BOOK REVIEW

OH, WHAT A BLOW THAT PHANTOM GAVE ME

By Edmund Carpenter

Holt Rinehart & Winston
New York - 1973

A Review by
David Essner

INTRODUCTION

"OH, WHAT A BLOW THAT PHANTOM GAVE ME"! is a book about man and his relationship to the world around him. It is a look at the different worlds as perceived by distinct cultural groups, and it is a clear indictment of the warping of society by mass media. It offers proof of the McLuhan-esque perception of the mass media as separate worlds within themselves, conquering and subjugating in a short space of time, cultures that had endured for millennia. It illustrates McLuhan's appeal to look at the formal cause which "constitutes the environmental violence" that is the mass media. As McLuhan puts it, "The effects of the media themselves represent a form of violence so vast as to be unnoticed".

Edmund Carpenter has an insightful view of how our world functions, and is able to discern how men of different cultures are in tune with and see the world around them. He gives many illustrations in his book, beginning with its title. This title, a quotation from "Don Quixote", is meant to illustrate the content of the book, by showing how Don Quiote, a product of his culture and environment, saw a perfectly ordinary world in a way unique to his own culture and upbringing. The book is no less intriguing.

By his own admission addressing the book to no particular audience, Carpenter adopts a loose structure and casual style in assembling it. The book is for anyone who cares to read it and is not meant to be a "scholarly treatise". It is divided into three sections. These sections are:

(a) WORLDS WITHIN--wherein, through various examples, Carpenter shows how the mass media penetrate and permeate cultures, becoming part of and doing violence to them, creating an unreal "Alice in Wonderland" environment. In this environment the "non sequitur" is king and nonsense can supercede reality.

(b) MEDIA LOG--a presentation of notes made by the author (an anthropologist, remember) between 1957 and 1972, many while observing different "primitive" cultures in other parts of the globe. Included are some notes made in North
America. This segment deals with "the world of surrealism where events are experienced from within, not observed from without". Described in this section are people who touched the author's life, and were not merely "specimens". As in the first section, there are examples of man's peculiar reaction to media encroachment.

(c) THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN--The culmination of the book, this section deals with the invasion of the electronic media upon cultures which did not know them. It shows whole cultures being swallowed and becoming part of the "media culture", mostly unknowingly. The world is indeed turned upside down, as the element of media presence infects the "observed" with a tragi-comic existence.

Let us examine the substance of each section.

Analysis:

(A) Worlds Within

This section consists of short papers--brush strokes almost--showing man's interpretation of his environment through his senses. It shows how perspectives can get warped when one sense does not work in harmony with the others, such as when, in a literate society, the eye becomes the only sense trusted.

The first thought, entitled "Angelization", shows how electronic media and communications devices, with their ability to bridge the gap of miles, and to capture voices on a machine, are held in awe by the societies they touch. And, in paying homage to them, we do some mighty peculiar things--a clerk will keep customers waiting to answer the phone; New Guinean villagers will obey orders from their chief when they are recorded on tape--orders they otherwise ignore; people will virtually tear down doors to get to a telephone; a bank robber at a protected bank with closed-circuit T.V. successfully robbed it by pointing a gun at the camera; and more. We are in awe of electronics. It makes us as a spirit, able to span large distances in a flash, able to be in several places at once. And we respond to electronics in such a way as to show that we have not successfully tamed and mastered it.

In the second note "The Self-Sufficient Image", Carpenter shows how people need to translate images into an observed reality, such as the tourist who wants to see a
famous landmark exactly as it was on a postcard, thus confirming the image, but not really experiencing the reality.

"Media Identities" offers anecdotes to illustrate how the media-image of a real person becomes bigger than the person himself, until even that person stands in awe of the image as a separate person.

"Will the Real Alice Please Step Forward" makes the point that this media image does, in a sense, assume a separate identity and life.

"Media Withdrawal" shows how people will try to escape into the T.V. environment completely to avoid the harsh realities of life.

In "The Reel World"; Carpenter lets us see how we divorce the media images from the real world. The Western media "created" the Viet Nam that we saw on T.V., the Viet Nam wherein the GULF OF TONKIN incident, which never happened was "real" and My Lai, unreported, therefore did not exist. Black people are perceived by non-blacks as they are portrayed on T.V., in an image that really is not them.

"T.V.: A Joking Word" advances the premise that T.V. is viewed as a purveyor of fiction regardless of whether what is actually being screened is fiction or fact. Thus, the moon-shots became "a hoax staged in Mexico on moon-like terrain". News reporting became editorialising instead, and reality was substituted with newsmen's opinions. "Profiles" on famous individuals highlights sometimes irrelevant facts and ignores those achievements which bring them fame. T.V. is not a mirror of reality.

In his short paper, intriguingly entitled, "I Saw A Woman Flayed, And You Cannot Imagine the Difference It Made In Her", Edmund Carpenter says that literate man treats symbols as neutral things, and words we use are used out of context, sometimes, not meant to convey the thing that the word literally means. If we profane God, we are not literally doing so--our words are meant to convey annoyance, perhaps, or anger. When we do accept the symbols as the reality itself, we sometimes use euphemisms so, as to avoid the emotion attached to the accepted word-symbol. "He's dead" thus becomes "he passed away". Bodily functions are cleaned up by the use of Latin words such as "defecation" or "urination", leaving less discomfort with the user. Carpenter
says our word-symbols mean different things to those who are totally familiar with what the reality is. His example, for instance, shows how a person in a primitive culture would, upon seeing a person holding a pencil for the first time, not recognise the pencil as an object unto itself, rather may use a word or words which would denote the person pointing "with a long, thin instrument". Language, says Carpenter, defines as well as labels. The same is true of all media symbolization, he notes.

"Sensory Profiles" explores the concept that preliterate societies use senses in harmony, to better result, and enabling them to experience more of their environment. Muting sight heightens the other senses. A good deal of pre-literate art, in Carpenter's view, is aimed at other senses than just sight, and this is why it is often out of place when put on display in a museum.

"Feeling With The Eye" advances the proposition that the advent of the phonetic alphabet brought supremacy to the sense of sight, destroying the harmony among all the senses. This theme is reinforced in "seeing in the Round", which illustrates how much perspective literate man loses by simply "viewing" an object. Similarly, "Hearing with the Eye", points out how seeing can be like hearing, where we can accept the sound of music from all directions. In visual art we can see more than one thing in one painting or "objet d'art", such as a visual trick where two different images co-exist within one design.

"The Meaningful Experience" points out that we respond only to what our mind accepts or recognizes. A person can therefore totally ignore a loud, traumatic noise he has never experienced before, where "conditioned" people might react with a sudden, startled jerk.

In "Translation", Carpenter points out that translation is essentially an imperialistic function because it engulfs and disassembles what it seeks to translate and puts it back together in accordance with the translator's cognitions, perceptions and prejudices. A third person, getting a description from the translator, is not getting any look at the reality. Thus, when works of art are "explained", they generally become less than they are, in the explanation. In essence, translation is re-creation.
"Synchronising the Senses" explains that literate people, who give precedence to the eye, can only listen to music, where nonliterate may more naturally merge with it.

In "Sight, The Great Validator", Carpenter explains how in our literature society, the eyes became the sole authority source by which all other senses were tested. In effect, sound became conducted by sight. Our world adjusted to this. "Eye-witness" accounts were the most readily-accepted; paintings with the "optical truth" were the most widely-acclaimed; in science, observable phenomena were the most easily accepted.

The paper entitled, "The Universe As Book", tells how we, as a visually aware society, tend to divide our life's experience into chapters, and to give our experience causal links, in following the example of a book's structure. We adopt chains of command, assembly lines, queues, etc., in our drive to organise our society this way. Our theories of evolution and progress assume this causal and serial link.

In "Play It By Ear", the fact that the converse of the above may be true in preliterate society is brought out. As the senses are given more equal status, visual values may not be supreme in these societies. When visual models are introduced, they thus have great power, as we shall see in the third segment of this book.

"Separate Realities" highlights the theme that our literate society expects all sensations, experiences, and insights to conform to "outer perceptions". Freud thus translated dreams into "reality". Because of this cultural peculiarity, say Carpenter, the young people, brought up in a media environment, accept T.V. as a separate reality—a self-contained environment. When we watch T.V., we, in effect, enter this separate reality. This accounts for people's acceptance of contradictory or untrue statements or events on T.V.—they were real, taking place in that "separate reality". The same holds true for other media, Carpenter points out in "WHN-1050 Is A Put-on. Everybody Put On WHN Radio (Or Else!)" He says we wear our media—we immerse ourselves in them. We adopt the image of a public figure on T.V., say, as our spirit merges with it. We then almost totally identify with it for as long as we are trapped in that media reality. Preliterate people thought of spirit possession as a rare, mysterious experience. We live in a world of spirit possession, without realizing it.
In "Memory", Edmund Carpenter shows us how, by being "ABCed"-minded, literate people, we impair our memories. He gives examples of primitive, oral cultures who preserve traditions for millenia, unchanged, as a contrast. The conclusion is that our need for memory fades as we write things down, and therefore the memory, untrained, fades with the need. Primitive cultures would pool their "memory resources" just as they pool everything else in the act of tribal living. Their art reflects this sharing, Carpenter points out in "Collective Unconscious", as in the case of Alaskan Eskimo artists, who, when they draw upon their subconscious mind for inspiration, produce art similar to other artists of their society, past and present.

In his next short paper, "Déjà vu", Carpenter explains his belief that so many people claim this feeling because of T.V. He thinks that people who have seen a particular experience at a particular place on T.V. and then have relegated this to their subconscious, feel that peculiar twinge of déjà-vu when they actually live that experience themselves later on.

T.V., says Carpenter, is a blind medium, because it does not reproduce the world "out there", rather it records a world within. Insight replaces sight, and we leave reality to enter the phantom world of T.V. This is one of the "Worlds Within" that Carpenter addresses himself to in titling this section. All media are misrepresentations.

Carpenter has tried, in this section, to show us just how we have been engulfed and changed by the media age. In trying to extend our horizons, we have entered a new reality, with consequences we have just begun to comprehend. I have touched briefly on each separate paper presented in this section because of the sheer volume and complexity of concepts introduced.

(B) Media Log

In this section, Carpenter tells us of his observations on the inner world of man—a surrealistic world. They are observations scribbled by him in note form during his widely-travelled career (between 1957 and 1972), and appear to be presented as originally written down, with minimal editing. The immediacy, flavour and impact of these observations are thus brought to the reader intact. My intent below is to provide a sampling of these excerpts.
A Bau, Indonesia teacher has but one book, "Geological Strate of York County, Pennsylvania", left behind by a long-forgotten missionary. Seemingly inappropriate, this book nevertheless demonstrates to this native teacher the meaning of literacy; of written words; and, not immersed in a media culture, but now unalterably drawn away from his, he truly values the treasure that he possesses. (1957)

Some "primitives" in New Guinea, with only the briefest exposure to writing, develop their own writing systems, some being fairly complicated syllabic systems. (1957)

Melville Peninsula, Northwest Territories is an example of the stark, harsh life in this raw environment. Carpenter hunted with head of the household of an Eskimo family he lived with. This man was his friend. One day they killed a walrus and 32 seals. After a hard winter and spring with them, Carpenter noticed the powerful impact reading had on him after living this long as a non-literate. Is this a taste of the wonder a non-literate society feels at its first exposure to writing? (1955)

At Mingende Catholic Mission in New Guinea, the blending of Western and New Guinean cultures is seen in the people attending Mass on Sunday. They were "decked with feathers and flowers", faces painted, bodies covered with clay. Men had large shells hanging from their noses. Many fought. One wonders if they genuinely understood the Christ or the Trinity concept in fact its downright unlikely! (1969)

Throughout this segment of the book, Carpenter is concerned with Man's motivations, his cultural biases, and the thing inside each person that happens, when different cultures interplay. He brings alive the depth of experience and humanity in cultures where the humanity of the people would be denied by a Westerner.

(C) The World Turned Upside Down

In this last section, Edmund Carpenter basically addresses himself to the process and results of a society being introduced to and swallowed up by the media. As it is presented in the form of short papers, I will give a brief synopsis of a few to demonstrate Carpenter's point.
In "Speak, That I May See Thee!", Carpenter tells us of his experience in New Guinea, helping in the introduction of radio, film and T.V. to a society that still indulged in cannibalism, and which had 700 different languages. He speaks of New Guineans, who, in seeing their images for the first time, duck their heads and cover their mouths in self-consciousness.

The second paper, longer than most, is entitled "Where The Hand Of Man Has Never Set Foot". In this, Carpenter describes his first forays into the primitive society where he would be introducing these shy New Guineans to electronic media. Government patrol reports gave an interesting look at these people.

The Biami people were hostile and consistently tried to turn the patrol back. Physical attacks occurred. (1960)

A patrol camp was visited by a dozen hostile "warrior type" Biamis. A few days later, members of another tribe told the patrol of an impending attack on them. The attack never came, probably because of a healthy Biami respect for firearms. (1962)

A patrol reported arrests of men from different tribes, who had committed murder and cannibalism. (1969)

A patrol learned of the beating of two women accused of sorcery. (1969)

Another patrol reported various skirmishes, murders and tortures. (1969)

In contrast to these reports, Carpenter found the Biami a happy people, caring with children, endowed with humour.

In "Mirror, Mirror", Carpenter records the Biami's first reaction to their mirror images. Initially, they would duck and cover their mouths, then stare tensely at their reflections. In days, though, they would be grooming themselves before the mirrors.

"Sudden Self-Awareness" is an attempt by Carpenter to further explain this phenomenon.

In "The Face of Mine Enemy", Carpenter tells us how suspicion and mistrust of others outside the immediate village
environment kept these people in a very limited world. When some saw photographs of people from neighboring villages, Carpenter could see their fear of this unknown enemy start to dissipate.

The end of a traditional culture is described in "World's End". Carpenter tells of the introduction of cameras, and recorders to Sio, a primitive village. He recorded their first, terrified reactions to their other selves, their images, both still and moving, and their timidity near a tape recorder. Yet, in a short time, they were making their own movies, taking Polaroids of one another and playing with the tape recorders. On a trip back to Sio some months later, Carpenter saw a great change in the village. Men wore Western clothes, some houses were rebuilt in a newer style, the people acted differently, and some had even abandoned the village for a more modern government settlement. In a short space of time they had been ripped out of their familiar world but had not become full members of the new world--they no longer had a safe sanctuary. In seeing his own image separate from his environment, each villager had assumed a new identity as a private individual and there was immediately a barrier between himself and his surroundings which led to this re-examination and finally, destruction of a way of life.

In "Love Thy Label As Thyself", Carpenter tells of a village which almost replaced a time-honoured "initiation into manhood" ceremony with a film of one. In experiencing the ceremony on film, the villagers had at once become detached from it.

The rest of this section goes on in this vein, showing how media touched and then swallowed many primitive cultures in New Guinea. For them the world, indeed, had turned upside down.

Summary:

This book is a highly personal document about Carpenter's observations of man, media, and man and media. In his unaffected writing style, he shows us from his personal experience example after example of the relationship between the two, and the damage done to the world by an uncritical introduction and quick proliferation of the various media. The book is easily readable, interesting, and makes its point. If this is the gauge used to judge a "well-written" book, then it is, indeed, well-written.