

Chapter 4 - The Gadget Lover

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In Chapter 4 of Understanding Media, McLuhan titles this one The Gadget Lover with the subtitle of "Narciss Narcosis". In this subtitle he is recognizing, in a Joycean sense, that Narcissus comes from the word narcosis means to be "numb". When one is considered Narcissistic, one does not recognize their own image and are the mirror (or insight) from which external reality provides. The numbness McLuhan expresses is that one do experience themselves in their environment and are cut off, or amputated from themselves as they no longer themselves in their mirror.

This is the dilemma of the Gadget Lover. It is not that one is in love with themselves, but rather one is totally with the other self they perceive to be separate that they lose their own being at the cost of it. "Obviously [Narcissus] would have had very different feelings about the image had he known it was an extension or repetition of him

The quality in which we participate with technology is akin to the myth of Narcissus in that we use the media something we define as separate from our own image and therefore do not recognize ourselves in the technology. McLuhan so well points out, "Physiologically there are abundant reasons for an extension of ourselves involving a state of numbness. Medical researchers like Hans Selye and Adolphe Jonas hold that all extensions of ourselves, whether in sickness or in health, are attempts to maintain equilibrium. Any extension of ourselves they regard as "autoamputation" and they find that the autoamputative power or strategy is resorted to by the body when the perceptual power cannot locate or avoid the cause of irritation. Our language has many expressions that indicate this self-amputation imposed by various pressures. We speak of "wanting to jump out of my skin" or of "going out of my mind," "being batty" or "flipping my lid." And we often create artificial situations that rival the irritations and stresses of real life in the controlled conditions of sport and play."

In essence, the technology that is created are a type of reaction to a pain of the body, or dis-ease or discomfort. Unless the area is located as the problem, our nervous system will protect itself from pain by producing a counter-balance of that pain in a form that is a representation of that offending pain, accordingly to where that pain is located in the body. Many times we are unable to locate the discomfort and thereby the technology that is created is unseen as anything in our image, and thereby we remain numb to the problem. McLuhan refers to these discomforts as "irritation" and technology as "counter-irritation". What the counter irritant provides is an "immediate

of strain on the central nervous system".

Because the CNS plays a chief role in our senses, he states, "whatever threatens its function must be contained, localized, or even cut off, even to the total removal of the offending organ." Is McLuhan describing the onset of diseases? That, when the CNS continually protects itself by CNS to a technology as a counter-irritant that it 'offending organ die off before it allows pain into its environment? Is the CSN naturally disposed towards pleasure? According to McLuhan, pleasure is equally a counter-irritant. This harkens back to the first chapter in the discussion of General David Sarnoff's quote of whether media is good or bad. Here, the CNS does not seek pleasure or pain; it protects from both. And when both are not sufficiently sustained to any degree, out comes the counter-irritant as a protective effort to maintain the equilibrium.

Returning back to the myth of Narcissus, when a technology is demanded as a counter-irritant, then one must adapt and conform to these technologies in order to use them. It is then the reflection is beheld, mistakably as something separate, and going unnoticed as such in order for the effects of the pain to wear off. He calls this closed system "closure" or equilibrium, which loops itself into a sort of a servo-mechanistic device. "To behold, use or perceive an extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it." He furthers this idea that in order to use these extensions of ourselves, we "must serve these objects as gods or minor religions."

Because technology then exists in the autoamputated state, as an exalted quality of ourselves, man then sets up a type of sex organ for these machines to continue their existence. It might be said, then, that machine has its own evolution or intelligence - not unlike our own, and not independent of us, but because of us. "Physiologically, the normal use of technology (or his variously extended body) is perpetually modified by it and in turn finds ever new ways of modifying his technology."

We are in a time when the central nervous system is exposed and we are vulnerable because of it. McLuhan is also "the age of consciousness of the unconscious". That is to say, humans are beginning to recognize, through electric media, that technology is that mirror. We have become conscious of our own assembly-line production to the electrical awareness that has been brought to us.

He finishes the chapter with the sentence, "In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin." What he is saying is we are infinitely connected to each other just as much as extension as intention.

In addition to the discussion of the extension of man as counter-irritant, I found that McLuhan seems to suggest man himself is a pure medium when not irritated and one can easily recognize the internal and external as united when the central nervous system is continually attacked, perhaps more directly, that thoughts themselves are perceived as the source of pain, the natural counter-irritant in this instant might be an hallucination. The hallucination, whether friendly or terrifying, serves to remove the painful dread of thinking directly about one's issues or experiencing the effects of chronic anxiety. The counter-irritant serves to distract the perceiver of these pervasive thoughts by creating an external thought, an extension by (or of?) consciousness. Contrary to this, one of the aims in ceremonial magic is to have a purposeful hallucination. One can do this by intentionally putting undue stress upon the nervous system to create about a state of psychic and physical irritation and to suffer through it. The difference is the magician knows how to counter-balance the anxiety, but to endure it, while continuing to work in the stressful state. This re-awakening opens the central nervous system (by shock) to be primed for a new experience in a consciously aware state where the intention is direct to create the proper hallucination of the magician's choice. The hallucination still acts as a counter-irritant and the magician, in the time of the occurrence, must not realize the hallucination is his own in order to have use for it. Once the realization that the hallucination is manifested by the magician, the hallucination dissolves.

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