

## Rudy Kousbroek on Marshall McLuhan

*Michiel Horn*

Allow me to take you back to 1967. On February 20, a clear winter day, I accompanied three other young men in driving to Port Hope, Ontario, where Vincent Massey, Canada's first Canadian-born Governor General, lived in retirement at his country estate, Batterwood House.<sup>1</sup> Three of us, William Dean, Ian Lancashire and myself, were Junior Fellows of Massey College, the University of Toronto graduate residence that Massey had created and of which he was the Visitor. Our driver, Derrick Breach, was a former Junior Fellow.

The purpose of our visit was to present Massey, who was celebrating his eightieth birthday, with two presents from the Junior Fellows. Having been introduced to Massey's dogs, Beau and Nash, we settled down to conversation, allowing him to pick the topic. After a couple of false starts he hit on Marshall McLuhan and the ideas advanced in his book *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964a), which Massey was reading. He offered the opinion that McLuhan was "a bit of a charlatan". Dean, who had taken a course with McLuhan, agreed, Lancashire gently demurred, while Breach (a mathematician) and I expressed no opinion. As I recall the events of that day, the conversation reached no clear conclusion.

My reluctance to contribute to the discussion was not due to ignorance of McLuhan's book. It had appeared in 1964, and I read the paperback edition two years later. After finishing it I commented in the diary I kept at that time: "An entertaining book, though scarcely well-written. I have the feeling that obfuscation is used to appear profound. But perhaps he just writes confusingly." Agnostic about the book's assertions, I willingly left their assessment to Dean and Lancashire, students of English literature and better informed than I was.

That is where McLuhan stayed, at least for me, until the summer of 1971. While I was visiting my art historian brother Hendrik (Jack) in Amsterdam, he gave me a slim volume with the comment that I would find its critique of McLuhan's work interesting. The book was *Het avondrood der magiërs* by Rudy Kousbroek; it

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, on May 27-28, 2017.

contained a section with the mocking title “*Het licht uit Toronto*” (‘The light from Toronto’). The book was a revelation to me, not least for its trenchant criticism of McLuhan’s thought. At the time he was revered by many in North America and regarded as a prophet with deep insights. It was stimulating to get a different view of him.

Born on Sumatra, Herman Rudolf Kousbroek (1929-2010) came to the Netherlands with his family after the war, which he spent in a Japanese internment camp, a subject he later wrote extensively about. After a gymnasium education in Amsterdam, he began the study of mathematics and natural science but dropped out and moved to Paris, where he studied Japanese. For years he lived alternately in France and the Netherlands before settling in Leiden in 1992. Fluent in several modern languages, he was mainly active as a poet, translator, essayist and newspaper columnist, notably in *Vrij Nederland* and the *NRC Handelsblad*. He won the *P.C. Hooftprijs* for his essays in 1975. A prominent atheist and advocate for animal rights, he was “*een denker met gevoel*” (‘a thinker with feeling’), in the words of editor and critic Arjan Peters, who wrote Kousbroek’s obituary in *De Volkskrant* (Peters 2010).

*Het avondrood*, containing essays and articles written in 1967 and 1968, has as its unifying theme *het moderne bijgeloof* (‘modern superstition’). Kousbroek finds this wherever people are searching for “*de Waarheid*” or “*het Hogere*”, a mystical truth or higher reality that is believed to lie beyond that which can be perceived by the senses or known by logical and rational means. To the seekers for *het Hogere*, the findings of the natural sciences, which are often beyond their comprehension, are conceived to be a manifestation of this higher reality, but are not to be confused with it. Kousbroek locates a key stimulus for the search for a mystic reality in fear of the incomprehensible:

Het moderne mysticisme is de reactie van mensen die afgezien hebben van pogingen om de hen omringende werkelijkheid nog verder te begrijpen. Het is de vlucht uit een werkelijkheid die te gecompliceerd geworden is om nog interpreteerbaar te zijn met de vederlichte rationele bagage die de meeste mensen in onze samenleving meekrijgen. (Kousbroek 1970, 23-24)<sup>2</sup>

Another major stimulus is the fear of death. To Kousbroek, modern mysticism represents regression on a massive scale, a return to an infantile view of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Modern mysticism is the response from people who no longer attempt to understand the reality around them. It is the flight from a reality that has become too complicated to be interpreted by the feather-light rational thinking skills that most people in our society are brought up with.’

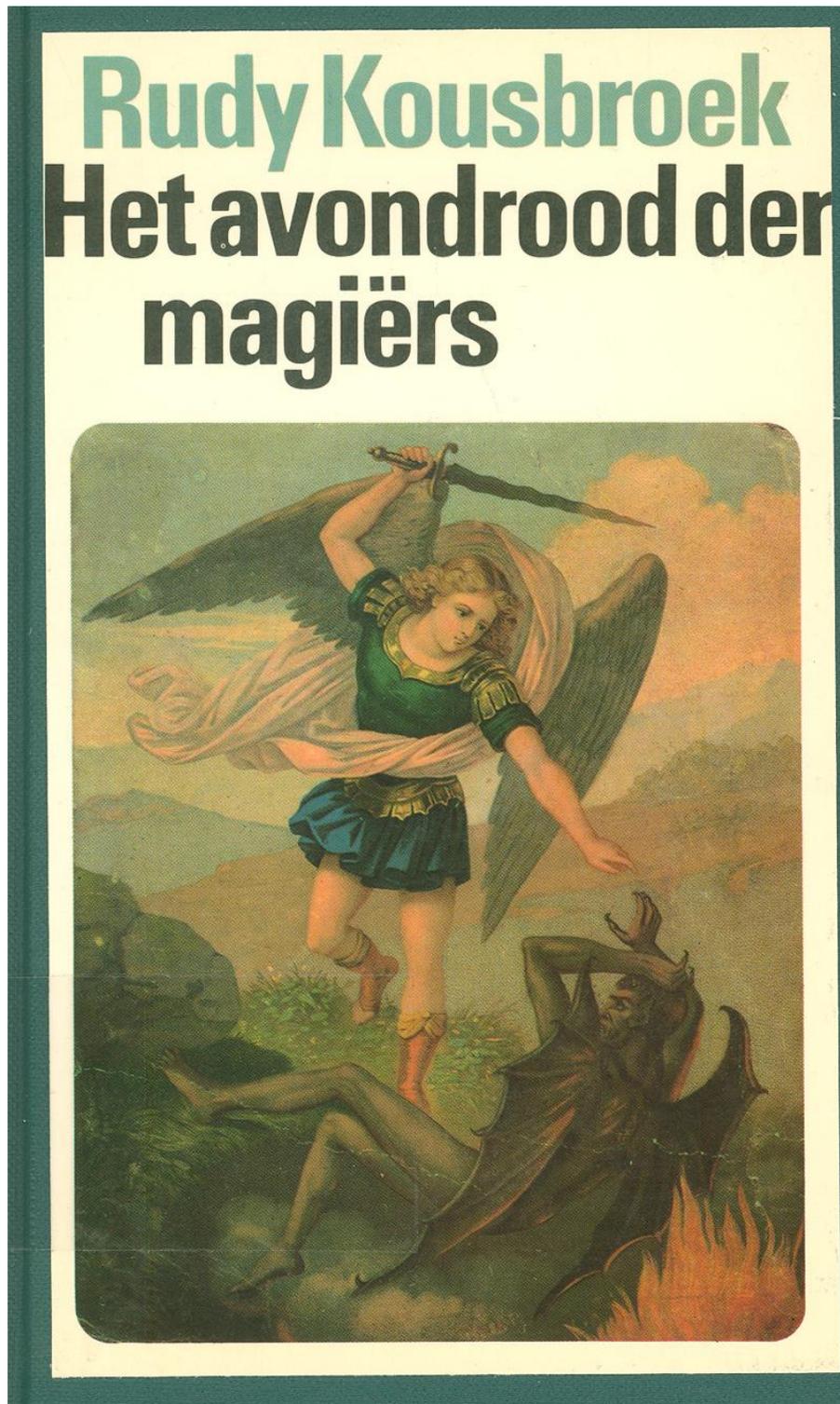


Figure 1. Front cover of *Het avondrood der magiërs* by Rudy Kousbroek.

Among the targets of Kousbroek's scepticism are the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1942), the Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the psychologist and LSD-advocate Timothy Leary (1920-96), and the film-makers Stanley Kubrick (1928-99) and Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930), as well as Marshall McLuhan.

Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-80) was an Edmonton-born professor of English literature. He obtained his B.A. from the University of Manitoba and his doctorate from Cambridge University, and he spent most of his teaching career at St Michael's College, which is federated with the University of Toronto. There he became interested in two early works in communications theory written by the University of Toronto political economist Harold Adams Innis, *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (1951). In an introduction McLuhan wrote for the re-issue of the latter book, he acknowledged his debt to Innis, while taking issue with him for failing to reach the same insights McLuhan did, as in: "It had not occurred to Innis that electricity is in effect an extension of the nervous system as a kind of global membrane" (McLuhan 1964b, xiv). This is classic McLuhan: supremely confident and given to categorical but opaque declarations.

For a brief summary of McLuhan's thought, I can do no better than quote from a famous article about McLuhan, accompanied by a question-and-answer session, that appeared in a 1969 issue of *Playboy*:

McLuhan contends that all media – in and of themselves and regardless of the messages they communicate – exert a compelling influence on man and society. Prehistoric, or tribal, man existed in a harmonious balance of the senses, perceiving the world equally through hearing, smell, touch, sight and taste. But technological innovations are extensions of human abilities and senses that alter this sensory balance – an alteration that, in turn, inexorably reshapes the society that created the technology. According to McLuhan, there have been three basic technological innovations: the invention of the phonetic alphabet, which jolted tribal man out of his sensory balance and gave dominance to the eye; the introduction of movable type in the 16th Century, which accelerated this process; and the invention of the telegraph in 1844, which heralded an electronics revolution that will ultimately retribalize man by restoring his sensory balance. McLuhan has made it his business to explain and extrapolate the repercussions of this electronic revolution. (Playboy Interview 1969, 53)

McLuhan may have owed some of his insights to Innis, but he did not emulate that scholar's scrupulous concern for facts and data. He *did* share Innis's infelicitous use of language. Kousbroek was not impressed by McLuhan's English:

Het spijt mij dat ik [...] moet bekennen dat het zijn taalgebruik is, dat mij in Marshall McLuhan het meest tegenstaat. Het Engels van McLuhan is stuitend. Mistroostig, hardvochtig, onnauwkeurig, onverschillig, houterig, zakkerig, square, knarsend en vreugdeloos, het zijn woorden die het nog maar onvolledig weergeven. (Kousbroek 1970, 85-86).<sup>3</sup>

Recalling my first reaction to reading *Understanding Media* I can only say: Amen!

McLuhan, it must be said, would have regarded Kousbroek's criticism (and mine) as wrong-headed. The critic Richard Kostelanetz wrote in the *New York Times* on January 27, 1967: "Everything McLuhan writes is originally dictated, either to his secretary or to his wife, and he is reluctant to rewrite, because, he explains, 'I tend to add and the whole thing gets out of hand'." In this self-serving view, muddled writing was actually meritorious, being evidence of profound cogitation. Kostelanetz reports him as saying: "Clear prose indicates the absence of thought."

More damaging than the poor quality of McLuhan's prose, in Kousbroek's view, was his readiness to invent his own facts in support of his ideas. One of the more astonishing of these "alternate facts" is that "the adolescent, as opposed to the teenager ... was indigenous only to those areas of England and America where literacy had invested even food with abstract visual values. Europe never had adolescents. It had chaperones" (McLuhan 1964a, 302). And again: "Tactility is a supreme value in European life. For that reason, on the Continent there is no adolescence, but only the leap from childhood to adult ways. Such is now the American state since TV, and this state of evasion of adolescence will continue" (McLuhan 1964a, 324-325). It was McLuhan's conviction that television "had disposed America to European modes of sense and sensibility. America is now Europeanizing as furiously as Europe is Americanizing" (McLuhan 1964a, 322).

Before television, McLuhan states, there was a clear distinction between "the detribalized and literate West", which he limits to the United Kingdom and North America, and a tribalized, less literate, more tactile Europe, oriented to the ear, "intolerant, closed, and exclusive", rather than to the eye, "open, neutral, and associative" (McLuhan 1964a, 302). This is the reason, in his view, that although "ideas of tolerance came to the West only after two or three centuries of literacy and visual Gutenberg culture, no such saturation with visual values had occurred in Germany by 1930" (McLuhan, 1964a 302-303). In the Russia of the 1960s this was, he asserted, still far off.

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<sup>3</sup> 'I am sorry to have to [...] admit that it is Marshall McLuhan's use of language that I find most grating. His English is abominable. Depressing, harsh, imprecise, careless, wooden, wretched, square, grinding and joyless, these are words that only partially express it.'

The central concept in McLuhan's thought is that "the medium is the message [...]. It is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association [...]" (McLuhan 1964a, 7, 9). If this is so, Kousbroek notes, it is strange that the medium of print, introduced in various countries of Europe at much the same time, should have had a different effect on the continent than in the British Isles and later in the United States. This is a conundrum, unless, as McLuhan asserts, the continental peoples *are* inherently more "tribal", "tactile", and "earthy", less "literate" and "visual" than their English and American counterparts. As Kousbroek says, McLuhan's distinction between a literate English-speaking West and a less-literate Europe that is closer to even less-literate Asia and Africa informs a good deal of his writing. But the notion that Teutons and Slavs as well as the inhabitants of the Low Countries, France, Spain, Italy, Greece and so on, are more tribal and less visually oriented than the English-speaking peoples is stated as a fact. It is unsubstantiated by hard evidence.

Kousbroek has a lot of fun with McLuhan's excursions into European social history, used to shore up his theorizing. Kousbroek offers several examples. One concerns the automobile and its past. "From the beginnings of the automobile", McLuhan asserts, "[Europeans] have preferred the wraparound space of the small car" (McLuhan 1964a, 325). And also: "The small European car [...] was no visual package job. Visually, the entire batch of European cars are so poor an affair that it is obvious their makers never thought of them as something to look at. They are something to put on, like pants or a pullover" (McLuhan 1964a, 326). On the other hand,

"[...] the American car had been fashioned in accordance with the *visual* mandates of the typographic and the movie images. The American car was an enclosed space, not a tactile space [...]. In the American car, as the French observed years ago, 'one is not on the road, one is in the car'.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the European car aims to drag you along the road and to provide a great deal of vibration for the [human] bottom. Brigitte Bardot got into the news when it was discovered that she liked to drive barefoot in order to get the maximal vibration. (McLuhan 1964a, 327)

Ah, yes, those tactile, earthy, *sexy* Europeans.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As is typical in *Understanding Media*, the quotation is not footnoted. Who were these French? The quotation feels as though it has been made up for the occasion.

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan adds: "Even English cars, weak on visual appearance as they are, have been guilty of advertising that 'at sixty miles an hour all you can hear is the ticking of the clock.' That would be a very poor ad, indeed, for a TV generation that has to be *with* everything and has to *dig* things in order to get at them." First of all, cars don't advertise, companies do. Second, the slogan, mangled here and unattributed, was: "At sixty miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes

As Kousbroek points out, McLuhan's views about the automobile are rooted in sheer ignorance (Kousbroek 1970, 92). The early history of the automobile shows no general European preference for small cars: consider the Alfa Romeo, Bugatti, Daimler, Hispano Suiza, Mercedes, and Panhard, to mention but a few. By and large and at all times since the late nineteenth century, people of means, wherever they live, have preferred large, luxurious cars. They did so in the Europe of the 1960s, when McLuhan wrote, but lower incomes than in North America, as well as higher taxes on gasoline in Britain and Europe, and the crowded nature of European and British cities,<sup>6</sup> all facts overlooked or ignored by McLuhan, forced most European as well as British drivers into small cars. (It should be noted that McLuhan believed one of the effects of television to be that it led Americans, too, to prefer "the wrap-around space of small cars" (McLuhan, 1964a, 316). This he held to be one of the consequences of Americans becoming more tactile under the influence of television. McLuhan evidently did not anticipate the rise of the SUV and its enormous popularity.)

Moving to another point of criticism, Kousbroek derides McLuhan's statement that it was "the literate American colonists who were first to insist on a rifled barrel and improved gunsights. They improved the old muskets, creating the Kentucky rifle. It was the highly literate Bostonians who outshot the British regulars" (McLuhan, 1964a, 341). Kousbroek points out that rifled barrels existed in Europe from the late fifteenth century on, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century every great power in Europe had numerous regiments that were equipped with rifles.

Van de superioriteit van de 'hooggeletterde Bostonians' over de Britten, waar McLuhan het over heeft, blijft niets anders over dan dat de Britse regering te krenterig was om haar koloniale troepen met behoorlijke geweren uit te rusten. (Kousbroek 1970, 92)<sup>7</sup>

He notes that, on this occasion, McLuhan has, presumably for the purpose of his argument, included the British among the Europeans, more oral and so

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from the electric clock." Dating from 1958, it is one of the most famous advertisements produced by David Ogilvy of Ogilvy and Mather. It had nothing to do with "English cars" in general. It's hard to believe McLuhan did not know this.

<sup>6</sup> An aunt who lived near Olympiaplein in Amsterdam used to complain about a Cadillac-driving neighbour: "*Die bezet met zijn monstreuse wagen twee parkeerplaatsen.*" ('He takes up two parking spots with his monstrous vehicle.')

<sup>7</sup> 'Of the superiority of the 'highly literate Bostonians' over the British, which McLuhan mentions, nothing more remains than that the British government was too cheap to equip its colonial troops with decent guns.'

presumably less capable marksmen than the more literate North American colonists.

McLuhan goes on to claim that “in the Second World War the marksman was replaced by automatic weapons fired blindly in what were called ‘perimeters of fire’ or ‘fire lanes’. The old-timers fought to retain the bolt-action Springfield which encouraged single-shot accuracy and sighting” (McLuhan, 1964a, 341).

(An aside: Kousbroek does not discuss the issue, but McLuhan’s claim is sufficiently misleading that it must not be allowed to pass without comment. The marksman was not replaced by soldiers firing automatic weapons. Starting in the First World War he was complemented by them. The argument in the American armed forces, particularly the US Marine Corps, was about the relative merits of the M1903 Springfield and the rifle that replaced it during the Second World War, the semi-automatic M1 Garand.<sup>8</sup> US infantrymen were equipped with rifles, as were infantrymen in all armies. Many of them were effective marksmen: the sniper was far from disappearing. The website *War History Online* provides a list of the Second World War’s ten most lethal snipers. Headed by a Finnish soldier active during the 1939-40 Finno-Soviet War, the list’s next nine places are occupied by Soviet soldiers (Saad 2016).<sup>9</sup> All ten used the Soviet-made Mosin-Nagant rifle, generally, though not unanimously, considered to have been the best sniper rifle in use during the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> This casts doubt on McLuhan’s implied judgement that North American literate man is more effective as a marksman than the more tactile/oral Europeans.)

McLuhan uses his misrepresentation of military history to make yet another controversial claim:

At this stage of technology, the literate man is somewhat in the position of the old-timers who backed the Springfield rifle against perimeter fire. It is this same visual habit that deters and obstructs literate man in modern physics [...] Men in the older oral societies of middle Europe are better able to conceive the nonvisual velocities and relations of the subatomic world.

(McLuhan, 1964a, 342)

Elsewhere he writes:

[...] Literate man can learn to speak other languages only with great difficulty, for learning a language calls for participation of *all* the senses at

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<sup>8</sup> See Miskimon (2017). McLuhan altogether misunderstands this debate.

<sup>9</sup> It does seem appropriate to ask whether the Soviet statistics were inflated.

<sup>10</sup> The 1903 Springfield, the German K98 Mauser and the British P14 Enfield also have their champions. See for instance: <https://www.quora.com/What-was-the-best-sniper-rifle-in-WW2-and-why>. Accessed July 10, 2017.

once. On the other hand, our habit of visualizing renders the literate Westerner helpless in the nonvisual world of advanced physics. Only the visceral and audile-tactile Teuton and Slav have the needed immunity to visualization for work in the non-Euclidean math and quantum physics. Were we to teach our math and physics by telephone, even a highly literate and abstract Westerner could eventually compete with the European physicists. (McLuhan, 1964a, 267)

Koesbroek's comment on these statements is caustic:

Het is goed om er aan te herinneren dat deze denkbeelden precies samenvallen met de gangbare vooroordelen van de kleine Noord-Amerikaanse (in did geval Canadese) burger: de voorstelling van Europeanen als achterlijk, sexy, primair, en daar tegenover de Amerikaan als beschaafd en geletterd. Amerika is het 'eigenlijke' Westen, waarbij de Engelsen een soort status van gelijkgestelden krijgen, ten slotte spreken zij ook Engels en niet een of ander barbaarse taal. Sommige van die Europeanen zijn wel duivels knap, maar op gebieden die eigenlijk weinig menselijks meer hebben, zoals niet-euclidische meetkunde en quantumfysica [...]. (Kousbroek 1970, 89-90)<sup>11</sup>

There are other passages that imply that McLuhan does not consider Europeans to be Westerners as he understands the term. Sentences such as "like the oral Russian, the African will not accept sight and sound together" (McLuhan, 1964a, 287), and (writing of radio and its effects) "the German defeat had thrust them [the Germans] back from visual obsession into brooding upon the resonating Africa within" (McLuhan, 1964a, 301), help to convince Kousbroek that "er bestaat voor McLuhan [...] tussen Amerikanen en Engelsen, 'Westerners', enerzijds, en 'Europeanen' anderzijds, een principieel verschil; het verschil tussen Russen en andere Europeanen, tussen Teutonen and Afrikanen, tussen de Slaaf en de Aziat, is alleen gradueel" (Kousbroek 1970, 91).<sup>12</sup>

When he wrote his two best-known books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media*, McLuhan seems to have known very little about either

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<sup>11</sup> 'It is good to remember that these views overlap perfectly with the common prejudices of the common North-American (in this case Canadian) petit bourgeois: the representation of Europeans as backward, sexy, primitive, opposed to the American as civilized and literate. America is the "real" West, with the British being afforded a status of sort of equals, since after all they speak English too and not some barbaric language. Some of these Europeans are devilishly clever, but only in fields that are virtually inhuman, such as non-Euclidian geometry and quantum physics.'

<sup>12</sup> 'For McLuhan there exists a principal distinction between American and British, "Westerners", on the one hand, and "Europeans" on the other; the difference between Russians and other Europeans, between Teutons and Africans, between the Slav and the Asian, is only a matter of degree.'

Europe or the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science. This is perhaps not surprising. His undergraduate majors were English and philosophy; his doctoral dissertation was in English literature. He studied in Cambridge, England, from 1934 to 1936 and 1939 to 1940, but a biography of him indicates that, before the 1970s, his longest visit to the European continent was his 1939 honeymoon in parts of Italy and France (Fitzgerald 2001, 51-52). He does not seem to have spoken any language other than English. (Does this shed light on his comment about the “great difficulty” literate man has in learning to speak other languages?) As for subjects like history and anthropology: he seems to have devoted no time to studying them in any disciplined way. He uses history and the social sciences to support his views, but his statements about past events and developments are riddled with elementary errors.

McLuhan seems to have been cavalier about this. In 1966, responding to questioning by the Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton, McLuhan said: “You’re not trying to explore anything with me. You’re exploring my statements, not the situation. I’m not interested in my statements. I don’t agree with them. I merely use them as probes” (Finkelstein 1968, 14). However, these “probes”, inaccurate and even fictional though they often are, do at first glance lend a spurious semblance of scholarly or scientific respectability to ideas that are, in fact, generally neither falsifiable nor verifiable. But that may not have mattered to McLuhan, or so Kousbroek seems to have thought. He believes that McLuhan’s ideas embody a mystical promise of human salvation through electronic media, if only we will abandon our obsession with factual content, part of the now-superseded age of literacy, and will abandon ourselves to the tactile medium of television.

This, Kousbroek argues, points to something more sinister.

In een bespreking van de Hollandse vertaling van *Understanding Media* [...] heb ik er al op gewezen dat het McLuhanisme racistisch is, en die merkwaardige onverschilligheid tegenover verifieerbare feiten heeft die totalitaire denkwijzen eigen is. (Kousbroek 1970, 98)<sup>13</sup>

In this view, McLuhan is the prophet of a new superstition that, by encouraging us to submit to electronic media, threatens to deliver us to the commercial enterprises that control these media. Asking how McLuhan can possibly be taken seriously, he writes: “*Het antwoord luidt dat onze samenleving een onstiltbare*

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<sup>13</sup> ‘In a review of the Dutch translation of *Understanding media* ... I have already pointed out that McLuhanism is racist, and has the remarkable indifference in regards to verifiable fact that is inherent to the totalitarian way of thinking.’

*honger heeft naar heilsbeloften die zich aandienen onder de naam van wetenschap*" (Kousbroek 1970, 93).<sup>14</sup>

Let me return to Vincent Massey's assessment in 1967. Would Kousbroek have agreed with him that McLuhan was "a bit of a charlatan"? The answer is not clear. A short essay in *Het avondrood*, "Announcing the Rudy McKousbroek Newsletter", suggests that the possibility of charlatanism did occur to Kousbroek (1970, 80-82). However, while he argues that McLuhan was mistaken in his attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of human development, and that he willingly veered into the realm of superstition in doing so, I see no compelling reason to believe that Kousbroek thought McLuhan was guilty of bad faith. Deluded, yes, dishonest, no.

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<sup>14</sup> 'The answer is that our society has an insatiable hunger for promises of salvation disguised as science.'

