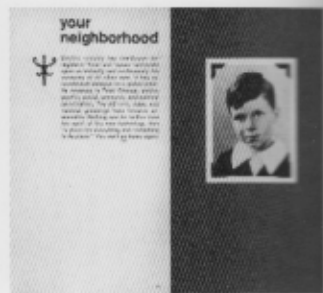
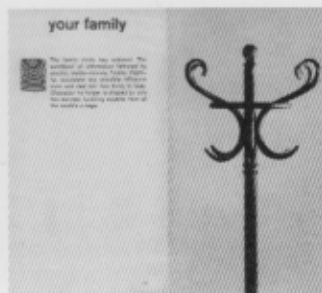


Book, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore; designed by Quentin Fiore (New York: Bantam, 1967).



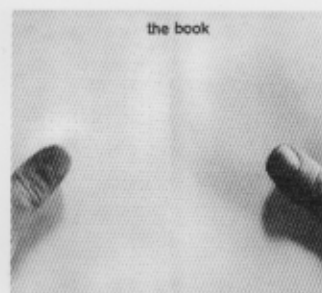
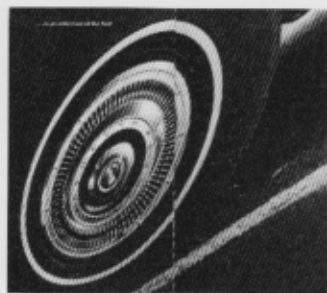
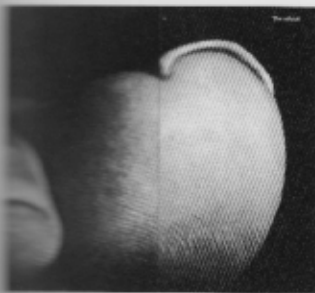
Conceived as a visual analogue for McLuhan's theoretical interests, *The Medium is the Message* is a hybrid of texts and images. Fiore served as co-author and designer of the book, acting as a visual translator of McLuhanisms. The notion of technology as an extension of the body is illustrated by the foot giving way to the wheel. The literal dimension of the book is established with a photograph of thumbs holding open the pages, followed by a Big Brother cyclops.

## McLuhan/Fiore

### *Massaging the Message*

A recent article on the critical reception of Marshall McLuhan's work summarily dismissed his 1967 *The Medium is the Massage* and 1968 *War and Peace in the Global Village* as "crude publicity tracts."<sup>1</sup> Yet from a design perspective, these books are landmarks in the integration of text, image, and layout. In the values of the publishing industry, a divide persists between words and pictures, high academia and low mass media, authors and designers. *Massage* and *War and Peace* are remarkable for blurring the professional, commercial, and formal distinctions that constitute the hierarchies of publishing.

*The Medium is the Massage* was initiated by Quentin Fiore, who was at the time a successful graphic designer and communications consultant; he now lives near Princeton, New Jersey. Fiore served as a visual interpreter of McLuhan's theories. While McLuhan approved each page of the book—revising only one word from Fiore's proposed layout—all the



texts and images, their order and arrangement, were determined by Fiore. He and McLuhan are listed as co-authors; Jerome Agel, a friend of Fiore's and a pioneer book packager, is listed as "co-ordinator" of the project. It was Agel who served as the link between Fiore and McLuhan, and who organized the follow-up book, *War and Peace*.

Fiore describes *The Medium is the Massage* as having "no 'original' manuscript. The idea was to select some of McLuhan's ideas from previous publications and present them in isolated 'patches' on individual spreads with accompanying artwork." The major sources for the book were McLuhan's 1962 *Gutenberg Galaxy* and 1964 *Understanding Media*, the two texts that had gained him notoriety for their aphoristic style and unqualified assertions. *Massage* was an attempt to popularize McLuhan, just as McLuhan himself had done in articles for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *TV Guide*, *Mademoiselle*, *Family Circle*, *Glamour*, *McCall's*,

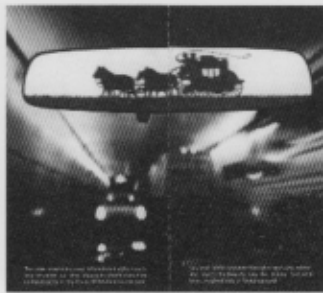
*Look, Playboy, and the Saturday Evening Post.*<sup>2</sup> To succeed, Fiore felt the book “had to convey the spirit, the populist outcry of the time, in an appropriate form. The ‘linearity’ of the average book wouldn’t work. The medium, after all, was the message!”<sup>3</sup>

While Fiore gave McLuhan’s ideas their most popular form, McLuhan was already an accessible writer. *Gutenberg Galaxy* has chapter glosses that read like advertising headlines (“Nobody ever made a grammatical error in a non-literate society”), while *Understanding Media* is divided into 33 essays that average three to four pages in length. Complaining to a friend about his 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan wrote that his editors were “obsessed with the old monoplaner, monolinear narrative and exposition.” McLuhan disliked the task of writing, and the brevity of his chapters reflects his impatience with the medium. He preferred the impact of the *bon mot* and the punchline to the intricate discourse of the classic academic.

*The Medium is the Message* exploits the cinematic potential of book design by repeating images from one page to the next in different scales and croppings. The foot introduced earlier returns to rub against the nose of W.C. Fields.



Another spread contrasts early and modern modes of transportation by using early and modern forms of representation.



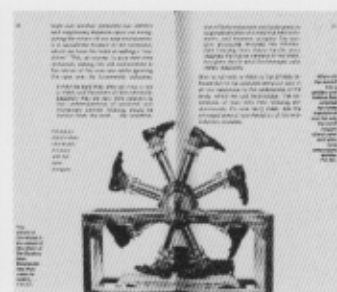
Despite McLuhan’s fame at the time, the project was difficult for Agel to sell. After being rejected by 17 publishers, a deal was finally struck with Bantam, who agreed to produce 35,000 copies in paperback, while Random House did a larger hardbound edition. The book’s rapid success led to two more runs of 35,000, followed by German, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, and Italian editions, which brought its worldwide circulation close to a million. *The Medium is the Message* became McLuhan’s largest-selling publication, a fact which he found irritating.

The success of the project was all the more surprising considering the conditions under which it was produced: Fiore was given a tight budget and a three-week deadline for design and production. Composed of commissioned photographs as well as stock images of news events and personalities, the publication is a hybrid: part book, part magazine, part storyboard. It combines short prose passages with caption-length texts, some tied directly to

images, others demanding to be read more obliquely—Fiore’s visual punning is as persistent as McLuhan’s wordplay. Showing a remarkable lack of confidence, the publishers refused to let the work push editorial or production boundaries too far. Fiore recalls, “There was concern that the book meet with wide acceptance. The publishers felt that the anticipated sales would not warrant expenditures for color, die-cutting, or photo-studio ‘tricks.’” Thus from both an editorial and production standpoint, Fiore felt that the project was not ambitious enough.

The most striking aspect of *The Medium is the Massage* is the way it explores the space of the book—its literal scale and sequential unfolding—as part of its content. For instance, the full-bleed images that introduce an idea on one spread are repeated on the following spread at postage stamp size. This structure, repeated across several pages, encourages the images to be read differently according to their scale and juxtaposition to other

Book, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, by Marshall McLuhan with Quentin Fiore and Jerome Agel; designed by Quentin Fiore (New York: Bantam, 1967).



*War and Peace in the Global Village* was a more conventional book with a more typical image-to-copy ratio. While the photo-editing is just as strong as in *The Message*, the integration of text and images is less ambitious.

images and words. Fiore’s layouts destabilize the traditional hierarchy of image and caption, text and illustration. Elsewhere, Fiore highlights the literal dimension of the book with a spread showing thumbs holding the pages open: a photographic doubling of the reader’s own hands.

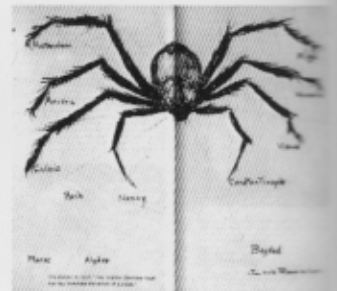
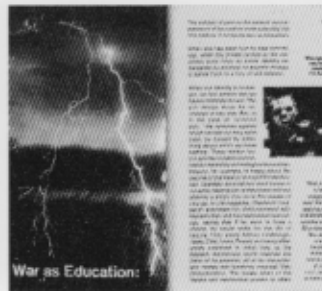
While the typography suggests a cool Swiss-Modern sensibility, the photography bears traces of a more diverse heritage, stretching from Moholy-Nagy’s *Painting, Photography, Film* and the Dada collages of Heartfield and Hausmann to the underground publications of the 1960s. Fiore cites such influences as Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, concrete poetry, Apollinaire’s calligrammes, Fluxus, rebuses, and the “mouse’s tail” of type in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Fiore is a self-taught designer. His only formal visual education came from a short period of painting and drawing classes in New York in the late 1930s with George Grosz and later, Hans Hoffmann. His classmates under



Hoffmann included Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. While studying with Grosz, he witnessed the teacher dismiss fellow student Paul Rand for bringing frivolous colored pastels to class. Hitchhiking across the country with a letter of reference from Grosz to Mohly-Nagy, Fiore attended the New Bauhaus in Chicago. His departure was swift: "I wanted to paint pictures, not design furniture!" After moving back to New York, he found himself working proficiently and profitably as a lettering artist, primarily for the emerging "Midwestern Modernist" Lester Beall.

As phototypesetting technology displaced hand-lettering, Fiore shifted from lettering artist to graphic designer. During the late 1940s, he worked as an art director for Christian Dior and Bonwit Teller. Beginning in the 1950s he worked as a graphic designer for organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Time-Life, RCA, and Bell Laboratories. His professional work included magazine design, instructional films, signage, and consultation



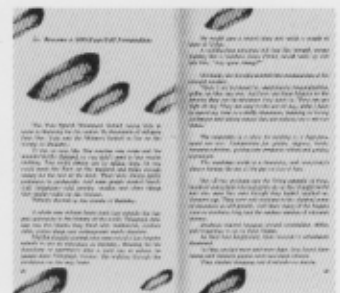
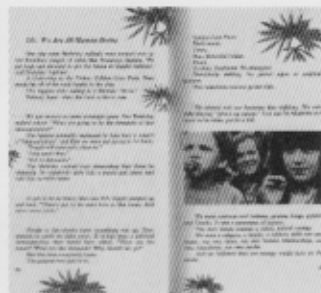
on an electronic newspaper. While remembered for his collaboration with McLuhan on the fringes of publishing, he was firmly positioned within the mainstream of graphic design, working at an advanced level for large, conservative organizations. When asked whether he considers himself a classicist or a Modernist, Fiore says the term "vaudevillian" is more apt, since he did whatever was required of him at the time. A good deal of his work is classical and "even reactionary," bearing the influence of his two great passions: Renaissance art and illuminated manuscripts.

The design of *The Medium is the Massage* is both inventive and readerly. Fiore remembers the book being attacked by the publishing world for having too few words per page, and for lacking a preface or table of contents. At the time, Fiore was told that "truly serious books should bulk at least an inch and three quarters." The people in the "industry of the word," as Fiore describes publishing, "demanded words, lots of words—all set on good, gray pages." For traditional book producers,

*The Medium is the Massage* was threatening: “The reaction of those designers with a highly developed moralistic sense was that the book was ‘manipulative.’” Reflecting on its popular reception, Fiore recalls that *The Massage* “became a kind of icon for many people. The images, the feel of the book, summed up their time. It became a graphic expression and an approbation of their feelings and thoughts. Along with the general acceptance of the book, however, there was some hostility: it promoted illiteracy, encouraged drug use, it corrupted the morals of American youth, it was anti-intellectual, and so on.”

The success of *The Medium is the Massage* led to a number of spin-offs with McLuhan and Agel. One was an audio version of *The Massage* with McLuhan, Fiore, and Agel doing vocals to a blend of audio effects and music. Fiore dismisses the record as a silly by-product of an otherwise important project. Another book began as a compilation of McLuhan’s

Book, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution*, by Jerry Rubin; designed by Quentin Fiore (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).



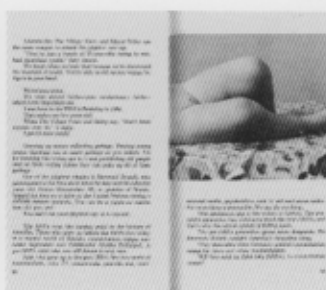
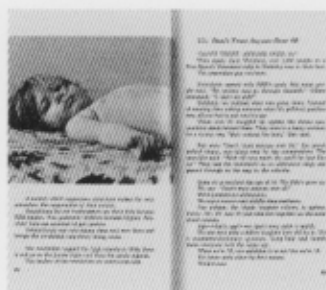
Fiore combined Yippie collages with wire-service photographs, creating patterned pages of marijuana leaves and chattering mouths.

writings on automation. The 1967 manuscript, edited by Agel and Fiore, was entitled *Keep in Touch*. The project was scheduled for publication by Bantam, but after McLuhan underwent a massive operation to remove a brain tumor, he cancelled the book and instead offered Agel, Fiore, and Bantam the manuscript for *War and Peace in the Global Village*.

In McLuhan fashion, *War and Peace* is a collage of thoughts about generational division, the “new tribalism” of electronic technology, and the ravages of violence and war. With the exception of his membership in the Canadian pro-life movement in the 1970s, McLuhan did not take up explicit political positions. The mode of commentary in *War and Peace* is oblique rather than specific: for example, a news photograph of a soldier, probably in Vietnam, is accompanied by the headline “Every new technology necessitates a new war.” Critical passages are softened by gentle humor: an image of the Pentagon is captioned, “The biggest filing cabinet in the world.” Formally, the book is more conventional than

*The Medium is the Massage.* According to Fiore, McLuhan submitted an official manuscript which “created a devotional relationship to the text among the publishers and editors.” Fiore describes the relationship between author and designer, and between text and image, as more traditional than in the first book, ultimately limiting the scope of his influence on the final product.

Two other book projects, both published in 1970, bear the stamp of Fiore’s involvement. *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution*, written by the Yippie leader Jerry Rubin and designed by Fiore, was an anti-authoritarian, free-love, blow-dope manifesto given lively form through the use of underground comics and news photographs. Fiore was invited to design the book by Rubin himself who, along with Abbie Hoffman and Timothy Leary, was impressed by his work with McLuhan. Rubin was one of the infamous Chicago Seven, responsible for organizing the demonstrations

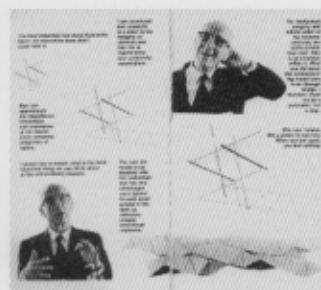
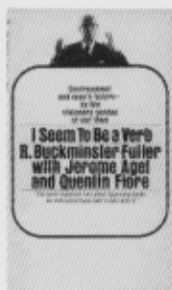


during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. According to Fiore, Rubin collected much of the visual material in the book: “We would lay out the book in my office on weekends when he was free to fly in from Chicago, where he was on trial in Federal Court.”

The jacket copy for *Do It!*, published by Simon & Schuster, describes Rubin’s text as the “most important political statement made by a white revolutionary today.” The conspiracy trial gave the book a special cachet, as did the introduction by Black Panther leader-in-exile Eldridge Cleaver. The images in *Do It!*—such as the photo-collage “Fuck Amerika” and the frequent shots of nude insurrectionists—remain today startling documents of another era. When asked whether his association with Rubin caused him any professional problems, Fiore describes himself as living a double life. With a few exceptions, his work with Rubin, McLuhan, and Buckminster Fuller left intact the classical modernism of his work with more conventional clients.

Perhaps Fiore's most unusual project was a collaboration with Jerome Agel and Buckminster Fuller. Echoing the success of *The Medium is the Massage*, the book *I Seem To Be a Verb* (1970) became Fuller's biggest seller. Like *Massage*, it served as a general introduction to a study of the environment, focusing (loosely) on technology rather than media. The first few spreads have a traditional vertical orientation, but the pages soon divide horizontally along a central axis, with the lower half printed upside down in green ink. Across the center of each spread, a quote from Fuller, which continues throughout the entire book, is conveyed in a telegraphic line of large capital letters. When the quote reaches the end of the book, it turns and loops back, continuing in the opposite direction. The pages themselves resemble a scrapbook, crammed with advertisements, newspaper clippings, paintings, camp film stills, lyrics, wire-service photographs, and quotes set in contrasting typefaces. *I Seem To Be a Verb* is even

Book, *I Seem to Be a Verb*, by Buckminster Fuller with Jerome Agel and Quentin Fiore; designed by Quentin Fiore (New York: Bantam, 1970).



less linear and didactic than *The Medium is the Massage*, and seems to revel in its puzzling discontinuity, mixing the words of Charlie Brown and Charles de Gaulle, images of Hollywood and starving children. The quote from Fuller is the only apparent thread holding things together.

Common to all of Fiore's books is the deliberate repetition of images and text. This technique seems partly inspired by the serial forms of Pop Art; more fundamentally, repetition is an effect of the mass media which McLuhan sought to explain. Throughout his career, McLuhan described his work as a series of "probes." Bruce Powers, one of McLuhan's collaborators, has explained how these "probes" were conducted not through argument, but with "semantic wedges." Phrases like "the medium is the message" allowed McLuhan to shift attention from content to form. Fiore complemented these "semantic wedges" with a design strategy centered on repetition, reinforcing McLuhan's larger premise that America is a culture of reproduction.





1 Robert MacMillan, "Marshall McLuhan at the Mercy of his Commentators," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 22, 4 (December 1992): 475-91.

2 Marshall McLuhan's most influential books include *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); and *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

Philip Marchand's book *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989) is a critical biography; it includes a complete bibliography of McLuhan's published works.

3 Quotes from Quentin Fiore are from an interview with J. Abbott Miller, Fall 1992.

4 Jean Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death," in *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed. (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1988), 138.

Jean Baudrillard has noted the relationship between McLuhan's "medium message" and Walter Benjamin's landmark 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." As Baudrillard writes, "Benjamin (and later McLuhan) grasped technique not as productive force (where Marxist analysis remains trapped) but as medium, as the form and principle of a whole new generation of meaning."<sup>4</sup> Benjamin and McLuhan both drew attention to reproduction, confronting it as a definitive aspect of modern culture.

The ability to create meaning by recycling, repeating, and reframing images and texts constitutes Fiore's graphic response to McLuhan's assessments of the cultural impact of communication and technology. This McLuhanesque design strategy informed Fiore's work with Rubin and Fuller as well—appropriately, since these authors, too, were concerned with the reproduction of social life, from Fuller's celebration of liberating technologies to Rubin's critique of oppressive institutions.

Buckminster Fuller, looping back on itself at the end, holds together a disparate collection of words and images.

Fiore finds irony in the fact that his 50-year career is measured by work he produced at the margins of publishing during a span of two and a half years. In retrospect, the late 1960s have emerged as a period of re-evaluation and re-invention in American history, an era whose momentous wave of cultural change carried design along with it. Like the 1920s, the 60s witnessed international upheaval in art and politics, in sexuality and social transgression, and in the theory and practice of media. Fiore's books collapsed together the roles of author, editor, designer, and producer. The fact that this strategy has been so rarely repeated says more about the conservatism of the "industry of the word" than about the success of the projects. The enthusiastic merging of theory and populism, words and pictures, forged by Fiore and his collaborators deliver a formidable challenge and an inspiring model to contemporary graphic designers who are seeking to rethink the normative boundaries of professional practice.