

Preface

Marshall McLuhan

The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial

Man. New York: Beacon Press, 1967.

Originally published 1951.

OURS is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. And to generate heat not light is the intention. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike.

Since so many minds are engaged in bringing about this condition of public helplessness, and since these programs of commercial education are so much more expensive and influential than the relatively puny offerings sponsored by schools and colleges, it seemed fitting to devise a method for reversing the process. Why not use the new commercial education as a means to enlightening its intended prey? Why not assist the public to observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon it unconsciously?

As this method was followed, "A Descent Into The Maelstrom" by Edgar Poe kept coming to mind. Poe's sailor saved himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by co-operating with it. The present book likewise makes few attempts to attack the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising. It does attempt to set the reader at the center of the revolving picture created by these affairs where he may observe the action that is in progress and in which everybody is involved. From the analysis of that action, it is hoped, many individual strategies may suggest themselves.

But it is seldom the business of this book to take account of such strategies.

Poe's sailor says that when locked in by the whirling walls and the numerous objects which floated in that environment:

"I *must* have been delirious, for I even sought *amusement* in speculating upon the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below."

It was this amusement born of his rational detachment as a spectator of his own situation that gave him the thread which led him out of the Labyrinth. And it is in the same spirit that this book is offered as an amusement. Many who are accustomed to the note of moral indignation will mistake this amusement for mere indifference. But the time for anger and protest is in the early stages of a new process. The present stage is extremely advanced. Moreover, it is full, not only of destructiveness but also of promises of rich new developments to which moral indignation is a very poor guide.

Most of the exhibits in this book have been selected because of their typical and familiar quality. They represent a world of social myths or forms and speak a language we both know and do not know. After making his study of the nursery rhyme, "Where are you going, my pretty maid?" the anthropologist C. B. Lewis pointed out that "the folk has neither part nor lot in the making of folklore." That is also true of the folklore of industrial man, so much of which stems from the laboratory, the studio, and the advertising agencies. But amid the diversity of our inventions and abstract techniques of production and distribution there will be found a great degree of cohesion and unity. This consistency is not conscious in origin or effect and seems to arise from a sort of collective dream. For that reason, as well as because of the widespread popularity of these objects and processes, they are here referred to as "the folklore of industrial man." They are unfolded by exhibit and commentary as a single landscape. A whirling phantasmagoria can be grasped only when arrested for contemplation. And this very arrest is also a release from the usual participation.

The unity is not imposed upon this diversity, since any other selection of exhibits would reveal the same dynamic patterns. The fact that the present exhibits are not selected to prove a case but to reveal a complex situation, it is the effort of the book to illustrate by

frequent cross-reference to other materials that are not included here. And it is the procedure of the book to use the commentaries on the exhibits merely as a means of releasing some of their intelligible meaning. No effort has been made to exhaust their meaning.

The various ideas and concepts introduced in the commentaries are intended to provide positions from which to examine the exhibits. They are not conclusions in which anybody is expected to rest but are intended merely as points of departure. This is an approach which it is hard to make clear at a time when most books offer a single idea as a means of unifying a troup of observations. Concepts are provisional affairs for apprehending reality; their value is in the grip they provide. This book, therefore, tries to present at once representative aspects of the reality and a wide range of ideas for taking hold of it. The ideas are very secondary devices for clambering up and over rock faces. Those readers who undertake merely to query the ideas will miss their use for getting at the material.

A film expert, speaking of the value of the movie medium for selling North to South America, noted that:

the propaganda value of this simultaneous audiovisual impression is very high, for it standardizes thought by supplying the spectator with a ready-made visual image before he has time to conjure up an interpretation of his own.

This book reverses that process by providing typical visual imagery of our environment and dislocating it into meaning by inspection. Where visual symbols have been employed in an effort to paralyze the mind,

they are here used as a means of energizing it. It is observable that the more illusion and falsehood needed to maintain any given state of affairs, the more tyranny is needed to maintain the illusion and falsehood. Today the tyrant rules not by club or fist, but, disguised as a market researcher, he shepherds his flocks in the ways of utility and comfort.

Because of the circulating point of view in this book, there is no need for it to be read in any special order. Any part of the book provides one or more views of the same social landscape. Ever since Buckhardt saw that the meaning of Machiavelli's method was to turn the state into a work of art by the rational manipulation of power, it has been an open possibility to apply the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society. That is attempted here. The Western world, dedicated since the sixteenth century to the increase and consolidation of the power of the state, has developed an artistic unity of effect which makes artistic criticism of that effect quite feasible. Art criticism is free to point to the various means employed to get the effect, as well as to decide whether the effect was worth attempting. As such, with regard to the modern state, it can be a citadel of inclusive awareness amid the dim dreams of collective consciousness.

I wish to acknowledge the advantage I have enjoyed in reading unpublished views of Professor David Riesman on the consumer mentality. To Professor W. T. Easterbrook I owe many enlightening conversations on the problems of bureaucracy and enterprise. And to Professor Felix Giovanelli I am in debt not only for the stimulus of discussion but for his prolonged assistance with the many publishing problems which have attended the entire work.

Herbert Marshall McLuhan