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Marshall McLuhan: Global Village Prophet

Elusively resisting conventional labels and blending opaque formulations with provocative insights, media theorist Marshall McLuhan challenges us most by spotlighting the obscurities that define our troubled relationship with technology.

URBAN THOUGHT IS IN MANY ways the story of technology, or, more specifically, of our culture's love-hate relationship with it. Our homes, public buildings, transportation, and livelihoods have been conditioned by technology. Its explosion of growth since the 19th century has transformed the planet and civilization, leaving our sensibilities and policies reeling. Throughout the 20th century, we struggled to understand its impacts, and still do. Technology tantalizes us with grand dreams of what we might achieve, and plunges us into anxiety and confusion over what it might cost us. Herbert Marshall McLuhan represents all these moods.

McLuhan's claim on our attentions is reinforced by the eminence of his critics. The 1967 book *McLuhan Hot & Cool* contained heated commentaries on his ideas by an assembly of intellectual celebrities, including writers Susan Sontag and Tom Wolfe. Four decades later, McLuhan remains powerfully relevant to the urban prospect. The concepts of the global village and technologically conditioned discourse appeared in his work long before the rise of the Internet. Sixteen years after his death in 1980, McLuhan was dubbed by a *Wired* magazine article "electronic culture's immortal saint." ("The Wisdom of Saint Marshall, the Holy Fool," by Gary Wolf, January 1996.) The writings of contemporary globalization scholar Saskia Sassen can scarcely be engaged on a high philosophical level without referring to McLuhan. (See "Saskia Sassen and the Rise of Urban Globalization," *Urban Land,* February 2008, page 151.)

McLuhan was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1911. He studied at the University of Manitoba and at Britain's Cambridge University, where his instructors included two of the 20th century's most influential literary scholars, F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards. Their philosophies provide important signposts to the intellectual stir McLuhan later created. Leavis did not study texts only for their verbal craftsmanship, but for how they related to the larger cultural sensibilities they represented. Richards, on the other hand, was famous for his intensive analyses of linguistic forms. Leavis strengthened McLuhan's interest in studying cultural products as a way of gaining insights into the overall features of our culture. Richards reinforced his pupil's preoccupation with the structures through which people communicate. Both these impulses are evident in McLuhan's subsequent writings about the transformation of civilization through media technology.

After earning a doctorate in literary studies at Cambridge, McLuhan taught literature at various colleges in Canada, and eventually was appointed founding director of the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. This remained his academic base except for visiting professorships at New York's Fordham University and the University of Dallas. Because of his reputation as a futurist visionary of technological society, McLuhan was much in demand as a speaker for corporations. His publications include a pioneering study of advertising and mass communications, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951); numerous articles in the magazine *Explorations*, which he also edited; *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962); *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964); *The Medium Is the Message* (1967); *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968); and *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* (1977).

McLuhan's significance in urban thought can be perceived in three areas: the evolution of art forms, changes in mass media, and the concept of technology per se. Each of these is highly complex, but the first is perhaps the most intellectually difficult for many urban professionals. While technology and mass communications are now widely acknowledged to be important areas of discourse with practical applications, art history can appear to be an ivory-tower subject unrelated to the practical issues that govern urban policy. For many busy urban professionals, it is enough to admit that public spiritedness occasionally demands that support be given, say, to efforts to preserve old buildings. It is too much to expect them also to consider the intricacies of how those old buildings relate to other art forms such as painting, sculpture, and literature.

Such practitioners forget that architecture not only is an important part of the management and economics of urban planning, but also its artistic heritage and responsibilities provide much of the energy that makes architecture a living cultural force. The principles of the Bauhaus movement, a major shaper of 20th-century architecture and general design, reflected an acute awareness of this interconnectedness of the arts. One of the seminal theorists of the modern current, Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968), was a scholar of art history.

Giedion, a close colleague of Bauhaus leader Walter Gropius, served for a time as chairman of the Harvard School of Design. His book *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) studies the way in which modes of perception are both reflected and conditioned by the arts, while his volume *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) examines the technological impact on the design of artifacts encompassing the

entire range of cultural experience, from slaughterhouses to washing machines. Giedion had studied under Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), who pioneered a formal approach to visual art by analyzing the way in which different eras appear to use distinctly different modes of perception. Among other things, Wölfflin had sought to create a psychology of architecture.

The agendas of Giedion and Wölfflin permeate McLuhan's work, although McLuhan treats these agendas in a style wholly his own. They clarify the intellectual context to which McLuhan belonged, namely the effort by art scholars to explain how the visual experience of the world intersects with the development of culture in general, including changes in technology.

Against this background, it is clear that even though McLuhan seems a startlingly modern figure, he is a philosophical descendent of the 19th-century architectural and art critic John Ruskin, who, using the vocabulary of his own time, engaged many of the issues that concerned McLuhan. (See "Architecture, Postmodernism, and the Language of Landscape," *Urban Land*, September 2007, page 194.) Whereas Ruskin focused on the arts and crafts of his day, McLuhan included contemporary popular art forms—such as advertisements, comic strips, and television. These "low-brow" products had seldom, if ever, received serious critical attention on the same level as had traditional painting, sculpture, and architecture.

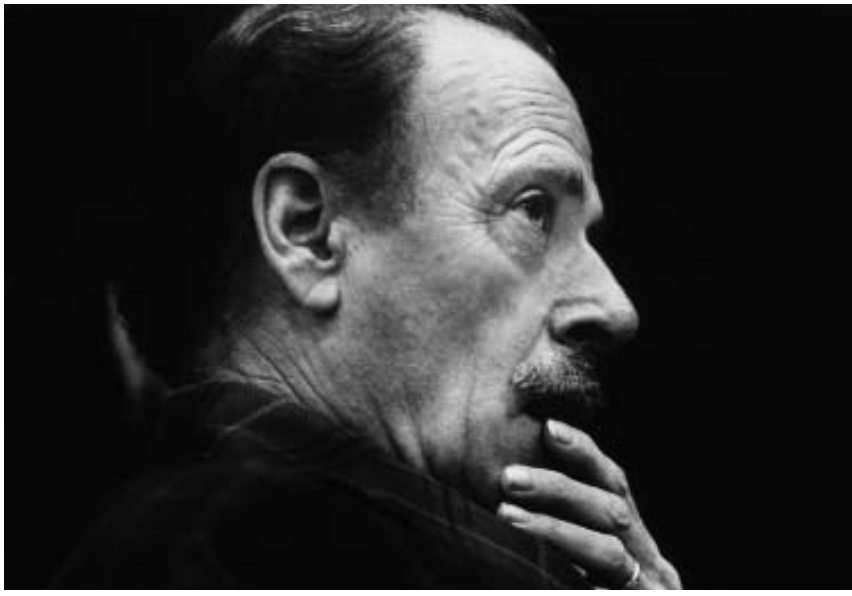
The interest McLuhan developed in popular art forms led directly to his work in general media studies. By treating art forms as part of the general media landscape, McLuhan was able to emphasize the cultural power of communication technologies more sharply and vividly than had previously been done. As a result, his writings connect conspicuously with the rise of the Internet and the need to map its implications for community structure, transportation, work patterns, cultural evolution, and other cornerstones of urban debate.

Here again, McLuhan did not create his ideas from scratch, but built them on the research of others, notably on the pioneering media studies of Harold Adams Innis (1894–1952), a fellow Canadian also at the University of Toronto. Innis was an economist who came to media studies out of concern for the economic evolution of media organizations and its impact on other economic processes. By noting that McLuhan's labor was based on Innis's economic groundwork, we can better understand why McLuhan is so relevant to current teletechnology, which is profoundly affecting the way we live.

The content of Innis's work went through a transformation in McLuhan's hands. Observations that were cautious, academically restrained, and relatively fragmentary in Innis and others came to acquire, through McLuhan, a new unity and boldness. For example, he adopted inventor Buckminster Fuller's conjecture that some technologies were not wholly artificial contrivances but, in a sense, extensions of humanity. McLuhan spoke of our communications media as being extensions of this sort. But Fuller had conveyed his theories in dense and difficult prose that severely limited readership.

By contrast, McLuhan—a shrewd judge of both high literature and sophisticated mass advertising—produced books that, while unconventional, drew a wide readership. (See "Richard Buckminster Fuller's Plea for Comprehensive Design," *Urban Land*, February 2007, page 156.) In effect, McLuhan created a metaphysical vision of the cross currents operating between the areas we experience—electronic technology, the mass media, and the psychology of culture.

At the heart of this vision was the third key aspect of McLuhan's mission, his attempt to reinterpret our relationship with technology per se. One way he achieved this was to emphasize the extent of the transformative consequences of electronic media technologies. Just as McLuhan had suggested that the invention of printing had significantly altered the psychologies of the cultures using it, he now contended that electronic media like television were effecting a similarly massive psychocultural change toward a nonlinear style of intellectual, perceptual, and emotional experience. As part of his thesis, he presented and popularized a conception of a "global village" society that remarkably anticipated the emergence of the Internet.



McLuhan promoted the far-reaching global consequences of electronic communications technology more vigorously than any other pre-Internet thinker. His work represents a turning-point in our awareness that a radically new kind of technology had arrived that could have widespread implications not only for our economies, but also for the kinds of societies we live in and the behaviors of individuals.

Aside from McLuhan, philosophers also have seen the importance of technology but have tended to write less about technology than about grammar, symbols, and language. This applies to the philosophy of architecture as well: two books illustrate this trend—Bruno Zevi's *The Modern Language of Architecture* (1978), and Charles Jencks's *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977). McLuhan continued to emphasize the media technologies that underlie and shape language rather than treating language itself as a pivotal or supreme technology. A notable exception among thinkers in this regard was Lewis Mumford, who, while of a very different mind, nevertheless came close to many of McLuhan's most provocative insights. (See "Lewis Mumford: Pioneer of Multidisciplinary Urban Thought," *Urban Land*, October 2006, page 172.)

McLuhan was by no means an ambassador or apologist for technology. He saw himself as a humanist of keenly felt moral sensitivities, much like Mumford, studying a strange and in some ways alarming, but in other ways tremendously exciting, phenomenon. Ambiguity of feeling about the nascent technological world that he describes runs through his writings, but it appears to be repeatedly overshadowed by a sense of wonder about the possibilities of the new electronic

media. He deserves high and lasting credit not only for anticipating the social context of the Internet, but for boldly making an insightful philosophical distinction between pre-electronic and electronic technologies, as the two decisively divergent experiences they are.

Though McLuhan was very familiar with the protocols of conventional scholarship, the books that made his reputation do not go by the codes that govern the normal output of professors. They are rambling juxtapositions of material from all corners of the intellectual world, fit together by McLuhan's eccentric logic. They do not argue in any recognizable sense, are annoyingly opaque, and defy classification. Where they compel, they do so not as scholarly papers, but in a disturbing way that effective works of art do. Because of these characteristics, and the fact that McLuhan seemed to take all knowledge as his province, he irked his peers even as he commanded their grudging attention.

McLuhan was a major figure when he first appeared, and the rise of the Internet has given him renewed relevance and stature. His work is filled with fertile material for new discourse and fresh insight into an era of concentrated technology. In this 21st century, an urgent need exists to make technology itself a humanity—a study conducive to the creation and governing of communities enlightened by broad learning, imagination, and wisdom. McLuhan is a towering contributor to this mission. **UL**

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