

Violence as a Quest for Identity

TV Ontario 1977
The Mike McManus Show
Host: Mike McManus

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McManus Way back in the early fifties you predicted that the world was becoming a global Village.

McLuhan We are going back into the bicameral mind that is tribal, collective, without any individual consciousness.

McManus But, it seems, Dr. McLuhan, that this tribal world is not friendly.

McLuhan No, tribal people, one of their main kinds of sport is butchering each other. It is a full-time sport in tribal societies.

McManus But, I had some idea as we got global and tribal we were going to try to -

McLuhan The closer you get together, the more you like each other? There is no evidence of that in any situation that we have ever heard of. When people get close together, they get more and more savage and impatient with each other.

McManus Why is it? Is it because of the nature of man?

McLuhan His tolerance is tested in those narrow circumstances very much. Village people are not that much in love with each other. The global village is a place of a very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations.

McManus Do you see any pattern of this in, for example the desires of Quebec to separate?

McLuhan I should think that they are feeling very abrasive about the English community and about the way the American south felt about the Yankee north a hundred years ago.

McManus Is this going to be a pattern right around the world?

McLuhan Apparently, separatisms are very frequent all over the globe at the present time. Every country in the world is loaded with regionalistic and nationalistic little groups.

McManus But in Quebec for example, like do you define it as the quest for identity?

McLuhan Yes, all forms of violence are quests for identity. When you live out on the frontier, you have no identity. You are a nobody. Therefore, you get very tough. You have to prove that you are somebody. So you become very violent. Identity is always accompanied by violence. This seems paradoxical to you? Ordinary people find the need for violence as they lose their identities. It is only the threat to people's identity that makes them violent. Terrorists, hijackers - these are people minus identity. They are determined to make it somehow, to get coverage, to get noticed.

McManus And all this is somehow an effect of the electronic age?

McLuhan No, but people in all times have been this way. In our time, when

things happen very quickly, there's very little time to adjust to new situations at the speed of light. There is little time to get accustomed to anything. Even radio has sent tribal societies around the globe up the wall with intensity of feeling. One of the major violence makers of our century has been radio. Hitler was entirely a radio man and a tribal man.

McManus Then, what does television do to that tribal man?

McLuhan Well, I don't think Hitler would have lasted long on TV. Like Senator Joe McCarthy, he would have looked foolish. McCarthy was a very hot character and like Nixon, he made a very bad image on television. He was far too hot a character. He would have been much better on radio.

McManus The investigations now of the CIA, the FBI and even our own, God forbid, RCMP, has this anything to do with the electronic age?

McLuhan Yes, because we now have the means to keep everybody under surveillance. No matter what part of the world they are in, we can put them under surveillance. This has become one of the main occupations of mankind, just watching other people and keeping a record of their goings on.

McManus And invading privacy.

McLuhan Yes, in fact, just ignoring it. Everybody has become porous. The light and the the message go right through us.

At this moment, .we are on the air. We do not have any physical body. When you're on the telephone or on radio or on T.V., you don't have a physical body - you're just an image on the air. When you don't have a physical body, you're a discarnate being. You have a very different relation to the world around you. I think this has been one of the big effects of the electric age. It has deprived people really of their identity.

McManus

So that's what this is doing to me?

McLuhan

Yes. Everybody tends to merge his identity with other people at the speed of light. It's called being mass man. By the way, one of the big parts of the loss of identity is nostalgia. So there are revivals in every phase of life today. Revivals of clothing, of dances, of music, of shows, of everything. We live by the revival. It tells us who we are or were.

McManus

Do you feel that the fact that you and I have enjoyed the rewards of literacy, that we are more protected against television than a child?

McLuhan

Yes, I think you get a certain immunity, just as you get a certain immunity from booze by literacy. The literate man can carry his liquor; the tribal man cannot. That is why in the Moslem world or in the native world is booze impossible; it is the demon rum. However, literacy also makes us very accessible to ideas and propaganda. The literate man is the natural sucker for propaganda. You cannot propagandize a native. You can sell him rum and trinkets but you cannot sell him ideas. Therefore, propaganda is our Achilles' heel. It is our weak point. We will buy anything if it fairly hard sell to it.

McManus

What now briefly is this thing called media ecology?

McLuhan

It means arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another. You might say, for example, that radio is a bigger help to literacy than television, but television might be a very wonderful aid to teaching languages. So, you can do some things on some media that you cannot do on others. Therefore, if you watch the whole field, you can prevent this waste that comes by one cancelling out the other.

McManus

In 15 seconds I have one question for you. How much television do you watch?

McLuhan

Whenever I get a chance which is not too often.