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Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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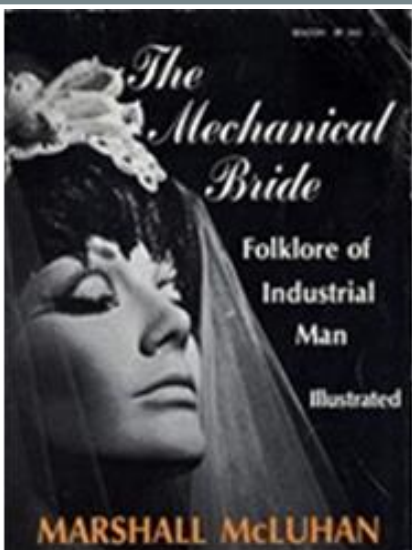
Mediated America Part Two: Who Was Marshall McLuhan & What Did He Say?

McLuhan, Marshall. **The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man.** (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951).

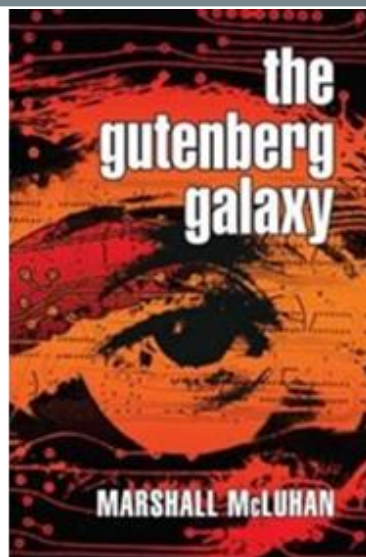
McLuhan, Marshall and Bruce R. Powers. **The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century.** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

McLuhan, Marshall. **The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man.** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

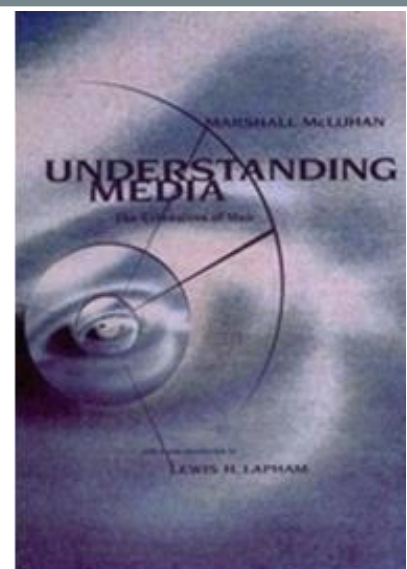
McLuhan, Marshall. **Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.** (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994. Originally Published 1964).



*The Mechanical Bride:
Folklore of Industrial Man*
by Marshall McLuhan



The Gutenberg Galaxy
by Marshall McLuhan



*Understanding Media: The
Extensions of Man* by Marshall
McLuhan and Lewis H. Lapham

Last week in [Book Notes](#), we discussed Norman Mailer's discovery in *Superman Comes to the Supermarket* of **mediated** America, that trifurcated world in which Americans live simultaneously in three realms, in three realities. One is based, more or less, in the physical world of nouns and verbs, which is to say people, other creatures, and things (objects) that either act or are acted upon. The second is a world of mental images lodged between people's ears; and, third, and most importantly, the **mediasphere**. *The mediascape* is where the two worlds meet, filtering back and forth between each other sometimes in harmony but frequently in a dissonant clanging and clashing of competing images, of competing cultures, of competing realities.

Two quick asides: First, it needs to be immediately said that Americans are not the first ever and certainly not the only 21st century denizens of multiple realities, as any glimpse of Japanese *anime*, Chinese *Donghua*, or *British Cosplay Girls* Facebook page will attest, but Americans first gave it full bloom with the "Hollywoodization," the "Disneyfication" of just about anything, for when Mae West murmured, "Come up and see me some time," she said more than she could have ever imagined. A clip of that can be seen [here](#).

Americans and others are still trying to work their way back down those fantasy stairs. Second, Mailer's metaphor of the "Supermarket" today seems dated and a bit confusing, for it is hard to envision Wegmans or Giant Eagle as fantasyland. In the early 20th century, it would have been the Sears and Roebuck Catalog, through which one could buy anything from a bonnet to a bungalow. In the middle 20th century, supermarkets were the symbol of a seemingly endless abundance – fresh fruit in January and spices that less than a millennium earlier Marco Polo traveled halfway around the world to savor. A later generation – Generation X, perhaps – would have said, "comes to the Mall" and captured Mailer's metaphor. Today, although one does not "go" to Amazon, it is Amazon and eBay that capture that Millennial metaphoric essence of infinite possibilities where no desire, no fantasy goes unfulfilled.

But I digress.

Back to *mediated* America or, more particularly, back to the **mediasphere** and **mediascape** where more and more Americans in our post-modern world seem to prefer to reside. The **mediasphere** is "the collective ecology of the world's media, including newspapers, journals, television, radio, books, novels, advertising, press releases, publicity, the blogosphere; all media both broadcast and published" [1] that gives rise to the **mediascape** – "the metaphorical [landscape](#) of trends, tastes, etc., promoted by the [media](#)". [2] In **mediated** America, where Americans have

increasingly seemed to prefer images depicting reality to reality itself, the real thing now seems somehow inferior.

Daniel Boorstin saw it in his 1961 book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. As Megan Garber explained in her 2016 essay, “*The Image in the Age of Pseudo-Reality*,” the image “strictly is a replica of reality, be it a movie, or news report or a poster of Monet’s water lilies, that manages to be more interesting and dramatic and seductive than anything reality could hope to be.” [3] Or, more ominously, when one shallower and less qualified politician’s *image* seems to glitter with the aura of a television celebrity’s possibilities diminishing his opponent’s wonkier, more qualified, dowdier, pant-suited self. It was this new reality of American politics that Mailer glimpsed, that Roger Ailes exploited and here we are in a 21st century America overwhelmed by the *mediasphere* and lost in the *mediascape*.

How to navigate the *mediascape*? As we asked last week in *Book Notes*, “How to tame the *mediasphere*, how to make it work for the common good?”

For that you need to know the turf; for that you need a map.

Who knows this land? Who has mapped it? As one definition of a map has it, who knows its parts, their relationships and how they work together? Who are *medialand’s* cartographers? Who are *medialand’s* mapmakers?

Three guides come immediately to mind: Marshall McLuhan, Daniel Boorstin, and Neil Postman. They are our Champlain, our LaSalle, our Leatherstocking exploring this brave new world of electronic, *intermediated* reality and reporting back to us its opportunities and its dangers, its safe settlements and its chasms of peril – those places of unknown risk denoted on the old explorers’ maps warning, “There Be Beasts Here.”

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan was a household name. By the 1970s, his popular acclaim began to wane (although he did a famous cameo in Woody Allen’s 1978 Oscar winning film *Annie Hall* that can be seen [here](#)). Unfortunately, he suffered a stroke in 1979, dying at age 69, in 1980. His star has faded and many of the details of what he promulgated have been superseded, but his core insights remain essential for understanding media.

Sometimes, I think of Marshall McLuhan as I do Columbus and Freud, both of whom got many or most of the details wrong. Columbus thought he was in India, when in reality he landed in a place foreign to his European contemporaries. Freudian psychology probably revealed more about the neuroses of *fin de siècle* upper-class

Viennese housewives at the turn of the 19th century than anything else, but Freud “discovered” the unconscious.

Yet, Freud and Columbus both had significant impact felt still today. McLuhan also got a lot of the details, hmm, maybe not wrong but rather snagged. He can be a challenging read. He got, however, the big thing right: it is the medium not the message that is most important. By deploying the methods of aesthetic and literary criticism to understanding how media affect human behavior, he can be said to have invented media studies and the serious study of popular culture.

He was one of the 20th century’s seminal thinkers. It is impossible to overstate the value of his key insights.

Among them were:

McLuhan’s major insights, at the risk of a vast oversimplification and, perhaps, distortion, fall into four buckets. In the first bucket, in his doctoral dissertation, later published as ***The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*** (1951), McLuhan argued that “the key development that led to the Renaissance was not the discovery of ancient texts, but a shift in emphasis from the formal study of logic to rhetoric and grammar.” [4]

That sounds extremely dull, about as exciting as your seventh-grade teacher illustrating how to diagram a sentence, but McLuhan in effect set in motion a revolution that led to post-modernism, deconstruction, and media studies. Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and others have acknowledged his influence.

What did McLuhan say that set in motion this cultural studies revolution? Well, risking a bit of wonkiness of my own, logic is concerned with truth (validity). Grammar, on the other hand, is not that thing that tormented you in fourth grade, although torment you it might well have done. Rather, grammar describes the rules that govern a group’s linguistic behavior. In short, if culture is created by language, then grammar governs the creation of culture. It is how we communicate with one another that determines how we will organize ourselves.

Which leads to rhetoric, for to organize ourselves in a certain pattern, we need to convince ourselves and others that pattern “A” is preferable to pattern “B.” That is, we must persuade. Rhetoric is the art of deploying language (any language – verbal, pictorial, aural (storytelling or music) to persuade others to accept one’s argument, which is an assertion about a desired course of action; e.g., “Let’s go to the movies tonight,” “Buy brand X because it will soothe your ache,” or “Vote for candidate Z because she *feels* your need.”

In short, by subordinating logic to grammar and rhetoric, McLuhan (and the post-moderns who followed him) argued that truth may or may not be discoverable (i.e. may or may not exist), but that it is constructed by the linguistic techniques (grammar and rhetoric) we use to examine it and to communicate to others the results of our examinations. Perhaps even more important, McLuhan demonstrated that the techniques of rhetoric can not only be used to construct an argument, but they can also be used to *deconstruct* someone else's argument.

Which leads to the second bucket. McLuhan could have applied his theories to the artifacts of high art, for example by analyzing the rhetorical structure of Virgil's arguments' in *The Aeneid* justifying Caesar Augustus's seizure of imperial power. That would have been easy enough, but it would have consigned McLuhan to the dusty and confined, albeit charming, world of literary studies. No, instead, in *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan focused his rhetorical analysis on contemporary culture and its mundane artifacts – newspaper and magazine articles, popular fiction, movies, and advertising. In the process, he pioneered the academic study of *popular culture*.

More than 40 years ago, completing a Masters in Business Administration degree, I wrote an unpublished masters thesis titled "*Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Marketing*," using classical rhetoric to explain what marketers do. [6] Having not yet read *The Mechanical Bride*, I now realize McLuhan preceded me by 30 years. But McLuhan went a step further. He used the rhetorical analysis of advertising to deconstruct the ad's argument to understand the culture to whom the advertiser was speaking.

This process became known as *content analysis*. The interaction between the *persuader* and the recipient of the "pitch" creates culture or maybe reinforces an already existing culture or does both simultaneously by reinforcing (exploiting) a cultural shift. In the process, it tells the culture something about itself it might not have known.

Rather than use one of McLuhan's examples, I will use several contemporary advertisements. First, however, a very quick explanation of classical rhetoric. All communication exchanges do one or both of two things: 1) they are simple exchanges of information or 2) they attempt to persuade someone to act in a specific way. In a simple exchange of information – "Is it raining outside?" "No" – then, although one might want to verify that "No" by looking out the window oneself, there is no need for the respondent, the utterer of "No," to deploy persuasive techniques.

If, however, one wants to persuade someone to do something, say to love you, to buy Brand X and not Brand Y, or to vote for them and not their opponent, they need to deploy the tools of rhetoric. There are numerous rhetorical tactics – e.g., what is a *red herring*? Many politicians are masters of the *red herring*. Recognizing space constraints, we are only going to concern ourselves with rhetorical strategy.

In any persuasive rhetorical exchange, there are four strategic variables at work. First, someone has a **purpose**, which is to persuade someone to do something. Second, to effectively do that, the persuader must know to whom they are communicating, i.e., they must do **audience analysis**. Audience analysis is both *demographic* and *psychographic*. *Demographics* describes an audience's tangible characteristics: age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, educational level, etc. *Psychographics*, however, describes an audience's psycho-emotive values, attitudes, and beliefs. Third, given the characteristics of the audience one is trying to persuade, the communicator adopts a **persona**, an **image** they think will be most acceptable to the intended audience. Putting aside that *persona* comes from the ancient Greek for *mask*, one way to think of a **persona** is as the *personality* one adopts to make oneself acceptable to those with whom one is communicating. Having adopted a **persona**, lastly, the persuader must deploy those **arguments** – reasons to believe – that they think will be most effective with a given audience. There are only three broad clusters of arguments – *facts*, *trust*, and *emotion*.

McLuhan's insight in *The Mechanical Bride* was that one can reverse this process and deconstruct another's argument to discern what it reveals about the audience, the culture, the communicator is attempting to persuade. A year or two ago at lunch, Bishop Dwane Brock and I discussed the phenomena of numerous TV ads with multiracial couples. We asked ourselves what they revealed about American society. The ads were for things that in themselves are not controversial, e.g. Fidelity Investments, Clearblue Ovulation Test Kits, and, banality of banalities, Cheerios. Using McLuhan's technique, we deconstructed the ads. Given that the purpose of each is to persuade one to consume their product or service, we asked for what audience did each product seller think a multiracial couple would be an effective and persuasive persona to adopt?

Well, Clearblue Ovulation Test Kits would appeal to those under 40, certainly under 30; Fidelity Investments a bit more of a puzzle, for it aimed at 40-somethings planning retirement. Cheerios was the most intriguing for it aimed at the widest audience. The specific arguments in each ad were uninteresting. They used facts – the Test Kit works and is easy to use; trust – Fidelity Investments is a respected and old firm, the integrity argument; and Cheerios combined all three – facts equals nutritious; trust equals an old and reliable brand; and emotion equals a warm bath of nostalgia and feel-good hominess.

We thought commercial sellers' use of multiracial couples as their persona an encouraging sign for American culture, for commercial advertisers are an unsentimental lot with an eye for the sale and not much more. Their social conscience, while perhaps not withered, takes a definite backseat to getting the sale. To get that sale, they need as accurately as possible to understand their audience. So, if they think a multiracial couple speaks affectively and effectively to the American people, that is progress.

Well, yes and no, for the reaction to the ads was complex, ranging from benign indifference to a positive feelgood view of America's future to a furious racist backlash to the Cheerios ad. First aired in 2013, the Cheerios ad "received enough racist vitriol online that the YouTube comment channel below the ad was closed." The good news, however, is that "there was also an outpouring of support, and Cheerios ran a sequel to the ad during the Super Bowl in 2014." [7]

The good news, however, is not unalloyed, for in searching for the ads to include links to them in this article, I discovered that they are no longer available. Has the culture pivoted again, in the era of Black Lives Matter, so that multiracial couples are no longer harbingers of the future, but literally too hot to handle?

Or another example from local politics circa 2020. I recently received a large postcard attacking a local candidate for state office. The sender was the opposition party's statewide headquarters. So, the sender was a persuader with a not too subtle agenda. The card was black and white, the symbolism of the colors obvious – that *this* message is simply a matter of (alleged) facts. The persona, like the color symbols, neutral, or were the colors sending a more ominous message? The arguments against the candidate? A kind of moral outrage (emotion) that the candidate had financially benefited from previous public positions. The card even footnoted its assertions with sources in public documents and other media ("facts"). Upon examination, however, which the sender was counting on recipients *not* doing, it seemed the candidate under attack had only benefited from perks consistent with the office and salary increases approved by the Legislature that one assumes the opposition also received.

Using McLuhan's reverse rhetorical analysis, the shabbiness of the ploy becomes transparent. It is so transparent that while I was leaning towards voting against the candidate under attack, I now think I'll vote against the sender of the card.

But I understand rhetoric; most do not. Which is exactly what the card's sender was counting on.

So, something as banal as television ads, magazine ads and political post cards can be read as socially revealing documents, an idea now so commonplace that such analysis has become a journalistic staple analyzing the *mediascape*. But it was Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* that first mapped that terrain. If we are to navigate the *mediascape*, we need maps – guides – to help us understand this brave new world. McLuhan provides us with a valuable tool using rhetorical analysis to understand popular culture – the cultural bath in which we all swim forming our opinions, shaping our values. Like Norman Mailer, McLuhan believed that popular culture was not disposable. He understood that it is *the* culture that shapes America in the postmodern world.

In doing so, he not only changed what we think about – a Cheerios ad and not the overture to *Don Giovanni* – but also how we think about what we think about. Earlier I said McLuhan's ideas come in four buckets; if buckets one and two were the rediscovery of the importance of grammar and rhetoric to the making of the modern world and their application to understanding popular culture, which is the culture of the modern world, then in the third bucket McLuhan explained how the medium we use to communicate our thoughts loops back and shapes the thoughts we think.

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), McLuhan analyzed how communications technology – the actual media we use to deploy grammar and rhetoric – affects how we organize our thinking. If we think in language, then how we use language to organize our thinking impacts how we organize ourselves socially, i.e., how we construct culture. [8] Concentrating on phonemic writing, that is the visual transcription of aural sounds, McLuhan traces the history of the cultural changes impacted by the development of writing from pre-alphabetic culture to the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. As a result, visual communication superseded aural communication. From a culture that listened to messages (aural), humans began to “see” their messages, which messages were communicated linearly on a page. Rather than the holistic experience of listening with its loops and reiterations to cue memory, humans began to process information sequentially in segments (sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc) that tended towards specialization.

In sum, by the manner in which the printing press organized information and made it available at large scale in a way that manuscript culture could never have done, the printing press created both the need for specialization to make sense of this new mass of information and the need for specialists themselves. Since printing made books generally available, the possibility of becoming a specialist was, ironically, generalized. “Specialists” are, by definition, individuals with a special, if not even unique, capability. This created individualism and its brethren: democracy, Protestantism, capitalism and nationalism.

The philosophical underpinnings of McLuhan's theory are both subtle and dense; parsing them is beyond the scope of this brief essay. Several concepts, however, merit specifying. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan began to develop ideas he would expand in *Understanding Media* and *The Global Village*. First, media impose their own structural biases upon content, i.e. they shape and impact how messages are received and understood. Second, new media, new communications technologies, subsume previously existing technologies and their messages. Thirdly, from the vantage point of cultural impact, the medium itself is more important than its content (which does not mean that content is unimportant, but it is secondary to the medium in which it is communicated). Lastly, media are themselves morally neutral, i.e. they do not have an *a priori* bias in favor of a specific content's message (although certain media are more effective in conveying certain content, which is to say that a *tweet* is not always just a *tweet*).

Let me see if I can make these abstract notions a bit more tangible and transparent. It is a commonplace of modern history that the printing press led to the Protestant Reformation, the rise of democratic liberalism and the fall of monarchy.

How?

When Bibles were precious artifacts laboriously copied and *illuminated* (illustrated) by hand, they were so valuable they were literally chained to the pulpit. They were capable of being read only by a select few, so the mass of people knew only what the anointed who could decipher them said they meant.

But when Bibles could be printed by the hundreds, then the thousands, then tens of thousands, they became generally available to anyone. Since they were now generally available, it became worth the trouble to learn how to read them (to decode them). As the number of people who could read the Bible increased, the number of interpretations blossomed. As the number of interpretations increased, the value of any one interpretation decreased, thus, ironically, empowering all people. Any one person's interpretation theoretically was as legitimate as any anyone else's. Hence, individualism sprang into the world calling into question the ultimate legitimacy of priests and monarchs giving rise to liberal democracy etc.

The point here is not to condense the history of the past 550 years into several paragraphs, but to illustrate what McLuhan meant. The printing press – an inanimate and morally neutral tool – subsumed manual writing and manuscript copying to make generally available that which had been sparse and hard to acquire. Ignoring for the moment squabbles about various translations, the Bible's contents did not change but the Bible as an artifact did. It was, in fact, no longer an artifact but a commodity. As such, any one Bible was reduced in value to the point it could be mass produced,

but the Bible became exponentially more valuable because it was now generally available.

Everyone their own priest; everyone their own monarch – individualism and personal freedom resulted from individuals being able to read and decide for themselves. Which most of us take as a given but is a rare thing in the history of the world. At first no new ideas were distributed. Just a new technology making some old ideas generally available spawning questions no one had previously thought to ask and, willy-nilly, modernity sprang into being.

That leads us to McLuhan's fourth bucket. It is the medium, not the message, that counts. Aural/oral humans lived holistically processing spoken information tribally – think of the group around a fire listening to the storyteller. Print-based humans, in contrast, process information visually – they sequentially read printed images on a page. More to the point, for its cultural implications, rather than tribally in a group, humans read alone giving rise to the modern notion of individualism. As a result, how culture was organized shifted from aural/oral humans valuing the group or tribe to print/visual humans valuing the individual.

Although his use of the terms aural/oral and visual culture can be confusing, McLuhan's prescience can be startling. For as he began to examine the world of electronic communications – the movies, radio, television and the computer – he realized several things. First, that electronic media hearkened back to aural/oral culture, in which information did not come at once in segmented, sequential steps but came at once in discontinuous and overlapping images of sight and sound. Second, the experience of processing information in the electronic age was communal. Print had detribalized humans who processed information individually, but in the electronic age information was again a collective experience. One reads a book alone; one watches television, goes to the movies, and listens to music tribally.

Electronic media retribalized human society. It also fragmented information, so that now one surfs the web in a global village (the internet) in a discontinuous, non-linear consumption of information.

McLuhan saw that coming; he coined the word **surfing** for how humans would process information in this electronic village of everything all at once. Having glimpsed this culture shifting impact of new media, he sought to understand it.

Next week in **Book Notes**, Marshall McLuhan's **Understanding Media** meets Daniel Boorstin's **The Image** exploring a world awash in information seeking not enlightenment but, to paraphrase Neil Postman, "*amusing itself to death.*"

Or, what happened when we followed Mae West up those stairs?



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End Notes

1. “*mediasphere*,” in **Your Dictionary** available at <https://www.yourdictionary.com/mediasphere> accessed September 22, 2020.
2. “*mediascape*,” in **Your Dictionary** available at <https://www.yourdictionary.com/mediascape> accessed September 22, 2020.
3. Garber, Megan. “*The Image in the Age of Pseudo-Reality*,” **The Atlantic** (December 1, 2016) available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/the-image-in-the-age-of-pseudo-reality/509135/> accessed September 22, 2020.
4. “*Marshall McLuhan*,” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan accessed September 22, 2020.
5. “*logic*,” **Merriam-Webster Dictionary** available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/logic> accessed September 22, 2020.
6. Roth, Andrew. “*Toward a Rhetorical Theory of Marketing*,” unpublished Master’s Thesis, Gannon University, August, 1980.
7. Kaufman, Joanne, “*A Sign of ‘Modern Society’: More Multiracial Families in Commercials*,” **The New York Times** (June 3, 2018) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/03/business/media/advertising-multiracial-families.html?auth=login-email&login=email> accessed September 24, 2020.
8. McLuhan, Marshall. **The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man**. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 41.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
10. *Ibid.*

Photo:

- Mechanical Bride: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1245140.Mechanical_Bride
- The Gutenberg Galaxy: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/440463.The_Gutenberg_Galaxy

Understanding Media: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/126274.Understanding_Media

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