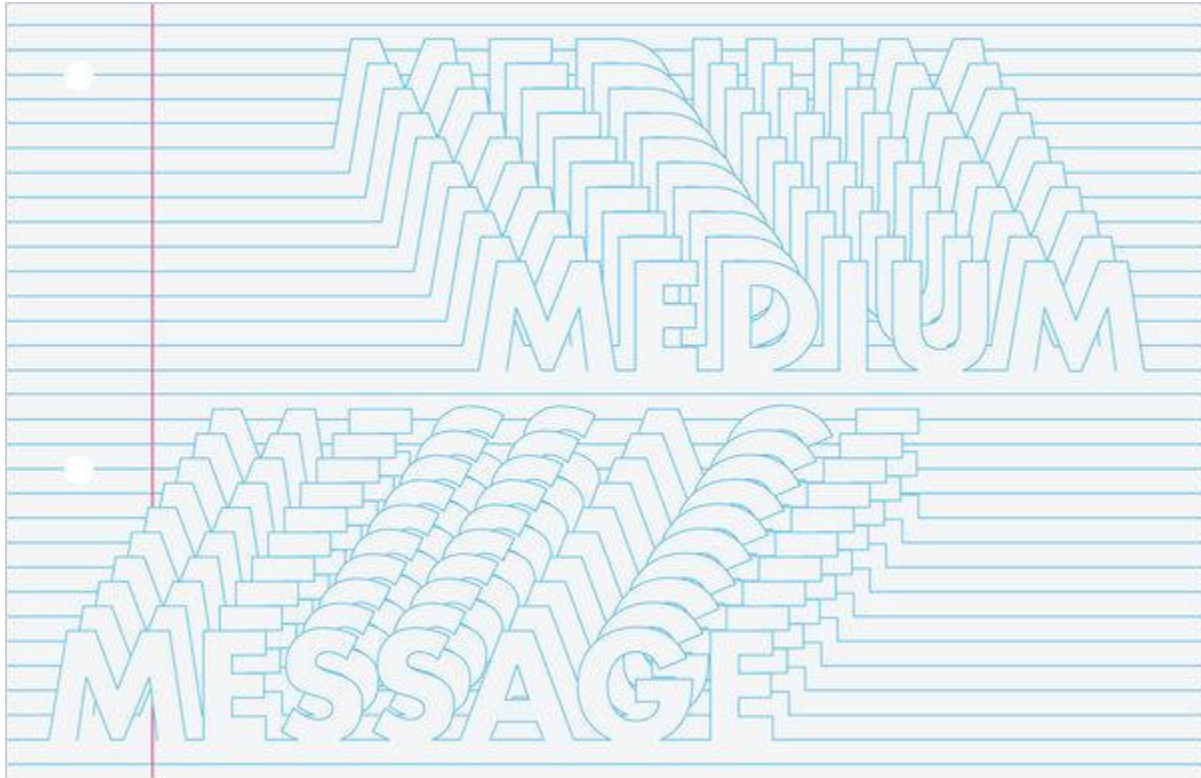


# Marshall McLuhan: Media Savant

By DAVID CARR

Published: January 6, 2011



Abbott Miller

Oh boy, yet another book about yet another modern thinker who suggests that “electronic interdependence” is the defining aspect of our time. All very ho-hum, except Marshall McLuhan, the subject of this book, figured it out 50 years before anybody ever updated his Facebook page or posted his whereabouts on Twitter.

## **MARSHALL MCLUHAN**

**You Know Nothing of My Work!**

By Douglas Coupland

216 pp. Atlas & Company. \$24

“Marshall McLuhan: You Know Nothing of My Work!” is an odd title for a weird book. Not weird bad, just weird in a way that makes you stop and think about what precisely the author, Douglas Coupland, is up to. Like the man it chronicles, Coupland’s book is full of unconventional angles, ricochets and resonances. Rather than offering a doorstep-size addition to the Great Man canon, it comes in at just over 200 pages that nonetheless sprawl and unfold to their own idiosyncratic rhythm.

This is the kind of book that will deliver major annoyance to academics who have made a career out of deconstructing McLuhan's effort to define the modern media ecosystem. But to a reader interested in a little serious fun, a dip into someone we pretend to understand but don't really know, "You Know Nothing of My Work!" is a welcome taunt. The book rewards by refusing to slip into the numbing vortex of academic discourse, taking a fizzy, pop-culture approach to explaining a deep thinker, one who ended up popularized almost in spite of himself.

The book will come in handy for those of us who parrot the phrase "The medium is the message" — the line that bore McLuhan into public consciousness — without really understanding that the man who said it found the triumph of context over content to be profoundly depressing. Yes, we all know that McLuhan was a rock star, standing alongside Warhol and Leary in the '60s pantheon (Time magazine ran a cover of him with the tag line "Canada's Intellectual Comet"), but what in blazes was he talking about?

Coupland explains that it was McLuhan's ability to anticipate the homogenizing and dehumanizing effect of mass media when the phenomenon was in its infancy that made him remarkable. Both a prisoner and a product of academic life, McLuhan broke out because he recognized the toxic effects of media long before media became the air we all breathe. And he did it before there was any genuine understanding of how human beings process mediated information. As Coupland writes: "One must remember that Marshall arrived at these conclusions not by hanging around, say, NASA or I.B.M., but rather by studying arcane 16th-century Reformation pamphleteers, the writings of James Joyce, and Renaissance perspective drawings. He was a master of pattern recognition, the man who bangs a drum so large that it's only beaten once every hundred years."

Put less charitably, McLuhan was the clock that was spectacularly right once a century. What made him singular was not his precision — anybody who takes "Finnegans Wake" as an ur-text will probably have a low signal-to-noise ratio. In between the puns, the aphorisms, the digressive language that seemed to chase itself and riddle the reader, McLuhan came up with a theory of media generation and consumption so plastic and fungible that it describes the current age without breaking a sweat.

Coupland, who has written at length on and for the Internet, does not belabor just how McLuhan predicted a world that he did not live to see — he died in 1980 — but simply frames the language and lets the reader marvel retrospectively. After doing relatively straightforward content analysis of advertising in "The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man" in 1951, McLuhan began thinking about the systems that produced all that commercial rhetoric. And then beginning with "The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man" in 1962 and following up with "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man" in 1964, McLuhan saw the dimensions of an emerging global village in which the means of communication began to define and overwhelm the conversation. When he wrote, "We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us," he was describing a television and telecommunications revolution, but he was also setting out the implications of the consumer Web four decades before it blossomed. In the lexicon of McLuhan, the Web would be the ultimate "cool" medium defined by participation and a multiplicity of inputs. And he was far from romantic, even back then, about what that might mean for civil, thoughtful discourse.

“When people get close together, they get more and more savage, impatient with each other,” McLuhan said. “The global village is a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations.” Placing that in a more contemporary milieu, what happens now that everyone is a broadcaster? Ubiquitous, cheap technology (digital cameras) and a friction-free route to an audience (YouTube) means that people might broadcast images of their closeted gay roommate having sex, and that the unwitting star of their little network might subsequently, tragically, jump off a bridge.

In Coupland’s hands, McLuhan’s upbringing is a chatty, gossipy exercise, in which his encounters as a young academic with the thinking and writing of G. K. Chesterton, the English writer and so-called prince of paradox, are no more or less important than the fact that he spent endless hours arguing with (and trying to impress) a perpetually unsatisfied mother who taught elocution in the provinces of Canada. Born Herbert Marshall McLuhan in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1911, he attended the University of Manitoba, receiving a bachelor’s degree before heading off to Cambridge, where he studied under I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, and fell under the sway of the New Criticism. He then taught at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, before beginning a long series of teaching assignments at various Catholic universities, including St. Louis University and Assumption College, and ending up at St. Michael’s, a Catholic college of the University of Toronto. His growing renown eventually led to the establishment of the Center for Culture and Technology there, which would serve as his intellectual base camp.

Coupland argues persuasively that McLuhan thought differently because he was wired differently, with two arteries pumping blood to his brain. (A stroke that left him unable to speak is attributed in some aspects to this biological anomaly.) In what seems to be a bit of a trend, almost a narrative infection in biographies of high-impact eccentrics, McLuhan is also placed on the spectrum of autism, although given his sensitivity to loud noises, love of ritual, distaste for physical contact and general obliviousness, it is not much of a stretch.

McLuhan was a mash-up of remarkable incongruities: He loathed television, yet stared at it long enough to discern its ability to generate mass culture. He was more interested in Dagwood Bumstead and his deleterious effects on the modern American male than he was in the Second World War, even though he moved to England to study at Cambridge the day war was declared. He loved teaching but was oblique in the extreme and had little use for the thoughts of others unless they were written down at length and subjected to rigorous analysis. He was a paranoid scold who not only believed in hell with the fervor of a Catholic convert, but felt the world was quickly headed toward that fiery portal.

Coupland has no pretension to having written the definitive biography of McLuhan. “You Know Nothing of My Work!” is a sketch of someone who coined a meme — “the global village” — rendered by another who did some coining of his own: Coupland wrote “Generation X.” The biography’s subtitle is a nod to just how misunderstood McLuhan was (he was frequently dismissed as an evangelist for rather than a chronicler of modern media) and a signal that the book is not about to take itself too seriously; it derives from a snatch of dialogue from a McLuhan cameo in “Annie Hall.”

Coupland, a Canadian who has his own struggles with noise and is something of a polymath (an accomplished designer and artist who is also a novelist, journalist and documentarian), sees himself as a kindred spirit and shares his subject's taste for finding meaning in marginalia. The main text of the book is interrupted with found scraps from the Web, a test for autism and lists that may or may not illuminate the adjacent pages. I found some of this puzzling, but began to think that puzzling out what was in front of me was part of the conversation Coupland was trying to have with the reader, all through the prism of a biography of a man who loved puns and riddles.

In addition to his role as seer, McLuhan was an undisputed crank, and as both fame and infirmity began to overtake him, he lapsed into parody that suggested he had grown intoxicated with his self-referential prose. For someone thought of as the first modern media savant, he was capable of incredibly archaic, hermetic thinking. In Coupland's rendering, it was clear that McLuhan thought of women as accessories to men. He never took a side during World War II, and in his later years failed to understand there were revolutions taking place beyond media. In 1967, something of a golden age for black literature and a time of rising black consciousness, he wrote as if he were describing an alien life form: "The Negro is turned on by electricity. The old literacy never turned him on because it rejected and degraded the Negro, but electricity turns him on and accepts him totally as an integral human being." Where to begin with that one?

Like many of McLuhan's fanboys, Coupland acknowledges, but then looks past the quirks and wrinkles on the way to placing him in the pantheon, writing: "Had Marshall not been born, there would have been a hole in the world. There would have been a hole in the sky; a hole in heaven."

Much of what McLuhan wrote and some of what Coupland relates are beyond my ken, but I don't know about that "hole in heaven" stuff. It's hyperbole, a passage written in purple, but there is something so good-natured in the telling, so unpretentious in its unalloyed admiration for an incredibly complicated thinker, that the reader will be inclined to let Coupland get away with it. McLuhan may not have approved — his taste in literature tended toward far more punishing tutorials — but no doubt he would have understood. "Art is anything you can get away with," he wrote.

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**A version of this review appeared in print on January 9, 2011, on page BR1 of the Sunday Book Review.**