

by Sam Zero

Einstein stated it most simply when he said: "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." McLuhan rounded it out into a global awareness with "the extensions of man." In the explosive atomic age, McLuhan's media implosion is near complete.

This implosion is a kind of continuous introspection through media with little awareness of how conscious we are becoming of our unconscious. More simply, we are affected by the media, the externalized processes of introspection, which, in turn, numb our conscious sense to the effect of a particular medium on our unconscious. Our unconscious becomes the tool of our introspection while our conscious selves are overwhelmed by media. The media and the unconscious, then, share the same function and a fusion of flesh and blood to steel and current takes place in the air waves. At this point the conscious understanding of media is impossible except, ironically, through a break-down of the whole into its component parts. To "understand media" it is necessary also to understand the mind's construction from which the form of the media spring. "What is the meaning of media?" becomes "What is the meaning of life?"

When I was younger – and without really being aware of it – I placed a great deal of emphasis on the power to walk, ride: on self-propelled motion. To me, freedom was a function of the ability to move. Today I understand this slightly differently: mobility gives freedom of choice. There is a similar unconscious pleasure in imagining a telekinetic capability, a magic carpet, a magician making someone disappear, being able to fly or travel swiftly – being able to be anywhere at any time desired. The newspaper, radio, film, television – all media – bring that sensation closer to reality by making the unconscious satisfaction a conscious audio/visual reality. The question "Why?" is no longer necessary except as stored data in the recesses of the mind.

But the faster one travels from station-to-station, the more one tends to miss. The fastest method of "travel" we have right now is the satellite-signaled video. In the Space-Time continuum, travelling very fast has the effect of retarding the aging process. In the vacuum of space, ages may pass and not be felt by the astronauts. Similarly, in the vacuum of video, the planet and beyond may be traversed within seconds. Today's armchair astroknots, however, do not move; the medium does and so, should they ever come down, the travellers could be faced with a changed world into which they may find some difficulty in landing. Their journey has been one of media content and not media form. The astronaut in the rocket is analogous to the active electric signal; the astroknot, tied into an armchair, is analogous only to the air in front of the screen to which the television would still send the signal, with or without the viewer. The speed of the medium is too much to assimilate whereas the image is easy; but it is the former that actively affects the viewer,

Misunderstanding media

Towards a critique of hi-tech culture

as was discovered in the first days of film formalism. The effect of change is not affective because of the new image but by the speed at which the transition is made. Thus McLuhan's final structuring of the real message: "The medium is the message." The speed of the video-image transition (filmic editing or montage) has a similar effect as in the entire Space-Time continuum: the viewer, because of his vicarious existence at the edge of experience, tends to grow-up slower.

The rock musician is the astronaut of popular culture; the signal to the social majority that both reflects it, at one level, with content and affects it with form. The shock is neither the gyrations and regurgitations of the performers nor the volume of their music, but the transitional rapidity of these elements. The noise, for example, of an industrial plant after a time of constant exposure becomes nullified, like Muzak in a Holiday Inn. One becomes aware only of what is created. Likewise rock fans are desensitized to the transitional rhythm of rock and are left with the feeling it generates of release from the continuum stasis. In this way, rock is an equal reaction to the swift nullifying information of video. It is opposite in its primitive ritualism. The rhythm of rock is the very basis of the tribal village of which McLuhan speaks. Like the whirling of the Dervishes, it mesmerizes the new world natives and gets them swooning, dancing and screaming before the showmen shaman. We hear the words, see the rock idols, but we *feel* the beat.

Numbered by ritual we are ready to accept what we hear and see as a kind of truth. We plug the base human content into our own system and reject or assimilate what we feel we can. As an answer to our highly technological video-society, rock ritual has infused itself into the very blood of the video tube. The emotional release available through rock'n'roll finds its strongest ally in the complicated intelligence of the technological network.

Both are popular forms, and being popular are implicitly cultural in that they affect the way we think, feel, dress, walk, dance, speak, exist, because each separately is a comment on the state of our social order. Together they are the realization of McLuhan's technological philosophy which, as McLuhan outlines the process, must also mean the end of it and the beginning of a new philosophy that will have to be equal in intensity but opposite in action. If we are coming to the end of an implosion, the next step will then be explosion. But in what medium will the explosion take place? Will the new explosion maintain the closed-circuit globe and fragment itself from within the human psyche, which is, by extension, the central nervous network of the computer and video technology? Or will it take on a physically conscious action to fill the vacuum with sensory content? The one promises a transition from McLuhan's age of anxiety to an age of fear under the security of an Orwellian Big Brother. The other promises further numbing of awareness, an age of apathy and Armageddon.

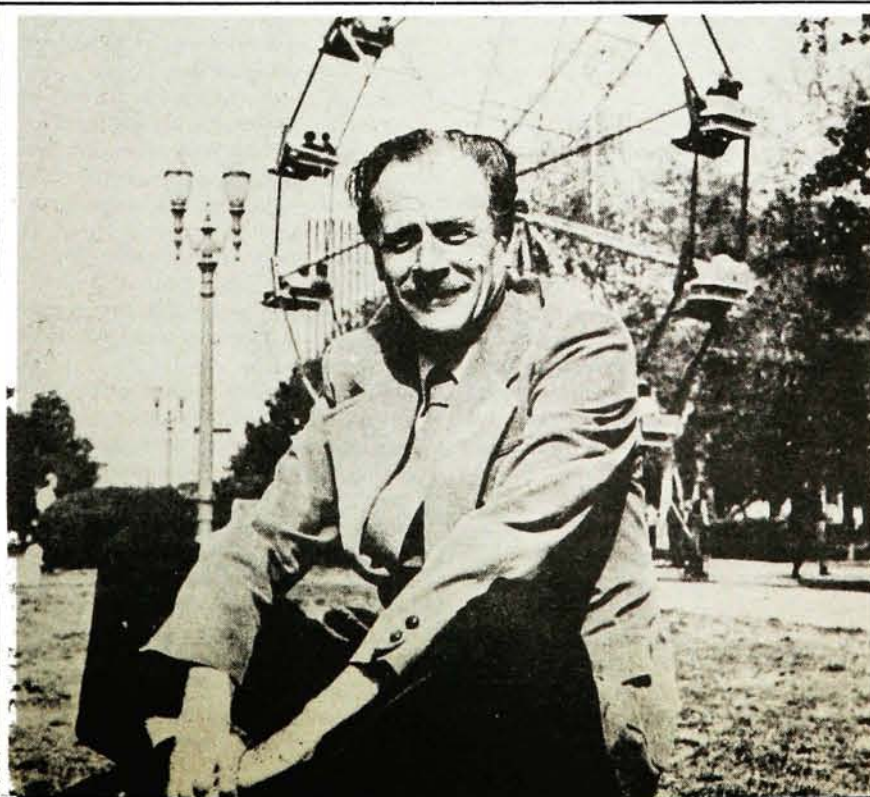
These are the extremes we have faced for centuries, because we both maintain the ritual fervor of the primitive while striving to exist in a realm of progressive intellectualism. The progress has always been noted by bigger and better versions of the primitive: the cave becomes the wheel, the drum becomes the transmitted electrical signal, and the picture, the picture tube. Because we think of them as better we consider them *above* what they simply are: extensions which return us to the religious upward reach; a metaphor toward heaven. But our reach exceeds our grasp and having moved too fast we miss the valuable point of transition, picking up only a subliminal impression of what it might have been. Having missed it we reach again, forever exceeding (like Icarus), flying too high and plunging to our doom or being about to fall, or afraid of falling, never really learning how to fly the spaceship. We remain, for the duration, on the edge.

In film there is a thin black line between frames. The frames are still images, photographs. It is the transition of the film and the eye's habit of retaining the previous image that gives the illusion of motion due to the small changes from photograph to photograph. A similar, and less noticeable process, goes on with the transition of the lines drawn on the television screen by the cathode. The fusion of raw rock with the cathode ray brings the two extremes together.

Now only in its prehistoric stage, the rock-video is a transitional point for all human history. The rockonauts have graduated from being test-pilots and are now training with the technicians to take us into space. Whether that means we are to be spaced-out or to become tuned-in to our space is up to us. An age of fear and an age of apathy will only serve to space us out or evaporate us. We will be, under the conditions of these social phenomena, stagnant observers still subject to the affective effect of media; still controlled, essentially, by the transitional power of information technology. To become tuned-in it is necessary to come in from the edge and be at the point where change happens. From here it is possible to draw information from both the image that is passing and the one that is coming (with film one would be in the projector by the gate), and the balance of each will keep the existence of both moving. But the process goes beyond just standing and moving with the flow of the tape or film. They are simply raw stock for which we must choose appropriate images. At the transitional point we have the ability to effect change affectively. Breaking down; understanding, how and why this point of change can affect us is the only means of 'understanding media' and, by extension, ourselves.

But, as with the rock-video, we can be numbed by the effect of this point or move too swiftly and miss the real importance of our position in the network of nature, that of a masseur/masseuse affecting change. We are in a transitional period which can serve to numb or nullify us. In either case, like the video to the astroknot, nature will continue – with or without us. Now, more than ever, it is important to find our way to that point of paradox where both extremes, science and ritual, exist on equal ground.

● The truth of Marshall McLuhan's philosophy calls for re-thinking media today



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