

Putting together each issue of the journal, besides a number of irrelevant materials, we come across texts that present the author of the reviewed book in a different light than expected. The image given is far from what the book might convey - if it does anything at all - about the author. These texts might be irrelevant to the reviewed text, yet at the same time too interesting to avoid. Most often, these new aspects are found in biographies, autobiographies, correspondence but also in interviews with the author. Our perception of the authors might differ from the way they would like to present themselves or the way we perceived them beforehand. These personal accounts are part of the context in which the work was created. The interview in *Playboy* with Marshall McLuhan is not only interesting but presents this Canadian nonconformist also as a witty and penetrating analyst of his times. We chose only a few segments of this extended conversation. The whole interview can be found either on the internet (www.mcluhanmedia.com) or in a book, *Essential McLuhan* (1995, Toronto).

K&K

In order to provide our readers with a map of this labyrinthine terra incognita, *Playboy* assigned interviewer Eric Norden to visit McLuhan at his spacious new home in the wealthy Toronto suburb of Wychwood Park, where he lives with his wife, Corinne, and five of his six children. (His oldest son lives in New York, where he is completing a book on James Joyce, one of his father's heroes.) Norden reports: "Tall, gray and gangly, with a thin but mobile mouth and an otherwise eminently forgettable face, McLuhan was dressed in an ill-fitting brown tweed suit, black shoes and a clip-on necktie. As we talked on into the night before a crackling fire, McLuhan expressed his reservations about the interview indeed, about the printed word itself as a means of communication, suggesting that the question-and-answer format might impede the in-depth flow of his ideas. I assured him that he would have as much time and space as he wished to develop his thoughts."

The result has considerably more lucidity and clarity than McLuhan's readers are accustomed to perhaps because the Q. and A. format serves to pin him down by counteracting his habit of mercurially changing the subject in mid-stream of consciousness. It is also, we think, a protean and provocative distillation not only of McLuhan's original theories about human progress and social institutions but of his almost immobilizingly intricate style described by novelist George P. Elliott as "deliberately antilogical, circular, repetitious, unqualified, gnomic, outrageous" and, even less charitably, by critic Christopher Ricks as "a viscous fog through which loom stumbling metaphors." But other authorities contend that McLuhan's stylistic medium is part and parcel of his message that the tightly structured "linear" modes of traditional thought and discourse are obsolescent in the new "postliterate" age of the electric media.

A CANDID CONVERSATION WITH THE HIGH PRIEST OF POPCULT AND METAPHYSICIAN OF MEDIA - MARSHALL MCLUHAN

PLAYBOY MAGAZINE, MARCH 1969

(...) **PLAYBOY: TO BORROW HENRY GIBSON'S OFT-REPEATED ONE-LINE POEM ON ROWAN AND MARTIN'S LAUGH-IN: "MARSHALL MCLUHAN, WHAT ARE YOU DOIN'?"**

MCLUHAN: Sometimes I wonder. I'm making explorations. I don't know where they're going to take me. My work is designed for the pragmatic purpose of trying to understand our technological environment and its psychic and social consequences. But my books constitute the process rather than the completed product of discovery; my purpose is to employ facts as tentative probes, as means of insight, of pattern recognition, rather than to use them in the traditional and sterile sense of classified data, categories, containers. I want to map new terrain rather than chart old landmarks.

But I've never presented such explorations as revealed truth. As an investigator, I have no fixed point of view, no commitment to any theory - my own or anyone else's. As a matter of fact, I'm completely ready to junk any statement I've ever made about any subject if events don't bear me out, or if I discover it isn't contributing to an understanding of the problem. The better part of my work on media is actually somewhat like a safe-cracker's. I don't know what's inside; maybe it's nothing. I just sit down and start to work. I grope, I listen, I test, I accept and discard; I try out different sequences - until the tumblers fall and the doors spring open.

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PLAYBOY: EVEN ACCEPTING THE PRINCIPLE THAT TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS GENERATE FAR-REACHING ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES, MANY OF YOUR READERS FIND IT DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND HOW YOU CAN HOLD THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRINTING RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH APPARENTLY UNRELATED PHENOMENA AS NATIONALISM AND INDUSTRIALISM.

MCLUHAN: The key word is "apparently." Look a bit closer at both nationalism and industrialism and you'll see that both derived directly from the explosion of print technology in the 16th Century. Nationalism didn't exist in Europe until the Renaissance, when typography enabled every literate man to see his mother tongue analytically as a uniform entity. The printing press, by spreading mass-produced books and printed matter across Europe, turned the vernacular regional languages of the day into uniform closed systems of national languages - just another variant of what we call mass media - and gave birth to the entire concept of nationalism.

The individual newly homogenized by print saw the nation concept as an intense and beguiling image of group destiny and status. With print, the homogeneity of money, markets and transport also became possible for the first time, thus creating economic as well as political unity and triggering all the dynamic centralizing energies of contemporary nationalism. By creating a speed of information movement unthinkable before printing, the Gutenberg revolution thus produced a new type of visual centralized national entity that was gradually merged with commercial expansion until Europe was a network of states.

By fostering continuity and competition within homogeneous and contiguous territory, nationalism not only forged new nations but sealed the doom of the old corporate, noncompetitive and discontinuous medieval order of guilds and family-structured social organization; print demanded both personal fragmentation and social uniformity, the natural expression of which was the nation-state. Literate nationalism's tremendous speed-up of information movement accelerated the specialist function that was nurtured by phonetic literacy and nourished by Gutenberg, and rendered obsolete such generalist encyclopedic figures as Benvenuto Cellini, the goldsmith-cum-condottiere-cum-painter-cum-sculptor-cum-writer; it was the Renaissance that destroyed Renaissance Man.

PLAYBOY: WHY DO YOU FEEL THAT GUTENBERG ALSO LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION?

MCLUHAN: The two go hand in hand. Printing, remember, was the first mechanization of a complex handicraft; by creating an analytic sequence of step-by-step processes, it became the blue-print of all mechanization to follow. The most important quality of print is its repeatability; it is a visual statement that can be reproduced indefinitely, and repeatability is the root of the mechanical principle that has transformed the world since Gutenberg. Typography, by producing the first uniformly repeatable commodity, also created Henry Ford, the first assembly line and the first mass production. Movable type was archetype and prototype for all subsequent industrial development. Without phonetic literacy and the printing press, modern industrialism would be impossible. It is necessary to recognize literacy as typographic technology, shaping not only production and marketing procedures but all other areas of life, from education to city planning.

PLAYBOY: YOU SEEM TO BE CONTENDING THAT PRACTICALLY EVERY ASPECT OF MODERN LIFE IS A DIRECT CONSEQUENCE OF GUTENBERG'S INVENTION OF THE PRINTING PRESS.

MCLUHAN: Every aspect of Western mechanical culture was shaped by print technology, but the modern age is the age of the electric media, which forge environments and cultures antithetical to the mechanical consumer society derived from print. Print tore man out of his traditional cultural matrix while showing him how to pile individual upon individual into a massive agglomeration of national and industrial power, and the typographic trance of the West has endured until today, when the electronic media are at last demesmerizing us. The Gutenberg Galaxy is being eclipsed by the constellation of Marconi.

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PLAYBOY: WHY DO YOU THINK THEY AREN'T FINDING IT WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

MCLUHAN: Because education, which should be helping youth to understand and adapt to their revolutionary new environments, is instead being used merely as an instrument of cultural aggression, imposing upon retribalized youth the obsolescent visual values of the dying literate age. Our entire educational system is reactionary, oriented to past values and past technologies, and will likely continue so until the old generation relinquishes power. The generation gap is actually a chasm, separating not two age groups but two vastly divergent cultures. I can understand the ferment in our schools, because our educational system is totally rearview mirror. It's a dying and outdated system founded on literate values and fragmented and classified data totally unsuited to the needs of the first television generation.

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PLAYBOY: DO YOU THINK THE SURVIVING HIPPIE SUBCULTURE IS A REFLECTION OF YOUTH'S REJECTION OF THE VALUES OF OUR MECHANICAL SOCIETY?

MCLUHAN: Of course. These kids are fed up with jobs and goals, and are determined to forget their own roles and involvement in society. They want nothing to do with our fragmented and specialist consumer society. Living in the transitional identity vacuum between two great antithetical cultures, they are desperately trying to discover themselves and fashion a mode of existence attuned to their new values; thus the stress on developing an "alternate life style." We can see the results of this retribalization process whenever we look at any of our youth - not just at hippies.

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PLAYBOY: DO WE DETECT A NOTE OF DISAPPROVAL IN YOUR ANALYSIS OF THE GROWING SEXUAL FREEDOM?

MCLUHAN: No, I neither approve nor disapprove. I merely try to understand. Sexual freedom is as natural to newly triba-lized youth as drugs.

PLAYBOY: WHAT'S NATURAL ABOUT DRUGS?

MCLUHAN: They're natural means of smoothing cultural transitions, and also a short cut into the electric vortex. The up-surge in drug taking is intimately related to the impact of the electric media. Look at the metaphor for getting high: turning on. One turns on his consciousness through drugs just as he opens up all his senses to a total depth involvement by turning on the TV dial. Drug taking is stimulated by today's pervasive environment of instant information, with its feedback mechanism of the inner trip. The inner trip is not the sole prerogative of the LSD traveler; it's the universal experience of TV watchers. LSD is a way of miming the invisible electronic world; it releases a person from acquired verbal



and visual habits and reactions, and gives the potential of instant and total involvement, both all-at-onceness and all-at-oneness, which are the basic needs of people translated by electric extensions of their central nervous systems out of the old rational, sequential value system. The attraction to hallucinogenic drugs is a means of achieving empathy with our penetrating electric environment, an environment that in itself is a drugless inner trip. Drug taking is also a means of expressing rejection of the obsolescent mechanical world and values. And drugs often stimulate a fresh interest in artistic expression, which is primarily of the audile-tactile world. The hallucinogenic drugs, as chemical simulations of our electric environment, thus revive senses long atrophied by the overwhelmingly visual orientation of the mechanical culture. LSD and related hallucinogenic drugs, furthermore, breed a highly tribal and communally oriented subculture, so it's understandable why the retribalized young take to drugs like a duck to water.

PLAYBOY: A COLUMBIA COED WAS RECENTLY QUOTED IN NEWSWEEK AS EQUATING YOU AND LSD. "LSD DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING UNTIL YOU CONSUME IT," SHE SAID. "LIKEWISE MCLUHAN." DO YOU SEE ANY SIMILARITIES?

MCLUHAN: I'm flattered to hear my work described as hallucinogenic, but I suspect that some of my academic critics find me a bad trip.

PLAYBOY: HAVE YOU EVER TAKEN LSD YOURSELF?

MCLUHAN: No, I never have. I'm an observer in these matters, not a participant. I had an operation last year to remove a tumor that was expanding my brain in a less pleasant manner, and during my prolonged convalescence I'm not allowed any stimulant stronger than coffee. Alas! A few months ago, however, I was almost "busted" on a drug charge. On a plane returning from Vancouver, where a university had awarded me an honorary degree, I ran into a colleague who asked me where I'd been. "To Vancouver to pick up my LL. D.," I told him. I noticed a fellow passenger looking at me with a strange expression, and when I got off the plane at Toronto Airport, two customs guards pulled me into a little room and started going over my luggage. "Do you know Timothy Leary?" one asked. I replied I did and that seemed to wrap it up for him. "All right," he said. "Where's the stuff? We know you told somebody you'd gone to Vancouver to pick up some LL. D." After a laborious dialog, I persuaded him that an LL. D. has nothing to do with consciousness expansion - just the opposite, in fact - and I was released. Of course, in light of the present educational crisis, I'm not sure there isn't something to be said for making possession of an LL.D. a felony.

PLAYBOY: ARE YOU IN FAVOR OF LEGALIZING MARIJUANA AND HALLUCINOGENIC DRUGS?

MCLUHAN: My personal point of view is irrelevant, since all such legal restrictions are futile and will inevitably wither away. You could as easily ban drugs in a retribalized society as outlaw clocks in a mechanical culture. The young will continue turning on no matter how many of them are turned off into prisons, and such legal restrictions only reflect the cultural aggression and revenge of a dying culture against its successor.

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MCLUHAN: The computer can be used to direct a network of global thermostats to pattern life in ways that will optimize human awareness. Already, it's technologically feasible to employ the computer to program societies in beneficial ways.

PLAYBOY: HOW DO YOU PROGRAM AN ENTIRE SOCIETY - BENEFICIALLY OR OTHERWISE?

MCLUHAN: There's nothing at all difficult about putting computers in the position where they will be able to conduct carefully orchestrated programming of the sensory life of whole populations. I know it sounds rather science-fictional, but if you understood cybernetics you'd realize we could do it today. The computer could program the media to determine the given messages a people should hear in terms of their over-all needs, creating a total media experience absorbed and patterned by all the senses. We could program five hours less of TV in Italy to promote the reading of newspapers during an election, or lay on an additional 25 hours of TV in Venezuela to cool down the tribal temperature raised by radio the preceding month. By such orchestrated interplay of all media, whole cultures could now be programmed in order to improve and stabilize their emotional climate, just as we are beginning to learn how to maintain equilibrium among the world's competing economies.

(...) PLAYBOY: **IF MAN CAN'T PREVENT THIS TRANSFORMATION OF HIMSELF BY TECHNOLOGY - OR INTO TECHNOLOGY - HOW CAN HE CONTROL AND DIRECT THE PROCESS OF CHANGE?**

MCLUHAN: The first and most vital step of all, as I said at the outset, is simply to understand media and its revolutionary effects on all psychic and social values and institutions. Understanding is half the battle. The central purpose of all my work is to convey this message, that by understanding media as they extend man, we gain a measure of control over them. And this is a vital task, because the immediate interface between audile-tactile and visual perception is taking place everywhere around us. No civilian can escape this environmental blitzkrieg, for there is, quite literally, no place to hide. But if we diagnose what is happening to us, we can reduce the ferocity of the winds of change and bring the best elements of the old visual culture, during this transitional period, into peaceful coexistence with the new retribalized society.

If we persist, however, in our conventional rearview-mirror approach to these cataclysmic developments, all of Western culture will be destroyed and swept into the dustbin of history. If literate Western man were really interested in preserving the most creative aspects of his civilization, he would not cower in his ivory tower bemoaning change but would plunge himself into the vortex of electric technology and, by understanding it, dictate his new environment - turn ivory tower into control tower. But I can understand his hostile attitude, because I once shared his visual bias.

PLAYBOY: **WHAT CHANGED YOUR MIND?**

MCLUHAN: Experience. For many years, until I wrote my first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, I adopted an extremely moralistic approach to all environmental technology. I loathed machinery, I abominated cities, I equated the Industrial Revolution with original sin and mass media with the Fall. In short, I rejected almost every element of modern life in favor of a Rousseauvian utopianism. But gradually I perceived how sterile and useless this attitude was, and I began to realize that the greatest artists of the 20th Century - Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Eliot - had discovered a totally different approach, based on the identity of the processes of cognition and creation. I realized that artistic creation is the playback of ordinary experience - from trash to treasures. I ceased being a moralist and became a student.

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PLAYBOY: **YOU'VE EXPLAINED WHY YOU AVOID APPROVING OR DISAPPROVING OF THIS REVOLUTION IN YOUR WORK, BUT YOU MUST HAVE A PRIVATE OPINION. WHAT IS IT?**

MCLUHAN: I don't like to tell people what I think is good or bad about the social and psychic changes caused by new media, but if you insist on pinning me down about my own subjective reactions as I observe the reprimativization of our culture, I would have to say that I view such upheavals with total personal dislike and dissatisfaction. I do see the prospect of a rich and creative retribalized society - free of the fragmentation and alienation of the mechanical age - emerging from this traumatic period of culture clash; but I have nothing but distaste for the process of change. As a man molded within the literate Western tradition, I do not personally cheer the dissolution of that tradition through the electric involvement of all the senses: I don't enjoy the destruction of neighborhoods by high-rises or revel in the pain of identity quest. No one could be less enthusiastic about these radical changes than myself. I am not, by temperament or conviction, a revolutionary; I would prefer a stable, changeless environment of modest services and human scale. TV and all the electric media are unraveling the entire fabric of our society, and as a man who is forced by circumstances to live within that society, I do not take delight in its disintegration.

You see, I am not a crusader; I imagine I would be most happy living in a secure preliterate environment; I would never attempt to change my world, for better or worse. Thus I derive no joy from observing the traumatic effects of media on man, although I do obtain satisfaction from grasping their modes of operation. Such comprehension is inherently cool, since it is simultaneously involvement and detachment. This posture is essential in studying media. One must begin by becoming extra-environmental, putting oneself beyond the battle in order to study and understand the configuration of forces. It's vital to adopt a posture of arrogant superiority; instead of scurrying into a corner and wailing about what media are doing to us, one should charge straight ahead and kick them in the electrodes. They respond beautifully to such resolute treatment and soon become servants rather than masters. But without this detached involvement, I could never objectively observe media; it would be like an octopus grappling with the Empire State Building.

So I employ the greatest boon of literate culture: the power of man to act without reaction - the sort of specialization by dissociation that has been the driving motive force behind Western civilization.

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PLAYBOY: DESPITE YOUR PERSONAL DISTASTE FOR THE UPHEAVALS INDUCED BY THE NEW ELECTRIC TECHNOLOGY, YOU SEEM TO FEEL THAT IF WE UNDERSTAND AND INFLUENCE ITS EFFECTS ON US, A LESS ALIENATED AND FRAGMENTED SOCIETY MAY EMERGE FROM IT. IS IT THUS ACCURATE TO SAY THAT YOU ARE ESSENTIALLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE?

MCLUHAN: There are grounds for both optimism and pessimism. The extensions of man's consciousness induced by the electric media could conceivably usher in the millennium, but it also holds the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ - Yeats' rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. Cataclysmic environmental changes such as these are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences. If we refuse to see them at all, we will become their servants. It's inevitable that the world pool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens to us and what we can do about it, we can come through.

Personally, I have a great faith in the resiliency and adaptability of man, and I tend to look to our tomorrows with a surge of excitement and hope. I feel that we're standing on the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos. I have a deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depths of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe. We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth. I expect to see the coming decades transform the planet into an art form; the new man, linked in a cosmic harmony that transcends time and space, will sensuously caress and mold and pattern every facet of the terrestrial artifact as if it were a work of art, and man himself will become an organic art form. There is a long road ahead, and the stars are only way stations, but we have begun the journey. To be born in this age is a precious gift, and I regret the prospect of my own death only because I will leave so many pages of man's destiny - if you will excuse the Gutenbergian image - tantalizingly unread. But perhaps, as I've tried to demonstrate in my examination of the postliterate culture, the story begins only when the book closes.

