The point I wish to make here is obvious yet vital to an understanding of the function of art in the environment. It's the idea that man is conditioned by his environment and that "environment" for contemporary man is the intermedia network. We are conditioned more by cinema and television than by nature. Once we've agreed upon this, it becomes immediately obvious that the structure and content of popular cinema is a matter of cardinal importance, at least as serious as most political issues, and thus calls for comment not from journalists but from those who work at the matter, artists themselves.

Gene Youngblood in *Expanded Cinema*

A period of efflorescence in the arts, writes Susanne Langer, is apt to lead to a cultural advance; it formulates a new way of feeling and the onset of a new cultural age.1 McLuhan's suggestion that the medium is the message need not be elaborated here. Nor the now obvious fact that the electronic arts have carried us headlong into a new age. The confluence of art and media is becoming increasingly clear.

Less obvious perhaps is the fact that the intermedia environment is making artists of us all. For the media, like art, extend perception and transform experience. "The business of art," D.H. Lawrence has written, "is to reveal the relationship between man and his circumambient at this living moment."2 An understanding of the counterenvironmental nature of art, as Youngblood suggests, is indeed critical to understanding the radical evolution now taking place in Western cultures. For having surrounded ourselves with media we have reached the seemingly paradoxical point at which environment and counter-environment merge. Today the circumambient universe is art. Ecological consciousness is no longer
the exclusive business of the artist and his work. As art frees us to see environment in new ways, media transform perception of environment and self. The person/environment interaction has taken on a new dimension.

In effect, we have reached the end of the age of paradox; we have entered an age characterized by the simultaneity of perception and experience. In the electronic age, relationships come into view, figure and ground converge, conscious and unconscious reverse roles.

In this perspective it becomes clear that the study of media is at base the study of perception and, inevitably, of consciousness itself. The challenge now is to identify the manner by which consciousness is altered by the intermedia environment. Like the artist, McLuhan has approached this task by attacking the problem with his "probes". Now scientific research into the workings of the brain sheds some much welcome empirical light on the significance of the medium/message metaphor.

* * *

The brain, we know, is divided into hemispheres; each of which performs rather specific functions. Paul Bakan provides the following catalogue of functional differences between the two cerebral hemispheres.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Differences Between the Cerebral Hemispheres</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Left</strong></td>
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<td>Analytic</td>
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The left side of the brain, then, is time-oriented, digital, and verbal. The right side is spatial and visual, nonverbal. In short, the left
hemisphere functions analytically, the right synthetically.

In this context, synthetic functioning refers to the integration of objective and subjective responses to perceptual stimuli—a convergent awareness of figure and ground. Whereas the left hemisphere dichotomizes, the right integrates, a point which will be elaborated further in this discussion.

It must be understood, however, that the hemispheres are complementary, not exclusive, and together form the basis of complete human consciousness. So, too, the two modes are not to be equated with activity and passivity. The functional orientation that determines which mode dominates has to do with the goal of the individual’s activity as motivated by environmental circumstances.

Arthur J. Deikman:

The choice of mode is determined by the motives of the individual organism. Motivations exist, however, at different levels and with different time scales. It is hard to say much about the specific hierarchy of motives that affect the choice of mode. It is my impression, however, that the baseline of mode choice is set by the general orientation of the individual’s culture.  

Prior to the age of mass media, the cultural orientation of Western man traditionally emphasized the analytic, action mode. With the development of electronics, however, the person/environment interaction has undergone radical evolution. After some five centuries of left-brain emphasis under the influence of machine and print, the sequential and analytic has been rather suddenly displaced by the relational and metaphoric. Right hemisphere emphasis is the natural consequence of living in the electric age.

But electronic media simply continue the evolutionary process of sensory extension that began with the spoken word. The word, McLuhan reminds us, “was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way. Words are a kind of information retrieval that can range over the total environment and experience at high speed. Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered or outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant.”

Like the word, media languages make new perceptual demands. Unlike the word, however, media are technologies of implicitness. In terms of the bimodal model, the word emphasizes the digital, the media the analogic. Just as phonetic writing diminished the role of the other senses of sound, touch, and taste, the iconographic language systems of the post-industrial age bring us full circle, diminishing the
analytic dissociation of senses and functions of phonetic writing. The difference between the two is no less than a difference in the perception of reality itself. "Whereas 'reality' in the nineteenth century meant matching the old, 'reality' in the twentieth century means making the new. For 2500 years visually oriented Western man had been recycling and reducing percepts (the direct experience of total existence) to concepts of that abstract 'Nature' invented by the Greeks. The art of communicating the new requires careful and deliberate dislocation of ordinary perception." Careful and deliberate dislocation of ordinary perception is of course the business of art. Thus, the new science of communication, as McLuhan says, is percept, not concept.

In a more empirical vein, research into the effects of various media on brain activity led General Electric's Herbert Krugman to a similar conclusion:

The basic response of the brain wave is clearly to the media and not to the content differences within TV commercials, or to what, in our pre-McLuhan days, we would ordinarily have called the "commercial message"...The old theory was concerned with the fact that the message was transported. The new theory must be concerned with the fact that the viewer is transported, taken on a trip, an instant trip—even to the moon and beyond.

The confluence of art and media grows clearer in this perspective: whereas communication theory has been traditionally concerned with message transportation, art theory is concerned with the fact that the consumer is transported. Television—and for that matter, film—"doesn't just wash over us and then 'go out of the mind'. It goes into mind, deep into mind. The subconscious is a world in which we store everything, not something, and television extends the subconscious." Language, art, media all transport us. The sense mechanism, once externalized and objectified, tends to possess a life of its own. It becomes autonomous to the point that concepts are taken for data, percepts for actual things. At this point, objectivity ends and subjective "reality" begins; we enter the realm of art, where meaning is unseparable from experience. In terms of the bimodal model, we have entered the synthetic mode, where the right cerebral hemisphere begins to dominate. In fact what Krugman noticed in his subjects was in effect, an increase in alpha wave activity, a phenomenon now known to be associated with the right hemisphere of the brain.

To go a step further, keeping in mine the environmental nature of mass media, electricity is accomplishing what the artist has attempted all along. In extending the subconscious, the intermedia environment may induce what might be called a kind of "polyphonic sensing". All artistic structure," Anton Ehrenzweig has written, "is essentially
'polyphonic'; it evolves not in a single line of thought, but in several superimposed strands at once.” This “scattered kind of attention” therefore “contradicts our normal logical habits of thinking.”

Essentially, polyphonic sensing is the opposite of what might be called Gestalt perception, in that Gestalt psychology posits an either/or choice between the “significant” figure or the “insignificant” ground. Polyphonic sensing is Gestalt-free: figure and ground co-exist in a state of active interplay. The instant communication of the intermedia environment “insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay.”

In psychoanalytic terms, this kind of multi-dimensional attention is characteristic of the subconscious phenomenon psychoanalysts call the primary process. However, it must be pointed out that although there is some similarity between aspects of the receptive mode and the primary process, the bimodal model “addresses itself to a functional orientation—that of taking in versus acting on the environment.” The receptive mode of the right cerebral hemisphere, Deikman reminds us, is not a retreat from the world, but rather “a different strategy for engaging it.”

New languages make new perceptual demands. The intermedia environment is making artists of us all because it tends to the metaphorical, the synthetic. In effect, there is a shift culture-wide from the outer-directedness of the symbol to the inner-directedness of the metaphor, a new strategy of “taking in” rather than “acting on” the environment. In this new age our languages tend to the receptive mode and turn us back inside ourselves as they induce a virtual meditative trance.

* * *

Pertinent in this regard is current psychotherapeutic research utilizing audio-visual stimuli as means of access to the internal self. According to Robert Masters and Jean Houston of the Foundation for Mind Research, “The possibility of experimentally giving persons access to subjective realities opens up many other possibilities for the enhancement of creativity, learning, and types of self-expression conducive to healing and personality development and integration.”

In simplest terms, Masters and Houston employ audio-visual stimuli to induce what McLuhan calls the “quiescence” of meditation. “As ordinarily worked with,” they report, “the audio-visual environment induces a mild altered state of consciousness or trance, and in a minority of cases much more profound altered states, or deep trances.” Characteristic responses include: time disorientation, empathy, euphoria, body-image changes, religious or erotic feelings, projected imagery, pronounced relaxation, feelings of mild intoxication, a strong sense of being drawn into the image.
Masters and Houston provide this report by a woman in her 70's as “fairly typical of what might be experienced by a responsive, but not exceptionally responsive, subject”:

As I sat behind the screen watching all those colors and abstract designs whirl and swirl and dissolve into each other continuously I had no idea what they were supposed to do to me. It was a strange, bewildering, slightly frightening experience but pleasurable, incredible, awesome like watching the Northern Lights I saw once, or it was like being a witness at the beginning of the world. Then it felt like the chaos of the modern world and of abstract art. The sounds in the earphones on my head were mostly unpleasant, my eyes and ears were being bombarde. It was impossible to think.

I began to feel uncontrollably sleepy. I wanted to succumb and go to sleep but doubted if that would be of any use to you. Therefore I forced myself to remain awake...When you came for me at the end I arose, and I had no concept of how long I had been there—it seemed like a very long time and yet like a few minutes. I was amazed to discover that I could scarcely walk, my limbs were so heavy, my mind in a pleasant but disoriented state. I recall I said, “I feel as if I’ve had five champagne cocktails.”

A young woman in her 20’s responded a bit more strongly, having what Masters and Houston describe as “a kind of esthetic mystical experience.” Her report:

It’s the images and colors that take you into it. Then, “colors” is the wrong thing to say, because you stop making identifications in the sense that you recognize “blue” as in a separate category of experience. I had the sense that there was only one color—not that I was seeing monochromatically, but the colors were all just color...And it was without any sense of an environment, or it felt as though all the environment was my own body...I just can’t describe it, but I feel obliged to produce for you, and as soon as I say it I know that I haven’t been able to produce anything that really mirrors what happened...I’m also not wanting to give the impression that I picked up a drug store copy of some book on mysticism that say “all is one.” See, this is not a theoretical level that I am speaking, not on a level of abstraction that says we all are one...What I am talking about is an actual sensory experience. I want to convey how it felt, and it was a total, actual experience.
Such experiences clearly parallel the mystical, but even ordinary media experiences can induce similar altered states of consciousness. "These states form a continuum beginning in familiar territory. When we watch a movie and become oblivious to everything except the screen, we are in a light trance, in which the scope of our awareness has diminished but the intensity of it has increased. In the Oriental scientific literature, analogies are often drawn between consciousness and light: intensity increases as scope decreases. In simple forms of concentration like movie watching or daydreaming, we do not become aware of the power of focused awareness, but we are doing nothing qualitatively different from persons in states of much more focused consciousness where unusual phenomena are the rule."

That media experiences may be equated with the mystical is of particular interest here. The "totality" of experience or "impossibility" of thinking described by Masters and Houston's subjects are essentially mind states endemic to meditation practices, often characterized as nirvana, satori, or the no-mindedness of Zen. It is interesting that these kinds of esoteric disciplines generally de-emphasize language and intellectualizing, often to the point of requiring vows of silence.

Even more interesting is current scientific research into such phenomenon. Research concerning transcendental meditation, for example, shows it purports to be primarily translated through "the integration of the analytic and verbal skills of the left hemisphere with the synthetic and spatial skills of the right hemisphere."

McLuhan long ago intimated a connection between the media environment and a strong drive toward religious experience in the young, a drive which appears to have expanded culture-wide. Similarly, research into the effects of drugs, particularly LSD, on the mind appears to support McLuhan's hypothesis (in lights of this discussion) of a connection between drug usage and the media.

Art, too, can induce this kind of meditative quiescence. When we speak of art, says Langer, "we speak of the feeling of, or the feeling in, a work of art, not the feeling it means. And we speak truly; a work of art presents something like a direct vision of vitality, emotion, subjective reality."

The power of media, like the power of art, lies in its form. Remove the narrative, concrete, or representational from film and television and the influence of form becomes clear. The circumambient universe is art: the intermedia network is making artists of us all.
Footnotes