

Baby Boomers and Popular Culture

An Inquiry into America's
Most Powerful Generation

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Marshall McLuhan and the Making of a Countercultural Generation

James C. Morrison

This chapter focuses on the ascendancy of Marshall McLuhan as a public intellectual in the 1960s and the symbiotic interactions between his thinking and perceptions and those of the baby boomer generation. His salience in the mind of the public was achieved primarily through his production of a remarkable series of books—*The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), and *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968). One measure of how times have changed since then is the fact that although McLuhan achieved his ultimate impact through his many appearances in the electronic media, it was possible for him to do so only because he wrote such a stunning series of books.

These books are part and parcel of the sixties, a time that so marked, and was so marked by, the boomer generation. For many boomers, as well as older avant-garde artists, musicians, designers, writers, and academics, McLuhan's sixties books became the bibles of a new consciousness. They were published when television was becoming the defining milieu of American culture. This chapter will therefore speak not only to the media environment of the boomers but also to the influence of McLuhan as the *agent provocateur* who urged and encouraged the whole of our culture to think about and understand media in new ways, and whose ideas resonated with the changes in consciousness fostered by electronic media. McLuhan was both an original thinker and a masterful synthesizer of the intellectual labor of predecessors and colleagues in a comprehensive and unique view of relations that only a mind such as his could present so cogently to a wide public. Those unfamiliar with his work will be presented with perhaps a taste of what it was like to encounter McLuhan's prose and the particular ways in which he "put on" his readership, as he did his listening audiences.¹ All this is in pursuit of demonstrating the central notions of McLuhan's work: that

"the medium is the message,"² and "[t]he new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village."³

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born on July 21, 1911, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He was awarded bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature from the University of Manitoba, and in 1934 he entered Cambridge University at Trinity Hall. He received his baccalaureate in 1936 and was hired as a teaching assistant in the English Department of the University of Wisconsin, where he encountered for the first time students who loved popular culture and were largely ignorant of the high culture that had formed McLuhan's education. In 1937 he converted from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism and was hired to teach English at the Jesuit St. Louis University. He and Corinne Keller Lewis were married in 1939, and they moved back to Cambridge for Marshall to begin research for a PhD. In 1940 they returned to St. Louis University and, when his doctorate was conferred in 1943, he was promoted to assistant professor.

After a brief appointment at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario, in the spring of 1946, McLuhan moved to the English Department of St. Michael's College of the University of Toronto, which was run, like Assumption, by the Basilian order. With his emphasis on contemporary American culture he soon became an irritant to many of his colleagues, but he was able to turn his series of lectures illustrated with slides of advertisements, comics, newspaper articles, and other cultural objects into *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951). The book sold only a few hundred copies and was not widely reviewed, though it did receive an unsympathetic review in *The New York Times*.

In 1953 he and his colleague Edmund S. Carpenter received a grant from the Ford Foundation for a series of multidisciplinary seminars on media and culture. Written contributions from participants were later published in their journal, *Explorations*. In 1959, McLuhan received a grant under the U.S. National Defense Education Act from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters to develop a syllabus in media awareness for high school students. This project eventually led to the writing of *Understanding Media*. McLuhan's fortunes and visibility began rising in 1962 with the publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which was awarded Canada's Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction and was reviewed in the prestigious journals *The New Statesman* and *Encounter*. This heightened visibility led to an article of his being published in *The Times Literary Supplement* and his being included in another *TLS* article spotlighting avant-garde thinkers. This interest was abetted in no small part by the efforts of two Californian self-styled "genius scouts," Gerald Feigen and Howard Gossage. Feigen and Gossage promoted McLuhan by getting him lucrative corporate speaking engagements and arranging a series of cocktail parties in New York, where he was introduced to prominent publishers of major magazines. Through these latter contacts

he met the “New Journalist” Tom Wolfe, who lent his considerable influence to promoting McLuhan. He was subsequently hired as a consultant for *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*, increasing his exposure to broader American publishing and advertising circles.

In November 1965, *New York* magazine published an article by Wolfe profiling McLuhan and his growing influence on denizens of corporate board rooms, titled “What If He Is Right?” The same year, Richard Schickel wrote a generally favorable article in *Harper’s* magazine about McLuhan titled “Marshall McLuhan: Canada’s Intellectual Comet.” Wolfe’s article, later republished in *The Pump House Gang*, chronicled the celebrity status McLuhan had gained as a result of the publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. During the 1960s and much of the 1970s, McLuhan achieved the status of a pop icon—his name was on the public’s lips and his face and slogans were recognized by the general public, not just the intelligentsia.

McLuhan’s fame occurred at a time when television was reaching its peak in defining, promoting, and spreading the pop culture of the baby boom generation. By the time *Understanding Media* was published, television had become the national electronic hearth. Several epochal events had brought huge television audiences together in common, emotionally charged experiences: the appearances of Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other major pop groups on *The Ed Sullivan Show*; the presidential debates between Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy; President Kennedy’s assassination and funeral; the live, on-screen murder of his suspected assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, by Jack Ruby; and the civil rights march on Washington led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, capped by his monumental “I Have a Dream” speech. As a consequence, the concept of an “electronic global village” had become engrained in the national consciousness by the time McLuhan announced it in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and amplified it in his later works.

Perhaps the apotheosis of his stardom was in Woody Allen’s 1977 film *Annie Hall*, when Allen’s character, Alvy Singer, pulls McLuhan from behind a poster in a movie theater lobby to settle an argument with a clueless and pretentious Columbia University professor spouting representations of McLuhan’s ideas diametrically opposite to what McLuhan meant. McLuhan says to the poseur, “I heard what you were saying! You know nothing of my work! You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing!” The sly, self-deprecating redundancy in the third sentence was a put-down McLuhan had devised for hecklers, burlesquing the all-too-common misperceptions of so many of his critics.

Naturally, as McLuhan’s star shone, he was bound to attract many critics as well as supporters. Although he was championed by some public

cultural values and changes and how media changes the ways community and identity construction are formed. She has published in a number of journals, including: *Sexualities*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Telematics and Informatics*, and *First Monday*.

William M. Knoblauch is an assistant professor of history at Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan. He earned his PhD in American history from Ohio University, where he was also a fellow of the Contemporary History Institute. His research focuses on connections between U.S. foreign policy and popular culture during the Cold War.

Anastacia Kurylo is a communication consultant and former professor who has taught at various colleges, including New York University, Rutgers University, and St. John's University. Her primary research area is the exploration of interpersonally communicated stereotypes, their role in stereotype maintenance, and their consequences for interpersonal, intercultural, and organizational outcomes. Currently, she is president of the New York chapter of the Tri-State Diversity Council and vice president elect of the New York State Communication Association. She has more than 25 publications, including, most recently, *Inter/Cultural Communication: Representation and Construction of Culture* published with SAGE and *The Communicated Stereotype: From Celebrity Vilification to Everyday Talk* published with Lexington Press.

David Linton is professor emeritus of communication arts at Marymount Manhattan College. He received his PhD at New York University in the program in media ecology under the direction of Neil Postman. His research and teaching interests have included Shakespeare's treatment of media, the reading behavior of the Virgin Mary, the Luddite Movement, and, most recently, the social construction of menstruation. He is president of the New York Conference of the American Association of University Professors and editor of the newsletter of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research.

James C. Morrison teaches in the Communication Department at Boston College and has taught at Harvard University, MIT, Emerson College, and Western Connecticut State University. He has published articles and reviews in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (EME), the *Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association*, *Counterblast*, *New Dimensions in Communication*, and *Technology and Culture*. He has also contributed chapters to *The Urban Communication Reader* (Hampton Press, 2007), and *Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition* (Hampton Press, 2006). A past president of the Media Ecology Association, he has also served as the MEA's historian and Internet officer. He is also a member of the Editorial

Board of Counterblast: *The eJournal of Culture & Communication*. His research interests focus on the cultural, social, and cognitive impacts of new communication media.

Sheila J. Nayar is a professor of English, communication, and media studies at Greensboro College, Greensboro, NC. She is the author of several books, including *Cinematically Speaking* and *The Sacred and the Cinema* as well as journal publications on a variety of topics, including Bollywood, silent film, film aesthetics, and the politics of the cinematic canon.

Todd K. Platts is a visiting assistant professor of sociology at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has taught courses in introductory sociology, social deviance, marriage and family, and culture and mass media. His publications have explored issues as diverse as race and racism and the sociology of zombies. Among his many current projects is an examination of the industrial conditions that underwrote the (re)emergence of zombie cinema in the 21st century. He is also working on translating his recently completed dissertation on the evolution of zombie cinema into a monograph on the subject.

Phil Rose, PhD, currently teaches in the department of Communication Studies at York University in Toronto and is president of the Media Ecology Association. Among his research and teaching interests are the evolution and history of technology, signal and symbol systems, and communications media (from before the origins of symbolic thought to the most recent technological developments); social and cultural issues related to literacy; concerns pertaining to technology and violence, particularly in relation to the mimetic theory of René Girard; and topics related to popular music and performance. In addition to the Beatles he has also written about Radiohead, and he is author of the forthcoming book *Roger Waters and Pink Floyd: The Concept Albums*, a project to be published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press for which he extensively interviewed the former creative leader of the classic group.

Lance Strate is professor of communication and media studies at Fordham University. As one of the founders of the Media Ecology Association, he served as the MEA's first president for more than a decade, and continues to serve on the organization's advisory council. He is also a past president of the New York State Communication Association, a trustee and former executive director of the Institute of General Semantics, an editor and partner with NeoPoiesis Press, and the president of Congregation Adas Emuno in Leonia, New Jersey. He is the author of more than 100 articles on media and communication and several books, including *Echoes and Reflections: On Media Ecology as a Field of Study* (Hampton Press, 2006), *On*

intellectuals, his ideas soon drew the scorn of others, and probably drew more disdain than support among the academic establishment. At the University of Toronto in particular, the reaction against McLuhan's celebrity got to the point that he warned his graduate students to erase any trace of his work in their theses and dissertations to avoid reprisals by their review committees.⁴ According to his son Eric, “[t]here were at least two concerted efforts (quiet ones, of course) to collect enough signatures to have his tenure revoked.”⁵ During the 1970s, despite a vigorous publishing output, almost completely in tandem with collaborators, McLuhan receded from our ken. Perhaps his ideas had initially received so much attention and exposure because they appeared so revolutionary, but then eventually they became overexposed and co-opted. His death on the last day of 1980 seemed to occasion reactions more along the lines of “Oh, was he still alive?” than the sense of loss of a contemporary figure. This was, prophetically, the theme of a *New Yorker* cartoon, published in 1970, whose caption read, “Ashley, are you sure it’s not too soon to go around parties saying, ‘What ever happened to Marshall McLuhan?’”

THE MCLUHAN GALAXY

By the end of the sixties McLuhan had ironically become, despite his learning, a prime example of Daniel Boorstin’s definition, in *The Image*, of a celebrity: “a person who is known for his well-knownness.”⁶ The apogee (or perhaps nadir) of his celebrity occurred when he became the subject of a Henry Gibson poem on *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In*, the quintessential television program: “Marshall McLuhan, what are you doin’?” The title of his 1969 *Playboy* interview—“Marshall McLuhan: A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media”—is emblematic of his elevation into the sixties pop pantheon with such figures as the Beatles, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Peter Max, Mary Quant, Twiggy, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and all the other icons of the age. This was a most ironic position for someone who declared at that time, “I find most pop culture monstrous and sickening. I study it for my own survival.”⁷

The McLuhan galaxy was star-crossed and fraught with such irony, for McLuhan is indelibly associated in the popular mind with a medium—television—whose effects he thoroughly mistrusted and even despised. Many, if not the vast majority, of his admirers among the burgeoning baby boom generation, and virtually all his critics, saw him as a television guru, a proselytizer for the electronic faith, whose attitude toward electronic media was akin to that of psychedelic shaman Timothy Leary, with whose philosophy his was sometimes confused: “Turn on, tune in, and drop out.” In point of fact, McLuhan was, according to Leary, the source for this slogan: