

Introduction to the MIT Press Edition

The Eternal Now

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Thirty years ago this past summer Herbert Marshall McLuhan published *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, and within a matter of months the book acquired the standing of Holy Scripture and made of its author the foremost oracle of the age. Seldom in living memory had so obscure a scholar descended so abruptly from so remote a garret into the center ring of the celebrity circus, but McLuhan accepted the transformation as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, nothing more than the inevitable and unsurprising proof of the hypothesis that he had found in the library at the University of Toronto. He was fifty-two years old at the time, Canadian by birth and a professor of English literature. As enigmatic as he was self-preoccupied, he had about him the air of a man who believed that it was the business of prophets to bring prophetic news, and if he had peered into the mist of the future and foreseen the passing of the printed word, well, he had done no more than notice what was both obvious and certain.

His book introduced into the language our present usage of the term *media*, as well as a number of other precepts, among them "global village" and "Age of Information" that since have become commonplaces, and by the fall of 1965 *Understanding Media* had prompted the *New York Herald Tribune*, speaking on behalf of what was then the consensus of informed opinion to proclaim its author "the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov. ..." For the next four or five years McLuhan toured the television talk shows as well as the corporate lecture circuit, astonishing his audiences with a persona that joined, in Tom Wolfe's phrase, "the charisma of a haruspex with the irresistible certitude of the monomaniac." Woody Allen placed him on the set of *Annie Hall*, and artists as well known as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg appointed him to the office of honorary muse. In journals as unlike one another as *Newsweek* and *Partisan Review*, the resident cognoscenti found that when confronted with sets of otherwise unrelated circumstance they could resolve their confusion merely by deploying the adjective "McLuhanesque." Although transformed into an eponym, the sage of the north retained the character of the rumpled professor, a gaunt and kindly figure, disorganized, absent-minded and quixotically dressed, always sure that the whole world could be made to fit into the trunk of his hypothesis, bestowing on audiences young and old, whether of insurance executives or guitarists on their way to Woodstock, the gifts of Delphic aphorism:

"The electric light is pure information. "

"We are moving out of the age of the visual into the age of the aural and tactile. "

"We are the television screen ...We wear all mankind as our skin."

But even as McLuhan passed across the zenith of his fame, few of the people who explicated his text fully understood what it was that he was trying to say. They guessed

that he had come upon something important, but for the most part they interpreted him as a dealer in communications theory and turned his prophecies to practical uses of their own. McLuhan had classified print as a hot medium and television as a cool medium, and although not one critic in five hundred was entirely sure what he meant by the distinction, the phrases served to justify a \$40 million advertising campaign, a novel lacking both a protagonist and a plot, a collage of junked automobile tires.

The alarms and excursions associated with *Understanding Media* didn't survive McLuhan's death (on New Year's Eve 1980, at the age of sixty-nine), and as perhaps was to be expected from artisans still working in a medium that the decedent had pronounced obsolete, the obituary notices were less than worshipful. Informed opinion had moved on to other things, and McLuhan's name and reputation were sent to the attic with the rest of the sensibility (go-go boots, Sgt. Pepper, Woodstock, the Vietnam War) that embodied the failed hopes of a discredited decade.

The judgment was poorly timed. Much of what McLuhan had to say makes a good deal more sense in 1994 than it did in 1964, and even as his book was being remanded to the backlist, its more profound implications were beginning to make themselves manifest on MTV and the Internet, in Ronald Reagan's political image and the re-animation of Richard Nixon, via television shopping networks and e-mail-all of them technologies that McLuhan had presupposed but didn't live to see shaped in silicon or glass.

Despite its title, the book was never easy to understand. By turns brilliant and opaque, McLuhan's thought meets the specifications of the epistemology that he ascribes to the electronic media - non-linear, repetitive, discontinuous, intuitive, proceeding by analogy instead of sequential argument. Beginning from the premise that "we become what we behold," that "we shape our tools, and there- after our tools shape us," McLuhan examines the *diktats* of two technological revolutions that overthrew a settled political and aesthetic order: first, in the mid-fifteenth century, the invention of printing with movable type, which encouraged people to think in straight lines and to arrange their perceptions of the world in forms convenient to the visual order of the printed page; second, since the late nineteenth century, the new applications of electricity (telegraph, telephone, television, computers, etc.), which taught people to rearrange their perceptions of the world in ways convenient to the protocols of cyberspace. Content follows form, and the insurgent technologies give rise to new structures of feeling and thought.

Once having stated this proposition, McLuhan works it through a series of variations for the entire orchestra of human expression, and his chapter titles (*The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis; The Typewriter: Into the Age of the Iron Whim; Weapons: War of the Icons; The Photograph: The Brothel without Walls*) bear witness both to the tone of his rhetoric and the reach of his ambition. His vocabulary takes some getting used to (writing is visual; television is aural and tactile), and quite a few of the notions to which he off-handedly refers in the early pages, as if everybody already knew what he meant, he doesn't bother to explain until the later pages, often by way of an afterthought or an aside. Not until page 305 does he suggest that the content of any medium is always another medium - "the content of the press is literary statement, as the content of the book

is speech, and the content of the movie is the novel"-and it is only on page 349 that he clarifies his use of the phrase "mass media" by saying that "they are an indication, not of the size of their audiences, but of the fact that everybody becomes involved in them at the same time. "

Some of his variations seem more credible than others, but I find that by making a list of the leitmotifs that wander in and out of his prose in the manner of Homeric epithets, I can formulate his dialectic as a set of antonyms. The meanings in the left-hand column McLuhan aligns with the ascendancy of the printed word during the four centuries between Johan Gutenberg's invention of printing with movable type and Thomas Edison's invention of the electric light; the meanings in the right hand column he associates with the sensibility now known as postmodern.

<i>Print</i>	<i>Electronic Media</i>
visual	tactile
mechanical	organic
sequence	simultaneity
composition	improvisation
eye	ear
active	reactive
expansion	contraction
complete	incomplete
soliloquy	chorus
classification	pattern recognition
center	margin
continuous	discontinuous
syntax	mosaic
self-expression	group therapy
Typographic man	Graphic man

Within a week of the publication of *Understanding Media*, the guardians of the established literary order in Toronto and New York read in the right-hand column the portents of their own doom, and they were quick to find fault with what the more scornful among them called McLuhan's "incantation. " Speaking mostly to themselves, they dismissed with contempt McLuhan's weird and hybrid dabbling in "scientific mysticism," his superficial understanding of modern art, his naive faith in technology, and his too primitive belief in "merely physical sensation. " A number of the objections were well taken, most especially the ones pertaining to McLuhan's discussion of the central nervous system (a subject in clinical neurology about which he knew almost nothing), but for the most part the dyspeptic critics contrived to miss the point, refusing to accept McLuhan's approach to his topic and reducing the sum of his hypothesis to the trivial observation that the "Ed Sullivan Show" was easier to read than the collected works of Wittgenstein and Plotinus. He

was talking about the media as "make-happen agents," not as "make-aware agents," as systems similar to roads and canals, not as precious art objects or uplifting models of behavior, and he repeatedly reminds his readers that his proposition is best understood as a literary trope, not as a scientific theory. His method is that of an English professor long acquainted with libraries and familiar with the apparatus of academic scholarship. Delighting in bookish puns, he constantly cites as his authorities the idols of the Age of Print and quotes at length from the novels of James Joyce, chiefly *Finnegans Wake*, and the poems of T. S. Eliot and William Blake, the letters of John Ruskin.

As often as not he employs the quotations to make sport of the high-minded literary gentlemen who continue to believe that all would be well if only the television networks would improve and correct the vulgar tone of their programming schedules, and he likes to compare his critics to the schoolmen of the late sixteenth century who railed against Gutenberg's typefaces as the precursors of intellectual anarchy and "the end of civilization as we know it"-that is, of an oral tradition founded upon illuminated manuscripts preserved in the vaults of a few monasteries. Just as the advent of print placed the means of communication in the hands of a good many people previously presumed silent (prompting an excited rush of words from, among others, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare) so also the broad dissemination of the electronic media invites correspondence from a good many more people presumed illiterate, and McLuhan suggests that in the twentieth century as in the sixteenth, the literary man prefers "to view with alarm to point with pride, while scrupulously ignoring what's going on." He has little sympathy or patience for people who defend positions already lost, and against the more pompous members of the literary academy (those who would restore the Republic of Letters as if it were a Colonial Williamsburg) he brings to bear a sardonic sense of humor-"for many years I've observed that the moralist typically substitutes anger for perception. "

His irony speaks to the superfluousness of most of the criticism directed against the electronic media over the last thirty years, and while reading his book I was reminded of some of my own irrelevant pronouncements about the banality of network soap opera or the idiocy of the evening news. I had thought the pronouncements astute, or at least plausible, until I had occasion to write a six-hour television history of the twentieth century and discovered in the process what McLuhan meant by the phrase, "the medium is the message." Allowed 78 seconds and 43 words in which to explain the origins of World War II and provide the transition between the Munich Conference in September 1938 and Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939, I understood that television is not narrative, that it bears more of a resemblance to symbolist poetry or the pointillist painting of Georges Seurat than it does to anything conceived by a novelist, a historian, an essayist, or even a writer of newspaper editorials.

Understanding Media confirms my own experience on both sides of a television camera, and I think of it as the kind of book that the reader can open almost at

random, taking from it what he or she has the wit to find. Some of McLuhan's observations lead nowhere; others deserve at least fifty pages of further commentary, and I'm surprised that over the last thirty years, despite the constant and obsessive muttering about the media-their ubiquitous presence and innate wickedness-so few critics have taken account of McLuhan's general theory. His prescience is extraordinary, and the events of the last thirty years have proved him more often right than wrong. His hypothesis anticipates by two decades the dissolution of inter-national frontiers and the collapse of the Cold War. He assumes the inevitable rearrangement of university curricula under the rubrics of what we now call "multiculturalism," and he knows that as commodities come to possess "more and more the character of information," the amassment of wealth will come to depend upon the naming of the things rather than the making of things. Recognizing the weightlessness and self-referential character of the electronic media as well as the supremacy of the corporate logo or the Q rating, McLuhan describes a world in which people live most of their lives within the enclosed and mediated spaces governed by the rule of images. As is his custom, he best expresses the general point in a conversational aside, while he seems to be talking about some- thing else:

Travel differs very little from going to a movie or turning the pages of a magazine. ...People... never arrive at any new place. They can have Shanghai or Berlin or Venice in a package tour that they need never open. ...Thus the world itself becomes a sort of museum of objects that have been encountered before in some other medium. (198)

Let technology be understood, in Max Frisch's phrase, as "the knack of so arranging the world so that we don't have to experience it," and McLuhan's point about the museum explains not only Ralph Lauren's fortune and Bill Clinton's presence in the White House, but also the state of disrepair into which the United States has let fall its highways, its railroads, and its cities. If the media are nothing more than the means of storing and transporting information, and if by assuming the character of information commodities can be moved by fiber optics, fax machines, and A TM cards, then why bother to maintain an infrastructure geared to the purposes of me- dieval Europe or ancient Rome?

On almost every page of *Understanding Media* McLuhan sets in motion equally promising lines of speculation, and although I'm tempted to pursue at least five or six of them-in particular the one ascribing the existence of Nazi Germany to the match between the medium of radio and Adolf Hitler's political persona (a persona that would have failed utterly on television)-I only have space enough to take up his point about the media's preoccupation with what our more eminent critics still insist on deploring as "the bad news." Nowhere else have I come across so succinct a reply to the ceaseless lament about the viciousness of the yellow press. McLuhan notices, correctly, that it is the bad news-reports of sexual scandal, natural disaster, and violent death-that sells the good news-that is, the advertisements. The bad news is the spiel that brings the suckers into the tent. Like the illustrations in a fifth-grade

reader, the sequence of scenes on CBS or CNN teaches the late-twentieth-century American catechism: first, at the top of the news, the admonitory row of body bags being loaded into ambulances in Brooklyn or south Miami; second, the inferno of tenement fires and bumming warehouses; third, a sullen procession of criminals arraigned for robbery or murder and led away in chains. The text of the day's lesson having been thus established, the camera makes its happy return to the always smiling anchorwoman, and so-with her gracious permission-to the previews of heaven sponsored by Delta Airlines, Calvin Klein, and the State Farm Insurance companies. The homily is as plain as a medieval morality play or the bloodstains on Don Johnson's Armani suit--Obey the law, pay your taxes, speak politely to the police officer, and you go to the Virgin Islands on the American Express card. Disobey the law, neglect your insurance payments, speak rudely to the police, and you go to Kings County Hospital in a body bag.

It is the business of the mass media to sell products-their own as well as those of their clients-and the critics who complain about the ceaseless shows of violence miss the comparison to the cocaine trade. Bad news engages the viewer's participation in what McLuhan recognized as a collective surge of intense consciousness (a "process that makes the content of the item seem quite secondary") and sets him up for the good news, which is much more expensively produced. A thirty-second television commercial sells for as much as \$500,000 and can cost over \$1 million to make; in *Time* magazine, a single page of color advertising costs roughly \$125,000 (a sum equivalent to the annual salary paid to one of the magazine's better writers), and McLuhan accurately accounts for the orders of priority by saying that the historians and archeologists one day will discover that the twentieth century's commercial advertisements (like the stained-glass windows of fourteenth century cathedrals) offer the "richest and most faithful reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities. "

McLuhan developed his dialectic during twenty years of teaching undergraduate courses in what was called "pop culture" at a succession of provincial universities in the United States and Canada, and as he learned better to understand the psychic effects of the electronic media, most notably their tendency to compress-and by so doing dissolve-the dimensions of space and time, he began to posit the existence of a world soul. In his more transcendent and optimistic moments he gives way to a utopian mysticism founded on his reading of G. K. Chesterton and his conversion, in his early twenties, to Catholicism. Believing that it was the grammar of print that divided mankind into isolated factions of selfishly defined interests, castes, nationalities, and provinces of feeling, McLuhan also believes that the unifying networks of electronic communication might restore mankind to a state of bliss not unlike the one said to have existed within the Garden of Eden. Every now and then he beholds a Biblical vision in the desert:

If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information

seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness? (61)

Or again, while telling the parable of the airline executive who built a little cairn of pebbles collected from all parts of the world, McLuhan makes of his text a lesson about mankind coming home at last from the exile to which it had been sentenced by Johann Gutenberg and the scholars of the Italian Renaissance:

When asked "so what?," he [the airline executive] said that in one spot one could touch every part of the world because of aviation. In effect he had hit upon the mosaic or iconic principle of simultaneous touch and interplay that is inherent in the implosive speed of the airplane. The same principle of implosive mosaic is even more characteristic of electric information movement of all kinds. (185)

It is this mystical component of McLuhan's thought that lately has revived his reputation among the more visionary promoters of "the Information Superhighway" and the Internet. Journals specific to the concerns of cyberspace (*Wired* or *The Whole Earth Review*) touch on similarly transcendent themes; the authors of the leading articles talk about the late-twentieth-century substitution of "the Icon of the Net for the Icon of the Atom," about the virtues of "the hive mind" (its sociability and lack of memory), about the connectedness of "all circuits, all intelligence, all things economic and ecological, " about the revised definitions of self that take account of mankind's "distributed, headless, emergent wholeness. " They echo McLuhan's dicta about the redemptive powers of art and the coming to pass of a ~ in which, "where the whole man is involved, there is no work. "

The rhetoric falls into the rhythms of what I take to be a kind of utopian blank verse, and much of it seems as overblown as the bombast arriving from Washington about the beneficence of "the New World Order" and the great happiness certain to unite the industrial nations of the earth under the tent of the General Agreement on Tariffs on Trade. To my mind McLuhan is most persuasive in the secular phases of his hypothesis, when he talks about present effects instead of promised reunions. Approached as a guidebook to the artificial kingdom within the glass walls of our communications technologies, *Understanding Media* describes the world that I see and know on CBS News, at Disneyland, in the suburban malls, on the covers of the fashion magazines—a world in which human beings become commodities (sold on T-shirts or transposed into a series of digital numbers), a world in which, as Simone Weil once noticed, "it is the thing that thinks, and the man who is reduced to the state of the thing," a world in which children find it hard to conceive of a time future beyond the immediate and evangelical present, a world of people living in their own movies and listening to their own soundtracks, a never-never land where the historical memory counts for as little as last year's debutante, where the crippled boy wins the lottery, the chorus girl studies ancient Greek, and the lessons of experience never contradict the miracles of paradise regained.

The world that McLuhan describes has taken shape during my own lifetime, and within the span of my own experience I can remember that as recently as 1960 it was still possible to make distinctions between the several forms of what were then known as the lively arts. The audiences recognized the differences between journalism, literature, politics, and the movies, and it was understood that the novelist wasn't expected to double as an acrobat or a talk-show host. The distinctions blurred under the technical and epistemological pressures of the next ten years, and as the lines between fact and fiction became as irrelevant as they were difficult to distinguish, the lively arts fused into the amalgam of forms known as the media. News was entertainment, and entertainment was news, and by 1970 network television was presenting continuous performances on the stage of events with a repertory company of high-definition personalities who, like the actors in a Shakespearean play, easily and abruptly shifted their mise-en-scenes to Dallas, Vietnam, Chicago, Vienna, Washington, and the Afghan frontier. The special effects were astonishing, and by 1980 McLuhan's theater of celebrity had replaced the old religious theater in which Poseidon and Zeus once staged cataclysmic floods and heavenly fires with the effortless aplomb of ABCs "Wide World of Sports. "

The postmodern imagination is a product of the mass media, but as a means of perception it is more accurately described as pre-Christian. The vocabulary is necessarily primitive, reducing argument to gossip and history to the telling of fairy tales. The average American household now watches television roughly seven hours a day (as opposed to five-and-a-half hours a day when McLuhan published *Understanding Media*) and the soap opera stars receive thousands of letters a week in which the adoring faithful confess secrets of the heart that they dare not tell their wives, their husbands, or their mothers. Like the old pagan systems of belief, the mass media grant the primacy of the personal over the impersonal. Whether in Washington hearing rooms or Hollywood restaurants, names take precedence over things, the actor over the act. Just as the ancient Greeks assigned trace elements of the divine to trees and winds and stones (a river God sulked and the child drowned; a sky God smiled, and the corn ripened), the modern American assigns similar powers not only to whales and spotted owls but also to individuals marked by the aureoles of fame. On television commercials and subway signs, celebrities of various magnitude, like the nymphs and satyrs and fauns of ancient myth, become the familiar spirits of automobiles, cameras, computers, and brokerage firms. Athletes show up on television breathing the gift of life into whatever products can be carried into a locker room, and aging movie actresses awaken with their "personal touch" the spirit dormant in the color of a lipstick or a bottle of perfume.

The greater images of celebrity posed on the covers of our magazines impart a sense of stability and calm to a world otherwise dissolved in chaos. The newspaper headlines bring word of violent change-war in Bosnia, near anarchy in Moscow, famine in Somalia, moral collapse in Washington-but on the smooth surfaces of the magazines the faces look as vacant and imperturbable as they have looked for twenty years, as steady in their courses as the fixed stars, as serene as the bronze of

Buddha in the courtyard at Kamakura. There they all are-Liz and Elvis, Madonna and the Kennedys - indifferent to the turmoil of the news, bestowing on the confusion of events the smiles of infinite bliss. Like minor deities, or a little crowd of painted idols in a roadside shrine, they ease the pain of doubt and hold at bay the fear of death.

As McLuhan noticed thirty years ago, the accelerated technologies of the electronic future carry us backward into the firelight flickering in the caves of a neolithic past. Among people who worship the objects of their own invention (whether in the shape of the fax machine or the high-speed computer) and accept the blessing of an icon as proof of divinity (whether expressed as the Coca-Cola trademark or as the label on a dress by Donna Karan), ritual becomes a form of applied knowledge. The individual voice and singular point of view disappears into the chorus of a corporate and collective consciousness, which, in McLuhan's phrase, doesn't "postulate consciousness of anything in particular." In place of an energetic politics, we substitute a frenzied spectacle, and the media set the terms of ritual combat imposed upon the candidates who would prove themselves fit to govern the republic. Medieval chroniclers tell of princesses who send Christian knights in search of dragons, requiring them to recover bits and pieces of the true cross and to wander for many days and nights in heathen forests. Toward the end of the twentieth century, in a country that prides itself on its faith in reason, American presidents endure the trials by klieg light and wander for many days and nights in a labyrinth of Holiday Inns. The presidency undoubtedly constitutes a fearful test of a man's capacities, but his capacities for what? Even if the electorate understood or cared about something as tedious as the mechanics of government, how does it choose between the rivals for its fealty and esteem? The one attribute that can be known and seen comes to stand for all the other attributes that remain invisible, and so the test becomes one of finding out who can survive the stupidity and pitiless indifference of the television cameras.

Had McLuhan lived long enough to contemplate the media's delight in the inspection of Bill Clinton's soul, I expect that he might have suggested equipping the president with a broadsword or an old crossbow and sending him into the field against four horsemen in black armor or an infuriated bear. Assuming that the event could be properly promoted and attractively staged, I don't see why it wouldn't draw a sizable audience (at least as large as the one drummed up for Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding at the Olympic games), and I can imagine Peter Jennings or Connie Chung murmuring sententious commentary about the president's prior showings against a lion, a Ninja, and a wolf.

Again as McLuhan understood, the habits of mind derived from our use of the mass media-"we become what we behold. '...We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us"- deconstruct the texts of a civilization founded on the premise of the printed page. To the extent that we abandon the visual order of print, and with it the corollary structures of feeling and thought (roads, empires, straight lines, hierarchy, classification, the novels of George Eliot or Jane Austen), we discard the idea of the

townsman or the citizen and acquire the sensibilities characteristic of nomadic and preliterate peoples. The two sets of circumstance imply different systems of meaning which, as with McLuhan's dialectic, also can be expressed as a series of antonyms. Several years ago I had occasion to compose such a series, and I'm struck by its nearly exact parallel with McLuhan's distinction between the technology of the written word and those of the electronic media. As follows:

<i>Citizen</i>	<i>Nomad</i>
build	wander
experience	innocence
authority	power
happiness	pleasure
literature	journalism
heterosexual	polymorphous
civilization	barbarism
will	wish
truth as passion	passion as truth
peace	war
achievement	celebrity
science	magic
doubt	certainty
drama	pornography
history	legend
argument	violence
wife	whore
art	dream
agriculture	banditry
politics	prophecy

The attitude of mind suggested by the words in the right-hand column is currently very much in vogue in the United States; it accounts not only for the triumph of Madonna and Rush Limbaugh but also for the reluctance of my children to believe that I completely and truly exist unless they can see me on television. By eliminating the dimensions of space and time, the electronic forms of communication also eliminate the presumption of cause and effect. Typographic man assumed that A follows B, that people who made things-whether cities, ideas, families, or works of art- measured their victories (usually Pyrrhic) over periods of time longer than those sold to the buyers of beer commercials. Graphic man imagines himself living in the enchanted garden of the eternal now. If all the world can be seen simultaneously, and if all mankind's joy and suffering is always and everywhere present (if not on CNN or Oprah, then on the "Sunday Night Movie" or MTV), nothing necessarily follows from anything else. Sequence becomes merely additive instead of causative. Like the nomadic hordes wandering across an ancient

desert in search of the soul's oasis, graphic man embraces the pleasures of barbarism and swears fealty to the sovereignty of the moment.