

# “The electric revolution”

Hank Malone

1967

## I

Marshall McLuhan, better known as the Ombudsman of the Hipsters, hates the twentieth century.

Yet, in his cheerful 19<sup>th</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> century way he has patiently dissected the corpse (if haphazardly) and has shown us all a glimpse of the invisible Cancer of Media, without so much as flinching, without a single four-letter word. He obviously takes pride in his zealous but essentially dispassionate style—he has learned the scientist’s way of overwhelming; he has come up with his own version of E equals MC squared, and has categorically dared all onlookers to light the fuse.

For being dispassionate, and for concealing his disgust for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, McLuhan has seemed to many as an advocate of our age. Not true. All the facts point to the very opposite; he is patently terrified of it all, it is a vast unholy mess to this Canadian Catholic recluse.

But he keeps a stiff upper lip nonetheless. If we are, as he says, to fight the cancers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we must understand what we are fighting. In “Understanding Media” he has rolled it all out before us so we may see—all the infected organs, all the inflamed and swollen inwards of the “media revolution.”

Unlike Paul Goodman and others, he has hesitated to interject into his investigations any grandiose conclusions and simple maxims. His conclusions are provisional, parenthetical, and always seem to suggest further questions. The rewards for his hesitation have been harsh. He has been regularly accused of being immoral, callous, and stupid. His questions are frightening, and he has become hated because he has not suggested many answers; he is like the post-war European film director, he has chosen to end his panorama on a painful note, close to the truth.

## II

It seems that McLuhan is hesitant to suggest “answers” to the dilemmas of media because they are extraordinarily difficult to derive without fudging.

Perhaps the most significant tendency of all modern media is that it indirectly breaks down the ethical or collective rationale for human behavior. Modern media destroys the efficacy of traditional logical forms which have led to the establishment of ethical and moral norms whereby self-interest could be gradually extended to the interests of the surrounding community. In other words, modern media inadvertently breeds selfishness. Modern media makes it very difficult for young people, contends McLuhan, to understand why they should give up some of their self-interest for the good of others. By breaking down the traditional logical modes of communication, we are no longer able to hold the attention of the young person. Ethical and moral principles which are unraveled by a breakdown in the logical system of the Western World (a breakdown generated by the electric revolution) becomes genuinely absurd as the machinery of communication grinds to a halt.

McLuhan, therefore, cannot suggest easy moral answers to his media problems because such a style of delivery would go absolutely unheeded.

The message is, in other words, no longer a media. Somehow McLuhan has to find a “message” or an “answer” which can be communicated where the message is currently being communicated—namely, in the media itself. He has not devised such an answer to date.

Our culture-in-transition has not yet devised for itself an intelligible alternative to the waning Indo-European logical forms of its traditional language.

### **III**

More important, in one sense, than the impact of electrical media upon our logical and linguistic forms is the impact that it has upon our political and economic realities. Though he hesitates in this area, there can be little doubt that McLuhan sees a new kind of fascism on the horizon, one that will hide behind a facade of democratic idealism, a fascism that will control attitudes and behavior by controlling the kinds and modes of communication between people.

The breakdown of the logical forms of communication and fascism go hand in hand, for when the medium of dialogue is destroyed (language and logic) there can be no recourse but through actions associated with what is now called violence and warfare. Without an agreed upon mode of language by which disputes can be arbitrated, there can be no dialogue except in hand to hand combat, a willfulness that leaves no room for mercy, justice, and pity, which are, in the end, synthetic categories hewn out of a passion for peace, order, and democracy.

### **IV**

The media explosion has been accidental. The revolutionary side effects of electrical technology were not foreseen. The sudden explosion of electric technology has been wildly important nonetheless. The first human reaction to the new bombardment of information forms was one of self-protection, the flight into individual apathy, or into tribalization for the purposes of warding off undesired information, for responding only to certain specialized kinds of media, e.g. art movies but not television.

Though tribalization (whether it be in returning to the family in the suburbs, or forming hippie clans) is superficially a satisfactory reaction to the incredible and absurd bombardment of modern media, we must respond, as McLuhan does, by stating that a fragmentalized group of subcultures each responding to their own media provides only the minimal basis for a certain level of cultural development. It does not provide any means for overwhelming or checking the unwieldy growth of existing political and economic forces. The fragmentalization of a people via media is just another way of maintaining the status quo, of keeping people divided and conquered.

### **V**

In short, McLuhan envisions that we are in a kind of culture in which “rationality” is quickly being reduced to an absurdity, in which people are struggling for an alternative mode of “rational” behavior while being simultaneously bombarded by intrinsically frustrating forms of contradicting social information. The result veers more and more toward inadvertent fascism, toward thought control, toward a spurious and possibly successful individualism on a cultural level, but an absolute political impotence and an economic dependence upon the monolithic forces that dominate and control the media.

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