

Marx and McLuhan

By Yukichi Amano

The twists and turns in the Soviet political situation were fascinating. In fact, I spent day after day this summer riveted to the television set, watching in amazement as events unfolded.

The summer screen was also filled with pictures from the national high school baseball tournament at Koshien Stadium—one of the television rites of summer. It is estimated that about half of the Japanese population tuned in to this spectacle, and this summer most of them were switching back and forth from baseball to Moscow to baseball. It was a busy summer for the remote controls.

For me, Moscow was even more amusing than the impassioned play at Koshien. Of course, there are those who will attack me for saying that events in Moscow were “amusing,” but I would like to use this term in the sense of causing me to muse. And cause me to muse they did. The events revealed much about the Soviet Union that I had not known, and thoughts that had been but ill-formed mists in my mind either dissipated or sharpened up into specific shape.

One of the things that I found most remarkable about the summer is how very accurate the philosopher Shunsuke Tsurumi was when he predicted that, “Marx will last for 100 years, and McLuhan for 30.”

Just as Marxist philosophy may be categorized as a print-media approach, McLuhan’s hypothesis, propounded in the early 1960s, that national borders would wither and that we would see the emergence of a single global village was the essence of the television approach. Twenty years ago, Tsurumi saw the shift in our information habits from print to television and predicted that the age of Marx would be followed by the age of McLuhan.

When the Berlin Wall went down, I wrote a number of articles saying that it was television that had brought the wall down. In the same vein, it might well be said that the Soviet Communist Party

and indeed even the Soviet Union itself is being broken up and disbanded not by Gorbachev or even Yeltsin but by the power of television.

Social thermometer

Even so, I suspect that the Japanese were among the most avid viewers of these events, whether they were the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War or the abortive Soviet coup. While there are no reliable statistics on this, I would not be at all surprised if a tabulation of the total hours broadcast and the total hours viewed showed the Japanese at the top of the lists.

Part of this, of course, is because television is so widespread. But even more than that is the immense Japanese fondness for watching television. According to a June 1991 NHK survey, the average Japanese watched three hours and 28 minutes of television a day. Three and a half hours a day. This has got to lead the league. And I doubt if this is because of a paucity of other recreational facilities. Very simply, the Japanese—like it or not—are unusually suited to the tele-

vision medium and think in very television-like ways.

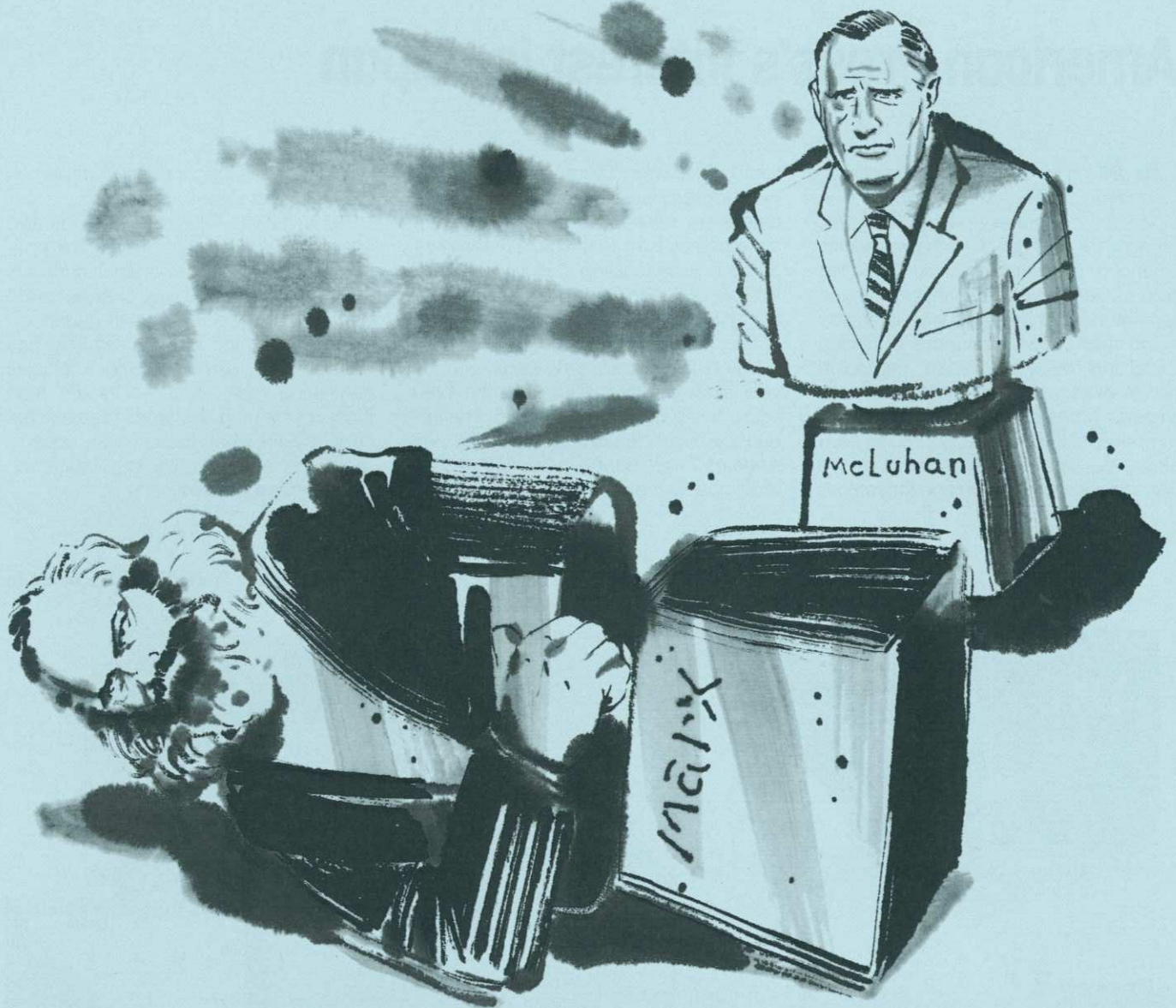
As such, Japan is the perfect laboratory for testing McLuhan’s hypothesis. To this observer, it seems that Japanese behavior and thought patterns are bearing McLuhan out in becoming more and more television-like.

For example, McLuhan has said that television is a “cool” medium, whetting our appetites for more. And as predicted, the younger Japanese who grew up on television are much cooler than the older people who were raised on print media. Call them jaded if you will. Say they have lower boiling points if you will. Whatever you think of it, it is clear that they are very resistant to being swayed by the heat of events.

Last year, there was a public opinion survey that asked people, “What would you do if foreign troops invaded Japan?” Seventy percent of the younger respondents said they would flee. Although there were some older people who railed at this and called it disgusting, I found it very encouraging. It is not only the Japanese Constitution that has renounced war. Cool Japanese youth are willing to go



A shop display of televisions for sale. Japanese are among the world's most avid viewers, a habit that is cause for concern.



on record as saying they want nothing to do with a hot war and the inflaming of towns and passions.

Down the tubes?

McLuhan also predicted that the hard sell and the heated approach would appear quixotic in the television age. This too has come to pass, as seen in Japanese television commercials. The decisive difference between Japanese and American television commercials is that the Japanese commercials do not make a big show of the product and do not have an impassioned pitch extolling the product's attractions and specifications.

Part of this, of course, stems from a cultural tradition that disdains boastfulness, but that is not the whole story. Even more

important is that this is a cool generation, and advertisers know that an excessive display of emotion—a hard sell—will be either laughed at or ignored by this audience. In fact, I suspect American and European advertising experts find Japanese commercials so inscrutable not because of any deep-rooted cultural differences but rather because the temperature level is so much lower in Japan and Japanese commercials are so television-like in their approach.

There are many more facets of Japan and Japanese culture that tend to bear McLuhan's hypothesis out. Combining assiduous diligence and a certain clownish carelessness as they do, the Japanese people were very assiduous in receiving the baptism of television—perhaps even carelessly so.

While I hope this cool generation will declare its abhorrence for war and other forms of violence and take the lead in the creation of the global village, I am a bit troubled by Tsurumi's prophecy. If the age of McLuhan is only going to last 30 years, I worry that Japan, which has built castles of prosperity upon an adept adaptation to this new climate, might not find itself discarded like a burned-out television tube before long. ■

(This is the last of five essays by Yukichi Amano.)

Yukichi Amano is a popular columnist and critic on advertizing and mass-media commercials.