

Tom Wolfe. The new life out there
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Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, Pavlov. What if he is right?

TOM WOLFE

What if he's right What . . .if. . .he . . .is . . . right W-h-a-t i-f h-e i-s r-i-g-h-t

There are currently hundreds of studs of the business world, breakfast food package designers, television net work creative department vice-presidents, advertising "media reps," lighting fixture fortune heirs, smiley patent lawyers, industrial spies, we- need vision board chairmen, all sorts of business studs who are all wondering if this man, Marshall McLuhan ... is right.... He sits in a little office off on the edge of the University of Toronto that looks like the receiving bin of a second-hand book store, grading papers, *grading papers*, for days on end, wearing-well, he doesn't seem to care what he wears. If he feels like it, he just puts on the old striped tie with the plastic neck band. You just snap the plastic band around your neck and there the tie is, hanging down and ready to go, Pree-Tide.

But what if-all sorts of huge world-mover & shaker corporations are trying to put McLuhan in a box or some thing. Valuable! Ours! Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Pavlov, studs of the intelligentsia game suppose he is the oracle of the modern times - *what if he is right?* he'll be in there. It almost seems that way. An "undisclosed corporation" has put a huge "undis closed sum" into, McLuhan's Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. One of *thebig* American corporations has offered him \$5000 to present a closed- circuit-ours!-television lecture on-oracle!-the ways the products in its industry will be used in the future. Even before all this, IBM, General Electric, Bell Telephone were flying McLuhan in from Toronto to New York, Pittsburgh, God knows where else, to talk to their hierarchs about . . . well, about whatever this unseen world of electronic environments that only he *sees fully is* all about.

They all sit in these conference rooms, under fluorescent lights, with the right air conditioned air streaming out from behind the management-style draperies. Upward-busting hierarch executives, the real studs, the kind who have already changed over from lie- down crewcuts to brush back Eric Johnston-style Big Boy

haircuts and from Oxford button-downs to Tripler broadcloth straight points and have hung it all on the line, an \$80,000 mortgage in New Canaan and a couple of kids at Deerfield and Hotchkiss-hung it all on the line on knowing exactly what this corporation is all about -they sit there with the day's first bloody mary squirting through their capillaries-and this man with part of a plastic neckband showing at the edge of the collar, who just got through grading *papers*, for godsake, tells them in an *of-course* voice and with I'm being-*patient* eyes, that, in effect, politely, they all know just about exactly . . . nothing . . . about the real business they're in-

-Gentlemen, the General Electric Company makes a considerable portion of its profits from electric light bulbs, but it is not yet discovered that it is not in the light bulb business but in the business of moving information. Quite as much as A. T. & T. Yes. Of course-I-am-willing-to-be-patient. He pulls his chin down into his neck and looks up out of his ion' Scotch-lairdly face. Yes. The electric light is pun information it is a medium without a message as it were Yes. Light is a self- contained communications system in which the medium is the message Just think that over for a moment-I-am-willing-to-be - When IBM discovered that it was not in the business of making office equipment or business machines

- but that it was in the business

of processing

information,

then it began

to navigate

with

clear

vision.

Yes.

Swell! But where did *this* guy come from? What is this-these cryptic, Delphian sayings: Th *e electric light is pure information.*

Delphian! *The medium is the message. We are moving out of the age of the visual into the age of the aural and tactile . . .*

Oracle!-McLuhan sits in the conference room on the upper deck of an incredible ferry boat that Walter Landor, one of the country's top package designers, has redone at a cost of about \$400,000 as an office and design center. This great package design flagship nestles there in the water at Pier 5 in San Francisco. The sun floods in from the bay onto the basket woven wall-to-wall and shines off the dials of Landor's motion picture projection console. Down below on the main deck is a whole simulated supermarket for bringing people in and testing package impact and all sorts of optometric wonder wards for testing visual reception of metribergiarglebarge and McLuhan says, almost by the way:

"Of course, packages will be obsolete in a few years. People will want tactile experiences, they'll want to feel the product they're getting-"

But!-

McLuhan's chin goes down, his mouth turns down, his eyes roll up in his *of course* expression: "Goods will be sold in *bins*. People will go right to bins and pick things up and *feel* them rather than just accepting a package."

Landor, the package designer, doesn't lose his cool; he just looks- *what if he is right?*

". . . The human family now exists under conditions of a global village. We live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums . . ." That even, even, even voice goes on-

-McLuhan is sitting in the Lombardy Restaurant in New York with Gibson McCabe, president of *News week*, and several other high-ranking communications people, and McCabe tells of the millions *Newsweek* has put into reader surveys, market research, advertising, the editorial staff, everything, and how it paid off with a huge rise in circulation over the past five years. McLuhan listens, then down comes the chin: "Well . . . of course, your circulation would have risen about the same anyway, the new sensory balance of the people being what it is . . ."

Print gave tribal man an eye for an ear.

McLuhan is at the conference table in the upper room of Howard Gossage's advertising firm in San Francisco, up in what used to be a firehouse they're pretty great converters in San Francisco- and a couple of newspaper people are up there talking about how they are sure their readers want this and that to read-McLuhan pulls his chin down into his neck: "Well . . . of course, people don't actually read newspapers. They get into them every morning like a hot bath."

Perfect! Delphic! Cryptic! Metaphorical! Epigrammatic! With this even, even, even voice, this utter scholarly aplomb-with these pronouncements-"Art is always one technology behind. The content of the art of any age is the technology of the previous age"- with all this Nietzschean certitude McLuhan has become an intellectual star of the West. He is a word-of-mouth celebrity.

Corporation executives are only the beginning of the roster of people in America who stand to be shaken up -*what if he is right?* The university establishments, the literati-McLuhan has already earned the hostile envy of the New York literary establishment- the artists-they like him-scores of little groups of McLuhan cultists-thou sands of intellectuals are now studying McLuhan. The paperback edition of his book *Understanding Media* has been an "underground best seller"- that is, a best seller without benefit of publicity-for six months. City planners-

City planners are wondering *what if he*-McLuhan is the prophet of the New Life Out There, the suburbs, housing developments, astrodomes, domed-over shopping centers, freeways, TV families, the whole world of the new technologies that stretches out to the West beyond the old cities of the East. To McLuhan, New York is already obsolete, on its way to becoming not much more than a Disneyland discotheque for the enjoyment-not the big business or the gawking wonder, but the playing around-of the millions out there. They are already living the new life, while New York sits here choking to death in its *old fashion*.

McLuhan has developed a theory that goes like this: The new technologies of the electronic age, notably television, radio, the telephone, and computers, make up a new environment. A new environment; they are not merely *added* to some basic human environment. The idea that these things, TV and the rest, are just tools that men can use for better or worse depending on their talents and moral strength-that idea is idiotic to McLuhan. The new technologies, such as television, have become a new environment. They radically alter the entire way people use their five senses, the way they react to things, and therefore, their entire lives and the entire society. It doesn't matter what the content of a medium like TV is. It doesn't matter if the networks show twenty hours a day of sadistic cowboys caving in people's teeth or twenty hours of Pablo Casals droning away on his cello in a pure-culture white Spanish drawing room. It doesn't matter about the content. The most profound effect of television-its real "message," in McLuhan's terms -is the way it alters men's sensory patterns. The *medium is the message*-that is the best-known McLuhanism. Television steps up the auditory sense and the sense of touch and depresses the visual sense. That seems like a paradox, but McLuhan is full of paradoxes. A whole generation in America has grown up in the TV environment, and already these millions of people, twenty-five and under, have the same kind of sensory reactions as African tribesmen. The same thing is happening all over the world. The world is growing into a huge tribe, a . . . *global*

village, in a *seamless web* of electronics.

These are McLuhan metaphors. He started out as an English literature scholar. He graduated from the University of Manitoba in Canada and then got a doctorate in English at Cambridge in England. He wrote his dissertation on the rhetoric of Thomas Nashe, a sixteenth-century English playwright and essayist. In it he led up to Nashe with a massive study of rhetoric from the Greeks on up. He got interested in the way different kinds of speech,

written and oral, affected the history of different civilizations. Gradually his field expanded from literature to the influence of communication, all kinds, all the media, on society. He started doing research in psychology, even physiology, sociology, history, economics everything seemed to come into it. McLuhan was sort of like John Huizinga this way. Huizinga is a historian, Medieval history, chiefly, who discovered "the play element" in history. He ended up with a rather sophisticated sociological theory, in the book *Homo Ludens*, that in many ways is a precursor of the mathematical "game theory" that so fascinates Pentagon war strategists today. McLuhan worked on his communications theory. For about thirty years he was pretty much in obscurity in places like the University of Wisconsin, the University of St. Louis, and the University of Toronto. He published *The Mechanical Bride* in 1951, then *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962, and with that one the McLuhan Cult really started, and *what if he-*?

As McLuhan sees it-in the simplest terms, here is his theory step by step: People adapt to their environment, whatever it is, with a certain balance of the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. If something steps up the intensity of one sense, hearing for example, the other senses will change intensity too, to try to regain a balance. A dentist, for example, can practically shut off pain-sense of touch-by putting earphones on a patient and pouring intense noise into his ear-sense of hearing.

Every major technology changes the balance of the senses. One of the most explosive of these technologies was the development of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Before that, people's senses still had pretty much the old tribal balance. That is to say, the sense of hearing was dominant. People got their information mainly by hearing it from other people. People who get their information that way are necessarily drawn closer together, in the tribal way. They have to be close to each other in order to get information. And they have to believe what people tell them, by and large, because that is the only kind of information they can get. They are interdependent.

They are also more emotional. The spoken word is more emotional than the written word. It carries emotion as well as meaning. The intonation can convey anger, sorrow, approval, panic, joy, sarcasm, and so forth. This *aural* man, the

tribal man, reacts more emotionally to information. He is more easily upset by rumors. His and every body else's emotions-a collective unconscious-lie very near the surface.

The printing press brought about a radical change. People began getting their information primarily by seeing it -the printed word. The visual sense became dominant. Print translates one sense-hearing, the spoken word-into another sense sight, the printed word. Print also converts sounds into abstract symbols, the letters. Print is or derly progression of abstract, visual symbols. Print led to the habit of categorizing-putting everything in order, into categories, "jobs," "prices," "departments," "bureaus," "specialties." Print led, ultimately, to the creation of the modern economy, to bureaucracy, to the modern army, to nationalism itself.

People today think of print as if it were a technology that has been around forever. Actually, the widespread use of print is only about two hundred years old. Today new technologies-television, radio, the telephone, the computer-are causing another revolution. Print caused an "explosion"-breaking society up into categories. The electronic media, on the other hand, are causing an "implosion," forcing people back together in a tribal unity.

The aural sense is becoming dominant again. People are getting their information primarily by hearing it. They are literate, but their primary source is the radio, the telephone, the TV set. The radio and the telephone are obviously aural media, but so is television, in McLuhan's theory. The American TV picture has very low definition. It is not three-dimensional, like a movie or a photograph, but two-dimensional, like a Japanese print or a cartoon. The viewer fills in the spaces and the contours with his mind, as he does with a cartoon. Therefore, the TV viewer is more involved in the TV image than in the movie image, he is so busy running over the image with his eye, filling in this and that. He practically reaches out and *touches* it. He *participates*; and he likes that.

Studies of TV children-children of all social classes who are used to getting their information primarily by television-studies of this new generation show that they do not focus on the whole picture, the way literate adults do when they watch a movie. They scan the screen for details; their eyes run all over the screen, focusing on holsters, horses' heads, hats, all sorts of little things, even in the fiercest gun battles. They watch a TV show the way a nonliterate African tribesman watches a movie

But exactly! The TV children, a whole generation of Americans, the oldest ones are now twenty-five years old-they are the new tribesmen. They have tribal sensory balances. They have the tribal habit of responding emotionally to the spoken word, they are "hot," they want to participate, to *touch*, to be involved. On the one hand, they can be more easily swayed by things like demagoguery.

The *visual* or *print* man is an individualist; he is "cooler," with built-in safeguards. He always has the feeling that no matter what anybody says, he can go check it out. The necessary information is filed away somewhere, categorized. He can *look* it up. Even if it is something he can't *look up* and check out-for example, some rumor like "the Chinese are going to bomb us tomorrow"-his habit of mind is established. He has the feeling: All this can be investigated- *looked* into. The aural man is not so much of an individualist; he is more a part of the collective consciousness; *he believes*.

To the literate, visual, *print* man, that seems like a negative quality, but to the aural, tribal man, it seems natural and good. McLuhan is not interested in values, but if anything, he gives the worst of it to the literate man who is smug in the belief that his sensibility is the only proper one. The tribal man-the new TV generation-is far more apt at *pattern recognition*, which is the basis of computers. The child will learn a foreign language faster than a literate adult because he absorbs the whole pattern of the language, the intonations and the rhythms, as well as the meaning. The literate man is slowed down by the way he tries to convert the sounds to print in his mind and takes the words one by one, categorizing them and translating them in a plodding sequence.

In formal learning, in schools, that is, the new TV-tribal man is at a great disadvantage, however, given the current teaching methods. As McLuhan sees it- if people think there is a bad drop- out problem in American schools today, it is nothing compared to what it is going to be like in another ten or fifteen years. There will be a whole nation of young psychic drop- outs-out of it-from the wealthy suburbs no less than the city slums. The thing is, all these TV-tribal children are aural people, tactile people, they're used to learning by pattern recognition. They go into classrooms, and there up in front of them are visual, literate, print-minded teachers. They are up there teaching classes by subjects, that is, categories; they've broken learning down into compartments -mathematics, history, geography, Latin, biology-it doesn't make sense to the tribal kids, it's like trying to study a flood by counting the trees going by, it's unnatural.

It's the same way with these cities the print-minded rulers keep on piling up around them, more skyscrapers, more freeways pouring into them, more people piling into them. Cities are still based on the old idea of using space efficiently, of putting as many activities into a single swath of ground as possible to make it easier for people to move around and do business with each other. To the new drop-out generation and the drop-out generations to come, this idea of lateral space and of moving people around in it doesn't seem very important. Even visual people have begun to lose a little of the old idea of space because of the airplane. When somebody gets on a jet in New York and flies to San Francisco in four hours, the time is so short, the idea of the space, the three thousand miles, loses its meaning. It is just like taking a "horizontal elevator," McLuhan says. In Los

Angeles, with everybody traveling by car on freeways, nobody talks about "miles" anymore, they just say "that's four minutes from here," "that's twenty minutes from here," and so on. The actual straight-line distance doesn't matter. It may be faster to go by a curved route. All anybody cares about is the time.

For that matter-the drop-out generations will even get rid of the cars, says McLuhan. The car is still largely tied to the idea of space, but the TV-tribal kids aren't. It even shows up in their dances. The new American dances, the twist, the frug, and all that, ignore the geography of the dance floor. The dancers stay in one place and create their own space. They jerk, spasm, hump, and bob around in one place with the sound turned up-aural! tribal!-up into the hot-jolly hyperaesthetic decibels. Eventually, says McLuhan, they will use the same sort of pattern in the way they work. They will work at home, connected to the corporation, the boss, not by roads or railroads, but by television. They will relay information by closed-circuit two-way TV and by computer systems. The great massive American rush-hour flow over all that asphalt surface, going to and from work every day, will be over. The hell with all that driving. Even shopping will be done via TV. All those grinding work-a-daddy cars will disappear. The only cars left will be playthings, sports cars. They'll be just like horses are today, a *sport*. Somebody over at General Motors is saying-What if *he is right*?

Whole cities, and especially New York, will end too just like cars, no longer vital to the nation but . . . just playthings. People will come to New York solely to amuse themselves, *do* things, not marvel at the magnitude of the city or its riches, but just eat in the restaurants, go to the discotheques, browse through the galleries-

-McLuhan is having lunch at Lutece, a French restaurant at 249 East 50th Street, with four of his admirers, three journalists and a movie star. Lutece is one of the real high-powered, gleaming toothed places in New York where the culturati, the fashionati, literati, and illuminati of all sorts have lunch. The Big Boys go there. It has real wine stewards. It is so expensive, only the man who has to pay is shown the prices. Everybody else at the table gets a menu with just the dishes listed. Eat 'em up, gleaming teeth. So these people with gleaming teeth, glissando voices, lazenge-shape cuff links, peacock-colored Pucci-print dresses signed "Emilio" turn the gleams on each other and sit in there and laugh, cozzen, whisper, bat the eyes, look knowingly, slosh their jowls around at each other in the old fight to make it or make it bigger in the biggest city in the world-and McLuhan just sits out in the garden at Lutece smiling slightly, oblivious to the roiling, wearing a seersucker jacket and the plastic neckband tie, looking ahead as if . . . he were looking through walls.

Well, of course he is! The city-

"Well, of course, a city like New York is obsolete," he says. And all the gleaming teeth and glissando voices are still going *grack grack grack* in the same old way all around, all trying to get to the top of the city that will disappear.

McLuhan was in New York that time because two rather extraordinary men from San Francisco, Howard Gossage and Gerry Feigen, had just begun their ongoing "McLuhan Festival." The original McLuhan Festival was a kind of "happening" or "environment" in an armory at the University of British Columbia, put on by some teachers there. They were part of what is sometimes called "The McLuhan Cult"-esoteric groups of intellectuals who have . . . *discovered* McLuhan, in Canada and in the United States, most of them over the past three years, since *The Gutenberg Galaxy* came out. In the armory they suspended sheets of plastic from the ceiling, forming a maze. Operators aimed light projections at the plastic sheets and at the people walking through them, a movie projector showed a long, meaningless movie of the interior of the empty armory, goofy noises poured out of the loudspeakers, bells rang, somebody banged blocks of wood together up on a podium, somebody else spewed perfume around, dancers flipped around through the crowds, and behind a stretch fabric wall-a frame with a stretch fabric across it-there was a girl, pressed against the stretch fabric wall, like a whole wall made of stretch pants, and *undulating* and humping around back there. Everybody was supposed to come up and *feel it*-the girl up against the stretch fabric -to understand this "tactile communication" McLuhan talks about.

McLuhan Temple! McLuhan in church-the Rev. William Glenesk brings McLuhan into the pulpit of his church, Spencer Memorial, on Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights, one week night in a kind of . . . apotheosis of McLuhan cultism. Glenesk is the "hip" Presbyterian minister who has had jazz combos, dancers, sculpture graven images!-in church. He brought McLuhan in one night and put him in the pulpit and it became . . . cult! like a meeting of all the solitary souls, from the cubicles of the NYU Bronx campus to the lofts of East 10th Street, who had discovered McLuhan on their own. All these artists came in there in the great carved oak insides of the church and sat in the pews, Stanley Vander Beeck the "underground" movie-maker in an orange shirt and red polka dot tie

"It is a hot night," says McLuhan, speaking from the pulpit. "Therefore, I invite you to move forward. Heat obliterates the distance between the speaker and the audience . . ."

But of course! The heat steps up the tactile sense, diminishes the visual; the audience is no longer at ease sitting back and watching the speaker as though he is separated from them like the usual . . . *visual spectacle*. The artists, Vander Beeck, Larry Rivers the painter, John Cage the composer-they are all for McLuhan, even though McLuhan has a paradoxical attitude toward the "modern" arts. On the one hand, he says artists are geniuses who serve as "early warning systems" for

changes in society's sensory balance. But at the same time, he says so-called "modern" art is always one technology behind. In the early nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution came in-the MACHINE age. The artist didn't realize that this was a new age, but they sensed that some kind of change was taking place, and they resented it-damned machine-cog life -so they reacted by coming up with the modern art of the early nineteenth century: NATURE, all those landscapes, grazing sheep -the content of the previous technology, namely, agriculture. Modern! All these modern artists, Constable and Turner, couldn't understand why nobody had even painted these great spewy albumen cloud banks and shaggy green horizons before. In the early twentieth century the ELECTRONIC age began, and the artists, only fifty or seventy-five years behind, as usual, suddenly discovered cubism and other abstract forms, breaking up objects into planes, spheres, component parts-the content of the MACHINE age, the industrial technology of the nineteenth century. But in any case, the artist's immediately obsolete "modernism" is a sign that something is changing in society's sensory balance. The artists seem to like this idea that they are the "early warning," the avant-garde, even if they are moving forward backwards.

They also like his general "culture" orientation. McLuhan started out as an English scholar, after all, and still laces his work with references to Marlowe, Rabelais, Whitman, Cervantes, Francis Bacon, Shakespeare, Joyce. McLuhan's work is really squarely in the area of biology and sociology now, but artists can take to him-he talks their language. It was the same with Freud. Pavlov never caught on with the culturati-all those damned endless clinical descriptions of dog brains. But Freud was "cultural," a lot of great business from Sophocles, Aeschylus, da Vinci, King Oedipus running around, bare-breasted Electra, all those classical lovelies. Freud wrote like an art dealer prospecting in the forbidden lands of brain physiology.

McLuhan talks the same language, and people are willing to undertake massive artistic expressions of his new science of the senses. In the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, a McLuhanite named Harley Parker is designing a "pure McLuhan" gallery for displaying invertebrate paleontology, fishes and things, "a gallery of total sensory involvement," Harley Parker says, with the smell of the sea piped in, the tape-recorded sound of waves, colored lights simulating the fuzzy-plankton undersea green, "not just a gallery of data, but a total experience." In New York, Father John Culkin of Fordham University is considering sort of the same thing, a McLuhan architectural environment, only on a much larger scale, a whole communications center at Lincoln Center, the big culture temple.

But with the standard old line romantic-reactionary literati of New York-that is another story. Old doggies like Dwight Macdonald recoil from McLuhan. This man, this pop Guru McLuhan, asserts he supremacy of technology, the environment, over the romantic ego. McLuhan says man succumbs to the new

technologies, the new sensory balance the technologies impose, no matter how hard he fights it, even if he doesn't watch the idiot box -*and I don't pay attention to ads*-no matter what. The old doggies put their faces up in the air, with their eyeballs rolled back, looking for God, and moan a few howls there inside their parlor-floor brownstones at this big red fire siren going by, Marshall McLuhan.

Get this man. But if they want to get at McLuhan, they ought to forget the sanctity of the romantic ego, the last godhead of the literati, and go after him where he is actually vulnerable; one place is his idea of the sensory balance of man and the dominance of one sense over another and so forth. McLuhan is talking straight physiology here, science and he has not proved that the five senses are actually set up that way. Maybe it can't be proved. As yet, there is no apparatus for measuring just how intensely the human mind is attuned to this or that sense. Knowledge about three of the senses, smell, taste, and touch, is still absolutely primitive. The sense of smell, for example, cannot be measured at all, currently. Perfume makers have to use people they call "noses" to get the right combination for different scents. They put a white smock on THE NOSE and squirt one test batch of hair spray in a tin closet and THE NOSE jumps in there, and then he jumps out of there, and they squirt another batch in the next closet, and THE NOSE jumps in there, and so on and on, with this NOSE in a white smock leaping and diving in tin cubicles-this is sensory *measurement* in the modern age.

The other place they might get McLuhan is in his crazy daredevil weakness for making analogies. He loves the things. He soars around making analogies. The Russians still have a basically aural, tribal sensory balance, and they like to do their spying by ear, hiding microphones in wooden American eagle seals in the American Embassy and so forth. That seems perfectly all right to them, that's natural, but they are scandalized by something like the American U-2 flights-that is *visual* spying, spying by eye. Americans, on the other hand, are basically a visual people; the U-2 flights seem like the natural way to spy, but a mike in the eagle that's a scandal to the visual Americans. Beautiful McLuhan rubric -but . . .

But, all right, he may have missed the mark on this or that, but McLuhan will remain a major figure in the social sciences if for no other reason than that he has opened up the whole subject of the way the new technologies are changing people's thinking, reactions, life styles, everything. One means, well, one is in a supermarket and here comes some Adam's-apply carbuncled kid with bad hair pushing a rolling hamper full of All Detergent Man Mountain Giant Bonus boxes, and he is not looking where he is going; he is not *looking* at anything; his eyes are turned off and screened over, and there is a plug in his skull leading to the transistor radio in the breast pocket of his shirt, and he is blamming his free hand on the Giant All boxes, *blam blam ble-blam blam*, keeping time to the Rolling Stones, *Hey You Get Offa My Cloud*; somewhere inside of his skull, *blam blam*, plugged into some kind of electronic circuit out there, another world-and

one knows, instinctively, that all this is changing people in some kind of way. Sociologists and physiologists have done practically nothing on the subject. They have done practically nothing on the way the automobile has changed Americans, as long as cars have been around. Every time sociologists have a meeting, somebody gets up and says, why doesn't somebody make a real study of the American automobile? Not just the stuff about how they're choking our cities or how they made the big housing developments possible, but how they . . . well, change people.

Not even with cars! Much less with television, radio, computers -McLuhan comes on like the only man to reach a huge, hitherto unknown planet or something, and there is so much ground to cover and so little time, all this unknown ground, mothering earthquake, swallowing everybody up and they don't even know it. That is the way McLuhan thinks of it, and he exasperates

A television executive is up in Howard Gossage's office in the firehouse in San Francisco, talking to McLuhan and saying how a couple of things he said don't fit together, they don't hold up; maybe it is the part about the Russian hidden microphones or something. McLuhan pulls his chin down into his neck and opens his right hand like a century plant-

"I'm not offering this as a self-contained theory; I'm making probes. Probes. There is so much here that hasn't even been gone into, I have no interest in debating it point by point along the way. There is so much that hasn't even been explored."

Rather grand manner. He won't argue, he just keeps *probing*, he spins off theories and leaves them there for somebody else to debate, moving on all the time on his single track . . . but, of course. The prophet.

A lot of McLuhanites have started speaking of him as a prophet. It is only partly his visions of the future. It is more his extraordinary attitude, his demeanor, his qualities of monomania, of mission-He do *esn't* debate other scholars, much less TV executives. He is not competing for status; he is . . . alone on a vast unseen terrain, the walker through walls, the X-ray eye . . . TV executives. McLuhan even characterizes General Sarnoff, Generalissimo of RCA and NBC, the most powerful man in American communications, a *god* in the TV world, and the eyes of the government, too, for that matter-McLuhan characterizes the good General as one of the "technological idiots." Sarnoff is one of those people who thinks that television is merely a wonderful tool whose impact is merely what a man chooses to do with it.

McLuhan flies all over Canada and the United States to talk to groups of five, six, twelve, well, not twelve, fourteen . . . disciples. Numbers mean nothing to him. If a thousand people suddenly turned up, it might be a bad sign-McLuhan sits in the

upper room at the firehouse at a round table with six or eight people, Gossage, Feigen, Mike Robbins of Young & Rubicam, the advertising agency, Herbert Gold, the novelist, Edward Keating, editor of *Ramparts* magazine, not disciples- But what if he is right-and somebody asks McLuhan what he thinks of the big communications conference going on in San Francisco at that very moment, at the Hilton Hotel, a thousand people, headed by the great semanticist, S. I. Hayakawa.

"Well . . . they're all working from very obsolete premises, of course. Almost by definition."

By definition?

"Certainly. By the time you can get a thousand people to agree on enough principles to hold such a meeting, conditions will already have changed, the principles will be useless."

McLuhan pulls his chin down into his neck. The Hayakawa conference . . . disappears.

McLuhan may get some of the normal chuckly human satisfaction out of putting down the General Sarnoffs and the Hayakawas of this world and bringing to package design moguls the news that packages have had it and so forth-it is hard to say. More likely, though, he is simply oblivious to the stake other people have in the things he is talking about. He seems oblivious to all the more obvious signs of status where he himself is involved. He just snaps on that Pree-Tide plastic neckband necktie in the morning and resumes his position, at the monomaniacal center of the unseen world . . .

Unseen scholars. McLuhan comes out of a world that few people know about, the world of the liberal arts scholars, the graduate schools, the *carrels*. It is a far more detached and isolated life than any garret life of the artists. Garret life? Artists today spend all their time calling up Bloomingdale's to see if the yellow velvet Milo Laducci chairs they ordered are in yet. Liberal arts scholars, especially in McLuhan's field, English literature,

start out in graduate school in little cubicles, known as carrels, in the stacks of the university libraries with nothing but a couple of metal Klampiton shelves of books to sustain them, sitting there making scholarly analogies-detecting signs of Rabelais in Sterne, signs of Byron- would you believe it? in Thoreau, signs of Ovid in Pound, signs of -analogies-hunched over in silence with only the far-off sound of Maggie, a Girl of the Stacks, a townie who puts books back on the shelves-now she is all right, a little lower-class-puffy in the nose, but-only the sound of her to inject some stray, sport thoughts into this intensely isolated regimen. In effect, the graduate school scholar settles down to a life of little

cubicles, little journals, little money, little chance of notice by the outside world-unless his intense exercises in analogies, mental combinations, bust out with something so . . . electrifying as Marshall McLuhan's.

Even then there is no one in the . . . outside world able to scout scholarly stars, it is all so esoteric. But McLuhan has had Gossage and Feigen, two of the most imaginative characters in San Francisco. Gossage is a tall, pale advertising man with one of the great heads of gray hair in the USA, flowing back like John Barrymore's. Feigen is a psychiatrist who became a surgeon; he is dark and has these big eyes and a gong-kicker mustache like Jerry Colonna, the comedian. He is also a ventriloquist and carries around a morbid looking dummy named Becky and is able to get into great psychological duels with strangers, speaking through the dummy. Gossage and Feigen started a firm called Generalists, Inc., acting as consultants to people who can't get what they need from specialists because what they need is the big picture. One thing that drew them to McLuhan was his belief in "generalism" -pattern recognition. McLuhan, for example, dismisses the idea of university "departments," history, political science, sociology, and so forth; he considers all that obsolete and works in four or five of the old "fields" at once. It is all one field to him. So Gossage and Feigen invested about \$6000 into just taking McLuhan around to talk to people, Big Boys, all sorts, outside the academic world, on both coasts. Gossage says they had nothing particular in mind, no special goal, they just wanted to play it "fat, dumb and happy" and see what would happen.

It all turned out kind of like the way the architect in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* describes life as being like one of those whirling discs at the old amusement parks. You get on the disc and it starts spinning and the faster it goes, the more centrifugal force builds up to throw you off it. The speed on the outer edge of the disc is so fast, you have to hold on for dear life just to stay on but you get a hell of a ride. The closer you can get to the center of the disc, the slower the speed is and the easier it is to stand up. In fact, theoretically, at the very center there is a point that is completely motionless. In life, some people won't get on the disc at all.

They just sit in the stands and watch. Some people like to get on the outer edge and hang on and ride like hell-that would be Gossage and Feigen. Others are standing up and falling down, staggering, lurching toward the center. And a few, a very few, reach the middle, that perfect motionless point, and stand up in the dead center of the roaring whirligig as if nothing could be clearer and less confused-That would be McLuhan.

Gossage and Feigen were bringing McLuhan to New York last May, and McLuhan was two days late getting there. He was in Toronto grading papers for two days.

"Grading papers?" says Gossage. Gossage can see the New York panoply of lunches at the Lombardy, lunches at Lutece, men like Gibson McCabe, and God knows who all else high in the world of communications waiting for McLuhan- and McLuhan holed up imperturbably grading papers. "Listen," says Gossage. "There are so many people willing to invest money in your work now, you'll never have to grade papers again."

"You mean it's going to be fun from now on?" says McLuhan.

"Everything's coming up roses," says Gossage.

In San Francisco, Gossage and Feigen take McLuhan to a "topless waitress" restaurant, the Off Broadway, at the request of some writer from New York in a loud checked suit. Herb Caen, the columnist, is also along. Everybody is a little taken aback. There they all are in the black-light gloom of the Off Broadway with waitresses walking around wearing nothing but high-heel shoes and bikini underpants, and nobody knows quite how to react, what to say, except for McLuhan. Finally, Caen says that this girl over here is good looking-

"Do you know what you said?" says McLuhan, "Good look *ing*. That's a visual orientation. You're separating yourself from the girls. You are sitting back and *looking*. Actually, the lights are dim in here, this is meant as a *tactile* experience, but visual man doesn't react that way."

And everyone looks to McLuhan to see if he is joking, but it is impossible to tell there in the gloom. All that is clear is that . . . yes, McLuhan has already absorbed the whole roaring whirligig into his motionless center. And later in the day, Gossage presents the *piece de resistance* of the McLuhan Festival, a party in the firehouse. The first floor of the firehouse, now the lobby, is filled, and yet in there Gossage has put a twelve-piece mariachi band, with trumpets . . . *En la Bodega* and the mariachi players stand on the tile in their piped powder blue suits blasting away on the trumpets and *Tout San Francisco* is filing into the firehouse into the face of the what the hell is Gossage up to now, *Santa Barranza*, mariachi trumpets, the trumpet announcement of the new Darwin-Freud Einstein, *Grack*, *En la Bodega*. Then McLuhan himself arrives, filing into the firehouse, and there before him is a field of powder blue and . . . yaaaaaaaaaaaaagggghhhhhh trumpets-and Gossage sits on the stairway with his head thrown back, laughing over the spectacle, but McLuhan-well, let one see here, or, actually, not see, the auditory sense is sharply stepped up, the visual fades, just the slightest haze of powder blue-of course! one need only stop struggling with one's eyes, roil, roil, well, of course, it is clear and . . . why not? serene, the new world.