

man may actually be right, that he may be able to tell them something about their business. For example, he talked about the electric light bulb as a pure method of communication. Immediately whoever manufactures light bulbs came forward offering to pay him untold sums to lecture to their executives on closed circuit television about the light bulb as a means of communication. In this way the North Americans can be very naïve.

J.P. Why does he take up that kind of invitation?

W.D. He does it partly to make a lot of money. The night of the day I was with him he was flying off to lecture a huge gathering in Mexico City. He still pulls vast audiences. He is, I suppose, the most celebrated person I have ever met, really in the Big League. I think his name will be remembered along with Jung, Freud, Levi Strauss and Marcuse: he has made statements, like "the Global village" or "the medium is the message" which have got through to people and evoked a deep response. It's difficult to explain this. What happens is that he fires a lot of intellectual and communications grapeshot and occasionally one really hits the button.

He's beyond caring

Where I part company with McLuhan is on the idea that there is a conspiracy to put violence on television so that people will be frightened into staying at home — but in effect that is what happens. There is a feeling in our society now that everything's getting so frightening, we'll pull the blinds down and watch more television. But when McLuhan talks about a huge conspiracy which he ties up with Watergate and Nixon as well as Neilson, I think he is unbalanced.

I found it fascinating talking to a mind like that: you pick up some things and others you reject, but you can see why he earned his reputation. He is basically very charming, bumbling professor one would like to have had as one's tutor at Oxford or Cambridge, who was taken up willy-nilly by the communications people because he appeared to be saying interesting and futuristic things about the way they earn their living. That phrase of Tom Wolfe's, "What if he is right?", really says it all.

What I liked about him personally is that he is beyond caring about his reputation. He is a happy man, happily married with five or six children all out in the world and doing well (two of them are writers). He is beyond it all in a way, but he is still saying perceptive things.

McLuhan's Canada

J.P. What does McLuhan have to say about Canada?

W.D. He has a view of Canada which I am inclined to agree with — having been there



The Rockies are so overwhelming, and the engineering feat of this railway going through them . . .

for a mere three weeks! He thinks that Canadians are essentially mediocre and that they are marked with a deep-seated inferiority complex. He has a theory of Canada being circumscribed by boundaries, geographically and culturally. To the south there is the enormously rich, economically developed, threatening presence of the United States. To the east there is the boundary of European culture, which produces a kind of cultural inferiority complex; writers feel a need to leave Canada in order to make their reputations. Mordecai Richler is a good example of this. What is there left? To the north, those terrible Arctic wastes. To the west there is something: the Rocky mountains, British Columbia, ultimately the Far East. He feels that although Canada is geographically huge, it is in character a small country because of its boundaries. The population is small, almost entirely centred on a narrow strip 150 miles wide to the immediate north of the boundary with the United States.

I did notice this inferiority complex among Canadians. They are very open people and bland to an extraordinary degree, rather the way Americans are bland. I got this fantasy that they were all Action Men, like those children's toys that speak in a puppet-like way when you pull a string. I did meet some very interesting writers and people on this trip, but I also met a lot of Canadians who were with the

best will in the world, extremely boring and predictable.

Niagara Falls

The day I went to Niagara Falls, I fell in with a Canadian on the coach and he was a classic Action Man. All his responses were predictable and I knew just what he would say when we got there.

Niagara Falls, incidentally, is the most enormous anti-climax: it's just a very large waterfall with a lot of motels built round it. The Canadian side is much nicer than the American side, where the falls are completely commercialized, but on the Canadian side they have done a better job. I knew this Action Man Canadian, who was a chartered accountant from Victoria, was going to say something like, "Boy that's one helluva lot of water going over there!" and he said exactly that. He added, for good measure, "Boy I wouldn't like to be underneath that!" I suppose it's partly out of social embarrassment that people say such things. But when I go to a place like Niagara Falls, it's such an enormous cliché anyway that I would rather not have verbal clichés thrown at me as well. I must say I suspected the Falls themselves would be a disappointment because the Wonders of the World nearly always are, whether they are man-made or natural. One that isn't, or so I'm told, is the Taj Mahal: that apparently exceeds expectation.