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The Influence of the Mixed Media Concept on Contemporary Literature and Music

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE MIXED MEDIA CONCEPT
ON CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND MUSIC

Cover list

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE MIXED MEDIA CONCEPT
ON CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND MUSIC

Probably the most exciting development in the fields of literature, art, music, and communications in the past twenty years is the mixed-media concept. The idea of using more than one artistic form in conjunction with others to produce a desired effect is not new, but only with the development of our modern electronic technology did this concept come to tremendously influence the contemporary literary and musical world. More important, however, the development of new and hitherto undreamt of communications and transportation media has had a profound influence upon modern culture and civilization itself.

Marshall McLuhan, author of Understanding Media, defines a medium as simply "any extension of ourselves." The medium can be an extension of any part of a man, an extension of any of his senses. Binoculars, for example, are an extension of the eyes, just as a slide trombone is an extension of a person's voice; yet media are more than mere extensions of physical senses and have a far greater influence upon individuals and the society in which they are used. Any medium, no matter how slightly, changes the very spirit of the user. It is not what the medium is like that determines its influence: It is how it is used. The medium is indeed the message.

The electric light is an "illuminating" example of a medium that is its own message. An electric light is pure information--it has no message, unless it were used to spell out a verbal name or advertisement. But look at the tremendous impact of the electric light on our civilization. Without it, none of our large manufacturing concerns could exist. There would be no movies, no television, no automobiles, and even no night baseball. The electric light escapes notice as a communications medium because it has no verbal content, no "message," but it is obvious that, to the contrary, the electric light has an overwhelming message. Although its message is primarily other media (it, for instance, makes night reading, newspapers, and radio possible) it and other aspects of electric power perform the staggering task of virtually eliminating time and space factors in human association. (2)

Poets and authors have long known that literary works are made more appealing when senses in addition to sight are appealed to. In this respect, the mixed media concept is not new at all. In fact, many traditional authors understood quite clearly the influence of different media upon literature and culture. Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida has been seen as a study, both psychic and social, of communication. (2)

Unquestionably, up to the development of electricity and electrical media, the greatest medium invented was the printing

press. The invention of the alphabet, centuries before Christ, in itself dealt the old tribal culture of early man a nearly-fatal blow. The alphabet meant power--authority and power over distant military structures. When combined with papyrus, the alphabet spelled the end of the stationary temple bureaucracies and the priestly monopoly of knowledge and power. The invention of the phonetic alphabet coupled with the development of papyrus and parchment and, later, paper enabled an ignorant person to learn the system in a few hours, whereas the older, pre-alphabetic writing with its innumerable symbols and applied to such unwieldy materials as brick and stone insured that only the elite--the nobles and priests--would have power. The printing press dealt the final blow to the old system. With its advent, a vast democratization of learning occurred. Communication became a science rather than an art. The old tribal existence of man was dead. The new media were low in participation and completion by the audience, unlike the old, which were high in participation (an example of which might be seen in the exaggerated gestures common to communication in culturally deprived areas--the "tribal" speaker's conversation is rich in gestures and tactile impressions). (2)

The mechanical culture ushered in by the printing press detribalized mankind by specialization. With the advent of the new electric technology, and its nonspecialist character,

the world has begun to retribalize. Electronic media and the contemporary developments in the field are inherently of a more personal nature than the older mechanical media because the essence of an electronic presentation is what the individual hears, sees, or senses in some way. Mechanical media tend to fragment their message and to establish a set interpretation, a characteristic of a culture based upon a phonetic alphabet and language. The new electronic art forms and communications media have a tendency to retribalize; to allow for individual participation; to establish what McLuhan calls a "cool" society in which the premium is placed on senses other than that sense used in immediate perception of the message and upon the effect on the individual's own perception. This is quite similar to the Oriental ideas about music and art: Zen poetry, for instance, creates involvement by means of the interval--what is either not said at all or only implied--rather than the obvious logical connection offered by most Western literature.

Aside from the great changes in culture which may possibly be brought about by these new ideas, the primary area in which the mixed media concept has been influential in the past several years is in the field of the arts--literature, art (painting and sculpture and other related forms), and music. The great contemporary American composer Charles Ives was one of the first artists to recognize that one does not have to be a musician

to be a composer. In his Essays Before a Sonata, (itself something of an attempt at mixing media, since Ives used the printed word to communicate his personal ideas to preface his second Pianoforte Sonata, Concord, Mass., 1845), he asks the question, "How far is anyone justified, be he an authority or a layman, in expressing or trying to express, in terms of music . . . the value of anything . . . which is ordinarily expressed in terms other than music?" In other words, how far afield can music or any other art forms go and stay reasonable and artistic?

Of course, this question can only be answered on a personal basis. Ives states in Essays that Thoreau was a great musician, not because he played the flute or sang well, but because he did not have to go to Boston to hear the "Symphony." He compares Thoreau to Beethoven: The greatest moments of both express profound truths, but the intimate nature of it affected Beethoven in such a way that he always showed it while Thoreau sometimes had trouble exposing it. These two artists were both endowed with remarkable talents, but the temperament of each and the difference in the quality of expression between the two arts, music and literature, created separate masterpieces. Music can be a continuation of emotion, not only a means of expressing it. However, music is more subjective in nature, while poetry is more objective (generally) and as a consequence the poet may be reluctant to say exactly

what he feels, such expression calling for an intimate expression which the physical words may repel. Ives believed that these words revealed more the nakedness of the soul than its warmth. Therefore, it is just possible that a synthesis or even a tasteful blending of the two different media might produce an entirely different message, one which neither form could express individually. This seems to be a good basis for justification of allowing any art form to go as far afield as necessary to say what it needs to say; the virtues of both forms may counteract some of the vices of both. (1)

Whether or not this is legitimate justification, mixed media presentations are currently the rage almost everywhere. As in the communications field, the arts had to wait for the development of new instruments and new methods of presentation. In the late 1930's, the American composer John Cage invented the "prepared piano"--a piano doctored liberally with screws, bolts, nuts, and strips of rubber. This instrument is endowed with a range of rather strange percussive effects, an unusual side effect of which is that this added range cuts down on the performer's ability to control the sound, thus achieving a spontaneous feeling in performance. Developments of this sort led more or less logically to the development and perfection of electronic sound systems, reverb chambers, and the like, culminating in the development of the electronic music synthesizer, the prototype of which was developed

by Robert Moog in the middle-1950's. This instrument makes use of highly-sophisticated electronic media to achieve a freedom and a range unknown on any acoustical instrument. The synthesizer puts sounds together, distorts sounds, or creates its own. An extremely interesting aspect of synthesized music is its use of "white noise," a sound produced by sounding all frequencies of sound at once. As white noise is filtered electronically, the different frequencies may be heard in almost any arrangement or distortion of an arrangement of sound. (3)

In literary modes, the new electronic sound equipment has tremendous possibilities. At a performance (a "happening") at Ouachita Baptist University in April, 1968, Mr. Merrill Ellis, head of the Electronic Music Laboratory at North Texas State University, demonstrated the use of sound distortion, synthesized music, light distortion and projection, and audience participation dramatically. During the main "program," several compositions by Mr. Ellis and others were performed, using the different media. After the closing number, a piece for brass instruments, electronic tape, light projector and sound distortion, Mr. Ellis divided the audience into two sections, each led by a director. These sections made various weird sounds while Ellis improvised on a synthesizer. A student read sections from the college catalogue (primarily from the ROTC section) through a sound distortion chamber while the room was in total darkness except for a strobe light. Various brass players strolled across the

stage at random, improvising as they walked. The effect (I can personally vouch for this--I was one of the brass players) was terrific. The distorted catalogue reading was as haunting as good contemporary poetry (which, in a sense, it might have been)--the effect of the sound distortion completely reversed the message from one of dry official information to poetry. In this case at least the medium WAS the message. The audience became involved deeply because each person present was able to add his own message--in a sense, the entire audience reverted to the primitive tribal state of early man for a few moments.

A number of well-known contemporary poets have experimented with media-mixing in varying forms. Lawrence Ferlinghetti has composed several spontaneously spoken "oral messages" specifically for jazz accompaniment. In a sense, each "message" is performed spontaneously at every performance due to the continued experimental readings with jazz. Kenneth Patchen has long been noted for his "poem-postcards," starkly simple, postcard-like compositions which, between Patchen's artwork and simple but profound poetry, manage to say considerably more than the composition itself would suggest. Patchen's drawings and sketches are at once whimsical and frightening, and, accompanied by such titles as "The Impatient Explorer Invents a Box in Which All Journeys May Be Kept," they achieve an effect similar to Japanese Haiku--short, to the point, and illuminating. E. E. Cummings uses a related form in his apparently totally illogical arrangement of poetry. However, the freedom that

Cummings and other poets who use this technique give to their readers by deviating from conventional poetic form is one of the strongest points of their poetry. Red McKuen, a Canadian poet, has recently come into fairly widespread popularity through the sale of his record albums, recordings of McKuen reading his poetry to an orchestra accompaniment. The value of McKuen's work (or, at least a great deal of it) is, from a personal standpoint, rather hard to see, but there is no doubt that his use of the mixed media concept is, to a large extent, responsible for his popularity.

Whether or not the new media will, as McLuhan predicts, eventually do away with our "alphabet-based" society remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that media-mixing has developed into a true art-form. From a purely personal standpoint, I find McLuhan a trifle obscure on several points, but it is quite evident that his philosophy is, for the most part, valid. It remains for the new generation to determine whether he is right.

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