

Television News as a New Mythic Form

TV Ontario 1970
Brave New Words
Interview by Tom Wolfe

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Wolfe I think a hundred years from now historians, that's assuming that the Chinese will have any interest our character or history, won't look at the 1960s in the case of, say, the United States as the era of the war in Vietnam, of the moon shot or anything of that sort. I think it will be looked at in terms of what you refer to as the ground has changed, the way people have changed the their ways of living.

McLuhan We used to concentrate on figures and now the ground itself has become figure. The area of attention has shifted from the older characters to the ground. Now that includes audience. The audience has now become actor. Don't you think this is a tendency as a result of developments in our time?

Wolfe Well, certainly Woodstock was a perfect example of it. Woodstock is probably the great, typical event of our times because ...

McLuhan Instant city.

Wolfe It was set up. From the very beginning there was going to be a movie made of Woodstock. As it started out every one of us were paying our eighteen dollars for the weekend. Gradually, so many people came, they just abandoned that and let them all come in. But actually they should have paid them all eighteen dollars as

they came in because they became the show.

McLuhan

Consider in that regard what we call coverage. Coverage now is no longer just on a single individual but on a whole complex action. In turn, don't you think that in both Vietnam and in the North of Ireland that the audience wants to get into the action, that the coverage encourages the audience to get into the action? I have been told by reporters from the North of Ireland that when the news is not on, and the cameras are ready to go, the public is all out in the streets ready to go into action as soon as the cameras are.

Wolfe

Yes, that's marvelous.

McLuhan

They all retire inside to watch the news, and then come outside to participate in covering the news and in acting it out themselves. Now I think the difference between hired actors and the public itself is tending to merge. This kind of unexpected flip happened in the Eichmann trial. The coverage pushes up the figure dramatically into heroic dimensions but at the same time involves the audience so completely in the process of his action that it begins to feel far more guilty than he did. He appears merely as a person carrying out orders - the orders of the community. He was a well-adjusted, nice guy who was doing what had to be done, according to the audience command, the audience being so involved in this process that it now begins to feel like a villain. Therefore, they want to cut that show right out of their lives.

Wolfe

Do you think this explains the really strange fascination that Arthur Bremer had with Sirhan Sirhan? Bremer obviously looked at Sirhan as some kind of heroic figure. He wasn't this poor, helpless, useless human being who had done this desperate thing, certainly not in Arthur Bremer's eyes.

McLuhan

No, and again, he had made the news. Sirhan had made the news. Now this you can take in every sense of the word as having gotten into the news, having been created into a vast figure by the news. "Making the news" is a very strange phrase, but the media them-

selves can now create events that are so much bigger than people, so much bigger than the audience, that it really is a new mythic form.

Wolfe

I would really like to run down a checklist of all the predictions you made six years ago that people thought were absolutely crazy that have come true. I remember your saying once that there would be a time when they would have to pay students to go to school. Well, there is a new federal program in the United States where they're doing just that. They figure the only way they can get these large numbers of kids interested is to give them a little salary.

McLuhan

I've always been very careful never to predict anything that had not already happened. The future is not what it used to be.