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McLuhan's Wake

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Primitive Entertainment, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Archives

National Film Board of Canada, Montreal, Canada (Producers), 2002.
93 minutes

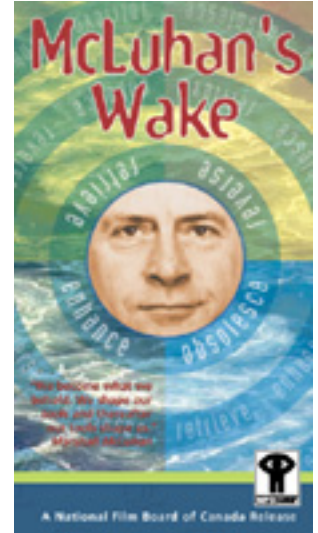
Editorial Info

VHS: US \$250.00 (institutional)

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The opening sequence of *McLuhan's Wake* foreshadows the aesthetic quality of the rest of the film. It begins with a montage of video images – crashing seas, a dancing ballerina, the Challenger shuttle – edited together with audio from Marshall McLuhan and original New Age music. This rapid succession of heterogeneous images fades into a retelling of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Descent into the Maelstrom*, complete with animation, special effects and narration by Eric McLuhan. As did so much of the literature that Marshall McLuhan read, *The Descent into the Maelstrom* impacted his thinking. However, the 1840 Poe short story is even more significant according to *McLuhan's Wake*; the film suggests the mariner's struggle in the story provides a metaphor for McLuhan's own attempt to make sense of the swirling, whirling culture of media that could have swept him away so easily had he not identified the laws regarding them.

McLuhan's Wake is organized around McLuhan's last scholarly book, *Laws of Media*, which was published posthumously by his son. In this lesser-known publication of McLuhan's, he and his son argued that there are four laws of media: any medium amplifies or intensifies some situation; any medium makes part of the environment obsolete; any medium recreates or revives any older structure or environment; and any medium, when pushed to its limit, can reverse to create the

opposite of its intended function. *McLuhan's Wake* explores this tetrad of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal with examples from places so varied as an elementary school classroom, the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant, and a Jaguar car dealership.

The film assumes that viewers have at least a rudimentary understanding of McLuhan's theories. With its abundance of examples illustrating the laws of media, *McLuhan's Wake* makes the meaning of the tetrad extremely clear. The film also highlights McLuhan's better known theories on the effects of technology, including its numbing effect, its potential for creating a global village, its retribalization of man, and its incompatibility with a passive model of education. Excerpts of McLuhan's lectures and interviews illustrate these theories, edited together with interviews from scholars like Neil Postman and Lewis Lapham and narration from performance artist Laurie Anderson. However, the viewer rarely sees the people speaking, causing them to become disembodied. While McLuhan would likely be quite comfortable with this haunting quality of the film, it has the potential to overwhelm an audience of students unfamiliar with McLuhan's work.

McLuhan's Wake does acknowledge criticisms of McLuhan's theories, but it provides no specific explanation, and attributes them mostly to jealousy or lack of full comprehension. The film, which also loosely follows McLuhan's life chronologically, portrays McLuhan as having died without ever fully being heard. In this way, McLuhan was the real-life mariner who made sense of and escaped the vortex, only to be dismissed by his peers. The film does highlight the resurgence of McLuhan since the computer revolution, but does not acknowledge that much of this resurgence, at least in popular culture, may be a result of people's misunderstanding of McLuhan. However, the film does make clear that McLuhan himself believed that computers enabled authorities to exert more control over society. It also highlights McLuhan's strong objection to technological change on the basis of the resultant unpleasant effects on the human body.

Ultimately, *McLuhan's Wake* succeeds as a film. Although it is slow-moving at times, it captures the ideas and aesthetic style of McLuhan. However, because of the McLuhanesque qualities of the film, it falls short as an instructional video to introduce students to McLuhan. However, for students who already have some familiarity with McLuhan's work, the film can provide insights into McLuhan's thinking. Additionally, the web-based tools accompanying the video include ["Understanding McLuhan,"](#) a brief but useful biography of McLuhan, and an [educator's resource guide](#) filled with discussion-provoking questions and possible assignments. *McLuhan's Wake* fills a long-time void for a film about Marshall McLuhan, whose relevance to our contemporary culture cannot be denied. Viewers should just be prepared to experience the film as they might any of his writings, as a

psychedelic intellectual journey.

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