

# Passages from the Reviews of McLuhan's Books: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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## Passages from the Reviews of McLuhan's Books: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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*Bill Kuhn's Note:* In the spring of 2021, I asked York student volunteer Robert Sparrow-Downes if he could help with a new feature I wanted to work into the script of my in-progress work, *The Bio-GRAPHIC Marshall McLuhan*, a graphic novelization of McLuhan's life and thought. The idea: after the publication of each of his books, to repeat the motif of Marshall dressed in the robes of Lady Justice, holding scales on which sit the most positive and negative lines from reviews. The reviews for *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) were not uniformly for and against. Some found a middle ground. But later reviews proved so decisively for or against the work at hand that Robert's assembly struck me as striking a nerve which still resonates.

Is McLuhan's reputation destined forever to be the subject of strong contention?

– William Kuhns

### ***The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951)***

#### **The Good:**

"Several writers have recently tried to bring out the meaning and trend of modern mass society through a universal survey. But no one has done it with so much verve and in so original a way as Herbert Marshall McLuhan."

Rudolph E. Morris. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *Renascence*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 1952, p. 217.

"It is to the author's credit that we are thunderstruck and overwhelmed by his presentation of things we 'know.' His ingenious method produces this effect which may make us stop and think before it is too late . . . he guides the reader through the nightmarish thicket of advertisements, comic strips, newspaper front pages which impress themselves upon us daily and hourly. He shows us what they mean and brings to light correlations and connections between them and other currents of thought, sentiment, and ideas we would never dream of."

Rudolph E. Morris. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *Renascence*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 1952, p. 217.

"We would not realize the full implication of industrialization on the human person and the life of mind and spirit if the author did not force us into seeing the paradoxical contradictions of our present ways of life."

Rudolph E. Morris. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *Renascence*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 1952, p. 218.

"How refreshing to see a critique of a period and of its morals avoiding moral indignation!"  
Rudolph E. Morris. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *Renascence*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 1952, p. 218.

"*The Mechanical Bride*, published in 1951, was his first book on media and his most bizarre. I will not dwell on it more than to say it is a collector's item fetching upward of fifty dollars in mint condition."

Howard Luck Gossage. "Understanding Marshall McLuhan." *Ramparts*, Apr. 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, p. 25.

"McLuhan is here a groundbreaking folklorist of his own times, tutoring a somnambulant audience in the myths of consumer populism."

Mark Kingwell. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *Saturday Night*, vol. 114, no. 8, Oct. 1999, p. 22.

". . . it was the first major example of a critical anthropology of advertising that is now ubiquitous . . . It's also the best book the future guru of media ever wrote."

Mark Kingwell. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *Saturday Night*, vol. 114, no. 8, Oct. 1999, p. 22.

"Like any great critic, McLuhan here makes the reader feel as if he or she has embarked with the author on a great adventure . . . Whether merely sententious or as gripping as a thriller, hectoring or satiric, the book never reads as dated. And that's partly because McLuhan, gearing up to slay the dragon of brainwashing, propaganda, and fascist-capitalist mind control, is having so much fun."

Greil Marcus. "Twentieth-Century Vox." *Artforum*, vol. 51, no. 1, Sept. 2012, p. 462.

"It is clear that this trained person, who appears throughout the book in different descriptions, the one who can crack the code, break the spell, and begin the climb from media slavery to human liberation, is McLuhan himself."

Greil Marcus. "Twentieth-Century Vox." *Artforum*, vol. 51, no. 1, Sept. 2012, p. 466.

"Joyce is not only the greatest modern artist . . . he is also the great liberator of the twentieth century—and what Joyce did in the first half of the century, McLuhan will do for the last."

Greil Marcus. "Twentieth-Century Vox." *Artforum*, vol. 51, no. 1, Sept. 2012, p. 466.

### **The Bad:**

"Righteous anger has its uses, but it is here often abused to the detriment of the author's thesis that we are wallowing in vulgarity and shabbiness of values. A passionate no-sayer, he is sometimes carried away by his anger."

David L. Cohn. "A Touch of Humor Wouldn't Hurt." *New York Times Book Review*, 21 Oct. 1951, p. 26.

"Too often, however, his own voice is lost amid his voice shouting to be heard"

David L. Cohn. "A Touch of Humor Wouldn't Hurt." *New York Times Book Review*, 21 Oct. 1951, p. 26.

"The idea of the book is excellent, its purpose admirable; unfortunately the effectiveness of *the work is all but destroyed by an inflated and professorial style and by the author's predilection for positively blood-curdling puns.*"

Unnamed Author. Review of *The Mechanical Bride*. *The New Republic*, 26 Nov. 1951, p. 21.

"*The Mechanical Bride* is very like Mrs. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public*, another book which doesn't argue well and is in the end historically false, but one which looks incisively at popular culture and which did precipitate some thinking. And yet the most important point against McLuhan is precisely that his antics are enough to give media studies a bad name." Christopher Ricks. "McLuhanism." *The Listener*, 28 Sept. 1967. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 103.

"Can we escape or not? Is the Mechanical Bride as transfixing as the Iron Maiden? McLuhan makes a lot of play with Perseus' mirror ('the mirror of conscious reflection') as the only protection against Medusa—but Perseus' mirror wouldn't have been very much use if he'd forgotten to bring along his sword."

Christopher Ricks. "McLuhanism." *The Listener*, 28 Sept. 1967. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 105.

"The maelstrom of commercial culture is wittily charted, but there are no very convincing hints about how to escape from it. On the contrary, the idealization of twelfth-century philosophy, the sneers at coeducation, feminism, and working mothers, the dubious assertion that the rich were once more socially responsible than they are now, and the rather Victorian attitude toward corsets, brief skirts, and high heels would depress the *Bride* to the level of silly Tory propaganda if they were anything more than digressions from the main concern of the book." Neil Compton. "The Paradox of Marshall McLuhan." *New American Review*, vol. 2, Jan. 1968. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 112.

## **The Ugly**

"As it is he is nearly always as solemn as Nazi propagandists who told Germans that we were a decadent people because we had tree-sitters, marathon dances and jazz bands: that our young men, 'drugstore cowboys,' were too soft to fight"

David L. Cohn. "A Touch of Humor Wouldn't Hurt." *New York Times Book Review*, 21 Oct. 1951, p. 26.

## ***The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1962)***

### **The Good:**

"The present work, like much of McLuhan's utterance, is prophetic in the classical sense of this term. It is the result of a live realization of a truth that at least partially transcends immediate powers of utterance and that, as uttered, will affect hearers diversely. Those whose antennae are as sensitive as McLuhan's will be overjoyed at this high degree of articulateness about a vast range of mysteriously linked cultural phenomena. Others, completely dominated by the habits of thought incident to the typographical society that McLuhan is standing off from and evaluating, will either be unable to make head or tail of what he is saying or will reject it with some show of hostility."

Walter Ong. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. *America*, 15 Sept. 1962. Reprinted in *An Ong Reader*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup, Hampton Press, 2002, p. 308.

"If the human community is to retain meaningful possession of the knowledge it is accumulating, breakthroughs to syntheses of a new order are absolutely essential. McLuhan aids one such breakthrough into a new interiority. . . ."

Walter Ong. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. *America*, 15 Sept. 1962. Reprinted in *An Ong Reader*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup, Hampton Press, 2002, p. 308.

"For McLuhan's now global reputation as a communications authority credits him with the power to see as few do, to hear a new language and to walk confidently in the strange and frightening world of the electronic age."

Kay Kritzweiser. "The McLuhan Galaxy." *The Globe and Mail*, 4 Jan. 1964, p. 8.

"This book does rather remind me though of the way a William Blake prophecy is written.

There too, in *Jerusalem*, there is no linear story. The reader has to forget his 'one thing after another' approach and instead get his head around and under the symbols, symbols which are meant to be felt *all at once*. *All at once* corresponds to 'unified sensibility.'"

James Reaney. "Change and the Invention of Printing." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 21, no. 4, Dec. 1964, p. 501.

"Part of McLuhan's stance as a maverick can thus be traced to his decision not to write another book in the conventional format. Therefore, in *Gutenberg Galaxy*, his farewell to literary criticism, an attempt is made to banish linearity and sequentiality in style and idea from the pages of the book medium . . . . The material is organized only by occasional newspaper-like paragraph headings. In this and other ways, McLuhan attempts to infuse his enormous erudition with some of the flair of journalism and the meter of poetry; the result is striking, but it will not be easily accessible to the average reader."

David L. Fagen. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, and *The Medium is the Massage*. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 1968, pp. 83.

"The whole theory is worked out in detail, with a wealth of quotations from primary and secondary authorities. Even those who are immune or antipathetic to McLuhanism may find a great deal of fascinating and out-of-the-way information in the pages of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*."

Neil Compton. "The Paradox of Marshall McLuhan." *New American Review*, vol. 2, Jan. 1968. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 114.

"Yet most people who have read *Galaxy* are unable to dismiss it. After every objection has been made, the book still contains a wealth of fascinating and novel material about the culture of the past twenty-five hundred years."

Neil Compton. "The Paradox of Marshall McLuhan." *New American Review*, vol. 2, Jan. 1968. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 117.

"The way in which McLuhan relates and connects ideas from a wide range of sources and people in this book is amazing. It is, of all his writing, perhaps the best example of how his

mind works.”

Charles Weingartner. “Marshall McLuhan and What He’s Been Doin.” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 1977, p. 229.

### **The Bad:**

“ . . . for all its claims, his book is essentially backward in its vision and method.”

A. Alvarez. “Evils of Literacy.” *New Statesman*, 21 Dec. 1962, p. 902.

“The book, however, cannot be trusted, as more than stimulation. The over-simplified view of types of society and character gets facts wrong . . . . The contrast between oral and typographic communication is carried to ludicrous extremes, as a vehicle of cultural criticism and historical explanation. It can no more stand against an adequate view of human history than any other single-minded exegesis known to us.”

Dell Hymes. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. *American Anthropologist*, vol. 65, no. 2, Apr. 1963, p. 479.

“Underneath it all McLuhan plays the history-of-ideas game, and plays it, I am afraid, none too well . . . . Furthermore, McLuhan does not have the encyclopedic learning with which to back up his generalizations . . . . Indeed, this is McLuhan’s worst failing: the wholesale reinterpretation of texts to prove his preconceived argument.”

John Simon. “Pilgrim of the Audile-Tactile.” *Acid Test*, 1963. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 97.

“The point of difficulty is then almost too simply seen: not only that the substance of the book is embedded in print, but that the normal reaction to it—given our present fields and procedures of advanced learning—will be in print also. Paradoxically, if the book works it to some extent annihilates itself.”

Raymond Williams. “A Structure of Insights.” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3, Apr. 1964, p. 338.

“ . . . one must confess an increasing incomprehension of McLuhan’s work... Some supporters of McLuhan defend his unique approach by describing him as ‘prophetic.’ He is the intellectual frontiersman who blazes a trail for less sure-footed mortals who will then make a roadbed broad and level enough to carry the freight of civilization’s institutions. The trouble with this defense of McLuhan is that he blazes away at every tree in the forest . . . .”

Patrick D. Hazard. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 356, Nov. 1964, p. 219.

“A mosaic is a way of suggesting, but the only way to ‘reveal’ is still by empirical means, and this implies an appeal to evidence whether the mosaic method is used or not. The mosaic method has no magical value, and only McLuhan’s followers will be impressed with his usual reply that the objection is based on a stuffy, visual, linear concept of cause and effect. He cannot dazzle us into believing that empirical method is merely a fallacy of print-culture.”

Arthur Efron. “Making Peace with the Mechanical Bride.” *Paunch*, vol. 22, Jan. 1965.

### **The Ugly:**

“One cannot escape the feeling that the book is a deeply felt attempt to intellectualize the

obvious.”

Dan M. Davin. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. *The Globe and Mail*, July 1962. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, p. 187.

“I had always suspected that *Finnegans Wake* was less a work for the future than the last manic rattling of the bones of scholasticism. The way McLuhan draws it continually from his magician’s hat makes me certain.”

A. Alvarez. “Evils of Literacy.” *New Statesman*, 21 Dec. 1962, p. 902.

“McLuhan claims that if we can understand the nature of this revolution, we can avoid being its victims. Perhaps, then, it would be more accurate to describe him not as the apologist, but as the dupe of the new technologies.”

John Simon. “Pilgrim of the Audile-Tactile.” *Acid Test*, 1963. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 97.

“Since there are no pictures in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and since McLuhan is an outrageously false historian, this is a maddening book.”

Christopher Ricks. “McLuhanism.” *The Listener*, 28 Sept. 1967. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 101.

### ***Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964)***

#### **The Good:**

“*Understanding Media* is a rich, sprawling, clotted texture of a book which may require a whole generation of readers before it gains the full attention I think it deserves.”

Arnold Rockman. “A rich, sprawling book.” *Toronto Daily Star*, 13 June 1964, p. 12.

“If I have inadvertently suggested that *Understanding Media* is pure nonsense, let me correct that impression. It is impure nonsense, nonsense adulterated by sense. Mr. McLuhan is an ingenious, imaginative and (above all) fertile thinker. He has accumulated a great deal of fresh and interesting information (and a great deal of dull or dubious information).”

Dwight MacDonald. “Running it Up the Totem Pole.” *Book Week*, 7 July 1964, p. 1.

“McLuhan has now gone well beyond discovering depth psychology; he has discovered mass society.”

Thelma McCormack. “Innocent Eye on Mass Society.” *Canadian Literature*, no. 22, Autumn 1964. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 199.

“Still, in this kind of free-ranging, up-by-the-bootstraps thinking about communications, McLuhan stands on his own. You don’t simply learn something new from each of his books; you see certain things differently ever after.”

Richard Hoggart. “Big-dipper.” *The Listener*, 3 Dec. 1964, p. 895.

“McLuhan’s ‘get with it’ tone—increasingly now—is a product of the electronic age as he himself defines it: ‘cool’, disconnected, free-floating, flux-like, sometimes as brittle as *Time/Life* prose, excited by the flow of multitudinous sense-impressions and by the opportunities for

intellectual fireworks which his mass of untraditional data offers.”  
Richard Hoggart. “Big-dipper.” *The Listener*, 3 Dec. 1964, p. 896.

“They are not the eccentric meanderings of a madman. On the contrary, Marshall McLuhan is one of the most brilliant socio-cultural theorists writing today.”  
Neil Compton. “The Cool Revolution.” *Commentary*, vol. 39, no. 1, Jan. 1965, p. 79.

“While most scholars bury their heads in the private little sand plots they have marked out as their ‘field,’ McLuhan obstinately takes all knowledge for his province. Like the great writers that he admires—Rabelais, Cervantes, Pope, Joyce—he strives to be a man of ‘integral awareness.’ I expect to be equally inspired and infuriated by his next book.”  
Neil Compton. “The Cool Revolution.” *Commentary*, vol. 39, no. 1, Jan. 1965, p. 81.

“As an artist working in a mixed medium of direct experience and historical analogy, he has given a needed twist to the great debate on what is happening to man in this age of technological speedup.”  
Harold Rosenberg. “Philosophy in a Pop Key.” *The New Yorker*, 27 Feb. 1965. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, p. 202.

“When the Westinghouse people announced that at the end of the World’s Fair they will again bury a Time Capsule filled with assorted cultural and technological mementos of twentieth-century man, a friend of ours suggested that they should replace the codes and artifacts with Dr. Marshall McLuhan, who could be counted on to explain us vividly to anybody digging around in Flushing Meadow two thousand years from now.”  
Unnamed author. “The McLuhan Metaphor.” *The New Yorker*, 15 May 1965, p. 43.

“Skimming *Understanding Media* is like trying to fill a teacup from a firehose.”  
Howard Luck Gossage. In an unpublished, untitled review written for *Scanlan’s*, 1965.

“Reading it is itself an educational experience, a trauma of sudden awareness, a turbulence of the imagination which matches the frequently apocalyptic style of its pentecostal message.”  
Monika Kehoe. “The Tyranny of Literacy.” *The McGill Journal of Education*, vol. 1, no. 1, Jan. 1966, p. 35.

“*Understanding Media* . . . adds to the ferment of the Canadian intellectual scene, it shatters conventional modes of thought, and it surely should provoke educators to reassess the subtleties and powers of their business of communication.”  
Monika Kehoe. “The Tyranny of Literacy.” *The McGill Journal of Education*, vol. 1, no. 1, Jan. 1966, p. 37.

“The point is not to be picky about the facts; no one is going to *Understanding Media* for information anyhow. The point is that McLuhan 2 cares very little for facts’ gristly specificity; their function is not to feed the mind but, like dust, to make insight visible.”  
Hugh Kenner. “Understanding McLuhan.” *National Review*, 29 Nov. 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 27.

“What then is McLuhanism? It is a chaotic combination of bland assertion, astute guesswork, fake analogy, dazzling insight, hopeless nonsense, shockmanship, showmanship, wisecracks, and oracular mystification, all mingling cockily and indiscriminately in an endless and random monologue. It also, in my judgment, contains a deeply serious argument. After close study one



comes away with the feeling that here is an intelligent man who, for reasons of his own, prefers to masquerade as a charlatan.”

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. “The Plugged-In Generation.” *Book Week*, 19 Mar. 1967, pp. 1-2.

“McLuhan illuminates phenomena that others perceive but cannot explain.”

Richard Kostelanetz. “A Hot Apostle in a Cool Culture,” *Twentieth Century Magazine*, Autumn 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 214.

“As intellectual endeavors, McLuhan's books merit nothing but highest praise; despite their intrinsically high-definitional quality, they invite participation in their thought processes, initiating not only dialogues between the reader and the book but between one reader and another. They are among the most richly insightful books of our time; and I doubt if any intelligent person can read them without being enlightened, if not influenced, in some way by McLuhan's perceptions—educated to cope better with his present environment. Amidst all the chaff, they contain much truth; more important, to many of us, they initiate an education—an awareness of dimensions previously hidden to us.”

Richard Kostelanetz. “A Hot Apostle in a Cool Culture,” *Twentieth Century Magazine*, Autumn 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 228.

“It's a pity that McLuhan shoots from the hip so much at anything stirring on the cultural horizon because he has indeed developed a sensitive system for interpreting signals.”

Irving J. Weiss. “Sensual Reality in the Mass Media.” *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 228.

### **The Bad:**

“This is an infuriating book. It offers a number of brilliant insights but mixes them in with some extravagantly turgid incoherencies.”

C.J. Fox. “Our Mass Communications.” *Commonweal*, vol. LXXXI, no. 4, Oct. 1964, p. 105.

“How can Mr. McLuhan possibly use the medium of the *book* (typographic, linear, fragmented) in order to speak in this way about the electronically instantaneous? On his own terms, a book cannot but enforce the typographical attitudes which he insists are cramping Western man. If his arguments are true, how silly to annul them by using a medium which has no option but to annul them.”

Christopher Ricks. “Electronic Man.” *New Statesman*, 11 Dec. 1964. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, pp. 212-213.

“There will have to be new seed, certainly, and a tremendous amount of patient work to cultivate the new truths that our new technological society needs to replace the old—but glibly Marshallled McLuhanacies are only going to grow weeds that will need pulling if they take root at all.”

Jack Behar and Ben Lieberman. “Paradise Regained or McLuhanacy?” *Teachers College Record*, April 1965. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, p. 224.

“One thing is certain: McLuhan badly needs a translator. His ‘hot and cool’ (not ‘cold’)

terminology is, I agree, typically maddening . . . . An elementary course in general semantics seems called for . . . . For a man who has so many interesting things to say about communication, McLuhan is a terribly bad communicator.”

Anthony W. Hodgkinson. “Comment and Controversy: McLuhan’s ‘Understanding Media.’” *AV Communication Review*, vol. 13, no. 4, Winter 1965, p. 442.

“The complaint isn’t that Professor McLuhan puts together a thoroughly fantastic account of the situation of contemporary man; it is that he sets himself up, speaking bluntly, as the constituted pardoner of this age—a purveyor of perfect absolution for every genuine kind of modern guilt.”

Benjamin DeMott. “Against McLuhan.” *Esquire*, 1 Aug. 1966, p. 72.

“To begin with, then, one must insist that McLuhan is no sort of specialist at all. Nothing he has to say is based on esoteric knowledge or technical competence.”

Theodore Roszak. “The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan.” *New Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 260.

“Alas, one searches in vain through *Understanding Media*, McLuhan’s *magnum opus*, for evidence. It isn’t there. McLuhan doesn’t prove this thesis; he browbeats you with it.”

Theodore Roszak. “The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan.” *New Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 261.

“But in fact McLuhan’s thesis is not simply unproven. It is false. There is no independent psychic effect that any mass medium has on an observer other than through its content. Indeed, no one witnesses a mass medium except for its content.”

Theodore Roszak. “The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan.” *New Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 263.

“It is in this way that, far from being some new messiah for the young, McLuhan emerges as a man of the study, monkishly substituting metaphor for equality and mistaking abstraction for universal truth whenever it suits his book to do so—not to mention misreading literature right, left, and center.”

Geoffrey Wagner. “Misunderstanding Media: Obscurity as Authority.” *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, Mar. 1967, p. 250.

“McLuhan is really rather like the man who apologizes first and then steps on your toe second. His vogue evinces how dearly we love a pundit, especially when he is polysyllabic. But his whole confusion of form and content is dangerous epistemology, since it is yet another force disrupting harmony and leading to excitable action.”

Geoffrey Wagner. “Misunderstanding Media: Obscurity as Authority.” *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, Mar. 1967, p. 255.

## **The Ugly:**

“Every so often, the semi-intellectual communities at the fringes of the arts, the universities, and the communications industries are hit by a new book, which becomes a fad or a parlor game. This summer’s possible candidate, with what may be just the right combination of

intelligence, arrogance and pseudo-science, is Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*." Unnamed author. "Blowing Hot and Cold." *Time*, 3 July 1964, p. 88.

"The book swarms with non-sequiturs, terminological confusion, sweeping statements unbacked by any evidence and a usage of dozens of quotations that does violence to their authors' meaning and sets new records for tendentious reasoning."

C.J. Fox. "Our Mass Communications." *Commonweal*, vol. LXXXI, no. 4, Oct. 1964, p. 105.

"The style is a viscous fog, through which loom stumbling metaphors."

Christopher Ricks. "Electronic Man." *New Statesman*, 11 Dec. 1964. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, p. 215.

"Unfortunately, as has been perhaps hinted, McLuhan has no real positive contribution to make in this book. He produces a great confusion of aphorisms, striking sentences, arresting allusions, hindsightful insights, and breathtaking inferences. It may well be that some of them are great and will be quoted millenia hence as imperishable truths. But it is possible to suspect also that if so, this will be true simply by the laws of probability invoked in the spewing out of a torrent of statements of one kind or another—just as a pack of monkeys can theoretically, in due time, type out a Shakespearean play. But is it worth the prodigious waste of paper, and even more the staggering work of wading through all those near-miss typings to find the gems?"

Jack Behar and Ben Lieberman. "Paradise Regained or McLuhanacy?" *Teachers College Record*, April 1965. Reprinted in *McLuhan Hot & Cool*, edited by Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Signet, 1969, p. 222.

"And it is in this spirit that Marshall McLuhan must be approached: as one who has little that is substantial to say, but who reveals a very great deal about the cultural permissiveness of mid-century America. For what McLuhan has discovered is the ease with which pretentious nonsense can be parleyed into a marvelously lucrative, but at the same time academically prestigious career."

Theodore Roszak. "The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan." *New Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 263.

*Understanding Media* "is his worst book—and the best-selling. No pictures, no anthologizing, just repetitive non-arguments about the media . . . held together by the incantation: 'The medium is the message' . . . He faggoted his notions as they fell, and if they rhymed and rattled, all was well."

Christopher Ricks. "McLuhanism." *The Listener*, 28 Sept. 1967. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 101.

### ***The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (1967)***

#### **The Good:**

"In the process of delivering content the medium also works over the sensorium of the

consumer. To get this subtle insight across, McLuhan punned on message and came up with massage. The switch is intended to draw attention to the fact that a medium is not something neutral—it does something to people. It takes hold of them, it jostles them, it bumps them around, it massages them. It opens and closes windows in their sensorium. Proof? Look out the window at the TV generation.”

John M. Culkin. “A Schoolman’s Guide to Marshall McLuhan.” *Saturday Review*, 18 Mar. 1967. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 246.

“The book itself is a massage, to use McLuhan’s own pun, a working over of the reader-viewer . . . . At any rate [the photos, sketches, and ‘typographic tricks’] force the reader to become involved in the book—which is what he wants.”

David Ramacitti. “McLuhan on Communication.” *Humanist*, vol. 27, no. 5, Sept. 1967, p. 198.

“Although he is an accredited expert in language and communications, McLuhan’s intellect is wide-ranging. In his own way he takes on the role of educator, sociologist, psychologist, philosopher, and theologian.”

David Ramacitti. “McLuhan on Communication.” *Humanist*, vol. 27, no. 5, Sept. 1967, p. 198.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, “McLuhan and collaborator Quentin Fiore create what, for all practical purposes, is a picture book. Yet it is a picture book that, in large part, is about words; this is McLuhan’s way of demonstrating the necessity of going outside the medium in order to be able to perceive its conventions.”

David L. Fagen. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, and *The Medium is the Massage*. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 1968, pp. 83.

“It will probably be some time before McLuhan’s brilliant but scattered insights and theories can be sorted out and transformed into a coherent set of critical principles and methods. But there are a number of younger critics who have begun to respond to popular culture in terms reflective of the new consciousness enunciated by McLuhan.”

John G. Cawelti. Review of *The Medium is the Massage*. *American Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, Summer 1968, p. 257.

“First, the book aspires to show its argument, to exemplify the dissonance and confusion of the coming ‘electronic’ age in the mash-up formats of multiple mediated ‘messages’. The hybrid text is to some extent a work of deconstruction *avant la lettre*. And what it first deconstructs is our conventional assumptions about an orderly ‘linear’ argument.”

Barry Sandywell. Review of *The Medium is the Massage*. *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 18, no. 12, 2015, p. 1408.

## **The Bad:**

“The other evasion is about inevitability. Can we do anything about our environments and about the massage which the media exert on us? The cover of *The Medium Is the Massage* proclaims: ‘There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.’ The trouble is that he never explains what could be done. Or rather, he can’t make up his mind whether understanding media makes much difference.”

Christopher Ricks. “McLuhanism.” *The Listener*, 28 Sept. 1967. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 104.

“Let us face it right away. Mr McLuhan is practically unreadable. His reputation, like that of

Freud and Marx, is based on what he is said to have said . . . . In the most recent of these books, *The Medium is the Massage*, the professor from Toronto concedes this. He asks to be looked at rather than read. Provocative photographs share pride of place with typographic gimmicks; there are enough nipples and navels to make a psychedelic slide show.”  
Unnamed author. “Unhappy Medium.” *The Economist*, 30 Sept. 1967, p. 1201.

“With *The Medium Is the Massage* a rather thin diet of prose is eked out with a great deal of typographic space-wastage and photographic interruptions, in an attempt to produce something nearer the specifications of his theory.”

Anthony Quinton. “Cut-Rate Salvation.” *The New York Review of Books*, 23 Nov. 1967.

Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 187.

“To justify this shapeless and enthusiastic technique of almost random accumulation he falls back on the idea that he is producing a mosaic, not a linear argument. In fact he is producing a linear argument, but one of a very fluid and unorganized kind.”

Anthony Quinton. “Cut-Rate Salvation.” *The New York Review of Books*, 23 Nov. 1967.

Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 191.

“*The Medium is the Massage*, on the other hand, is quite satisfying on its own terms, but represents the end of an idea, not its genesis. In a very real way you have to be tuned in to McLuhan beforehand in order for *The Medium is the Massage* to be more for you than a picture book.”

David L. Fagen. Review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, and *The Medium is the Massage*. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 1968, p. 83.

## **The Ugly:**

“McLuhan’s assertions are not, he would have us believe, propositions or hypotheses. They are ‘probes.’ But what is a ‘probe’? It is apparently any outrageous statement for which one has no evidence at all or which, indeed, flies in the face of obvious facts.”

Theodore Roszak. “The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan.” *New Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 268.

“His most recent literary effort, *The Medium Is the Massage* (*sic*)—a gimmicked-up non-book—is fetching \$10.95 a copy in the hardbound edition. He should worry about intellectual respectability? About as much as Andrew Ure or Samuel Smiles, who long ago discovered the secret of becoming successful ‘fee-losophers’ in an exploitative social order.”

Theodore Roszak. “The Summa Popologica of Marshall McLuhan.” *New Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1966. Reprinted in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p. 269.

“Technology is to subsume education, and under the guise of emancipating the education process McLuhanism would enslave and humiliate it.”

Kenneth Melvin. “McLuhan the Medium.” *The Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 48, no. 10, June 1967, p. 490.

"McLuhan is a monomaniac who happens to be hooked on something extremely important. We ought to be grateful. But the colossal evasiveness, the slipshod reasoning and weak-kneed glibness accompanying the mania make him quite dangerous going. He has rapidly acquired the reputation of being a prophet, or a charlatan, or both. In fact, he is neither."

Tom Nairn. "Into McLuhan's Maelstrom." *New Statesman*, 22 Sept. 1967, p. 363.

### ***War and Peace in the Global Village (1968)***

#### **The Good:**

"Everything about it points to this truth that education is now a painful and cruel experience—a warlike process—and that war, to many innocent people (innocent in the sense of unknowing) is an essential process of education. Learn or perish: this is the crash program of our times!"

Louis Le Gall. "Sinclair on McLuhan." *The Globe and Mail*, 3 Oct. 1968, p. 6.

"Dogmatic percepts and dramatic prophecies stab and prick previously anesthetized sensibilities and the book's conscious disconnectedness will cause linearly-oriented readers great discomfort. But instead of being so sharp that they are too hot to handle, McLuhan's paradoxical probes are often so sharp that the reader is hooked."

Peter Dart. Review of *War and Peace in the Global Village*. *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, Summer 1969, p. 376.

"In *War and Peace*, McLuhan tracked the shapes and contours of the present modern dilemma—a total restructuring of our metaphysical reality."

Daniel J. Cahill. Review of *The Interior Landscape* and *From Cliché to Archetype*. *The North American Review*, vol. 256, no. 1, Spring 1971, p. 78.

"Though a lot of this may seem like freaky rantings from the Sixties . . . many of McLuhan's observations on technology, violence, etc., still ring true."

Michael Rogers. Review of *War and Peace in the Global Village*. *Library Journal*, vol. 122, no. 12, July 1997, p. 132.

#### **The Bad:**

"That such writing can be accepted raises discouraging questions about the reading capacity of the educated public."

D.W. Harding. "Trompe l'oeil." *The New York Review of Books*, 2 Jan. 1969, p. 15.

"Of charlatanism, in the sense of deliberate trickery, McLuhan need not be suspected; feeling threatened by the civilization of which he is inescapably part, he so eagerly welcomed the reassurance offered by his prophetic vision that the sleights of mind producing it escaped his notice."

D.W. Harding. "Trompe l'oeil." *The New York Review of Books*, 2 Jan. 1969, p. 15.

"Yet, if anything comes through clearly it is that McLuhan books are going 'out.'"

John H. Langer. Review of *Understanding Media*, *The Medium is the Massage*, and *War and Peace in the Global Village*. *Journal of Thought*, vol. 5, no. 3, July 1970, p. 203.

#### **The Ugly:**

"What are we to do with an undisciplined writer who has all the potty confidence of a teacup reader, who seems to have got all his hard facts from old copies of the Reader's Digest?"  
Lister Sinclair. Review of *War and Peace in the Global Village*. *The Globe and Mail*, 14 Sept. 1968, p. A17.

"In the meantime, some of us think that the most important question is not how Paul VI or Marshall McLuhan came to set down their special views, but how so many people could take them so passionately seriously in a world where what happens contradicts half of what they say."

Lister Sinclair. Review of *War and Peace in the Global Village*. *The Globe and Mail*, 14 Sept. 1968, p. A17.

"Chairman McLuhan has always insisted that he only provides the words; you provide the meaning. But now the Big M seems to be getting a little tired of stick-handling. We puzzle through the irrelevancies by the dim light of *Finnigan's Wake* [sic], and we think how McLuhan frays our nerves with his hippiegrams."

Lister Sinclair. Review of *War and Peace in the Global Village*. *The Globe and Mail*, 14 Sept. 1968, p. A17.

"This sounds like an advertiser's cure for fibrositis. But his command of the limpidly meaningless never fails him."

D.W. Harding. "Trompe l'oeil." *The New York Review of Books*, 2 Jan. 1969, p. 15.

### ***Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting (1968)***

#### **The Good:**

Regarding McLuhan's interpretation of Seurat in *Through the Vanishing Point*. "For McLuhan, we are like astronauts in the processed world of technology. We now take our 'environment' with us in the form of technical 'extensions' of the human body or senses. The technostucture is both the lens through which we experience the world, and, in fact, the 'anxious object' with which human experience has become imperceptibly, almost subliminally, merged."

Arthur Kroker. *Technology and the Canadian Mind*. New World Perspectives, 1984, p. 60.

"Those critics who derided McLuhan for writing deterministic, schematic, and mythic history would have been surprised by *Through the Vanishing Point*, an empirically based history of nonvisual space . . . ."

Robert Macmillan. "Marshall McLuhan at the Mercy of his Commentators." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 22, no. 4, Dec. 1992, p. 486.

#### **The Bad:**

"It is impossible to assess Marshall McLuhan 'correctly.' No one, including the swami himself (by his own admission) is sure what he means."

Charles G. Roland. "McLuhanism." *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 207, no. 12, Mar. 1969, p. 2287.

"The comments are disordered, unconnected, and often meaningless. The authors seem preoccupied with creating a James Joycean world of aesthetics, although there is scant similarity to Joyce's genius."

Charles G. Roland. "McLuhanism." *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 207, no. 12, Mar. 1969, p. 2287.

"These pairings are preceded by a statement of intent and followed by a rambling and incoherent discourse that struck me as the worst thing McLuhan has yet done, short even of those bursts of wit that usually enliven his diatribes. In fact, the whole production struck me as inept and unconvincing."

F.E. Sparshott. "The Gutenberg Nebula." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 3, no. 3, July 1969, p. 137.

### **The Ugly:**

"*Through the Vanishing Point* is nominally a study of 'space in poetry and painting.' Actually, it is a collection of programmatic campaign speeches in which McLuhan endorses his own brilliance in the guise of commenting on Western culture."

Unnamed author. Review of *Through the Vanishing Point*. *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 Aug. 1968.

"Anti-intellectualism may have some virtue if it helps destroy authoritarianism; but McLuhan's anti-intellectualism promotes himself as Authority in a religious-dogmatic sense. His noisy deification makes his ostentatious spurning of the intellectual process potentially harmful to all professions."

Charles G. Roland. "McLuhanism." *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 207, no. 12, Mar. 1969, p. 2287.

"McLuhan claims only to stimulate you, and no doubt I am a poor judge of a stimulus. After eighteen years of exposure to McLuhan up here in Toronto, I am getting a bit numb."

F.E. Sparshott. "The Gutenberg Nebula." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 3, no. 3, July 1969, p. 137.

### **Counterblast (1969)**

#### **The Good:**

"Bless McLuhan for his latest book!"

George Sanderson. Review of *Counterblast*. *The Antigoneish Review*, vol. 1, no.1, Spring 1970, pp. 124-130.

"In any case McLuhan has not yet come near his saturation point. His message is so important that it needs to be presented as often and in as many ways as possible."

George Sanderson. Review of *Counterblast*. *The Antigoneish Review*, vol. 1, no.1, Spring 1970, pp. 124-130.

"I suggest that most people are appalled by this idea rather than excited by it. They tend to attack it unthinkingly, ignore it or suppress it. Kafka's hero awakes to find he is a bug."

McLuhan's hero has trouble admitting he is a colossus. He is leviathan imagining himself a minnow. His writings threaten global wars, mass starvation, riots, universal crime. McLuhan is justified in his continuing attempts to make us realize what we have become."



George Sanderson. Review of *Counterblast*. *The Antigoneish Review*, vol. 1, no.1, Spring 1970, pp. 124-130.

"The book achieves a new role. It ceases to be an information source and becomes instead a means for the training of perception."

George Sanderson. Review of *Counterblast*. *The Antigoneish Review*, vol. 1, no.1, Spring 1970, pp. 124-130.

### **The Bad:**

"I once hoped, naively, that the time would arrive when McLuhan would have felt sufficiently reassured by the popularity of his theories to re-examine them in the light of the criticism they have attracted."

Dennis Duffy. "Blind faith loves neutral bias." *The Globe and Mail*, 22 Nov. 1969, p. A26.

"For all his talk, McLuhan is a man of the printed world, who loves high-order verbal abstractions which are worth a thousand pictures."

Robert Gorham Davis. Review of *Counterblast* and *The Interior Landscape*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 21. Dec. 1969, p. 8.

### **The Ugly:**

"What we have is another of those supposedly neutral observations of contemporary trends that is in fact as blatant an example of the bias of communication as the media which preoccupy McLuhan."

Dennis Duffy. "Blind faith loves neutral bias." *The Globe and Mail*, 22 Nov. 1969, p. A26.

"Of all our principal public and publicized thinkers, Marshall McLuhan is probably the most confused."

Robert Gorham Davis. Review of *Counterblast* and *The Interior Landscape*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 21. Dec. 1969, p. 8.

"In *Counterblast* we are given a horrifying vision of a world in which media techniques are the only reality, and individual humans are only significant as their awareness are determined in common by communicative processes over which they can have no real control."

Robert Gorham Davis. Review of *Counterblast* and *The Interior Landscape*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 21. Dec. 1969, p. 8.

### ***Culture Is Our Business* (1970)**

#### **The Good:**

"The book provides little in the way of paraphrasable 'content' that cannot be found in or inferred from his more sober works; but if there is one thing most of us now accept, it is that the medium crucially affects the message."

Dudley Young. Review of *Culture Is Our Business*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 12 July 1970, p. 7.

"Indeed, the formal intention of the work as a whole is to force the reader to discover present mythologies by participating in them; as McLuhan puts it, 'It is the interval whether in music or mosaic or in poetry that compels involvement until we become part of the situation.' It is in this sense that *Culture Is Our Business* can be seen as a kind of Symbolist poem, not unlike Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which McLuhan quotes throughout."

Dudley Young. Review of *Culture Is Our Business*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 12 July 1970, p. 7.

"Once again Marshall McLuhan has endeavored to read the currents of the maelstrom of masscult-midcult mainstream American thought . . . . In *Culture Is Our Business*, McLuhan has plunged himself and his readers right into the midst of the confusing confluences of our mores and value systems as represented in what he calls 'the cave art of the twentieth century'—advertisements—our 'hidden environment of magical forms.'"

Joel M. Jones. Review of *Culture Is Our Business*. *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, Spring 1971, pp. 984-985.

"is he savior or shyster, explorer or exploiter, writing as prophet or for profit? This time, for those of us interested in the study of popular culture, the decision must go in McLuhan's favor."

Joel M. Jones. Review of *Culture Is Our Business*. *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, Spring 1971, p. 985.

"McLuhan—as he would have us do—has been diving relentlessly into the cultural maelstrom, and though often his bloodshot eyes may seem short-circuited, they are never short-sighted—and they, at least, have been open."

Joel M. Jones. Review of *Culture Is Our Business*. *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, Spring 1971, p. 989.

### **The Bad:**

"The Marshall-maniac will find the book comfortable, although he will notice few fresh ideas or witticisms. The neophyte will read it in discomfort; the usual McLuhan disjointedness, terseness, circularity, and gameyness—at a price not right—will anger, confound, and confuse. For him, one may suggest *The Mechanical Bride*; the ads are dated, but the analyses are at least clever and considerably more coherent. Perhaps we still are dialecticians."

Bruce E. Gronbeck. Review of *Culture Is Our Business*. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 57, no. 2, Apr. 1971, p. 240.

"*Culture Is Our Business* provides much repetition, both in its original material and in the quoting of mcluhanisms"

Sam Neill. "Books and Marshall McLuhan." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 41, no. 4, Oct. 1971, p. 314.

### **The Ugly:**

"Unfortunately, this is old stuff by now, the kind of thing everyone says when writing about advertising. And what is more unfortunate, Marshall McLuhan has nothing else to say. In the rest of his book he returns to his 'probes,' the pun-filled propositions that made him famous with *Understanding Media*, but alas he is no longer inventive.

There is the occasional flash of wit . . . . But otherwise he is either ridiculous . . . . or else he is

repetitive. Almost all of *Culture is Our Business* is a rehash of the ideas expressed in his earlier books. The result is that the ads are often more interesting than the 'probes.'"

Peter Sypnowich. "A new message from Marshall McLuhan." *Toronto Daily Star*, 9 May 1970, p. 39.

### ***From Cliché to Archetype* (1970)**

#### **The Good:**

"the most influential prophet of our age"

Peter Newman. "McLuhan, hurrah!" *Toronto Daily Star*, 30 Dec. 1970, p. 6.

"Given McLuhan's metaphysical assumptions of truth and reality, the book is a vivid embodiment of the dynamics of his theories. No appeal is made to those whose minds are mired in the defunct and eroded 'linear logic' of a rapidly waning humanistic culture . . . . For the seasoned reader of McLuhan, the tardy appearance of the 'Introduction' on p. 122 presents no problem, since the point of all that precedes this bow to the 'linear mind' will be understood and absorbed as tactile probes—a part of the great task of the purgation of a now errant tradition."

Daniel J. Cahill. Review of *The Interior Landscape* and *From Cliché to Archetype*. *The North American Review*, vol. 256, no. 1, Spring 1971, p. 78.

"*From Cliché to Archetype* consolidates the argument of the previous works, and McLuhan here advances the scope of models . . . . that we will and must form as an essential part of the task of redefining our images of identity."

Daniel J. Cahill. Review of *The Interior Landscape* and *From Cliché to Archetype*. *The North American Review*, vol. 256, no. 1, Spring 1971, p. 78.

"If the total thrust of McLuhan's pronouncements is to be accepted seriously, we must now be prepared to relegate to the discard our present notions of truth, reality, and history; we must be ready to receive the new inheritance of our electronic inventiveness: retribalization. Do not be frightened: it is a bright new future of resonance and tactility."

Daniel J. Cahill. Review of *The Interior Landscape* and *From Cliché to Archetype*. *The North American Review*, vol. 256, no. 1, Spring 1971, p. 78.

". . . . it is probably his best work since *The Gutenberg Galaxy*."

James W. Carey. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1, Spring 1972, p. 181.

"McLuhan has attempted to trace out the role of certain verbal formulations in the extension of mind and culture. By retreating to the ground he understands best, he can again provide sensitive understanding of language as a medium of expression and culture. But, alas and alack, I fear that such a retreat will also cost him some readership, for he also sacrifices much of the messianic impulse of his more popular work."

James W. Carey. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1, Spring 1972, p. 181.

## **The Bad:**

"*From Cliché to Archetype* is another in a series of booklets that he has been producing since *The Medium is the Massage*: scattered and elliptical in approach, defensive in their assertion that brevity and formlessness are the only valid ways of exploring their subject, smug in their attribution of obsolescence to any questioner of the views within them."

Dennis Duffy. "Marshall McLuhan fad appears to be fading." *Toronto Daily Star*, 21 Nov. 1970, p. 67.

"The book is not an attempt to communicate a new conviction to the reader. It is rather a verbal cocoon of familiar theories and overworked insights that eventually smothers."

Dennis Duffy. "Marshall McLuhan fad appears to be fading." *Toronto Daily Star*, 21 Nov. 1970, p. 67.

"It grows clear that 'archetype'—like most McLuhan terms: one remembers 'medium—is a dog's coat to gather whatever burrs it touches."

Hugh Kenner. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 13 Dec. 1970, p. 7.

"A voltage is a difference, as between ground and cloud. No art can step up the voltage of boiled spinach, whatever its nutritive power. So *From Cliché to Archetype* is essentially more of the same. It's a pity, with much insight glimpsing around inside it, that many readers are going to call the book spinach, and then go on to quote the rest of the famous cliché."

Hugh Kenner. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *The New York Times Book Review*, 13 Dec. 1970, p. 7.

## **The Ugly:**

"Unfortunately, McLuhan's offerings give us as little sustenance now as they did in 1968."

Dennis Duffy. "Marshall McLuhan fad appears to be fading." *Toronto Daily Star*, 21 Nov. 1970, p. 67.

"Reading Marshall McLuhan is rather like riding the magic railway during the seaside holidays of my childhood. As I recall it, one got aboard, and then off she went; up and down on a funicular, into a dark cave where skeletons rose grinning and gibbering out of the darkness . . . until, finally, shaken and bewildered, one was back where one began."

Malcolm Muggeridge. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *Esquire*, 1 May 1971, p. 40.

"... one hasn't the faintest notion of what it is all about."

Malcolm Muggeridge. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *Esquire*, 1 May 1971, p. 40.

"Though considered an expert on communication media, McLuhan is about as bad a communicator as could be possibly imagined."

Malcolm Muggeridge. Review of *From Cliché to Archetype*. *Esquire*, 1 May 1971, p. 40.

## **Take Today: *The Executive as Dropout* (1972)**

## **The Good:**

"With all its faults, the method has proved enormously useful in forcing us to look at what is

going on around us and to 'rethink through' our situation."

Mavor Moore. "The prophet as performer." *The Globe and Mail*, 3 June 1972, p. 35.

"In *Take Today*, McLuhan the entertainer is in fine form—changing viewpoints as often as a quick-change artist changes hats . . . . McLuhan is an actor—at least that's my working hypothesis. This is not to devalue philosophy but to raise the currency of acting. In a day when understanding other roles is essential, and when one must fill several roles oneself, the art of the actor becomes the art of living."

Mavor Moore. "The prophet as performer." *The Globe and Mail*, 3 June 1972, p. 35.

"The book is, I think (thinking is obsolete) a device to turn one's head into a kaleidoscope, so that concepts (concepts are obsolete) and percepts constantly fall into new patterns. And instantaneous perception of constantly changing patterns is man's only way of relating himself and his world."

J.R. Rayfield. Review of *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 16, Jan. 1975, p. 143.

"This book . . . . is filled, again, with the most complex series of interrelationships between and among a vast array of human statements from the past and present, all focusing on the future . . . In his view of the universe as a series of complex *processes* (rather than as fixed states), McLuhan still emulates his sailor in the maelstrom, and simultaneously complements Korzybski by reminding us of the prices we pay as a result of the Faustian bargain we make by talking in nouns about a universe of verbs."

Charles Weingartner. "Marshall McLuhan and What He's Been Doin'." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 1977, pp. 230-231.

### **The Bad:**

"Marshall McLuhan has always had a problem. In short sentences he can be extremely provocative . . . . but on the lecture platform or in a book he ranks as probably one of society's most awkward and difficult communicators."

Jack Gould. Review of *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. *New York Times*, 21 May 1972, p. F16.

"On the pragmatic level, the authors are on shaky or at least on inadequate and uncommunicative grounds on just how conversion of all the myriad instruments of society into an 'art form' would improve everyone's lot. It is far easier said than done."

Jack Gould. Review of *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. *New York Times*, 21 May 1972, p. F16.

### **The Ugly:**

"If taken seriously, the book is insulting in its illiterate — oops, grating — references to Keynes and its 'post-industrial' platitudes . . . . The hyperbole would be forgivable if it didn't exaggerate stale misconceptions about prosperity and automation and cybernation ending social conflict and the survival-oriented way of life for business and labor."

Unnamed author. Review of *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 Apr.

1972.

"[McLuhan and Nevitt] have produced a rambling newspaper in the form of a book."  
S.D. Neill. Review of *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 43, no. 2, Apr. 1973, p. 170.

### ***City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media (1977)***

#### **The Good:**

"McLuhan's call for a new approach to media study—an approach that reaches beyond the classroom—has been largely ignored. But now, with the publication of *City as Classroom*, coauthored with Kathryn Hutchon and Eric McLuhan, his approach has been clarified, updated, and presented in a form that will make it hard to ignore."

Ed Wachtel, "McLuhan in the Classroom: The Method is the Message." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 35, no. 2, June 1978, p. 196.

"Instead, the authors have offered questions for the students' consideration rather than answers for their digestion. The authors realize that the traditional relationship between the school and the community has changed. Before the advent of modern media, the classroom was the greatest source of information. The flow of facts was linear and directional -- from a single teacher to rows of students. This type of classroom is indeed obsolete. Data are no longer available only in the classroom. The community itself has become an information storehouse and the facts are available in films, recordings, and data banks. Since 'answers' have become accessible throughout the community, the authors suggest that it is now the responsibility of the school to formulate the questions. If the student emerges from the classroom knowing what to ask, the community will supply the answers."

Ed Wachtel, "McLuhan in the Classroom: The Method is the Message." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 35, no. 2, June 1978, p. 196.

"*City as Classroom* represents not just a change from the traditional high school text, but also a shift in direction for Marshall McLuhan. Throughout his previous work, McLuhan has used his 'mosaic,' metaphoric approach as a flashlight to illuminate patterns and relationships in the media environment. In the present book, the flashlight itself has become radiant."

Ed Wachtel, "McLuhan in the Classroom: The Method is the Message." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 35, no. 2, June 1978, p. 196.

#### **The Bad:**

"While *The Medium is the Message* sold a million copies, most of McLuhan's other books baffle readers."

Paul Connolly. "McLuhan & His Message." *Commonweal*, 6 Oct. 1989, p. 537.

### ***Letters of Marshall McLuhan (1987)***

#### **The Good:**

"Despite the controversy that still surrounds his reputation, it is now beyond argument that Marshall McLuhan was one of the most original and provocative thinkers that Canada has ever produced."

Norman Snider. "The guru of pop culture." *Macleans*, 12 Dec. 1987, p. 54.

"It is a measure of the importance of McLuhan's ideas about the media and society that many of the observations that were once considered dramatically revolutionary now seem staggeringly obvious."

Norman Snider. "The guru of pop culture." *Macleans*, 12 Dec. 1987, p. 54.

"Although he might be mistaken for either, he was not a wet, undisciplined genius like Coleridge, nor one of those from whose minds a few central ideas emerge over a long span of time like splinters from beneath the skin. His was a third and more modern type, closer to Aldous Huxley: one who compulsively puts together scraps and notions from many disciplines and rubs them together until he gets sparks. And as the letters show, when he was cooking, he was cooking indeed."

Douglas Fetherling. "The letters of a guru." *The Whig-Standard*, 16 Jan. 1988.

"With the publication of this overdue collection of letters, it should be clear to anyone still not convinced that Marshall McLuhan is among the small company of intellectual geniuses Canada has thus far produced. Arguably, he has been our most exciting and original thinker, and the partial eclipse of his reputation in the past decade is an indictment of our national short-sightedness and mediocrity."

Brian Fawcett. "Village scribe." *Books in Canada*, Apr. 1988, p. 31.

*Letters* "provides major clarifications of McLuhan's theoretical opus, and is a testimony to just how far ahead of his time Marshall McLuhan's thinking reached."

Brian Fawcett. "Village scribe." *Books in Canada*, Apr. 1988, p. 31.

"Yet we find in many letters greater clarity of expression, and this again pitches us into the question of why McLuhan crafted his public prose in so dazzling and blinding a manner."

Paul Levinson. "McLuhan's Space." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 40, no. 2, Spring 1990, p. 171.

### **The Bad:**

"Today television needs a new McLuhan, a theorist who will undo the harm accidentally perpetrated by the first one."

Robert Fulford. "The message is the message: McLuhan's letters setting stage for a revival." *Toronto Star*, 10 Oct. 1987, p. M5.

"Less admirable is a growing intellectual carelessness as he became famous, a preference for pronouncement rather than argument and an incapacity to respond and adapt in the face of criticism."

Michael Ignatieff. Review of *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. *The Observer*, 6 Mar. 1988, p. 42.

"In this search for a hard, scientific determinism, he neglected the area of impact that as a literary critic should have been his privileged terrain: how the medium influences the *meaning* of messages. His neglect of meaning . . . can only be regarded as perverse."

Michael Ignatieff. Review of *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. *The Observer*, 6 Mar. 1988, p. 42.

"Late in life he took to advising public figures, including Harry S. Truman and Pierre Trudeau, but to judge from the letters he threw off to them he was too grey really to be worth taking seriously as an eminence. His scholarly side was equally unremarkable."

Peter Levi. "The message was hardly even medium." *The Spectator*, 12 Mar. 1988, p. 35.

Regarding McLuhan's 'hot' and 'cool' terminology: "All this passage indicates to me is that the Centre of Culture and Technology at Toronto was well supplied with hot and cold running nonsense."

John Mortimer. "Tedium is the message." *The Sunday Times* (London), 13 Mar. 1988.

"The young wonder who Marshall McLuhan was. Maybe some kind of TV commentator in the sixties? The rest of us remember 'the medium is the message' and 'a global village,' and that McLuhan was otherwise unintelligible."

Michael Bliss. "False prophet." *Saturday Night*, May 1988, p. 59.

"He emerges from his letters as a failed metaphysician of the media. McLuhan's system and style proved ludicrously inadequate as a guide to our time, which is why he fell into comparative obscurity after about 1972."

Michael Bliss. "False prophet." *Saturday Night*, May 1988, p. 59.

"His last refuge is the arrogant elitism of modernist aesthetics – a view of the artist as prophetic outsider."

Michael Bliss. "False prophet." *Saturday Night*, May 1988, p. 60.

### **The Ugly:**

"Undoubtedly Mr. McLuhan was a great man and, we must assume, did not intend to weaken the democratic process. But his advice, followed by weaker minds, is calculated to turn an image-mad politician into a sorcerer, a shaman, and, finally, a tyrant."

Bruce Hutchison. "Genius to icon: the McLuhan letters." *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 Sept. 1987, p. B10.

"Marshall McLuhan's intellectual reputation is dead."

Michael Ignatieff. Review of *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. *The Observer*, 6 Mar. 1988, p. 42.

"He was not only as nutty as a fruitcake, but the paranoia which was the dark side of his megalomania took a disturbing turn to the extreme right wing."

Peter Levi. "The message was hardly even medium." *The Spectator*, 12 Mar. 1988, p. 35.

"The only really interesting bit of new information that I got from labouring through this heavy junk-heap was that Dom Pierre Lou Tseng-Tsiang, Chinese Foreign Minister around 1900, was an Abbot of a Belgian Benedictine monastery in 1948, and published his memoirs—which I intend to read soon to clear my head of poor McLuhan."

Peter Levi. "The message was hardly even medium." *The Spectator*, 12 Mar. 1988, p. 35.

### **Laws of Media: The New Science (1988)**

#### **The Good:**



"At the time of his death in 1980, Marshall McLuhan's reputation as one of the most important thinkers on contemporary culture and communication had been established beyond question." Timothy Buell. "Actually, it's the 'tetrad' that's the message." *Toronto Star*, 25 Mar. 1989, p. M9.

"Marshall McLuhan wanted to break the bondage not only of print but also of dialectical thinking. The McLuhans 'new science' is actually a new rhetoric that substitutes situatedness for viewpoint. A logical mind may despair of this book's analogical reasoning, but it is full of open space that invites thought."

Paul Connolly. "McLuhan & His Message." *Commonweal*, 6 Oct. 1989, p. 537.

"This text is a surprising posthumous gift from Canada's greatest cultural theorist. The collaboration with his son Eric has produced not only the most stimulating intellectual formulations but also the most welcome concessions to the norms of scholarship and argument since *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*."

John Fekete. Review of *Laws of Media*. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 1, Fall 1989, p. 248-249.

"It may be, in the long run, that the most enduring value of this book lies in its deeper structure, underneath the specific 'laws of media.' After all, this was meant to be different from McLuhan's customarily aphoristic phenomenology of culture. It was to be not a mythos but a *logos* of media; it was to be McLuhan's Logic. And the form of this logic, beyond the particular results it has so far generated, is itself of real interest. McLuhan's logic is *analogical* and *numerological*, and the current text provides a fuller and clearer access to its features than any of the earlier McLuhan books."

John Fekete. Review of *Laws of Media*. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 1, Fall 1989, p. 250.

"He was not a scientist, not even a social scientist. He was an English professor, and his use of literary criticism techniques is only now becoming recognized as a potential tool of educational technology research."

D. Hlynka. Review of *Laws of Media*. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, vol. 38, no. 2, June 1990, p. 89.

"In sum, after reading *Laws of Media* we come to realize how exciting and thought-provoking Marshall McLuhan's original media formulations were, for *Laws of Media* fully reveals what a scientific Marshall McLuhan might have been like."

James W. Chesebro. Review of *Laws of Media*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 77, no. 3, Aug. 1991, p. 379.

### **The Bad:**

"These so-called tetrads, or four-finger exercises, prove nothing, beyond the embarrassing fact that McLuhan's questions and his own impressionistic answers to them are never going to amount to a science."

John Sturrock. "Wild Man of the Global Village." *The New York Times Book Review*, 26 Feb. 1989, p. 39.

"These tetrads -- basically groups of four or more loosely-connected thoughts -- are trashy page-fillers, as vacuous as endearments in greeting cards. The McLuhans, father and son, are like Mr. Jones in the Dylan song: they know something's happening, but they don't know what it is."

Patrick Tivy. Review of *Laws of Media*. *Calgary Herald*, 4 Mar. 1989, p. E8.

"Overall, insofar as *Laws of Media* is viewed as the culmination of Marshall McLuhan's earlier contributions, it has dramatically, if not radically, transformed and displaced Marshall McLuhan's earlier conceptions and style. Indeed, little remains of the open-ended and thought-provoking probes found in *Understanding Media* . . . . These open-ended explorations are lost in *Laws of Media*, and in this sense *Laws of Media* detracts from and undercuts the truly heuristic value of Marshall McLuhan as a prober of media systems."

James W. Chesebro. Review of *Laws of Media*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 77, no. 3, Aug. 1991, p. 379

### **The Ugly:**

"Although we have adopted his term 'global village' and still use his aphorism 'the medium is the message' often in a confusing rather than enlightening way, it is true that time has erased much of the popular interest in the man who became for a time the best known Canadian in the world."

Harry J. Boyle. "McLuhan's media 'science.'" *The Ottawa Citizen*, 7 Jan. 1989, p. C3.

"It's a spirited, enthusiastic volume, a text enlivened by an impish sense of word-play -- but it's unfortunately about as lucid as a North Korean political broadcast."

Christopher Dornan. "McLunacy is the message." *The Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1989, p. K9.

"Even in the heady days of his reign as media guru in the mid-'60s, [Marshall McLuhan] was a tad abstruse. By the late '80s, his grandiloquent theories have all the pressing relevance of hieroglyphics. Nevertheless, cheerfully oblivious of his father's marginalization within communication theory, McLuhan the younger presses on, convinced that *Laws of Media* makes an important - no, a revolutionary - contribution to the field. The result is a book that pushes beyond McLuhanism and well into McLunacy."

Christopher Dornan. "McLunacy is the message." *The Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1989, p. K9.

"All the trademark McLuhan eccentricities are here: the nutball aphorisms gussied up as profound propositions . . . . the eclectic use of quotations . . . . and, of course, there are the tetrads - pages and pages of concrete poems intended to prompt a new understanding but that read for all the world like the fractured insights scribbled on empty pizza boxes by habitual hashish users."

Christopher Dornan. "McLunacy is the message." *The Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1989, p. K9.

"The McLuhans' 'laws' are little more than vacuous, convoluted maxims."

Christopher Dornan. "McLunacy is the message." *The Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1989, p. K9.

"In such a context, interest in McLuhan is purely historical: what intrigues is not what he argued but the fact that he was once taken so seriously. The result is that Marshall's legacy to his son is a book that will, at best, become an unwelcome addition to the reading lists of grad students slogging through the mandatory paper on McLuhan's moment in the sun."

Christopher Dornan. "McLunacy is the message." *The Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1989, p. K9.

"The reputation of Marshall McLuhan has sunk too low to be helped much by this book."  
Patrick Tivy. Review of *Laws of Media*. *Calgary Herald*, 4 Mar. 1989, p. E8.

### ***The Global Village (1989)***

#### **The Good:**

"The book should provoke people to think, if nothing else."

A.J. Anderson. Review of *The Global Village*. *Library Journal*, vol. 114, no. 5, Mar. 1989, p. 76.

"Dense, heavily technological writing—but with the occasional insight that reminds us of what once brought such renown to McLuhan."

Unnamed author. Review of *The Global Village*. *Kirkus Reviews*, 15 Mar. 1989.

"I would unreservedly recommend the Powers book as the best available introduction to and summary of McLuhan's thinking. To begin with, this looks like a book, with recognizable chapters and subchapters that have beginnings, middles, and endings. This organization is a betrayal of McLuhan's "mosaic" style . . . but the result will be better understood by most readers. The book also has some good observations on current computer developments . . ."  
Paul Levinson. "McLuhan's Space." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 40, no. 2, Spring 1990, p. 171.

"Despite the initial redundancies, *The Global Village* is studded with the controversial genius, insight and originality for which McLuhan was famous."

Thomas W. Cooper. "Re-viewing McLuhan." *Telecommunications Policy*, vol. 14, no. 4, Aug. 1990, p. 344.

"I find it more like reading speech than writing and I keep noticing that what at first I took to be vague or even facile statements become, on second reading, perfectly clear remarks that fit the 'whole thought' of the book, once I get the hang of it."

"The grammar of technology?," review by John Chris Jones, *Futures*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1992, pp. 93.

#### **The Bad:**

"Increasingly, the global village has become a global slum, and no awareness of tetrads or understanding of media has dented, let alone reversed, that tendency. Indeed the printing of more McLuhan spin-off books only exhausts more paper from an already limited lumber supply . . ."

Thomas W. Cooper. "Re-viewing McLuhan." *Telecommunications Policy*, vol. 14, no. 4, Aug. 1990, p. 346.

"Furthermore, notions, problems, and the terminology to express them . . . are much more elegantly and powerfully articulated in the works of Jean Gebser . . . [whose books] contain virtually all of McLuhan's claims about shifts in Occidental and Oriental thought, including

much of the evidence he cites.”

Eric Mark Kramer. Review of *The Global Village*. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan. 1991, p. 117.

**The Ugly:**

“Weighted with technobabble, McLuhan’s fervent forecast of a computer-linked global village flies in the face of political realities . . . .”

Unnamed author. Review of *The Global Village*. *Publisher’s Weekly*, 1 June 1989.