

## McLuhan's Messages, Echoing in Iraq Coverage

By Sarah Boxer

It was a cold night in the global village. The war in Iraq was about to begin. Across the street from the Empire State Building, in an auditorium at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a celebration of Marshall McLuhan, the media prophet of the 1960's, was also beginning. The auditorium was nearly full.

McLuhan, of course, is the man who coined the term "global village," came up with phrase "the medium is the message" and drew the strange distinction between a "hot," or sharp, medium — "one that extends one single sense in 'high definition' " — and a "cool," or fuzzy, medium. Hot media (like radio and lectures) are packed with data, leaving little room for individual interpretation or participation. Cool media (like the telephone and seminars) leave a lot of room.

The McLuhan program included a hot medium, a film about McLuhan by Kevin McMahan titled *McLuhan's Wake*, followed up with a cool one, a panel discussion. Then everyone was cast out into the cold night to return to their cool media sets (their televisions) to watch the war begin.

Why McLuhan now? This is not an anniversary year for him. He was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1911 and died in Toronto in 1980. His two best-known books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, were published in 1962 and 1964, respectively.

And anyway, before he died he had become something of a laughingstock. He railed against bureaucrats by citing the failure of the king's men to put Humpty Dumpty together again and enthused over a juice commercial: " 'Glug, glug, glug' — that's great television!"

But the war in Iraq — particularly the television coverage of the war — brings out something fresh and bright in McLuhan. One of the last chapters of *Understanding Media* is about weaponry. And it happens to come right after the chapter on television.

McLuhan's stroke of genius was to anchor his theory of history in the realm of the senses, as Anne Middleton Wagner, an art historian at the University of California at Berkeley, suggested last month at a Boston symposium, "Mediators: Medium and Its Messages." Because McLuhan saw the media as extensions of the human body — printed books as extensions of eyes, radios as extensions of ears — he believed that each new technological advance would reshape humanity and traumatize it, too. "We shape our tools and our tools shape us."

Once upon a time, the city served as "a collective shield or plate armor," an extension of our skins, McLuhan wrote in 1964. But with the coming of the electronic age, McLuhan said, "we put our whole nervous system outside ourselves." We live in a highly sensitized global village. The world, as Laurie Anderson said in the McLuhan movie, is like "a buzzing forest, stirring all around you."

This was a strange image to take home as the war in Iraq began on television. Suddenly the world and the war took on a McLuhanesque cast.

The tanks rolling into Iraq from the south were not just tanks but extensions of marching legs and protective skin. The night vision goggles were extensions of eyes. And what about those television cameras attached to the tanks? They were harder to classify.

McLuhan declared television a cool medium. He said that television, unlike film, radio or print, presents a fuzzy, low-definition, mosaiclike image, which leaves a lot of details to be filled in by those who watch it. It is a "participant medium," sucking people into its vortex and demanding "maximal interplay of all the senses." Of course, McLuhan did not live to see high-

definition television. But the grainy, jumpy videophone images being beamed back from Iraq would have been familiar to him. Indeed, they give him a second wind as a theorist of television.

So what happens when a cool medium like television is attached to a hot weapon like a tank or a Bradley fighting vehicle?

It exerts a powerful effect on the audience. Suddenly everyone watching television is dragged into war. When there is a sandstorm, you, the audience, can't see ahead any better than the troops. When the fight's going smoothly, you feel that maybe the war will be quick and easy. When the camera is attached to a smart bomb, you might feel that you have become the bomb.

McLuhan understood this kind of tactile television experience. "In closed-circuit instruction in surgery, medical students from the first reported a strange effect — that they seemed not to be watching an operation, but performing it," he wrote. "They felt that they were holding the scalpel." Television, he continued, "in fostering a passion for depth involvement in every aspect of experience, creates an obsession with bodily welfare."

With the war rolling ahead on television, you the viewer are made a part of the invading army. Even the local meteorologists participate in the illusion. They give two weather reports: sunshine in New York, sandstorms in Basra.

Meanwhile, just as the audience feels a part of the army, the army becomes part of the audience. American troops on an aircraft carrier watch CNN to see how the war is playing and progressing. Soldiers are watching other soldiers on television.

That is, there is general confusion as to who is acting and who is watching. And at the crux of the confusion are the traditional eyewitnesses to war, the journalists, "embedded" with the troops. Are the television cameras the witnesses to war, or are they part of the weaponry? Or both?

In this war, the perception of winning is almost the same as winning. If Saddam Hussein can appear to be in power on television, he is in power. If the United States military can show the world that it is winning, then it is winning.

This, in turn, puts the Iraqi people in a bind. They have to appear loyal to anyone who might be in power. Early in the war, when it looked as if the United States and Britain were going to have an easy victory, an American soldier starting tearing down the image of Saddam Hussein, and an Iraqi man took his shoe off and pounded on the picture, then turned and smiled for the camera. This is what I want you to know about me, he seemed to say.

When space is filled with satellites, all the world becomes a proscenium arch, the narrator of the McLuhan movie suggested. The phrase "theater of war" becomes literal.

Almost four decades ago, McLuhan noted that war had become less "hot," less a matter of tanks and soldiers, and more "cool," a participatory event. "The French phrase 'guerre de nerfs' " — war of nerves — "of 25 years ago has since come to be referred to as 'the cold war,' " he wrote, linking his own lingo of cool and hot with the language of international politics. He understood the cold war as "an electric battle of information and of images."

Maybe it is no accident that in "Understanding Media," McLuhan's brief chapter on weapons, follows his long chapter on television. He proposed that "all technology can plausibly be regarded as weapons." And now, in his own muddled way, he seems to be right on target. Television cameras are weapons. The battle in Iraq is being fought with cool weapons mounted onto hot ones. It's a warm war in the global village.

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