

Introduction

“Media,” intoned Marshall McLuhan in 1964, are “extensions of man.”¹ Circling the globe in a benevolent electronic web, television, radio, film and the print press enabled men and women to stretch their senses, to reach out to one another, and to become equal citizens in a global village, he explained. Even as McLuhan spoke, the hipsters and artists of New York and San Francisco were building prototypes of the world he described: new multimedia environments in which they would soon conduct what amounted to tribal rites. Within little more than a year, colored lights, multiscreen slide shows, and walls of amplified sound surrounded dance floors and performance art spaces on both coasts and in more than a few Midwestern capitals as well. For McLuhan, as for much of the emerging American counterculture, to be ringed by media was to enter a state of ecstatic interconnection. At first to dance, and then later to gather at be-ins and rock concerts was to open oneself to a new way of being: personal, authentic, collective, and egalitarian.

But where did this vision come from? Only twenty-five years earlier, most American analysts had been convinced that mass media tended to produce authoritarian people and totalitarian societies. Accounts of just how they did this varied. Some argued that mediated images and sounds slipped into the psyche through the senses, stirred the newly discovered depths of the Freudian unconscious, and left audiences unable to reason. Others claimed that the one-to-many broadcasting structure that defined mass media required audiences to turn their collective attention toward a

single source of communication and so to partake of authoritarian mass psychology. In the late 1930s, if anyone doubted the power of mass media to remake society, they only needed to turn to Germany. How could the mustachioed madman Adolf Hitler have taken control of one of the most culturally sophisticated nations in Europe, many wondered, if he hadn't hypnotized his audiences through the microphone and the silver screen?

In the months leading up to America's entry into World War II, Hitler's success haunted American intellectuals, artists, and government officials. Key figures in each of these communities hoped to help exhort their fellow citizens to come together and confront the growing fascist menace. But how could they do that, they wondered, if mass media tended to turn the psyches of their audiences in authoritarian directions? Was there a mode of communication that could produce more democratic individuals? A more democratic polity? And for that matter, what *was* a democratic person?

The answers to these questions ultimately produced the ecstatic multimedia utopianism of the 1960s and, through it, much of the multimedia culture we inhabit today. To see how, this book returns to the late 1930s and early 1940s and tracks the entwining of two distinct social worlds: one of American anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, and the other of refugee Bauhaus artists. At the start of World War II, members of the first community believed that the political stance of a nation reflected the psychological condition of its people. That is, fascist Germany represented the triumph not only of Hitler's party, but of what would later be called the "authoritarian personality."² In 1941, more than fifty of America's leading social scientists and journalists gathered in Manhattan to promulgate a democratic alternative to that personality as members of the newly formed Committee for National Morale. Though largely forgotten today, the committee was very influential in its time. Its members published widely in the popular press and advised numerous government officials, including President Roosevelt.

Across the 1930s, committee members such as anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and psychologist Gordon Allport had worked to show how culture shaped the development of the psyche, particularly through the process of interpersonal communication. In the early years of the war, they turned those understandings into prescriptions for

bolstering American morale. First, they defined the “democratic personality” as a highly individuated, rational, and empathetic mindset, committed to racial and religious diversity, and so able to collaborate with others while retaining its individuality. Second, they argued that the future of America’s war effort depended on sustaining that form of character and the voluntary, non-authoritarian unity it made possible. In their view, both individual character and national culture came into being via the process of communication. Since mass media prevented precisely the sorts of encounters with multiple types of people and multiple points of view that made America and Americans strong, the shoring up of the democratic personality would require the development of new, democratic modes of communication.

For that reason, members and friends of the committee advocated a turn away from single-source mass media and toward multi-image, multi-sound-source media environments—systems that I will call *surrounds*. They couldn’t build these systems themselves. With a few exceptions, they were writers, not media makers. But they knew people who could build surrounds: the refugee artists of the Bauhaus. Since the early 1930s, Bauhaus stalwarts such as architect Walter Gropius and multimedia artists László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer had fled Nazi Germany and settled in New York, Chicago, and other centers of American intellectual life. They brought with them highly developed theories of multiscreen display and immersive theater. They also brought the notion that media art should help integrate the senses, and so produce what they called a “New Man,” a person whose psyche remained whole even under the potentially fracturing assault of everyday life in industrial society. As World War II got under way, they repurposed their environmental multimedia techniques for the production of a *new* “New Man”—the democratic American citizen. By 1942, Bayer was collaborating with American photographer Edward Steichen to create complex multi-image propaganda displays at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And Moholy-Nagy was working with composer John Cage, alerting him to the environmental and industrial-therapeutic aims of Bauhaus art, and also to the ways such things might be used in wartime America.

The first half of this book then, recounts the coming together of Ameri-

can intellectuals and artists with their Bauhaus counterparts. Under the pressures of World War II, these twinned communities created the pro-democratic surround and the networks of ideas and people that would sustain it in the years ahead. The second half of the book follows the surround into the propaganda and art worlds of the 1950s and, through both, into the American counterculture.

As the chill of the Cold War began to creep across America and Europe, communism replaced fascism as the source of totalitarian threat. But the wartime consensus persisted: intellectuals, artists, and many policy makers continued to agree that political systems were manifestations, mirrors even, of the dominant psychological structures of individual citizens. The surrounds developed during World War II lived on as models—for new exhibitions, new works of art, new modes of environmental media, and, ultimately, new patterns of democratic practice. Through them, the ideals of democratic psychology and democratic polity articulated by wartime social scientists remained available, not only as words in texts, but as invitations to embodied action. Anthropologists and artists gathered at places like Black Mountain College, where they worked to train a new generation of American artists in the multidisciplinary, psychologically integrated techniques of the Bauhaus and, at the same time, the progressive political ideals that infused wartime campaigns for democratic morale. Likewise, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Steichen transformed Bayer's wartime exhibition design into what almost certainly remains the most widely viewed photography exhibition of all time, *The Family of Man*—a show designed to help Cold War Americans imagine themselves part of a racially and culturally diverse global society.

At the same time, however, officials of the United States Information Agency or USIA—the postwar governmental agency charged with overseas propaganda work—quickly began exporting both *The Family of Man* and the surround form more generally to countries on every continent. As they did, they sought to instill the psychological proclivities that they believed defined democratic Americans in the citizens of other nations. By the end of the 1950s, multiscreen arrays and multi-sound-source environments had become mandatory features of American exhibitions abroad, most famously in 1958 at the Brussels World's Fair and in 1959 at

the American National Exhibition in Moscow, where Khrushchev and Nixon staged their “Kitchen Debate.” In Brussels and Moscow the original industrial-therapeutic aims of Bauhaus artists and the pro-democratic ambitions of the Committee for National Morale came together once again on behalf of a new mission: taking personalities that might be drawn toward communism and turning their perceptions and desires in more democratic directions.

The states of mind that the USIA sought to create, however, were not quite the same as those that defined the democratic personality at the start of World War II, nor was the USIA’s surround quite the same form. Both had been changed by the embrace of a mode of control that had been part of the surround from its inception, and also by the rise of postwar American consumerism. In the 1940s, social scientists agreed that the democratic person was a freestanding individual who could act independently among other individuals. Democratic polity, in turn, depended on the ability of such people to reason, to choose, and above all to recognize others as being human beings like themselves. For these reasons, wartime propaganda environments such as Steichen and Bayer’s *Road to Victory* turned away from the one-to-many aesthetics of mass media and constructed situations in which viewers could move among images and sounds at their own individual paces. In theory, they would integrate the variety of what they saw and heard into their own, individuated experiences. This integration in turn would rehearse the political process of knitting oneself into a diverse and highly individuated society. Ideally, visitors would come to see themselves not simply as part of a national mass, but as individual human beings among others, united as Americans across their many differences.

The turn to the surround form in World War II thus represented a break away from the perceived constraints of mass media and fascist mass society. But it also opened the door to a new mode of social control. Visitors to *Road to Victory* may have been free to encounter a wide array of images, but the variety of those images was not limitless. Bayer and Steichen had designed the exhibition space and selected the pictures viewers would see. Likewise, at *The Family of Man*, visitors were free to move, but only within an environment that had been carefully shaped by Steichen and his collaborators. When analysts at the time compared the surround to the

one-to-many dynamics of mass media and of fascism, many found it to be enormously liberating. Even so, from the distance of our own time, the surround clearly represented the rise of a managerial mode of a control: a mode in which people might be free to choose their experiences, but only from a menu written by experts.

In the late 1950s that managerial mode met an American state campaign to promote American-style consumerism abroad. Visitors to the American pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair and to the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow enjoyed the same mobility and choice that had been offered to visitors to *Road to Victory* almost twenty years earlier. But they also found themselves surrounded by a cornucopia of consumer goods. In the surrounds deployed in Brussels and Moscow, political choices and consumer choices became a single integrated system. The democratic personality of the 1940s, in turn, melted almost imperceptibly into the consumer of the 1950s. The World War II effort to challenge totalitarian mass psychology gave rise to a new kind of mass psychology, a mass individualism grounded in the democratic rhetoric of choice and individuality, but practiced in a polity that was already a marketplace as well.

Surprisingly perhaps, it also helped give rise to the American counter-culture. In the same years that the USIA was presenting *The Family of Man* around the world, John Cage was bringing his Bauhaus-inflected mode of performance to international music festivals, the Brussels World's Fair, and the downtown New York art scene. And like the USIA, Cage was working to create surrounds in which audiences could experience semiotic democracy. In *The Family of Man*, Edward Steichen hoped to surround museum visitors with images and so free them to see a whole world of people who were simultaneously unlike and yet like themselves. At about the same time, Cage was promoting modes of performance in which each sound was as good as any other, in which every action could be meaningful or not—a space, in short, in which audience members found themselves compelled to integrate a diversity of experiences into their own individual psyches.

In the summer of 1952, Cage staged a performance at Black Mountain College that transformed his efforts to democratize sound into key elements of one of the defining performance modes of the 1960s, the Happening. No single authoritative account of the event exists, but witnesses

agree that many things happened at the same time: Cage lectured from a ladder, Merce Cunningham danced, Charles Olson and M. C. Richards read poetry, and David Tudor played something on the piano. Together they staged a pattern of interpersonal relations much like the one both Cage and the members of the Committee for National Morale had called for a decade earlier: one in which every person acted individually and yet in concert with the group. Though it lacked the commercial orientation of the USIA exhibitions overseas, Cage's performance shared their psychological ambition. He, too, hoped to surround his audience with sights and sounds that might free them from allegiance to more authoritarian modes of communication—and, by implication, from authoritarian political systems too.

By 1957, Cage had brought these ambitions to the New School for Social Research in New York, where he taught composition. Young members of Cage's class such as Allan Kaprow and Dick Higgins soon built elaborate Happenings across lower Manhattan. And in the early 1960s, inspired by Cage and Marshall McLuhan as well as the early Happenings, poet Gerd Stern and a tribe of painters, poets, dancers and sound and light technicians who called themselves USCO (short for the Us Company) began to build a new kind of multi-image, multisound environment. Their constructions aimed to produce in their audiences a simultaneous sense of their own individuality and of their membership in a global human collective. USCO hoped to awaken its audiences' senses—first of sight and sound, but soon thereafter, of their personhood and of the possibility of belonging to an egalitarian society.

In the fall of 1966, a reporter for *Life* magazine called one of USCO's installations a "be-in." The phrase caught fire, and in January 1967 thousands of San Franciscans streamed toward Golden Gate Park for the first "Human Be-In." Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary spoke. The Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother and the Holding Company played psychedelic rock. Attendees later recalled that they reveled in one another's company, crossing race lines, crossing class lines, and enjoying a shared sense of membership in a broader human community. By that summer, the Human Be-In had become an early emblem of what appeared to be a new American generation, a counterculture devoted to overthrowing the social and

psychological hierarchies of the 1950s and exploring a more organic, more personally fulfilling way of life.

Yet, as this book shows, the kinds of personality, community, and media that defined the counterculture represented not only a new beginning for Americans, but an end point to a story that began in the late 1930s, on the verge of World War II. The vision of “man” that animated the writings of Marshall McLuhan was born not in 1964 but somewhere closer to 1944. And the media forms we so often think of as having been created within the American counterculture—immersive, multi-mediated environments designed to expand individual consciousness and a sense of membership in the human collective—first came into being as part of the same urge to defeat the forces of totalitarianism that animated the most aggressive cold warriors.

By making this case, this book joins a growing chorus of works challenging the view that the 1960s represented a top-to-bottom revolution in American culture.³ In popular memory, the 1960s rose up in a Technicolor wave and washed away several decades of bland, black-and-white American life. But nothing could be farther from the truth. In the early 1940s, the intellectuals of the Committee for National Morale offered a genuinely radical vision for America. Defining their ideals in opposition to those of fascism, they called for a world of racial integration, sexual and religious tolerance, and individual freedom. In the wake of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and of the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1970s and beyond, we have tended to think of our own as the first era in which diversity has been celebrated as the foundation of an ideal America. Since the McCarthyism of the 1950s, we have also tended to think of the state as the enemy of such a vision. But for the intellectuals and artists of this book, the ability to embrace diversity was precisely what distinguished America from Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. For them, and for their backers in the federal government during and after World War II, it was the job of the state to defend that diversity, at home and overseas. And it was the job of intellectuals and artists to develop modes of media and mediated interaction that could transform the integration of diversity into an experience that could be enjoyed by everyday citizens.

This is not to say that the social networks at the center of this book were especially diverse. They weren't. The social scientists, artists, and government officials I discuss here include virtually no African-Americans and very few women. Yet they were among the most vocal and most widely recognized critics of American racism, sexism, and religious intolerance in their day. There is no way to say for sure what drove their activism, but it might well have had to do with the fact that many were refugees. Some were Jews or modern artists who had fled the discrimination of fascist Europe. Virtually all had lived overseas at some point in their careers, often in countries where they belonged to racial or religious minorities. Others were unusual in other ways. Though they were among America's leading intellectuals, women such as Margaret Mead habitually found themselves at conference tables surrounded by men. A number of the people profiled here were widely known to have had homosexual partners—and this at a time when such partnerships could land a person in jail.

Whatever their individual motivations, the artists and intellectuals in this book collectively found a way to call for a society in which individual diversity might become the foundation of collective life. They also called for a new, multisource, environmental kind of media to help bring that world into being. By coining the term *democratic surround*, I am trying to make that new media genre visible across its many different incarnations. In part, I want to reclaim a little-known history and, with it, a new understanding of the origins of contemporary multimedia. But I also want to show how a media form that was never named by its makers enjoyed substantial influence in large part because it lived just below the surface of public awareness. The democratic surround was not only a way of organizing images and sounds; it was a way of thinking about organizing society. Across a wide variety of communities and multiple decades, the democratic surround provided a set of agreed-upon aesthetic and political principles that could serve as scaffolding for new artistic and social projects. It was a flexible prototype, a sort of not-quite-visible image of the way the world could work that came to life at various times in words, in performances, and in museum displays.

By tracking the democratic surround across those platforms, I want to extend a project I began in my last book, *From Counterculture to Cyber-*

culture. That book showed how the cybernetics of the Cold War research world and the countercultural ideals of the New Communalist movement came together to give us a utopian vision of the internet and the World Wide Web. This book tracks the entwining of American idealism and multimedia further back, to an era that predates ubiquitous computing, and one with which we habitually associate neither multimedia nor radical progressive idealism. My last book argued that the counterculture of the 1960s shaped the cyberculture of the 1990s. This book demonstrates that World War II-era visions of a socially diverse American polity and a semiotically diverse media environment helped give rise to that counterculture and the visions of media's political potential that informed it. In other words, this book is a prequel to my last.

It is also an attempt to show how media and politics were entangled during and after World War II, not only at the level of representation, but at the level of attention. In recent years, scholars have done a thorough job of showing how images on television and the movie screen shaped mid-twentieth century American beliefs and, through them, American politics.⁴ And for decades now, cultural historians have analyzed what they've seen in films and television programs as windows on the historical moments in which they were produced. This book however, worries less about the pictures on the screen than the relationships between those pictures and their audiences. For the media-makers and theorists I study here, it was not only the power of stories or pictures conveyed by media to change beliefs that mattered; it was also the power of media to solicit particular modes of interaction. For these analysts, patterns of media reception aped and foreshadowed patterns of political interaction. To listen to the radio, watch a movie, or wander among a roomful of sounds and pictures was to rehearse the perceptual skills on which political life—fascist or democratic—depended.⁵

At the start of World War II, the democratic surround presented a powerful alternative to mass media and totalitarian society. But it also represented a turn toward the managerial mode of control that haunts our culture today. In many ways, the multimedia landscape we inhabit represents a fulfillment of the dreams of writers like Margaret Mead or designers like Herbert Bayer. Screens surround us. Sounds come toward us from every

direction. As we log on to our computers and finger our cell phones, we each find our own way through a landscape of images and sounds, and we practice the modes of interaction on which the Committee for National Morale once suggested democracy depends. But we do so in terms that have been set for us by distant experts: programmers, media executives, government regulators. In the 1940s and 1950s, many welcomed such expert management for the ways it granted the individual freedoms that were prohibited by fascism. Today, many continue to welcome such management, albeit on behalf of new freedoms: the freedom to stay in touch with distant friends and family, to take work on the road, or to catch up with a favorite television series.

What has disappeared is the deeply democratic vision that animated the turn toward mediated environments in the first place, and that sustained it across the 1950s and into the 1960s. This book aims to recover that vision. The ideal of a radically liberal, diverse, and egalitarian society once lived where we might least have expected it to: in media, at the heart of America's leading intellectual, artistic, and political institutions. I've written this book in the hope that with a new generation's efforts, it might yet live there again.