

The End of Polite Society

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The Way It Is 1968

Panelists: Marshall McLuhan, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Norman Mailer

Moderator: Robert Fulford

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McLuhan Well, for heaven's sake, this present time we're moving into, this electric age, is the dawn of much the greatest of all human ages. There's nothing to even remotely resemble the scope of human awareness and human –

Fulford Now a value judgment.

McLuhan No, this is quantity. Most people make their judgments in terms of quality. I'm merely saying, quantitatively, this is by far the greatest human age. What further valuations would you wish to make?

Fulford Oh, I thought when you said "greatest" you meant the finest, that is –

McLuhan No.

Mailer There would be biggest, more admirable than the Renaissance (unclear), or something. Do you mean the biggest or –

McLuhan Yes, we are a thousand times greater than the Victorian age –

Muggeridge In size but not in quality.

McLuhan I don't know ...

Mailer There must be some way. Let's say if there is a God, it's possible he might measure these affects by how a handful of air seemed to him ... He might take a handful of air and say "Marvellous" and then take another and say "Automobile exhaust."

Muggeridge Contrary to what Marshall has so brilliantly suggested in all his writing, I think there are absolute standards in this thing [called] culture – in art and literature. And that [through] these standards you can measure one age against another. And we happen to have lived – a great misfortune really – we happen to have lived in what amounts to a dark ages.

McLuhan We're a highly integral civilization, and this is what distresses people who belong to the old specialist, disintegrated one. They can't find a little place for themselves.

Muggeridge Are you sure ... are you absolutely sure that this is the birth struggle of a new civilization?

McLuhan Oh yeah.

Muggeridge Are you absolutely sure that it's not just the break –

McLuhan No, the circuit is new.

Muggeridge That's what I think is perhaps the whole difference between North America and Europe, really: over here you do believe that. You do, you do.

- McLuhan** That's because you have a bigger stake in the old technology.
- Muggeridge** Well, over here you're inclined to think that all these things that you imagine to be of such enormous importance – for instance, this thing we're doing now on television, because there are a lot of people who goop at television for hours every day – you're inclined to think that's an enormously important thing. And I just think it's a sign of the kind of vacuity that comes when a civilization breaks down – like [the Roman circuses]. If there'd been a Marshall McLuhan then – Caius Marcus McLunicus – he would have written a great book about the circuses, and he'd have said here's this new civilization.
- McLuhan** No, there was no new technology. Caesar, by the way, educated the Gauls by [means of] wars. The approved Western method of educating backward areas is warfare. Alexander the Great did it that way too, and Napoleon. I was reading a book on the Russian Revolution the other day in which the author explained enthusiastically that the great forward thrust in Russian institutions came from the Napoleonic invasions – and then from the Crimean War. What is happening in Vietnam now is a great educational forward thrust from us on the war front – on the war path.
- Fulford** It's very pleasant to think of it that way.
- McLuhan** I think it's horrible – it's like roast pig, you know, Charles Lamb's theory of –
- Muggeridge** Yes.
- McLuhan** You want roast pig? Then burn your house down.
- Muggeridge** Yes. I'm a bit inclined to agree with you. But I don't think it's done consciously.

- McLuhan** Oh no, we'd never do anything consciously.
- Fulford** Would you say that this North American society is basically optimistic still?
- Muggeridge** Yes, I would.
- Fulford** European is basically pessimistic?
- Muggeridge** In a very general term, and I would – rather sticking my neck out, and Marshall may disagree with me very strongly – say this, that you over here do believe that the environment men create governs their nature and their lives. And I don't believe in that. I think that this is only a very small part.
- McLuhan** We are of 18th-century origin, and it was precisely at that time that Rousseau suggested the theory that the environment was the great educator.
- Muggeridge** That's right. And a load of rubbish it was. Absolutely rubbish which has produced the present chaotic state.
- McLuhan** The nature of the teaching machine is now capable of being programmed by human intention.
- Muggeridge** Yes, but you see this in a way, Marshall, that's just words.
- McLuhan** No.
- Muggeridge** You program it like men program computers. You mean they put in something and –

McLuhan Yeah.

Muggeridge – then the computer. But you see that's –

McLuhan It's like programming lighting levels, sound levels, temperature levels –

Muggeridge This is my great point that I'm trying to make: that that is not life, that's a surface thing, you see.

McLuhan Oh.

Muggeridge And I think that life's about something more than that.

McLuhan It's like saying, though, isn't it, that disease is not just a matter of symptoms. On the other hand, if you can get rid of all the symptoms, who cares about what disease you have?

Muggeridge Yes, but the simple fact, taking that analogy, is that treating the symptoms does not kill the disease.

McLuhan No, but getting rid of the symptoms does.

Muggeridge Well, not completely. Very often if you just treat a symptom and get rid of it, you get another one.

Fulford What do you think of the young people who are in this hippie thing? You're one of their favorite people. Are they among your favorite people?

McLuhan Well, I can't say that I have given them too much cause for com-

fort or I haven't done very much beside just observe what they ... or what sort of form that their behaviour seems to indicate is behind their life. And I can see clearly that they are desirous of a very much more rich involvement in social life, and the mere finding of little niches and jobs and so on will not satisfy them.

Fulford

Aren't they becoming tribalized the way you say the whole world is, and they're actually doing it? They even use the word, don't they?

McLuhan

I don't know, but tribal is not a new form exactly. But post-literate tribal is a very different matter from pre-literate tribal. And we're tribalizing simply by virtue of a much closer family, a sense of the human family.

Muggeridge

In this part of the world, you are inclined to say now, as Marshall, that 200 years ago printing was invented –

McLuhan

Five hundred.

Muggeridge

Five hundred years ago, printing was invented.

Mailer

Life's never been the same since then.

Muggeridge

I don't agree with that. I think that printing or television, all these things, they affect the surface of man, but the fascination of life to me is the exact opposite – what I find in Socrates and Augustine and St. Paul, all those people who lived before printing –

McLuhan

But not before writing. By the way, Socrates ... there's a wonderful book by Eric Havelock called Preface to Plato in which he just mentions in passing that what Socrates' great contribution was to the dialectic was the ability to say, "Would you mind repeating that please." This kind of Socratic irony, the Socratic questioning,

was a playback. With the coming of writing, the possibility of playback came into human society for the first time. Socrates was very much a product of technology, new technology.

Muggeridge

But I wouldn't ... Marshall, wouldn't presume to dispute it. But what I would say is that if you, as far as I've been able in a very sort of amateur way to read and think about the various contributions to knowledge which have been produced at different times, the thing that astonishes me about them is the huge area which is the same, which is constant, and how narrow is the area that belongs to particular environmental changes where a civilization is in a very stable or advanced state or where it's in a chaotic state. You know, there are two questions that you can ask about life, really. You can ask the question "How?" and you can ask the question "Why?" Now I'm passionately interested in the question Why, and I'm not much interested in the question How. But I think you're enormously interested in the question How.

McLuhan

You know the phrase "polite society"? That, when that came in, this historically meant a society that established its values on the word or the behaviour that was capable of inspection, that would bear looking at. And polite society no longer is with us because we no longer live in a visual culture. And so the values of polite society are for the birds. And I'm not free of the nostalgic look back at some of those old values. On the other hand, I can see why they've gone down the drain and I can see why new ones are forming right under our noses. I can see why the new ones create such revulsion, total recoil.