



Marshall McLuhan

mid-Atlantic Canadian, a kind of Robert Mackenzie figure, dapper and bespectacled, but in fact he's a rather bumbly professor type, very much influenced by James Joyce. If you wanted to be unkind you could say that he read far too much James Joyce when he was a young man. He looks like James Joyce, he talks in the same punning way and he has a bumbly, Joycean manner of addressing himself to people. The thing that surprised me most was his humility.

Amateur night

I met a lot of Canadian writers on this trip and some of them were very conceited, but Marshall McLuhan struck me as a humble man.

In a sense he has done it all, he is not concerned any more with reputation or with money, he is now concerned just with enunciating certain truths that he sees. He has set up this thing which is called rather pretentiously the "Centre for Culture and Technology." It sounds rather grand; in fact it works out of a ramshackle office in a converted coach house in a small street on the edge of the University of Toronto. He has a secretary and a strange man called George who is his personal assistant. It isn't grand in any way and it's amateur night when you arrive there.

When I walked in, McLuhan was being interviewed by a French journalist called Nina Sutton who is writing a book about him, a kind of biography and examination of his works. She was approaching it in a heavy, French intellectual way, which is not his way — his approach is intuitive. Although he calls himself a scientist, he is essentially a literary figure who has got interested in communications. He throws out wild jabs and guesses and perceptions — and every now and then he hits one on the button.

Here's one of his new theories which is quite interesting. It concerns violence on television. He says the reason there is so much violence on television, particularly street violence, is because the programme makers put it there deliberately in order that people will be frightened into staying inside and watch more television. He is a great conspiracy theory man; you could argue that he is paranoid.

J.P. Who does he think is actually responsible for the conspiracy?

W.D. The programme makers, influenced by the Neilson Ratings (the equivalent of TAM ratings in Britain).

This is a typically McLuhan concept. When you first hear it you think "That's brilliant!" When you think of it a bit longer, as I have been doing for a few weeks, it begins to sound almost too glib and too clever. He is full of these and his

way of thought is catching. I came out with a McLuhanesque remark myself at the seminar, which just shows we can all be McLuhans if we try.

I got to the seminar rather late — it was the same evening I had seen *As it happens*, at the suggestion of someone in McLuhan's office — and I was actually sitting at the master's feet because the chairs were all filled by PhD students. There were about 40 or 50 earnest, bearded PhD men and a few very pretty girls. I tried to be self-effacing, not get drawn into it, but McLuhan wanted to say, "Mr Wilfred De'Ath has come to see me from the BBC and *The Listener*, all the way from London" — he's got enough ego left to want to say that.

Paradoxical personality

He asked me one or two very difficult questions, like "Mr. De'Ath, do you think the British understand the essentially paradoxical nature of my work?" I gulped and did the old BBC trick of asking him a question quickly while I thought what I was going to say. Eventually I came up with my remark when everyone was talking about Neilson organization, which studies viewing figures all over North America and is immensely powerful, being ultimately responsible for shows going on or being taken off. I said that I thought that probably the American TV viewers were the performers and the Neilson people were the viewers. There was a kind of silence in the room as all the PhD beards earnestly turned to me and McLuhan himself remarked "You know, I wish that I had said that!" I was quite pleased with myself. It just shows what can happen once you start thinking in that particular vein . . .

J.P. What do you think is behind these extraordinary pronouncements of McLuhan's? What is he trying to achieve?

W.D. I think he is trying to draw people's attention to the nature of paradox, among other things. Most of his statements are very paradoxical. His personality is paradoxical. On the one hand he is the "medium is the message" man, the apostle of communications; on the other hand, he is an old fuddy-duddy conservative Roman Catholic who believes in all kinds of preposterous things. Punning and paradox are built deep into his nature and he places a great value on them.

What he is doing now is simply sitting there, sparking off about our life and times — but from a very literary viewpoint. He spent a great deal of time talking to his students and to me about Joyce, Pound, Auden, Eliot, his great heroes in twentieth century literature. He was, after, all a professor of literature for nearly 30 years before he was taken up by the media.

The essential thing about McLuhan was best expressed in the essay which Tom Wolfe wrote, which is called *What if he is right?* There is a terrible fear on the part of media people and large industrial corporations in Canada and America that this