

Marshall McLuhan - *UNDERSTANDING MEDIA (part I)*

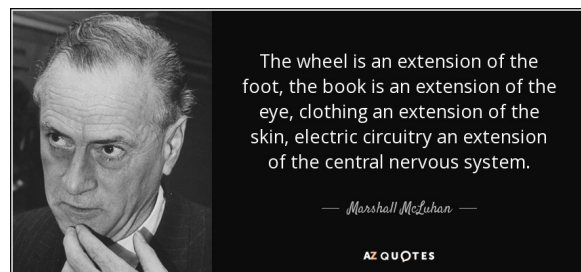
"Media Hot and Cold", "Reversal of the Overheated Medium", "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis" (1964)

Key terminology & ideas

- global village
- predicted the World Wide Web
- medium is the message
- we are shaped by the media, not media shapes us
- we lost control of the media
- craving for stimulation
- overstimulation from too many media
- MEDIA AS AN EXTENSION OF THE BODY
- the eye, the ear
- the tactile senses: touch screens? → tactile technology
- media interacts with our body and brain ⇒ reading ⇒ thinking in straight lines

1. **the extension thesis** [everything that extends the human body is media ⇒ broad definition of media]

REPRESENTATION ⇒ extension



⇒ I would however argue that the book is not only an extension of the eye, but an extension of the whole body as it has the capacity to trigger bodily reactions. Of course, not to extent that a movie can, as I believe that we have become a bit immune to that after being so accustomed to many stimuli and triggers. So from a neuroscietific point of view, the literature has the power to transpose the human body to different places, to tense our muscles, to make us cry or to create

other involuntary reaction. I believe that a book is not just about visualisation, but it rather involves many other senses.

2. the environmental thesis [the media surrounding us are like water to a fish]

the new media are not bridges between man nature, they are nature.

~~INSTRUMENTALISM~~ ⇒ substantivism = understanding media as substances, just like water is the substance a fish swims through and air to a primate

- **we may not actually be able to consciously reflect upon the media environment we are so entertained which might seem so natural to our circumstances ⇒ media are not instruments through which we interact with the world but they form the world.**

Media deterministic views:



Determinism is the philosophical view that all events are determined completely by previously existing causes. Deterministic theories throughout the history of philosophy have sprung from diverse and sometimes overlapping motives and considerations. The opposite of determinism is some kind of indeterminism (otherwise called nondeterminism) or randomness. Determinism is often contrasted with free will.

⇒ "we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us" [McLuhan], but the "we" that are shaping those tools are not pristine entities, free and separable from the tools that have already shaped us. the extensions of our bodies help us to interact with the world, so for us to keep on creating tools some other preexisting ones need to exist.

3. the anti-content thesis [media cannot be understood through their content ⇒ the medium is the message. it is the media itself that changes our lives, not its content]

- **Historical changes and revolutions are the products of developments in media technologies that change the substance of our environment that changes the way we engage and exist in that environment.**
- electric light is a medium without content
- avoiding the narcotic effects of media = don't be lured into mistaking the medium's content for its meaning

Introduction

"Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man-the technological simulation of consciousness when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. " →

internet

- extensions of man
- central nervous system extended to the whole mankind → consequences of action
- **THE AGE OF ANXIETY: for the reason of the electric implosion that compels commitment and participation, quite regardless of any "point of view". → If the Nineteenth century was the age of the editorial chair, ours is the century of the psychiatrist's couch. → The psychiatrist employs the couch, since it removes the temptation to express private points of view and obviates the need to rationalise events.**

→ Art in the Age of Anxiety by Kholeif



"Today the action and reaction occur almost at the same time".

The Medium is the Message

(...) the **technique of fragmentation** is the essence of machine technology.

- **FRAGMENTATION**

- The content of media is irrelevant to understanding the effect media have

The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no "content." And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. **For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the "content" (or what is really another medium) that is noticed. The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized.** For electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth. → **Media eliminates time and space?**

(...) mechanisation is achieved by fragmentation of any process and by putting the fragmented parts in a series.

In other words, cubism, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back, and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that the medium is the message.

in the past, the message was the "content", but now we are in the age of the "total field", of simultaneity instead of sequencing → form and function as

unity

A Passage 'to India by E. M. Forster is a dramatic study of the inability of oral and intuitive oriental culture to meet with the rational, visual European patterns of experience. "Rational," of course, has for the West long meant "uniform and continuous and sequential." In other words, we have confused reason with literacy, and rationalism with a single technology. Thus in the electric age man seems to the conventional West to become irrational.

We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal world and beaches him in individual isolation. We are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture. [zine]

It is in our I.Q. testing that we have produced the greatest flood of misbegotten standards. Unaware of our typographic cultural bias, our testers assume that uniform and continuous habits are a sign of intelligence, thus eliminating the ear man and the tactile man.

The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as "content." The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content. The "content" of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech.

For the man in a literate and homogenized society ceases to be sensitive to the diverse and discontinuous life of forms. He acquires the illusion of the third dimension and the "private point of view" as part of his Narcissus fixation, and is quite shut off from Blake's awareness or that of the Psalmist, that we become what we behold.

Media Hot and Cold

- hot medium → high definition = High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, "high definition. ⇒ low participation ⇒ fragmentation

⇒ Any hot medium allows of less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than dialogue.

- cool medium → low definition = And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. ⇒ high participation

- FRAGMENTATION ~ SPECIALISM
- Media is always in a constant interplay with other media
- effect vs. meaning

For myth is the instant vision of a complex process that ordinarily extends over a long period. Myth is contraction or implosion of any process, and the instant speed of electricity confers the mythic dimension on ordinary industrial and social action today. **We live mythically but continue to think fragmentarily and on single planes.**

The effect of electric technology had at first been anxiety.

Now it appears to create boredom. We have been through the three stages of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion that occur in every disease or stress of life, whether individual or collective.

—————→ ANXIETY —————→ THE AGE OF ANXIETY: for the reason of the electric implosion that compels commitment and participation, quite regardless of any "point of view". → If the Nineteenth century was the age of the editorial chair, ours is the century of the psychiatrist's couch. → The psychiatrist employs the couch, since it removes the temptation to express private points of view and obviates the need to rationalise events.

