

FRED TURNER, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia & American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013), 365pp.

In 2006's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner connected the rebellious energies behind *The Whole Earth Catalog*—offering star charts, guidelines for growing-your-own, and a communal withdrawal from big business and big government—to some of the founding figures of the Digital Revolution. The same method of linking two unlikely cultural formations, along with the same overtones of historical irony, shapes his recent “prequel” (10), *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia & American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*. In a narrative supported by rigorous research and yet still eminently readable, Turner extends his media genealogy backwards in time, showing how the immersive “multi-image, multi-sound-source media environments” (3) we associate with 1960s counterculture, “designed to expand individual consciousness and a sense of membership in the human collective” (8), in fact originated with a group of cold warriors looking for a mode of communication that would reinforce democracy in both the individual and the national character. With the phrase “democratic surround,” Turner coins a term to reach across the “different incarnations” of these immersive multimedia experiences and to express their binding interest in both modeling and actively producing a democratic society (9).

In the 1930s and 40s, Turner begins by reminding us, American social scientists worried about the stultifying effects of mass media increasingly saw devices like film, radio, and newspapers as potential organs for fascist propaganda. Turner thickens this familiar story with a representatively graceful movement from one scene to another: a glimpse at the twenty-two thousand gathered for a fascist rally in Madison Square Garden in 1939 helps establish the threat of totalitarian politics at home, while Theodor Adorno's infamous claim that the chorus of jazz music encourages conformity to the social collective reappears as a provocative example of intellectuals' critique of mass culture. Taken together, moments like these help Turner establish the causes and consequences of this era's deep-seated fear of the ‘authoritarian personality’ in more complex terms than they are often treated. Chapter two, in many ways the central articulation of the book's principles, then demonstrates how a “culture and personality” (54) school of anthropologists, psychologists, and journalists in the United States joined with government organizations like the Committee for National Morale in order to identify a corresponding mode of communication capable of shaping non-authoritarian personalities.

Believing “the key to building both a democratic personality and a democratic culture was the transformation of apperception,” figures like Margaret Mead and her husband Gregory Bateson sought to develop immersive experiences in cultural diversity that would avoid instrumentalizing the viewer’s relationship to the other on display (66).

From here, the bulk of the book tracks the various developments and appropriations of this core interest in a democratic surround. Bauhaus expatriates such as László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, and Herbert Bayer introduced America to spatial designs and multiscreen displays intended to stimulate a ‘unified’ psyche without didactic coercion. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man* became the most visited photographic display ever by appropriating Bauhaus aesthetics and offering Cold War Americans the chance to conduct themselves through carefully assembled images of global community. As both an aesthetic novelty and an advertisement for American pluralism, *The Family of Man* toured worldwide and even spurred the U.S. Government into setting up photographic displays at the 1958 Brussels World Fair and at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, where turning democracy into a multimedia experience was intended to “reorient Soviet citizens’ individual desires” (247). Meanwhile, back at home, John Cage was pushing his early experiments with prepared pianos into new realms of indeterminacy, insisting that to find true freedom in sound, to break finally with the constricting order of European music, the listener must “enjoy unimpeded access to the *process of choosing* from the possibilities arrayed before them” (123). Finally, the story of *The Democratic Surround* culminates with “The Coming of the Counterculture,” when veterans of Cage’s musical tutoring, such as Allan Kaprow, broke down the boundaries between performers and audiences with their “Happenings” (263), when Marshall McLuhan denounced print for fundamentally dividing the human psyche, and when mixed-media art forms began multiplying and cross-pollinating at a tremendous rate in cities like New York and San Francisco.

Turner succeeds in making each one of his set pieces seem an equally weighted node within a remarkably permeable network of influence between government agencies, expatriate intellectuals, and avant-garde artists. His rhetorical and methodological consistency in keeping the ‘surround’ at the center of the reader’s attention shows a notable fidelity to Marshall McLuhan’s famous axiom: “the medium is the message” (*Understanding Media* 7). But while distinguishing American propaganda from its Soviet counterpart based on the organization of media through which these nations articulated their self-images fits with the book’s guiding

thesis, juxtaposing democratic and authoritarian uses of media in this way largely sets aside the question of whether there may have been moments when the ‘democratic surround’ became less than completely democratic. While Turner acknowledges that the U.S. government appropriated multi-media platforms for promoting its ideological agenda both at home and abroad, and even adapted these media into mechanisms that could “fuse the work of persuasion and monitoring” (251), there is a noticeable tendency throughout the book to honor the self-valorizing language of an emerging American hegemon. One sub-section concludes: “At the global level, the United States promised to enclose its allies in a ‘free world,’ watched over by a benevolent, all-seeing military and guided by disinterested American experts. At the Children’s Carnival the citizens of Milan and Barcelona caught a glimpse of that world, peopled by their own children” (230). One can easily imagine another version of this book where Turner tells exactly the same story, only with a savage cynicism about the idea a “benevolent, all-seeing” American military (ibid.) spreading its peace-loving personality around the world. Such a volume might take a sharply critical stance on the role of media in the emerging political agenda of that “American liberalism” advertised by the book’s title, yet conspicuously absent from the safer focus on democracy it has adopted from midcentury liberalism’s own rhetoric.

None of this, however, is to wish that Turner had written such a book. With barrels of ink already spilled decrying the ideological complicity of any intellectual or artistic movement to come in contact with midcentury American liberalism, there is some merciful relief in a work of cultural history that sustains the hopeful promise for democratic media held by its cast of characters and allows us to fill in the moments of irony for ourselves. Most interested readers should be more than adequate to such a task, and so whatever reservations one may have about the nationalist narrative that finally emerges from *The Democratic Surround*, ultimately the work accomplished by both the teller and the tale impresses.

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