

UNDERSTANDING MARSHALL

By Eric Koch

Every Monday evening Marshall McLuhan conducted a seminar at the Centre for Culture and Technology, a coach house on St. Joseph Street hidden behind other buildings, just south of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. The doors were open to one and all. By the fall of 1966, McLuhan was a world celebrity. There was often standing room only for the latecomers among the scholars, students, artists, advertising people, politicians and lay visitors who attended. Many people, especially academics, were, to put it mildly, unconvinced by his main insight, that the course of history was determined, to a considerable extent, by the methods of communication available and by the way we received information, and that at the present stage, these methods of communication were passing from the print era to the electric era. Our perceptions were, therefore, changing in a fundamental way, with profound and surprising consequences in the way we live. Many people considered his explorations – “probes” he called them – impenetrable and were upset and sometimes hostile.

However, few denied that his charm and wit, his aphorisms and paradoxes, his playfulness generally, were great entertainment, and so was his talent for playing verbal games with his audience, “putting it on,” was the phrase used to describe it. Only rarely did a skeptic upset him. Many of the participants had read at least parts of his recent book, *Understanding Media*, i.e., understanding him, Marshall McLuhan. But they still didn't. He had turned his back on the traditional ways of explaining things and usually declined to provide evidence for the many unexpected observations he made. To do so would be “linear,” he explained, a left-over from the print age, and therefore inherently unsuited to throwing light on the new electric world of television and computers.

I saw no reason why I should not cash in on his fame by trying to bridge the chasm between him and the thousands who wanted to understand him but couldn't. So one Monday evening, after everybody else had gone home, I accompanied him to the parking lot. As usual he was wearing a Harris tweed suit, was well groomed, handsome, bright-eyed and generally in good shape for a man of fifty-four.

“Marshall,” I said, “I am hatching a plot and I need your help.”

“I'll do anything as long as it doesn't cost me a single coffee spoon.”

“A *coffee spoon*?”

“Don't you know *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*? ‘I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.’”

“Oh, I see. I'm sorry I have never read it. But I see what you mean. This will actually save you time. My plan will keep blockheads off your back. I want to rent a place somewhere near the campus and start a little business explaining you to the world. I will put an ad in the *Toronto Star* and see what happens. Assuming that you will give me your blessing, would you please recommend a couple of former graduate students of yours who need money. I will charge the customers forty dollars for thirty minutes' consultation. Your two students can keep twenty. And I will keep twenty. Your reward would be the deep satisfaction that you have done a good deed for two of your starving disciples.”

“And for you, who, from the look of things, has more than enough to eat.”

This remark was not entirely fair. For a man of thirty-six I had so far avoided a middle-age spread. But I decided to let it go.

“Yes, thank you, I do, Marshall.”

“All right. You have my blessing. I will call you in the morning with two names. I must get their consent first. I will also check it out with my agent. But I’m sure she won’t object.”

Always prompt and reliable, he called me around eleven o’clock.

“I have two names for you. As you requested. They both know my work well. One is Elizabeth Huntley, now an under-employed actress. She is lively and good-looking and has already been married twice, once to a trumpeter, and once to a platonist. Which is more than anybody can say about you, as far as I know. Some male customers may wish to stay for a full hour. Don’t worry, I won’t expect any extra reward for my role as pimp. And the other person is a man who has just spent six months in a mental institution. Probably he just suffered from depression, nothing terrible. I saw him last week. He strikes me as perfectly normal. His name is Richard Long. He told me an amazing story. While he was there, a group of ordinary people volunteered to pretend to be mad. They easily got themselves admitted. The doctors who treated them were unable to detect that they were so-called “sane.” However, the patients noticed it immediately. They could see that they were *playing*. Which goes to show that the ability to play, the good humour needed to enter into fun and games, is the final mark of sanity.”

“That is why you are such a sane man,” I said. “Well, thank you, Marshall. I will keep you informed.”

I had no trouble at all renting two large rooms on the ground floor of a house close to the campus, on the southeast corner of Willcocks and Huron, with a balcony facing Huron Street, available immediately. The grey-haired, kind-hearted landlady was Finnish. I explained to her what I was doing, that one of the rooms was to be a waiting room, the other a consulting room, and that I hoped there would be a constant flow of people coming and going. I said I would make sure she would not have to open the door when visitors rang. I would do it. She accepted this arrangement cheerfully and pointed out that visitors could also use the balcony as an additional entrance and exit, which was certainly an added advantage.

Before putting an ad in the paper I met both candidates. Marshall could not have done better. Elizabeth Huntley was in her mid-twenties and looked like a robust Judy Garland. Richard Long was a little older, wore steel-rimmed glasses and a pony tail. He seemed to spend his nights in the coffee houses of Yorkville, on borrowed money, probably smoking pot and who knows what else. Both said Marshall had changed their lives. I explained that we would have to work out a timetable to divide up the chores between them. I made it clear that occasionally I intended to be present since I was also anxious to learn.

I received twenty-seven answers to this ad:

Stop Being a Global Village Idiot!

Take Lessons in Understanding Marshall McLuhan.

One 30-minute Questioning of a McLuhan Student – \$40

Our first client was an elderly Ukrainian sales clerk in a supermarket on Dufferin Street.

“What’s all this about a Global Village?” he asked Elizabeth Huntley. They were sitting opposite each other on easy chairs, near the Huron Street balcony. I had made myself comfortable on a sofa.

“It’s really quite simple.” Elizabeth was wearing a dark green sweater and a black skirt, a deliberately unglamorous costume to prevent any unnecessary digressions. “We are now living in an era when information is communicated with the speed of light. This has made it possible for the whole world to live in one village, the global village. We call our present time the electric era or, if you prefer, the electronic era. The preceding era was the print era, which began about five hundred years ago. It took the place of illiterate tribalism when communications were conducted largely by word of mouth. Our current electric period is more like the tribal era than the print era.”

“Do you mean we’re all going back to the jungle?” the client asked.

“That is not the language we use. We watch patterns and ask questions. In fact, we enjoy asking questions far more than we enjoy providing answers. We do a lot of guessing and speculating. Our one big insight is that a lot of the things that are happening in the world are connected with the way we communicate with one another. For most of us this is hard to grasp because it’s a new idea. It’s also a new way of looking at the past. One particular insight is that print led to individualism and to a linear way of thinking, called linear because we read a book line by line. And we’re alone when we read. Hence the individualism. And we read with our eyes, which makes it possible that we can easily verify things. Hence the rationalism. This does not mean that people were actually more reasonable than they had been before or have been since. Far from it.

“I’m still living in what you call the print era,” the client said, scratching the back of his head.

“Of course,” Elizabeth smiled. “We all do, to a large extent. The various periods overlap. In any case, many of these changes in perception are subliminal.”

“What does that mean?”

“We are not aware of them. For example, we are not aware of the shift of emphasis from the eye to ear, from visual space to acoustic space.”

“Now you’ve lost me.”

“I don’t blame you,” Elizabeth assured him. “I was lost the first time I heard this as well. I simply couldn’t believe that in the new electric era, when we live in acoustic space with centres everywhere and boundaries nowhere, we can in a sense – so I was told – hear everything simultaneously that happens on the planet earth since information travels with the speed of light. There’s a renewed emphasis on the community, on the tribe, big and small. Unlike our eyes, which are focused, our ears favour collectivity. They are not focused. Acoustic space enhances inner experience. The Greek poet Homer was blind. He didn’t need any eyes. He couldn’t write, anyway. He was illiterate. He didn’t mind being illiterate since he had never heard of writing. He spoke his verses and others remembered them and eventually wrote them down.”

“Now let’s come down to earth,” the client, drumming his fingers irritably on the arm of his easy chair. “Forget about Homer. How can you actually tell that people today are more collectivity-minded than they used to be?”

“One way of telling is that young people are suddenly looking for their communal roots. Their parents were less interested. If you have children or grandchildren they’ve probably asked you all kinds of questions about the past. Am I right?”

“Yes, you’re right.” He brightened up considerably. “My grandchildren keep asking questions my children never asked. The place where my great grandfather was born, and that sort of thing. And most of them I can’t answer.”

“And look at the way various groups are getting together and demanding an end to discrimination,” Elizabeth continued. “Blacks and French Canadians, and many others. It’s a new tribalism. People are more and more proud of the tribe they belong to. Of course they don’t use the word.”

“I can see that.”

He needed a little pause to absorb all this.

“There’s one thing you said,” he resumed, “that worries me. I don’t think there’s anything better than reason. Which you say is now passé, since it belonged to the print era. I mean, I am a religious man but I still think that in everyday affairs there’s no substitute for reason, for being rational. Are we going to be governed by a bunch of madmen who just follow their instincts?”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth assured him. “I just said belief in reason did not make people more reasonable. In the French Revolution people cut off a lot of heads in the name of Reason. Since today, in the electric age, ordinary people can communicate instantaneously in a way they never could before they can participate in the running of things much more easily than they ever used to. Ordinary people are not mad.”

“Well, that’s encouraging.”

Elizabeth looked at her watch.

“I just said I am a religious man. What do you think about the future of religion?”

“We don’t make predictions. But we look at patterns, as I said. Let me get at your question in a roundabout way. This will tie together some of the ideas we have been talking about. Take the business of looking for roots. A person who looks for roots has no body. Don’t take this literally – this is kind of poetic, I know. In the electric age you have no body. You use the telephone, all there is of you is your voice. You stand in front of a television camera, all there is of you is your picture. You have no body. And when you have no body you look for your origins, for your identity. The word we use is ‘discarnate.’ The new reality in the electric age is that of ‘discarnate man.’ Man without a natural body.”

“If you say so.” He frowned. “But what has it to do with religion?”

“Isn’t it obvious? When you are nobody, when you don’t have a natural body, the void must be filled with the spiritual.”

For the first time during the entire conversation, the client smiled.

“So you think religion is going to make a comeback?”

“To the extent that religion is a response to our spiritual needs, yes. I have no doubt. On the other hand, many people will take drugs. They already do. There probably will be all kinds of new religions, and new cults. But I repeat, I must be careful. We make no predictions. We only look around us and observe.”

The client happily paid us our money and went home.

My business was booming. Our clients were usually satisfied and recommended us to their friends. I felt like an eye doctor’s nurse who had to make appointments weeks in advance. But I procrastinated about asking Marshall for another poor student and renting more space. I did not wish to be in this

business for ever, however profitable and beneficial. And I preferred listening to Marshall himself, undistilled, on Monday evenings, to hearing his views second hand from his two disciples, covering the same ground again and again. Both did very well. Only one of Elizabeth's clients, a swashbuckling garage mechanic, made a nuisance of himself and refused to leave the premises unless she agreed to have dinner with him. She had to ask me to help her dispose of him through the balcony, which seemed to amuse him more than it did us.

A number of our clients challenged everything they were told. They usually enjoyed the sessions but at the end of the half-hour they were just as skeptical as the beginning. One of these was the formidable, aggressive, English-born Catherine McBurney, a retired high-school teacher who looked like a younger sister of the actress Margaret Rutherford and had the same double-chin. She constantly interrupted Richard Long's exercise in advanced McLuhanism. I was reminded of Marshall's definition of an argument: it is when two people are trying to have the last word at the same time.

Catherine

Now what's all this about the medium being the message? Does this mean that when I read a newspaper it doesn't matter what's in it, all that matters is that I am reading a newspaper? Isn't your clever-clever friend profoundly mischievous when he says content does not matter?

Richard

No. He says nothing of the kind. "The Medium is the Message" is a paradox that contains many ideas. Let us just say that it says that the technology in which we receive information has a bearing on the information we receive but, in a sense, it has also become part of it.

Catherine

Do I have to take your word for this?

Richard

All you have to do is think about it. When you read a novel you have one kind of experience. When you see the same story told to you by word of mouth, it is another kind of experience. When you see it on the screen, it's something else again. When you receive it translated into the language of computers, you are encountering a substantially different animal.

Catherine

That's pretty obvious. So why are you making such a fuss about it?

Richard

Because every technology creates its own environment. When the message gets to us by electric circuitry we get far more information than we ever got before. The world has to find new ways of coping with this. There is a need for recognizing new patterns. In the compressed, high-speed systems in which we live, these patterns are often mythic.

Catherine

Mythic? As in Greek mythology? I haven't noticed that. You mean primitive?

Richard

We are not afraid of that word. We don't use it in a pejorative sense.

Catherine

Make up your mind! Are we going forward or backward?

Richard

We think the play of circuitry, of instant feedback, demands a great increase in human autonomy and human awareness. In the print era, there was a split between the head and the heart. In the electric era this split will be healed.

Catherine

You hope.

Richard

Yes, we hope.

Catherine

What about violence? Will we have more of it? Less of it?

Richard

When people have been robbed of their identity, they become violent. That's the way they find out who they are. They have to discover where their boundaries are, what kind of people they are confronting. So, to answer your question whether we will have more or less violence depends on the way we cope with groups who are looking for their identity and can't find it in non-violent ways.

Catherine

You mean, we only have wars because some people are looking for their so-called identities? I'll never believe that! Did the Germans unleash two world wars because they were trying to find out who they were?

Richard

Yes.

Richard ducked as she tried to hit him with her umbrella.

The following Monday evening, a biology student named Tania Knox attended Marshall's seminar. She was one of the first to arrive and parked in his spot. He found another spot but left a note on her windscreen. "I would be grateful if in future you did not park in my spot." Signed, Marshall M.

She left before him and saw the message.

She wrote a reply and put it in his windscreen.

"Dear Professor McLuhan, I apologize. Your note was the first writing of yours I understood."
Signed, Tania Knox.