

The Future of Man in the Electric Age

British Broadcasting Corporation 1965

Monitor

Interviewer: Frank Kermode (British literary critic)

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Kermode

In a sense, you have been a historian as you've gone about your work. Let's talk first a little, if we may, about your book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where you argue that for a long time, without actually understanding it, we've been living in a culture in which our whole way of looking at the world has been determined by typography, by the successiveness of print and so on. Would you like to enlarge on that a bit?

McLuhan

Well, I remember I decided to write that book when I came across a piece by the psychiatrist, J.C. Carruthers, on the African mind in health and disease, describing the effects of the printed word on the African populations – it startled me and decided me to plunge in. We have a better opportunity of seeing our old technologies when they confront other populations elsewhere in the world – the effects they have on most people are so startling and so sudden that we have an opportunity to see what happened to us over many centuries.

Kermode

Yes, which we couldn't see because we're inside the system.

McLuhan

Yes.

Kermode

Don't you say that what happened was that we got used to having our information processed as it is in print – that is to say it's set

out successively – whereas at the root of your thoughts, perhaps, there's the view that we can see the world as an image instantaneously, but that we've chosen, under the pressure of a technology, to set it out successively like a block of print.

McLuhan Well, every technology has its own ground rules, as it were. It decides all sorts of arrangements in other spheres. The effect of script and the ability to make inventories and collect data and store data changed many social habits and processes back as early as 3000 BC. However, that's about as early as scripts began. The effects of rearranging one's experience, organizing one's experience by these new extensions of our powers, are quite unexpected. Perhaps one way of putting it is to say that writing represents a high degree of specializing of our powers.

Kermode Yes.

McLuhan Compared to pre-literate societies, there's a considerable concentration on one faculty when you develop a skill like scripting.

Kermode Well, this is the visual – what you call the visual sense.

McLuhan Yes, this is a highly specialized stress, compared to anything in ordinary aural societies. There've been many studies made of this in various ways, but in our own Western world the rise of the phonetic alphabet seems to have had much to do with platonic culture and the ordering of experience in the terms of ideas – classifying of data and experience by ideas.

Kermode You mean that sight has become the pre-eminent sense, as it was with Plato, and it went on being so in so-called civilized, as opposed to primitive, societies?

McLuhan Increasingly so, to the –

Kermode – and climaxed with the invention of printing –

McLuhan Printing stepped it up to a considerable pitch, yes.

Kermode Now, how would you describe the impact of the invention of the printing press? Give us some instances of what happened as a consequence of it.

McLuhan It created – almost overnight it created what we call a nationalism, what in effect was a public. The old manuscript forms were not sufficiently powerful instruments of technology to create publics in the sense that print was able to do – unified, homogeneous, reading publics.

Everything that we prize in our Western world in matters of individualism, separatism, and of unique point of view and private judgment – all those factors are highly favored by the printed word, and not really favored by other forms of culture like radio or earlier by the manuscript. But this stepping up of the fragmented, the private, the individual, the private judgment, the point of view, in fact our whole vocabularies, underwent huge change with the arrival of such technology.

Kermode Now, could I ask you about the technology which, in your view, is superseding it and which is having its own effect on our lives, comparable with, though of course entirely differently in kind to, the Gutenberg technology?

McLuhan Well, the Gutenberg technology was mechanical to an extreme degree. In fact, it originated a good deal of the later mechanical revolution assembly-line style and the fragmentation of the operations and functions as the very rationale of industrialization.

Kermode Yes.

McLuhan This fragmentation had begun much earlier, after the hunter and the food Gatherers, with Neolithic man. I suppose, in an extreme way, one might say Gutenberg was the last phase of the Neolithic revolution. Gutenberg plus the industrial revolution that followed was a pushing of specialism that came in with the Neolithic man, the agrarian revolution – pushing of specialism all the way, and then suddenly we encountered the electric or electromagnetism, which seems to have a totally different principle. It is, some people feel, an extension of our nervous system, not an extension merely of our bodies?

Kermode Hm.

McLuhan If the wheel is an extension of feet, and tools of hands and arms, then electromagnetism seems to be in its technological manifestations an extension of our nerves and becomes mainly an information system. It is above all a feedback or looped system. But the peculiarity, you see, after the age of the wheel, you suddenly encounter the age of the circuit. The wheel pushed to an extreme suddenly acquires opposite characteristics. This seems to happen with a good many technologies – that if they get pushed to a very distant point, they reverse their characteristics.

Kermode What difference is the electric technology making to our interest in content in what the medium actually says?

McLuhan One of the effects of switching over to circuitry from mechanical moving parts and wheels is an enormous increase in the amount of information that is moving. You cannot cope with vast amounts of information in the old fragmentary classified patterns. You tend to go looking for mythic and structural forms in order to manage such complex data, moving at very high speeds, so the electric engineers often speak of pattern recognition as a normal need of people processing data electrically and by computers and so on – a need for pattern recognition. It's a need which the poets foresaw a century ago in their drive back to mythic forms of organizing experience.

Kermode Well, here we are, a couple of archaic literate men, Gutenberg men, talking on the television. What is the audience getting from this? Is it listening to what we're saying, or is it feeling the impact of a new electric medium?

McLuhan There is a book called *Is Anybody Listening?* It's what worries the advertising men a great deal. The idea of feedback, of being involved in one's own participation, in one's own audience participation, is a natural product of circuitry. Everything under electric conditions is looped. You become folded over into yourself. Your image of yourself changes completely.

Kermode In the other book, *Understanding Media*, where you ... use a kind of slogan, I think the expression is the "medium is the message." Would you like to illuminate that?

McLuhan I think it is more satisfactory to say that any medium, be it radio or be it wheel, tends to create a completely new human environment.

Kermode Yeah.

McLuhan The human environment, as such, tends to have a kind of invisible character about it. The unawareness of the environmental is compensated for by the attention to the content of the environment. The environment as merely a set of ground rules and as a kind of overall enveloping force gets very little recognition as a form, except from the artist. I think our arts, if you look at them in this connection, do throw quite a lot of light on environments. The artist is usually engaged in somewhat excitedly explaining to people the character of new environments and new strategies of culture necessary to cope with them. Blake is an extreme case of a man who was absolutely panicked by the kind of new environment that he saw forming around him under the auspices of Newton and Locke and industrialism – he thought it was going to smash the unity of the imaginative and sensory life all to bits. But the artist, what he was insisting upon in his own lifetime, became quite a popular and

widespread movement later on.

Kermode Can I return to television because here we are, whoever's listening to us, is also undergoing the impact of television at the moment. On your view, they're all deceiving themselves insofar as they're paying attention to what we're saying, because what's going on is a medium which is in itself the image that they ought to be concerning themselves with.

McLuhan The medium of television has many characteristics which have been unheeded. Mostly it is seen under the aspect of movie form. The TV camera does not have a shutter, does not take pictures. It picks up, as radio picks up ... its environment, handles it, scans it – and the effect of the TV image is iconic in the sense that it shapes things by contours rather than by little snapshots.

Kermode This is one of the words that you use a good deal, iconic. We'd better be clear what you mean.

McLuhan I think, again to tie in with Blake, his whole insistence upon the engraved, the highly patterned and highly sculptured forms and images – that the iconic in that sense is very low in visual quality, very high in tactile. Active touch, not cutaneous but active touch, as the psychologists say.

Kermode You call television a tactile medium.

McLuhan Iconic medium ... having much in common with the cartoon for which it is ideally suited. Much more well suited than for pictures.

Kermode If you feel that way, I'm going to have to come to terms, or we are coming to terms much more, with typographical man, with this kind of instantaneous image. And I'd like now just to ask you about the distinction that you draw between different kinds of media within the electric technology, because some, such as televi-

sion, you call cool, and some such as radio, hot. Now what does this mean?

McLuhan It has to do with the slang phrase the hot and the cool, which puzzles many people. The way it's used in slang reverses the meaning of cool. Cool in the slang form has come to mean involved, deeply participative, deeply engaged. Everything that we had formerly meant by heated in argument is now called cool in slang. The idea that cool has reversed its meaning, I think has some bearing on the fact that our culture has shifted a good deal of its stress into a demand that we be more committed, more involved in the situations in which we ordinarily work.

Kermode A cool medium is one in which the definition is low, and the audience has to work and supply.

McLuhan Yes, the cartoon you see, that we were mentioning before. This is cool.

Kermode Yes.

McLuhan Jazz as compared with classical music has many of these aspects of discontinuity and very much room for fill in.

Kermode Yes.

McLuhan But where the information or data content level is low, the fill-in or participation is high. If you fill the situation with complex data, the opportunity for completion fill-in is less and participation is less.

Kermode Now this reminds me to ask you what I think is pretty important about your work, but if you got phases like this which are determined technologically, one cannot only speak about the kind of state of affairs we now have, one can also to some degree do some

prediction. Now I think in *Understanding Media* you sometimes write as if we'd pushed on deeper into electric technology than we actually have. But you do venture some predictions about the kind of life, the kind of quality of feeling that we're going to have with the new alteration in our senses. Could you say something about that?

McLuhan

Well, I remember when I was here two years ago after a long absence, I was quite startled at the upsurge of regional dialects in England as compared with 20 years earlier, and the relative decline of standard and homogeneous English, and the quite proud display of dialects that I had hardly heard before when I lived here. This drive in depth toward regional depth of culture is a normal feature of electronic forms because of this circuitry that involves us deeper and deeper in ourselves. The French separatists, for example, at the present time in Quebec are very much related to this new image they have of themselves since television – a depth image.

Kermode

Now the vision of the future that your book could leave one with is ... a big brother image in a sense. You speak of, for example, programming cultures. For instance, you say that if the South African scene looks like it is getting too hot, then we program a lot of television, cool them off, this kind of interference with what the typographical or literate man calls human rights.

McLuhan

We have never stopped interfering drastically with ourselves by every technology we could latch onto. We have absolutely disrupted our lives over and over again.

Kermode

Do you think this might lead us into a kind of electric totalitarianism?

McLuhan

No, I think the logic, if left unimpeded, the logic of this sort of electric world is stasis.

Kermode

Where do you see ... is there a terminus or should we always go from the thesis of typography to the antithesis of electricity.

McLuhan

I think if there is a logic and a hopeful one that appears in this, it is the dispelling of all unconscious aspects of our lives altogether. That, in order to live with ourselves in such depth, in such instant feedback situations, we have to understand everything – so that our easygoing lolling about in the lap of the the unconscious cannot endure, that we will have to take over the total human environment as an artifact. But it seems to be forced upon us, the need to become completely autonomous and aware of all the consequences of everything we're doing before the consequences occur is where we're heading.