

The Planet as Art Form

The American Broadcasting Corporation 1972

The David Frost Show

Host: David Frost (British journalist)

Guests: Marshall McLuhan and Peter Fonda (American actor)

Visit Marshall McLuhan Speaks Special collection to view the video:

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Frost What's made you turn to the subject from communications to executives?

McLuhan The executive is in a great bind today because of the enormous speed with which he has to cope with data. The old organization chart that belonged to the old hardware world of the 19th century has simply flipped upside down with the speed of electric information and so the little slots that the execs used to fit into in the business world no longer hold them.

Frost One radio thing I heard you said was that TV was in a way ending war you think.

McLuhan By bringing war immediately into our living rooms, it has become unbearable and intolerable so that coverage has actually taken the place of war itself, as it were. The coverage is now bigger than the war...

Frost That there can never be an acceptable war again.

McLuhan That's true. Acceptable is one thing. But the coverage of the war is so colossal that war has become unbearable.

Frost But, say it was a highly acclaimed, that's a terrible word to use, but it was a war that was an acclaimed war, a war people were in favor of. Could television increase the fervor for the war as it's increased the fervor against it.

McLuhan No, it would cool it very fast.

Frost And is television enriching or the reverse in our lives do you think?

McLuhan It enormously enriches because it will not tolerate specialism. The TV age is an age of complex role-playing involvement. For example, strikes today are just beginning. A striker is a person who is not really seeking money so much as seeking a role. He wants to be noticed as playing an important role in the world. You go on strike not so much to strengthen your position in a specialist job as to announce the fact that you are a significant being.

Frost You say in another way, hijacking is typical of today's world.

McLuhan When Sputnik went around the planet, nature disappeared. Nature was hijacked right off this planet. Nature was enclosed in a man made environment and art took the place of nature. This was one of the biggest hijack jobs conceivable. When you put a new service environment around, say TV, with hologram or what-not, you will find that TV has been completely hijacked, that a new service environment has come in. It isn't in yet. But, when you put TV around the movies, movies were hijacked. The whole service industry of movies was hijacked and another service industry went around it. When Sputnik went around the planet, the planet became an art form. Nature disappeared overnight and planet polluto took the place of the old nature. Planet polluto, discovered to be in a very bad state, needing a great deal of human attention - art form.

Frost Come and take a seat Peter. Do you agree or not with what Marshall has just been saying about television making war unbearable

and the sputnik generation, that sputnik and all of that changed the world for the people who live in it?

Fonda

One question about the television and war ... I feel that it makes it unbearable to an extent but the problem is we cut to an Ajax ad and clean it all up right away. So everybody thinks it's all right because they're still getting Ajax. But, it also creates a theatre for the war to play on in a grand scale, whereas some guerrilla warfare or something that happened in North Ireland would never be known about throughout the world, now it's known throughout the world and we discussed this earlier. So the media provides a great stage for it to play on. Now the Sputnik thing is really very easy. The first time the idea occurred to me or the first time I heard it or rather I listened to Mr. McLuhan speaking to a bunch of television writers, editors of magazines, and so forth in 1964. I think it was radio telescopes that you talked about then and how they created a consciousness of the earth as an art form because it became the past and it became something that we could then deal with. It wasn't something that, what's the saying, "you can't see the forest for the trees?" When you're living on the planet and you don't know anything else you can't see the planet. But now we've been to the moon, we have seen it's a little tiny thing floating out in space. We don't know where it is but there it is you know. Now we can deal with it. Now we can take upon ourselves such enormous problems as cleaning up the atmosphere, stopping wars, understanding what it is to be one person on a planet, one group of people, not ethnic groups and not nationalist groups and see where that's at. Now we understand the atrocity of Vietnam. We understand all these absurdities because we have created the art form to look at the planet. It becomes Williamsburg, Pennsylvania.

McLuhan

Like Woodstock ... a sort of instant city.

Fonda

Right, instant city, and we have to take care of it like Disneyland you see. We have got to go get some brooms and clean it up you know because it's our act and we blew it.