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THE MC LUHAN PROBES

SUMMARY

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The McLuhan Probes is a web site (<http://www.mcluhan.ca>) presenting an ongoing series of visually-organized and hyper-linked documents, made by students at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Canada and Connecticut College in New London, USA. The Herbert Marshall McLuhan Foundation's goal in supporting

this project is to introduce McLuhan ideologies (through design projects and readings) to young designers. The authors invite the international art and design community to participate in the making of a bi-annual electronic journal on McLuhan.

The McLuhan Probes

DISPLAY IMAGE: McLuhan Slide Blank

MICHAEL B. LeBLANC: I was twelve years old when I first heard of Marshall McLuhan on a television comedy show. North Americans of my generation will remember when on Laugh-In Henry Gibson asked the question in rhyme: "Marshall McLuhan, what are you doin'?" Although I was from a media family, and I lived in a Toronto suburb, an hour commute from McLuhan's University of Toronto office-my young mind was on other things. So, the name was vaguely familiar when, as a university student, I found "Understanding Media" on a library shelf. I borrowed the book, but gave up after about twenty pages, preferring more readable thinkers like Toffler, Fuller or Papenek. I suspected this experience was not exclusive to me, and for the first time I realized the truth of Henry Gibson's question.

DISPLAY IMAGE: McLuhan Portrait

Marshall McLuhan was a communication theorist who taught in the English Department at the University of Toronto. He considered himself a grammarian studying the linguistic and perceptual biases of the mass media.

DISPLAY IMAGE: Gutenberg Galaxy

In his 1962 book *Gutenberg Galaxy*, (subtitled *The Making of Typographical Man*), McLuhan claimed that print technology had modified the forms of our perception, shifting and concentrating perceptual emphasis from the ear to the eye, with tremendous consequences for individuals and cultures.

DISPLAY IMAGE: Understanding

Two years later McLuhan published *Understanding Media*. He studied the way information shifts its focus from specialist emphasis on detail towards a need to interpret the contexts created by media forms, hence the aphorism 'the medium is the message'. He died in 1980.

During the late 1960's and '70's, McLuhan was a darling of the media. He made the cover of *TIME* magazine, and millions read his *Playboy* interview. In fact, we give copies of the *Playboy* interview-without the pictures-to our students, since it is still the most accessible introduction to his thoughts and ideas.

DISPLAY IMAGE: Probes

McLuhan, recognizing the shortened attention-span of a television-influenced audience, used epigrams, which he called "probes" McLuhan's probes are short snippets of wit, sometimes self-supportive and sometimes self-contradictory, calculated to elicit a reaction. A good example of a McLuhan probe is "The medium is the message" McLuhan often utilized hyperbole as a rhetorical device to provoke discussion. When McLuhan says "...at the speed of light man has neither goals, objectives nor private identity. He is an item on the data bank-software only, easily forgotten", he is testing an audience, looking for an argument. At other times, he is eminently quotable: "We are living far ahead of our thinking" is today a commonplace that was startling when McLuhan said it at the end of the '60's.

The McLuhan Probes project was initiated in late 1984, when the directors of the Herbert Marshall McLuhan Foundation approached us to develop an Internet-based forum for discussion of McLuhan's ideas. The Foundation is a non-profit corporation based in Nova Scotia, Canada, and continues with the full support of Corinne McLuhan, who transferred the electronic rights of her husband's work to the Foundation in 1989

Students in the Communication Design program at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Canada, and design students from Connecticut College, New London, USA, were invited to create an ongoing series of electronic, visually-organized and hyper-linked documents that illustrate some of McLuhan's probes.

In late 1994, the World Wide Web was just beginning to become established. Image maps were still very experimental, and the majority of web users were using text-only browsers such as Lynx. Furthermore, in Hypertext Markup Language typographic control belongs to the person browsing; the designer has very little authority over the typeface or the placement of text on the screen. Today, advances such as Netscape's browser-side imagemaps and Tables make it much easier to control graphic and textual elements in HTML. Even so, as typographic forms are used by today's designers to carry semiotic information, and much of McLuhan's work deals with the use of typography as a message-carrier, the lack of typographic control was the principal impediment to using HTML for this project. A more suitable delivery vehicle for the Probes was found to be Adobe's Acrobat technology. Although the end-user would be required to first download the Acrobat document before viewing, designers can use familiar tools like Quark XPress, Adobe Photoshop or Pagemaker to assemble their work. Once completed, the design can then be handed over to the instructor/editor for conversion to Acrobat format, where hyperlinks and other interactive details are added. Acrobat also has the merit of being cross-platform, and the typefaces that are used in each document are stored as scalable outline fonts. Andrea Wollensak will be showing us some Probe examples in a few minutes

DISPLAY IMAGES: McLuhan Probes web pages

Although we rejected the use of HTML in the Probes themselves, we do use the Web to display thumbnails of the Probes for downloading, and to provide information about the McLuhan Foundation and the McLuhan Listserv.

DISPLAY IMAGES: McLuhan Probes Exhibition In June 1995, the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada hosted the 'G7 Conference'. This is an annual event where the heads of state of the leading world economies, along with Russia, get together to discuss world problems and have their pictures taken together. The McLuhan Probes was part of this festival. Apple Canada loaned three PowerMacs for the exhibition, held at the Anna Leonowens Gallery. An installation of imagery from the first two McLuhan Probes and a 6-minute video accompanied the electronic work. Although Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin missed the event (old Boris seemed a bit hung over and distraught over Chechnya), over two thousand people from around the world paid us a visit

I will now hand the presentation over to Andrea Wollensak, who will show you some examples of the Probes and talk about what we have in mind for the future.

ANDREA WOLLENSAK: Marshall McLuhan has gone beyond literary theory, bringing cultural criticism into popular culture, while maintaining true to his critical inquiry in privileging the medium and the message. Areas of cultural history that McLuhan categorized are explored by the probes that I will be

presenting.

Andreas Huyssen in "Twilight Memories, Marking Time in a Cultural Amnesia" defines stages of cultural history isolated by McLuhan as : the definition of a "primitive" tribal society; a cool audile culture with an oral technology of speech; a hot visual culture with a technology of phonetic writing; and an even hotter visual culture with a mechanical technology of print (the Gutenberg Galaxy); and finally a return to a cool culture on a higher level, an audile-tactile culture with an electric technology of television and the computer. As you will see, many of these ideas were interpreted visually by the students. The perspective of the students work is one of being born into an era of advanced technology, where their reading of McLuhan's text exists in a contemporary and temporal context, one without the history of predictions.

DISPLAY IMAGE : FIRST PROBE The first Probe is from Volume 2, number 4. Cory Harrison is the designer, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

the text reads: "The American image of itself, American goals, American directions, have been scrapped... I am not making value judgements. I am simply observing that if you accelerate any structure beyond a certain speed it collapses"

"Rigid distinctions between thinker and doer, observer and observed, object and subject are being eroded... old ground rules and Human perceptions are being transformed by this new resonant surround where nothing is stable but change itself"

"... The whole world becomes a happening. It ceases to be an ordinary place of work or play. This is a terribly involving situation and I think people do resent it. It makes far greater demands of them than they feel it should."

DISPLAY IMAGE: SECOND PROBE The second Probe is from Volume 2, number 3. Amy Braddock is the designer, Connecticut College.

The text reads: "myth is highly speeded up information and experience as in dreams where you begin to move at the speed of your own nervous systems you inevitably come up with mythic structure, you do not have classified data ub dream life, you have myth- multi-layered, rich, fast moving data. It is collage, transparency, etc.

DISPLAY IMAGE: THIRD PROBE The third Probe is from Volume 1, Libby Taggart is the designer for one section of this probe, Connecticut College

The text reads: "In America, the lay out and design man may be may be a very great artist and nobody would ever know it. We are so ashamed of our commercial activities that we refuse to inspect our world for symptoms of virtue or beauty which, we feel, could only creep into it by accident."

DISPLAY IMAGE: FOURTH PROBE The Fourth Probe is from Volume 2, number 1. Karla Hatt is the designer, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

The text reads: "Touch and smell and hearing do not claim objectivity. The horse that's known by touch alone is all horse, but not visibly recognizable. The horse drawn by a blind man would be a blotty gestalt."

MCLUHAN DESIGN GUIDELINES guidelines to participate in the journal we be on-line and will include upcoming thematic and deadline information for participation, a library of suggested list of probes, and technical information for downloading available software for viewing.

FUTURE OF MCLUHAN PROBE PROJECT The McLuhan Probes web site beginning early next year will be a bi-annual on-line journal. The format of the site will be divided into two areas- the continuation of the probes, and a new section of critical writings on McLuhan's ideas. This text based area of the site will be structured thematically as a "call for papers". The first deadline for articles will be December 15 and that issue will be on-line in March 1997. The deadline for next years issue #2 will be July 15 to be on-line in September 1997. Interested authors should submit abstracts or proposed texts (under 300 words) by electronic mail to both Michael and myself. Selected authors will be invited to submit full manuscripts once reviewed by the editorial board and the McLuhan Foundation. Guest editors are invited to submit thematic proposals. The visual probes will continue to be reviewed for the journal also on a bi-annual basis, the same deadlines apply to the probes.

The upcoming journals themes are Spring 1997: education in the age of amnesia Fall 1997: media and terrorism