

Interview with Marshall McLuhan

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McLuhan was 60 when he gave this interview to a weekly news magazine. He was then at the height of his fame, garnering faithful followers and bitter enemies alike – at both ends of the political spectrum, right and left. It is a historic document which, allowing for the spirit of those days, still reveals the intellectual brightness, the provocative attitude and the controversial assertions for which the “prophet of the electric age” was famous.

L'Express, February 1972

L'Express: Did you know that, in France, your name is often seen as synonymous with American capitalism?

Marshall McLuhan: Who says that?

L'Express: Left-wing intellectuals, for example.

M. McLuhan: That equation, McLuhan = capitalism has no usefulness whatsoever as a category. What they are actually saying is that my way to see the 20th century is different from theirs. If I am not on their side, then I have to be against them. I have nothing against communism, except for the fact that it is tremendously melancholic. There are no longer social classes in our society; they simply don't exist any more. It is not possible to have social classes with this instantaneous speed, since the class system supposes that things remain in their places. Like it or not, this is a fact.

Marrxists are fool. They provide a lot of people with a security valve in the emotional plane, albeit without a minimal understanding of anything at all.

What I am interested in are innovations as such, and especially their effect. I study what

would happen if we did this or that. Most people wonder what happens to our children when they see violence on television. I am really no longer concerned about this. What I study is why individuals have the need for violence, and this has nothing to do with TV shows. I analyze phenomena starting from effects and moving toward the cause, not starting from the cause to arrive at the effects, as is a more common practice. It is like playback. I analyze all in .

L'Express: This is the opposite of what we normally do. Why do you act like that?

M. McLuhan: Because it is when we invert the order of a process that we find its structure, its scheme. Meanwhile, neither the study of an emission nor that of its reception will give you the scheme of a message or of an action.

I learned that with advertisement. In the world of advertisement, you do not start by the creation of an ad, but by studying the effect you wish to elicit. You create the cause after the effect has been defined. Likewise, when you to solve a management problem, you start by the aspects you ignore, not by what you know. The ignorance zone is the environment, the zone in which you get immersed in the environment, like in the case of a fish in the water: water is what it is completely ignorant about.

Symbolists had already found that. They said that, to write a poem, you have to start by knowing the effect you want to produce, and this in turn will determine what will be put inside. It

was Edgar Allan Poe who taught Baudelaire this technique in his study on the principles of poetry. Mallarmé, as it is known, managed a fashion magazine. Writers such as Flaubert studied all fashions, even the most banal ones.

What I want to say is simply that I do not study what the fish does, but its environment.

L'Express: Because we will always have a better view from outside.

M. McLuhan: Because the environment is always invisible. The French language, for example, is the environment where you soak and about which you do not know much, precisely because you are immersed in it. An Englishman knows much more about the French language than yourselves because he gets surprised with its expressions. For that Englishman, all is , “”, while for you it is “”.

L'Express: Your great discovery has been showing that the medium constitutes an environment. What is your definition of a means of communication?

M. McLuhan: All that expands the action of the human agent. Clothes, for example, are extensions, amplifications. Language is an extension, a long distance action that comprises a memory, a codification system. It assimilates perceptions, conducting and channeling them. All forms of expression are means of communication, and I recently found that the content of a given means is first and foremost its user. Hence, those who speak French are the

content of the French language; those who watch television are the content of television, and so on.

L'Express: Your idea seems fascinating, but isn't it quite paradoxical at the same time?

M. McLuhan: A psychologist at General Electric in New York, Herbert Krubmann, whom also did not believe in my ideas, decided to employ encephalograms to verify whether the content of different means of communication mattered or not. He used his patients in this experiment, exposing them to various media, and found that the reactions of brain waves to printed text, cinema, photography, radio and television showed very relevant variations.

On the other hand, what was on the media was of little importance. It did not really matter whether the radio was or was not noisy – the brain did not react to the variation among shows. Answers varied according to means of communication that had been used. Krubmann thought he would be able to reduce to dust McLuhan's theories. He spent a lot of money on that, only to establish as a result the first proof that those theories are 100% right.

However, when I assert that the medium, the means of diffusion, is the message, this refers to the effect of that medium on society as a whole, to the way in which it transforms everyone. This is the message, not its particular effects.

L'Express: And what would, more specifically, be the effect of TV on our society?

M. McLuhan: Through language, speech, we

translate our perceptions of the visible world into sounds, verbal forms. With television, to the contrary, verbal forms disappear, being replaced by rather simple and universal "gestures".

Since the advent of television, youngsters became increasingly verbal. Young people say: "Actually...you know...man...I meant, man...I mean".

The TV generation does not use more than a dozen words. This is one of the many effects provoked by television.

L'Express: Of course, but isn't that exactly a consequence of what television shows them?

M. McLuhan: No, not at all. If you show a film on television, no matter which film, it is transmitted by television, conveyed by it. In the cinema you look at the screen, whereas with television you are the screen, since light reaches you through the cathode ray tube. Cinema is visual, while TV is audio-tactile. It is possible to compare the latter with the effect of stained glass. It is not the image that the stained glass window represents that captures our attention, but the light that goes through it. You can also compare it with the painting of Soulages, in which light snatches us. More widely, all our electric environment is responsible for our transformation. If we dive into the water and start to swim we will no longer have a vantage point, since we will be inside an environment that involves us completely. Likewise, in the electric environment we no longer have an objective vantage point, because we will always have reached the place

where we want to go, wherever that may be. Everything started with the telegraph. The first man connected to the frontline through the telegraph was Abraham Lincoln in 1860. He was the president of the United States and the chief of the Armed Forces. From the decision-making point of view, the result of his ability to connect through the telegraph with the front was revolutionary, since it meant that the head of state would also engage in combat action. He was no longer away from action, rather he took part in it; he was inside it.

Today you get the phone and you are in Tokyo. They are here and you are there. This is not a desire, but a fact. And it is sacred, disembodied. The spirit leaves immediately to Tokyo. There is no longer a body, hardware. There is only software.

L'Express: And how does that explain the loss of vocabulary observed among the young?

M. McLuhan: It is a matter of space. The rationalist, in the way the West has understood them for millennia, is a classifier: he puts in order, organizes, extracts perspectives, and traces long avenues. With the electric space, to the contrary, it is the intervals among things that become decisive.

Electric space is absolute. It is like acoustic space, open 360 degrees, resonant. We can no longer localize things and concepts in it. It is like the wheel and the axis. For the wheel to turn you need a small space separating them. But this can't be too big because then the wheel will fall out and will stop turning. This is what happens

with the TV generation.

Today's kids are all hunters. They have left the Neolithic Age and returned to the Paleolithic Age. This is why they want to walk barefoot on the earth; this is why they aspire to a primitive life and no longer want to have anything in common with the world of consumption.

Eskimos, Brancusi, Bergson are this kind of man; the non-visual man who listens, perceives and hears everything with his fingers. Much more than us, the hunter uses his perceptions, as he must be capable of making an in-depth reading of the environment in which he is inserted.

L'Express: Wouldn't it be the case to say that young people "spit out" precisely the world of TV that oppresses them and that they can't take anymore?

M. McLuhan: They clearly react. Rock and jazz, for example, aren't more than translation for a musical language of repugnant and irrational sounds from the industrial environment. They are a way of humanizing it. They attempt to translate industrial noise into a language with which they are familiar so they can cohabit with it.

However, the key is that they return to a primitive existence, in which life is reduced to nothing, and they no longer have any kind of identity. They reject their own identity, and become no-one.

I have just said that clothes are a means. Let's take the example of the miniskirt. Before the miniskirt there was a device called a hula hoop,

do you remember that? It was a plastic ring that people moved around their waist. They did not play spinning the ring on the streets like children do; nobody ever did that with a hula hoop. You see, spinning a ring is equivalent to using it as a machine, a wheel, whereas putting yourself into it and making it move around you is wearing it as garment. Now, translating a wheel into garment is quite a mysterious idea. Yet the hula hoop came before the miniskirt, which is a kind of wheel. And all tribes – men and women alike – use the miniskirt.

L'Express: But is it a garment? Wouldn't the miniskirt be a costume instead?

M. McLuhan: Sure, of course. In the United States, for example, a policeman with his bureaucrat clothes is a "pig", the perfect public servant to enforce the rules and write fines. Yet with his motorcyclist clothes, on the other hand, he becomes a hero. And, with glasses, even a Cyclops, he is a one-eyed hero. But garment is our habit. You can't create a habit alone; you need a lot of people for that. Therefore, the miniskirt is a garment and a mask. People use it somehow to canalize, codify social energy, thereby joining the show. It is a collective mask. In the Western world, we hadn't had such a mask for centuries.

L'Express: It is your theory of a global village, that is, the whole humankind forming nothing but a huge planetary tribe.

M. McLuhan: Yes, that is electricity, television.

And all of us, not just the young, are affected.

Here's your last day with yourself. You don't need to be yourself anymore. It is liberation, but when it is total liberation, it is like death. We all know the reincarnation thesis: we are freed from our own body; we can disappear right now and come back totally different next time. This is what we have reached.

Most people have a dog just to remind themselves of who they are. This is why dogs are so important in our society. I know who I am because my doggy recognizes me. It is the guardian of my secret, it knows my smell. He ultimately guarantees my identity. In today world, it is the dog that controls everything.

L'Express: Couldn't what you call an identity loss represent, on the other hand, the emergence of a kind of solidarity?

M. McLuhan: What do we assume as a basis when we talk about solidarity? The basis can only be civilization. Well, we have evidently done well, since it is funded on various specialized technologies, such as written text, the alphabet, phonetics and I don't see how we could make it resist to electricity, which is not specialized. Now what we have is the multitude, half way between old civilization and the new tribe. And the multitude is only confusion.

Do you know how Americans call this?

Literally, "worm box". It is a phrase used when there are many problems interwoven with each other. This is what we have now, a kind of Pandora's Box.

L'Express: You are incredibly pessimistic, which is quite unexpected for the apostle of the means of communication.

M. McLuhan: I am not either pessimistic or optimistic. I make no value judgment. I am simply deeply interested in understanding what is going on. At the same time, I don't get terribly excited about facts.

In the moment we are living it is possible to have a wholly overlapping conscience. It is the most metaphysical age that has ever existed in the system of humankind. But it is not about theoretical metaphysics – man is no longer conceptual. His metaphysics has become a perceptive one.

What I mean is that he leaves the world of logic to enter the world of mysticism, with immediate perceptions. Hence, it is no longer necessary to teach anyone philosophy. Now people bring philosophy in their blood. In my view, we are living history's most metaphysical age.

L'Express: Is this where you see the gap between generations emerge?

M. McLuhan: Yes, between that old fashioned team that carries the hardware of the 19th century, composed by ultra-specialized individuals who are fascinated by consumer products, on the one hand, and youth's new aspirations, on the other. We have slipped from the most fragmented group of specialists that has ever existed to its opposite. And see what happens: by doing so, by getting read of hardware, what returns is occultism.

I have explained in one of my books that, when innovation emerges, we always discard the immediate environment to look for a much older one. When Gutenberg annihilated the Middle Ages by inventing the printing press, he brought back the pagan, Greco-Roman antiquity. There was a major run, but he had destroyed the Middle Ages. Today, having exploded the 19th century schlock with the emergence of electricity, we have brought to surface inner life. And we currently live an eternal journey toward inner life.

L'Express: Do you mean we are witnessing the rebirth of religious attitude?

M. McLuhan: No. In fact, I would say that what is happening goes beyond religion and does not depend on any faith or anything else. It is a complete and immediate experience. Today's youngsters are all religious without, however, having faith.

L'Express: They have religion, but not a god.

M. McLuhan: They can have a god if they want, but there is no such need. Nietzsche's stance is well known: "God is dead." I actually believe that it is really Newton who is dead, because, with him, the great, rationalist world of dynamics and mathematics disappeared. It is that simple. He disappeared just like industrial hardware evaporated.

L'Express: Sure, but God came before Newton.

M. McLuhan: Indeed, and personally I am a staunch Catholic. However, I note that what is

happening in the world today has nothing to do with that, since our world doesn't have to be religious in the Christian sense to be totally spiritualized.

I always think that Lucifer, the prince of this world, was a great electrical engineer, the boss of that entire diabolic universe, of everything! Lucifer was an angel of prodigious intelligence, and seems to have organized the situation in which we currently live. And what is angelical may well be diabolic. Who knows? Anyway, it is he who conducts the game.

James Joyce, in , counts 10 thunders. Television is thunder number 10, after the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and after the radio. When you get to television, that is the end. You cannot move forward, we are totally covered by the global process. But it is odd, because Joyce's thunders represent the effects of inner vision, the rumor that echoes while the effects propagate among men, so that each innovation reverberates through all the society.

L'Express: Does it mean that we face, at the same time, an urgent metaphysical need and a spiritual void?

M. McLuhan: When we talk about a void, we are implicitly talking about a recipient, and a recipient is quite a visual thing, it is really hardware. In Chinese culture, to the contrary, void is the great mystery, not the external, but the inner part of the pot. In the West, we only have an epistemology of knowledge; we only systemize what we believe we know. In the East, they seek to

discover what they don't know.

There is no doubt young people are sick. I will give you an example. The daughter of friends of ours had her first kiss recently. She knew that was imminent, so she asked a friend what she needed to do. The friend answered: "You spit in his mouth and he spits in yours." This is how young people see things. It is insane.

On the other hand, some are acquiring that Eastern habit of starting by ignorance, and no longer by what is known. In detective novels the same happens: the detective starts by what he doesn't know.

L'Express: Yet there remains a significant amount of hardware in our society. For example, automobiles, whose technology dates back to the 19th century.

M. McLuhan: A car is obviously something totally outdated. Its future could be in the moon, but in ten years' time cars will have been banned from cities, it is unavoidable.

We have discovered this in Toronto only recently. I wondered why Americans do not allow advertisement in movie theaters and in theaters when it is allowed on television. It is quite a curious phenomenon: an American that sees some kind of publicity on a cinema screen would immediately stand up and demand to have his money back.

It wasn't me who found the answer, but one of my doctorate students, who made the following observation: "You know, we, Americans, leave home to have some privacy!" Europeans go

back home to find their lives there, and leave it to be in a community. For Americans, it is the other way round. They leave to have privacy and find themselves being in a community as soon as they are home. Indeed, in American homes doors are always open, children decide everything and especially tell their father what to do – he is no more than a complete farce. As a result, the car is the single most privileged element of American life.

When an American feels the need to be on his own, he takes the care and leaves. This is why he doesn't use public transportation, which is a huge problem.

L'Express: What about Europe? Could this be the case in the United States because means of communication there are more abundant than here? Basically, because the country has more advanced technology?

M. McLuhan: No, this dates back to the time when discoverers nurtured the feeling of owning the whole world. The private space was really what was outdoors. Like Robinson Crusoe. In North America, people feel they own the world when they go outdoors, not when they are between four walls. This is not what happens in Europe.

L'Express: Why?

M. McLuhan: Because Europe is much smaller.

L'Express: Don't you underestimate somewhat the conservative attitude in your description of the effects of means of communication on the modern world?

M. McLuhan: I don't know, I am not sure, because it is difficult to tell what remains from what changes along the way.

This happens when we start to utilize language in a new way. If I all of a sudden I ask for the "back" in a restaurant, instead of the "check", there is a language inversion. When we introduce new patterns to language, what happens with the old ones? It is hard to know. We do that all the time. We transform language all the time due to new perceptions. Slang is, in fact, a zone of new perceptions. When a new perception emerges, people feel the need for creating a new expression, so they come up with one.

After four or five years in the United States, it is quite impressive that we use every 30 seconds the phrase where it is at. It is a huge leap, a huge incursion in the dominion of metaphysical conscience, because of the word "it", which is new in America. In the 1920s, the phrase that was used was I'll tell the world. For example, I'll tell the cock-eyed world. Then we were in the radio days, while the age of television presents a very quiet, deep phrase: Where it is at. "I" gives way to "it", which is impersonal, neutral. It is as metaphysical as it can be. And in the United States young people use it every minute. This is a signal of a major change in perception.

In its origin, the word slang meant dress, that is, it had to do with clothing. And, naturally, language is a garment. But is the new costume used temporarily to create an effect.

L'Express: Aren't books and newspapers and old costume? Doesn't their survival indicate a kind of survival of Gutenberg's galaxy today?

M. McLuhan: Well, we are far from being done with the press! Printing will have many new applications. Old applications gradually disappear and new ones emerge on a permanent basis. Voice printing is something really awesome, isn't it? Just like direct printing of brain waves, thanks to encephalogram.

Our newspapers are electric in the sense that they are made using news agencies that promise instant coverage of facts. You only have to observe any page to see that it is a collage. This is so clear that no-one reads a part of a newspaper trying to understand another part of it. The reader never looks for connections among the different parts. But everything resonates, produces an echo. A newspaper vibrates, interferes. It is an induced image of the world on a flat surface and in a mosaic shape, whose only unity is a common date.

Newspapers' first page is almost always reserved for bad news; it is normally heavy and sad. Do you know why? Because of publicity, which, through all the services it offers, always consists of a set of pleasant news. And when you are seeking to sell pleasant news, you also need to have bad news. This is fact, without cynicism. It is true. People will not read pleasant news unless they are also shown bad news.

One of the reasons for that is that, when they get to know about sad stories, they experience the survival's feeling. "I survived that, I am still sound", etc. So the more bad news they read, the better they feel.

L'Express: Unfortunately, isn't that an eternal feeling? Is it related only to the media?

M. McLuhan: The media widen it. Manufacturing news became something much bigger than news as such, since teams working in the agencies are enormous, and means of communication are very powerful. What is new is the fact that we have this huge amount of information at the same time. This means that any attempt to classify is an illusion. Nowadays intelligibility is no more than "pattern-recognition", an attempt to bring schemes to the surface.

All that creates another galaxy, with new contours. And all presents this paradox, since it is speed that is at stake here.

L'Express: And what can people who control the media do?

M. McLuhan: Nothing, because in fact they don't control them. And neither would they know how to do it.

Given the rate of speed we have reached, the director at the top of the pyramid is no longer able to make decisions. He is out of the game. Decisions are made at a much lower level in the company chart. Whatever the organization in question, the director is no more than an ornament.

It is like the issue of pressing a button. The atomic bomb is a conspicuous example: the president of the United States can never be more than 20 minutes away from the commands and information he needs to press the button. Hence, if he goes to China, they have to figure out a way to ensure he is 20 minutes away from everything

he needs to press the button if needed.

That is quite an uncomfortable way to travel.

L'Express: But it is he who makes the decision.

Doesn't that contradict your idea that it is those in the mid tier who command?

M. McLuhan: No, because he needs thousands of people to tell him when he should press the button.

It is strange that the faster and more consistent news are, the more centralized the decision is.

What happens in the electric plan is a centrifugal effect toward the periphery.

We currently see this in all countries in the world, in Northern Ireland, France, and Britain. Regions no longer want to be under the influence of the major central organization.

Hence, we feel much more independent in a car than on a train. Trains need to stay on the track, pass by the stations, the railway hubs, so that passengers can disembark. With the car, that is no longer needed. And you don't even have to belong in a metropolis.

L'Express: How do you see tomorrow?

M. McLuhan: The future is now, there is no tomorrow. All that can happen in the next 100 years has already happened. We are unable to mention something that has happened in the past that wasn't already there 100 years before.

In fact, all novel elements are always present 100 years before their advent, be it in science, be it in other areas.

I believe that we are already being apocalyptic when we limit ourselves to describe the present.

L'Express: You give the impression of speaking like a man from past times.

M. McLuhan: As a student of the means of communication, my role is simply to organize perception. But obviously there is a limit to what we can accept. No-one would like to spend all the time inside an airplane. When you violate the human dimension, reaction tends to come in the form of much smaller, simple elements. This is why young people turn to small things.

L'Express: And, like them, you also want to live in the human dimension.

M. McLuhan: Of course, but simply dreaming about it will take you nowhere, since it is not something easy to do.

There are many young people who wish it and will probably get there. What they will do is to leave this world, to leave it exactly where it is. They will not try to improve it; rather, they will simply abandon it, let it get rotten.

This is already what is happening. In Saint Louis and other US cities, people are starting to leave urban centers. They abandon furniture in the flats, leave everything and simply go away, never to get back. It is as though they were leaving behind a condemned city. In Saint Louis there are many square kilometers of empty flats whose residents have just abandoned them. They are still owners or tenants, but they will not return.

L'Express: Does this mean that what seems to be the future is actually a certain nostalgia for the past?

M. McLuhan: I think today we are led to make a critique of rewards. What have we gained from all our techniques, inventions, knowledge etc.? And when people are sure they are not gaining absolutely anything, they just give up.

It is like a very rich man who makes 100,000 dollars a year today. Most services the rich can buy are free for the very poor. Roughly speaking, the poor have access to the same services as the rich. So, what can the advantages of wealth be? Some of the richest men today, such as Howard Hughes, owe thousands of dollars and do not have a penny. But they owe so much money that their creditors spend a fortune to ensure that they can stay very rich. This is what happens in the world we live in. We have many rewards – the most varied and comprehensive ones. The human dimension also disappears there.

L'Express: Listening to you, we have the impression that once of your main defenses is your sense of humor.

M. McLuhan: I don't know. When I make a discovery – something we could have understood a long time before – I start to laugh. On the one hand, this is due to surprise; on the other, it is due to satisfaction, or even disgust. But there is also a significant part of my job that consists of satire based essentially on the observation of what is going on. The greatest possible satire, for me, seems to be simply a record of what has been going on.

Erasmus, as is well known, wrote The Praise of Folly believing that when you praise follies they

explode and disappear. I believe that, if I have that kind of humor and can attract the attention to the absurdity of our world, maybe that absurdity can disappear, explode.

On the other hand, it doesn't seem to me that what I could think or feel about something – whatever that is – matters too much, since I don't think that could lead to anything. I have no illusions regarding the influence I exert or may have exerted. I identify myself more with the chorus in old tragedies, which exists only to comment on an action, not to change it.

We experienced a huge regressive evolution of cultural forms, which started with the romantics when they started to adore the noble savage and to demonstrate feelings for the primitive, such as Rousseau and others. Then came electricity and, together with it, the passion of the whole world for anthropology, which is the study of primitives. Today electricity is present time for primitives.

L'Express: What about revolutionary thought? Can't it bring a solution to the problems of today's world?

M. McLuhan: People on the left, for what I have been able to understand so far, assess everything in terms of hardware, that is, they belong in the 19th century. They use as basis very simple categories of consumers. They believe that if all men had the same amount of food available and the same living standards everything would be solved and there would be peace in the world. After all, Marx is a man of the 19th century. He isn't a man of the electric age. So I am not very

concerned with people on the left, except for the fact that they retain too much attention, preventing it from going “where it is at”. Moreover, I believe they use Marx as a means of indignation. We know that anger became a way of life for many. Most people feel fulfilled when they are angry. They have the feeling of being integrated. What China and Russia want is the 19th century. The Chinese and the Russian don't want the 20th century. And neither does Africa: it seeks the 19th century.

L'Express: You have just finished writing a book, *Take today - the executive as dropout*, dedicated to the industrial world. What is it about?

M. McLuhan: It is about the transformation of decision-making mechanisms in the whole world, in different cultures. This book has its origins a long time ago, when I started to realize that management teams were more open to new ideas than any other group. Since managers are interested in their own survival, they want to know what is happening. In contrast, university theorists are interested in reputation and, therefore, are very hostile to innovations, new ideas.

L'Express: So it is a book about corporate management?

M. McLuhan: Not exactly. The co-author, Barrington Nevitt, is an electrical engineer and

consultant to companies. He has spent many years in Scandinavia, Russia, South America, Britain, and the United States. He has a vast experience in different bureaucracies and speaks 12 languages. So there is not a problem that has emerged in the world of industry on which he has not taken a direct or indirect interest.

L'Express: Is there any piece of advice you can give, at the political level, to improve the current situation?

M. McLuhan: Of course. For example, if they wanted to improve the situation in the Middle East, they would need to silence the radio and replace it by television. Immediately. You see, Hitler wouldn't have survived politically for longer than a one time TV appearance, because on TV you can't clench your fist and shout. You have to be “cool”, calm. Hitler would have been watched once, and then he would be over. The radio is a “hot” means of communication. It produces Hitlers all the time and leaves society as a whole in state of ebullition. It is crazy to allow the radio to be present in underdeveloped countries: in China, the Muslim world, India. It is like adding fuel to the fire.

Note

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