

On Reading McLuhan

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How does one understand Marshall McLuhan? The answer is a quintessentially McLuhanesque paradox: To understand McLuhan, you must read McLuhan, but to read McLuhan, you must first understand McLuhan.

Be forewarned: McLuhan is not an easy read, at least, not until you have learned to both decipher his language and break yourself of the habit of linear reading. Many people — mostly those who are academically inclined — tend to begin close to the chronological beginning. They will pick up *Gutenberg Galaxy* and start from page 1. Or, they may choose to dive right into his classic work, *Understanding Media*, with the hope of doing just that. Both approaches will undoubtedly lead to frustration, confusion and tough slogging.

McLuhan's work is mosaic. It cannot be understood as a linear construction, beginning at the beginning and proceeding through the middle to the end. He presents no linear argument, no consistently built case of evidence, yet his body of work is remarkably consistent, except when it's not. His evidence is clearly presented, except when it's obscure. His arguments and examples are easily caught, mainly because they are reiterated throughout all his works — if you miss it the first, second, third or seventh times through, you're sure to catch it the tenth or fifteenth or twentieth time you see it. Reading McLuhan is an exercise in pattern recognition, and once you see the patterns that emerge from the McLuhan mosaic, you will never, ever, be able *not* to see them — anywhere and everywhere.

So how does one approach McLuhan's writings? The best, and most accessible, book with which to start is not by McLuhan at all. It is written by his "official" (that is, sanctioned by the McLuhan family) biographer, W. Terrence Gordon. *McLuhan for Beginners* is a great introduction, as it covers McLuhan's biography, his works and his various approaches to understanding all that is around us. In other words, it shows how McLuhan approached the environment that we create through the compendium of our technologies, from spoken and written language to pizzas to electronic communications at light speed. Not only does *McLuhan for Beginners* provide the novice McLuhanist easily digestible, bite-size pieces of McLuhan, it does it in a fun way without "dumbing down" the material. *MfB* is also a great index into the rest of McLuhan's work.

After gaining a bit of understanding, it's probably best to put your new-found skills to the test by picking up *Culture is Our Business*. This is McLuhan in action: each double plate consists of a circa-1960s print advertisement on one side and various comments and



quotations on the other side. It is a McLuhanesque Rorschach test of sorts. Depending on your state of mind, you may see wonderful insights and connections, or you may see nothing at all. And each time you approach *Culture*, the results differ. If you discover something profound during any particular visit, be sure to write it down — you aren't guaranteed to ever find it again.

At this point, it is time to move up to some of the “harder” stuff. Either *From Cliché to Archetype* or *The Medium is the Massage* are good journeys into McLuhan's mind. You only need to read *Cliché* from the beginning through to the Introduction to understand what is going on — and to get the joke. The book examines the effect that language has on our thinking — an important prerequisite to understanding McLuhan's pervasive word play. As well, it serves as a foreshadowing of the retrieval quadrant of the later *Laws of Media*.

On the other hand, *Massage* can be considered as a sort of “*Understanding Media* Light.” The main ideas contained in the classic are “worked over,” like a good massage, and illustrated in a manner that *McLuhan for Beginners* attempts to emulate. You can dive into this book pretty much anywhere, as McLuhan says, “like stepping into a bath.” Regardless of where you enter, pretty soon you will be completely immersed in it!

Now you are probably ready for your first venture into *Understanding Media*. Take Part I, which is chapters 1 through 7. To understand *Understanding Media*, requires several readings of various sections in a variety of different sequences. Like any modern mosaic, after a while the patterns will emerge and the work will start to make sense. At one time, you may get the sense that the book would be far more understandable if it was a hyperlinked document, with the main “story” of the piece on several pages, networked with all the various references and glosses elsewhere. Indeed, had any such technology been available to McLuhan in the mid-1960s, he may well have employed it. *Understanding Media* becomes truly understandable when one stands aside from the linearity of writing and gains the overview that the writing is a “flattened” network of thoughts throughout— much like a modern web-site.

Laws of Media: The New Science is your next stop. Chapters 3 and 4 are the best place to start, with Chapter 5 as an optional dive into “Media Poetics.” *Laws of Media* was intended to be the sequel to *Understanding Media*, and was published 8 years after Marshall McLuhan's death by his son, Eric. It reflects the culmination of McLuhan's life's work, or rather, life's thinking and exploration. Indeed, the four media laws taken together represent a “Grand Unified Theory” of McLuhan. This book brings together and consolidates all that you have read to this point. McLuhan's thinking will become clear, and you will be able to tackle (and re-tackle) any of his works, “so long as you are willing to contemplate what is happening.”

You are now ready to return to *Understanding Media* and review any of the illustrative chapters in Part II, according to your interest, whim or need. As well, to return to “basics,” *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* is worthwhile for the more serious student, as it provides many of the fundamental ideas pertaining to the effects of literacy



versus orality. Looking slightly farther back, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* is useful in that it reveals McLuhan's first intellectual encounters with "pop culture" — print advertisements, although it does have a decidedly moralistic point of view that McLuhan later eschewed. It does, however, suggest an interesting "compare and contrast" exercise with his later, but analogous, work, *Culture is Our Business*.

However, there is still the enigma that is the man himself. How do we understand the influences on, and nature of Marshall McLuhan, the man? Fortunately, that story is told in two excellent volumes, both about to be republished by Gingko Press. *Escape Into Understanding* by W. Terrence Gordon is the exceptional and definitive biography of Marshall McLuhan. Terry Gordon had access to both family members and the McLuhan Archives in the National Archives of Canada to research and annotate this wonderful work. Marshall McLuhan in his own voice can be discovered in *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* that were compiled, edited and annotated by McLuhan's wife, Corrine McLuhan, his literary agent, Matie Molinaro, and editor William Toye. The letters span almost his entire lifetime, from his college days in Cambridge through to the end of his life. Now out of print, an expanded version of this volume is being republished as *Marshall McLuhan – Complete Correspondence* in the Spring of 2004 by Gingko Press. No McLuhan-ophile's reading, not to mention collection, is complete without these two volumes — the biography and the letters.

Naturally there is much else written by, and about, the "sage of Aquarius." But even loosely following this plan will have you off to a good start. But be warned: "People make a great mistake trying to read me as if I was saying something ... I don't want them to believe me. I just want them to think." (quoted in Wallace Turner, "Understand McLuhan (sic) by Him," *The New York Times*, November 22, 1966.)

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Many of Marshall McLuhan's works, including his Ph.D. thesis, *The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*, are being republished throughout the early 2000s by Gingko Press. Visit Gingko's website at <http://www.gingkopress.com/>

