

Marshall McLuhan in Conversation with Norman Mailer

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The Summer Way
Moderator: Ken Foley

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McLuhan “Violence is essentially the form of the quest for identity.”

Mailer “I don’t really go around punching out guys in the nose – and I try to avoid getting punched in the nose.”

McLuhan “The absolute indispensability of the artist is that he alone in the encounter with the present can give the pattern recognition.”

Mailer “You take for granted processes which I would consider Faustian, tragic, dramatic, apocalyptic, cataleptic.”

McLuhan “Gone into orbit.”

Warren Davis Tonight: a meeting of minds, Norman Mailer and Marshall McLuhan on The Summer Way.

Two of the most remarkable men of this era must surely be Norman Mailer and Marshall McLuhan. The one, a prophet of hip and the probable conscience of the nation. The other, a prophet of the media and a spokesman for the electronic age.

Mailer’s career is studded with literary success and stained with matrimonial failure. It had its early beginnings with The Naked

and the Dead, a bestseller that brought him instant fame. Recent years have been lean, but last October he joined 50,000 Americans in a march on the Pentagon to protest against the war in Vietnam. Mailer pushed his way through police barricades to certain arrest. He is now appealing a five-day prison sentence. His account of that skirmish has become what the critics have called his greatest book, *Armies of the Night*, a modern-day document of dissent.

In his latest about-to-be-released book, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, Marshall McLuhan maintains that violence is really a quest for identity and firmly nails down his prediction that the media will eventually hurl 20th-century man back to tribalism. Well, who or what does he speak for? His followers claim he's a brilliant revolutionary in his own right who speaks for the future. His critics are less enthusiastic. They see more jargon than genius in his tribal village, rearview mirror, and host of novel slogans that have become his universally acknowledged trademarks. Call him what you will, there's no doubt that McLuhan's definition of communication makes him at least a passing master of the media.

Two men of our time. Hate them or love them. But you must listen to what they say on tonight's meeting of minds.

Here's Ken Foley face to face with Norman Mailer and Marshall McLuhan.

Mailer

Look Marshall, we're both agreed that man is accelerating at an extraordinary rate into a super-technological world, if you will. And that the modes and methods by which men instruct themselves and are instructed are shifting in extraordinary –

McLuhan

We've gone into orbit.

Mailer

Well, at the same time I would say there's something profoundly autoerotic about this process, and it's sinister for that reason.

McLuhan

It's psychedelic. When you step up the environment to those

speeds, you create the psychedelic thrill. The whole world becomes kaleidoscopic, and you go inward, by the way. It's an inner trip, not an outer trip.

Foley Look, Marshall, you've said, among other things, that a novelist like Norman who is preoccupied with sex and violence is mid-Victorian for that reason. What do you mean by that?

McLuhan Oh, I didn't say that.

Mailer No, you said in that sense I was essentially Victorian.

Foley Centrally Victorian?

Mailer Essentially, I think it was.

Foley Essentially? Well what did you mean by that?

McLuhan I don't –

Foley Well, he's saying what you said.

McLuhan I doubt whether I said that. But anyway, what was the key to the Victorian period? It was the great triumph of the mechanical age, which is the age of fragmentation and specialism. But just at the peak of that mechanical triumph came the electric circuit, flooding in the whole electric image and world.

In 1844, the first year of the commercial telegraph, Kierkegaard published a book called *The Concept of Dread*. He was quite aware that a new environment had formed around the old mechanical one. And whenever a new environment goes around an old one there is always new terror. And we live in a time when we have put

a man-made satellite environment around the planet. The planet is no longer nature; it's no longer the external world. It's now the content of an artwork. Nature has ceased to exist.

Mailer Well, I think you're anticipating a century perhaps, but –

McLuhan But when you put a manmade environment around the planet, you have in a sense abolished nature. Nature from now on has to be programmed.

Mailer Marshall, I think you're raising huge, tremendously serious questions. One of them is that we have not yet put a manmade environment around this planet totally. We have not abolished nature yet. We may be in the process of abolishing nature forever.

McLuhan The environment is not visible. It's information. It's electronic.

Mailer Well, nonetheless, nature still exhibits manifestations which defy all methods of collecting information and data. For example, an earthquake may occur or a tidal wave may come in or a hurricane may strike, and the information will lag critically behind our ability to control it. Even though there may be all sorts of instruments which are warning us of the possibility of these things, man's environment is destroyed by nature.

McLuhan The experience of that event, that disaster, is felt everywhere at once under a single dateline.

Mailer But that's not the same as controlling nature, dominating nature.

McLuhan Oh no, now just wait.

Mailer Superseding nature, it's far from that. I mean nature still does exist as a protagonist on this planet.

McLuhan Oh yes. But it's like our Victorian mechanical environment. It's a rearview mirror image. Every age creates as a utopian image a nostalgic rearview mirror image of itself which puts it thoroughly out of touch with the present. The present is the enemy. The present is the – and this will delight you, Norman – the present is only faced in any generation by the artist. The artist is prepared to study the present as his material because it is the area of challenge to the whole sensory life, and therefore it's anti-utopian. It's a world of anti-values. And the artist who comes in contact with the present produces an avant-garde image that is terrifying to contemporaries.

Mailer I still come back to my particular point, which is that everything you say I would go along with and I would say it's true up to a particular point. That is yes, man does resent his new environment, which comes always at the expense of –

McLuhan He fears it.

Mailer He fears it. He feels a certain claustrophobic relation to it.

McLuhan A sense of total recoil.

Mailer Yes, but that doesn't mean that each new environment is thereby innocent. Some new environments are worse than other new environments.

McLuhan Yes.

Mailer I'm not at all convinced that we're moving into anything that represents any attractive sort of evolution for man.

McLuhan No.

Mailer I think we may be moving toward an apocalyptic end to man.

McLuhan Oh, I don't know.

Mailer These successive environments that you speak of may just be the paroxysms of –

McLuhan An electronic world retribalizes man, yes.

Foley Look, just a second. Now surely you, with the kind of things you've written, can't be accepting the proposition that what a man is living in is an electronic envelope of some kind.

Mailer No, I don't accept it entirely. I think that part of McLuhan's genius is that he is the first man to see how totally we were living in an electronic envelope and proceeded to detail it. And where I part company with him over and over again is that he details it and takes a great kindly pleasure in outlining for us the lineaments of this electronic world, whereas I'm absolutely appalled by it.

I think that there's a kind of totalitarian principle present in this sort of avalanche of over-information, if you will. I mean we –

McLuhan That's a very useful phrase.

Mailer Yes. I think there's a lack of form and order and category in the nature of modern experience which to me speaks of nothing so much as entropy – to wit, that disease which concerns the dissolution of form.

McLuhan But you see any form when pushed to its limits always reverses its characteristics, and information overload is a nice example.

Mailer Well, Marshall, excuse me, that's not really true. Some forms when they're pushed to their limit do not reverse their characteristics. They mainly disappear.

McLuhan It's like cool and cool. You see, cool is reversed.

Mailer Some forms when they push their limits take on forms which are more extreme. For example, somebody, let's say, gets a finger broken, and the finger when it comes out is an extraordinary form. It doesn't reverse its nature, does it?

McLuhan This isn't necessarily pushing the nature of finger to its limits anyway. But we use the word finger in some fascinating contexts. I don't want to lose touch with one word or phrase you brought up, Norman ... violence.

Ray Bradbury was being interviewed not long ago and he pointed out something that struck me with great force. That violence is essentially the form of the quest for identity. And that, whether in an individual life or a whole culture, violence is the quest for group or private identity. Without that interface, without that roughhouse, without that encounter with the world, you don't get an identity. Now this isn't to say that identity is necessarily bought at its true price. We may pay far too much for it.

The other matter, though, of reversal of form that we already got on to, there is in IBM, for example, a phrase that information overload produces pattern recognition. This is the kind of reversal I mean. When you give people too much information, they instantly resort to pattern recognition – in other words, to structuring the experience. And I think this is part of the artist's world.

The artist, when he encounters the present, the contemporary artist, is always seeking new patterns, new pattern recognition, which is his task, for heaven's sake. His great need – the absolute indispensability of the artist – is that he alone in the encounter with the present can get the pattern recognition. He alone has the sensory awareness necessary to tell us what our world is made of. He's more important than the scientist. The scientists are going to

wake up to this shortly and will be resorting en masse to the artist's studio in order to discover the forms of the materials they're dealing with.

Mailer

What I find absolutely fascinating, and at the same time ultimately almost repellent, about your ideas (or funnily not repellent because they're so stimulating) is that you take for granted processes which I would consider Faustian, tragic, dramatic, apocalyptic, cataleptic. For example, when you say that the scientists are going to come around one of these days discovering what the artists have to offer, I would say that they're not going to come around to it by just walking along that road they're on.

McLuhan

No.

Mailer

Because there is a fundamental antagonism between the scientist and the artist which is very deep.

McLuhan

The scientist lives in a world of matching, and his idea of proof or verification is just the matching evidence against evidence. When somebody doesn't match but makes a new breakthrough, this is just as disturbing to the scientist as to the educator. It upsets the whole apple cart.

They used to think that science was something that went on inside an environment that could remain there. Like the lab, it would stay put. Now they know the whole environment changes with every new technological development. In fact, the environment is a technological thing. And so science is beginning to study the human response to their own discoveries increasingly.

Foley

Let me ask you whether you think of yourself as a scientist. Your effects are not the effects of a scientist at all; they're the effects of an artist and precisely a literary man, a writer. You're a constructor of metaphors. Do you think of yourself as a scientist?

McLuhan No. Well, I don't think of myself as an artist, but I've been called both. Now the categories are not very important. It isn't important whether you call something war or peace, unless you pay some attention to what's really going on.

Mailer Excuse me, I'd say it's desperately important whether you call something war or peace. It's desperately important because if it's a war and you're calling it peace, you're deluding yourself – or the rest of the population, and so forth.

McLuhan No.

Mailer No, no, follow this through.

McLuhan I want to.

Mailer And calling something war and it is war, that's very good because everybody then is dealing with the same objective correlative, if you will. Part of the modern disease I'd say is that people are fed this enormous amount of information, but everybody ends up making not only a different use of it but having a different comprehension of the information.

McLuhan What we have created, for example, with the advent of television is a vast generation gap between the pre-TV and the post-TV generations. The parent and child have discovered a considerable gap between themselves in the last ten years, and likewise teacher and student. The child feels utterly alienated. The dropout in school or in college or in big business is alienated by a world which doesn't permit involvement.

Now I'm not saying involvement is a good thing or that civilized detachment and classification is a good thing. I'm simply studying these forms. If you call that science, all right. If the reporting on these new environments is the work of the artist, then I'm an artist. I've no objection to these categories. I'm not much interested

in categories or labels applied to anything at all. That belongs to the old literacy... classification.

Foley I can hardly think of a man who's attached more labels to more things than you have for more people.

McLuhan But not as classifications. Classified data is fragmented and stays in place. My labels say what? The medium ... or the message? These are not easy to classify, nor do they stay in place at all. They're fast-moving entities. They're like electronic particles which are completely non-visual anyway.

Foley Look, if you, Marshall, are the prophet of the media, you, Norman, are surely the prophet of hip.

Mailer Yes, in a way I suppose ... one of fifty prophets of hip.

Foley You're, well okay, let's say a prophet of hip. Your phrase the "white negro," a phrase that meant a lot to a lot of people in this generation that Marshall is talking about. Do you think that he accounts for you, your ideas of hip and your ideas of the white negro as the alienated part of this society.

Mailer Oh, not in the slightest. One of the reasons I'm absolutely fascinated with Marshall McLuhan's work is that it's the only time in my life I've ever encountered a system of ideas which are fascinating, just about totally comprehensive, brilliant, charged with metaphor, extraordinarily stimulating, and yet, finally, there's not a single place in which I find a real, if you will, existential common ground.

Foley What is going on with the negroes, with the dispossessed?

Mailer Well, I'd rather back into that at the other end of the street. What

I'd like to start with is where McLuhan and I start off being a tiny hair apart, and getting further and further apart at a great rate is precisely on the nature of the artist. Because Marshall speaks of him as a man who essentially records –

McLuhan

He records the new world.

Mailer

– who is the man who delineates the new features of each particular period. And I would say that the artist does that and he does one step more, he goes one step further. And he then decides whether this is good or bad. And it doesn't matter whether the artist finally is right or wrong and what is good or bad. What he does do is he gives the people who come into contact with his art a subtler sense of good and bad, and therefore they have a better ability to determine for themselves whether something is good or bad.

Now the reason I keep hitting this note of good or bad is because in all of McLuhan-land you'd never find the words good or bad. You find many jokes about the sort of Victorian, Edwardian, and Gay Twenties indignations about his –

McLuhan

Do you remember a phrase of Edmund Burkes: "I do not know how to draw up an indictment against a whole people." Now I wouldn't know how to value the Western world which we're demolishing by our new technology or the Oriental world which we are Westernizing. We are demolishing the Oriental world and –

Mailer

At a great rate, yes.

McLuhan

And demolishing the Western world. I don't know whether that's good or bad because I wouldn't know how to make a value judgment on such a scale.

Mailer

Well, I'm prepared to, and I'll tell you why I'm prepared to, because I think we have certain guidelines that we can use.

McLuhan

Okay.

Mailer

And one of them is this. Let's say in the 18th century, which you like very much, and I agree with you it was a fine century. One reason it was a fine century means that man's mind was developed to a very high degree, but his sensuous relation to the universe was still not only simple but very pleasurable and very complex.

So if a man wished to encounter another man whose ideas he found fascinating, he had to get into a stagecoach, he had to travel. And on the way he had to recapitulate the entire history of man because as he went through each small village –

McLuhan

It was Dan Boyston who pointed out that the word travel comes from travailler, to work.

Mailer

Yes, yes, indeed. Thank you. As he went through each small village, he had to engage all the local ghosts of this village. He'd get off at a stagecoach inn and he would hear some local folklore perhaps – let's not get over-romantic about this, he might also have bed bugs in his bed. But he had to pass through a series of small but very detailed perils. By the time he arrived at his destination he was a wiser man, if not a richer man. He knew more, and his centrist equipment had been engaged and exercised.

McLuhan

He'd had time to learn some of the local languages.

Mailer

Yes. Also, when he arrived he had time to talk. Now what happens is that when we get into jet planes – I don't want to come on and be everybody's Aunt Siphonia and complain about the good old days, which I never knew either, but I would like to make one particular point. When we get into a jet and travel a thousand miles in an hour and a half and get out, we have travelled through whole areas of existence which we have not necessarily gained. It may be confounding, it may finally be destructive of what is best in the human spirit.

McLuhan But Norman, if you push that all the way, you see what it means is that we will increasingly tend to inhabit all of these areas in depth simultaneously.

Mailer But I disagree with you there. You see, now we finally come to a point where we do disagree. I say that we will inhabit all these areas and we may inhabit them in depth, but we will not inhabit them well.

McLuhan Oh.

Mailer We will inhabit them with a desperately bad fit. To wit, we will pop into a Hindu village, but we won't know a damn thing about that Hindu village. Because all we will know by then, by the time we get to that Hindu village, is that the Hindu village will have created for itself a mode of receiving us. In other words, they will have learned how to deal with us. And what we will get is their knowledge of how to deal with us.

McLuhan When Hindu music, art, and ballet come to our towns, we surely make contact with them in a very rich way, better than we would as travellers or tourists.

Mailer I would rather make contact with my Western music in a rich way first. I never had time to. There's much too much between Western music and myself, so that to have this added benefit of Ravi Shankar does not necessarily fill me with delight.

McLuhan The tendency of music in our time is to become environmental again. And electronic music is increasingly the sounds of the environment itself.

Mailer Distorted ... distorted gravely.

McLuhan But to select is to distort. But Hindu and Chinese music –

Mailer Marshall, excuse me, it's not true. You're jumping to one cardinal point, which is we may select and not distort. We may select the best flower in a patch, pull it out, put it in our vase.

McLuhan You violate the environment made by the flower.

Mailer Well, there's a way to pluck. What I'm saying is that Western man today is at the mercy of his own machines. Now it's a very old notion and a very dull notion, but because it's dull doesn't mean that it's not necessarily true. To therefore welcome the interplay of more and more powerful concatenations of machines doesn't necessarily mean that one is working on the side of the angels, Marshall.

McLuhan No. But these machines are extensions of our own beings and are metaphors – they are literal, not figurative. All the technologies whatever and all the science in the world are extensions of our own bodies and are metaphors therefore. I think it was Allen Tate who said: "A man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a metaphor." But anyway ... Look at the new environments as metaphors of our own bodies and nervous system.

Mailer I'm perfectly prepared to. But what I see there is a dreadful nervous system and a hideous body.

McLuhan All right. But don't feel too disturbed if I choose metaphors to discuss these metaphors.

Mailer I don't at all. I love your metaphors – I think they're marvellous. What I don't like at all, though, when I come to grips with your thought, or try to, is this sort of extraordinary, if you will, this saccharine approach you have to problems of morality. It's above the fray –

McLuhan This must be temperamental, this unwillingness to involve myself

in moral judgments. Perhaps, I hope, it has something to do with charity, which is supposed to cover a host of faults on roughnesses and horrors. But this kind of problem of moral judgment, it tends to involve people in head-on encounters, whereas if you dim down that moral judgment a bit you can bypass many problems that otherwise become exacerbated and miseries.

I call this a cool approach to morals instead of the point of view. When you're dealing with a total field, you can't have a fixed point of view. You can have a whole series of points of view, but you can't have a fixed point of view.

Foley

Look, let me interrupt this for a second. Marshall McLuhan argues that violence is a way for a guy at this time to define himself, find his own identity, and in fact create an identity for himself. The style of your life and your writing would seem to bear out what he says. Violence is a central part of your writing, you've made it a central part of your style in living. Now, has he defined you?

Mailer

Well, I think McLuhan is on to something absolutely at that point for this reason. The difference is this. McLuhan talks about man. Say man, what he calls a man in a field situation or whatever – I won't pretend to use his vocabulary – is what I would call an alienated man. In other words, the great distance between McLuhan and myself, I see now, is all the while he's talking about man and man's relation to these new environments, I would say, yes, everything he says is true if he would just add this one word – alienated man – in relations to his new environments, which alienate him further from himself.

McLuhan

I just –

Mailer

Let me go on with this now. This is really where I've been trying to get to all night – and it is daytime. What does it mean to be an alienated man? It means to be a man who does not have a clear notion of himself but rather contains two opposed notions of himself. It means, if I'm an alienated man, I think that I am smart and I think I am dumb. I think that I am good and I think I am evil. I

think that I am strong and I think I am weak. I think I'm a tough guy and I think I'm a coward. I think I'm a great lover and I think I'm inept.

McLuhan All right.

Mailer The nature of the alienated man is that he always contains opposed notions of himself at the same time. So, therefore, the only actions which can define his nature are precisely not field actions, not actions in relation to an environment which is controlled to allow. He cannot define himself in any environment which has been programmed for him. He can only define himself by getting into situations which are brand new for him. Because when he's in a situation which is brand new for him, his obsessions can cease for a moment. He can stop thinking of himself at that one moment as being either this or that because he can only be one thing at the moment.

In other words, if a man is jumping off a burning building into a fireman's net, that is a profoundly existential situation because he doesn't know how it's going to turn out. He doesn't have – so that at moment –

McLuhan Would you say that was a valuable moment of experience?

Mailer It is probably at that point in a man's life the most valuable moment in his whole life up to that point.

McLuhan He has no time to evaluate it.

Mailer Precisely, because he does not have time to evaluate it and, therefore, the bad training of the past, the bad habits of the past, cannot inflict themselves upon him. And even more important than the bad training of the past is the bad program training of the past. He is no longer at the mercy of all the mistakes of the past because at moments of great danger, at moments of great love, there's a

tendency for those upper regions of the brain, which control us so much of the time, to be temporarily anaesthetized because they are equipped for every situation but the novel one, the brand new one.

McLuhan Why don't you tend to consider value judgments as a profound way of alienation? The man who makes value judgments usually manifests deep alienation from almost everything.

Mailer Well, I would go along with you to this extent. I'd say that whenever a man engages in a value judgment, he is either suffering profoundly from alienation or finding his way back out of alienation.

Foley Every time you punch somebody in the nose then, Norman, are you judging yourself to be doing a bad thing? You're the man for the good and bad judgments.

Mailer The difficulty with arguing ad hominem ad-me-a-mum [laughter] is that I don't really go around punching guys in the nose and I try to avoid getting punched in the nose, so that fights are still interesting for me. I don't get into that many of them. And I don't think, straight to the point, I'd rather talk about a man in a fight – and because I'm a novelist we can assume I can conceive a man who's not myself in a fight.

I think what happens in a fight generally is – that's one of the reasons why some men are so particularly obsessed with violence all the time. And I've had any number of friends who have a bad week if they haven't been in three fights. It's because it's their way of communicating at a full level. If they get into a fight with an equal, they learn more about themselves in that two minutes or ten minutes the fight goes on –

McLuhan Moment of truth.

Mailer Yes, but it's a sustained moment of truth, and there are all sorts

of truths there. And they find all the emotions that you can find in any kind of programmed environment – like love, like sex, like violence.