Marshall McLuhan was a self-declared oral man, so it is always useful to have his talks and interviews published, even though virtually the entire McLuhan corpus is currently being reprinted by Gingko Press. The talks and interviews published in Understanding Me, edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, provide valuable additions to those published in works such as The Essential McLuhan (edited by Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone) or the CD Understanding McLuhan. The 18 items chosen for Understanding Me are primarily talks and interviews given as McLuhan began his path toward becoming the media guru of the 1960s and early 1970s. That said, they range from a 1959 talk delivered in conjunction with his work for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters that preceded the publication of The Gutenberg Galaxy and Understanding Media to his last taped talk, delivered at York University in the spring of 1979, just over 18 months before his death in December 1980.

While the collection is important and illuminating with respect to reading what McLuhan has said elsewhere, one hopes that the title, Understanding Me, was chosen by the editors, Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, in the same spirit of learned satire that McLuhan argued permeated all of his work. For although all the items included are relevant for those wishing a deeper understanding of McLuhan’s work, they contain the same poetic complexity and ambiguity as his published works, hardly providing the type of insight into one’s self that occurs in works such as Katharine Hepburn’s Me or, for that matter, presenting any permanent resolution of the problem of interpreting McLuhan.

Not too surprisingly, the main concern of most of the essays is the effects of the new media. The collection opens with the aforementioned 1959 talk, “Electronic Revolution: Revolutionary Effects of New Media,” given in conjunction with McLuhan’s research for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. His research was published in his Report on Project in Understanding New Media (1960), the forerunner of work that later appeared in The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962) and Understanding Media (1964). The same motifs, though somewhat reinforced by numerous corollaries and supplemented by the impact of new aspects of new media, appear in the final talk, “Man and Media” (delivered at York University in Toronto in 1979, the last taped item before his death). Intervening items range from talks directed toward new evolving media to those on one of McLuhan’s strongest themes—the arts as the ultimate guide to the effects of media—and others concerned with social, moral, or ethical questions, such as violence as a quest for identity or the “end of the work ethic.”

One value of the collection is that it illustrates effectively and extensively the range of McLuhan’s interests, many of which, although present, are somewhat concealed by the density, complexity, and ambivalence of his aphoristic writings. Still, that is a secondary value compared to the richer presentation this volume provides into the basic patterns of McLuhan’s vision. The importance of that vision is clear in the initial talk, “Electronic Revolution,” in which he declares: “A kind of alchemical foreknowledge of all the future effects of any new medium is possible” (p. 8). He still stresses it in the final talk, “Man and Media,” in which he notes: “The phrase ‘rear-view mirror’ tells you that you are looking at something that went past, but . . . All you can look at in the rear-view mirror is literally the foreseeable future. Now ‘living at the speed of light’ [the title of an earlier talk in 1974], there is no foreseeable future. You are there literally” (p. 293). One entire talk, delivered at Columbia University in 1973, “Art as Survival in the Electric Age,” is devoted to demonstrating how in the instantaneous post-electric world the artist alone can provide the insight and knowledge to survive while living at the speed of the computerized world.
In this talk McLuhan reiterates his total commitment, clear from the time of *The Mechanical Bride* onwards, that it is the artists, musicians, and poets and later the major artists of the popular arts, who are his guides and the only guides who are 50 years ahead of their time, who can provide guidance and the requisite vision. The tradition of those artists, says McLuhan, we now know occupied a major role in the prehistory of contemporary digiculture, beginning with Poe and Baudelaire, involving Rimbaud and Picasso, and continuing in the work of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot. McLuhan concludes by noting “that the job of the artist is to upset all the senses, and to provide new vision and new powers of adjusting and relating to new situations” (p. 223). In almost all of these talks artists appear as guides to understanding media—such as Marcel Duchamp, Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce. It is clear the one with whom McLuhan felt the closest affinity was Wyndham Lewis, as he indicates in a talk on “Technology, Media and Culture” (1960) when he suggests that Lewis’ uniqueness and thoroughness as historian and critic of the period means he is the most complete guide to the arts and letters of his age, providing the crucial critique of the avant-garde’s flight from visual values and their embracing of popular culture as illustrated from Duchamp to Joyce (p. 16).

For the vision that McLuhan feels is essential to “surviving at the speed of light,” Joyce is the critical figure in a talk on “Open Mind Surgery” (1967). McLuhan notes that Joyce “called TV as X-Ray ‘the charge of the light barricade’ which is just one of a multitude of insights that makes Finnegans Wake . . . the greatest guide to the media ever devised on this planet, and . . . a tremendous study of the action of all media upon the human psyche and sensorium” (p. 152). Thus McLuhan’s talks are largely a kind of aphoristic prose-poetry advancing artistic insights into the tremendous transformation of human perception through the emergence first of TV and then of computerization and worldwide electronic communication from the 1940s, when he wrote *The Mechanical Bride*, until 1979, when he delivered his last recorded talk.

While so far I have stressed the way the talks demonstrate the immense importance of the artists and particularly such figures as Lewis and Joyce to McLuhan’s writings, they are also important in clarifying, emphasizing, and enriching the analysis of the effects of old, new, and very new media in McLuhan’s major writings. This also means that they regularly reveal aspects of his work at a deeper level, such as his analysis of war in the electric age (including the Vietnam War), which inspired in part the writing of *War and Peace in the Global Village* with Quentin Fiore in 1968. The essays in this collection are crucial in connecting art, media, violence, and war, which were an intrinsic part of McLuhan’s analyses from the late 1950s and which reached their epiphany in talks such as “Violence as a Quest for Identity” (1977). Since, in that presentation, he begins with a discussion of Hitler as a “radio man” and a “tribal man,” this traces his thought to its roots in World War II, which elsewhere in his writings he describes as a radio war.

Since violence is a quest for identity spurred on by each major change in medium, throughout his works he dubs the Vietnam War as a TV war, which would presumably not be as severe without TV coverage. In his talks, though, he reiterates how inescapable war is as long as there are rapid changes in the media world.

In view of the contemporary situation with war in the Middle East, this becomes further complicated if one sees these conflicts somehow as partly tied to the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web reinforcing McLuhan’s fears of Holy Wars, as he expresses it in a later printed version of his talk in 1980: “The 80s will see a great swing from the military toward the temple bureaucracy, from the outer conquest of space to the inner conquest of spirit. Holy wars will occur: an extreme example of hardware shifting to software and spiritual values” (*Maclean’s*, 1980). The talks underpin repeatedly what he always stressed in his work—that he was interested in media communication as transformation in contradistinction to all of those communication theorists who treated it as trans-
portation (p. 230). And further, that these transformations would necessarily be violent, creating irreversible changes.

It is not so much that there is strikingly new material here, but material that will clarify and often intensify what has been said earlier. It will certainly confirm that McLuhan was stressing the immense impact that the rapidly changing media as we moved to the Internet and the speed of light would have on the life of the average person in all societies throughout the world. It is noteworthy, too, how the talks and interviews had so little impact, even from such a cult celebrity as McLuhan. In one interview he is queried about the nature of media ecology, and his reply that it is about balancing all media using each one most efficaciously for people’s benefit takes on a much greater urgency, particularly since it is the interview focused on “violence as a quest for identity.” These talks are essential to students of communication theory, of McLuhan, and of media ecology as well as those involved in humanistic and artistic subjects.

In closing it must be noted that Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines have excelled in selecting, introducing, and editing the items presented in this book. Staines has also provided a brief personal account of his relations as a student and later as a colleague of McLuhan that reinforce the values McLuhan promotes throughout all of these talks. It is unfortunate, therefore, not to have him do an introductory essay. For while Tom Wolfe in his famous essay “What If He’s Right” launched McLuhan on his media celebrity status in the 1960s and Wolfe became a friend of McLuhan and his family, he apparently had little sympathy for most of the foundation of McLuhan’s work. Consequently, the book’s foreword, while interesting as an example of Wolfe’s work, is largely tangential to the strongly historical, aesthetic, and intellectual stance of McLuhan when addressing groups primarily interested in academic discourse, which underpins the largest part of the present collection. For example, there are three consecutive pages in the foreword in which Wolfe overstresses the importance of the writing of Teilhard de Chardin on McLuhan. He hypothesizes that McLuhan suppresses recognition of the importance of Teilhard to his work, because Teilhard was disapproved of by the Catholic Church. This is misleading in two ways: first, in the late 1950s and 1960s intellectual Catholics openly discussed the work of Teilhard, and McLuhan quotes or mentions Teilhard on a number of occasions in his _Gutenberg Galaxy_; and among those remarks he clearly indicates the reservations he has concerning Teilhard’s writing, primarily through his more plentiful citations from Joyce and other avant-garde writers (see Theall, 2002).

Yet for the scholar interested in McLuhan the foreword still holds interest in conjunction with an interview of McLuhan by Wolfe included in the collection, “TV as a Mythic Form” (1970). In much of the exchange it is two individuals speaking at cross purposes to one another, and although Wolfe seems to push the importance of the arts to McLuhan, the interview does not include the type of insight from the tradition of Modernism and the avant-garde that McLuhan held to be so essential. The opposition of the two participants arises at the very outset of the interview, when Wolfe writes off the entire Southern and Modernist traditions, both of which meant so much to McLuhan at many points throughout his career. Wolfe’s categorical statement to McLuhan that he rejects anything that might appear in the _Kenyon Review_ clearly clashes with McLuhan’s praise for the New Criticism (that is, of I. A. Richards, Frank Leavis, and the Southern group of Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and others), which occurs in his address to the American Association for Higher Education. The attentive reader will notice that this misunderstanding is reinforced by many similar differences of opinion. While it was reasonable, given the connection of Wolfe to McLuhan’s family, to ask him to make some comments, this excellent collection of talks and interviews would have profited from a more academic introduction from David Staines as well. Nevertheless, the editors should be congratulated for bringing
forward this selection of talks and interviews, which contain important issues about the media and its relation to culture and the arts.

References

Donald Theall
Trent University