

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 035 623

TE 001 595

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TITLE McLuhan and the Future of Literature.
PUB DATE Jul 69
NOTE 19p.: 1969 Presidential Address for the English Association (England)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC-\$1.05
DESCRIPTORS *Communications, Cultural Context, Cultural Environment, Cultural Images, Learning Theories, Literacy, *Literature, *Mass Media, Maturation, Role Playing, Role Theory, Social Attitudes, Social Influences, Tactual Perception, Technology, Television, Television Viewing, Youth

IDENTIFIERS McLuhan (Marshall)

ABSTRACT

Marshall McLuhan's belief that our electric age is moving away from literacy entails unconvincing theories about the relationship of man to communications media. One such doctrine is that society has always been influenced more by the nature of the media than by the content of the message communicated. McLuhan divides media into two types: hot media which feed a single sense with a message full of facts and which are low in participation; cool media which give few facts and require the recipient to actively complete the message and which are high in participation. Reading a book is hot; watching television is cold. According to McLuhan, only television of all communication media involves us with everybody and gives us desirable tactile involvement. The acceptance of McLuhan's beliefs by young people can lead to alienation from the educational and social structures of the society and to an obsession with involvement, role-playing, and ego gratification. Teachers and critics must oppose "the tacit approval of emptiness" at the core of McLuhan's glorification of illiteracy, for in playing a role rather than doing a job, the young person grows up ill-equipped to carry out long-range plans or to function productively in a culture. (JM)

THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Presidential Address

1969

McLUHAN
AND THE FUTURE OF
LITERATURE

BY

DAME REBECCA WEST

D.B.E., CLIT., D.LITT.

JULY 1969

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

Published by the Oxford
University Press for the
English Association

McLUHAN AND THE FUTURE OF LITERATURE

MR. Chairman, Members of the English Association, I would like to draw attention to the works of Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian by birth who has attained great influence in the United States by his writings on social science. He is the Albert Schweitzer professor at Fordham University in New York. He has written several books, of which the best known are *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, and has recently appeared in the Penguin Library as part-author of a very distressingly produced little book, called *The Medium is the Massage*, planned to cheer illiterates on their way, and this is not a petulant description, for the burden of Professor McLuhan's gospel is that illiterates should be cheered on their way.

It is his theory that we should all be rejoicing because we are entering a peculiarly happy phase of civilization in which we are growing away from literacy, which has outlived its usefulness. It is now only respectable as an aid to technology. Once it rescued us from a primitive oral state, but that was a long time ago. Since then we have developed various media of communication, all of which are extensions of our senses: books are extensions of our eyes, tools and paintbrushes and pens are extensions of our fingers, roads and railways and cars are extensions of our feet. This has occurred to other people; I said it myself once in a book about art called *The Strange Necessity*. The sole value of the conception is that it suggests that art and science and labour and exploration of the environment are biological functions and that the person who cannot exercise them will suffer from a deprivation akin to hunger or thirst. Professor McLuhan, however, draws other deductions.

It seems that the invention of writing and printing enabled man to follow a subject along a logical line of thought as far as he wished, working on it in depth, but he therefore became a specialist and thus fragmented himself. This might seem a danger of which the world has been usually quite well aware, and which, notably during the Renaissance, men often avoided; and perhaps the danger has been exaggerated. It is so difficult to become a specialist that the mediocre man has been very eager to cry wolf to the specialist, often before it was actually necessary. However, in any case, Professor McLuhan tells us, the danger is over, because we are now living in the age of electricity. Because we are living in the electric age, our central nervous systems are so far extended by technological activities, not just our own, everybody's, that we receive an impression of everything that is happening practically as it happens; and as a result of

this simultaneity of perception, we are all involved in the whole of human proceedings, and necessarily participate, horizontally and vertically, in the results of every human action. But I myself do not feel that I participated in depth in the results of the activities of the astronauts who have just come back from approaching the moon at close quarters, nor in the activities of the Kray brothers. I am not convinced when Professor McLuhan explains that after three thousand years of specialist explosion and of increasing specialism, and alienation so far as technological extensions of our senses, the world has suddenly become 'compressional by dramatic reversal', and the world has been electrically contracted and is now like a village. It was more like a village when I was a child, when there was almost no part of the world except Tibet and areas of South America and the Poles which a spirited person could not easily visit. But that was a long time ago. However, Professor McLuhan assures us that 'electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree'.

I must explain that Professor McLuhan habitually uses the word 'implosion' not as you and I have always understood it, as the bursting inward of a vessel from external pressure, a word added to our vocabulary, I think, by nineteenth-century physicists. Professor McLuhan uses it in the sense of the opposite of an explosion, as a unification contrasted with a dispersal. This unification, caused by electricity, this implosion, has compelled us to commitment and participation in world affairs, of a kind quite independent from any opinions we may hold. This has had great social consequences. It has altered the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups, which are now involved in the lives of you and me, as we are in theirs, thanks—Professor McLuhan tells us with no further explanation—to electric media. Because of that electricity, we now revolt against imposed patterns and desire people and things to declare the nature of their beings, and adopt this as a faith, a faith which, he says, 'concerns the ultimate harmony of all being'.

We have on our hands a new religion with a vague creed founded on the misunderstanding of a word, but that is nothing new, if one looks back to the history of the early Church. It is however disconcerting to learn that this faith depends on the relationship of man to the media of communication which he employs, writing, printing, mechanics, transport, the telephone and the telegraph, radio, gramophone, film, electronics and automation, and TV, but not through anything that is in the nature of a communication that is communicated by these media. It is his theory that society has always been shaped more by the nature of the media than by the content of the communications they have made. This is a drastic

doctrine. It causes one to feel phantom pity for those monkeys, the ones who type through infinity and do or do not eventually come on the permutations which compose the works of Shakespeare. They need not have troubled according to Professor McLuhan, it was the typing that mattered.

Professor McLuhan asserts that the various media of communication all produce effects which condition all the responses of the people who use them more effectively than any ideas which might have been communicated to them. He classifies these media as hot and cold. A hot medium is one that feeds a single sense with a message full of facts, and because it is full of facts it is said to be of 'high definition'. A cool medium is one which gives facts parsimoniously, thus being classified as of 'low definition', and may give it to several senses. Because a hot medium gives a lot of information the recipient does not need to consult others to work it out and does not have to fill in the message in order to complete it, but can go on burrowing into the problem. A cool medium gives few facts and the recipient has to look round to get others to complete the message. Hot media are therefore low in participation, and cool media are high in participation. Hot media therefore result in passionate and egotistic emotions of a narrow sort; one draws closer to one's kind, and that benevolently, by using a cold medium.

There are further subtleties of classification. Hieroglyphs and ideograms are cooler versions of the hot medium of writing, and the phonetic alphabet hots it up, and writing on a stone is a cold medium. People have to gather round and get together to read it; there is the element of participation, but printing hots it up again. Written or printed paper is a hot medium which 'unifies space horizontally, both in political and entertainment empires'. A lecture makes for more matiness than a tutorial, so a lecture is cooler than a tutorial. Reading a book is hot, taking part in a conversation is more cool. The printing of books becomes very hot in Professor McLuhan's opinion from time to time, and one sentence names nationalism and the religious wars as its only products. But electricity comes as a saviour, doing wonders for everyone in its cool way, because of its speed. Constantly Professor McLuhan names speed as if it were a product of modern industrial science, specifically that connected with electricity. Yet surely the conduct of life was expedited to a very notable degree in the seventeenth century by Napier and Briggs by their invention of logarithmic tables, and surely Professor McLuhan is mistaken in thinking that thanks to electricity practically everything is happening simultaneously. For myself I am conscious of being further away not only from heaven but from simultaneity than when I was a child. In what Western country are not the mere acts of going to work in the morning and going home at

night not taking longer and longer every year? It is of course quicker to go to New York and to Tokyo than it was, but more people go out to work in the morning and come home in the evening. Is it not obvious that the development of the telephone system has slowed it down and that the optimum period for speed and service has passed? And let me formulate what, had I been an American professor, would by now be known as West's law: once man has invented the internal combustion engine for the sake of speed and succeeds in manufacturing automobiles at a price which makes it worth while for anybody wishing to progress on his way more quickly to purchase them, then at all times when the purchasers of such vehicles feel the need to use travel quickly which made them buy the automobiles, as to go to or return from work and to go on holiday, then the vehicles will clog the roads and be unable to proceed at a speed greater than that attained by vehicles before the internal combustion engine was invented. But speed, due to electricity, Professor McLuhan perceives everywhere and attaches to it a significance others may find elusive.

* He knows an air-line executive who 'is much aware of the implosive character of world aviation'—I should like to know which line he is connected with, in case he is using the word implosion correctly to mean the bursting of a vessel by inward pressure. He (God forgive him) asked his opposite number in every airline in the world to send him a pebble from outside his office. His intention was to build a cairn of these pebbles. Someone asked him, and who can wonder, why he was doing this. He answered that 'here in this cairn one would be able to touch every part of the world because of aviation'. He had, Professor McLuhan says, hit upon 'the mosaic or iconic principles of simultaneous touch and interplay that is inherent in the implosive speed of the airplane'. To make things perfectly clear, Professor McLuhan amplifies the statement. 'The same principle of implosive mosaic is even more characteristic of electric formation movement of all kinds.'

The world of the Professor is very odd indeed. It is distinguished by the remarkable activity of electricity which is always busy with something and always has been. He describes Florence Nightingale as 'the first singer of human woe by telegraph wire'. By this he means that she was moved to organize the nursing service in the Crimean War because the horrors suffered by the soldiers there had been reported by telegraph by the correspondent of *The Times*, William Howard Russell. But Florence Nightingale's interest in nursing in the Crimea was the particular manifestation of a general interest in nursing which had begun at an earlier date. Though nobody, so far as one knows, had telegraphed anybody on the subject she had made persistent and intelligent efforts to become a professional nurse with

the aid of a German institution which reached far back into the pre-electric age. It is to be noted that since what Professor McLuhan calls the electric age the shortage of nurses has been a serious brake on the development of society.

But many of Professor McLuhan's references to history are unfortunate. Consider these three successive sentences:

The grammar of print cannot help to construe the message of oral and non-written culture and institutions. The English aristocracy was properly classed as barbarian by Matthew Arnold because its power and status had nothing to do with literacy or the cultural forms of typography. Said the Duke of Gloucester to Edward Gibbon upon the publication of his *Decline and Fall*: 'Another damned fat book, eh, Mr Gibbon? Scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?'

The shock of the anecdote goes deep into our history. Those of us who are most respectful to Her Majesty the Queen must feel some resentment at the failure to recognize that though the House of Hanover might then have provided us with our anointed king, it did not give it the title to be included in the ranks of the British aristocracy, which they later so happily joined. But it is impossible to forgo the pleasure of quoting the remainder of this paragraph. Professor McLuhan had been discussing de Tocqueville's analysis of the differences between American and English conditions when he made this digression, and he returns to this task, and describes de Tocqueville in these terms:

a highly literate aristocrat who was quite able to be detached from the values and assumptions of typography And it is only on those terms, standing aside from any structure or medium that its principle and lines of force can be discerned. For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary. Prediction and control consist in avoiding this subliminal state of Narcissus trance. But the greatest aid to this end is simply in knowing that the spell can occur immediately upon contact as in the first bars of a melody.

There is really no exaggerating the oddity of the world in which Professor McLuhan lives. His allusions to literature are puzzling, when he tells us that primitive societies regard violent crime as pathetic, and think of the murderer as we do of a cancer patient. He cites as an illustration Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. Not in my copy is it quite like that. The point of Synge's play was that a community found itself unable to think of murder as anything like cancer—they regarded it more as a fantasy. McLuhan's view of contemporary reality is as strange. In *Understanding Media* he has a chapter called 'Reversal of the Over-heated Medium' which begins with what is intended to be a rebuke of the Philistine, the outdated, the hot medium conduct of affairs. He comments on a news item in *The Times* of 21 June 1963 which carried the headline, 'Washing-

ton. Hot Line to open in 60 days', and it relates to the agreement to establish a direct communication link between Washington and Moscow for emergency use, which consisted of one cable and one wireless circuit, using teleprinter equipment. Professor McLuhan expresses this as 'unfortunate in the extreme'. He believes it to have been prompted by the literary bias of the West, which prevented due consideration being given to the bias of the Russians, who, having only recently emerged from illiteracy, love to use the telephone, not for the reason that most of us tolerate that instrument, that one can speak to the man at the other end of the line, but because of the 'rich non-visual involvement' it affords. He supports his case against this, as he calls it, 'invitation to monstrous misunderstandings' by a cock-and-bull allegation that the Russian finds it natural to spy by ear, and put microphones in rooms, but is shocked by the West's visual spying, which, according to Professor McLuhan, the Muscovite finds 'quite unnatural'. Now, if all the books on spying were put together they would make something only a little less massive than the Matterhorn, and recourse to only one of them would have corrected this ridiculous delusion. I do not think M.I.5 would feel the slightest reluctance to bug a room if it seemed likely to bring in any useful information; and the Russian spy organizations are gluttons for visual spying. Think of the gusto with which they have practised industrial espionage: it is unlikely that Harry Gold, when he was stealing the secrets of Philadelphia Sugar Corporation for the Soviet Embassy, whispered the formulas down the telephone. What is significant here is that sheer nonsense is being used to promote discontent with the government of the United States. Now it is absolutely necessary that all peoples should chivvy their governments to keep them on the right path, spare the rod and spoil the government, but it is not possible to correct a government by making accusations against it which are based on babbling.

But Professor McLuhan's misinformation extends to much less esoteric matters, such as the daily newspapers. One way to grasp the transition from the mechanical to the electric age is, according to him, to contrast the lay-outs of two of our own newspapers, *The Times* and the *Daily Express*. He believes that the lay-out of *The Times* concentrates on opinion and the *Daily Express* concentrates on news sent by cable. The reverse is, of course, true. *The Times* uses far more cabled material than the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Express* is always telling its readers what they should think and do in explicit terms, whereas there is in *The Times* only an occasional hoarse voice speaking from behind the leader pages. Oddly enough, for a writer on political science, with emphasis on communications, Professor McLuhan is curiously deluded about the press. He alleges that the press seems to be performing its function most efficiently when it is

publishing bad news. Real news, he says, is bad news. This is a cliché of vulgarity. Only people below the level of our general culture read the papers for disasters, and every editor knows that only a special and limited circulation can be built up on publishing horrors. But we run on through very strange country. There is a chapter on Games, where we meet an English book which 'speaks of a social revolution in England. The English are moving towards social equality, and the intense personal competition which goes with equality. The older rituals of long accepted class behaviour now begin to appear comic and irrational gimmicks in a game'. What is this book? Why, Stephen Potter's *Gamesmanship*. It often seems a shame to take Professor McLuhan's money.

We run through the telegraph, the typewriter—and we pause at the telephone to read a little ruefully, that 'the English dislike the telephone so much that they substitute numerous mail deliveries for it'. There is a darkling chapter on radio, a medium not approved. It is a hot medium with kinks in it, not participatory, and wrong.

It certainly contracts the world to village size, and creates insatiable village tastes for gossip, rumour, and personal malice.

There is a great deal of shaman-like rhapsody.

The adolescent, as opposed to the teen-ager, can now be classified as a phenomenon of literacy. Is it not significant that the adolescent was indigenous only to those areas of England and America where literacy had invested even food with abstract visual value? Europe never had adolescents. It had chaperones.

I will read that again. I do not understand it, and what is more I cannot understand how any person writing in this manner should have become known as a writer except in the sense that the Great McGonigle is known as a poet; and never does Professor McLuhan write better. Listen:

At first, however, it was the detailed realism of writers like Dickens that inspired movie pioneers like D. W. Griffiths who carried a copy of a Dickens novel on location. The realistic novel, that arose with the new paper form of communal cross-section and human-interest coverage in the eighteenth century, was a complete anticipation of film form. Even poets took up the same panoramic style, with human interest vignettes and close-ups as variants. Gray's *Elegy*, Burns's *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, Wordsworth's *Michael* and Byron's *Childe Harold* are all like shooting scripts for some contemporary documentary film.

There is something to be noted in that paragraph as well as its obvious absurdity. Anybody who knows anything about script-writing will know that whatever kind of script these poems might resemble, it is not a shooting-script, which is of course full of technical directions to the camera-man. There is no sense on any level in this paragraph.

But the gist of the book is that all media—radio, film, gramophone—are all inappropriate to our age, except TV. This involves us with everybody, and that is what we should seek to be, involved with everybody. This is because it gives us tactile values, and they are all right. Professor McLuhan quotes with approval Bernard Berenson's remark that 'the painter can accomplish his task only by giving tactile values to retinal impressions'. Now, Professor McLuhan approves of tactile values partly because he thinks of them as already sanctified by previous artistic accomplishment, because the pointilism of Seurat he sees as close to 'the present technique of sending pictures by telegraph, and close to the form of the TV image made by the scanning finger'. A Seurat and Monet and Renoir were foreseeing electrical forms, because 'like the digital computer with its multiple yes-no dots and dashes, they caress the contours of every kind of being by the multiple touches of these points'. Electricity, we learn, is not really much concerned with sight or hearing, it is primarily tactile, and this is a good thing, as they used to say in *1066 and All-That*, because 'to the sense of touch, all things are sudden, counter, original spare, strange'. A familiar poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins in which he praised all dappled things is a 'catalogue of the notes of the sense of touch', a manifesto of the non-visual, which will surprise all of us. And TV is consecrated to the service of touch.

This is because when we look at it the moving, palpitating camera reaches out to us and takes uncommon liberties, seducing us into tactile joy by giving us an iconographical picture. When we read books or look at pictures we are perceiving single facets in the phenomena of the world. We see an object at one single moment or phase, separated from all others. But TV shows us iconographical art, which makes the eye go over an image as if it were a hand, and create an inclusive image, made up of many moments, phases, and aspects in the being of whatever entity is depicted. The conception is complicated by the fact that Professor McLuhan uses the words 'iconic' and 'mosaic' as if interchangeable, as if all the religious art of the Byzantines (which seems to be vaguely present in the vagueness of his mind throughout his disquisition) is mosaic. The proceedings are also given a curious character by allusions to the emotional world. One has to use the eye as if it were a hand, and Professor McLuhan tells us that this comes easier to illiterates than it does to literates, and goes on to humiliate us Europeans by saying that it is the same habit of using the eye as a hand which makes European males—thus unmasked as illiterates—so 'sexy' to American women. His word, not mine.

According to Professor McLuhan, looking at TV has had certain effects on America. It has Europeanized the United States in the last ten years, and the proof is that Americans now feel new

enthusiasm for the dance, the plastic arts, and architecture, as well as the small car, the paperback, sculptural hair-dos and moulded dress effects—and what Professor McLuhan calls ‘complex effects in cuisine’ and a taste for wine. I have known the United States for nearly half a century, and I have never known a time when Americans were not warmly enthusiastic about these pleasant things. To check on the dance, Loie Fuller who inspired the European nineties was an American by birth, so was Ruth St. Denis, so was Isadora Duncan (who in no way resembled Vanessa Redgrave) and so was and is Martha Graham. I do not know why TV should make people accept small cars, and I understand still less when Professor McLuhan explains to me that a paperback is a tactile rather than a visual package, adding as a gloss that it can either be serious, or, as he says, ‘froth’, possibilities open surely to hard cover books. I do not know what any of these objects have to do with synaesthesia, the interplay—according to Professor McLuhan—of the icoric qualities of touch and sense.

I am hampered by the fact that nothing which Professor McLuhan tells me about TV tallies with my experience of it. He alleges that one of the most extraordinary effects of TV in our own country has been the upsurge of local dialects which it appears have been revived in areas where formerly only standard English was heard. It may of course be that Professor McLuhan’s habit of vagueness has betrayed him and he does not really mean that at some point Scottish crofters have turned from the TV screen and said to their wives: ‘Jean, please no more of that Oxford accent, from the morn for you and me it’s a’ braid Scots.’ But even if he is referring to entertainment and public appearances, we must remember that Gracie Fields has been on our stage for the last forty years, and that even then J. B. Priestley was exploiting his beautiful North-country vowels as if they were dimples. In little things Professor McLuhan is wrong, and in the big things too. We are told that one result of TV in America is that nobody is happy with ‘a mere book-knowledge of French and English poetry. The unanimous cry now is, “Let’s *talk* French”, and “Let the bard be *heard*”’. Here we have the most vulgar and erroneous view of book-learning, very painful to anybody who remembers the irruption to England of, say, Ezra Pound or John Gould Fletcher.

If I plague you with this ridiculous nonsense, it is because this man is a professor at a university, and has influence over his times. He is misrepresenting the past and its culture, which did not fail in the limitation which he ascribes to it. I find very little real humanity in Professor McLuhan’s writings, and many evidences of desperate poverty; and it occurred to me when I read that passage how French literature had, at all periods, given us just the warmth and involvement which Professor McLuhan claims for TV. There came into

my mind an essay by Paul Valéry, called 'Le Prince et la Jeune Parque', and for a space of time I forgot the Professor. In that charming essay Paul Valéry describes how for twenty years he wrote no poetry, and then suddenly found himself thirsty to write poetry again, but, very uncomfortably, he could not remember exactly how to write verse. He had the intention of writing a poem which would resemble the recitatives in Gluck's operas, something to be spoken, to be heard. One day, wishing he could recall his forgotten technical skill, he went into a café and sat down at a marble table and found that there had been left on it a copy of *Le Temps*. He picked it up and found himself reading an article by Adolphe Brisson, in which he described how he had once met a second cousin of the first Emperor of Germany, the Kaiser Wilhelm, named Prince George. The Prince had been in love with Rachel, and he had written a pamphlet which consisted of accounts of his beloved, and a line-by-line analysis of the way that Rachel recited her most famous speeches. He was in the habit of presenting people he liked with this pamphlet, and he gave a copy to Brisson, who, in this article, quoted from it several moving and informative passages. Among them was this:

Rachel! incomparable genius, sublime artist, you will remain in our memory like a flame in a dark night. Gravity, force, and grace of gesture, a magic glance, purity of diction, the deep ringing tone of a unique voice, all were hers, everything that charms, seduces, exalts. To see Rachel was one of the great experiences of life. She was pale and slender and looked very delicate. Her hands were extremely distinguished, her brown eyes were of unparalleled depth. Her contralto voice sank to F in this line from *Bajazet*:

N'aurais-je tout tenté que pour une rivale?

Que was uttered on F below middle C, then her voice rose. When she said, in *Andromaque*,

Va, cours, mais j'ains encor d'y trouver Hermione,

cours was spoken on C above middle C with great force. The cry she uttered in the fifth act of *Adrienne Lecouvreur* compared to the line from *Andromaque* was on F four tones higher. She thus had a range of two octaves.

So the Prince continued. As Brisson said:

The Prince mentions the most insignificant details of Rachel's diction; he appraises the length of her silence; he notes her pauses, the breaths she took.

*Je voudrais assister à ta dernière aurore,
Voir sombrer dans les flots ton sanglant météore*
(Deep breath).

Et seule
(Breath) *au bord des mers*
(Breath) *respirer la fraîcheur*
(Breath)
De l'éternelle nuit.

The Prince assures us:

She used to fill her lungs deeply before speaking, and it was as if she were a person standing on the seashore giving herself up with joy to the freshness of the element. It was admirable.

There is something touching about that weak, sincere ending. 'It was admirable.'

Paul Valéry describes how this article touched him. He was moved by the simplicity of the Prince, and also by the feeling for poetry which had made Rachel blaze during her short life, and which, simpleton or not, the Prince had marvelled at and had delighted in and had been able to recall, at least to one qualified to take the hint. Suddenly Valéry found himself again possessed of the faculty of writing verse. He began to write poetry again, he wrote 'La Jeune Parque'; and he is careful to note in this essay that this was not a subjective experience, he was not reacting to a stimulus that would have been nothing had he not been there to react to it, there was information in that article. He mentioned as proof of this that several years later he showed 'La Jeune Parque', still in manuscript, to Pierre Louys, who was a bad writer but an excellent judge of poetry, and told him he had been restored to poetic practice by reading this article by Brisson; and Pierre Louys had turned away from him and rummaged in a drawer of his desk, and had pulled out the article, which he had cut out and marked and underlined, with red ink. That article was published in *Le Temps* on 1 December 1913, fifty-six years ago. If involvement be what is needed, how deeply Valéry involves us in his article on that essay, uniting us with him, the writer of poetry, awkwardly circumstanced as Orpheus, Rachel, the street-arab little priestess of the temple of poetry, the Prince who came on the scene down the crystal backstairs of love, Pierre Louys the bad writer who was a good reader and therefore also essential to poetry, and the immanence of genius invoked by these people, the presence of Racine and, fainter but undeniable, the presence of the Greek dramas and the questioning spirit of the Greek world. Here it seems to me is the interplay of the senses and the intellect bringing the mind to cognizance of many and rich phases of human life, and unifying us with mankind. I cannot believe that Professor McLuhan is right in thinking that TV gives better training than literature.

But I do not believe that he really thinks it is. The alarming part of *Understanding Media* is the section dealing with the effect of TV on the young. It is apparent that he himself is terrified by the spectacle. The section is called 'Why the TV child cannot look ahead', and in it he points out that the TV child encounters the world in a state of hostility to literacy. It does not want literature, and Professor McLuhan explains that this is a good thing because

the brat is engaged in a more glorious enterprise. 'The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being, as does the sense of touch.' I do not understand the physiological theory behind this sentence, and I would think it had no meaning. Therefore the child faces life with the TV image, 'which necessarily thickens the sense-transforming fragmented and specialist extensions into a seamless web of experience'. This is admitted to be a disaster for the child in so far as it attempts to master our culture. But instead it has the glory of feeling its way, of forcing its way, obviously to 'a total involvement in all-inclusive oneness'. It therefore wants to intervene in the affairs of society, it wants to manifest its feelings towards other people, but it does not want to have a job in society. Instead it wants to have a role in society, and it is deeply committed to this desire. But as it is divorced from the culture of the past it can only run about making noises. It will be seen that McLuhanism has some connection with the university disorders which are distressing America. The child has learned nothing in the way of traditional techniques or substantial wisdom, so it does not know what it ought to do, it must act at random; and it cannot foretell the results of random behaviour. He therefore cannot see ahead, and neither will society be able to see ahead. Chaos is come again, with a very unpleasant aesthetic feature. Any young person who reads *Understanding Media* or imbibes its message at second hand is left with the conviction that it is no use for them to study at any recognized educational institution, they cannot absorb what it has to give, and this is not to be held against them, because they are attaching themselves to a progressive element which makes them superior to the poets and philosophers and scientists of the past simply because they feel vague emotional warmth towards a large number of people of whom they have been made aware by seeing them on TV, but who may be quite beyond their range of communication, and who may have no desire to be warmly regarded by them. It is no wonder that young people who have this view of themselves become rioting drop-outs who disintegrate but are prigs while they melt; and how they do it is revealed by another book which has just been published, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, by Tom Wolfe. This is a book which may repel many readers because Mr. Wolfe writes at the top of his voice and has a habit of dropping into free verse of a not very rewarding kind. But he is one of the great journalists of his time, and he has pursued a group of people with whom it must have been difficult to make contact, as they were practitioners of this theory and were passionately involved with society but had no vocabulary, and engaged in so many physical experiences that these must have been hard to attend, chronicle, and contrive into a book. He has also kept his sense of balance, and is never betrayed into rage

against these people because he is bored and exhausted by them. What he has to say has relevance to Professor McLuhan's statement that the TV child does not wish to do a job, he wants to play a role in society. The story he tells is true: some years ago a young man named Kesey, the son of a prosperous agriculturist in Oregon, possessed of great talent and a striking personality, went to California and became a drug addict. This was not his fault. A number of irresponsible doctors were hiring volunteers at 75 dollars a day to come into hospital and stay under observation while they were given psychomimetic drugs, that is drugs which produce temporary states resembling psychoses. Among other drugs they gave the unfortunate young man LSD, lysergic acid, and thus he became an addict. In the early stages of his addiction he wrote a remarkable novel, and used the profits to collect round him a crowd of young people, like himself drug addicts, and take them in a bus painted with the colours known as psychedelic and equipped with expensive film camera apparatus, musical instruments for performance at gatherings which were half-concerts and half-propaganda meetings in favour of involvement, and a machine which produced lighting effects productive of a hallucinatory state. They called themselves the Merry Pranksters, and one of their pranks was to distribute to audiences what appeared to be a soft drink, but was laced with LSD. They vexed the local police with their violations of the narcotic laws, and also by the sanitary problems they raised, and they had a fairly uncomfortable time themselves. One or two went mad, and Mr. Wolfe notes that none of the Merry Pranksters for one moment attributed this madness to the practice of taking drugs not under medical control. It seemed to them to have no bearing on the catastrophe at all. All suffered discomfort and distress because they travelled so fast and so continuously that they had to go short of sleep.

The important thing to note about this situation is that these young people who were, according to Mr. Wolfe, for the most part intelligent and amiable, many of them well-educated and members of literate and even cultured families, had been wholly uninterested in whatever it was that they had been doing when they left home to join Kesey. They cannot have been attracted to the studies they were pursuing, and they were, just as Professor McLuhan says, quite unable to look ahead. They were not conscious of any need to prepare themselves for the future, they were not frightened that when they were older they would find themselves unable to earn a living and have no place to go. They were not alarmed into flight by finding themselves verminous. They were, just as Professor McLuhan says, uninterested in the idea of doing a job, they wanted to play roles. They did not want to discuss ideas or practise crafts, they

wanted simply to exist and warm themselves with goodwill towards others, which could of course have no practical effect. There was nothing any of these people could have done for anybody. They were living in a vacuum.

Mr. Wolfe describes the attitude as it was seen by a clever young playwright who joined them in his late twenties:

Almost immediately the strange atmosphere of the place starts rolling over him. There is an atmosphere of—how can one describe it?—we are all *on* to something here, or *into* something but no one is going to put it into words for you. Put it into words—and trouble right away is that he finds it very hard to get in to the conversations here in this house in the woods. Everyone is very friendly and most of them are outgoing. But they are all talking about—how can one describe it?—about . . . *life*, things that are happening around here, things they are doing—or about things of such an abstract and metaphorical nature that he can't fasten on to them either. Then he realizes that what it really is is that they are interested in none of the common intellectual currency that makes up the conversations of intellectuals in Hippy Los Angeles, the standard topics, books, movies, new political movements.—For years he and all his friends have been talking about nothing but intellectual products, ideas, concoctions, brain candy, shadows of life as a substitute for living, yes. They don't even use the usual intellectual words here, mostly it is just *thing*.

Now, this could be ascribed to their drug-taking, but that certainly has nothing to do with Professor McLuhan. But it is, I think, due to the philosophy of the day which is expressed McLuhanism. It is very difficult to play a role if you renounce the idea of a job. If you try to play a role without being a philosopher or a painter or a carpenter or an engineer, and live in peripatetic conditions where it is no longer possible to share in the life of people doing these jobs, you will find yourself forced back to undesirable simplicity, to a mere manifestation of one's innate attributes. What happens when people play roles without doing jobs, when they simply 'do their thing', is shown in a barbarous passage which I will read to you, because we all ought to take it, if only as a proof of the importance of ideas, even negative ones. Here is Kesey delivering the tables of the law.

Before heading east, out across the country, they stopped at Babb's place in San Juan Capistrano, down below Los Angeles. Babbs and his wife Anita had a place down there. They pulled the bus into Babbs' garage and sat around for one final big briefing before taking off to the east. Kesey starts talking in the old soft Oregon drawl and everybody is quiet.

'Here's what I hope will happen on this trip,' he says. 'What I hope will continue to happen, because it's already starting to happen. All of us are beginning to do our thing and we're going to keep doing it, right out front, and none of us are going to deny what other people are doing.'

'Bullshit,' says Jane Burton. This brings Kesey up short for a moment, but he just rolls with it. 'That's Jane,' he says, 'and she's doing her thing.'

Bullshit. That's her thing and she's doing it. None of us are going to deny what other people are doing. If saying bullshit is somebody's thing, then he says bull-shit. If somebody is an ass-kicker then what he's going to do on this trip, kick asses. He's going to do it right out front. He can say, "I'm sorry I kicked you in the ass, but I'm not sorry I'm an ass-kicker. That's what I do. I kick people in the ass." Everybody is going to be what they are and whatever they are, there's not going to be anything to apologise about. What we are we're going to wail with on this whole trip.'

This arrangement by which life became a play in which all the actors cast themselves and wrote their parts had its immediate perils. There was one Prankster, since found dead, named Cassidy, whose thing was to drive dangerously, and drive the bus dangerously he did. On and on in the bus went the Merry Pranksters, occasionally settling down for a few days and playing such simple tricks as painting woods with Day-Glo, planting on a tree-stump a telephone with luminous multicoloured cords running into the undergrowth, with a fantasy not so new as they thought. It was in the middle of the last century that a lobster was taken on a sky-blue ribbon down the Champs-Élysées. They were sustained by such practical jokes and apothegms which began too late and stopped too soon. 'Babbs said "If you don't know what the next thing is, all you have to . . ."' That was all. They were sustained also by the sense of unity which came on them during their mass meetings, their sense that there was a pattern into which everything fitted, and indeed there was a pattern into which everything fitted. Finally, after Kesey had ineffectually gone into sordid exile and come back and wrestled with the law and lost, they held a vast meeting where Kesey was to give a message to the faithful which would take them a stage further than drug-taking in their repudiation of civilization and their attainment of mercy and unity. Kesey attended the meeting and he did his thing. He was a prophet. He behaved like a prophet. He stood on the platform and out in front he did his thing, which was to be a prophet. But he has done no job. He is a prophet but he has no prophecy. The audience stare at him and listen but what he says makes no sense and it goes home. The Merry Pranksters, far from merry, are left to serve their sentences for drug-taking or join other peripatetics or go home. They have the desolate air of returned empties. Not even that. They are disposable. If they felt involved with everybody, nobody felt involved with them.

It is to be noted that there is a difference in the attitudes of Mr. Wolfe and Professor McLuhan. Mr. Wolfe admits the inevitability of the phenomenon he describes; he writes, 'There is no earthly stopping this thing, its like a boulder rolling down a hill, you can watch it and talk about it and scream but you can't stop it', and he compares it to the intractable infection of areas of the Pacific Ocean

off Western Mexico by a micro-organism which turns the blue water red and is lethal to all fishes but is itself, so far as we know, indestructible. He takes the case of Kesey with the utmost seriousness. He sees his decline from a potential writer and person to a prophet with no prophecy as a victory over something by nothing. But Professor McLuhan, though he himself claims to belong to the pre-TV and though he admits that even in the age of electricity a liberal education can have its uses, he actually lauds this disturbing age. He describes the TV child as 'unable to accept a fragmentary and merely visualised goal or destiny in learning or in life'. This implies that what he calls the 'involvement in nowness' given by TV, or so he claims, is superior to what can be learned by ordinary study and cultivation; and this is a perilous doctrine for the young. We all of us, as children and adolescents, had moods in which we wanted to believe that the knowledge accumulated by the past which we find so difficult to acquire was not worth acquiring, and that truancy was a sign of superiority over all our contemporaries who found study easier than we did. All of us ought to remember this, though not specially for our own selves, since we are not really the persons who get the worst of the Merry Pranksters. The elderly and the middle-aged can live their own lives. But Merry Pranksterism wages a terrible war on all young people who are at home with ideas and who want to use them, who want to govern themselves and the world by reason and the sounder instincts. These are the people who are being robbed by the tacit approval of emptiness which is the core of McLuhanism.

Now, here I think we have the right to complain of a certain lack of vigilance on the part of American critics. Surely the man who wrote the sentences I have read to you this afternoon should not have been allowed to establish himself as an authority, should not be treated respectfully, should not be a professor at a university of high standing. We are all used to having our differences with writers, even, or I should say particularly, the great, and there is really no presumption in our doing so. Writers, especially great writers, raise such large and real issues that the reader is forced to compare what they write with his own experience, and that experience is individual and cannot be identical with that of the great writer. The disagreement may be acute, and come between us and our enjoyment of what we are reading. Many of us must have been distracted in reading Plato by wondering how Socrates managed to hand-pick his interlocutors, for there is something very unnatural in the invariability with which they said to him, 'I cannot deny the truth of what you say', or 'Yes, of course it is so', and wished that one could have gate-crashed and argued the point. But all such differences between writers and readers should take place a certain distance above intellectual low-water

mark. I must own that I blush. I feel I am in some sense Professor McLuhan's accomplice in having consented to go below low-tide mark and consider the sentence: 'Persons grouped round a fire or candle or warmth or light are less able to pursue independent thoughts, or even tasks, than persons supplied with electricity.' This sentence embarrasses in several ways. Purists might ask, 'Independent of what?' Others must grieve that Marx has lived in vain, he has not earned his chief justification, if an academic can write that sentence without reflecting that it makes a great deal of difference who owns the fuel for the fire, the tallow for the candle, or controls the electricity supply. But what a mockery of human history! How he mocks Socrates, who never knew what it was to have the man from the Electricity Board come to read his meter, but drank the hemlock all the same, and how he mocks all the courageous men and women who have followed Socrates into the honourable shadows; and how he mocks all the courageous men and women who have lived through recent depravations of history, sitting in rooms kept bright and warm by electricity, and felt themselves deprived of independence by totalitarianism! Why should anybody listen to the writer of this sentence? Is political science really in such a degraded state that this can wear the title of that branch of learning? Is the future of literature that it shall be supplanted by nonsense? And if I be blamed for speaking so long with such a negative conclusion, let it be remembered that this afternoon we have all been involved in nowness, and that I have been right out front, doing my thing.