

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)

McLuhan Among Moralists

by David J. Dooley¹

IN AN INTERESTING “Mermaid Inn” column in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* (21 Jan. 1984), my colleague Derrick de Kerckhove suggested that Marshall McLuhan could be one of the best answers to George Orwell’s unsettling novel *1984*. Orwell predicted a world of violence; his understanding of the world was that it was ruled by evil men who oppressed others in the name of professed ideologies but really out of the sheer joy of exercising power. This is still a commonly held opinion, but, de Kerckhove maintains, it is just as banal and wrong today as it was in 1948 when Orwell’s novel was written.

The most arresting insights of *1984*, he continues, are that society is subjected to media surveillance through television; that the balance of world powers is ensured by a tripartite division of shuffling alliances; and that history is constantly being rewritten by an army of archivists who change statements in the media about the past to suit the changing whims of Big Brother. But power structures have very little moral intent or content, either good or evil. As McLuhan showed, media effect deep changes in our very being, and ideologies are merely after-effects of human technologies: “Media and technologies can be considered as the physical, tangible reality of culture; ideologies are largely media trappings.”

The tripartite division of the world, in this analysis of it, is not among Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia, but among Computerland, Bookworld, and Radio City. North America, most of Europe, and Japan are in Computerland. China, the Soviet Union, and Africa are in Bookworld, or about to get there, because books are still news to them. South America, the Middle East, and India are in Radio City. National boundaries and ideologies are no barriers to the interpenetration or blending of these media realms.

New media have the potential for considerable violence and aggression. But Orwell had it wrong, when he assumed that television would promote absolute mind-control by political power. Television does not have

¹ Doctor Dooley, who for many years taught English at Saint Michael’s College, wrote this article in 1985 for the (now defunct) *Canadian Catholic Review*.

to bother with our minds, because it controls our nervous systems. Radio, on the other hand, wrought havoc among literate peoples—reaching back to the tribal hordes of Germany, for example. It has killed more people in a shorter period of time than any other communication medium ever invented by man: “Today, the voice of the Ayatollah is sending fourteen-year-olds to death, the voices of Ian Paisley and others are sending terrorists into Irish streets, the voices of South American strongmen are blowing up shanties. Television and computers, however, are offsetting the potential violence of radio.”

While Orwell was laboriously deploring the breakdown of our old institutions, de Kerckhove concludes, two professors from the University of Toronto, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, were laying the ground for our recovery. By revealing the forces of media as they patterned cultures, Innis gave us a grip on forces beyond human motivation, thus running circles around Marx. By carrying this investigation to the human body and the senses, McLuhan made us aware of the cultural ground of our sensory perceptions, thus running circles around Freud. The question left for us today is whether our technologies alter and re-define our physiological buildup, our organic reality. That question leaves Orwell’s political musings far behind.

This analysis is clearly based on McLuhan’s ideas, and it is very much in his spirit. Like much of his work, it is fascinating, stimulating, suggestive and—I would contend—wrong. McLuhan himself was never one to let facts stand in the way of a good theory. De Kerckhove’s criticism of Orwell in McLuhan’s terms may serve to elucidate some of the dilemmas which the master himself faced.

It is worth observing that Orwell’s description of the world of Big Brother has often been used as a frame of reference within the Soviet Union itself; his description of the workings of tyranny is not as far-fetched as de Kerckhove claims.

Surely an ideology such as Communism is not merely or largely a media trapping. Surely it was the will of Stalin, guided by his own twisted mind, which caused the deaths of millions of Ukrainians—without benefit of radio. Surely Paisley is as venomous and rabble-rousing on television as on radio. Surely, too, what people see does affect their actions, as Plato and Aristotle said many centuries ago; surely the demand for some control over the violence and pornography shown on television stems from a realistic observation that television violence is not harmless and pacifying, but may breed social violence in the home and on the street.

Two books by V.S. Naipaul make a connection between ideology and behaviour in a way that McLuhan would have deprecated. Naipaul is

particularly concerned with the myths by which people live, myths arising out of their own perception of the effects of historical influences upon them. In *The Return of Eva Peron*, for example, it is evident that the myth of machismo in Argentina, together with the myth of a glorious past, has been responsible for political instability, tyranny, the disappearance of political dissidents, and a whole litany of similar horrors. In Trinidad and in a number of African countries, Naipaul also shows, the myth of anti-imperialism has been responsible for terrible atrocities. In the very place where Conrad had his Kurtz perform unspeakable rites, Pierre Mulele's perspective on history led him to wipe the slate clean and begin all over again—by killing everybody who could read and write and everybody who wore a tie.

Naipaul's later book *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, carried on a similar investigation of the effect of myth upon the behaviour of individuals. In the holy city of Qom in Iran, where scholars pored over ancient manuscripts, he found that the war against the unbelievers was being carried on implacably not only with radio but with print: "So this was where they churned it out, the rage about the devils of western democracies, the hagiographies of the Shia Imams. This was where they read Schumacher and Toynbee and used their words—about technology and ecology—to lash the West." This war was not only being waged by print and radio, however, but also by television. Among the slogans painted on the wall of a shrine, he found some in English—"We Want Republic," "Khomeini is Our Leader"—evidently for foreign television. On a television programme meant for the Iranians themselves, Khomeini was shown in hospital, "And all the time, in the background, a male choir sang a three-word song: 'Khomeini e Imam! Khomeini e Iman! Khomeini is our ruler!'"

For Islam, then, in Naipaul's view, technology is not the physical, tangible reality of culture at all; the media are what the word implies: means or mechanisms of transmitting something, such as an ideology. We are not dealing here with forces beyond human motivation; the motivation in fact becomes very clear. Their eyes fixed upon the past, the Moslems are engaged in a futile attempt to construct a twentieth-century political framework based on a foundation established by a seventh-century religious prophet.

At the end of his Islamic journey, Naipaul notes how alike the Moslems and the Marxists are, even though they are supposed to be implacable enemies. His friend Behzad has become disillusioned with the regime, and has revolted in the direction of Communism. In his apartment, Naipaul finds a booklet with a picture of Stalin on the cover; when he asks Behzad about it, the latter replies that he loves Stalin, because he was one of

the great revolutionaries.

“Why do you say he was one of the greatest revolutionaries?”

“Because he constructed socialism in Russia. That was the first socialist revolution in the world and it was the greatest turn in human history. Maybe he made some mistakes. But I can say he was the most suitable man to do what he did. What he did in Russia we have to do in Iran. We too have to do a lot of killing. A lot.”

So this man lives within the myth of revolution. For many Iranians, Islam is the answer: a society of believers. For Behzad, Islam is not the answer, but Communism: another society of believers. In both, revolution is an essential part of the myth.

The medium, therefore, is not the entire message by any means. Content and intent do matter. Hitler used radio to spread tyranny, to justify his occupation of the Rhineland, his annexation of Austria, his bloodless triumph over Czechoslovakia. Churchill used radio to stop the spread of tyranny. There was a difference. It has been necessary in the twentieth century to make intellectual and moral decisions about the claims of Naziism, Communism, and Islam to liberate men or provide the way to fuller life for them.

“When my critics imagine I am being vaguely metaphorical,” wrote McLuhan in the foreword to *The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan, 1943-62*, “I, too, am trying to be literal and precise.” He went on to say, “The effects of new media on our sensory lives are similar to the effects of new poetry. They change not only our thoughts but the structure of our world.” Many times he asserted that he was only describing what happens, not moralizing upon it; others had made moral judgements on simplistic lines—“Is television good or bad?”—and got into trouble, and he knew better than to do this himself. His claim to objectivity, his desire not to make the moral judgements to which all mortals are prone, necessarily involved him in strategies of evasion.

For example, at a conference on abortion held at Saint Michael’s College on 24 May 1972, he followed Doctor W.H. Allemang, Senior Staff Obstetrician and Gynaecologist at the Toronto General Hospital. Once the 1969 amendment to the Criminal Code was passed, in Doctor Allemang’s view abortion became virtually a woman’s right, and the chief problem for him and his staff was to establish a smoothly working procedure. After initial difficulties, the problems had been overcome and, in his opinion, the system was working well. For all his revulsion at the idea of abortion (he

himself had taken part in a number of right-to-life rallies and marches), McLuhan did not denounce Doctor Allemang directly, but made his comments in so oblique a fashion that some of Doctor Allemang's staff thought he was on their side. What he attacked was the notion of the system, an idea related to the industrial technology of the nineteenth century, the belief that if you had a smoothly working assembly-line procedure then everything was all right. Instead of making the expected judgement on evils of abortion, then, he ridiculed a reliance on an out-of-date technology.

Four years later, in a *Canadian Forum* article (Sept. 1976), he came much closer to a direct unfavourable judgement, on television itself. Referring to a *Listener* discussion of pornographic violence under the heading "No victim, no pornography," he made a characteristically paradoxical comment: "To invade the private person, or to invade a group with teaching, with doctrines, with entertainment, all these are alike forms of violence." He then went on to discuss the specific qualities of the violence associated with the electric media. Part of the trouble is that they operate instantaneously; instant involvement suppresses private identity and leaves the individual bewildered and prone to violence himself:

The loss of individual and personal meaning via the electronic media ensures a corresponding and reciprocal violence from those so deprived of their identities; for violence, whether spiritual or physical, is a quest for identity and the meaningful. Characteristically, he emphasized formal causality rather than efficient causality of the programme content of the media. We are dealing with forces beyond our control and beyond our recognition, environmental or diffused forces. He paid tribute to Harold Innis for being the first to recognize this fact, and then went on to discuss a psychological study undertaken by Stanley Milgram at Yale. Milgram concluded:

When the individual is on his own, conscience is brought into play. But when he functions in an organized mode, directions that come from the higher-level component are not assessed against the internal standards of moral judgement. . . . The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often, it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act.

Interestingly, this takes us close to the world of *1984*, to the world in which Winston Smith tries to prove that Milgram is wrong and that the individual can still bring his own conscience into play. In McLuhan's

opinion, Western man is seemingly incapable of recognizing the formal or acoustic structure of situations which are disturbing and destroying him. Content and programme do have a function on television: “Indeed, their function is to ‘assure that TV will be turned on so that it can perform its work of obliterating all individuality and all privacy. . . . the function of a program is to keep the users occupied by some diversion while the medium itself does its work upon him.’”

McLuhan carried this analysis a bit farther in an interview with Alan M. Kriegsman, “What TV Does to Us” (*The Guardian*, 12 June 1977). Again, he emphasized its violent invasive nature, its destruction of people’s privacy and people’s rights. Again his discussion was full of paradoxes and contradictions, as when he said that “People who take a point of view and an alarmist stand, are people who don’t understand the media” and then went on to describe the present situation as “a kind of total disease.” If it is a disease, what is the remedy?

The defence is not to pass a law or to say this shouldn’t happen, we’ve got to stop this. The defence is to understand the thing, and to, well to pull the plug out if necessary. Under conditions of extreme survival need, obviously we wouldn’t hesitate to pull the plug.

This leaves us in some perplexity, since it is not clear what “pulling the plug” means if it does not mean passing a law and saying that this should not happen.

Characteristically again, towards the end of the interview McLuhan said, “By the way, I do not make value judgments. I simply try to discover what’s going on.” Elsewhere he did make clear what was going on, and made a perfectly clear value judgement at the same time: “Leasing our eyes and ears and nerves to commercial interests is like handing over the common speech to a private corporation, or like giving the earth’s atmosphere to a company and a monopoly.” (*Globe and Mail*, 12 June 1977).

What conclusion can we come to? That McLuhan was as scared of Big Brother as Orwell was. The real difference was that he made Big Brother a television executive. ☞