual events—but in how it is said. The ostensible message is that a skirmish occurred at such-and-such a place. The hidden message, conveyed by the loaded words chosen, is that we are facing not Vietnamese peasants defending their homes but a dire conspiracy hatched in Moscow and Peking. Again, this is the process of manipulating people's minds without their knowing that they are being manipulated. The medium is the message.

More and more, the operation of foreign affairs is carried on in terms borrowed from the commercial advertiser; namely labels and slogans. The countries with a capitalist economy—a simple economic fact—and those open to capitalist investment, must never be described as such; the term to be used, by not only the press but the State Department itself, is the "Free World," regardless of what military and bloody dictatorships this "Free World" embraces. If in some issue that rises between us and one of the "other world," a proposal comes from the other side, both UN delegates and State Department officials draw on either one of two stock answers: the proposal is either "the same old story" or it offers something new "only for propaganda purposes." The real, hidden message is that the other side is made up of wily characters with whom it is impossible to deal. The truth, of course, is that we do not want to deal with them.

So the commercial, mass produced popular entertainment industry, whether producing paperback "thrillers," or motion pictures, or television shows, is full of "cold war" messages, hidden within the seemingly innocent purpose of make-believe time-killing. A rather frank confirmation of this deception plus hypocrisy is offered by the *New York Times Magazine* (December 24, 1967) in an article by Joan Barthel called "John Wayne, Superhawk." It told of a movie, then being made by John Wayne, as acting star, director and part

producer, of the book *The Green Berets*, with the active help of the U.S. Army brass. It is a propaganda movie extolling the American necessity for bombing, defoliating and burning Vietnam, and slaughtering its people, on the grounds that if we didn't do so, they might be friendly to communism. It was released in June, just months before the 1968 elections, in which the war was certain to be an issue. Mr. Wayne declared:

"This picture is naturally from the hawk's point of view. But I don't think pictures are made for messages. I think they will emotionally affect people, which in turn may affect thinking, but this picture is strictly for entertainment."

What Wayne is saying in effect is this: "My picture is a definite statement about an existing situation, made without any attempt to be true to the realities of this situation but only to impress my thought on your mind through thrilling pictorial battles between good men, labeled my side, and bad men, labeled the other side. I trust you will absorb this statement and make it your view without questioning whether it is true or not. You should not even be aware that there is a statement. You should be aware only of the pictorial thrills. The medium is the message, the only message you need believe exists."

It is precisely this kind of subliminal deception, influencing the mind in such a way that it does not know it is being influenced, to which McLuhan gives blanket approval, with his proclamation that "the medium is the message." He does not openly advocate deception, of course. He merely accomplishes the same purpose, that of guarding the operations of modern media from any criticism in terms of deception, by removing from his picture of media any consideration of truth or untruth.

Never in McLuhan's book does he ever raise the concept of truth, or truth to life. There is no hint that what he calls "media" have any connection to the knowledge and exploration of the actual world. The most he will say in this respect

is that some "media" are "informational." Truth means correspondence between what one thinks of the real world and what is actually doing in the real world. But the real world never exists for McLuhan. He doesn't use the term. What he uses in its stead is "environment." And since according to his theory, each "medium" creates a "totally new environment," the concept of any knowable real world vanishes. McLuhan's utter unconcern with truth or deception is seen when he writes about newspaper and magazine ads: "The ads are by far the best part of any magazine or newspaper. . . . Ads are *news*. What is wrong with them is that they are always *good* news. In order to balance off the effect and to sell good news, it is necessary to have a lot of bad news. Moreover, the newspaper is a hot medium. It has to have bad news for the sake of intensity and reader participation. Real news is *bad* news. . . . Ads, in contrast, have to shrill their happy message loud and clear in order to match the penetrating power of bad news" (pp. 187-8).

True, ads are good news—to the publisher. They bring income. But to the public? The fact is that the vast majority of newspaper readers are interested in truth, or in knowing what happened sometime, somewhere; even in learning something of the real forces and events in the world that affect them. McLuhan, however, betraying the contempt for people typical of a Madison Avenue media theorist, says the people are interested only in having their feelings twisted. Apparently the newspapers made a colossal mistake in putting the end of the Second World War in headlines. They should have found some bad news to feature.

Having evaded the concept of truth and deception, McLuhan's further step is to muddle the understanding of media itself by using the term without qualification for diametrically opposite kinds of phenomena. He starts with the meaning of the term as it is used on Madison Avenue, the center of the advertising and publicity industry, and then assumes that this is nothing other than what media mean in

the creative arts. On Madison Avenue, media refer to the organized mass communication networks like newspapers, magazines, radio and television. According to the Madison Avenue mentality, a mass campaign is under way to establish some product, or politician's image, or political policy. What media should be used for this? Newspapers? Radio? Magazines? TV? Which provides for the money it asks the largest and most impressionable audience, along with the best technology for capturing its mind? In all such projects, the public is thought of as an object or victim to be operated on. The medium itself, so far as it lends itself to this campaign, is impersonal, and embodies in itself or its technologies no special perceptions of or approach to life. Like the telephone and telegraph, which McLuhan also calls "media," it is run by technicians whose job it is to carry out whatever messages are given to them, with the impersonality of hired servants.

It is otherwise with the languages and means of expression of the arts. Here we are in the realm of "extensions of man," or of the expanded mind, skills, perceptions and senses; the realm of active exploration by human beings of the world outside them, along with that within them, and the exchange of their findings. The term "medium" is used here, but in a quite different sense from that which it has to the advertiser choosing between magazines, newspapers, radio or TV. A painter may decide to use the medium of water color, oil painting, etching or drawing; a composer may use that of an orchestral piece, song, piano piece, or string quartet; a writer may use the medium of the novel, essay, lyric poem or drama. The medium is not the message, although it is involved with and shaped by the message.

The arts are nourished by truth to life. The medium is a tool both for exploring this reality, always changing and inexhaustibly revealing ever new facets, and for fixing the artist's perceptions in objective, evocative form. Each artistic medium relates to a special aspect of external and internal reality which it is best fitted to explore. Within this aspect of

reality the crystallized discoveries or "messages" are as varied as is real life itself. And the medium is shaped by the life it reflects. Works of art may view life narrowly, and can even falsify it. But if falsification dominates the work, it does not operate as art. If there is no integrity at all, no genuine and deeply felt human response to something real, this is revealed in the lifelessness with which the medium is handled. All the fine craftsmanship applied cannot make it live. As Shakespeare showed, the skills of deception are different from those that reveal the beating heart of a human being, or open the mind to the real world. For example, in *Othello,* Iago's prim and pompous observations on "good name" are skillful blank verse, and nevertheless dead rhetoric:

> *Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;*
> *'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;*
> *But he that filches from me my good name*
> *Robs me of that which not enriches him,*
> *And makes me poor indeed.*

Cassio's outburst when he has been caught derelict in duty, not knowing that Iago has tricked him into this, is prose, and yet a moving cry from the heart:

> IAGO: What, are you hurt, lieutenant?
> CASSO: Ay, past all surgery . . . . Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.—My reputation, Iago, my reputation!

McLuhan's writing is close to the skills of deception. Enthusiastically he exploits the ambiguity of the term "medium"—on the one hand an active tool for the expanded perception of reality and on the other an impersonal, mechanical channel for communicating anything, true or untrue—to eliminate the concept of truth from all discussion of media. Just as Nietzsche declared himself to be "beyond

good and evil," so McLuhan, in his exaltation of the modern service and communications media, is beyond such considerations as truth or untruth. He is liberated from this relic of the "print age." His statements, he says, are only "probes." His book, in the spirit of the advertising media, is above such questions as, "Is what you say true?" It is presumably a gigantic probe. But we might legitimately ask, just what is he probing? Is it the gullibility of his readers?

It is a cunning device for McLuhan to draw upon the arts in order to make the modern electronic media appear to be the culmination of what the arts had been striving for in history. But it is a deceptive device. The arts are the historic embodiment of the growth of human sensitivity, the media through which human beings have striven to know the world and themselves, the windows progressively opened on reality, the developing extensions of man that make human life more human. They are not simply technologies that become outmoded, to be replaced by new technologies. They are not environment but forms of human relationship and collectively shared perceptions sensitizing people to their real environment.

The electronic media of today, however, try their best to become the people's environment, to become their universal culture, so that to the advertiser or publicist, they can guarantee a captive audience. This confusion of media is necessary to McLuhan's thesis. It enables him to ennoble, with the phrase "extensions of man," the operation of media today for assaults upon man.

5

Art Extensions vs. Media Amputations of Man

THE PHRASE "extensions of man" has profound relevance to the study of the arts, sciences and media in general, if we use it in its figurative meaning, not to connote physical extensions that can be lopped off or amputated. In its figurative meaning, as extensions of the human senses and powers, it refers to deepening perceptions of the real world, truer knowledge of its make-up, trained skills in manipulating it, so that the entire relationship of the human being to the surrounding world changes and grows. As people change nature to fit their needs, work with it or become creatively involved with it, all its manifold sensuous qualities are revealed to them, and become stocked in their own mind, as changed perceptions.

People also become aware of powers in themselves previously unknown to them. Step by step an unknown, apparently hostile outer world is transformed into something known, understood, loved, serving as an arena for human growth. In this psychological sense, nature itself can be said to become an "extension of man," to the extent that man discovers himself in nature. So it is with relationships among people. As they move from hostility and destructive competitiveness to cooperation, each person finds in his contacts

with others the source of his own growth and awareness of his own capacities, so that human relationships themselves become "extensions of man."

But the term "extensions of man" can also be used in a crudely physical sense. Thus a hammer is an "extension of the hand," a spear is an "extension of the arm," a paintbrush is an "extension of the fingers," a gun is an "extension of the body." However, with such tools, the true "extensions of man" lie not in the physical tool itself but in the essential growth of the senses and skills represented by it. A tool can be lost or broken, but there is no basic loss, or "amputation," so long as the skills for handling it remain; another one can be made. So the "extension of man" represented by artist's pencil or paintbrush is really the ability to draw with it. A bad artist would not improve himself one bit if he stole Picasso's paintbrush. McLuhan, however, makes full use of this ambiguity in the term "extensions of man" in order to muddle the question of media. When he writes of the arts, languages and perceptions, he evokes the first or humanistic meaning of the term "extensions of man." Then he develops the thought in terms of physical extensions, so that the entire history of arts and languages becomes a preparation for what the modern media like television and automation are doing to man. From the beginning of society, according to his theory, each new medium built up one sense at the expense of others. Thus come, as we have seen, "wars of the senses," man "fragmented," people forced "to exchange an ear for an eye," the "ultimate conflict between sight and sound," the "mechanizations of the various physical organs since the invention of printing," the "self-amputation of our physical bodies" by "any invention or technology." Neatly he turns the development of human sensitivity into the development of human vulnerability, and the process of making human life more human into a process of making it more terrifying.

Let us consider spoken language. Its rise was slow, not the sudden apparition of a "new technology" that whiplashed the

senses. It grew through all the complicated activities of hunting, agriculture, sex relations, and the various needs for organizing a tribe about its collective tasks. It did not make these tribes "oral," as McLuhan puts it; that is, extended their ears and voices at the expense of the other senses. Its growth was due to the complex interrelation of many senses and organs, including eyes, ears, touch. It enabled people to name the things of the world about them, to refer to or think about these things without their being physically present, to envision combinations and changes of things, to enrich the "outer eye" with the "inner eye," or imagination. It fostered speculation about the appearances and forces of nature, with generalizations about them. It made possible the transmission of craft lore. And it was used for rituals that also involved picture making, dance and music. Pictorial art, drawing and shape-making grew along with spoken language, and they too enabled people to see or observe more accurately, record and transmit their observations, develop communal knowledge. Furthermore all these means of expression or extensions of the senses made possible the exploration of inner states of feeling and awareness by one human being of kinship to others.

Written language afforded another such extension of human senses and powers. It made possible an awareness by people of their real historical past, and a sharing of experience and knowledge over wide expanses of space. It made a more complex literary art possible, and engendered a leap in scientific method. The ability to write thoughts down and assemble data made possible the creation of logically structured systems of thought and knowledge. But this does not mean that, as McLuhan declares, literacy "created" logical man. The human beings who collectively and step by step carried on the exploration of patterns of reality, also step by step developed logic as an aid in exploration, just as they developed written language. And just as the societies using spoken language were not exclusively oral, so the later

societies using the written alphabet were not predominantly "visual," or reading minded, exchanging "the ear for the eye," as McLuhan declares. He describes the ancient Greeks as a people whose senses were transformed by the "visual" impact of the phonetic alphabet, and so became, as he claims, geometry minded. But these Greeks also produced remarkable sculpture and painting, and their drama included chanting and music.

Now we can also call, figuratively, the actual works of art created through these means of expression, "extensions of man," but this is not simply due to their concrete, physical presence. It is due to their embodiment of an exploring human mind, and their transmission of a stage in the growth of human sensitivity. Thus an old piece of music or story is like an ancestral voice, telling us what it meant to be alive at a certain time. And even the most faithful record of nature, if it is art, carries a "human presence," for we recognize in it a form shaped by a human's mind and touch, a kinship to us bridging time and space.

With finished works, as with the products of human skills and technologies, another phenomenon must be considered as central to the study of media. It is the social institution. For the arts, crafts, technologies and communications must operate through socially created channels, and these institutions are by no means necessarily "extensions of man" or "extensions of the senses." They may be assaults upon the senses and upon man.

To offer a simple example, the skills to make and handle tools and even machines may be called "extensions of man," in that they afford new potentialities for transforming nature to human use. But a factory is not necessarily an "extension of man." It is a social institution. When it is privately owned, it may be an extension of the owner's avarice and drive for profits. What it creates or produces as a factory interests the producer only in that it can be sold for a profit. So the Dow Chemical Corporation cheerily moves from making plastic

wrappers for food to making napalm to burn human flesh. And to the worker in such a factory, the factory is not an extension of himself but a kind of amputation. It brings alienation of the worker from his own potential creativity and from the fruit of his labor. He finds that he must sacrifice or lop off part of his being, as the price he must pay for the necessities of life.

So it is with the arts. Poetry, acting and dramatic techniques may be called extensions of the senses and skills, but a theater is a social institution. The ancient Greek dramas were created by men of genius, but they came to be written only because there were amphitheaters and stages, actors, and a built-up tradition derived from religious rituals of enacting and retelling their myth-history before the city population. So Shakespeare was able to become a playwright because there was a living theater in the London of his time, with acting companies that he could join to learn his craft, and audiences in the practice of attending plays. Prose and the ability to spin a narrative and create characters, are "extensions of man" but the printed book represents a social institution, the complicated combination of printing presses, and means for manufacturing, selling and distributing books, with the availability of a public able to read them.

The true "extensions of man" never die, in the sense of human beings losing the need for them. And they never war with one another. Each such foliation of perception and skill is a precious development of human sensitivity. The more such developments there are, the more they can cooperate with one another. But the social institutions flower at one time and collapse in another. They are subject to changes in the structure of society. Although McLuhan claims he is talking in his book about "extensions of man," the "media" on which he bases his thinking—television, radio, computer compiexes, automation—are not "extensions of man," but social institutions. They have little or no use, in their present mode of operation, for truth to life and the free in-

vestigation of a changing world out of which the true extensions of the human senses, mind and skills flower. They may move, through their economic weight and strategic position in social life, to drive other media, in which these "extensions" can flower more freely, out of existence. But when such economic pressure operates to destroy or stifle some genuine art medium by making it uneconomic, this is not what McLuhan makes of it; rather, he sees it as a perfectly normal process of a new "extension" or medium replacing an outmoded one. In truth, it is a barbaric destruction of a precious aspect of human sensitivity.

The "extensions of man" require social institutions in order to realize themselves fully. But the actual social institutions, as we have seen, are not always friendly to the "extensions of man." When they are friendly, the conventions that spring from the shape of these institutions become organic to the very planning and structure of the art work. When they are unfriendly, these conventions become stifling to art. For example, in the "classic era" of ancient Athens, where the people had driven out the tyrants and established the first, limited democratic practices in the ancient world, choosing their leaders and debating policies and politics, social institutions rose that were friendly to drama. Public religious ceremonies were transformed into theater festivals in which old myths could be freshly treated and humanized, and in which burning problems of personal and social morality, even of religion itself, could be raised. But this production of great drama did not continue for long after this arena for free debate collapsed, along with the collapse of Athenian democracy. And sculpture flourished better when it was a public ornament of a relatively democratic society, than when it became an ornament of the private villas of the wealthy.

Shakespeare and his fellow Elizabethan playwrights created drama with a form, style and content entirely different from the Greeks. The social institution represented by London theatrical life at the time was friendly to such a free growth.

Drama was a form of popular entertainment. The growth of an independent, mercantile English nation, beginning to shed its medieval and feudal skin, engendered a wide-ranging examination of the conflict between feudal and Renaissance humanist thought, including, as we can see in Shakespeare, a critical view of both kings and aristocracy and the mercantile money-grubbing mentality. Although an acting company like Shakespeare's had to get some official aristocratic or court sponsorship, its real support was the public which paid its way into the theater. Prices were low enough for almost all strata of the population to enter, and this breadth of audience, crossing class lines, helped foster the conflict of views and critical scrutiny.

The New York theater is a quite different kind of social institution that shapes a quite different kind of production. The forward step in Shakespeare's day of making the theater commercial, that is reaching a middle class and artisan audience instead of one exclusively aristocratic, has turned into the backward step of commercialism, in which the dominating drive for profit controls the shape and content of the art work itself. In Shakespeare's time a successful play made money, but there were no "play doctors" to tell him that *Romeo and Juliet* was too dangerous to produce because it was so different from his successful farce *The Comedy of Errors,* and that the tourist public would not go for a sad ending. Furthermore, he did not have to find some "angel" who could supply a hundred thousand pounds to make the production possible, and who would become, along with the producer, a kind of dictator over what took place on the stage. Nor were there teams combining plot-writers, dialogue-writers and gag-men, with music, dance and decor "experts," organized to produce synthetic and tourist-attracting musical comedy confections.

In the true "extensions of man," the "medium" is not at all the "message," although there is some organic connection between the two. A craftsman's tools are adapted for specialized tasks. Give a metal worker a good lathe and the freedom

to do what he wants with it, and he can work miracles. But this close relation between tool and product doesn't mean that the medium (tool) is the message (product), because it is the craftsman who is in control of the tool all the way. The tool does not control him. So in a far richer way in the arts, the way in which the artist uses his materials of expression gives us a clue to his personality and attitude toward life and people. We can tell from the sound and imagery of a few lines of poetry whether the poet loves nature and people or is estranged from them. William Butler Yeats in *The Fiddler of Dooney* and T. S. Eliot in *East Coker* both describe the folk dancing. Yeats' lines speak affectionately,

When I play on my fiddle in Dooney
Folk dance like a wave of the sea

while Eliot writes with obvious contempt,

Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes.

So it is with all the arts. Van Gogh paints nature with an urgent clamor while Corot gives it softness and sweetness. Dvorak's melodies have folksy sunniness and tenderness, while Wagner's melodic lines are intensely yearning and brooding. But all that this means is that as each artist fashions the malleable means of expression of the arts, the medium begins to reflect his own sensibility. This is not the McLuhan media backlash, in which a new medium, seen as pure technology, disarranges the senses, and this becomes the true "message."

Certainly each medium an artist takes up raises special technical problems, but the process of solving them is that of making himself free to express himself in them. The new medium doesn't control him but gives him new powers. So Shakespeare mastered the lyric poem for one purpose (a songful directness and simplicity of expression), the sonnet for another purpose (the working out of inner conflicts),

blank verse for still another purpose (a grand or passionate declamation with often deep personal involvement) and prose for still another purpose (a lusty naturalism or humor). Rembrandt, a master painter, turned to the relatively cheaper form of the etching to find a broader audience, and the special problems of the etching medium, like creating subtleties of light, shade, modeling and contour, with black and white instead of color, were no restrictions placed on his art. He opened up new, exciting possibilities of what could be said with this medium, for all subsequent artists. So in the nineteenth century, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt each explored the bravura possibilities of the solo piano medium within the social institution of the public concert, with its adulation of the virtuoso performer, and each composed with a quite different pianistic sound and "message."

What is true of the artistic medium is also true of the social institution used for art or communication. Each such institution has its own conventions or artifices that turn into special technical demands upon the artist. But the question of whether the product is a free artistic expression, representing an "extension of man," rests not on the technical demands but on who controls the social institution and for what ends.

When the social conditions are such that the institution opens up a broad avenue between public and artist, permitting a wide range of ideas and honest exploration of life, a new potential is created for the development of the artist's thought, skill and imagination. The very artifices and technical demands of the social institution, acting as "medium," become interwoven with the artist's creative thinking, as can be seen by comparing the conventions of the ancient Greek theater with the quite different conventions of the Elizabethan theater. In this sense it is possible to say that the social institution, as "medium," has a good deal of influence on the kind of "messages" that emerge. But this is quite different from saying that "the medium is the message." When an avenue for the dissemination of art influences it by

opening up new ways of involvement with life, it opens up a new stage of artistic freedom, and as a result not one "message" but a host of "messages" appear.

A striking example is offered by the novel. The prose narrative or tale was known as a form by the ancient Greeks, in Asia and the Middle East, and during the European Middle Ages. But it only became, in Europe, a major art form attracting a host of creative minds, when the rise of mercantile and industrial capitalism brought about the democratic spread of literacy, providing an audience receptive to the entire overhauling of views of life as one order fought to replace another. The peak of its stature as a major art form came not with Gutenberg's installation of a printing shop but about three centuries later. By that time the printed book represented a far-flung social institution of presses, publishers, book stores, libraries, all bringing to the writer a broad literature audience cutting across social strata and class divisions. A host of "messages" appeared. The entire interior history of the decline of the landed gentry, the growth of capitalist and petty-bourgeois, the transformation of city and countryside, looked at from every possible point of view, appears in the works of Balzac, Hugo and Flaubert in France; Gogol, Dostoyevesky, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Gorky in Russia; Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Thackeray, Dickens, Hardy in England; Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James, Dreiser in the United States. The only approach to a situation in which it appears that "the medium is the message" comes with the large-scale commercialization of literature, and the standardized mass production of "wood-pulp" romances, horror stories, mysteries, Westerns, all following set formulas. "The medium is the message" signifies a situation where both artists and public have lost their freedom. That writers willingly take part in this factory production of pseudo-art in order to make a living, does not alter the surrender of their freedom.

Such surrender of freedom is the rule in the modern elec-

tronic mass media. And it is here, where the social institution operates directly against the "extensions of man," that McLuhan hails the operation as confirmation of his universal law, "the medium is the message." What gives TV in the United States its special character as a "medium" is not the picture tube, about which McLuhan, as we will see, makes an enormous fuss. It is that the television network is a service industry for the great industrial and financial corporations. The social condition responsible for this development is the enormous growth in wealth and power of the great monopoly corporations themselves. This condition has pulled other media into the same path. Radio has become a lesser medium for advertising, like small business compared to television big business. A host of newspapers and magazines base their existence not on their primary function but on their ability to be an effective channel for corporation advertising. McLuhan gloats over this, declaring the ads to be the most interesting parts of a magazine or newspaper. But he is only gloating over the destruction of freedom involved in this dictation of a message by the social institution, so that the technological side of the medium exists only to serve this message, and the medium becomes the message. TV in the United States is the classic example in which no program even exists on it unless it is judged to be a satisfactory setting or public trap for the advertising message, or for any other thoughts the lords of industry and finance wish to impress upon the public.

TV offers its programs "free" to the public that has access to television sets, and ironically, this is its only freedom. Otherwise artist and communicator on the one hand, the public on the other, have lost their freedom to an extent unprecedented in past media. The give and take between creator and public, through the channel of the social institution, has become minimal, on the verge of vanishing altogether. It its here that the "voice of authority" controlling the social institution is most irresponsible and dictatorial,

telling the artist what he can do and cannot do, and trying to make the public into passive acceptors of whatever is channeled their way. The living relation of the creative figure to an active public disappears. And it is McLuhan's trickery that precisely when the media have lost their quality of embracing or fostering "extensions of man," or "extensions of the senses," that he hails them, as with television, as the climax of human development, a revolution in "extensions of man."

Actually the talented person serving such mass media is alienated from his own creativity, his own humanity, his own free sensory response to nature and people, his independence of mind. He has become a serf. He is no longer manipulating a medium for his own expressive purpose and freely exploratory thoughts about life. Instead, the medium is manipulating him. Behind it stands the marketplace campaign, dictating what particular illusion he is to instill in the public's mind, and he obediently does this by playing upon the public's yearnings and anxieties. McLuhan calls this, "giving the public what it wants." But "the medium is the message" really denotes that the public is victimized and the artist has given up all right to a mind of his own. That many talented people do this gladly and willingly does not in any way alter the enslavement. The Greek and Elizabethan theater and the nineteenth-century publishing houses were no artistic Utopias, but Euripides, Marlowe and Balzac were free men compared to the writer preparing a program for a television network.

The unique nature of the present-day mass media in the United States is that their social sweep, the extent of their tentacles, the vast amount of hired serfs they enlist, the millions of people they hold in their grasp, the passivity they force on them while exploring their vulnerability to be victimized, is unprecedented in history, while they are controlled and run by the most individual, socially irresponsible interests devoted to their own profiteering and aggrandize-

ment. At no time in the past have so many been plundered, their minds operated on, in the interests of so few. To McLuhan, however, this is the new universal democracy. In his paean to the attempt to standardize the public mentality, he says "it stretches out toward the ultimate electronic goal of a collective consciousness" (p. 202). Advertising, with all its slanted psuedo information and creation of artificial needs, is called "the huge educational enterprise" (p. 203). Let extensive research be done by advertisers to determine the vulnerability of the public, or the particular fears, desires and hopes that can best be exploited to sell them things they do not need, and he calls these products of market research "magnificent accumulations of material about the shared experience and feelings of the entire community" (p. 203).

Since he also calls the TV "medium" itself, with its multisense victimization, the path to a rounded man, replacing the "fragmented" and "specialized" man of the humanist and "Gutenberg era," it is worth examining how "rounded" are the figures who create the TV commercials. In a one-minute commercial, a bevy of specialized talents are called on; one provides the idea, another the words, a third the music, a fourth the pictorial effects, and so on. These commercials have given a great number of jobs to actors, but the price the actors have to pay is the complete erasure of their personalities. They are strictly anonymous. Their names must never be known to the public. They must have a "neutral personality," so that the public will not recall, when watching one commercial, that they have seen this same personage advertising a different product some previous time. And all of these specialists are subject to the whim and dictation of the advertiser. Even the programs surrounding these commercials are similarly produced by a galaxy of one-sided, one-faceted specialists.

This kind of overspecialization is like that which grew in the industrial factory, when the aim was to concentrate the

worker's mind and body on one simple operation. He became an appendage to the machine. This might be called a true "amputation" of himself as a human being. That hosts of workers fought against this "amputation," that they restored at least part of their rounded humanity by collaborating with their fellow workers to form trade unions, carry on strikes for better working conditions, and make themselves social-political minds, is a side of history which need not be pursued further for the matter at hand. That the conditions of many of the "specialists" making TV shows and commercials are more gilded does not alter the one-sidedness and amputation.

Although the electronic mass media of today, like radio and television, on which McLuhan bases his entire concept of media in all history, purport to supply the public's need for entertainment, they have developed no stimulating or creative relationship of their own to art. Other social institutions, like the Greek theater, the medieval and Renaissance church, the Elizabethan theater, the concert hall, the book publisher and distributor, may have come into being for purposes other than art. But because they did involve an active public with the artist, who often spoke the very mind of this public, they did become media for a rich flowering of new forms of art. As two-way channels between artist and public, they excited the imagination of artists and the products found a welcome audience. The electronic mass media of today, television and radio, however, are parasites on other art forms. They have opened up no new creative channels. The reason is not technical deficiency but the high degree of passivity forced upon their audience.

McLuhan disguises this parasitism and the artistic poverty it discloses by turning the situation into a universal law for all media: "The 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (p. 23). Thus he asserts that the "content" of writing is speech. But this is a misuse of the word "content." There is no special content to speech, just as there is no

special content to writing. The content of each is what is communicated or expressed in it. Each is a form of expression with a sensibility of its own; writing has not digested or eliminated speech. If he means that writing came after speech, he could just as well say that the "content" of writing is painting, since writing grew out of pictorial communication with signs and symbols. By the same logic, he could say with equal untruth that the "content" of sculpture is "stone-cutting." He goes on, saying that the movies "took over the novel and the newspaper and the stage all at once" (p. 61). But the novel, the newspaper and the stage still flourish, alongside of the movie, and from the earliest experiments with the motion picture camera, the most interesting works were those which started from scratch, exploring the potentialities of the camera medium itself. But all this nonsense is aimed simply at turning the artistic barrenness of TV, shown in its prolific use of old films, into a universal law of all media. So when he declares "the content of TV is the movie" and "TV is reprocessing the film" (p. ix), he hopes this will be taken as a proof of how well TV functions in the tradition of all media in history, instead of as an admission of its artistic impotence.

The arts, as we have seen, stimulate, collaborate with and give subject matter and ideas to one another, but are not parasites on one another, and do not assimilate, restructure or digest one another. Many of the most beautiful sculptures and paintings are illustrations of stories and books. An example is the wealth of Biblical carvings and paintings in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Presumably, the original purpose of this was to give Biblical instruction to a population that could not read the Bible. But far from supplanting the Bible, the pictorial work helped stimulate a demand by the people for a Bible in their own language, so that they could read and interpret it for themselves. And the pictorial work itself became a profund step in humanism, through artists ostensibly "illustrating" the Bible but actually looking at

their own social conditions and fellow men in terms of Biblical morality. With Rembrandt's great seventeenth century Bible paintings, etchings and drawings, we get the most sensitive commentary on both the moral problems and the life of the poor in his own Holland.

Verdi's *Otello* is rightly considered the greatest opera made from a Shakespeare play, a towering work of art in its own right. But to make a viable opera libretto out of Shakespeare's *Othello,* Verdi and his librettist, Boito, had to not only translate Shakespeare into Italian, but also to chop and rearrange a good part of the play, concentrating on one main dramatic conflict and omitting both characters and inner dramas that are an integral part of Shakespeare's thought and conception. This only means that Verdi found in Shakespeare's play a theme and human-social situation about which he had a profound commentary of his own to make, using music. The opera does not do away with the play. We are lucky to have both.

The motion picture has operated in this way, as a genuine creative medium or "extension of man" which does not do away with the other arts but stands alongside of them, bringing its own unique sensibility to the reflection of life. As a twentieth century mass-produced popular art, like popular song and dance, pulp fiction and comic strips, the movies have produced quantities of artistic garbage, and in their incessant drive for material have also adapted novels and plays, with results sometimes fruitful and sometimes barren. Yet as a "free enterprise" popular art, the movies, like these other popular media, were able to tap reservoirs of popular creativity, occasionally. Here and there the public, with its varied tastes, found its own artists, often from among its own ranks. There was some freedom of exploration occasionally possible, some room for independence, some reflection of human realities. To the astonishment of commercial-minded producers, the public proved again and again that it was fed up with formulas, and that originality could be successful.

And so popular or tin-pan-alley song production found its Negro blues, a Handy or Gershwin could rise in its ranks, the miracles of jazz could appear with a galaxy of Negro musicians, however ill-paid and mistreated, asserting their right to play as free men. The crime and detective story found a Dashiell Hammett. So the movies found Charlie Chaplin, for example. As a thin current amidst the torrent of worthless pseudo-art, the film grew not as an assimilation of other media but with a form of perception and sensibility of its own.

TV and radio, however, are almost pure parasitism, so far as art and genuine "extensions of the senses" are concerned. There have been some small, very rare, artistic achievements in these media; good radio dramas and some well-written well-conceived television plays. Pleasant forms of popular entertainment have appeared, restructuring the old stage vaudeville or music hall to fit the new media, but they are nothing about which one can raise any artistic hallelujahs. In the main, these media have had to draw upon other art media to fill their programs and attract a public. Radio, for example, leans heavily on the phonograph record; TV, on movies, sports and newscasting. This is not to say that radio and TV do not have artistic possibilities. A sound microphone and a television camera can be tools for art in the hands of an artist with freedom to follow his own thought and perceptions. But the kind of social institution these media have become, as arms of big business, inhibits this.

When television takes over a stage play or a motion picture, its "restructuring," which McLuhdan makes sound so impressive, is only a process of alteration which works to the detriment of the originals. Plays have to be cut, because "time is money." The TV camera distorts the spacing and movement on the stage which is so important to a full realization of a play. Movies are broken up by incessant commercials, and are often badly hacked. Much of the sensuous appeal of the original is lost. TV networks, as part

of their forced parasitism, also pay fantastic sums for the right to broadcast major spectator sports events. And here too, television has wrought harm. These events now have a new function, that of becoming good public-attracting media for TV advertisers. The drive among the sports producers for TV money has helped turn these sports themselves into callous big business operations.

In McLuhan's exaltation of TV, it is a neat sleight of hand to turn a cultural deprivation into an "extension of man," an offensive aimed to force the utmost passivity upon the public into a bold path to the future of a happy, harmonious world. Having used as weapons a perverse rewriting of history and a confusing portrayal of artistic media, McLuhan then offers a theory of biological psychology which makes passivity into activity and the dulling of conscious thought into "involvement." This is his theory of "hot" and "cool" media. His use of these catchwords, perhaps more than anything else, has contributed to his reputation as the scholar who really "knows" television.

6

Hot, Cool and the Brainless Involvement

THE TERMS "hot" and "cool" are taken from jazz slang. The swinging, improvisational jazz of the 1930's and most of the 1940's was known as "hot jazz." At the end of the 1940's and in the early 1950's a trend developed that got to be known as "cool," led by musicians such as Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Quartet. The "cool" was a jazz of low dynamics, understatement and subtlety, in which the listener had to "feel" the basic rhythm within the off-rhythms and in other ways fill in the deliberately created musical gaps.

Contrary to McLuhan's implication that the "cool" use of the jazz medium was a special response to the television age, there had always been some jazz strongly propulsive in its emotional impact, while other jazz was reserved, witty, subtle and suggestive of things unsaid. And a distinction like this, if not the terms "hot" and "cool," had existed throughout the history of the arts, even within the work of a single artist.

To give but one example, when Shakespeare opens a sonnet with

Not mine own fears, but the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come

this, if we use McLuhanese terminology, is "hot," in the

directly affecting, brooding vision it opens up. When he begins a sonnet with

> *Farewell! Thou art too dear for my possessing*
> *And like enough thou know'st thy estimate;*

this is "cool," for the reader must read on two levels, do a "double-take," catch the twin meanings. "Dear" means lovable and also high-priced. "Estimate" connotes a human valuation like "esteem" and also a cash valuation, as with a bidder at an auction. The sonnet is a bitter and ironic address to a woman who has jilted her lover, selling herself to a higher bidder, and Shakespeare here adopts the cool style because he does not wish to say this directly. The reader must pick up the thought from the double meaning of the imagery.

McLuhan however is not interested in what actually took place in jazz and the other arts, but only in undermining the "Gutenberg medium," and entire humanist heritage, as something harmful and outmoded. He redefines "hot" as "non-involved" and "cool" as "involved." He goes on to describe everything done with the written and printed word, all "literate culture" as "hot" and "non-involved." All the arts in their great humanist development from the Renaissance on, are also "hot" and "non-involved." Television, however, is "cool" and "involved."

It is of course better to be "involved" than "non-involved." However, the true distinction in the arts, or in various forms of expression through media, is not between "involved" and "non-involved." It is between different forms of involvement. The "hot" appeals straightforwardly to thought, emotion, experience of life, the awakening of empathy. It is in this sense, a complete and full statement. It pretends to be the experience it evokes. The "cool," by comparison, works with a kind of disguise or reserve, pretending to be the opposite of the experience it evokes.

Thus Milton's *Paradise Lost* is "hot," in its direct dramatic

and oratorical appeal. Milton announces that he will attempt "to justify the ways of God" to man, and to do this tells a dramatic story of the revolt of Satan, and the temptation of Adam and Eve. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* on the other hand is "cool." He doesn't say at all that he is satirizing England. In fact, he appears to praise it. He tells a seemingly whismical fantasy. The reader however must pick up Swift's hints, turn the fantasy upside down, bring it down to earth, realize that behind Swift's poker-face, comic manner he is savagely berating the hypocrisy and inhumanity of his own England.

Wagner's operas are the epitome of "hot"; Mozart's comic operas and piano concertos are "cool." Wagner thunders and tries to overwhelm the audience with the tragedies of his heroes. Mozart will ripple along lightly, even merrily, and then through a sudden twist, with a few notes that a dull listener might readily miss, he will open up an abyss of deep poignance—then close it again. Daumier will paint a directly affecting portrayal of a strong working woman, holding her little girl by the hand, with a bundle of laundry under her other arm. This is "hot." But the cartoon and sculpture showing the Emperor Louis Napoleon as a seedy, bedraggled and degenerate roué is "cool," for the spectator must "fill in" from his own experience, turn the picture "upside down," as it were, gather that the elegant Emperor does not look like that at all, but that this is what he really is inside; a seedy, dissolute scoundrel playing about with the lives of the people.

Both "hot" and "cool" involve the audience or readers' mind. The "hot" presents what appears to be a complete, simulated experience. It may expect the audience or readers to ponder over it. It may arouse disturbing questions, uncover heretofore unglimpsed aspects of inner or outer reality. But it opens up its heart and mind. The "cool" demands an analytic act in the very process of receiving the work. Instead of saying directly what it has in mind, it impels the

audience, through various hints, to make the statement. For this reason the "cool" was used by "serious" jesters from at least the Middle Ages on, to evade censorship, to say things that would appear to be sheer innocuous nonsense to a hostile audience and make sense to those ready to receive the message.

How, then, does this relate to the humanist tradition on the one hand and the TV picture tube on the other? Why is the one, which has so often used satire, wit, understatement and reserve, "hot" and "non-involved," while TV, with its sentimental soap-operas, its Western pseudo-dramas, its spy stories and sensational on-the-spot newscasts, is "cool" and "involved?" McLuhan's trick is to shift from the mind to the mindless, from the conscious to the unconscious, from the brain to the body and viscera, and along with this to dazzle the reader with his apparently expert technical knowledge of what goes on in the television picture tube. "Hot" media, he says, are "filled with data," while "cool" media are sparse in data. He then uses "data" to mean not information or evoked experience offered to the mind, but only the physical impact of the medium on the sense organs. Thus, "hot" media are hot because they offer "high definition." "Cool" media offer "low definition." A low-definition medium requires more physical filling in by the audience. And so, "Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation, or completion by the audience" (p. 32).

McLuhan then neatly amputates the conscious mind, thought, the evoked recollection of past experience, out of any consideration of what is meant by audience "participation." This to him is purely a matter of physical and tactile acts of "completion." For example, he mentions the cartoon, as a "cool" medium, but has nothing to say about its wit or satire. It is "cool," compared to the "hot" art of painting, only because it is sketchier, and "very little visual information is provided." Television is the "coolest," most "in-

volved" of media, not because of any show or program that might be offered on it, but because of the operation of the picture tube, whatever the program. The onlooker is involved to the depths of his being without knowing it, because the picture on the tube is really a "mosaic" of tiny dots, which the observer must put together, without knowing it. "The TV image offers some three million dots per second to the receiver. From these he accepts only a few dozen each instant, from which to make an image. . . . The TV image requires each instant that we 'close' the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses" (p. 273).

The argument is absurd, when analyzed. For a Rembrandt drawing, with its sparse strokes, does not involve the observer more than a Rembrandt painting. And when one looks closely at a painting by Titian or Rembrandt, one sees thousands of little brush-strokes and spots of color that, at a greater distance, coalesce into evocation of textures and light. But painting like that of Titian and Rembrandt is, to McLuhan, the "hottest" of media. A printed photographic reproduction of a painting or photograph—likewise a "hot" medium to McLuhan—is actually a "screen" of tiny printed dots which coalesce to the eye as a picture. The act of the ear in putting together the innumerable different wave vibrations that reach it in each moment of a symphonic performance—likewise to McLuhan a "hot," "nonparticipation" medium—is similarly a most complicated physical act. The printed word is the acme of "hot" media to McLuhan, yet silent reading, as we have seen, requires not only a complicated act of the eye and brain in "seeing" not isolated, individual letters but words and phrases as units, but also the "inner ear" and kinetic movements of the speech muscles.

However whether this special bodily impact of the television picture tube "mosaic" is really scientifically so, does

not interest McLuhan. He is no more interested, as we have seen, than in whether his statements about history are really true. Like his pseudo-historical statements, so this physiological statement about the picture tube dots is only thrown into the hopper to further a thesis of much broader implications. This thesis is that all art or communication which involves the audience in a mediated way, which calls up thought, rational questioning, memories of past experience, reservoirs of knowledge, is "non-involved," "non-participatory," and therefore unhealthy, a thing of the past, a product of the Gutenberg medium's fragmentation of human beings. The healthy art and communication replacing this is that which does not involve mind and thought, but makes an immediate, physical impact. It short-circuits the thinking mind. Only this strong physical reaction is what McLuhan calls audience "participation."

To state the question in different terminology, McLuhan is attacking the humanist kind of realism which addressed itself to real life so that it could interpret it, probing the relation of the inner world of human mentality to the outer world of human affairs, nature and society. He hails, as replacing this, what can best be called a kind of naturalism, although he doesn't use this term. It is the naturalism in which the concrete, immediate impact on the senses, and especially the viscera, is paramount; what is most real is what can be handled and touched, or arouses "touch" feelings, and establishes itself thus as an actual, physical part of environment.

To illustrate this, let us think of some works of humanist realism. They present what seem to be replicas of life, nature and people in various relationships. But we do not think of the works as being actual reality. A painting of an ocean is not expected to be watery when we touch it. If it is a novel, we do not take it to be biography or documentary history. If it is a tragic drama, we know that the bodies on the stage are not really dead. If we thought they were, our reactions

would be entirely different. The central aspect of this kind of art is that it illuminates or comments on reality, gives us new insights, but does not offer itself primarily as physical reality. This is true whether the art is directly realistic, or fantasy, or comedy, or the "inverted reality" of satire and caricature. We can be deeply moved by the memories such works of art awaken in us of our own past experience. They make us feel, even if we are not consciously aware of why we feel so, a sense of kinship to the human portrayals presented to us. We feel that if the work of art is talking about other people, it is also talking, in a way possible only to art, of ourselves. And so the empathy, participation, or involvement is a mediated one. It goes through a process. It stirs up our minds about a host of past events that are now drawn up to bear upon it. Even if much of the new sensibility and outlook the work gives to us, through its very style of exploring reality, is not something we can translate into words, still the process of appreciation is filtered through our mind, and has stirred up our thought.

When however in ancient Rome, gladiators were forced to actually kill each other, or Christians and other victims were actually eaten by lions, the audience reaction was far different. The physical impact is much greater, as with all naturalism, in its replacement of realism. The spectacle is not a commentary on life. However contrived, it becomes a slice of life. The audience can be said to participate strongly; the immediate shock power is greater. But there is nothing to filter through the mind and the memories. There is no thought process involved. This is what McLuhan means by "cool," "involved," and "high participation" media. The epitome of this, to him, is TV. Whether or not it is true that the stream of dots has the "kinetic" and "tactile" effect which he claims for it, and that "tactility is the interplay of the senses," this comes close to describing in pseudo-scientific language the actual method of a TV commercial. The creators of a commercial do not quite trust McLuhan's theory

of the kinetic effect of the picture tube dots. But they consciously attempt to short-circuit the thinking and critical mind of the observer by keeping busy all the time and appealing to all the senses at once; picture, motion, music, speech, tactile feelings—all concentrated in a drive to drug the mind and create a subliminal conditioned reflex.

Aside from the picture-tube theory, McLuhan makes many shrewd observations about the kind of presentations that work best on TV, and these have earned him the respect and even admiration of those employed by the medium itself. The trend of his observations is that what has been described here as naturalism, although he avoids this term, is highly suited to TV, and there is probably a good deal of truth to this. And in pointing out that any production of the "Gutenberg era" needs considerable restructuring in order to become effective on TV, he is repeating what has long been known as a truth about all recreations of an art work in terms of a medium different from that in which it had been conceived. Such restructuring took place, for example, when Shakespeare's plays, which had been conceived as swift successions of scenes for the open, curtainless, almost bare Elizabethan stage, were revived for the nineteenth century proscenium and curtained stage, with its sumptuous, unwieldy scenery. Scenes were cut, others were reshuffled, and the emphasis of the production was no longer, as Shakespeare had planned, on the protagonists' action within a matrix of an entire society in motion. Underlined instead were the ordeals of the central characters.

Such transfers from one medium to another need not always be harmful. But extensive restructuring is demanded, as for example when a stage play becomes a motion picture. It may apear that these media are very close to one another. In both, the spectators see personages moving and hear them speaking. But no work of art worthy of the name is simply a replica of life. It is life restructured in terms of a medium, to embody thought about life, insight into life, or the

artist's involvement with life. The seeming naturalness of a great work of realistic art hides very subtle artifices, and in fact these artifices are necessary to make the work appear to be "natural." When the "medium" is changed, the artifices are exposed. The playwright writing for a "proscenium" stage plans his action for a space that is broad and relatively shallow, with the knowledge that the spectator's eye is always the same distance from the stage. The motion picture camera, however, represents the spectator's eye, and achieves powerful effects by seeming to take it on journeys, constantly changing its focus and point of view, rising to spacious panoramas and swooping to sharp close-ups. So an unaltered play would look very artificial, space-restricted and stilted in the movie version, or it would lose important meanings because of the different eye emphasis. Or again, the most natural-appearing play for the proscenium stage is so written that a climax is reached at the end of each act, and the fall of the curtain is a calculated part of the dramatic effect. Let the play be literally reproduced in a motion picture, and it is hard, sometimes impossible, for the movie director to smooth over the letdown that the spectator feels when this climax is reached, and instead of a curtain dropping, the action goes on.

So TV, as McLuhan points out, has special "laws" or makes special requirements of its own. Like the movies, it is low in definition to the ear, and does not favor extended speech. It likes to break this up with picture and movement. But unlike the movies, it is also low in definition to the eye. And so it does not go in for elaborate, eye-filling scenes. It favors, rather, "processes." It likes an easy informality, a casual spontaneousness, from its protagonists. Thus a lecture that goes over well on a platform might not be a success on television. It would have to be restructured for television, made more informal, given more movement and illustration, turned into more of a "process." Because of TV's low definition to the ear and eye, it also favors added evocations of touch, or

kinetic, visceral and tactile feelings, and these become part of the "process." McLuhan points out that a symphony rehearsal makes a better TV program than a finished symphonic performance. This may be true enough, but what it really means is that a rehearsal is more interesting than the finished performance to an observer who really doesn't care much about music anyway. To the music lover, the rehearsal can be most interesting, but only when he has in mind, or later hears, a finished performance. If rehearsals were to supplant final performances, the result would be cultural deprivation.

In its two decades of development as a major social institution in America, TV has discovered methods that are peculiarly suited to itself. One of them is the late night "talk show" in which famous entertainers and other personages appear not in their imposing stage or public images, but in behind-the-scenes chit-chat; the easy informality and casualness of which McLuhan speaks. The spectator feels part of this intimate circle, and the commercials do not come as a shock for there is no continuity to break. Another is the contest show, in which there is no "imagined," significant drama, but a real dramatic, if artificially created, "slice of life" naturalism. One person, before the spectator's eyes, is actually handed frustration; another is given instant happiness. TV has fostered a new form of popular music, in the concoction of motifs or tunes that are designed to attach themselves permanently to an advertised commodity or some episode series like "Batman." Hardly a vital contribution to musical art, commercial TV jingles have replaced the old Mother Goose rhymes to many children.

A startling step has been taken in news presentation. Through the TV camera and sound track, the spectator can see history itself, while it is going on. The war in Vietnam is the first war in which television has shown what marvels it can do. Camera and sound men go where shot and shell are falling. Some have already been wounded and killed. One

wonders, however, is the main motive that (like a football game) a visually and viscerally compelling and sensational news program provides a good, audience-catching framework for commercials? After all, no television network spends money for any other reason than to make money. Such a newscast alone adds little to an understanding of the real forces behind the war. It puts the finishing touches on the explosion of the romantic glamorization of war, but that explosion was pretty well accomplished by the books on the Second World War. It shows some of the ordeals of the soldiers. It does not show the horror wreaked by us on an entire people, with planes constantly scouting the jungles for any sign of life, and immediately dropping napalm, phosphorus, newly devised bombs scattering innumerable pellets that can devastate large areas and kill anything living. To see a fact does not mean that the fact is understood, or put into an illuminating context of the forces behind it. Thus a TV shot of a war going on does not show what is in the mind of the President, or the State Department, or the generals. But it is now possible that a family sitting in its living-room may actually see a son, brother or husband shot dead before their eyes (followed by a cheery commercial extolling beer or hair spray).

That TV as an entertainment and communications medium has unique powers of its own is undoubtedly true; also that it is here to stay. But it is still, like radio, a service medium. It has yet to show that it can create from scratch, through its unique qualities, an artistic experience of lasting stature. Like radio, it still borrows its art from other media, and pays interest in terms of artistic loss. This loss is bearable. Like radio, it has the advantage of providing an enormous potential audience at one time. Radio has put this to some good use. The broadcast "live" of a Metropolitan Opera performance, or a symphony orchestra concert, is an enormous cultural boon, even though there is some musical loss, and it would be better to be in the actual theater or concert hall. But TV has not, but for rare occasions, been able to do

this much. It would be a boon if a successful play could be shown on television, instead of demanding that people who want to see it buy tickets months in advance, or travel to another city. The live performance would still be far better, and people would want to see it even if they had already seen the TV broadcast. But this is prohibitive because of the economics of play production. It would be a boon if an important motion picture could be shown on TV when it is made. But this is also, economics-wise, unthinkable.

Such developments as the casual, informal "talk" show, the sensational "on-the-spot" newscasts, the transformation of certain competitive sports into big business due to their link-up with television networks, indicate that TV as a medium leans toward naturalism, no "illusion," no interpretation, no insight, no thought about life, but the naked blunt fact; a hunk of reality wiped clean of all context and thrust up against the senses, with the appeal: "Can you disbelieve the testimony of your own ears, eyes and bodies?" But McLuhan, as we have seen, evades the term "naturalism," just as he evades such matters as realism, the fact that there is an actual world that can be explored, the question of truth. He talks of processes, and "environment." Thus he evades the important truth that naturalism can be one of the trickiest forms of deception, precisely because it offers itself as unadulterated reality, the concrete fact. McLuhan himself shows, unwittingly, how one kind of naturalism, the easy informality, is used by TV for calculated political deception:

"On the Jack Paar show for March 8, 1963, Richard Nixon was Paared down and remade into a suitable TV image. It turns out that Mr. Nixon is both a pianist and a composer. With sure tact for the character of the TV medium, Jack Paar brought out the *pianoforte* side of Mr. Nixon, with excellent effect. Instead of the slick, glib, legal Nixon, we saw the doggedly creative and modest performer" (p. 269).

In a similar vein, McLuhan impresses the reader with his magical insight into TV by declaring that Hitler could not

have been a success, had there been television. Even if this were true, McLuhan neglects to state that the reactionary German trusts which financed Hitler could easily have found a different form of deception suitable for television. But at best, McLuhan is stating a half-truth. He is comparing television to radio, and the real point he makes is that Hitler's speeches, which were so effective on radio, would not have made at all the same impact on television. Hitler however had more strings to his bow than radio; forms of naturalism, numbing the critical intelligence with their sense-data, visceral impact and implied messages of irresistible power. The frenzied mass rallies at Nuremberg would have made good television fare.

Seeing that what McLuhan extols as the special qualities of TV are also drastic limitations, we get some inkling of the reason that television has failed to produce a current of art works worthy of the name, and unique to its own medium. However useful it is for popular entertainment and mass communication, it cannot in itself satisfy the cultural needs of the people, nor can it supplant the humanist, and to McLuhan "hot" and "uninvolved" media productions, without savage cultural destruction. But it is exactly such a future that McLuhan sees for TV, hailing it as a liberation of humanity from the "fragmented" mentality of the era of literacy and Gutenberg. And true to his practice of generalizing the limitations of TV into a universal law media, his entire book becomes, aside from its glorification of TV and electronics, an argument for various forms of naturalism. The important aspect of reality to him is not the real world itself, as people progressively know it, but some isolated sensation, some concrete thing, process or artifice that happens to make a sheerly physical, concentrated assault upon the senses. Even McLuhan's "media," as he sees them, are not "media" at all. They do not act as a "medium" for anything. They are not tools for learning, thinking or exploring channels for enhanced perception. Their function is simply to be things in

themselves, not operated by people but operating on them. It is like saying that the importance of the telescope lies not in the truer knowledge it gives us of the stars, of suns, planets and galaxies, of their make-up, movement and spatial order, but only in the physical impact its concentration of light waves has upon the eye.

McLuhan's bent toward naturalism emerges again in his theory that out of literacy and the printed word came the error of rationality, and "linear sequences." His argument is the puerile one that any moment of actual life is not at all logical or rational. "There is nothing lineal or sequential about the total field of awareness that exists in any moment of consciousness" (p. 87). But that is exactly why great art is not a substitute for life but a humanization of life, a clarification of the human involvement with the outer world; why science enables human beings to restructure elements of the world outside them; why philosophy tries to illuminate the values of life. If art were simply a moment by moment replica of actuality there would be no need for it. If philosophy were simply interested in statistics, if science did not look beneath surface phenomena to find pattern and structure, if art did not raise in the imagination the human desire to change the world, human beings would still be subhuman, close to wolves and pigs. And so McLuhan's great rebuttal of logic and reason, or of any attempt to fathom reality, is again the naturalism of emphasizing the false realism of the immediate event or sensation, while short-cutting thought, understanding and socially transmitted experience. Even "stream of consciousness" music like that in Wagner's operas, and "stream of consciousness" prose like that in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Joyce's *Ulysses,* are by no means transcripts of any actual "total fields of awareness" in moment after moment of consciousness. The "stream of consciousness" method is a highly selective form of commentary on life. It unfolds the mentality of a specific kind of personage in a specific social situation. The difference be-

tween this and more outgoing styles is its concentration on the "internal" world. It is "more true to life" only in that, historically, it has opened up a new realm of human sensibility in art, and it has often lost touch with certain important aspects of reality in the process of making contact with other aspects.

One of the qualities that lifts human beings above the animal world is that their actions are no longer simply immediate responses to sensations and impulses. The more that people have replaced ignorance of the world about them with true knowledge of its make-up and laws, the more they have been able to plan their actions in terms not merely of immediate effect but of the wider repercussions of the forces they set in motion. McLuhan, turning not only to naturalism but to a kind of primitivism, attacks this rational mode of planning human actions. He uses the old chestnut that thought inhibits action and chills the responses to life.

It is true enough that rational thought and the knowledge brought by sharing others' experience help control and temper action. But far from stultifying action, their longer-term result is action more in accordance with human desires. This is seen as well in the impact of realist and humanist works of art, which throw light on reality and appeal not only to the sensations but to the conscious and thinking mind. The audience is not expected to respond by a single action. Instead the effect of the work is to alter or expand the mind and perceptions of the audience, so that all its responses to life, or human relations, will be different; educated, in a sense, by the art work. McLuhan writes, however, "Understanding stops action, as Nietzsche observed" (p. 30).

Actually, the great, progressive actions, in art, science and politics were carried on by people who also had deep understanding. Hamlet did say,

"And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought"

but the line before this reads, "*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.*" It is not simply thought in itself, but conscience that deters him. He is faced with a complicated moral problem. And once Hamlet understands what he has to do, he proceeds to do it. Certainly there are people who are hung up on a dilemma, where conflicting pulls paralyze action. But in general, the more one understands a problem, the clearer one sees what must be done to solve it. Certainly in the Second World War, a vast number of people engaged themselves in the fight against fascism precisely because they understood it.

But McLuhan insists that literacy has made people no longer respond to human appeals. Thus: "Western man acquired from the technology of literacy the power to act without reacting" (p. 20). This to him is a "fragmentation" of the human being, and the example he uses is that of a surgeon operating. "The advantages of fragmenting himself in this way are seen in the case of the surgeon who would be quite helpless if he were to become humanly involved in his operation" (*ibid.*). But most surgeons are deeply involved in the struggle for life against death in which their operation plays a part. And it is precisely this involvement which demands that they draw upon all their knowledge, skill and self-control, that they do not respond impulsively to any immediate sensation without considering the total picture. It is fortunate that McLuhan's book was not written 200 years ago. For how would Colonel Prescott at the battle of Bunker Hill have been able to tell the fighters for independence, "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes," knowing that by inhibiting their trigger response to the first sight of the English, he was transforming his men into non-involved, fragmented robots?

There is of course a gruesome form of "acting without reacting" in our time: from the commanders and doctors at the Hitler murder camps, to the strategists who now treat wars and human destruction simply in terms of statistics.

The strategists of the Vietnam war, for example, plan increasingly brutal methods of wiping out Vietnam villagers and destroying their land itself, simply because the "Vietcong" is rooted among them. This kind of "detachment"—another favorite McLuhan epithet—has nothing to do with literacy, the "Gutenberg medium," and the humanist tradition. This "detachment" is a modern relic of the ancient civilizations based on slavery and of the feudalism of the Middle Ages, when life was held very cheap. It was challenged, if not eradicated, by humanism. And it has risen again to become a major phenomenon in modern times, when great numbers of scientists, people of education, and "specialists," find themselves seemingly hopelessly in the grip of super-powerful governmental and corporation structures, that appear to be beyond human control. In their service to these forces, they become truly "fragmented," or alienated, estranged from any attachments to, or involvement with, the mass of their fellow human beings, and estranged from their own humanity. This is anti-humanism. It is fostered by the modern attack against the humanist tradition, an attack in which McLuhan does his part. It is, in its modern grotesque form, a product not of the age of "literacy" but of the age of the electronic technologies.

Had McLuhan devoted himself to an honest, sober evaluation of TV, with its special contributions, potentialities and limitations, even ignoring its economic connections and structure, treating it solely as a medium for communication or expression, or in its character as an "extension of the senses," he might have written a useful book. For TV has a place in the cultural and educational scene, and can make a valuable contribution. Instead he extols it in sensational terms as a revolution which will liberate the human race whether it wants to be liberated or not, and which must "overthrow" all previous "media." There are a stick and a carrot in his argument. The stick is a "practical" fatalism: there is no use fighting a changing world, you are being

altered by the electronic media whether you like it or not. The carrot is the promise of a harmonious, conflictless future, the new "tribalism." And his exaltation of this fake "revolution" is an abstraction of the competitive, "dog eat dog" spirit that spurs the modern media. All rivals must be wiped out. The past must not be allowed to compete with the present. To make room for the hegemony of TV and the modern electronic media, McLuhan undercuts and abuses the entire humanist heritage of non-electronic or "Gutenberg" and "literate" culture. It is outmoded and harmful. It has created logic, individualism and fragmented man.

The arts and sciences, however, are not utensils or even social institutions that can be thrown away in favor of improvements. The scientific heritage embodies the accumulated knowledge of the physical world. The artistic heritage embodies the development of the human being's sensitivity to nature, society, his fellow human beings and himself. They must be used critically, and they cannot satisfy the scientific and artistic needs of today. But they are part of the necessary education of the human being of today, the accumulated experience of his predecessors, the preparation needed to face new problems.

Social institutions and social systems are discarded in the course of human progress, to be replaced by others. And the achievements of art and science, as well as all culture, can be linked to the social systems within which they appeared. But they are not synonymous with these social systems. The systems pass away but the achievements of art and science remain alive and necessary, and they speak to later generations. So the great drama, sculpture, poetry and science of "classic" Greece appeared in a social system that had fashioned the first democratic institutions in the ancient world, but erected them on a base of human slavery. Only the "free citizens" of a city like Athens enjoyed democracy. Masses of slaves worked for them. Now slavery has passed away. But the Greek arts and sciences, while reflecting the limitations of

an age which intellectually accepted slavery, still speak to us. For they also embody a testament to a stage in the growth of the human spirit, a stage in consciousness, the stature born out of the confidence that human beings could begin to think about and try to control their environment.

So it is with the achievements of later epochs. We need them, not for imitation but to let us know how we came to be what we are. To McLuhan, all this heritage is like debris that must be swept away to make room for the new electronic mentality. And the eternal "war of media" he invokes to justify the necessity for this destruction is bolstered by presenting a history of society that leaves out society. He records some of the real characteristics of an era, making what appears to be a convincing argument, and then ascribes the change to the mysterious, magical activity upon the senses of the people of a selected "technology" or "medium." And so, when he is writing about the intellectual and artistic products of the age of capitalism, he simply leaves out the term "capitalism," as well as anything denoting a social and economic structure, and instead calls it the era of the "Gutenberg technology." The effect is to muddy the waters of comprehension and undercut any attempt to understand the real forces operating in the world.

So with the situation today, McLuhan, knowing quite well that the real conflict he is writing about is the replacement of "free enterprise" capitalism by a system in which great corporations, banks and trusts dominate not only economic life but also the government policies, transforms this into his own "media conflict" approach to history: "The electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology" (p. 32). Thus he can follow with the cheery advice to "understand" the new (as technology, not economic and social structure, of course), live with it, accept it, ready ourselves for the new, happy revolutionary future it is inevitably bringing.

The obscurantism of McLuhan's "technology" theory of history is not simply his omission of economic, political and other social considerations. More abysmal is that he omits entirely the creative human spirit, the great human conquests of obstacles and problems, the visions and bold transformations of the world, the daring explorations of reality, the battles of ideas. In McLuhan's history, the human being dwindles to almost nothing. But if people today seem to be dominated by electronic technology and media this is only another example of what has happened in the past. Forces set in motion by people have gotten out of hand. But just as in the past such forces were eventually taken in hand, so today there is no reason to believe that human beings will remain puppets of their own technology.

Much of the theory with which McLuhan extols television as the avenue to a new mind and a new world is drawn from pseudo-scientific theories that appeared in the 1930's around various forms of non-objective art. Writers like Georgy Kepes, constructing optical illusions or tricks with perspective (many of which were well known to Renaissance and Dutch painters), proclaimed that only through such altering or "opening up" of the vision could the mind be freed for new ideas. This theory stood psychology on its head. For while human sensitivities have continually grown and changed, and the mind with them, it was always in collaboration with labor, thought and active involvement with reality. Through the process of actually doing, or working with the outer world, a richer and deeper sensory response developed, an awakening to hitherto unperceived qualities in the real world. Out of the actual process of change, ideas rose in the imagination for further change. If the eye is temporarily deluded, as with a flat plane with slanted lines so drawn on it that they make it appear to be three-dimensional space, the result is only a temporary bewilderment between the report of the eye and the report of other senses, along with

the memories of past experience. If the disparity between the report by the eye, and the experience of the other senses, as well as past knowledge, is artificially intensified, the result is not an opening of the mind to new ideas. It can well be neurosis or paralysis, as has happened with animals in laboratory experiments. In real life, the other senses, and the accumulation of socially transmitted knowledge, are always correcting the eye. Thus when we see a sunrise, we no longer think that a ball of fire is rising over the rim of a flat, plate-like world. According to the modern topsy-turvy theory, however, a new artificial "environment" has to be created, and this, by deluding the eye, alters the mind.

McLuhan revives this sham theory for the argument that each new medium creates a new environment, and that this utterly changes the senses. It not only serves his argument that television, simply because it presents a picture actually made up of innumerable tiny dots, has created a new "environment" and radically altered human psychology. It also helps make him a spokesman for various other art trends—abstract expressionism, op art, aleatory music and the "theater of cruelty"—that also claim to be "environment" involving the viscera and not the mind. He refers to such trends as signs of the brave new world of anti-Gutenberg. Actually they play out the sad drama of the modern artist's alienation or self-estrangement from his own social humanity.

An example of modern "environmental" art is a work by the painter and sculptor Robert Rauschenberg, as reviewed by Grace Glueck in the *New York Times* of May 27, 1967:

"In line with his often-expressed ideas of encouraging audience involvement, Mr. Rauschenberg's 'revolvers,' big plexiglass wheels mounted one behind the other in motorized aluminum stands, invite—indeed depend on—the spectator's participation. The wheels, five to a stand, are stenciled with random words and photo-images—a tennis match, a trailer truck, Batman, an archaic statue, the labeled chassis of a car.

Using push buttons, one can play a kind of visual roulette with them, spinning the disks to effect the chance relationship of the images."

This exemplifies what McLuhan calls "involvement"; namely physical involvement, tactile, brainless; the opposite to mediated, thoughtful, humanist involvement, which he calls "non-involvement" and "detachment." He doesn't mention Rauschenberg, or the transitory art fashion of which such work is a part. But he does refer briefly to some greater artists. It is part of his cunning to draw upon all sorts of great names for confirmation of his theories, while trusting the reader not to realize that they don't confirm his theories at all. So he cites Seurat, Cezanne and Roualt, as typical modern artists, and writes about them: "The nonvisual mosaic structures of modern art, like those of modern physics and electric-information patterns, permit little detachment. The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being, as does the sense of touch" (p. 291).

It is true that Seurat painted with dots of color, like a "mosaic," but his drawings are not mosaics, and both his paintings and drawings speak of his tender regard for the people of Paris. Cezanne created powerful structures on canvas, but these works also demonstrate his tender feelings toward nature and people. Roualt is the very opposite of a painter whose aim is solely to create "touch" feelings. Of course his work has these tactile sensations, a characteristic of any artistic drawing, found throughout the history of art. It is difficult to think of painting more "tactile" than that of Michelangelo, El Greco and Rubens, for example. Characteristic of the entire art of painting and sculpture is that the movement of the artist's hands and his touch sensitivities translate themselves into pictorial line and contour. But to the artists, this was a tool of their craft, enabling them to give an intense sense of life to their visual imagery, and the thought behind it. Roualt especially, of twentieth century

painters, carries on the great humanist tradition. His work, with its suffering clowns, crucified Christs, satiric portrayals of judges, bitter portrayals of prostitutes, cries out against the grossness, injustice and oppression of the forces that rule society. An idea of his artistic thinking can be gotten from the titles he appended to his set of copperplates, *Miserere;* "Jesus reviled," "Are we not all convicts?," "It would be so sweet to love," "His lawyer in hollow phrases proclaims his entire unawareness," "Street of the lonely," "My sweet homeland, what has become of you?" He would be somewhat shocked to know that his art is cited as support for the brainlessness of TV, as McLuhan expounds it; a medium in which the image is of no account, and the "message" that is important is only the tactile twist given the body by the procession of dots on the picture tube.

The dramas of Shakespeare, the Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo, the portrayals of the poor by Rembrandt, the great social novels of the nineteenth century, the symphonies of Beethoven, the operas of Verdi, the poetry of Walt Whitman —all of the age of "literacy"—are imbued by the involvement of the artist with the troubles of his fellow human beings. If in the course of this they carried on great transformations of style, developments of word sounds and rhythms, intensifications of color and tactile feelings in their art, it was accessory; a necessary sharpening of their tools to be able to move the audiences and spectators with their thought and imagery. But McLuhan thinks otherwise: "Literacy, in contrast, had, by extending the visual power to the uniform organization of time and space, psychically and socially, conferred the power of detachment and noninvolvement" (p. 291).

McLuhan becomes ecstatic over the way in which TV, through its tactile feelings, opens up a new world. It replaces the old "hot" and "non-involved" medium of reading and literacy. By concentrating on touch, which brings all the senses together at one blow, it recreates, he says, the

whole man, as against the detached and fragmentary man of the literacy era. Does the TV child become backward in reading? That, to McLuhan, is a sign of progress. That reading is a primary key to acquaintance with the other human beings in the world, and the interior as well as exterior history of society is inconsequential to McLuhan. Involvement has nothing to do with fellow human beings, but only with the TV dots. "The tactual mode of perceiving is sudden but not specialist. It is total, synesthetic, involving all the senses. Pervaded by the mosaic TV image, the TV child encounters the world in a spirit antithetic to literacy" (p. 291). And "The TV child cannot see ahead because he wants involvement, and he cannot accept a fragmentary and merely visualized goal or destiny in learning or in life" (p. 292).

Wielding the loaded word "fragmented," McLuhan enthusiastically tears up the entire humanist cultural past, in favor of the new TV brainless multi-sense appeal, or "synasthesia."

One might demur that cultural life from the Renaissance on was not quite so fragmented. The same person could read a novel, and also look at a painting and listen to music. It is true enough that from the first appearance in society of a division between those who worked and those who ruled, there was further division of labor, both physical and intellectual. There were specialized crafts and skills. And so long as these specializations were controlled for service to the rulers, the pressure was for each worker to devote himself solely to his appointed task. But this confinement has continually been defied.

The great dramatists and philosophers of ancient Greece were men of breadth, who knew a great deal more than their particular craft. The giants of the Renaissance were cultured creators whose interests ran to many fields. Modern times have brought a far more intensive intellectual specialization. But the answer to over-specialization is not to appeal to all the senses at once. It is to see each "specialty," or division of

labor, in its social context, and bring to it a social perspective. Thus a Rembrandt, Beethoven, Goya, Daumier, Thoreau, Tolstoi, Galileo, Milton, Newton and Einstein created in one medium, and yet were great in it precisely because they were not "fragmented." They approached their work as social minds. They were aware of and thought deeply about what was going on in the world about them, and this often showed itself in the very groundbreaking problems they raised in their work.

There is a lurking, partial truth behind McLuhan's generalized nonsense, if we think not of "literacy" or "Gutenberg era" but of such things as capitalism and monopolies. The truth is that capitalist forms of manufacture tended to make each worker perform a single operation on a product, in contrast to the earlier artisan who created a complete work with his combined skills and mind. With the rise of the factory, the drive was for his entire personality to be negated, but for the few movements he had to perform. Even this over-specialization, however, began to be negated, when workers began to find ways to assert their wholeness as human beings by forming trade unions, going on strike, fighting for better conditions of work and for their right to live as human beings, involving themselves in politics. The odd devlopment is that this kind of factory over-specialization has now become the rule precisely in the operations of the electronic technology that McLuhan exalts so highly. Where is more over-specialization to be found than in a television broadcast, in which a host of technicians are called upon each to perform a highly specialized operation, without any application of breadth of mind, since the owner-producer supplies the mind and message? These specialists truly become slaves to the "machine." Computers and automation likewise demand hosts of clerks and technicians to perform single specialized operations.

The answer to specialization, to McLuhan, is not to bring the branches of knowledge together, not to show how these

branches interrelate in their social context, not to bring to people the many discoveries and opening up of the senses of the sciences and arts. It is to discard reading books or "visual structures" altogether, in favor of appealing to all the senses at once, with touch and the viscera dominant. His magic word for this new brainlessnes is "synesthesia," the television culture of the future. "The Western way of life attained centuries since by the rigorous separation and specialization of the senses, with the visual sense atop the hierarchy, is not able to withstand the radio and TV waves that wash about the great visual structure of abstract Individual Man" (p. 275).

McLuhan's world of the future demands a hard look.

7

McLuhan's Totalitarianism and Human Resilience

McLuhan's description of the world rapidly approaching through the new electronic media and technology comes as balm to the heart of those lacerated by the troubles of our day. One world of humanity is at hand, whether we like it or not, he says. Are people worried, or indignant, over tensions in Africa and the Middle East, or by the barbarous spectacle of the most wealthy and industrially advanced country in the world employing all its technology to massacre the people of Vietnam? This, he says, is merely a rough form of bringing equilibrium among cultures. War was always "the speedy dumping of industrial products on an enemy market to the point of saturation. War, in fact, can be seen as a process of achieving equilibrium among unequal technologies" (p. 299). Are white people worried about the ghetto uprisings or the clamor of Negro people against their condemnation to joblessness, slums and discrimination? Take heart, McLuhan says, brotherhood is being forced on us by electric technology. The world is becoming a village, with the kinship that characterized the primitive tribal village. "As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. . . . It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some

other groups. . . . They are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media" (p. 20).

McLuhan warns against "the folly of alarm about unemployment" (p. 304). Let automation throw more people out of work. It points to a future when nobody will have to work, and everybody will be rich, like coupon-clippers. A Land of Cockaigne is at hand, when the biggest problem of people will be that of finding something to do, or something to spend their money on. "The problem of discovering occupations or employment may prove as difficult as wealth is easy" (p. 65).

Although this may sound to the naive like socialism, McLuhan's vision far transcends so stodgy a thought. He writes pityingly about Marx, who, he says, was obsessed by such matters as how people produced and distributed the necessities of life. Marx, to McLuhan, was utterly unaware that not people but media were the real propelling forces in history. Media even make people unnecessary. No socialist ever thought of a world where nobody would have to work. The sorry best that Marx and Engels could offer was: "From each according to his abilities; to each according to his needs." Yet there are strange connections between Marx and McLuhan, which make it necessary to present a quick sketch of Marx's thought for the full comprehension of McLuhan. Much of McLuhan seems like Marx seen through a distorting mirror.

Both Marx and McLuhan find qualities in early tribal society that were lost in the subsequent social changes, and will reappear in a new form in future society. An important element to Marx was that the means of production, like the hunting grounds, the land that was tilled, the waters that were fished, were held in common. The impelling force for change was the rise of private property, coming about through the development of tools, techniques, means for mastering nature and expanding production and the growth of trade. Slowly and in various forms, property accumulation

and exchange turned into the private ownership of the means of production, accompanied by the exploitation of human beings, as with slavery. Around the organization of labor to serve the rulers, state structures rose, with the surplus product making possible the support of armies, priesthood, a hierarchy of officialdom, servants and workshops of craftsmen, all for the aggrandizement of the rulers, who became a ruling class. Great leaps in production took place, along with skills, arts, knowledge and technologies.

But because this progress occurs in a society divided into antagonistic classes, one profiting from the exploitation of another, leaps are inevitably followed by disasters, organization by chaos. The ruling class abhors changes in the social structure. Yet its need to retain its position, its drive for wealth, its intensification of production and exploitation, and the accompanying rise of new technologies, are a process of change which arrive at the point of threatening the social structure. There are external rivalries to seize its wealth, and wars both of defense and to gain more sources of labor. There are internal rivalries for power, with divisions and struggles among the rulers. As the burdens laid upon the workers become heavier, there are revolts. The ruling class can no longer control the forces it itself has set in motion. Production with its technological change reaches a point where its continued fruitful operation demands changes in the production relations, or the social structure. And since the ruling class cannot so transform itself, the economic machinery is clogged and crises arise, resulting eventually in revolutionary upheavals.

A new ruling class, coming to power after such an upheaval, is better able than the old to put the newly developed productive forces to work. But since this class also exists by exploitation, it is eventually faced by crises and disasters. So, in the ancient epoch of slavery, or exploitation through the ownership of human beings, great empires rose, one destroying another, until finally slavery itself was more or less

replaced by serfdom, or various other forms of exploitation and feudal servitude of a peasantry on the land. And as the feudal system and an exploitative landed aristocracy rose to a peak of power in Europe, its very wars, rivalries, and need for products on which to expend its wealth, engendered the rise of city industries and a middle or bourgeois class which eventually drove the landed aristocracy out of power. This middle class, becoming the modern capitalist class, could carry on vast leaps in production, with factory and machinery. And it too was exploitative, the servitude taking place under the guise of "free bargaining." In this bargaining the worker is really not free, since the means of production are privately owned or commanded, and it is to the owners or commanders that the worker must offer his labor power, in order to get the necessities of life. And capitalism is likewise faced by a series of crises, until its relatively small, or "free enterprise" character is changed to the domination of great monopolies and trusts. This twentieth-century capitalism of monopolies and trusts again moves through economic crises and disastrous wars.

To Marxists, through these leaps, disasters and changes that have made up the history of exploitative society, there has been a continuity of human progress. For if in early tribal or primitive society there was communal ownership of the means of production, human life was but one step above that of the animal kingdom, enslaved by nature, and anything but "free." In the zig-zags of subsequent social history there were irrepressible development of means for mastering nature, of real knowledge of the external world, and with these, increasing human sensitivities and powers. There were successive stages in the knowledge of the makeup and nature of society itself, and in the ability of human beings collectively to control the forces they themselves set into motion. With the rising expansiveness and complexity of social life, and accumulated knowledge, there were flowerings of human mentality, individuality and personality. Through the social up-

heavals, each such development, whether or not carried on around the needs of a particular ruling class, became the possession of a wider body of people. Thus history, for all its checkered character, is also one of successive stages of human freedom, or the growth of the human being and the ability to make the world outside of him his own.

Capitalism, to Marxism, is the last possible epoch of human exploitation. For in its monopoly stage it has organized production on a vast scale, both within the country in its manufacturing and distributive process, and over the world, in its investments, markets, and hunt for labor and raw materials. This "socialization" of production is accompanied by an intensification of the opposite of socialization; the individual, anarchic ownership and command of the means of production, with the competitive drive for profits and the constant need to expand its investments. These two "opposites" come into conflict. Monopoly capitalism cannot use its new and enormous technologies for general welfare, but only for private profit and war. It is racked by internal conflicts, the absorption of the weaker by the stronger, and also by revolt of the very peoples whose lives it has disrupted by forcing them into the grip of its operations. As disaster looms, as potentialities for material progress turn into new and greater threats of widespread human destruction, the working people, for their own protection, must move to take over the means of production in the name of society itself. An end will come to the self-alienation of the war of "all against all," which had its inception in the private ownership of the means of production and reached its terrifying climax under capitalism. All people will work and share in the rising opportunities for a full life and culture made possible by their joint labor. Nations can live and progress in friendliness, mutual assistance and understanding. In a sense, the communal ownership of the land in early tribal life could be said to reappear on a world scale, but the differences are crucial. Precisely because of the growth of human knowledge of the

external world and of depths within the human being himself, through the successive stages of society humanity approaches the collective task of mastering nature for human needs on a level not of enslavement but of freedom.

Even with this most schematic and sketchy outline, the possible source of McLuhan's views and the drastic alterations he has made, become apparent. Thus the primitive tribe becomes to McLuhan a kind of model for the future society arising, but on a level of exaltation that removes it from the sphere of reality. The real element of communal ownership of the land is of no interest to McLuhan, and accordingly there is no interest in the fact of primitive enslavement to the unknown forces of nature, the short life-span, the incessant need for food and the destruction by tribes of one another in the hunt for food until better production allowed conquered people to be used for slaves. The only important element to him is that these tribes were "oral"; the people were happily within "the tribal trance of resonating word magic and the web of kinship." Their senses were unified. They were untroubled by meditation. Each sensation aroused an immediate reaction. "Oral cultures act and react at the same time." Thus the people were rounded, whole men, with complete brotherhood. "Tribal cultures cannot entertain the possibility of the individual or the separate citizen" (pp. 86, 87, 88).

So with the forces that disrupted tribal society, McLuhan shows no interest in such factors as private property in the means of production, the formation of social classes, the question of who did the labor and who owned the product, or even in the rise of production technologies. For a philosopher of "media," McLuhan is highly selective even with "media." Thus to McLuhan, what detribalized humanity and disrupted this peaceful "trance" was only the phonetic alphabet, literacy, reading, writing and their successive revolutions culminating in the printed book. The senses were thus disassociated from one another and the "visual" sense put on

top of the disrupted hierarchy. Individualism came into being, along with logic, "lineal" and "sequential" thought, the pursuit of knowledge, humanism, the fragmentation of the human being, nations, nationalism, wars, and the ability to "act without reacting." Such is the decline humanity has suffered.

The electric technology has now changed all this. By eliminating literacy and restoring the unity of the senses through their basis in touch, it is bringing back the happy tribal trance, but now on a world scale, making the entire globe into a single village. The basic conflict today is between those who shortsightedly are addicted to the old culture of literacy, logic and fragmentation, and those who understand and welcome the liberation that the electric technology like TV is bringing to their sense equipment. "Today we appear to be poised between two ages—one of detribalization and one of retribalization" (p. 299). Non-involvement, produced by literacy, is being replaced by total involvement. "In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action" (p. 20).

One of the attractions of this picture is that the process of arriving at this happy state of affairs is so easy. All we have to do is sit back and let the electric technology reshape our senses. The old, benighted, angry social critics demanded that people study, learn the makeup of the world, society, and economics, master history, think for themselves, enter politics. McLuhan laughs at this. By participation in "depth," and "involvement," he does not mean anything like conscious study and understanding. People no longer need to read. Words stand in the way of the single world consciousness that is coming upon us. Just as primitive tribal society had no need for words, but only sound and touch, so the future world tribal village will have no need for verbalization, with

the conscious thinking and logic it entails. "Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatsoever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the pre-verbal condition of men" (p. 83).

In fact, any conscious act of criticism or questioning is not only useless, but harmful. The only understanding demanded of us is that we understand, and so welcome, what the electronic age is doing to us. Docility is the road to the future. "Electromagnetic technology requires utter human docility and quiescence of meditation such as befits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide" (p. 64). This is the triumphant liberation of man. TV and computers do our thinking for us, radiating their messages into our brain. McLuhan demands "higher education" for his future, but this education is only in how the electric technology is worked. There is no need for any knowledge other than applied techniques. "With electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience" (p. 311).

Knowledge, to McLuhan, has nothing to do with understanding. It is simply accumulation of data, and computers do this for us. "Today it is the instant speed of electric information that, for the first time, permits easy recognition of the patterns and formal contours of change and development. The entire world, past and present, now reveals itself to us like a growing plant in an enormously accelerated movie" (p. 305). It could be pointed out that to watch a growing plant in an accelerated movie gives no clue to what makes the plant grow. And a mass of accumulated data is never a substitute for the difficult and literate brain process of understanding the forces behind them.

This move to the glowing future is being carried out by the great corporations. Antiquated are the old cries of alarm of the "trust-busters," or of social critics demanding that the great banks and corporations be curbed, and prevented from

taking over the country. The "harsh logic of industrial automation," says McLuhan, has changed all this. "Totally new structures are needed to run a business or relate it to social needs and markets. With the electric technology, the new kinds of instant interdependence and interprocess that take over production also enter the market and social organization" (p. 310).

Despite McLuhan's disavowal of logic, a certain logic begins to appear in his picture: that of the great corporate structures adjusting their rivalries, dividing up the markets, and taking over the world. Other elements of the picture begin to fall into place. Labor would certainly not be eliminated. On the contrary, the structure would have to be fed by a vast amount of labor, presumably done mainly by the dark-skinned people. Around the corporate structure itself there could well be a considerable "aristocracy" of coupon-clippers, parasites, people with wealth and nothing to do, as well as those receiving the typical doles of a "welfare state."

McLuhan makes some suggestions for what such people should do with themselves. One is to engage in art. "This would seem to be the fate that calls men to the role of artist in society" (*ibid.*). The art would not be of social humanity, showing man's fellow human beings to be part of himself. McLuhan is quite explicit about what he feels the real role of art to be; a kind of adjustment of the mind to the way in which a new media environment reshapes the senses. Art is, he says, "exact information of how to arrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties" (p. 71). There could also be recourse to the psychoanalyst's couch. True to his concept of media, McLuhan sees the couch itself, not anything that the analyst can say or do, as the means of adjustment. "As extension of man," he says, the chair is "a sort of ablative absolute of backside," while the couch, on the other hand, "extends the integral being" (p. 21).

But what about human kinship in this world-wide corpora-

tion empire? McLuhan's constant stress is not on kinship or brotherhood. The word he stresses continually is the tricky one, "involvement."

While we don't express any kinship for people the world over today, we are certainly involved with them. What is our burning and bombing of the land and people of Vietnam if not an "involvement?" Let some people on the other side of the globe nationalize their industry, and we are immediately "involved." We are "involved" when England devalues the pound; or when some corrupt military and dictatorial government in Latin America or Africa is threatened by a popular movement. The owner of a factory and the workers on the machines don't act with brotherhood and kinship, but they are certainly "involved" with one another. Let the workers leave and the machines are worthless. Let the factory close its doors and the workers must starve or go on relief.

A different kind of involvement among world peoples has grown in the twentieth century; one of genuinely awakened mutual understanding, and realization of common needs, problems and humanity. The rise of a world literature, assisted by other arts, has only begun to erase the alienation which makes one people look on another as strangers. Especially in countries struggling to throw off hidden and open colonialism and economic servitude and backwardness, the growth of a literature revealing the realities of the people's existence and their human needs is prized as integral to the achievement of independence itself. As Frantz Fanon writes of Africa in *The Wretched of the Earth* (N.Y., 1966, p. 197), "We believe that the conscious and organized undertaking by a colonized people to re-establish the sovereignty of that nation constitutes the most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists. . . . The new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and others." It is exactly this literary growth that McLuhan proposes to cut off at the roots, to make way for

the new world approaching. It is the outmoded "Gutenberg medium."

Beneath the cloud of McLuhanese fantasy thrown over history and obscurantism thrown over media, lies the outline picture of a very real force growing in the world today, a move toward totalitarian control of the world's natural resources, labor and markets by the great interlocking industrial corporations. McLuhan's book is an exhortation to people to accept this new world a-coming as their happy fate. People must accept this coming servitude with docility, for what will control them is only an extension of themselves. They must cast away the obstructions to progress represented by rationality, thought, mediation, literacy, the humanist tradition of the arts themselves. They must give away their conscious mind for the happy blandishments of the kinesthetic appeal to the unity of the senses that shortcuts thought. The rounded person is a mindless person. Media or the extensions of man, are " 'make happen' agents but not 'make aware' agents" (p. 57).

McLuhan advises the future ruling powers on how to preserve the happy servitude of the new world-wide tribal village. He does not believe the economically backward peoples should share the advantages that have accrued to the colonializing "West." He raises an alarm: "With literacy now about to hybridize the cultures of the Chinese, the Indians, and the Africans, we are about to experience such a release of human power and aggressive violence as makes the previous history of phonetic alphabet technology seem quite tame" (p. 58). To get the full meaning of this, read "industrialization" for "literacy" and "phonetic alphabet technology." By no means must the economically backward peoples be allowed to attain the new technologies of the West. "On the one hand, a new weapon or technology looms as a threat to all who lack it. On the other hand, when everybody has the same technological aids, there begins the competitive fury of the homogenized and egalitarian pattern

against which the strategy of social class and caste has often been used in the past" (p. 299). We get an inkling of what he means by the new "tribalism" through the many references to the German Nazis as a "retribalized" people (pp. 204, 262, 264). Of course, says McLuhan, this was caused by Hitler through the "tribal magic" of radio, and radio is to McLuhan a "hot" medium. But radio is also part of the new electronic technology. And in the near future, as he envisages it, whole peoples can be kept in check through the adroit channeling of both "hot" radio and "cool" TV. "We are certainly coming within conceivable range of a world automatically controlled," he writes. "We could say, 'Six less hours of radio in Indonesia next week or there will be a great falling off in literary attention.' Or 'We can program twenty more hours of TV in South Africa next week to cool down the tribal temperature raised by radio last week.' " Thus the new corporation totalitarianism can run quite smoothly. "Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable in the same way that we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world" (p. 41).

It could be that McLuhan believes the present methods of controlling an economically backward, dark-skinned people, in the service of the great investment corporations, are outmoded, and soon to be replaced by electronic media. The present methods are certainly unwieldy, expensive and unpleasant; bribery of a segment of the population, the overthrow of popular governments, police oppression, the setting up of military dictatorships. Of course, "media" in the McLuhan sense do play a role, supplanting the local culture, and its potentialities of growth and self-consciousness, with outside cultural domination, including a cheap, imported, "lowest common denominator" entertainment. But a future of hordes of miners and plantation workers presumably with radios attached to their ears and television sets strapped to

their chests, so that their psyches can be properly heated or cooled, is a preposterous picture.

And the probability is that McLuhan knows this too: that this vision of an electronic, automated, computerized dictatorship controlling the population by beaming radio and TV waves at them is presented tongue in cheek, as a sick joke. For there is a good deal of this sick joking in McLuhan, like dancing on a grave. Some of his more bizarre historical misstatements are undoubtedly leg-pulling; as is his theory of war as a form of technological equalization. When questioned about United States intervention in Vietnam, and how he thought the conflict should be resolved, he wrote: "As a crash program of Westernization and education, the war consists of initiating the East in the mechanical technology of the industrial age" (*Authors Take Sides on Vietnam,* New York, 1967, p. 49). Certainly the pun on "crash" is a sick joke.

A form of pulling the reader's leg is McLuhan's method of apparently proving or confirming ideas through authoritative quotations that don't confirm these ideas at all. It was developed by McLuhan with remarkable finesse in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, 1962; U.S. edition, 1965). The meat of the book is the charge against the "Gutenberg technology" and "literacy" that is repeated in *Understanding Media:* man has become fragmented, he acts without reacting, he is addicted to logic and sequential thought, his senses are split apart, he is individualistic, nationalistic, one-sidedly visual. Here the quotations are from poets, philosophers, natural scientists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, art critics. At a rough estimate, they seem to comprise about a third of the book or more. There is also an impressive bibliography. And the extent to which these quotations don't at all make the points that McLuhan says they do is shocking.

For example, at the very opening McLuhan quotes from the first act of Shakespeare's *King Lear,* where Lear announces that he is retiring from kingship except in keeping the title,

and the respect due it, and will split up his kingdom in three parts, giving each to one of his daughters and her consort. Now if there is one concept on which all Shakespearean critics agree, it is that Shakespeare prized a unified nation and felt that the medieval and feudal fragmentation of the land under the rule of little independent nobles, barons and soldiers of fortune only tore up the land in rivalries and wars. But McLuhan, "explaining" this quotation, makes a complete somersault. Lear in dividing his kingdom was not taking a backward step, but "proposing an extremely modern idea of delegation of authority from center to margin" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 11). In other words, according to McLuhan, Shakespeare is not castigating Lear's backwardness but projecting, through Lear, a daring vision of the modern world where a state has various departments, operatives and specialized tasks. But even Shakespeare's Fool in Lear knows better: "When thou clovest thy crown in the middle, and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine own ass on thy back o'er the dirt." To hammer home the point of Lear's prophetic vision, McLuhan quotes his line, "Give me the map there," and says, "The map was also a novelty in the sixteenth century . . . key to the new vision of peripheries of power and wealth" (*ibid.*). But the map is older than writing. Ptolemy in the second century was famed for his maps. Lear is using the map not to plan explorations, but only, in the age-old customary sense, to mark out divisions of his land.

The contempt for the public implied in McLuhan's misuse of quotations is another manifestation of the undercutting of the human spirit, human resiliency, human creativity, and the human urge to freedom, that glares throughout McLuhan's view of history and approach to the present.

This gaping hole in McLuhan's thought was apparent in his first book *The Mechanical Bride* (1951; paperback, Boston, 1967). Written before McLuhan became aware of the significance of TV, and when the McLuhanese jargon itself was only in a germinal stage, it is a dramatically presented,

caustic, keen and witty exposure of the "mythology" of modern merchandizing, advertising and popular arts, including magazines, detective stories, movies and comic strips. He used such phrases as, "controlling the childish mental processes of those locked in the mass dream," and the "trek toward the voluntary annihilation of our individual humanity." He wrote sharply of "Planned obsolescence. . . . Production for use? Yes. But for the briefest possible use consistent with the rigging of the market for the pyramiding of profits" (p. 128).

He appealed for the restoration of sanity, to the heritage of rationality, thought, humanism, meditation, knowledge; in other words, to everything that he would later deride as "literacy" with its product of "split man," the "Gutenberg technology" with its unrealistic creation of reason. "Much hope, however, still emerges from those parts of the scene where rational self-awareness and reasonable programs of self-restraint can be cultivated . . . The friendly dialogue of rational beings can also be as catching as it is civilizing" (p. 34). Or again: "Freedom, like taste, is an activity of perception and judgment based on a great range of particular acts and experiences. Whatever fosters mere passivity and submission is the enemy of this vital activity" (p. 22).

Yet this book does not make an all-over effect commensurate with the fireworks set off on each page. Narrow in scope, it seems to make the same point over and over again. It hammers at the most vulnerable points, at the expense of attempting something of a rounded picture of American life and popular culture. It gives the impression that the mass of people have no real life of their own, other than being imprisoned in the "mass dream" of the movies, slick fiction, and magazine ads. But they do have such a life. And McLuhan gives no inkling of the fact that this actual life is sometimes, if inadequately, reflected in the popular arts themselves.

It would be wrong, of course, to underestimate the power

over the mind exercised by mass advertising campaigns, and by the thick streams of manufactured novels, tawdry songs, vacant-minded motion pictures. And yet works of independence, imagination and a sense of reality and humanity appear, which the people welcome. Popular music might be pointed to. Amid its streams of claptrap there appeared the songs of Gershwin, Handy, Kern, Porter, Carmichael, Rodgers. Jazz improvisation was created by the Negro people, and there appeared the rollicking and poignant musical expression, with its inner humanity and flag of freedom, of Armstrong, Morton, Ellington, Basie, Lester Young, Parker, Billie Holiday, Gillespie, Rollins and a host of others. Amid the claptrap of science-fiction appeared genuine criticisms of present-day society and concern for the future of humanity. Motion pictures, comic and realistic, have been powerful human documents. There has been the popular wave of revival of American folk song, and on its heels, the determined "election" by an immense, youthful public of its own favorite singers, and socially critical song writers, who break the standard mold. The commercial mentality still dominates the control of these popular arts, but at least there is a struggle.

With the growth of TV from a starry-eyed baby to a lusty young monster, the "mass medium" most devoted to the service of the corporation structure and most integrated into that structure, McLuhan appears to have gone through a considerable change of mind. He has abandoned his critical view of mass media of today, and aims his shafts at their rivals from the past. That TV is the mass medium least responsive to popular creativity, imagination and pressures, that it devotes itself most single-mindedly to treating the public as an object of manipulation, a victim, is now to him an asset. Advertising, which he derided for its falseness in *The Mechanical Bride,* is now to him, "happy news." It is the most artistic, attractive part of magazines and newspapers, as well as an admirable feature of TV. In 1950, he spoke of

content, being highly critical of the imposed "mythology" and "dream life" in the mass media and the popular arts. He now derides the view that content has any importance. The "medium" itself is the "message." Where he once attacked "submission," he now applauds "docility" on the part of the public. Where he formerly found recourse in reason, mediation, rational thought, he now derides these as outmoded products of the fast disappearing "Gutenberg technology." They inspired "fragmented" and "one-sided" man. The core of his world view has now become what was already apparent as an undercurrent in *The Mechanical Bride,* for all its sardonic criticism of manipulations of the public mind. This is his blindness to the resilience of the human spirit, to the creativity, independence and urge to freedom of the masses of people; qualities that have continually shown themselves in sudden and unexpected ways.

In *Understanding Media,* this blindness on McLuhan's part appears as a total distortion of history; human history with the humans who created it left out. "If the student of media will but meditate on the power of the medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives they touch" (*Understanding Media,* p. 60). All he can admit in his history is that electric light came like a mysterious genie and altered the senses with its magic wand. But who turned electricity from lightning that destroyed people into electric current that could be a tool for change? Who transformed the world with its use, and made it an immense, productive tool? Who envisaged and carried out the vast extensions of literacy and art that electric light made possible? McLuhan robs the human being of all his creativity and injects it into the media he created, so that the media become the creators and the human beings become the passive recipients, the slaves.

Although McLuhan wraps his "media" fantasy of history

in whimsy, he is serious about his surrender to the corporate structure. An occasional barb indicates that he is chafing at his enlistment in its service. He has taken the path of other minds of our time, who have no love for the great corporation imperialism, but have decided it is too powerful to oppose. Most ironic is the spectacle of a man who bears the title of Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities, at a great university, engaging in undermining the heritage of the humanities themselves, along with the sciences and history. A professor of the humanities is now the one against whom a defense must be raised of the humanities, of knowledge so far as it has been painfully achieved, of reason, logic and humanism. And this defense is raised not out of any nostalgia for the past, but because with the many real and awesome problems confronting us, the loss of this heritage leaves us the more impotent.

This irony is part of the greater irony of our times. This is that when knowledge of the world is available such as society never possessed before, knowledge embracing not only natural science but also art, history and the makeup of society itself, there rises in the intellectual world itself forces stifling the use of this knowledge. These are the forces of obscurantism. There is a vested interest in obscurantism. If its most prevalent form is an assertion of the impossibility of human beings ever to know anything, McLuhan can be credited with a novel and bizarre form of obscurantism. It is that of writing a travesty on knowledge.