
Any extension of man is a medium, according to Mr. McLuhan. He uses media to define both the feel of the culture and the forces which bind it together. The form of the medium, not especially its content, is his subject—not the content of the book but print, not the TV program but TV itself. Henry Adams standing before the dynamo saw its force as mystic: mystic means unified, whole, one, all parts equivalent. McLuhan says that our culture has been a print culture: linear, compartmentalized, logic-minded, analytical; it is now becoming unified, intuitive, "mythic" because of the very force to which Adams responded in the humming dynamo. So brave an approach leads immediately into areas of prime importance to "civilizationers," not merely because McLuhan's work grows partly out of contact with the myth-critics whose stuff has been so fruitful for American Studies, but also because it enables him to be "anthropological" about our culture in areas in which until now we have been too limited by vagueness of definition to operate. Long upset by the problem of recognizably elite arts in a democracy, for example, we have too often tended to be hostile to other arts. McLuhan makes it possible to transcend taste as an anthropologist does, and to deal instead with form and the force of form.

Indeed, Understanding Media is about a number of things which neither we nor he know how to handle, so in many of the short chapters, when the topic grows too cosmic or complex to be handled or even grasped adequately, McLuhan ducks out by changing the subject to something only intuitively connected to what was under discussion. A dry list of the complications involved would be more helpful, if poetically less successful. Intuitive methods are a good way of implying the new unity he feels in our society, but one has the strong feeling that in some cases, awed by what he has turned up, the author fakes a little. Frequently one wonders whether his brilliant analogies have any real content; in other places in which one is quite certain that they do, the author's insight is presented so briefly and impressionistically as to be merely tantalizing. These are, however, the faults of a good book which tries to do too much and of an author too filled with bright insight to get it all down.

STUART LEVINE, The University of Kansas