

## Marshall McLuhan, Prayer and Epiphany

My brilliant graduate school advisor, [Donald Theall](#), was Marshall McLuhan's first PhD student, which situates me in a direct "chain of transmission" with McLuhan, who's considered to be the 20<sup>th</sup> century's seminal philosopher and prognosticator of all things related to mass media.

[McLuhan](#) famously coined the term "the medium is the message" and predicted the World Wide Web, whose advent, he prophesied, would corral humanity into a "global village" characterized not by happy citizens holding hands and singing Kumbaya, but by people so up in each others' business that division, hatred and violence would ensue. In meaningful measure, McLuhan's prophesy has been fulfilled.

Since stepping away from higher ed many moons ago, I've restricted my occasional acolyte impulse to two subjects: explaining McLuhan's most famous insights and predictions, and initiating anyone who will listen to what most don't know, specifically, that McLuhan's crypto-Bible was James Joyce's enigmatic tour de force, *Finnegans Wake*, from which McLuhan drew more than a handful of his revelations.

Notwithstanding his attachment to Joyce (who left the Catholic Church and imported the term "epiphany" into world literature), McLuhan was a convert to Catholicism and a faithful, practicing Catholic. It seems fitting, then, on this day of Epiphany, to conjecture how McLuhan might react to last year's line-up of the 100 most-watched telecasts.

According to [Variety Magazine](#), 56 of 2023's "most-watched 100" were sports broadcasts, with NFL games totaling a whopping 45. Yet the more telling snapshot is this: 28 of the top 30 telecasts were NFL games, with only the Oscars and Chef Ramsay interrupting the run at numbers 15 and 22.

A look at the NFL lineup reveals that one of its contests was the season's only "abandoned game," specifically, the Monday Night Football telecast in which Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed, which, according to several sources, was the most-watched Monday Night game in ESPN's history. Channeling McLuhan, it's my contention that this is the 2023 television moment upon which he would have opined most, and most cogently. But first, here are other sweeping observations he might make:

- While baseball is the "national pastime," football is America's "secular religion," just as ice hockey is in McLuhan's native Canada, despite lacrosse being the official national sport.
- He would flag the parallel between Europe's magnificent cathedrals and America's football stadiums, the one conveying the Christian story via "Middle Ages multi-media"—i.e., architecture, sculpture, relief, stained glass, music, song, sermon, homily, and responsive reading—and the other conveying through cutting-edge electronics, pyrotechnics, spectacle, and jet-fighter flyovers the story of American commercial and military might.

- McLuhan would praise the dual nature of football—occurring one play at a time and therefore “linear,” but everyone involved in each play, so also “multi-dimensional.” We know from McLuhan’s documented musings that the force multiplier in modern sport is the instant replay, which breaks wide open the concept of “multi-dimensionality.” He might ask, in how many dimensions can an individual exist concurrently, and is “multi-dimensionality” a good and productive thing? Anyone?
- Last but not least, given the current, war-pocked state of the world and, for that matter, the country, we’d never hear the end of McLuhan on the obvious and ever-swirling subject of tribalism.

Yet, McLuhan’s most important observation about 2023’s most-watched broadcasts would focus on the “abandoned game” in which Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed, the game that saw a miraculous medical team swing into life-saving action, the game that saw 106 of the nation’s strongest and fastest men fall to their knees in prayer, the game that saw thousands of competing tribe members clutch in prayer and 23 million viewers join them, the pre-empted game in which prayer prevailed and God was palpably and powerfully present.

For McLuhan, this would be the most important television moment of 2023, as well as his hope for a universal “epiphany,” which he would undoubtedly probe with this question: might not the way back to some semblance of national unity and international peace involve the tribes—humanity—re-focusing on God and prayer, in face of which many of our concerns and contests would shrink, and with which we might collectively head off existential peril? Anyone?

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