

# Multimedia: Massaging Senses for the Message

By GRACE GLUECK

A new method of communication is developing in our society—the technique of multimedia.

Its jarring combinations of stimuli—sounds, lights, colors, smells and moving images—aim at reaching audiences by a supersaturated attack on all the senses, not just eye or ear. The multimedia technique is helping to convey information, provide entertainment, create esthetic experience, sell products and even further medical research.

A recent string of successful sales meetings held by the Scott Paper Company—sales have increased 11 per cent—imbued salesmen with the Scott “message” not by means of the standard song-and-dance industrial show, but with the aid of rock ‘n’ roll music, slide and movie projections and a battery of pulsing strobe lights.

## Visitors Participate

A new exhibition hall at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum, designed by Harley Parker, the museum's director and an associate of Marshall McLuhan, departs from the usual “don't touch” display technique. The hall, like 55 of the exhibitions at Expo 67, employs multimedia techniques and allows visitors to participate in a “multisensual experience” created by slide projections and color cartoons, flashing lights, sounds of gulls and

## New Mode of Communicating Uses Jarring Combination of Sights and Sounds

thunder, and fossils they can feel.

“Total environment” discothèques, such as Cheetah and The Electric Circus in New York, have left the old drink-and-girlie nightclub formulas far behind, turning on their patrons with high-decibel rock-'n' roll combined with pulsing lights, flashing slide images and electronically tinted “color mists.”

## Blitzing the Audience

The audience at “Black Zero,” one of a series of “electric-media theater events” by Aldo Tambellini, an artist, is not played to by conventional actors. Instead, they are blitzed by such devices as eye-searing strobe lights, wailing sirens, the jumpy play of images on a screen, and a huge balloon that bursts with the clap of a thunderbolt.

“We are the primitives of a new era,” says Mr. Tambellini. “With multimedia you create an effect that is not based on previous experience. You saturate the audience with images. It happens now—it has a live quality. It's a total experience in itself.”

The multimedia trend reflects varied influences—psychedelic drugs, which their users say, help to deepen and

merge sensory experience and free the mind from the rational ordering of perception: the electric-information processes of our new technology, movies, television, the telephone, the computer and the urban environment itself, with its overload of sights, sounds, smells and activities.

## Multiplicity of Stimuli

Overload is a key multimedia word. The new communications techniques, say multimedia theoreticians, take into account the daily bombardment of our senses by an extraordinary multiplicity of stimuli.

Marshall McLuhan, multimedia's guru, says the dominant electric media of today—TV and movies—cause man to see his world through numerous simultaneous experiences. This contrasts with the older way which, based on the dominance of print, forced him to perceive sequentially.

It is no accident that the audience most responsive to multimedia is young—the generation that grew up with TV. “The TV set was waiting for them when they came home from the hospital, and they liked it enough to clock 15,000 hours of viewing by high-school graduation,” the Rev. John Culkin, director of Fordham University's Center for Communications, has said. “They are the only people who are the native citizens of the new elec-

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tronic environment. It is their natural terrain, their turf."

Some multimedia people hold that the re-creation, in a heightened intensified way, of complex environmental experiences can expand our consciousness to higher levels of perception. In fact, multimedia artists like the USCO—the us company—group, a "tribe" of artist-engineers who helped design the Scott Paper presentation, believe that overloading the senses until rational judgment and choice are blocked may greatly enhance the impact of what is communicated.

The Scott Paper presentation was conceived by John Brockman, a 26-year-old alumnus of the Columbia School of Business Administration who is in close touch with the artists' and filmmakers' underground. His one-man company, John Brockman Associates, serves as a liaison between artists involved with intermedia and the many worlds that want to make use of it.

Mr. Brockman specializes in what he calls "intermedia kinetic environments"—multi-channel sound and light shows that encourage total audience participation. Last winter, he was hired to produce such an environment by Matt Levine, an old school friend and product manager of a Scott division lagging in sales. Its product was Confidets, a sanitary napkin.

"We couldn't seem to get through to our salesmen," says Mr. Levine. "They had too many other Scott products to push that were doing well. These guys are really marketing men—they've gone to graduate business schools. They're young—in their 20's—and they want to be with it. Since this kind of thing is what's going on now we decided to approach them with it."

For a \$15,000 fee, Mr. Brockman, USCO and Ken Dewey, a young pioneer in offbeat theater pieces and happenings came up with a "high-input mix," presented at Scott sales meetings in nine cities last spring. It was specifically designed to give salesmen the message on Confidets.

## Screens Are Vinyl

Programed by an electronic console, three slide projector and a movie projector simultaneously flashed images on four screens surrounding the salesmen—a supermarket scene, shots at the Scott factory, a pretty girl ("the typical Confidets user") who at one point ripped a Scott paper dress down to her navel.

Three reflecting screens of Nylar, an aluminum like vinyl gave the images more bounce. Four stereo sound tracks blasted a barrage of sounds—the Beatles, bird calls, guitar notes shouted and whispered repetitions of company advertising slogans. A strobe light pulse disrhythmically. Amid the audio-visual chaos, Mr. Levine and a public-relations woman batted Confidets product information, market statistics, and competitive sales figures back and forth.

Gerd Stern, USCO's spokesman and chief theoretician and a McLuhan disciple, explained the intent of the "mix."

"When you walk down the street you take in, say, 50-million inputs—sights, smells and so forth. You process and cope with them on many levels. Here we create an overload situation where you can't bring all of your critical baggage. The techniques block out the analytical and judgmental faculties and allows the information to get straight through as emotional input."

## Expanding the Uses

Mr. Levine recently wrote Mr. Brockman, declaring: "The impact of your meetings, which communicated a well-balanced marketing plan in a manner strange and befuddling to most concerned, has yielded a complete turnabout in sales for attitude. At this writing, sales are 11 per cent ahead of the same period during 1966."

Several multimedia consultant companies now stand ready to give advice on electronic multimedia environments for fashion and trade shows, discothèques and rock 'n' roll groups. One such is Sensefex, started last January by two former classmates at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Frank Cohen, who is 27 years old, and Josh White, 24. (They have a silent partner, Sam Plaia, with the William Morris Agency "but he's over 35. So we do show him," according to Mr. Cohen.)

In a suite of neat, black-and-white offices on East 60th Street and a small laboratory two blocks away, Mr. White and Mr. Cohen plan shows and environments for clients like duPont de Nemours & Co.,

Jefferson Airplane rock group; and the new discothèque, Salvation, in Greenwich Village. With a staff of young engineers they produce packages of "hardware" (projectors, control boards, etc.) and "software" (the program material, such as hand-painted slides and audio tapes) for their clients.

"Our three muses are Tim Leary, the Beatles and McLuhan," says Mr. Cohen who, with his long blond hair, Indian bead necklace and thong sandals, seems ready himself to strum an electric guitar. "In our daydreams we approach every project with 'how many senses can we involve?' The better we can control everything—light, sound, temperature, humidity—the better we like it."

At Expo 67, the world's biggest multimedia spectacular to date, the technique has come to full flower. At least 55—more than half—of the theme and national pavilions use multi-sensory devices to communicate ideas and information. Some of the set-ups are enormously complex. Labyrinth, for example, a theme pavilion created by the National Film Board of Canada, is a five-story maze of sound, light and images. In its winding passages visitors are beguiled by films projected simultaneously on giant screens and, in a huge reflecting chamber, treated to a barrage of twinkling colored lights and taped sounds.

The future of multimedia as an exhibition technique for art museums has been forecast by Allon Schoener, who planned last year's widely praised multimedia show at the Jewish Museum, "The Lower East Side Portal to American Life." He also designed a multimedia display boat now plying upstate New York to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Erie Canal.

## Changing Museums

Mr. Schoener, now visual arts program director for the New York State Council on the Arts, says: "Museums are no longer repositories for work of art. They're becoming communication centers. The work of art themselves serve as bases for communication."

Responding to new technological processes, a growing number of young artists, musicians dancers and filmmakers have cast off the conventional forms of their arts to work environmentally, using space, light, sound and other elements to provide multisensory effects. They attempt to involve the spectator directly, often to the point of making him a participant.

Viewers became part of the act in a recent multimedia event, "The Proliferation of the Sun," staged locally and in Minneapolis by Otto Piene, young German artist who has been working environmentally with light. As participants reclined on foam mattresses around a "light bush" (a global steel construction spike with dozens of bulbs), projectors placed around the room threw slides, hand-painted witty arresting organic images, on the walls in rhythmic sequences. A taped voice chanted a "homage to the sun."

## Audience as Activators

"Snows," a "kinetic theater piece" by Carolee Schneeman, a painter who has staged eyebrow-raising happenings here and in Paris, uses six live performers, film projections, strobe lights and aluminum foil (the dancers' bodies are encased in it). The spectators' shiftings and turnings, picked up by contact microphones under their seats, activates part of the stage lighting, which, in turn, affects the performers' cues.

Working directly with the environment, these artists concerned minimally, if at all, with turning out objects in the sense of individual paintings or sculptures or other works of art. They are, they say, more interested in process, the creative ferment, than in product a key reason why their work often takes the ephemeral form of happenings, events, theater pieces, light shows.

Boyd Compton, director of the intermedia department at New York University's new school of arts, refers to the environmentally oriented work as "art that's in life."

"Very often, it's public, free, transient," he says. "And unlike conventional art, the metaphor is often not made for you. Much of the work points its finger at you and says 'make something of it.'"

USCO's Gerd Stern says such art goes "against the whole grain of the acquisitive society."

"There are," he adds, "no collectors for this type of art. And there are no Picassos of the media."

Recognizing the interconnecting interests of young artists working with new techniques and media, several universities and colleges have already in-

stituted intermedia courses or departments. As head of N.Y.U.'s intermedia department, for example, Mr. Compton, formerly with the arts program of the Rockefeller Foundation, administers a faculty of three—a filmmaker and kinetic sculptor, Len Lye, an electronic composer, Morton Subotnik, and a painter-projection artist, Tony Martin.

The Philadelphia College of Art, which offers courses in "expanded" forms, requires every student to buy a movie camera and light-exposure meter upon matriculation.

Intermedia artists are not only achieving recognition by educational institutions. They are also obtaining it from such quarters as fashion, industry, entertainment and establishment cultural organizations. Jackie Cassen and Rudi Stern, artists who have been hailed as innovators in kinetic lighting effects (achieved with hand-painted slides and multiple projectors) have designed light environments this year for the Boston Opera Company, the Harkness Ballet and the Best & Co. department store. (They have also advertised in Variety their availability for mixed-media balls and bar mitzvahs.)

Among other "commercial" projects, USCO is working at its Garnerville, N. Y., headquarters in its most offbeat multimedia assignment to date. It is cooperating with a medical-research team, working on an "overstimulator environment" for the Albert Einstein Medical Research Center in Philadelphia.

## Endocrinology Enters

The physicians (Dr. Harold Persky and Dr. Marvin Zuckerman), who are studying endocrinological response, have already made sense-deprivation experiments, placing subjects inside a steel cube for eight hours with total lack of sensory stimulation. Reversing the procedure, they plan now to test the effects of sensory overstimulation on the endocrine system by means of an eight-hour multimedia environment. "We're developing basically four channels of audio input, and maybe two, three, four channels of visual input—slides and film plus a strobe light," says Mr. Stern. "It has to be a real blast."

Whatever they may have achieved so far, intermedia artists believe they are only beginning to explore the possibilities offered by the new technological environment. They tend to agree with Mr. McLuhan's statement in his book "Explorations in Communication."

"The media are not toys; they should not be in the hands of Mother Goose and Peter Pan executives. They can be entrusted only to new artists, because they are art forms."

"Harnessing the Tennessee, Missouri or Mississippi is kid stuff compared with curbing the movie, press or television to human ends. The wild broncos of technological culture have yet to find their busters or masters. They have found only their P. T. Barnums."