

In a note to the editor, Mr. McLuhan said of this article: "It is a real step beyond my *Understanding Media* volume. What I have been describing for ten years in the phrase 'The medium is the message' is better explained here. The fact that a new medium is environmental at once describes why it is the 'message' and why it is mostly unconscious."

# NEW MEDIA AND THE ARTS

by marshall McLuhan

New media, new technologies, new extensions of human powers, tend to be environmental. Tools, script, as much as wheel, or photograph, or Telstar, create a new environment, a new matrix for the existing technologies. The older technologies, the older environment, become the content of the new environmental technology. Technologies, as they tend to create total environmental change, could plausibly be regarded as archetypal. Telstar creates a new environment for our planet, even as the planet itself becomes the content of Telstar. Whatever becomes the content of a new environment tends to become processed and patterned into an art form. Indeed, it becomes *clichéd* and conventionalized, needing the encounter with other forms and environments in order to awaken its potential. The history of the arts and sciences could be written in terms of the continuing process by which new technologies create new environments for old technologies. The old technology, as the content of the new, quickly becomes tidied up into an art form, such as is now happening to film since it has become the content of TV.

The invention of script provided a technology that created extensive new environments. The content of script was at first the oral tradition of poetry and wisdom. Just how the content of script was affected by the new medium of writing is a story that has been told by Albert Lord in his *Singer of Tales* and by Eric Havelock in his *Preface to Plato*. The new technology, in creating new environment for the old technology, maximizes change. Yet the environmental is also the unnoticeable. We seem to be least conscious of the most archetypal technologies. Nature had been environmental for a good while before it became the content of the new industrial environment of the 18th and 19th centuries. As content of the mechanical technology, Nature became an art form. With the advent of electric technology as a new archetypal environment, the mechanical technology, in its turn, became content and art form. The futurists, the cubists, the Vorticists, and others accepted the mechanical as an art form. Today, Pop art, derived from the old environment of advertising technology, appears as an art form. Advertising had become an environmental and archetypal form with the aid of photography and radio. When this whole advertising complex suddenly



became included in the new TV environment, the usual unconscious process began. Advertising began to get tidied up into an art form, much to its own surprise. Telstar, in turn, creates a new environmental technology for which the planet itself is the content, as it were. The entire human environment of the planet now moves increasingly towards the status of an artefact. For some time now, the problems of revising the educational establishment, as well as the problems of reshaping the nature of Work, have presented the necessity of dealing with the environmental as if it too were artefact. Perhaps this is another way of confronting the existential, because to deal with the environmental as artefact is to move that which has long been unconscious onto the plane of knowing.

For centuries our artists have offered us artefacts as a means of creating new vision and new awareness. The artefact, as much as the content of our curricula, has provided us with a means of correcting the defects of perception that have been engendered by specialized technological environments. Electric technology offers, perhaps for the first time, a means of dealing with the environment itself as a direct instrument of vision and knowing.

New media are new archetypes, at first disguised as degradations of older media. This degradation happens when new media inevitably use older ones as content. Using the older ones as content hastens the tidying-up process by which a medium becomes an art form. For example, film has become the content of TV. When film was new, it used the novel and the drama as content. When film seemed to be most itself, most *avant-garde*, as in the documentary, it was in effect using the newspaper as content. Dickens anticipated the form of film when he was most documentary in his novels. In *David Copperfield*, he experimented with the eyes of a child as if they were a camera turned on the adult world. To see the adult world as a live process unfolding mysteriously to the child awareness was a notable degree of anticipation of film form and camera eye. D. W. Griffiths recognized this and habitually carried a volume of Dickens with him on location. He would sit down and open his Dickens in the midst of shooting a film in order to discover new ways of solving his problems.

A glance back to the beginnings of print will show this strange process at work whereby the new form swallows, as it were, an older form. Rabelais, in his *Gargantua*, seems to mime this process whereby one medium swallows another. The older medieval forms of fable and narrative, when they enter the new medium of print, seem to be small creatures inside a whale or a monster. This scale of the small thing being encompassed by the larger thing seems to recur, as in Swift's *Gulliver* and in Cecil B. DeMille's epics which swallowed the book, as it were.

In the medium of painting, Hieronymus Bosch performed the same task as Rabelais. He used the new pictorial space of perspective then—that is, a space uniform, continuous and connected—as a new container or environment for the old, iconic, medieval space. Iconic space is discontinuous, and nonuniform, and nonconnected. It is a space in which objects create their own environment. By using the new visual space as container for the old iconic or tactual space, Bosch created the same kind of fantasy



as Rabelais. Today it is the iconic world that has become the container for the old visual space, creating not dissimilar nightmarishness in our world.

The gigantism of Rabelais in the presence of the first onset of typography was reported by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. When the new form swallows the older form, there is a natural confusion of scales and images during the process of translating the old into the new. During this process, the culture seems to enter a phase of fantasy and unreality. Marlowe and Shakespeare used the new p.a. system of blank verse as means of taking over and magnifying the world of medieval chronicle and anecdote. Edmund Spenser's *Fairie Queen* used the world of print to enshrine the fantasy and imagery of the preceding age. Milton did the same for the sermon and the theological tract, though he admitted the very strong appeal that the medieval image still offered as possible content for his new pictorial space created by the printed world.

Swift's *Tale of A Tub* used the new world of print to enclose the preceding world of the sermon and theological exegesis. Swift is aware of the conflict of forms somewhat in the manner of *Mad Magazine* today. Bunyan, using Swift's themes and components, takes them far more literally and seriously. His tales use the sermon and the theological tract with all the sobriety of our "sage and serious Spenser."

A notable feature of Swift's *Gulliver* is that his story line is tied to the hand rather than to the foot. It is this that gives his work its bond with traditional art forms. *Gulliver* is an extraordinarily tactual world in which we encounter objects and situations in a many-sided way of multi-sensuous involvement. What happens with Fielding and Smollett is that the eye is suddenly linked to the foot rather than to the hand, and begins to move with all the freedom and *tracking* curiosity of the movie camera. This meant a progressive specialization of the sensory life in the arts with mounting stress upon the eye in isolation from the other senses. With Sterne and Jane Austen there is a very qualified acceptance of this development. Sterne preferred as content the older forms of the sermon and the tract, as did Swift. Jane Austen also used as content the livelier forms of the moral essays of the 18th century.

Scott and Byron take over into their camera-eye world the new pictorial perspectives developed by the 18th century. With Scott and Byron the camera eye has become so tightly tied to the foot that they offer experience of the travelogue as much as any film today.

Dickens, by contrast, ties the camera to the minute inspection of the newspaper documentation. Somewhat earlier, George Crabbe had experimented with this dimension. Dickens, by using the newspaper as the content of the older novel form, created a new hybrid of great power. As usual, when the new medium swallowed an older one, conventional taste protested that vulgarization had occurred. Paradoxically, Dickens, by pushing the camera eye to a point of high fidelity, broke out of the domain of perspective and moved back into the highly tactual and iconic world of surrealism and modern art.



TV took over the film world as its lawful prey, or content. Since the TV image is a kind of braille that prefers flat space and stark contours, its preference for the out-of-doors is a way of announcing that its natural space is one that is unenclosed and therefore nonperspective and nonpictorial. The TV camera unites the eye and the hand as much as the movie camera had united the eye and the foot. The TV camera has no shutter. It does not deal with aspects or facets of objects in high resolution. It is a means of direct *pick-up* by the electric groping over surfaces. Since the space of active touch is discontinuous, one of the natural results of TV pressure on the film is in the development of polyvision, or multiple screen projection. As long as the camera was tied to the foot rather than to the hand, it tended to prefer the uniform, continuous and connected space of the visual sense. No such preference characterizes the TV camera.

To sum this up, it can be enunciated as a principle that all new media or technologies, whatever, create new environments, psychic and social, that assume as their natural content the earlier technologies. Moreover, the content of these new environments undergoes a progressive reshaping so that what had appeared earlier as dishevelled and degraded becomes conventionalized into an artistic genre. TV, as the latest archetypal environment or technology, is very much in this dishevelled phase. The movie remained in such a dishevelled phase for decades. Whether Telstar is already a new archetypal environment that assumes the present TV form as its content will appear fairly soon. The principle of new technology as an archetypal environment that moulds new art forms out of the antecedent technologies is a principle that applies to all the arts and sciences, to architecture as much as to music, or mathematics. This principle affords a means of swift insight into the most complex phases of the life of cultural forms.

