

The Importance of People

The Importance of Marshall McLuhan

Arthur W. Foshay

SOME of us have become aware of Marshall McLuhan. He is like a thunderclap; you cannot overlook him once you have been nearby. There are those, of course, who do not like thunderclaps. The colliers hide under the dining table. The poodles and the terriers variously bark and yap. The Great Danes look pained.

Mr. McLuhan has written another book: *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (University of Toronto Press, 1962), and has thus created another sensation. With enormous erudition, he has brought the whole Western intellectual tradition into a single hypothesis: that the basic experience of western man has been shaped mainly by the invention of type.

The great difference between McLuhan and everyone else is that he sees the basic forms of experience both as critical and as modifiable. What is a "basic form"? It is the form in which you put the raw data you think about and the form, therefore, of your thoughts. It matters—scarcely anyone realizes how much it matters—whether you perceive information (data) all-at-once, or sequentially. Is your basic experience of the world lineal or simultaneous? Do you really believe things when they are written *out*, or written *up*, or *down*, or

in; or none of these? Do you see the data of experience in a line or as a swarm? It makes all the difference which you do.

It makes you a member of the Renaissance—a Gutenberg man—a typographic man—if you arrange experiences in lineal form. For after Gutenberg, the most significant things that happened were *said* and *written* and *printed*, and every one of these is a sequential form in which the data are arranged all in a row.

Not so the medieval man, who entered the great stimulus of his time—the cathedral—and was assaulted from every direction, simultaneously, with the most significant happenings in his culture. He lived in an oral culture, not a print culture. His ear and eye had to cooperate. To be blind after Gutenberg was to be helpless, but a deaf man could even compose music. Not so during the pre-Gutenberg period.

McLuhan presents his hypothesis as a . . . mosaic or field approach to its problems. Such a mosaic image of numerous data and quotations in evidence offers the only practical means of revealing causal operations in history.

The alternative procedure would be to offer a series of views of fixed relationships in pictorial space. Thus the galaxy or con-

stellation of events upon which the present study concentrates is itself a mosaic of perpetually interacting forms that have undergone kaleidoscopic transformation—particularly in our own time.

This Explosive Man

McLuhan's description of his method, above, does not describe the effect his book has. The book presents an array of explosive statements, each supported by argument. There is a minimum of bridging. Here are some of his explosions (he calls them "chapter glosses"—an arcane double pun that no doubt arises from his extensive, scholarly interest in James Joyce):

Civilization gives the barbarian or tribal man an eye for an ear and is now at odds with the electronic world.

Cervantes confronted typographic man in the figure of Don Quixote.

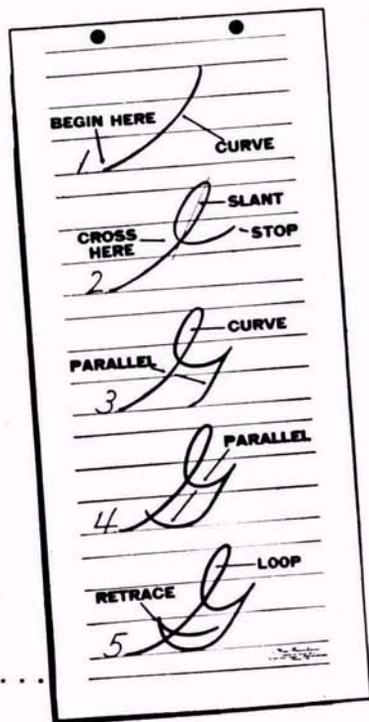
Nobody ever made a grammatical error in a non-literate society.

Typography cracked the voices of silence.

Why should we pay attention to such a book? For one thing—and perhaps this is enough to say—it exists. It has happened, and it is not possible to act as if it has not.

In our various educational roles, however, the book has a special importance. At the root of our thinking about education is our conception of the nature of knowledge, the nature of knowing, the nature of experience. Here is a man who says that the development of the electronic forms for experience wholly transforms it: that the culture-shift we are a half-century or more into is as fundamental as the shift from medieval to Renaissance experience.

Now, that is something to think about. For it is inevitable that the straining between the generations, between teach-



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ers and taught, will reflect this strain. It already does. We, the older generation, think of the difference between the generations as action-reaction, as the swinging pendulum. The young sense it, not as anything on one plane, but as an explosion. It is appropriate that the one to tell us of it is this explosive man, Marshall McLuhan, who is called by a professor of English now at Harvard, "the most seminal mind on the continent."

—ARTHUR W. FOSHAY, *Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York.*

Critical Thinking—Ennis

(Continued from page 20)

ter adapted to critical thinking instruction than the subject approach?

In summary, critical thinking, which is here defined as "the process of correctly assessing statements," has ten major aspects, which have been indicated in this article.

As a result of our review of the literature, I am convinced that research in critical thinking has been virtually neglected, although many people speak enthusiastically about critical thinking. The following areas need attention by researchers: further refinement and definition of the concept, *critical thinking*; development of critical thinking tests (the greatest need at the moment); discovering the learning capabilities of children; doing developmental studies; determination of subject matter areas that are particularly suited to different aspects of critical thinking; development of theory (requiring establishment of connections with many other things); and study of teaching methods and curriculum organization. The task is monumental, but worthwhile.

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