Session 3: Media Effects I: The Medium is the Message and Technological Determinism, Part 1

Edmund Carpenter: “The Tribal Terror of Self-Awareness”

→ individualism & private self-reflection versus collectivity & communality

→ A thesis of an “all powerful West”? More about an all powerful technology, which reinvents all societies

“I think media are so powerful they swallow cultures. I think of them as invisible environments, which surround and destroy old environments. Sensitivity to problems of culture conflict and conquest becomes meaningless here for media play no favorites; they conquer all cultures.”

→ technology itself carries cognitive and cultural effects that reshape how we think and see the world
“medium is the message”: print forces us to see the world in linear terms, in terms of causation, in rationalist terms, it teaches individualism

Carpenter: one sense dominates all others - sight
Sight creates the detached observer

Effect of being introduced to a photograph of one's self was instant alienation.

Visual media cause people to:
(1) dissociate from themselves,
(2) lose communion with their pre-existing collective cultures

Carpenter: we become our media

Dancers in floral skirts & feather headdresses put on the jungle

Now they wrap themselves in information
Radio reclothes them
*Marilyn Monroe to TIME Magazine (1952):*

“It’s not true I had nothing on, I had the radio on.”
we assume the role of our costume

disembodiment

spirit possession is now the norm

The Ethnographic Issue

Is Carpenter’s work “ethnographic”?

“being there”

interviews

observation

A challenge to ethnographers:
Carpenter: “The results generally tell more about the medium employed than about the cultural background of the author or cameraman. In each case, I had hoped the informant would present his own culture in a fresh way, and perhaps even use the medium itself in a new way. I was wrong. What I saw was literacy and film. These media swallow culture. The old culture was there all right, but no more than residue at the bottom of a barrel. I think it requires enormous sophistication—media sophistication—before anyone can use print or film to preserve and present one’s cultural heritage, even one’s cultural present. Sensitive autobiographies and films come from men of the utmost media sophistication, men un-housed in any single culture or medium.”
A Preview of Cultural Imperialism?

From McLuhan:

- Assimilation to the technology itself—we become what we behold—(therefore, can there ever be an “indigenous” media?)
- “detribalization by literacy”
- print culture creates uniformity
- “Mental breakdown of varying degrees is the very common result of uprooting and inundation with new information and endless new patterns of information....accelerated media change as a kind of massacre of the innocents”
- “the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology”
• “Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as ‘content’....The ‘content’ of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech”

• Much of cultural imperialism theory focuses on contents and their effects, less on the cultural transformations wrought by the technology as such