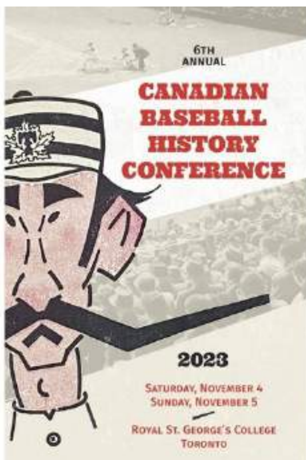

Marshall McLuhan and the Death of Baseball

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Marshall McLuhan loved puns—couldn't get enough of them. Here's one of his: "When is baseball first mentioned in the Bible?" Answer: "When Rebecca goes to the well with a pitcher." Sorry about that. That was just to establish McLuhan's baseball bona fides, if not his incisive Biblical scholarship.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, Marshall McLuhan was everywhere—in every bookstore; in *Playboy*, in *Newsweek*, on the cover of *Rolling Stone*; on all the more cerebral of the TV talk shows. "No longer is it possible to *discover* McLuhan," one commentator complained. "It requires a strenuous effort just to avoid him."

In fact, you couldn't even tune in *Laugh-in* on Monday nights without hearing his name. A running gag had comedian Henry Gibson popping up with a couplet on a lot of lips in those days: "Marshall McLuhan, what're you doin'?"

Well, before he became a comedy catchphrase, what McLuhan was doin' was teaching English at the University of Toronto. But in the early '50s, he'd started formulating theories about media, and so, naturally, everybody *in* the media wanted to talk to him: Dick Cavett and Tom Snyder, Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe. After all, he was talking about *them*.

Wolfe was maybe McLuhan's biggest booster. In a breathless 1965 essay, Wolfe posed the big question: "Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein or Pavlov.... Suppose he *is* the oracle of modern times?"

Well, McLuhan always denied any talent for reading tea leaves. "I've always been very careful never to predict anything that had not already happened," he said. "The future is not what it used to be. It is here." He was no prophet, no village soothsayer, he said—even as he described in detail a future where we'd all be walking around with portable computers in our hands. And we'd all be connected to a world-wide, speed-of-light electric grid, where we'd have access 24/7 to pretty much any bit of information ever recorded.

To describe the fragmented, non-linear way we'd retrieve this information, McLuhan coined the term "surfing." That was in 1964, *30 years* before the digital tsunami hit us. "Everything is changing," he said back then, "—you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government....And they are changing dramatically. Electric technology is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence—*and* every aspect of our personal life."

If the chattering classes weren't quite sure *what* he was on about, they were certainly curious. And they all had t*heir* theories about *his* theories. Woody Allen's 1977 film *Annie Hall* contains this exchange:

ALVY [HEARING A MAN BEHIND HIM RAMBLING ON ABOUT MCLUHAN]: What I wouldn't give for a large sock with horse manure in it. [TURNS TO CAMERA] What do you do when you get stuck in a movie line with a guy like this behind you? It's just...maddening.

MAN IN MOVIE LINE: Wait a minute, why can't I give my opinion? It's a free country!

ALVY: Did—did he, he can give you— Do you have give it so loud? I mean, aren't you ashamed to pontificate like that? And the funny part of it is, Marshall McLuhan—you don't know anything about Marshall McLuhan!

MAN IN MOVIE LINE: Oh really, really? I happen to teach a class at Columbia called "TV, Media, and Culture." So I think that my insights into Mr. McLuhan, well, have a great deal of validity!

ALVY: Oh, do ya? Well, that's funny, because I happen to have Mr. McLuhan right here, so, so, yeah, just lemme, lemme, lemme— [PULLS MCLUHAN FROM BEHIND A NEARBY POSTER STAND]. Come over here for a second. Tell him!

MCLUHAN: I heard what you were saying. You know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing.

ALVY [TO CAMERA]: Boy, if life were only like this!

Yep, Marshall McLuhan—and his “fallacy”— were everywhere then, with challenging pronouncements on everything from miniskirts to brain surgery, and all of it backed by his personal pledge: “I don’t necessarily agree with everything I say.”

At the risk of sounding like the hapless stooge in *Annie Hall*, I’ll just say that McLuhan’s most fundamental proposition was this: that the *content* of any medium is pretty much irrelevant in the greater scheme of things, that what really shapes our world is the *medium* by which the message is delivered—and that to a far greater degree than any particular content we might consume. A medium like television, for example, has far more of an impact on our world than anything—or *everything*—on it. “The medium *is* the message,” McLuhan famously said. Or sometimes it was “the medium is the massage”—another pun he couldn’t resist.

So, what do his theories tell us about baseball and *its* place in our world? Well, prior to our current electric age, our most powerful communications tool was the printing press. And with the invention of movable type in the 15th century, we began to process information in a linear, sequential, ABC fashion. And that *change* in the way we communicate—away from the old oral culture—McLuhan said, unwittingly gave rise to the modern world—to the Industrial Revolution, the middle classes, nationalism, capitalism, individualism—and also to baseball.

"The characteristic mode of the baseball game is that it features one thing at a time," McLuhan said. "It is a lineal, expansive game, which, like golf, is perfectly adapted to the outlook of an individualist and inner-directed society. Timing and waiting are of the essence, with the entire field in suspense, waiting upon the performance of a single player."

To McLuhan, the era when baseball was most in tune with American culture was the Jazz Age. "Baseball," he said, "belonged to the age of the first onset of the hot press and the movie medium. It will always remain a symbol of the era of the hot mommas, jazz babies, of sheiks and shebas, of vamps and gold-diggers and the fast buck. Baseball, in a word, is a *hot* game that got cooled off in the new TV climate...."

Baseball, it seems, had made the fatal error of being a Scott Fitzgerald novel in the fast-emerging age of Google, Minecraft and ChatGPT. "The 500-year-old monarchy of print has ended," McLuhan said, "and an oligarchy of new media has usurped most of its power.... The world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as in an infantile piece of science fiction."

The effect of moving information around at warp speed, he said, was to shrink our world into one giant, paradoxical Global Village, with information—and, I suppose, *dis*information—as the universal currency. With TV and successor gadgets like the iPad and the Smart Phone, these new electric media have already re-wired and re-tribalized us. "We become what we behold," McLuhan said. "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us."

Now, McLuhan's Village wasn't, as many assumed, some hippy-dippy Woodstock kind of place, but rather a fractious, and potentially violent arena—more clash than kumbaya. The emerging Village would be a messy place—as we've certainly witnessed this century—with everybody in everybody else's business all the time, and all of us struggling in some fashion to cope with a perpetual state of information overload. When people get close to each other, they get more and more savage, more *impatient*

with each other," McLuhan said. "The Global Village is a place of very arduous interfaces and abrasive situations." Said McLuhan: "Innumerable confusions and a feeling of profound despair invariably emerge in periods of great technological and cultural transition."

So what, you may ask, does all this pointy-head talk mean for baseball? *Would* baseball still be played in the Global Village? Marshall McLuhan didn't think it would be. "Television," he said in 1968, "has *killed* baseball. It is doomed. It is a dying sport." And not only baseball, he said, but newspapers and magazines and other quaint artifacts of the fast-receding print era—all were headed for the last roundup.

Of all the major sports, baseball, with its long season, uniquely-shaped playing field, and—let's face it—relative lack of action, is probably the least suited to the TV image. It lacks the constant motion of soccer or basketball, and, he noted, it lacks bursts of crowd-pleasing violence as in football or hockey. "It is the inclusive mesh of the TV image, in particular, that spells...the doom of baseball," McLuhan said. "For baseball is a game of one-thing-at-a-time, fixed positions, and visibly delegated specialist jobs such as belong to the now passing mechanical age.... Baseball is just too individual a sport for our new age."

Well, right or wrong, when somebody mentioned in the same breath as Einstein or Darwin pronounces the demise of baseball, it tends to get a reaction—in this case, a general bristling from sportswriters and baseball men—that an ivory tower elitist didn't really understand the game or appreciate it for the timeless institution it was. *Sports Illustrated,* for instance, took offence at McLuhan's Doomsday declaration: "Obviously," their writer sniffed, "anyone under the impression that he enjoyed watching the World Series was quite wrong."

The insinuation, of course, was that anyone with any proper understanding of the game would never have uttered such heresy as "Baseball is doomed." But the truth was McLuhan actually had a deep respect, if not affection, for the game, that dated back to his childhood.

Marshall McLuhan was born in Edmonton in 1911. In 1915, the family moved to Winnipeg. Mars, as he was called, was an odd boy— bordering on the anti-social, much more comfortable with gadgets than with other kids—or with school, for that matter. Despite an off-the-charts IQ, he somehow managed to flunk Grade 6. Then again, Mars was busy with other projects.

At the age of 10, he built a crystal radio set, so he and his younger brother Maurice could tune into powerful Pittsburgh radio station KDKA--which happened to be the home of the first-ever baseball broadcast: Pirates vs. Phillies, August 5, 1921.

(Trivia alert: Pittsburgh won that first broadcast game, 8-5, under manager Mooney Gibson, from London, Ontario.)

In his early teens, Mars started to emerge from his shell. And one factor in this, maybe from listening to Pittsburgh radio, was a growing interest in baseball. He even organized a team in his Fort Rouge neighbourhood. They played on the street, with a manhole cover as home plate.

Despite a notable lack of athletic ability, McLuhan appointed himself team pitcher. And that's the way I imagine him throughout his professional life—a lanky southpaw with control issues, out there on the mound, throwing a baffling assortment of pitches, lots of which went for strikes, but with lots, too, sailing to the backstop.

Young Mars struggled with school until his Grade 7 teacher ignited in him a passion for English literature. He would go on to attend the University of Manitoba and earn a scholarship to Cambridge for his PhD. Literature became front and centre, but McLuhan never left baseball totally behind.

In 1952, now in his 40s and, finally, a full professor at the University of Toronto, McLuhan published a controversial essay entitled "Baseball is Culture." It was a somewhat radical notion at a time when "culture" meant the symphony or the ballet, things that were allegedly *good* for you— like kale—even if, for most people, they weren't much fun to consume. "We have come to see culture," McLuhan said, "as a class of unpleasant activities that we ought to engage in more often."

Things that *were* fun, he lamented, things that ordinary people delighted in— *didn't get no respect* from our cultural gatekeepers. By snobbishly ignoring activities like baseball, we fail to consider how a lot of people spend a significant chunk of their waking time—playing games, listening to games, watching games, reading about games, betting on games. But to McLuhan, popular culture was *not* some scruffy and disposable substitute for high art. And high art was no substitute for pop culture. "They [are] *all* components of a larger network," he said. "They are all closely interwoven in the single network of communication which makes any society whatever a living unity."

For McLuhan, then, baseball was as valid a subject for serious study as any of the snootier arts. “Imagine,” he said, “an outsider coming to study the culture of the American continent today. Could he not learn a great deal more from the artistic forms of our newspapers and magazines, our sports and our songs, than from our historians and sociologists? *Yes,* I'm going to suggest not only that baseball is culture but that comics are culture, and pulp fiction is culture, and pictorial advertising is culture.” In other words, the artistry of a Rick—or even a Mickey—Mahler might even be as culturally significant as that of a Gustav Mahler.

So how did someone sensitive to the place of baseball in our lives end up spreading rumours of its imminent demise? How was someone so right about so many things, so wrong about baseball?

Well, consider the era. It was the mid-’60s—and baseball had increasingly become a game about nothing. 1968 became known as the Year of the Pitcher: Don Drysdale threw six consecutive shutouts, Bob Gibson had a 1.12 earned run average and the Cardinals racked up 30 shutouts. The Yankees, meanwhile, managed to parlay a Mendoza-like .214 team batting average into a winning season.

Baseball may not yet have joined the choir invisible, but it certainly seemed to be auditioning for a place. The game, especially in TV terms, had become a snooze. Nor was it drawing fans to the park. Major League attendance in the ‘60s averaged about 14,000 fans a game—which was lower even than it had been in 1946, before the arrival of TV.

In response to McLuhan’s prognosis, White Sox manager Al Lopez admitted, “There is some dullness to the game.” But then he caught himself, and said: “But otherwise it's perfect.”

Well, baseball did respond to the alarm bells by doing something it had only rarely and reluctantly done in the past. It tinkered with its “otherwise perfect” product by lowering the pitching mound and tightening up the strike zone. It also expanded the number of teams and moved to divisional play. Despite the tweaking, average attendance continued to slip in ‘69, while more telegenic sports like football—*especially* football—exploded in popularity.

Television booted football into the stratosphere. It passed baseball as America’s most popular spectator sport in 1972, and has never looked back. Football has, in fact,

become the biggest draw on all of television. Twelve of the top 15 rated TV shows of all time have been Super Bowls. The 2023 Super Bowl pulled in an audience more than nine times bigger than the one that watched the deciding game of the 2022 World Series. So, there was football. And now, in recent years, basketball, another telegenic sport, has also passed baseball in popularity.

And yet—spoiler alert!— baseball has survived, and even thrived, as it has settled into a comfortable and lucrative role as third banana of American sport. Attendance per game is more than double what it was in 1964, and TV revenue has helped make baseball a $10-billion-a-year money machine. One thing McLuhan seems to have misjudged was baseball's willingness to adapt, whether by tinkering with the height of the pitching mound, or, in 1973, finally instituting the Designated Hitter position, something that had first been proposed back in 1891.

And I think, too, McLuhan probably underestimated the extent to which baseball would embrace and incorporate the very technology, the electric technology, that threatened its existence. Now, in every ballpark, you'll find giant video scoreboards; iPads in the dugout; video challenges; Dick Tracy devices on catchers' wrists; analytics spitting out data on every pitch—and, now, on deck, the robo-ump.

TV coverage itself has also changed dramatically—although traditionalists might argue not for the better. Certainly, in the early days, televised baseball was a pretty primitive affair. It was still essentially radio, fronted by a few fuzzy monochromatic images, all of it captured—or not— by an extremely limited array of camera angles. And early TV had none of the e-bells and e-whistles broadcasters have since adopted: on-screen graphics, in-game interviews, strike-zone overlays—all of these innovations struggling, with some success, to liven up or paper over the innumerable dull spots in a baseball game.

But perhaps the most significant innovation was instant replay—or at least McLuhan thought so. "This is surely one of the greatest art forms of our time," he said, "one of the most remarkable developments of any age.... You don't have to watch the game. You can have the meaning of the game minus the experience."

But would advances like instant replay be enough to save baseball? McLuhan, the one-time prophet of doom, suggested they just might. "Television," he said, "nearly destroyed baseball and then revived it through the technique of instant replay."

These days, more than half of Americans consider themselves baseball fans, although only about one in 10 says it's their favourite sport. On the other hand, more than half of

Americans also say baseball is boring. Ominously for the future of the game, this sentiment is particularly ingrained among under-30s, where baseball ranks only fifth on the favourite sport list. In Canada, according to a recent Leger poll, baseball, once the most popular sport in this country, also ranks fifth, after hockey, basketball, soccer and football. Only 7% of people say they follow baseball.

So, how would McLuhan interpret these current measures of baseball's popularity? Would he reverse himself again and decide, yes, maybe baseball *is* doomed after all, that maybe all we've succeeded in doing is nailing it to its perch? He might, but the lanky southpaw would not be happy about it. While being interviewed by Robert Fulford in 1966, McLuhan had this to say:

> "Now, many people think if you talk about something recent, you're in favour of it. The exact opposite is true in my case. Anything I talk about is almost certain to be something I'm resolutely against, and it seems to me the best way of opposing it is to understand it. And then you know how to turn off the button."

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