



MCLUHAN'S WAKE: MASSAGING THE MEDIUM

BY Matthew Hays

The scene has left an indelible impression upon Marshall McLuhan and Woody Allen fans alike. While on a date in his Oscar-winning *Annie Hall*, Allen and Diane Keaton wait in a long movie lineup. Allen is infuriated to hear a man behind him discuss his mangled interpretation of McLuhan's theories, convinced this fellow is all wrong. Allen then pulls McLuhan, himself, out of nowhere, who promptly corrects the offender and backs up Allen in his interpretation of his theories.

It's arguably a silly comic scene, but it points to the broadly and often adamant interpretations of Marshall McLuhan, the man widely regarded as one of the greatest, inspired thinkers this country has ever produced. Now, in a feature documentary, a Toronto-based filmmaking team has examined a number of McLuhan's theories, as well as some personal recollections about the final months of his life. The result is *McLuhan's Wake*, a bold, experimental film that attempts to look at how McLuhan's theories have shaped us and affected us, some 22 years after his death.

The film is at once a poetic collusion of mediated images, a montage of incredible file footage of McLuhan himself and rather devastating tales of his final months of life after being debilitated by a stroke. Notably, the film includes family contributions from McLuhan's widow, Corrine, his son, Eric, and even McLuhan's grandson Andrew. As well, the filmmakers have rounded up an impressive roster of talent to reflect on McLuhan's wake, among them media guru (and McLuhan disciple) Neil Postman, *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham, *Toronto Star* editor and McLuhan biographer Phillip Marchand and York University professor Frank Zingrone. McLuhan fan and performance artist extraordinaire Laurie Anderson narrates much of the film.

McLuhan's Wake was the brainchild of Toronto-based McLuhan scholar David Sobelman, who says the idea came in a roundabout way. "In 1996, I wrote an outline of 50 pages for a documentary on electricity," he recalls. "I handed it to Rudy Buttignol [filmmaker and executive producer of *The View from Here* at TVOntario]. He recog-

nized a lot of McLuhan's ideas in it. He phoned me from an airport and suggested I just focus on McLuhan. I had read *Understanding Media* in 1969 and it changed my life. After I got off the phone with Rudy, the penny dropped. I knew it was a great idea."

Sobelman and Buttignol then set about finding filmmaking collaborators for their idea. No easy task, considering the depth of McLuhan's concepts and the breadth of their aspirations. But when Sobelman saw *In The Reign of Twilight*, Kevin McMahon's feature documentary about the effects of technology on Inuit people, he was suitably impressed. "Rudy described McLuhan's final days to me," McMahon says. "I'm 44 and I was at university when his star was waning. I had him in the back of my mind. I didn't know that he was a literary scholar or about his unhappy end, but I definitely thought this could make for an intriguing documentary."

Kevin McMahon



through line to assume, how to capture the overall essence. We wanted to make a biography of his ideas. The question was how to capture the essence of this while still being true to McLuhan."

For McMahon, the tough part came with settling on an operating metaphor. "We settled on *The Laws of Media*. The toughest thing was getting a sense that I understood it all. That meant understanding what the ancient roots of McLuhan are. He was operating out of an ancient tradition. Then it was important to make all of it intelligible to people." As the film progressed, Sobelman says he focused more on the soundtrack and the words involved, while McMahon focused more closely on the film's rich, dazzling visuals. Sobelman, being a hardcore McLuhanite (he teaches the Media Philosophy of Marshall McLuhan at the University of Toronto), wanted to convey the man's huge influence on the English language and, ultimately, all of us. "McLuhan is mentioned 365 times in the Oxford English Dictionary," Sobelman says. "Four times he's cited as bringing a word into the English language. Those words are 'structuring,' 'interface,' 'retribalization' and 'McLuhanism.'"

Sobelman says that *McLuhan's Wake* began to take on a structure. "Like good wine or fine cognac, in the distillation process it became more and more refined until you get what you have today." McMahon acknowledges having his own misreadings of McLuhan, something he rethought while making the film. "There is a sense that so much of McLuhan is free-form. That he had no agenda, that he was just probing about, a sound bite here, an idea there. But I don't think it was true of him at all. He has a strong central message that he repeats over and over again. The central message is that print makes you think one way and the electronic media makes you think another. If you can't understand what those differences are, you're screwed." McMahon says there were other questions to be reckoned with. "Do we go around the world? Do we look at technology in its most exotic forms? Do we look for cyborgs and genetic this and that and wild computer thingamajiggers or do we stay in Toronto and look at the mundane reality of the Global Village? We decided to do the latter in the end."

"The toughest thing was getting a sense that I understood it all." Kevin McMahon

After McMahon and Sobelman met in 1997, the hard work really began. This, after all, was quite a task. "There was a long and arduous process of distillation," says Sobelman. "It was very labour intensive. We went through seven drafts. Finally, we came up with a draft everyone agreed upon." When asked what the most difficult aspect of this phase of the filmmaking process was, Sobelman pauses, and sighs. "So much of McLuhan's intellectual celebrity was tied into the rise of television. He was on the ground floor of communication studies in 1958. Think about it. No one else was doing it at that time. The question for us was the direction to take, which



Marshall McLuhan

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McLuhan's Wake includes a number of media clips, segments that reflect McLuhan's shift from respected and deified thinker to his vilified and forgotten academic status in later years. Television pundits loved him when they thought he was validating their medium, but soon turned on McLuhan when it became clear that he was acutely critical of the effects of electronic media on the public. "The television types were initially hot to have him on TV," says McMahon. "McLuhan went from discussing the Global Village to the Global Theatre. Ultimately, he was saying that television has no value as news, but rather that it was just entertainment. It's just a big theatrical project. They didn't like that. Now it's widely regarded as true, but in the early 1970s, TV journalists didn't see themselves as entertainers. Or didn't like to see themselves that way."

Particularly striking is one interview in which talk-show host (and Global Village idiot) Tom Snyder attempts to engage with McLuhan about what the uses of television could be. McLuhan looks exasperated and simply dumbfounded as Snyder asks a round of what must be some of the stupidest questions ever posed on television. Part of the saddest wrinkle in *McLuhan's Wake* is when the



philosopher's reputation is run down and many deem him out of favour. A particularly devastating scene is relayed late in the film. After McLuhan suffered a debilitating stroke in the last months of his life, he was accompanied to the Toronto academic institute that now bears his name. There he saw that most of his papers had been gathered up, ready for the dumpster. At this sight, McLuhan reportedly fell apart.

McMahon says there were filmic influences along the way. "There weren't really any specific models. I wish there were – I always wish there were. But I thought of Frederick Wiseman and Peter Greenaway. Errol Morris is always a guide, in many respects. I did think of *A Brief History of Time*, but Morris had a distinct advantage, as Stephen Hawking is still alive."

Both McMahon and Sobelman are now eager to gauge audience response to their collaboration. They'll certainly have ample opportunity in the coming months. The film will open the Canadian section of Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival in Toronto at the end of April, and directly afterwards, it will have its U.S. premiere at New York's Museum of Television and Radio. In the fall, it will be screened on TVO as the culmination of a variety of programming specifically highlighting the achievements of Marshall McLuhan.



McMahon expects the reactions to *McLuhan's Wake* to be as varied as they were to the man himself. He was a workaholic. He was famous. He was not a touchy-feely kinda guy. He didn't always take much notice of others' emotional state. He was a scrapper. Some were delighted by his quirkiness. Others were annoyed at not being able to understand him. That complexity, of course, made for a documentary filmmaker's dream. "McLuhan was an undeniably intricate and challenging man," adds McMahon. "The trick was bringing all of that through in the film."

TAKE ONE