

MARSHALL MCLUHAN

“THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE”

The word “medium” refers to an intervening means through which something else is being transmitted, so it is more than natural that there is a “message” coming out, just from the “medium” itself. The common (mis)conception about media is that the “message” is the “content”, but after reading Marshall McLuhan’s text it is evident that *The Medium Is the Message*. In order to understand that phrase the most important thing is to first understand what he means by saying that “For the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” (McLuhan 8). By applying this phrase to our quotidian and to the vast variety of media that surrounds us we can break it down and understand it thoroughly.

McLuhan is giving the railway example as far as a technology that changed the human affairs is concerned, proving that even though transportation and human movement was not something new, the new technology and speed of the train literally changed the way people formed their cities and, literally, lived their lives. That example goes even further when it comes to our times and the acceleration the airplane provided, but McLuhan supports his opinion by using a much simpler, and at the same time much stronger, example and he is making a very specific point. Electric light is something powerful on its own, it “is pure information” (McLuhan 8). The electric light as a “medium” changed the way people interacted in almost any way possible. Whether it was to be a part of major operations or

projects or it was just the comfort of going home at night and being able to switch on the light, the series of events that the electric light has led us is endless and the fact that we cannot even imagine our lives without it is proof that a “medium” like that has managed to have such a strong impact on our human affairs. The “content” of it may vary from activity to activity but “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (McLuhan 9). The perception of electric light as “pure information” though is a fact that the majority of people miss. The fact that the electric light does not have a “content” on its own does not mean that it is not a communication medium. For example, a skylight in the dark night sky of a city is a means of communication. If someone looks up and sees the skylight they will know that somewhere else in the city another person is using this skylight as a form of communication. It has no “content”, but it is a “medium”. It would be interesting though if we thought of the Batman skylight, which is still a light, but it has a bat sign in the middle – now, the “medium” has “content”, and “then it is not the light but the “content” (or what is really another medium) that is noticed” (McLuhan 9). Nevertheless, the “medium” remains the “message”, since the skylight is the way Gotham City is communicating with Batman and “the effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as “content” ” (McLuhan 18).

The electric light, being a very important medium on its own, has led to the development of almost every other contemporary medium. The cinema, television, the Internet, they are all extensions of electric light and since “before the electric speed and total field, it was not obvious that the medium is the message” (McLuhan 13), it just makes sense that this “rule” can be applied to all of them. Whether we are watching a movie, the news on TV or reading a blog online, the medium is the message and its content is a second medium which makes

the first one more “aggressive”, or as McLuhan puts it “For the “content” of a medium is like a juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watch-dog of the mind” (18). What is intriguing though is that when McLuhan wrote that text, in 1964, he confessed that “It is, however, no time to suggest strategies when the threat has not even been acknowledged to exist” (McLuhan 18), whereas now, almost fifty years later, someone would have to be naively gullible to believe that the dangers of the media do not exist.

Works Cited

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1964. Print. Reissued MIT Press, 1994, with introduction by Lewis H. Lapham; reissued by Gingko Press, 2003.