LAST GASP: THE END OF MULTIMEDIA PERFORMANCE, NEW YORK 1950–2000

by

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Abstract

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In this dissertation I examine the historical and cultural meanings of the word multimedia, coined in 1950, and how its evolution throughout the twentieth century has revealed anxieties through theory and performance. I argue that performance is always already multimedia, and thus I claim that when "multimedia" is carved out as an explicit genre, critics and theorists express a pastoral nostalgia, a belief that contemporary life can be separated from media communications and technologies. Multimedia is a genre that results from the cultural and economic production following World War II, in which production shifted from technological development for the military-industrial complex to the domestic sphere in the U.S. The effort to sell media technologies as a part of everyday experience distinguished multimedia as a commodified, exceptional sphere apart from the quotidian.

Performance, because of the critical and practical emphasis on its live experience, is a valuable frame by which to understand this complicated history. Works by Robert Whitman, Laurie Anderson, and the Blue Man Group are historical case studies that help to reveal the workings of their respective cultural moments. I read these performances alongside critical theorists such as Marshal McLuhan, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Peggy Phelan, and Philip Auslander in order to connect ideas produced for the cultural imaginary. Ultimately, I argue that the term multimedia is obsolete, and that this distinction prevents a deeper and more dynamic critical engagement with contemporary performance.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The "Idea Man"

On May 14, 1950 a classified advertisement for an "IDEA MAN" appeared buried in the business section of the *New York Times*. Lost among the larger, more visually appealing ads, the call for the Idea Man's significance must have been very easy to overlook:

> Excellent opportunity to assist director of Latin American drug division of top New York City manufacturer. Man should be on sunny side of 35 with proven background in consumer packaged goods advertising. Primary emphasis will be on planning and execution of multi-media advertising and sales promotions to Latin American markets. Spanish is desirable.[1]

This copy is a watershed moment, not only for the world of advertising, but for arts, technology, and culture in general; here we have one of the first published usages of the adjective "multi-media" in English, a term that would become commonplace in myriad aspects of culture, the marketplace, and the domicile.[2] Although rife with implications for industry, media, globalization, and the performance of commerce, the *Times*'s professional context explicitly refers to commercial promotion across a variety of media, such as newspapers, magazines, and radio; an assumption that continues often today.[3] This assumption conveniently obviates the fact

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[1] "Idea Man," classified ad., *New York Times*, May 14, 1950, Business Section, F8.

[2] "Multimedia," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed September 30, 2009, http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2088/cgi/entry/00318167?single=1&query_type=word&querywor d=multimedia&first=1&max_to_show=10.

[3] For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s secondary definition of "media": "The main means of mass communication, *esp.* newspapers, radio, and television, regarded collectively; the reporters, journalists, etc., working for organizations engaged in such communication. Also, as a count noun: a particular means of mass communication." (The primary definition in the *OED* refers to Greek rhetoric, to be discussed presently, or the circulatory system of a biological organism.) I will use the term as singular when referring to the phenomenon of this communication and plural when referring to the modes

that the Greek root of technology, *techne*, is defined as both "art" and "craft," making no distinction between aesthetic expression and mechanical construction. In this study I will foreground techne's inextricability from performance, and investigate why there has been a cultural desire to maintain distinct spheres of art and technology as exemplified by the emergence of multimedia as a genre. In the mid-twentieth century, multimedia was defined as unique from previous media, and even though the distinction between the live and mediated has generated a wealth of useful discourse and practice, multimedia as a contemporary phenomenon has not threatened the existence of performance; rather, it has always been inherently part of performance, constantly shifting meanings and roles for culture at large, and, if anything, media has increased the desire for, creation, and capabilities of live performance.

Nevertheless, multimedia is a term that has helped maintain a separation between performance and media; the word came to refer to the many devices and tools that were used on an everyday basis, such as computers, televisions, and phones. As these devices and services grew in number and capability, so did the interdependence of the devices and the sensory cues they utilized. But multimedia was also appropriated and reexamined by visual art collage, such as Robert Rauschenberg's combines and Wolf Vostell's dé-collages[4]; pedagogical strategies, such as the "connected," multimedia classroom, online forums and wikis; and almost anything

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of communication. I will explore the *OED*'s primary definition of the term later in this chapter. See "Media," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/view/Entry/115635?rskey=KlwOkB&result=2#eid.

[4] See Wolf Vostell, *Dé-Coll/age Happenings*, trans. Laura P. Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1966); Günter Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Robert Rauschenberg, *Combines*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005); and Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

computerized, such as "windows," CD-ROMs, software, the Internet, not to mention the physical computer itself.[5] With the tools in common usage today, such as smartphones, digital displays, and e-commerce, one would be hard-pressed to identify everyday experiences that are not multimedia; it is now common to read books and newspapers on an e-reader, connect with family and friends via video chat, and find an infinite repository of information on a tool that used to be considered a "telephone." The exceptional nature of a multimedia campaign in 1950 is a foregone conclusion in the marketing strategies of the early twenty-first century.

By mapping constellations of etymology, politics, theory, and performance, I will demonstrate that the ideology of multimedia extends far beyond its ambiguous definition; even when named in 1950, the commercial and cultural forces that guide the nascent concept of "multimedia" led to shortsighted theories of sociology and aesthetics for decades, and arguably continue to the present. This discourse will help inform the framework of my argument, namely, that there has been a major discrepancy between multimedia discourse and practices, one that has fostered debates and performances that operate under the assumption of difference between media and live event, which is counterproductive to both theory and performance-making. Instead, I argue given that multimedia is always already part of performance, the otherness of multimedia is exposed as a result of cultural and market forces that encourage an ideology of media as commodity, and thus an independent sphere of cultural production only when historicized and contextualized. This separation between media and performance is a construct,

[5] The origin of "multimedia" within the pharmaceutical industry is significant and troubling; campaigns in Latin America have been immensely successful due to lack of regulation and countries' dependence upon foreign investment: for example, "Although three quarters of the people die [in Brazil] before the age of 50, the pharmaceutical industry makes most of its money selling large quantities of drugs to the rich and the urban middle class—the minority which needs them least." Robert J. Ledogar, *Hungry for Profits: U.S. Food and Drug Multinationals in Latin America* (New York: IDOC/North America, 1975), 3.

and multimedia is an expression of larger anxieties concerning technology, communication, and expression in the latter half of the twentieth century. As multimedia technologies have become an integral part of cultural practices, I argue that the term multimedia is obsolete, a return to an understanding of performance as techne.

I will analyze the genealogy of multimedia in the cultural imaginary, less the material than the ideological impact upon social understanding, from the inception of the term in advertising in the 1950s to what I argue is the pinnacle of its usage in the globalized, Internet-boom era of the 1990s. My focus on the cultural imaginary is intended to expose the problems within the discourse: the ideologies of criticism are much more muddied and vague than in multimedia practices; thus, I will examine performance as a frame through which to understand critical and social theory of the history of multimedia.

This analysis is indebted to Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977), which formalizes a materialist approach to cultural criticism, claiming that "labor and language as practices can be seen as evolutionarily and historically constitutive"; to generalize, I argue that cultural practice and theory inform each other.[6] Analysis cannot remain abstract, Williams warns, "In authentic historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance. It is necessary to examine how these relate to the whole cultural process rather than only to the selected and abstracted dominant system."[7] Essential is Williams's analysis of specific, complex forms and relationships as opposed to a concept of cultural

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[6] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 34.

[7] Ibid., 121.

autonomy, an analysis in which performance, for example, can be framed apart from a larger history of social forms and processes. In this study, the coinage of "multimedia" reveals an important historical moment, one in which a divide to create cultural autonomy is named for the sake of larger cultural anxieties.

Williams points to a critical quandary during moments of particular tension, that during the struggle for emergence—new meanings, values, practices, and relations that continually evolve—critics find it "exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of dominant culture […] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it."[8] The virtually immediate appropriation of multimedia techniques by advertising, then, comes as no surprise; a new generation following World War II, with considerable disposable income and new forms of commercial communication at hand, were primed for a shifting relationship to technology. Marketing for these new forms not only proved successful in a postwar context, but also erased the line between product and culture, exemplified by the rise of consumer behavior as a science in the 1940s.[9] The promotion of product as lifestyle as opposed to material good is one of the most significant abstractions Williams warns against, one that is reflected accurately in the simultaneous rise of multimedia as abstract idea, such as in branding, in lieu of the material cultural force of commodities, such as televisions, computers, and mobile devices.[10]

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[8] Ibid., 123.

[9] See Jean Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 71.

[10] Williams furthered this mode of analysis by specifically studying television as a "cultural form." See Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, ed. Ederyn Williams (New York: Routledge, 1974).

I utilize Williams's form of cultural criticism, which follows both material and ideological formations, as a point of departure for my own analysis and consider what is at stake when the word "multimedia" comes into being, as well as the matrix of structures that encouraged the term to develop. This analysis includes the rise of the post-WWII military-industrial complex that innovated new media and communications techniques, the burgeoning of global communications, as well as larger cultural and aesthetic shifts that began to incorporate these media into the private and artistic spheres, those which simultaneously fuel discourse of multimedia as an autonomous form. I heed Williams's warning that "Elements of emergence may indeed be incorporated, but just as often the incorporated forms are merely facsimiles of the genuinely emergent cultural practice."[11]

The conception of multimedia is not based solely upon technological innovation, demands of the market, or an abstract shift in cultural ideology; trends in the arts and theory contribute to the matrix of meaning as well. Thus, each chapter will comprise three parts: historicization, contemporary theories, and performance. Inevitably, all three sections inform one another (for example, historical events affect performance and vice versa), but I have chosen this structure to develop from the general, popular usage of multimedia, to the specific, often unconventional uses of media in performance.

To aid in this ideological distinction, the genealogy will be set against a background of the post-WWII, Cold-War-era ideology of military, political, and cultural competition, which in the 1960s fostered technological determinism for two divergent ideologies—the absolute dominance of political systems via the military-industrial complex and the augmentation of human and spiritual capabilities promoted by countercultures, such as those set forth by Marshall

[11] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 126.

McLuhan and Timothy Leary[12]—and in the 1990s expanded to a globalized, system in which ideologies have been folded into a seamless integration of media and culture. As a result of this integration, the cultural phenomenon of multimedia as a separate, autonomous element of daily life has become obsolete in practice, though it has remained in discourse. To be fair, the task of understanding or predicting the effects of emergent media in the moment are much more difficult than in hindsight, particularly when those media develop and propagate at staggering speeds.[13] David Bolter and Richard Grusin write, "Digital technologies are proliferating faster than our cultural, legal, or educational institutions can keep up with them."[14] This is to say, multimedia technologies (of which I include analogue, or non-digital, technologies) develop much faster than contemporary critical and cultural inquiry can analyze these forms, and so remediation is a strategy by which new forms are framed by previous ones in order for cultural accessibility and acceptance.

The post-WWII proliferation of technologies exacerbated the divide between multimedia and everyday experience through generating an artificial narrative of media as paradoxically both exceptional and quotidian. The division paves the way for marketing strategies that fuel desire for media commodities, explained well by advertising historians such as Jean Kilbourne and

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[12] In the wake of World War II, political and ideological dominance was thought to be determined by information and technological advancement: "Both the US and the Soviet Union had entered the Second World War after they had been victims of surprise attacks by Japan and Germany respectively […]. Both countries began to devote huge resources to the computerisation of intelligence gathering and in particular to the decipherment of the enemy's coded radio transmissions." See Richard Wise, *Multimedia: A Critical Introduction*, with Jeanette Steemers (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.

[13] For a compelling analysis of technological development and its cultural and economic effects, see Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Viking, 2010).

[14] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5.

John Seabrook. Kilbourne in particular reveals the goals of advertising to be a part of a complex sphere of production:

> The fact is that much of advertising's power comes from this belief that advertising does not affect us. The most effective kind of propaganda is that which is not recognized as propaganda […] Indeed, the most skillful propagandists of our time are not working for dictators, they are certainly not working exclusively for the Democratic party or the Republicans either. They are working for Foote, Cone & Belding, Ogilvy & Mather, and DDB Needham Worldwide.[15]

In one fell swoop, Kilbourne illuminates the conflation of marketing, politics, and multimedia strategies, folding in multimedia to the everyday and becoming a normalized component of cultural literacy. But there remains a resistance to Kilbourne's analysis, and by framing each sphere as separate from the others, cultural analysis can form, but also simplify significant forces at work that drive cultural production and consumption.

Therefore, cultural forces such as performance and politics incorporate into the cultural imaginary the same definition of multimedia as marketing: as a separate, consumable addition, distinct from live performance, as opposed to an earlier understanding of (or no need to understand) technology as part and parcel of daily life. As Chris Salter argues

> *any* performance practice that utilizes some kind of constructed instrument or procedure deserves to be discussed [as technology …]. Consider the fact that most forms of modern theatrical performance involve the use of woodshop tools designed to cut materials for scenery or the employment of computer-controlled lighting and sound equipment in works that are not in the least interested in thematizing or embedding issues of technoculture into their making.[16]

Technology and media (such as these examples of props, sound, lighting, and computing) are all media utilized in performance, but are rarely included in a conversation as multimedia

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[15] See Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 27; and John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, The Marketing of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

[16] Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), xxxv, original emphasis.

performance. Performance, where the tensions between the "live" and the "mediated" are still being unpacked, makes for a fruitful discipline in which to discuss the history of multimedia's usage.

By tracing the influences and ideologies that multimedia shapes and by which it is shaped, I will show that theory, politics, and performance all inform and reflect each other in histories and ideologies and ignore the discursive complexities and implications of multimedia as a concept. The uses and misuses of mass media such as television, film, and computers, not only within the commercial sphere but within art as well, are normalized and regulated by commercial forces. What performance suffers in the face of this regulation is a lack of innovative engagement and challenge that existed to a greater degree before it had the vocabulary of multimedia, going as far back as Ancient Greece and recognizable in the works of Richard Wagner, the futurists, and the Bauhaus. Indeed, the most successful "multimedia" artists and performers have been those that grapple with the distinction between media and performance, deconstruct it, and reveal it to be illusory. But before this discursive rift is addressed, a working definition of multimedia is required.

Toward a Definition of Multimedia

Despite the proliferation of "multimedia" and the forms that adopt it, such as marketing, art, and performance, there is a significant lack of definition as to what, exactly, the term means. As prime examples, two relatively recent readers entitled "Multimedia" illustrate this vagary: Richard Wise's text narrowly defines multimedia as the "application of computer technology to human communication," neglecting typical uses that describe forms that employ film, video,

television, or text, such as "multimedia" performances and art like that of Laurie Anderson or Robert Whitman, or "multimedia" museum displays, such as those discussed by Alison Griffiths, or even the "multi-media" campaigns of commercial interests, such as the pharmaceutical ad that I introduced at the opening of this piece; Randall Packer's and Ken Jordan's anthology on multimedia never explicitly defines the term at all.[17] There seems to be an endemic critical assumption that everyone naturally knows what multimedia means, that the term is so elementary that there is little or no need to define it.

Working with the incomplete picture that these studies leave, I can only extrapolate the assumption that "multimedia" describes a form that incorporates multiple modes of mechanical communication working in concert toward a singular message or expression. But this assumption leads to a lack of engagement with how these disparate modes of communication (i.e., video, computers) are included and, vitally, how they comprise a singular form. Moreover, previous studies neglect non-mechanical forms such as performance and the visual arts. Thus, multimedia is frequently theorized as a nebulous yet autonomous form, without critical discourse concerning the function of the term and its implications for the cultural impact of multimedia forms. Therefore, at best, the term has been a buzzword for performance to market events or obtain grants; at worst, it is used as muddy shorthand in criticism and theory.[18] What ensues is a gaping

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[17] See Wise, *Multimedia*, 2; Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Randall Packer and Ken Jordan, eds., *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002).

[18] Many artists with whom I have spoken are annoyed or at least confounded by the term, as it is difficult to find a contemporary performance that is not multimedia. As Alex Timbers, the director of Les Freres Corbusier, told me: "it's a weird issue to me why people sort of pay very peculiar and special attention to multimedia theatre, because it's all multimedia." In Steve Luber, "In Media Res: Why Multimedia Performance?" *PAJ* 29, 3 (September 2007): 16.

disparity between ostensible multimedia practices (in performance, commerce, or education) and discourse.

Perhaps most surprising is the fact that I have not found one critic who includes performance *as a medium in and of itself*; rather, performance is almost always positioned as antithetical to multimedia, such as within the "liveness" debates of the early twenty-first century, predominantly discussed in the mobilization of Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* (1993) and Philip Auslander's *Liveness* (1999). Multimedia can enhance or detract from performance, but never have I found an acknowledgement of performance as one of the "multi" in multimedia. Indeed, the very function of naming performance multimedia is to other the mediated forms as distinct from live performance. Performance is not categorized with other mediated modes of communication, revealing sharp biases of performance as an exceptional form, one that escapes the traps of reproduction, as theorized by Phelan.[19] The etymological evolution is somewhat ironic, considering the origins of media are based in live performance.

The very word "media" comes from Greek rhetoric, *mediae*, for voiced stops—significantly, a middle degree of stop, neither hard nor soft between consonants.[20] The voiced stop, a "critical requirement for the production of speech is a mechanism to create an air pressure difference in the appropriate locations in the larynx and vocal tract […] used to build up pressure behind a complete blockage" and create a faint sound when the "blockage is suddenly removed."[21] This linguistic mechanism was codified for a rubric by which to judge rhetoric and

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[19] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[20] "Media," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

[21] Carlos Gussenhoven and Haike Jacobs, *Understanding Phonology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.

speech, a vital form of expression in Ancient Greek culture.[22] This rubric extended to theatre as well: Aristotle, for example, emphasized the integrity of diction to tragedy.[23] The earliest use of the word media defined speech and performance.

In rhetoric and language in general, then, mediae are inherent divisions, separating sounds to distinguish one unit of meaning from the next; they are what Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle call feature units, basic technical components of speech that serve semantics. In linguistic theory, these are to be examined separately:

> two levels of language and linguistic analysis are to be kept apart: one the one hand, the semantic level involving both simple and complex meaningful units from the morpheme to the utterance and discourse and, on the other hand, the feature level concerned with simple and complex units which serve merely to differentiate, cement, and partition or bring into relief the manifold meaning of units.[24]

At the technical and even the discursive levels, mediae are kept apart from meaning. Linguists claim feature units contain no meaning alone, but rather serve meaning via the technical elements of breath and phonetics through time. This is the source of media's more contemporary definition of that which is in between.

This basis in linguistics has filtered through to the cultural imaginary today; multimedia is understood in large part as technical components added to culture. Much as in linguistics, media do not inherently make meaning, but rather they create a separation in the service of

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[22] See Ian Worthington, *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010).

[23] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), chapters 19–22.

[24] Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1956), 4.

meaning. Media are in between, and multimedia is a series of in betweens connected to an otherwise live presence.

Thus, media is not only etymologically but also historically situated in a middle, always between a "then" and "now." Mediae are transitions, the momentary pauses between breaths. Mediae complete gasps of breath and create units of meaning. This gesture of distinction is one that I argue resonates with the evolution of its successor, media, and that the use of the term multimedia is one that separates a form, but that this separation is momentary and creates a larger meaning, even after the moment has passed.

While for the most part media have held a comfortable place as functional units, the proliferation of multimedia technologies throughout the second half of the twentieth century troubled the borders. As media became more a part of quotidian experiences, to relegate media as an other, an in between, became less and less tenable. This is why Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that "the medium is the message" was such a flashpoint: McLuhan brought media technologies from the periphery to the center of meaning making and communication.[25] Theorists and practitioners of multimedia and multimedia performance have been struggling and engaging with this sense of convergence since.

Media and *mediae* are aligned here in their disquieting ability to alter cultural literacy of autonomous forms, much like the debate in performance between live and mediated presences. The unstable definition of multimedia therefore has shifted greatly in the past fifty years, and this study will map these shifts along with the anxieties the shifts create in performance and the cultural imaginary.

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[25] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Gingko Press, 1994 [1964]), chapter one.

Indicative of media's exponential rise are the parallel creations of "mass media" and "new media." It is important to chart these two terms as well, as a part of how multimedia functions in a larger context and how these further divisions of media express other cultural anxieties. Multimedia, mass media, and new media all are often used without sufficient contextualization or rigor, even in distinction from one another. To address this problem, I will examine the definitions of these terms, the vagaries that immediately follow when these terms are used, and finally fix them within a context of performance history.

The three terms seem to fit one within the next, from the narrow to the broad. New media is the most recent coinage, appearing in 1960, referring mostly to computerized and digitized media. Much like multimedia, new media was being used to solve marketing problems in a postwar, rapidly globalizing economy.[26] A decade after the coinage of multimedia, new media's rapid growth is reflected in studies of marketing, which push for innovation and a race to control networks of information. New media, in the popular imagination, thus took the form of technologies of information. Critics are fond of listing qualities of new media, but rarely are they aligned: Lev Manovich lists its guiding principles as modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding; while Packer and Jordan write of integration, interactivity, hypermedia, immersion, and narrativity.[27] These various rubrics emphasize the malleability yet universality of

[26] The *OED* cites this first usage from the *Journal of Economic History* in 1960: "The decision maker who must deal with globally gathered information, moved at electronic speeds, is impelled to acquire a more interrelated and overall type of knowledge concerning the operations in which he is involved. The new media, in management that is to say, have been directly responsible for the rise of management training centers." See "New Media," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed April 1, 2011, http://www.oed.com /view/Entry/255819?redirectedFrom=new+media#eid.

[27] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 10; Packer and Jordan, eds., *Multimedia*, xxxv. See Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds.,

information, as well as new media's implicit augmentation of human intelligence. This is exemplified in Vannevar Bush's imagining in 1945 of a "Memex machine," in which any information would be available to the user at a multimedia, desk-like station.[28] And while all these qualities are well defined by Manovich, Packer, and Jordan for media studies, as well as by Steve Dixon and Auslander for performance studies, the multiplicity of ideas results in more individualized, arbitrary frameworks than actual attempts to render a disciplinary consensus.[29] In a more practical definition, the term new media refers to any "new means of mass communication," which builds simplistically upon the notion of mass media.[30] Texts such as *New Media: 1740–1915*, edited by Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, are valuable additions to the expansion of new media's definitions, as they note that contemporary ideas apply as much to technologies that predate the term.[31] In this sense, new media was utilized as part marketing tool, part cultural coping mechanism: commercial interests needed to be at the forefront of communications technologies while also priming the buying public for technology's appeal and desirability, and some rhetorical turn was needed as technologies developed at a rapid

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New Media: 1740–1915 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) for a historical contextualization of the term.

[28] See Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *Multimedia*, ed. Packer and Jordan, 141–59.

[29] Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York, Routledge, 2009).

[30] "New Media," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

[31] Gitelman and Pingree, eds., *New Media*; see also James Lyons and John Plunkett, eds., *Multimedia Histories: From the Magic Lantern to the Internet* (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

rate. New media served to create an opposition between then and now, much as the voiced stops of mediae also created significance for semantics.

Mass media, on the other hand, is typically defined as any media that can be mechanically reproduced and distributed—books, photographs, films, digital files. The term began to appear in the early 1920s, unsurprisingly in advertising trade journals.[32] However, mass media influences the works of many artists and theorists working after the industrial revolution of the mid-nineteenth century, such as Richard Wagner and the Bauhaus, reaching an apex with Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) and the reactions of his Frankfurt colleagues as they defined the Culture Industry.[33]

It is important to pause here to reflect upon the significance of Benjamin's theory and analysis of mass media as a lynchpin of media theory and its legacy. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in particular is a foundational work in media theory. Of primary concern in the essay is the loss of a work's aura, what Benjamin defines as the work's claim to authenticity and its roots in ritualistic action, which stems from its "origin and testimony to its history."[34] As technologies of mass reproduction increase the ability to bring art to the masses, the ability simultaneously "detaches the reproduced object from the domain of

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[32] The term comes into vogue in 1923 thanks to an essay by S.M. Fechheimer. See S.M. Fechheimer, "Class Appeal in Mass Media," *Advertising and Selling*, ed. Noble T. Praigg (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1923), 238–40.

[33] See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[34] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 221.

tradition."[35] The essay has become a touchstone for any theorist considering how reproduction and mediation affect the status and ontology of art in the twentieth century, especially for theorists of performance who concern themselves with the impact of reproductive technologies such as cinema and computers.

What is often omitted from these conversations with Benjamin is the politicized nature of his theory. Even though many critics acknowledge his politics, few address them when mobilizing the essay. Benjamin, a German Jew, was writing in exile, and witnessed the effects of fascism upon art and the German cultural imagination. Fascist regimes such as those in Germany and Italy had become adept at controlling the reproduction and dissemination of "art," rendering its function in society as not expressive, but informative: "The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion."[36] Benjamin claimed that by controlling modes of communication and information, fascism had rendered politics itself aesthetic, so that "the masses" were kept complacent with and even proud of the nation's achievements.[37] The line between art and propaganda is erased in this scheme.

The contemporary uses of mechanical reproduction represented a menace to Benjamin: reproduction was theorized as a mode of social control through the rewriting of history and the anaesthetizing of populations. Benjamin concludes, "The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology

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[35] Ibid., 221.

[36] Ibid., 234.

[37] Ibid., 242.

has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society."[38] Benjamin's grave proclamation is understandable from its historical moment. But while his formulations, examples, and ideology were fairly accurate, even prescient, this last statement is the most flawed. History would show that society was all too ready for these technologies of mass reproduction, and the forces that co-opted them most skillfully were not totalitarian governments or political movements that Benjamin theorized, but rather capitalistic ones.[39] Although Benjamin did not live to see it, his proclamations concerning the work of art were understood and practiced by the market with remarkable acumen and financial success. Various artistic movements, most notably pop art of the 1960s, instead of becoming puppets of totalitarian regimes, responded to and became part of capitalist modes of exchange and power. Some fought this culture as though charged with the task by Benjamin, such as body artists of the 1960s, while others would accept it and even work with it in an almost scientific fascination, such as posthumanist and bio artists like Stelarc and Eduardo Kac.[40] These paths are a part of the same postwar economic conditions, and contributed to the growth of multimedia as commodity and performance.

Thus, mass media through mechanical reproduction became a significant development in the creation of markets as well as an incentive to accept media on a large, private scale, even as artists and consumers of these media maintained underlying anxieties about media's ubiquity in everyday life. Mass media, in large part, moves media discourse and consumption from the

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[38] Ibid.

[39] See Kilbourne's earlier comparison of propaganda and advertising. Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 27.

[40] See Marquard Smith, ed., *Stelarc: The Monograph* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Eduardo Kac, ed., *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

public to the private sphere, the opposite movement prophesized by Benjamin.[41] In contradistinction to new media, mass media does not qualify the technology, but rather how and where the technologies are utilized. Technologies of reproduction create a type of public sphere, a consumer base for the goods that these technologies produce in mass quantities, and more importantly, this sphere situates these technologies as a part of everyday experience. But even this definition must be qualified, as Sylviane Agacinski does in a clever rhetorical turn on Benjamin's essay, writing that "no means of artificially 'reproducing' natural things exists, only the means of production that allow for a proliferation of products."[42] Mass media relies upon modes of production, and Agacinski's claim is essentially a retooling of McLuhan, "the medium is the message." Even though mass media can be understood singularly, as a mass medium, it is more often used to refer to multiple media, "considered collectively," and thus gets enveloped within multimedia.[43]

Multimedia, then, is a much larger and more complex umbrella term, and at the very least requires two media to occupy the same space, discourse, or performance. In relation to multimedia, new media is conventionally used to define digital communication, and mass media can be a singular mode, a product of the age of mechanical reproduction. Both of these terms help to define a culture by which media are understood as strong, if not ubiquitous, presences in cultural practice and imaginary. Now that these three terms have been defined, their geneses

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[41] See William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[42] Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 81, original emphasis.

[43] "Mass Media," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed May 1, 2010, http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2088/cgi/entry/00302981?single=1&query_type=word&querywor d=mass+media&first=1&max_to_show=10.

from the same field, marketing, will provide insight into the history of multimedia and performance in the second half of the twentieth century.

Marketing and Military

As I noted previously, all three terms—multimedia, mass media, and new media—were generated by marketing theory in the twentieth century before they shared a domain with engineers and performance makers. The earliest, mass media, was put into use beginning in the 1920s, as companies attempted to differentiate themselves by harnessing the power of print and radio.[44] Kilbourne explains how this shift in advertising occurred: "Since the 1920s, advertising has provided less information about the product and focused more on the lives, especially the emotional lives, of the prospective consumers. This shift coincided, of course, with the increasing knowledge and acceptability of psychology, as well as the success of propaganda used to convince the population to support World War I."[45] Kilbourne situates the genesis of modern advertising within an amalgam of forces: cultural and scientific advances (psychology), economic changes (branded products), and military campaigns (propaganda). The prosperous U.S. culture of the 1920s paved the way for growth in production and competition among products. And as communications technologies proliferated, companies clamored to be on the next wave of consumer outreach. Each new medium and its uses were explored as opportunities to expand a product's market share.

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[44] For mass media's earliest uses, see S.M. Fechheimer, "Class Appeal in Mass Media"; for a discussion of the earliest days of branding, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, 10th anniv. ed. (New York: Picador, 2009), 5–8.

[45] Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love,* 71.

One of the first appearances of the word multimedia for a pharmaceutical sales position is significant beyond 1950: one of the best examples of these emergent marketing strategies is the pharmaceutical industry. The science and production of drugs in the U.S. evolved alongside those of advertising, and thus the two are remarkably aligned with regard to strategy and ideology at most points in their histories. For the pharmaceutical industry, the early part of the twentieth century was a struggle for scientific and public legitimation of its products. Stuart Anderson charts the rise of these companies in *Making Medicines* (2005), and his credit for the phenomenon is both historically and culturally reminiscent of Kilbourne's description of advertising's parallel rise. Anderson writes that the growth of these companies in the early twentieth century "was driven by a combination of economic, social and political factors, including urban growth and prosperity, the incidence of disease, the development of scientific, medical and technological knowledge and its diffusion, the growth and structure of national healthcare systems and of consumer demand and consumerism."[46] With the financial resources, scientific advancement, and a public primed for this type of consumerism, these companies were among the first to experiment with marketing to ensure a cultural presence in order to increase profits. Jeremy Greene, in a fascinating study of the pharmaceutical salesperson, the "detail man," points out, "As historians of general salesmanship have demonstrated, several of the strategies central to the 'everywhere culture' of mass marketing and advertising originally centered on the local culture of the traveling salesman."[47] The description of the detail man is similar to the professional sphere sought in the "Idea Man" classified of 1950. The strategy was a

[46] Stuart Anderson, ed., *Making Medicines: A Brief History of Pharmacy and Pharmaceuticals* (London: Pharmaceutical Press, 2005), 155–56.

[47] Jeremy A. Greene, "Attention to 'Details': Etiquette and the Pharmaceutical Salesman in Postwar American [sic]," *Social Studies of Science* 34, 2 (April 2004): 272.

remarkable success: "Between 1939 and 1959, sales of pharmaceuticals increased from US$300 million to US$2.3 billion; by 1959 the nationwide corps of detail men had grown from 2000 at the end of the 1920s to more than 15,000 nationwide."[48] The "everywhere culture" of advertising became a proven method of cultural contact. Pharmaceutical companies had found a way to become an everyday part of the American home, and therefore were illustrative of the science of marketing and the power of media to expand a company's place in the market and cultural imaginary. The power of everywhere culture quickly expanded to multimedia campaigns featuring billboards, radio and television ads, and branded products unrelated to the products themselves, such as pens and stationary for medical professionals.

The U.S. military was another vital factor that drove pharmaceuticals to become a multibillion-dollar, international force. World War II incited the government to invest heavily in pharmaceutical research for "wartime drugs" to help soldiers on the front lines: "Disease, which before the twentieth century had always accounted for the vast majority of deaths in war, was all but eliminated as a significant factor in military mortality."[49] Historically, the military has been a partner in the formation of multimedia as a cultural phenomenon. Much like drug companies, the military understood the capital and research necessary to create a stronger, more effective workforce and, after the war, was instrumental in providing the necessary research and scientists

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[48] Ibid., 272. Greene analyzes training manuals and marketing ephemera and finds that much of the literature on the Detail Man draws a connection between salesmanship and performance: "the detail man, like any itinerant performer, had to rely on reflexive tactics to make a place seem like his rightful zone, lest he lose the attention of his audience or, worse, get kicked out of the room" (272). Greene's epigram, significantly, is Linda Loman's defense of her husband, Willy, from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949): "Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person." See Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1949), 39.

[49] Anderson, *Making Medicines*, 168; Barton C. Hacker, *American Military Technology: The Life Story of a Technology*, with Margaret Vining (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 104.

to create a market for similar production and technologies: "Arrangements made to exploit research in World War II permanently transformed relations among American military, technological, and scientific institutions. Academic and industrial laboratories largely dependent on government funding have become major sources of military-technological innovation during the later twentieth century."[50] Investments by the U.S. government, in partnership with private industry, developed some of the most commonplace technologies of the twentieth century, including computers, satellites, and other communications infrastructures. Some of the most prominent and forward-thinking scientists and engineers were funded by the U.S. military, such as Vannevar Bush. The power of this research was channeled in the 1960s to the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), which also employed some of the players integral to the development of computers and the Internet, including Douglas Engelbart and J.C.R. Licklider.[51] Not only was the government responsible for many of the technical achievements of the mid-twentieth century, but it also partnered with private enterprise, granting contracts to companies like Bell Laboratories and Xerox to further research and extend these achievements to the public.[52] After WWII, the government took its cue from advertising, understanding that the competition for international dominance and the spread of democracy was incumbent upon not only military might, but also economic and cultural superiority. The U.S. needed to extend the ideology of "everywhere culture" to a political, global scale.

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[50] Hacker, *American Military Technology*, 94.

[51] Bush served as chief scientific adviser to Franklin Roosevelt and director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development through WWII, while Engelbart and Licklider were instrumental in developing interactive features of the computer and began to develop the first system of online communication, the ARPANET. See Packer and Jordan, eds., *Multimedia*.

[52] See for example Michael A. Hiltzik, *Dealers of Lightning: Xerox PARC and the Dawn of the Computer Age* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009); and Jon Gertner, *The Idea Factory: Bell Labs and the Great Age of American Innovation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

As a result, in 1955 CIA director Allen Dulles gave a report to the National Security Council to implement a program for "breaking down the isolation of the captive peoples from the West, by penetrating Eastern Europe with books, magazines, and newspapers, by exchange of personal visits, and by elimination of Communist jamming of Western radio programs." Technology, media, and culture collapsed into a singular offense for the government's postwar strategy. Within days of Dulles's proposal, "Eisenhower approved the plan to keep the Soviets on the propaganda defensive by pushing for more open cultural exchange."[53] The media capabilities that had been developed for military might during the war were repurposed and sold to the American public—indeed, to any population in need of the affirmation of democracy's potential—and the folding in of communications technologies into the everyday—for function, communication, expression, and entertainment—commodified and normalized what had been used previously as weapons of defense.

The confluence of marketing and military strategy fostered a cognitive dissonance for a postwar public: how could consumers adopt technologies that had been utilized for violent combat? This was partially the job of advertising and corporate interests in the 1950s, to be explored in the next chapter. But one side effect of the cultural desire to distance society from the technologies of warfare was a narrative of pastoral nostalgia, the false consciousness that society was more complete and simpler without the proliferation and consumption of media.

The impulse to combat the fusion of cultural production (machines) and cultural forms (the writing and understanding of history) is a mitigating factor for pastoral nostalgia. Lawrence

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[53] Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 69. For more on the U.S. government funding cultural figures and activities, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999); and Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance*, 64–68.

Lerner writes that "nostalgia posits two different times, a present and a longed-for past."[54] Pastoral nostalgia functions much like mediae, separating time in the service of meaning. In the wake of panic over cultural and political competition during the Cold War, unbridled technological and economic growth, and mechanical reproduction, performance just as easily follows Lerner's rubric. Thus, performance became a sanctuary from technology, as live performance, conceptually speaking, required no technological augmentation—simply performers, an audience, and a space in which to perform. Performance became a site of struggle for what Elizabeth Outka characterizes as the contradictory desires of the modern subject:

> the longing for the noncommercial, the pleasure in distinguishing between high and low culture, and a modern wish to acknowledge and even celebrate the constructed nature of this satisfaction. These very desires became a critical part of the modernist project, as such strategies promised to transcend distinctions between the "authentic" and the mass-produced, between an aesthetic modernism and a commercial modernity.[55]

This contradictory desire would play itself out fittingly in performance. Whereas projects by the military and commercial interests were envisioned to bring everyday prosperity to the postwar public, performance struggled to incorporate newer technologies while also challenging and engaging with new modes of expression, consumption, and connection; all the while, performance was idealized as a nostalgic safe haven from ubiquitous media.

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[54] Laurence Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), 44.

[55] Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

Performance and Multimedia

In 1960, Piero Manzoni premiered a piece entitled *Artist's Breath*, in which he—the Artist—inflated a series of balloons, mounted them on wooden bases, and signed them, legitimating them as high art.[56] This satirically simple take on the cult of genius and commercialism of the art world is perhaps the epitome of media performance. Manzoni's low-tech piece, using his breath, his mediae, as medium is a brilliant ushering in of multimedia art and performance, a decade *avant la lettre*.

With the proliferation of discourse on performance and media comes an understanding that technology has always been a part of performance. Salter discusses how the earliest codified theatres, from Ancient Greece to Sanskrit theatre, utilized machines and architecture to enhance their theatrical spaces and ideas. He even goes so far as to claim that the theatre space itself is a technology of framing and ordering of perceptual space. He concludes: "technology in the performance arts reveals itself not only in the machines that descend from the heavens by their own will [the mechane], but also in how—through craft, skill, construction, or making (what the Greeks called *techne*)—it orders the world (*logos*)."[57] Salter, along with many other multimedia performance theorists, acknowledges this ontological relationship between performance and technology.

Many theatre historians have focused on stage technologies as integral pieces of performance design and execution. James Laver documented technological developments as a

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[56] See Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 148–49. Manzoni had a keen sense of media's relationship to market forces: for *Artist's Breath* he charged by the liter of air, 200 lire per liter of mediae.

[57] Chris Salter, *Entangled*, xxii.

service to cultural needs, from the *periaktoi* of Ancient Greece to pyrotechnics of Renaissance court spectacles to the projections of the Federal Theatre Project; Jean-Pierre Moynet offered an account of daily life in French theatre of the nineteenth century, including stage machines and mechanics as an obligatory department of a theatre's inventory; Margarete Baur-Heinhold catalogued the numerous innovations of the Baroque era; while Marvin Carlson read theatre spaces and innovations not only as technological advances, but also as adaptations to cultural demands and ideologies.[58] In addition to similar historical foci, each of these texts discusses technological advances without needing to rely on a moniker of multimedia as distinct from performance. There is no distinction between media and theatre until twentieth-century ideologies of a post-industrial age and pastoral nostalgia take root.

The history and prehistory of multimedia performance were not theorized until multimedia was created as a form in the 1960s, and even then most considerations do not arise until the emergence of digital technologies in the 1980s. Books such as Denis Bablet's *Revolutions in Stage Design of the Twentieth Century* (1977), RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (2001), Arnold Aronson's *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (2005), Christopher Baugh's *Theatre, Performance, and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century* (2005), Berghaus's *Avant-Garde Performance* (2005), Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Performance* (2006), Dixon's *Digital Performance* (2007), Matthew Wilson Smith's *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to*

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[58] James Laver, *Drama: Its Costume and Decor* (London: Studio Publications, 1951); Jean-Pierre Moynet, *French Theatrical Production in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Marvin A. Carlson, trans. Allan S. Jackson with M. Glen Wilson (Binghamton, NY: Max Reinhardt Foundation with the Center for Modern Theatre Research, 1976); Margarete Baur-Heinhold, *Baroque Theatre: A Cultural History of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, trans. Mary Whittal (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967); Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Cyberspace (2007), Greg Giesekam's *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre* (2007), and Salter's *Entangled* (2010) all trace the fascination of early avant-garde movements with technological progress.[59] While these histories have been thoroughly explored using a variety of frameworks, it will suffice to touch on the major artistic movements and their contributions to multimedia performance and the cultural and critical formations of a multimedia sensibility.

The most widely cited precedent is Richard Wagner and his concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is outlined in works such as *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849) and *Actors and Singers* (1872). The "total work of art" is the idealization of the unification of all theatrical elements to serve an immersive, transcendent experience. Wagner viewed these elements not as technologies, but rather as contributions to a mystical and spiritual experience: "Error's crowning folly is the arrogance of Science in renouncing and contemning the world of sense (*Sinnlichkeit*); whereas the highest victory of Science is her self-accomplished crushing of this arrogance, in the acknowledgment of the teaching of the senses."[60] The need for Wagner to unite various artistic forms reflects an early inversion of media and technology as distinct from performance. Matthew

[59] Denis Bablet, *Revolutions in Stage Design of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Leon Amiel Publishers, Inc., 1977); Goldberg, *Performance Art*; Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance, and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance*; Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Dixon, *Digital Performance*; Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Greg Giesekam, *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Salter, *Entangled*.

[60] Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 72; see also Richard Wagner, *Actors and Singers*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

Wilson Smith's characterization of Wagner's ideology is almost identical to Outka's "contradictory desires of the modern subject." Smith writes

> The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is modernity's polestar. It is an uncompromising wish for joyful community to be realized in this life, in this world. It is a longing for unity amidst fragmentation, for collectivity amidst alienation. It is inherently restless and potentially revolutionary, and while it is inescapably ideological its longings can never be entirely contained within the bounds of ideology. It is the shape of radical hope.[61]

Wagner, at this early stage of theoretical development, already waxes nostalgic for performance that is unified, one in which there is little distinction among forms, as they all contribute to a singular form of expression. In this sense, Wagner was less prone to technophobic or technophilic impulses than his immediate successors.[62]

The most infamous champions of technology and performance were the Italian futurists. "The Manifesto of Futurism," published in *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909, declared a new era for art and performance, one that would embrace technology and speed as forms of expression:

> We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals: the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons: the gluttonous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts flung across the diabolic cutlery of sunny rivers: adventurous steamers sniffing the horizon; great-breasted locomotives, puffing on the rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aeroplanes whose propeller sounds like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds.[63]

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[61] Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 8.

[62] Texts on Wagner include Smith's *The Total Work of Art*; Jacques Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1941); and Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Case of Wagner," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 601–54.

[63] F.T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Futurist Manifesto," *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 19–24.

Among the most technophilic of avant-gardists, the futurists believed that technology should not only aid human endeavor and expression, but entirely overtake it. The inadequacies of art could be remedied by technology's superior mechanical capabilities. These very technologies led to the ultimate futurist art form, "war, the world's only hygiene." This claim would later be echoed tragically by Benjamin, witness to the destructiveness of war, less than three decades later. More neutrally, the futurists acknowledged the relationships that bound art, science, government, and the larger cultural imaginary.

A movement with more levity, but just as much emphasis on the integration of technology and performance, was the Bauhaus. While it similarly embraced the ambition of creating a unified aesthetic of all art forms, the Bauhaus departed from futurism in its belief that art should be available to and practiced by everyone. Form followed function for the Bauhaus artists, and they attempted to incorporate industrial materials such as glass and steel into performance as elemental, just as light, sound, and costume are.[64] Oscar Schlemmer idealized the body as a part of the entire theatre architecture, writing, "He is the organism of flesh and blood, conditioned by measure and time. And he is the herald, indeed he is the creator, of possibly the most important element of theater: SOUND, WORD, LANGUAGE."[65] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy also described Bauhaus experiments as a type of total theatre, positing that the performer should be

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[64] See Goldberg, *Performance Art*, chapter five; and Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, chapter three.

[65] Oscar Schlemmer, "Theatre (Bühne)," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius and trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 91, original emphasis; see also Gropius's introduction, 9.

"employed on equal footing with other formative media."[66] Both echoed Wagner's call to unite the separate arts to synthesize a singular expressive form.

Walter Gropius thus designed a "Synthetic 'Total Theatre'" (never realized), that was equipped with mechanical, adaptable stage architecture, projectors, and screens in order for the space to "dissolve into the shifting, illusionary space of the imagination, [which] would become the scene of action itself."[67] Bauhaus artists believed that media were just as integral to expression as technologies of previous eras, and the emphasis upon this integration historicizes the movement within this period of fragmentation feared by Wagner and other theorists of the postindustrial age. Instead of reflecting a convergent aesthetic, Wagner, the futurists, and the Bauhaus were reactionaries to what they viewed as a break in aesthetic and humanist practice: there would be no need to champion the integration of media into performance if it were understood that media were always already part of performance, as it was in earlier periods. Media had been othered from performance, and these artists, driven by a sense of nostalgia, sought to reunify the forms. These early avant-garde movements are examples of the struggle to reclaim techne as a defining feature of art in the face of increasing fragmentation of industries and mass reproduction of consumer products.

Many other artists believed similarly in media as integral to performance practice: Steele MacKaye developed complex machinery for his Madison Square Theatre; the constructivists envisioned performance as a giant machine; Piscator also mechanized the stage and

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[66] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Circus, Variety," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius and trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 21. See also Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 97–120; and Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, chapter 3.

[67] Gropius, introduction to *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius and trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 12–14.

experimented with recorded sound and projections.[68] All of these artists struggled to understand the role of newer media in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and all were instrumental in inadvertently establishing a discourse of media as a separate element and performance as a site in which to seek lost unity, a pastoral nostalgia.

Of course this brief list could be extended to many other practitioners and theorists of the era—clearly, there was far-reaching concern over how these newer technologies would affect the cultural fabric. What is important to note, though, is the ideological separation of performance and media in the early twentieth century, and also how these histories have been written; note that the predominance of texts that chart these artists are histories and theories of scenography. The stage picture and its design has been relegated to a specific aspect of performance making; to be sure, some of these histories acknowledge the role of the auteur director in hindsight, but most are framed as the history of design, reinforcing the division between media and performance.

Even so, most of these texts argue at some point for a more integrated understanding of art and technology, with roots in Wagner's ideal, and set up the tension that Lewis Mumford explains so well when he writes, "We had created a topsy-turvy world in which machines had become autonomous and men had become servile and mechanical: that is, thing-conditioned, externalized, de-humanized—disconnected from their historic values and purposes."[69] As most of these texts attempt to outline what multimedia performance is, they reveal more of a concern for institutional and market forces than artistic ontologies.

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[68] See J. A. Sokalaski, *Pictorial Illusionism: The Theatre of Steele Mackaye* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 31–49; John Willett, *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979).

[69] Lewis Mumford, *Art and Technics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000 [1952]), 18.

A confluence of commerce, engineering, and performance forms, then, emerged in the mid-twentieth century. World War II helped to further a consumer culture that adopted these technologies as early practitioners did, and so artists completed this break of technology from performance in an effort to examine closely the roles technology played in the cultural imaginary. The main catalyst for the break was the war itself; media technologies had become instruments of violence and destruction, and to incorporate them into aesthetic forms presented a conundrum to artists: how could these tools of war be reappropriated and adapted once again as valuable tools for expression?

A key transitional figure is Josef Svoboda, who directed the Czech National Theatre for over thirty years beginning in 1948. Svoboda is recognized for spectacular stage pictures, many of which employed technologies of light, sound, projection, and engineering. The staff for his workshop included specialists in chemistry, electronics, mechanics, and optics, as well as draftsmen and architects.[70] He developed the *Polyekran* and *Laterna Magika*—synchronous, multi-screen, multi-projection systems of slides and film; the Laterna was designed for interaction with live performers.[71]

But, perhaps more than any other designer or theorist, Svoboda expressed consistently a nuanced, holistic understanding of techne and the theatre: "Modern technical progress belongs in the modern theatre just as an elevator or laundromat belongs in a modern building."[72] Technologies served creativity, according to Svoboda, and could help create a more insightful

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[70] Jarka Burian, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 21.

[71] Ibid., 81–82.

[72] Ibid., 23.

aesthetic depiction of the illusory world far more appropriately than a naturalistic setting. He even went so far as to muse, "I would be delighted to create a setting of cheese if it best suited the play."[73] Svoboda not only incorporated technological elements because they were a part of the contemporary cultural imaginary, but also sought to develop and improve these technologies for performance, to further the organic, "metaphorical power" these technologies could help express.[74] Svoboda understood the significance that emergent technologies had on the language of performance.

As other artists experimented with new technologies, the cultural omnipresence of media as technological communication began to filter into subjects and practices in performance, and slowly multimedia became a genre.[75] Previously, other theorists had begun to examine the effects of screens, mostly cinema, on live performance, such as theatre historian A. Nicholas Vardac in *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (1949).[76] But the actual descriptor "multimedia" would take more time to become a part of performance parlance. One rare etymological precedent is Dick Higgins's coinage of "intermedia" in 1965.[77] Higgins

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[73] In Jarka Burian, "Josef Svoboda: Theatre Artist in an Age of Science," *Educational Theatre Journal* 22, 2 (May 1970): 124.

[74] Burian, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda*, 26.

[75] On integrated work, see Gropius, ed., *The Theater of the Bauhaus*; Mumford, *Art and Technics*; R. Buckminster Fuller, *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969); Adrian Henri, *Total Art: Environments, Happenings, and Performance* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1974); Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means: An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments, and Other Mixed-Means Performances* (New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1968).

[76] A. Nicholas Vardac, *From Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

[77] Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, ed. Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 27–32.

situated the separation of media as a concept as early the Renaissance, when humanist thought established an ideological and aesthetic separation between human and machine. Intermedia was Higgins's term to establish that, with media infiltrating everyday experience, it was necessary to investigate media products and practices through art as a cultural form. Art needed to address an audience that thinks "at 85 miles an hour."[78] If anything, Higgins ushered in the conversation that was wanting, and a few months later Bob Goldstein produced a happening on Long Island, his "Lightworks" at L'Oursin, which combined music and a psychedelic lightshow. The performance was designed "like a giant Scopitone jukebox, to light up with a complete picture show every time a new record dropped on the turntable. The images that flashed upon its three towering screens (which were played contrapuntally, one against the other) were drawn from every source dear to the Pop sensibility."[79] Goldstein referred to the species of performance as "multimedia," one of the first times the term gets used to describe performance.[80]

But still the term did not take immediately, and others were appraised in the meantime: Richard Kostelanetz theorized a "Theatre of Mixed Means" in 1968 that began to grapple with newer media's place in performance; in 1974, Adrian Henri introduced the idea of a "Total Art," resonant with Gesamtkunstwerk, to describe the multimedia happenings of the 1960s; and

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[78] Ibid., 31.

[79] Albert Goldman, *Freakshow: Misadventures in the Counterculture, 1959–1971* (Cooper Square Press, 1971), 16. The same critic noted that the Lightworks had more of a nightclub feel, which had "the mysterious and magical quality that I once found in the theater." Ibid., 41.

[80] Richard Albarino, "Goldstein's 'Lightworks' at Southampton Preem," *Variety* 243, 11, August 3, 1966, 60.

educational psychologist George Klima examined phenomenological encounters with media in *Multi-media and Human Perception* (1974).[81]

But discourse engaging with the term multimedia does not form significantly for performance until the twenty-first century, perhaps as a result of a struggle to accept, adopt, and contextualize performance of the late twentieth century. Greg Giesekam explicitly explores "staging the screen," in line with the visual, screen-oriented definitions above; Christopher Baugh analyzes an abstract grouping of "complex technologies," basing his loose definition on the Greek *mechane*; even Amy Jensen's more vigorous definition is problematic in her book, *Theatre in a Media Culture* (2007), in which she equates media culture with *mass* media culture, defining at the outset that "*mass media* must be understood as the source of mechanically delivered messages of persuasion that bind large populations into communities."[82] The only qualification in this definition is the adjective "mechanical"; otherwise the reader is presented with a vague definition that could apply to performance in general, with no consideration for her alignment of "mass" as inherent to media culture. Considering the rich history of mechanics in theatre history (as Baugh does), Jensen's statement is indicative of the vagaries of multimedia performance criticism, and ignores performance itself as a medium.

Multimedia is part of the process of technology's place in the cultural imaginary, namely, in order to maintain a separation between live communication and technologically augmented expression. Performance, lighting, sound amplification, and arguably the art of acting itself are

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[81] Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*; Henri, *Total Art*; George Klima, *Multi-Media and Human Perception* (Elnora, NY: Meridian Press, 1974).

[82] Giesekam, *Staging the Screen*; Baugh, *Theatre, Performance, and Technology*; Amy Peterson Jensen, *Theatre in a Media Culture: Production, Performance, and Perception Since 1970* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007), 2, original emphasis.

media, that is, methods by which audience perspective is filtered.[83] Because of the vast implications of the term's definition, many theorists and practitioners bandy about terms such as multimedia, mass media, and new media without much clarity or context. This imprecision does the most harm when considering how media shapes a culture. By not defining their terminology, critics foster a vacuum of understanding; the gesture of labeling a form "multimedia" goes unexamined entirely and so the form is restricted in its potential engagement with larger issues; this is to say, critics do not consider what is at stake in calling this genre of performance multimedia, and therefore ignore the implications of the epistemological division between media and performance. This gap in discourse can be remedied in part with a return to Williams's mode of analysis, framing multimedia as a more complex cultural form.

The assumption of media's ubiquity leads many writers to forego a definition altogether, creating a confusing singularity in which multimedia becomes shorthand for film, video, and digital projection.[84] Most of these authors—notably Dixon, Packer and Jordan, and Bolter and Grusin—concede that not everything digital is multimedia, a framework many others do utilize, such as Birringer, Laurel, and Rush.[85]

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[83] Another significant text that is often left out of the conversation is Joseph Roach's *The Player's Passion*, which explores technological impacts on the culture and practice of acting training. See Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[84] This includes the discussion of Wise and Packer and Jordan above. See also Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss*; Colin Beardon and Gavin Carver, eds., *New Visions in Performance: The Impact of Digital Technologies* (New York: Taylor and Francis, B.V., 2004); Nick Kaye, *Multi-Media: Video—Installation—Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[85] Johannes H. Birringer, *Performance, Technology, and Science* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2009); Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (New York: Addison-Wesley

Indeed, the most insightful frameworks are the ones that recognize how multimedia performance is not a break of any sort from other forms of performance. Hearkening back to Benjamin's recognition that the "work of art has always been reproducible" (such as Greek stamping and nineteenth-century lithographic techniques), Mark Hansen writes that "with the flexibility brought by digitization, *there occurs a displacement of the framing function of medial interfaces back onto the body from which they themselves originally sprang*. It is this displacement that makes new media art 'new.'"[86] This is perhaps the most direct and comprehensive definition, defining both "new" and "media," and although the binary opposition Hansen constructs between the material and mediated body remains problematic, he acknowledges media's historical and aesthetic integrity to the live, and even lays out how this division is productive: "They compel us to explore what it is about the tactilely and kinesthetically active body that allows it to synthesize the imaging capacities (the medial conventions) of divergent media interfaces into a coherent, complex experience of the digital experience."[87] Hansen provides an open and critical basis for examining what the discursive splits in media theory indicate and, more importantly, how they can be inverted and deconstructed to create new understandings and realities through these splits. However, he is still part of a bizarre disconnection within the field: he does not provide for a productive inquiry into the analog and its relation to the digital; he makes no mention of Jacques Derrida or Jean

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Publishing Company, 1993); Michael Rush, *New Media in Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005).

[86] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 218; Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 22, original emphasis.

[87] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 46. Here, Hansen is specifically discussing the works of Jeffrey Shaw, but uses it as a guiding principle for his theory in general.

Baudrillard, while citing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari at every turn. Flipping through the indices of all these texts is a fascinating experiment in cataloguing who mobilizes which theories. I argue that this lack of media historiography from critics is a symptom of media's inextricability from culture at large, and that the history of "multimedia," the term, has only lasted fifty years because of this redundancy, a nostalgia for lost unity imagined by commercial forces. As Mumford writes,

> The specific triumph of the technical imagination rested on the ability to dissociate lifting power from the arm and create a crane: to dissociate work from the action of men and animals and create the water-mill […]. The external environment, because it was so immediately part of man, remained capricious, mischievous, a reflection of his own disordered urges and fears.[88]

Mumford's assessment of the "technological imagination" bears a striking resemblance to Kilbourne's analysis of advertising's self-effacement; both emphasize the respective forms' abstraction from empirical forces. Both technology and advertising fold into the larger culture to further commercial ideologies, resulting in the explicit debate concerning performance's "liveness" throughout the 1990s.[89] These arguments form a bias toward live performance, which is held above and apart from commercial and mass-produced media, when in fact performance practices function within the same culture and inevitably influence and are influenced by the same cultural imaginary.

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[88] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1962 [1934]), 33.

[89] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*; and Philip Auslander, *Liveness*. I examine the discourse of liveness in chapter four.

Multimedia: From Emergence to Obsolescence

The chapters that follow document moments, performances, and ideas that engender the development of multimedia as genre throughout the second half of the twentieth century. They are not meant to convey a comprehensive history of multimedia performance; instead I present the reader with a confluence of examples and ideas that generates one document of the cultural history of multimedia performance.[90] Unlike other studies, I will weave together phenomena whose narratives have remained disparate in order to illustrate that performance, in technological capabilities, ideologies, and practices, is intimately linked with cultural forces such as advertising, production of consumer technologies, militarized research and development, TV broadcasts, pharmaceutical sales, branded products and politics, and pastoral nostalgia for a preindustrial society that never really existed. These concepts and products emerge from similar historical moments and create a feedback loop amongst one another that generates larger cultural ideologies, including the discursive need for a distinct sphere of performance that is called "multimedia."

Chapter two examines the period immediately following WWII, when multimedia is no more than a nascent idea among advertising and sales companies. Research and production that fed wartime need, such as that of the pharmaceutical industry, was refashioned to be sold to the U.S. public, both in order to maintain the level of production and income for industry as well as to serve a prosperous postwar boom in economy and population. Early media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Herbert Marcuse viewed this new wave of economic production as,

[90] Many scholars have already attempted this and/or acknowledged the task's impossibility. See Baugh, *Theatre, Performance, and Technology*; Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance*; Dixon, *Digital Performance*; and Salter, *Entangled*.

respectively, utopian or dystopian; as a necessary form of communication and, by extension, ethics, or as an oppressive force of consumer capitalism, designed to placate the public through a Society of the Spectacle, as theorized by Guy Debord.[91] This matrix of industrial production and cultural demand developed with strange results: as the military-industrial complex was normalized to become a part of the public everyday and media technologies became part of the average home, artists explored the ideological underpinnings of the everyday with happenings. While happenings were idealized as objective portrayals of quotidian movement and experience, media such as video, TV, projections, and music played large roles in these performances. In addition to being treated as everyday objects, these technologies, newly available to the consumer, were engaged by artists such as Robert Whitman in an attempt to denaturalize media's presence and explore their potential in aesthetic expression. *Prune Flat* (1965) was an exemplary performance that played with the interaction between the bodies and screens of TV and cinema. The "flatness" that was explored in the piece was part of an artistic engagement with media and the live; an ideological split formed and multimedia became a distinct genre of performance.

Chapter three begins with the zeitgeist surrounding 1984, as Nam June Paik greeted the prophetic year with a "satellite performance" entitled *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell.* The technologies that infiltrated the American home and lifestyle were now widely adopted and proliferating at an astounding rate with the introduction of the VCR, cable television, and most importantly the personal computer. Multimedia was a buzzword used to describe the wealth of technologies available to the consumer, as the language of video, audio, image, and text are all brought together to form new modes of communication and expression. Ronald Reagan, who understood the power of new technologies, was a part of this cultural force, and with his

[91] See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

administration deregulated communications industries in the hopes of fostering private competition and development. Reagan himself was characterized as "the president electric,"[92] a public figure who disseminated a sense of power and ideology through multimedia platforms. Programs such as the Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan's project to build a system of satellites and weapons to defend the U.S. from nuclear attacks, illustrated both a cultural and political fascination with technological capability and an absurd sense of ambition and faith in multimedia to protect the nation and its ideologies. It is no coincidence that postmodernism came into vogue simultaneously in the academy. Theorists like Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard grappled with historical narrative, science, and art as problematic and even detrimental phenomena. With increasing access to and speed of media technologies, the postmodern subject became less concerned and able to engage with narrative. Language, narrative, and expression were complicated greatly by these new technological tools. Laurie Anderson's opus, *United States* (1983), presented multimedia technologies both as enhancements of and obstacles to contemporary communication, and set up an allegory of multimedia connections as complex and indefinite as the country itself. Her position as the narrator destabilized the metanarratives of politics and consumerism against which postmodern theorists had warned.

The final chapter documents what I call the "last gasp" of multimedia: after a half century of technophobic and technophilic ideologies, commercial and political agendas, and performance trends, the presence of multimedia collapsed into itself as technologies of the computer and Internet became an integral part of the everyday. Consumer media converged into singular forms, and multimedia folded into the everyday to the point of invisibility. This is not to say that these technologies were not utilized or "seen" by users, but rather they had become an assumed

[92] Timothy Raphael, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

component to cultural literacy. I argue that this shift in multimedia technologies played a large role in the liveness debates of the 1990s. Phelan's *Unmarked* and Auslander's *Liveness* could not have been written without the Internet and computer as rising forces in consumer culture. Phelan's concern with the "truth effect" of the visible is troubled by media's naturalization, and so the conclusion that "performance's only life is in the present" expressed a cultural anxiety over the reproductive forces of multimedia. Auslander's counterargument that the live is historically contingent and takes the form of the mediatized to survive was a product of the same anxieties. Rather than situate these two texts as antagonists, as many historians do,[93] I will argue that they are generated by the same cultural forces and express the same concerns for performance. If anything, Phelan and Auslander documented the end of multimedia performance: the discourse of liveness attempted to maintain the border between performance and multimedia, as the convergence of technologies and experience were already well developed. This convergence signaled a return to the understanding of performance as techne, art and craft; "liveness" was a final attempt to maintain the cultural desire for multimedia as a border, and has since become a phenomenon as historically contingent as multimedia itself. The Blue Man Group is a fitting case study for the end of multimedia performance: the company's bridging of high and low, multimedia and "live communication," and prescient understanding of connection at the advent of the Internet situate it as a group that both understands and struggles with multimedia's convergence. Blue Man is a technological neophyte, alienated from normalized modes of communication and open to the potentials of technology, potentials perhaps unexplored by commercial forces of production. The Blue Man Group occupies a paradoxical space by both

[93] See, for example, Matthew Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology," *Theatre Journal* 51, 4 (December 1999): 383–94; Marcyrose Chvasta, "Remembering Praxis: Performance in the Digital Age," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25, 2 (2005): 156–70; Dixon, *Digital Performance*.

satirizing modes of production and expression while simultaneously expanding as an international corporation.

To conclude, I posit that the historical age of multimedia performance is obsolescent; the proliferation of texts documenting multimedia histories in the early twenty-first century is indicative of the periodization of multimedia and, by extension, its obsolescence. Joining contemporary performance creators with emerging trends, I argue that multimedia, while a term still in use today, is an anachronism, a phantom of pastoral nostalgia, market forces, and performance, an art form that still struggles to understand its role as a part of the history of technology and communications.

Chapter 2

Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out

There is a lack of terminology to describe the historical precedents for what we now call multimedia performance; there seems to be no agreed upon term or rubric for what constitutes multimedia performance until the mid-1980s. Despite the fact that the term "multimedia" came into parlance in business and marketing as early as 1950, it is absent from artistic discourse until the late 1960s. Predecessors to the term nevertheless appeared throughout the 1960s: Dick Higgins's "intermedia" in 1966, and Richard Kostelanetz's pragmatic "Theatre of Mixed Means" in 1968, to name only the most cited.[1] And although multimedia is used as early as 1966 by Bob Goldstein to promote his "Lightworks" at L'Oursin, an experiment in painting with color,[2] the term was rarely used in the art world until the 1980s. Few descriptors exist to distinguish performance that utilizes multiple forms of communication (aside from, of course, "performance"). So, if we can accept that performance is always already multimedia, as argued in the introduction, why is there a marked absence of vocabulary to discuss the phenomenon? Is the adjective multimedia even necessary?

This chapter will specifically focus on the post-WWII years when multimedia is not yet a genre, category, or descriptor in the arts. I argue that the coinage of the term is largely driven by economic factors of accessibility, production, and marketing after the war, and that these political and economic ideologies filter through to performance styles, ideologies, and genres. The normalizing and domestication of communication technologies led to an aesthetic of the

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[1] Higgins, "Intermedia"; and Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*.

[2] Albarino, "Goldstein's 'Lightworks' at Southampton Preem."

everyday, as wartime technologies entered the home. The normalization of multimedia technologies in the home led to discursive oppositions concerning the role of technology. I will discuss these oppositions by analyzing Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* as utopian and dystopian visions, respectively. Both extremes are flawed, however, as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces used the same sources, resources, and discourse for their arguments, and I will look at the life of Jim Morrison as a living example of how this shift in media communications functioned. Morrison wrote of the impact of multimedia in his poetry, as notions of multimedia infiltrated pop culture and embodied the conflict of Morrison's success as a media celebrity. Finally, I will examine happenings as a form that celebrates the quotidian, yet one that adopts technology quickly, illustrating how everyday these technologies had become. As a form, happenings ideally blurred the line between art and life, and illustrated that technologies such as video, recorded sound, and film were a part of this everyday understanding. The performances engaged with how technologies were a part of cultural literacy, as well as how newer technologies were challenging contemporary expression and communication.

I pick up this debate and examine its life in the performances of Robert Whitman, who, as a practitioner of happenings, member of the Judson School, and later a proponent of technologically augmented performance, engaged with technology more reflexively than many of his contemporaries. Pieces such as *Prune Flat* exemplify an artist struggling not with the economies and alienation that technologies ostensibly foster, but rather the artistic expression that exploits these phantom tensions between industry and art, between multimedia and the everyday. When viewed together, these critics and practitioners reveal a more intricate relationship between economy and performance, theory and practice. *Prune Flat* serves as a

frame for early attitudes toward multimedia in the wake of this great shift in communications, a shift that required a great amount of labor and financial resources, combined with strong political and economic factors. The performance set up an encounter between the live body and recorded media, and the ideology of flatness served as a practical concern with screens and mediated bodies and a larger metaphor for the flatness that these technologies imposed upon social interaction and artistic practice. Artists such as Whitman repurposed these commodities, and although the technologies still were a part of the economic cycle, these artists engaged with media outside the conventional sphere, and therefore analyzed media beyond quotidian use. This mode of analysis provides a framework by which to investigate how these media functioned in the everyday, and how they were an integral part of performance, not an obstacle, antagonist, or even enhancement. The performance illustrated the anxieties expressed by those such as McLuhan and Marcuse while incorporating film as a necessary component to contemporary aesthetics. Far from expressing a new paradigm, Whitman showed how film was not an adversary to performance, but rather was a tool that performance utilized as a multimedia form.

The advent of multimedia in the popular imagination, though not yet as a word in common currency, emerged during what Theodore Roszak calls "The Age of Affluence," a period in which cultural phenomena flourished due in great part to economic growth and prosperity.[3] With the shift of new technologies from the battlefield to the home, and to a more consumerist paradigm for the U.S. economy, technologies became increasingly integrated within the everyday. Readied for the "home of the future," the U.S. population took little note of the marketing deployed for a more subtle shift in home technologies, allowing new modes of communication, such as television, to fold seamlessly into the cultural imaginary. Some

[3] Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocractic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995 [1968]).

theorists, such as McLuhan and Marcuse, examined some of the fledgling technological trends either as utopian forms of global responsibility or as oppressive, dehumanizing forces. When examined closely, however, both fall prey to reductive economic points of view and participate in technological determinist attitudes. What is at stake are different conceptions of technology within the everyday—the production and consumption of communications commodities.

However, McLuhan and Marcuse are held as respective pillars of the ideological struggle of the postwar economy; throughout the opposition of military-industrial complex and counterculture, the world of performance grappled with both ideologies of consumer culture alongside the new media at its disposal—televisions, Sony Portapaks, and audiotape, among others. The technologies developed during the war led to these consumer electronics after the war. These technologies were instruments of new economies, economies of access and privatization, as well as significant opportunities to experiment with new forms, as performance itself was shifting and reshifting, embodied in the still unnamed and amorphous mixed-media performances. These artists and performers worked to adopt and adapt to new technologies, performances that blurred the line between art and everyday life, when in fact media were already an institution in the everyday, and performances merely served to investigate the implications of multimedia and its role the cultural imaginary. In this sense, happenings were an extension of contemporary understandings of media as commodity form and engendered a discursive split between media and performance while reinforcing the integral relationship in practice.

Break on Through

> Multimedias are invariably sad comedies. They work as a kind of colorful group therapy, a woeful mating of actors and viewers, a mutual semimasturbation. The performers seem to need their audience and the spectators—the spectators would find these same mild titillations in a freak show or Fun Fair and fancier, more complete amusements in a Mexican cathouse.
> —Jim Morrison, "The Lords"[4]

Jim Morrison, best known as the lead singer of The Doors, published his first works of poetry in 1969. "The Lords" is a series of brief aphorisms and meditations upon the seedier side of contemporary life: "Diseased specimens in dollar hotels, low boarding houses, bars, pawn shops, burlesques and brothels, in dying arcades which never die, in streets and streets of all-night cinemas."[5] Of particular concern for Morrison was complacency, the notion that mass media had rendered its audiences inert, unthinking and unmoving. His complaint of emotional and intellectual stasis stemmed directly from the physical stasis induced by entertainment via screens, the passivity of which permeated audiences' psychic lives: "We are content with the 'given' in sensation's quest. We have been metamorphosised from a mad body dancing on the hillsides to a pair of eyes staring in the dark."[6] To his biographer, "Morrison saw most people as

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[4] Jim Morrison, *The Lords and the New Creatures: Poems* (New York: Fireside Books, 1970), 75.

[5] Ibid., 12.

[6] Ibid., 28.

being like sheep, a herd, following the leaders. The Lords were the people who controlled them, the ruler class."[7]

In many ways, Morrison epitomizes the tensions of 1960s ideologies: his public persona was constructed as the Rebel, the antiestablishment poet who fought the idealism of a prosperous 1950s middle-class America, both celebrated for and vilified by his antics on stage and in front of the camera. Simultaneously, this image of Jim Morrison would never have been possible without mass media: the Doors' appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (arguably a barometer of mainstream U.S. culture at the time) on September 17, 1967 solidified this tumultuous relationship with the media machine. Asked to censor the line "Girl, we couldn't get much higher," from its performance of "Light My Fire," the band broke protocol during the live broadcast and sang the original lyric. Banned from *Ed Sullivan* as a result, the incident proved the adage "There is no such thing as bad publicity," and the band achieved even more fame as a result of the controversy.[8] Morrison, then, was constantly negotiating his critique of contemporary media practices and the system that would allow him to disseminate his beliefs. Some biographers and writers have even concluded that it was the paradox of Morrison's media celebrity that drove him to the self-abusive lifestyle that ended in an untimely death in 1971 at the age of 27.[9] It is no coincidence that "The Lords" was originally self-published, and only put out by Fireside (along with the rest of his poetry) years after Morrison's death, when he had become even more of an international phenomenon due to the cult of celebrity and the romanticization of an early death. The poetry, music, and persona of Morrison express the

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[7] James Riordan and Jerry Prochnicky, *Break on Through: The Life and Death of Jim Morrison* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1991), 58.

[8] Ibid., 170.

[9] Ibid., 20.

paradox of postwar discourse: an assault on technological determinism under the false consciousness of pastoral nostalgia. Morrison idealized a more primitive, non-technological mode of living, but could only idealize it and communicate his ideas with the aid of mass media outlets. Morrison had been consumed by his own image, a casualty of dissociative discourse and economies.

This common cry of protest was that technology had rendered postwar U.S. a "society of the spectacle," to use Guy Debord's famous term. The spectacle, according to Debord, is the matrix of relationships forged in a society through mediation, and capitalism itself has rendered meaningful interaction obsolete: "Spectacle unites what is separate, but unites only in its separateness."[10] Debord voiced the overarching concern of many cultural critics of the 1960s, one that views the influence of technological production as a detriment to authenticity and holistic experience, enveloping the sanctity of the individual and the social fabric through relationships understood only through consumption and capital. One of Debord's significant contributions to media studies was not the condemnation associated with the book *Society of the Spectacle*, but rather the film of the same name from 1973. Instead of theorizing the spectacle with text and theory, Debord attempted to practice an antidote to the spectacle, what he called a *détournement*: recasting spectacular media images with subversive juxtapositions and revisionary messages. The film utilized a voiceover, recited by Debord, made up of the various aphorisms from the book. Debord's voice played over a wide variety of stock footage, from the moon landing to fighting in Vietnam, from workers' strikes to stripteases.[11] The manipulated

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[10] Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 22.

[11] Guy Debord, "*The Society of the Spectacle*," in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. Ken Knabb (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2003), 43–109.

sequences form a dialectic approach to filmmaking, not unlike that of Sergei Eisenstein's montage, in which the juxtaposition of two distinct images synthesizes to instill a new, politicized meaning.[12] Debord hoped to fight fire with fire, as it were, writing, "As revolutionary critique engages in battle on the very terrain of the cinematic spectacle, it must thus *turn the language of that medium against itself* and give itself a form that is itself revolutionary."[13] Debord had to become a media persona himself, much like Jim Morrison, in order to disseminate theories to the audience he sought to reach. The film therefore is political propaganda utilizing the language of pop culture and entertainment seen everyday—an attack on the passivity of spectatorship with contemporary technological means. But even Debord's attempt at subversion was co-opted, as Ken Knabb discusses, as "artists, filmmakers, and even ad designers have used superficially such juxtapositions," albeit against Debord's critical stance and lacking ideology.[14]

The fear of technological dominance such as Debord's is certainly understandable: the post-WWII generation was conditioned to consume and "keep up with the Joneses," a relief and right of Americans in the wake of the war. Yet this was the same generation that witnessed the horrors that technology could unleash, paradigmatically the U.S.'s own atomic bomb. This contradiction fostered a society dubious of technological change, yet eager to create a more civilized and convenient culture. Meanwhile, the U.S. economy shifted its energy and focus from wartime to consumerist production, mobilizing the same technologies, methodologies, and products with renewed marketing and aesthetics. This strange attitude toward consumption in the

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[12] Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1977 [1949]), 45–63.

[13] Guy Debord, "On *The Society of the Spectacle*," in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. Ken Knabb (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2003), 221, original emphasis.

[14] Ken Knabb, introduction to *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. Ken Knabb (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2003), viii.

postwar period is characterized well by Cynthia Lee Henthorn, who writes that both corporations and the U.S. government were promoting a morally superior country, boosted by its victory in WWII, based upon the foundation of human-engineering a "hygienic" and "civilized" people. Campaigns were launched, particularly by industrial and marketing firms, to frame this superiority as a technologically advanced society: "Americans, especially those Progressive-minded members of the middle class, needed reassurances that the Machine Age was not only alive and well but also ethical."[15] The duality of technology as marker of progress and harbinger of social doom is popularly conceived as the primary antagonism of postwar discourse. And much like the concerns of both Morrison and Debord, performance practitioners grappled with the effects of new mass media technologies and their impact upon performance, more and more concerned with its liveness in the face of increasing technological communication. Theorists' attitudes toward passivity also struggled with concern for the body, the sanctity of live performance, and the communal experience of performance.

But this duality is oversimplified. Somewhere along the way from impulse to invention to production to cultural phenomenon, the realities of development get overtaken by social mythology and ideology, and cultural amnesia enables one to forget that dominance and resistance are inextricable, that Jim Morrison cannot rebel against multimedia culture without multimedia culture celebrating Jim Morrison; this cycle of media production and consumption exemplifies the shifting economies and ideologies of performance and embodiment as new media became more integral to the everyday.

The mass production of technologies that allowed artists to experiment with new forms of performance, such as video, film, and audiotape, was conceived and sometimes explicitly

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[15] Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939–1959* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 41.

performed as reinforcement of the live-mediated divide, although at the time the debate revolved more around the privileged, communal experience of performance (Morrison's "mad body dancing on the hillsides") versus the complacency of the society of the spectacle ("a pair of eyes staring in the dark"). But this duality emerged from decades of marketing ideologies and government innovations that bound the two sides together, as well as ideological contributions from artists, who heralded technology for opening new forms of expression in performance. Multimedia performance was not yet coined as such; the nascent experimentation with new consumer electronics became an important part of marketing's narrative. Just as advertisers attempted to infiltrate everyday life, happenings attempted to unite art and the everyday, and technologies played an integral role.

The Cold War and Consumerist Determinism

The romantic conception of the post-WWII boom—among populations, industries, technologies, and economies alike—is that two divergent ideologies of technological determinism developed: the absolute dominance of political systems via the military-industrial complex and the augmentation of human and spiritual capabilities promoted by counterculture.[16] The military sought to develop technologies for dominance over other countries and deterrence of their armaments, ostensibly to prevent another world war from occurring; countercultural critics viewed the same technologies, many created by the military, as potential forces of

[16] For critics of the military-industrial complex, see Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; and Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991 [1964]). For proponents of technology and counterculture, see Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (New York: College Notes and Texts, Inc., 1968); and Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968). For an analysis of both sides, see Bush, "As We May Think."

consciousness raising; as liberation from egoism, materiality, and oppressive hegemony. The products of this development, such as satellite, Internet, and computer technologies, are the very same technologies that so-called media prophets such as McLuhan and, McLuhan's colleague, Timothy Leary, envisioned as the wave of the future for psychic transcendence and anti-systemic ways of being and peace-making. Others, however, such as Debord and Marcuse, saw them as tools to further an oppressive, capitalist regime.

The picture this relationship begins to paint is of symbiotic ideologies: nationalistic and political competition, through research, development, and production, during and after the war, both invest the necessary resources for development, while agitating countercultural constituents. The countercultural constituents appropriate these developing technologies to work outside the political system, simultaneously encouraging the political system to defend increasingly against "domestic threats" to that system. And while this antagonistic narrative makes for more exciting histories and teleologies, these divergent ideologies derive from the same cultural anxieties: namely, fear of technological capability, hope for salvation through technology, and the economies that fuel them both.

Not surprisingly, advertising in the U.S. had been grappling with this quandary of destruction and creation for three decades. After the devastation and cultural trauma of World War I, much of it spurred by wartime propaganda, the entire field of marketing was met with distrust and disillusionment. Advertisers had turned to psychology and the success of propaganda to encourage social desire for U.S. involvement in the war, but now needed to shift strategies to maintain a consumer base, a more trusting public. By learning from the beginnings of the military-industrial complex—the production of goods and the propaganda which then becomes necessary to sell the goods—the advertising industry created a savvy system to drive not

consumption, but a nascent mystique called consumer culture. Kilbourne characterizes this adaptation:

> Industrialization gave rise to the burgeoning ability of businesses to mass-produce goods. Since it was no longer certain there would be a market for the goods, it became necessary not just to mass-produce the goods but to mass-produce markets hungry for the goods. The problem became not too little candy produced but not enough candy consumed, so it became the job of the advertisers to *produce consumers*. This led to an increased use of psychological research and emotional ploys to sell products. Consumer behavior became recognized as a science in the late 1940s.[17]

The focus of marketers shifted from selling goods to selling a lifestyle, an everyday experience that would require commodities. The pharmaceutical industry is a remarkable example: it sent detail men directly to healthcare providers, to sell drugs to the environment where consumers would be most prone to accept important choices in regard to health. The ideology was not limited to corporations: the U.S. government attempted a similar strategy in 1945 when President Truman consolidated the propaganda arm of the State Department (the Office of War Information) into the Interim International Information Service (IIIS). Truman appointed William B. Benton assistant secretary of state for public affairs: "Benton made a fortune creating radio advertisements for Maxwell House coffee and Pepsodent toothpaste. To the detriment of elevators everywhere, he also founded the Muzak Corporation. After leaving the advertising industry, he served as vice-president of the University of Chicago and chairman of the board of *Encyclopedia Britannica*."[18]

In Benton we have a phenomenal figure: not only does his career point to the interdependence of consumerism and politics, but it also furthers the infiltration of media such as Muzak and multi-form ad blitzing (radio, billboards, print, etc.) into the everyday, normalizing a

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[17] Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 71, original emphasis.

[18] Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*, 10.

multimedia experience. Benton began a decades-long tradition of what essentially amounts to advertising the utopian United States to prove its dominance, to produce "markets" for capitalism and democracy. More importantly, much of this image-making was accomplished through incredibly complex stagings and performances, both figuratively and literally, of American culture.

It is precisely this impulse to market belief in nationalism that belies the romantic conception of post-WWII United States, caught between the antagonism of Cold-War paranoia and countercultural utopianism (echoed in the theories of the time, such as those of McLuhan and Marcuse, to be discussed presently). Rather, both these ideologies contributed to the folding in of multimedia into the everyday, laying the groundwork for the production and media infrastructure that would allow media technologies to become an integral part of the American home and enter the vocabulary of performance. Indeed, the normalization of newer media within performance would trouble practitioners and theorists so much that they would insert countless wedges among themselves concerning the state of liveness and mediation, as well as performance itself. A crisis of performance's ontology was emerging in reaction to the technologies produced by wartime research and integrated into everyday experience.

The Economy of the Everyday

Before analyzing the similarity of opposing ideologies, it is important to understand their similar origins in postwar culture and economy. After WWII, the industries that had worked so hard to supply wartime efforts pushed to maintain momentum by displacing the supply into the domestic sphere, a significant factor in the shaping of a multimedia ideology. The great forces

that produced technologies of mass communication, developed or improved upon for war efforts, needed a new marketplace. Shifting focus to the home was a logical step: the U.S. workforce's exposure to these new technologies and a postwar prosperity provided both desire and resources for consumer electronics. What many of these "new consumers" did not realize, however, is that the heads of government and corporations had begun setting their sights on the home years before the war ended. Although many homes had radios and phonographs before the war, technologies in the home increased exponentially after the war due to the refocus of industrial capabilities, technological advancements (many thanks to military development), and the marketing boom of the 1950s. The relationship of U.S. culture to technology and media alters radically in the decades after the war, as technology became more a part of the everyday, in business and the home; technology became more accessible both practically and culturally within the realm of performance, as proven by the rise of experimentation with technology and works that investigate the "everyday," such as happenings and performance art.

Henthorn's history, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939–1959*, helps to explicate how companies made long-term goals for themselves during WWII. During the war, industries focused on production for wartime efforts and building, boosting production by twenty-five percent,[19] but they simultaneously understood that the war would not last forever. The result was a discreet public relations campaign among many companies to plan ahead and get a loyal consumer base, even in the midst of crisis. Henthorn cites an amusing ad for a marketing firm that carries an ominous warning to companies: "Are you going to be a stranger to Mrs. Tomorrow? Are you going to wait until peace to let her know about the things you want her to buy? Do you think it's smart to come cold to your biggest market and try to crash it, when

[19] Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs*, 83.

competition will be so tough? Mrs. Tomorrow should get to know you today."[20] Technological advancement, industrial prosperity, and a significant shift in the position of the consumer allowed technological production and consumption to skyrocket in the postwar environment.

Advances for the sake of the wartime effort would have a profound impact upon the U.S. market: the rapid evolution of computers, data storage, magnetic tape, television, plastics—not to mention huge steps in efficiency of production—set up a new culture of consumption in the U.S. at an astonishing rate. Henthorn cites the marketing ideology of a "world of tomorrow," one in which war would no longer need to exist due to the social and cultural evolution of the U.S. The future promised peace through convenience, hygiene, and, thus, contentment. The underlying message of peacetime public relations, of course, was the promise of upward social mobility, the classic 1950s ideology of the nuclear family, the suburbs, and access to a futuristic present: "Consumer confidence in the future was thus nurtured by the fertilizing promises of the fast track to social evolution, and it was wartime technological advances that were credited as the key to democratizing this evolutionary ascent."[21] The consumer had also changed drastically—since a large number of women had joined the workforce during the war, they had been exposed to new luxuries in lighting, air conditioning, and appliances that they would come to expect in their postwar homes.[22]

But the "world of tomorrow" promised by these industries as well as journalists and marketers never came to fruition, at least not as speedily as originally projected. While kitchens and home entertainment became slightly more automated, work was still part of the daily routine,

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[20] Ibid., 79.

[21] Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs*, 86.

[22] Ibid., 85.

a phenomenon that has generated much discourse concerning social control and domestic identity.[23] Though the world of tomorrow never arrived in its idealized form, few questioned the science-fiction promises, mostly due to the thriving postwar economy. Roszak, in *The Making of a Counter Culture*, speculates as to why this acceptance might have been: "By 1960 the military-industrial complex quite simply *was* the American political system, and few were inclined to take issue with it. It was running too smoothly, providing fat profits at the top and full paychecks at the bottom."[24] What took the world of tomorrow's place were the rise of consumer culture and an accompanying influx of new products and technologies that at least promised an easier, healthier, and more aesthetic existence. And due to the production, hype, and momentum generated by wartime industry, technologies became integral to the home, which would greatly influence artistic attitudes toward and mobilization of newer media. For media to be such a part of the quotidian, with screens and mediated presences part of daily experience, artists had a new cultural climate to address as well as new tools with which to address that climate. But all of this was only possible in an "Age of Affluence."

The Boom: Economic Prosperity and Multimedia

Theodore Roszak wrote of The Age of Affluence in 1968, positing that the well-oiled machine that was the military-industrial complex allowed for an American society of luxury, from the very upper echelon of business owners to the lowest level worker. Post-World-War-II America's working class earned comfortable wages, which were reinvested into the economy,

[23] Ibid.; see also Boddy, *New Media and the Popular Imagination*.

[24] Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, xv, original emphasis.

and national economic growth was unprecedented, allowing huge corporations to flourish.[25] He argues that it is only from this position of comfort and prosperity that a counterculture could have risen; the younger generation could fight, reorganize, and "drop out" because they could afford to do so. The counterculture of the 1960s, from the rigid Students for a Democratic Society to the lax hippies, was "protest that was grounded paradoxically not in the failure, but in the success of a high industrial economy. It arose not out of misery but out of plenty; its role was to explore a new range of issues raised by unprecedented increase in the standard of living."[26] The boosting of American economic power, therefore, provided a safety net over which the counterculture could organize. Much like Jim Morrison, the mythos of rebellion was enabled by economic success. Without the technological advances developed by U.S. industry and the economic windfall they brought, there would be fewer destructive technological forces to fear and less inclination and opportunity to protest. Of course, production informed and was informed by consumption, which Roszak explicates through "secular skepticism," which "has concomitantly given us a proficiency of technical means that now oscillates absurdly between the production of frivolous abundance and the production of genocidal munitions."[27]

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[25] This was enabled in part by Congress's G.I. Bill; the Employment Act of 1946, which focused resources and legislation on maximizing employment, production, and wages; as well as bargaining rights obtained through various Supreme Court cases. See Richard E. Schumann, "Compensation from World War II through the Great Society," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed September 10, 2012, http://www.bls.gov/opub/cwc/cm20030124ar04p1.htm. For a larger economic picture, see Andrew Glyn et al., "The Rise and Fall of the Golden Age," in *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Postwar Experience*, ed. by Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet B. Schor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 39–125.

[26] Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, xii.

[27] Ibid., 13. This is a conundrum also voiced by McLuhan, who called this paradox "the peculiar drama of the twentieth century." See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 453; and Fuller below.

The economy boomed thanks to the unprecedented expansion of the U.S. military and the consumption of products produced by and large by technologies provided by these industries as well as a growing desire for conspicuous consumption. This cycle of production and consumption is elucidated well by R. Buckminster Fuller, who echoed Roszak's analysis of wartime and economic prosperity and had one of the most nuanced understandings of these relationships, even in the thick of 1960s political conflicts. In a series of lectures published as *Utopia or Oblivion*, Fuller developed a notion of "ephemeralization," the doing of ever more with ever less:

> Because those wars required ever more automated tool-up to harness more universe energy to do ever more continuous work on an earth whose total industrialization's percentage of strictly killing tools has become a progressively negligible minor fraction. The harnessed energy, production, distribution, communication tools, and techno-scientific literacy thus inadvertently established—all of which can produce peace-supporting prosperity—*is* the wealth.[28]

Fuller provides insight to the refined system that gives way to new technologies, as he states that the production of wartime industry naturally gives way to technologies of peace and "prosperity." This was Fuller's lifelong work, making the best of the most disastrous of humanity's achievements.

In regard to the advance of multimedia, Fuller's history is accurate: Alan Turing's cryptography work led to the microchip, military flight simulators were prototypes of video games, and ARPANET preceded the World Wide Web; this must also include the innumerable industries, jobs, and demands that are created by these technologies. But Fuller's scientific method flounders when broader cultural understanding is layered upon technological invention. Bolter and Grusin pinpoint a much larger issue at stake with ephemeralization, the struggle of

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[28] Fuller, *Utopia or Oblivion,* 7.

discourse to keep in step with economic and technological production.[29] Immediately, discourse lags behind technical achievement, and the transition from wartime technological growth would be somewhat unaligned with peacetime consumption. Cultural understandings of the role of media would have to evolve with the products already in place—supply before demand. This explains why economic prosperity helped to produce the counterculture, as well as why various media are appropriated (and misappropriated) in the service of consumer culture, objectified, then folded into the regime of dominance theorized by those such as Roszak, Marcuse, and Debord. As technologies vastly expanded the capabilities to absorb and analyze information, the culture was at a loss as to how to approach and utilize this knowledge. What were the implications for the overwhelming amount of production, and what could distributors and consumers (be they the military, the government, the marketers) do with them? More importantly, what uses and ideas were relegated to obsolescence?

I will now examine two of the more influential texts that address these concerns over unbridled technological production and reception: McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. Although they are commonly staged as adversaries, both theorists comment on the ideological difficulties of technological proliferation and reach surprisingly similar conclusions. When historicized, we see that they are both products of utopian ideologies; their works are divorced from a more nuanced understanding of economy and cultural complicity. These tensions were addressed much more incisively by experimental performance.

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[29] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 5.

Understanding *Understanding Media*

Perhaps the most widely appropriated text of the technology debates during the postwar era was Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. The book represents a paradoxical text for social and media theory, not so much for the text itself, but for its influence upon the social imagination. *Understanding Media* became not so much a text, but an idea, an icon, one appropriated by theorists and practitioners across the ideological spectrum. His concepts of "the extension of man," "the medium is the message," and "the global village" are often undertheorized and decontextualized, and therefore can be made to fit any narrative, from nationalistic ideologies to countercultural manifestos. Harold Rosenberg characterized McLuhan as "a belated Whitman singing the body electric with Thomas Edison as accompanist."[30] But by 1971, Donald Theall warned critics and practitioners to think about "McLuhanism rather than living it as a religion or even as a way to embrace all contemporaneity."[31] The theories and style of McLuhan are best treated as a symptom of larger cultural concerns about the rapid expansion of new media technologies and their effects upon communication and social experience.

When first published, *Understanding Media* was one of the first crossover bestsellers between the academic and lay worlds. It was taken up not only by critics and media scholars, but

[30] Harold Rosenberg, "He is a belated Whitman singing the body electric with Thomas Edison as accompanist," in *McLuhan: Hot and Cool*, ed. Gerald Emanuel Stearn (New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1967), 194. The allusion to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is a strange but significant parallel to that of Raphael, who applies the body electric to Ronald Reagan, to be explored in the next chapter. See Raphael, *The President Electric.*

[31] Donald F. Theall, *The Medium Is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), xvii.

also by artists, musicians, gurus, hippies—the list goes on.[32] At the heart of McLuhan's argument is that the key to understanding a society is to understand its modes of communication—its media. For without an interconnection between and among media, societies cannot learn, grow, and advance. Thus, form must be considered to understand the content of meaningful connections within societies, i.e., "the medium is the message."[33] Particular to the twentieth century, McLuhan writes, is the fact that communication technologies have sped up relations: "The Western world is imploding, abolishing space and time."[34] This ability to communicate instantaneously allows any individual access to news, information, and connections to anywhere else in the world at any time. McLuhan's conclusion is that because of this ability, which theoretically connects everyone on the planet, communications technology is an extension of our very nervous systems, and makes "us participate in the consequences of every action."[35]

McLuhan's vision of a completely interconnected world, couched in terminology accessible to scholars and laypeople, makes the utopian-deterministic quality of the work clear. McLuhan's text idealizes technological progress in the service of an almost existential sense of ethics and personal responsibilities: he argues that the "oral man" is gone, and that the fragmented, Western literate man has transformed into a "complex, depth-structured person

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[32] In the performance world, see Kostelanetz's interview with USCO in *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 243–71; and works by the ONCE Group in Mariellen R. Sandford, ed., *Happenings and Other Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 182–94; see also Douglas Davis, *Art and the Future: A History/Prophecy of the Collaboration between Science, Technology and Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973).

[33] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 20.

[34] Ibid., 5.

[35] Ibid., 6.

emotionally aware of total interdependence with society."[36] This interdependence requires, as McLuhan puts it, "depth," which is the quality of multiple sources of information, usually conveyed through a number of pathways—for example, stereo sound or television's visual and auditory functions. In other words, McLuhan's depth is a prototype of multimedia. McLuhan's global village, utopia itself, depends upon the then-current modes of multimedia communication. This situates McLuhan well ideologically among the artists, performers, and cultural critics of the time who saw new media as a mode of deliverance from an oppressive, capitalist system. But his is the exact same rhetoric employed by the marketing forces of the time. The connection that media engenders was emphatically employed by marketing theory as Kilbourne discusses as well as by political interests such as the Benton's work with the IIIS. The adoption of McLuhan's theories by a variety of interests speaks to the malleability said theories.

McLuhan's notion of an interconnected, responsible world thanks to media is related to many of the peaceful, utopian projects of 1960s counterculture. Though many associated with the counterculture shunned technology as part of a corporate, materialist culture, others saw new opportunities in new methods of communication, new conveyances of information, and the potentialities of misusing new technologies for subversive purposes.

One of McLuhan's contemporaries and followers was Timothy Leary, who wrote of McLuhan's increasing influence in the 60s and 70s: "Young minds exposed to the free spray of electronic information suddenly blossom like flowers in the spring."[37] Leary extended McLuhan's arguments to a more explicitly utopian reading, allying it with his own quest for a

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[36] Ibid., 75.

[37] Timothy Leary, *Chaos and Cyberculture*, ed. Michael Horowitz (Berkeley, CA: Ronin Publishing, Inc., 1994), 74.

worldwide collective consciousness. Similar to McLuhan, Leary's philosophy was at once spiritually unified and yet rooted in fierce liberal humanism; Leary refers in his late writing to a "postpolitical" era (explicitly ignoring the post-national corporate conglomerates that were gaining power), which united all humans politically and ethically, similar to the McLuhanian global village. Leary wrote: "The postpolitical information society, which we are now developing, does not operate on the basis of obedience and conformity to dogma. It is based on individual thinking scientific know-how, quick exchange of facts around feedback networks, high-tech ingenuity, and practical, front-line creativity."[38] Theorized thirty years after *Understanding Media*, Leary's global citizen was not only more immediately engaged, but also highly knowledgeable in the ways of cybernetics and engineering.

To Leary, the Internet was a practical and technical realization of his call to "Turn on, tune in, drop out." It should come as no surprise then that Leary credited this phrase to McLuhan during a casual meeting, in which the two were discussing, of all things, marketing and advertising, and McLuhan sang the words to the tune of a Pepsi jingle.[39] While the anecdote is comical and can be read as a subversive call to combat consumer culture, the revised jingle also speaks to a number of gaps that can be read in the logic of both men. Indeed, ideologically, McLuhan has been attacked constantly since *Understanding Media*'s publication. Many have dismissed the utopian and technologically determinist attitudes of McLuhan, as well as his assumptions of how instantaneous communications connect individuals.[40]

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[38] Ibid., 74.

[39] Neil Strauss, *Everyone Loves You When You're Dead: Journeys into Fame and Madness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 338.

[40] See for example Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), 136–44; and Williams, *Television*, 126–27.

The most avid response to McLuhan was Jonathan Miller's study and critique of McLuhan's work under the Viking Press's "Modern Masters" series in 1971. The book-length attack examined aspects great and small of McLuhan's body of work, but namely refused the wholesale acceptance of media without, ostensibly, casting judgment. Miller roots McLuhan's ideology in Catholicism, characterizing the set of values based in "agrarian socialism," a pastoral impulse that clings to conservative politics and social norms.[41] McLuhan has set up a theory of homeostasis that does not encourage the global citizen to participate, but rather sink into complacency in order to stabilize a Catholic sensibility. Miller's criticism of McLuhan's popular appeal deserves to be quoted at length in order to understand the larger argument at work:

> Not only has an impressive academic figure cleared their name of the humiliating stigma of vulgar and destructive triviality; he has actually promoted them to the helm of cultural progress. And it is not just the practitioners of these arts that have been relieved of their cultural guilt; the audience also has been exonerated from the crime of self-indulgence. Intelligent spectators who would once have felt furtive about looking at television can now sit glued to their sets confident in the belief that by doing so they are participating in a new community of human self-interest. So long as the viewers retain their vigilance and attend to the character of the media themselves (regardless of what is being said on them) they are actually pursuing the study of epistemology.[42]

Miller turns the utopianism of McLuhan's admirers upside-down. The rhetoric is hyperbolic, equally dismissive of consumers, producers, and McLuhan himself. But within the argument is a key to understanding the media-age cultural contest that McLuhan frames. Miller is part of the loudest attack on McLuhan's aphorism that the medium is the message. Miller, Umberto Eco,

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Both men criticize McLuhan for his broad extrapolation of technological change and the abstraction of new forms of communication and their effects. Ironically, one of the other common criticisms leveled at McLuhan at the time was the aphoristic, simplified nature of his discourse, what many recognize now as more of an effective, intellectual pastiche, one that reflects the very modes of communication McLuhan was examining.

[41] Jonathan Miller, *Marshall McLuhan* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 17.

[42] Ibid., 6–7.

Williams, and Kenneth E. Boulding, among others, took McLuhan to task for dismissing the content of form at the expense of a utopian paradigm shift. All of these men criticized McLuhan for his broad extrapolation of technological change and the abstraction of new forms of communication and their effects. Boulding writes succinctly that, "the message is not just another medium, as McLuhan is continually saying, for the message consists of the processing of information into knowledge, and not the mere transmission of information through a medium."[43] These are more formalist readings of McLuhan. Ironically, one of the other common criticisms leveled at McLuhan at the time is the aphoristic, simplified nature of his discourse, what many recognize now as more of an effective, intellectual pastiche, what McLuhan referred to as a "mosaic" form of argumentation, one that reflects the very modes of communication McLuhan was examining. As Theall concludes, in a manner neither accepting nor condemning, "this is precisely what McLuhan tries to do—to turn the whole world into a multi-media poem—and in fact he says that satellite technology has made the world itself cease to be nature and become a work of art."[44] It seems as though the frenzy of new media technologies intimidated McLuhan and his critics, and in McLuhan's effort to understand the impact of these ever-changing forms, the fear of evacuating critical thought created a fervent reaction.

These criticisms of McLuhan's work arose simply from under-reading or at least selective reading, but they do address a significant gap in McLuhan's theory: a considerable lack of agency among producers and consumers of media. McLuhan idealizes the consumer as global citizen, and critics overreach in their concern for the producers, returning to the Debordian

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[43] Kenneth E. Boulding, "It is perhaps typical of very creative minds that they hit very large nails not quite on the head," in *McLuhan: Hot and Cool*, ed. Gerald Emanuel Stearn (New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1967), 63.

[44] Theall, *The Medium Is the Rear View Mirror*, 30.

society of the spectacle. I would argue that the adoption and critique of McLuhan in the cultural imaginary stems more from Fuller's concept of ephemeralization: McLuhan's own text is rendered obsolete by the rapid proliferation of technologies that its author did not or could not anticipate. The vagaries of McLuhan's position in the ever-shifting social imagination is exemplified in an issue of the nascent *Wired* magazine, as it named McLuhan their "patron saint": "McLuhan's quasi-theological perspective has given a millenarian tinge to the discourse around new media technologies. Characteristic of the spiritual view of those who promote the ideology of cyberspace is that the spread of a planetary computer network prefigures a quasi-mystical 'neo-biological civilization.'"[45] This "millenarian tinge," I argue, is technological determinism *par excellence*: the spread of a global nation (economic structure) or a fetishization of primitivism (communal society), either one of which is capable of delivering technologies that "abolish space and time." It all depends upon one's vantage point.

Stemming from McLuhan's technological determinism is his bizarre relationship with the market. When he discusses economic forces, McLuhan is witty and insightful. But these moments are few and far between, mostly relegated to vilifying the oppressive forces of marketing, an all too easy target if one considers how important that discipline was to creating and innovating these "extensions of man." McLuhan laments (as Neil Postman would twenty years later[46]) that advertisements are the workhorses of contemporary entertainment: more work, thought, and wit go into the production of advertisements than anything else in the press, leading McLuhan to the argument that ads *are* news; the problem, he quips, is that "they're always good

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[45] In Wise, *Multimedia*, 185.

[46] See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

news."[47] But a major irony behind this rhetoric was how much media industry giants celebrated and analyzed McLuhan's work. In many ways, McLuhan was expressing an attitude already co-opted by the market; as Theall explains,

> From the business community's point of view McLuhan's thoughts are in many ways really rather safe in contemporary terms, such as his 1970 suggestions to a committee on education that the role of ETV is to bring together all of the great figures across the continent and make them accessible within a single classroom, a concept that Ford and Encyclopaedia Britannica have worked with since 1950.[48]

In other words, McLuhan was voicing an impulse that had already been at work in the postwar market: expanding the reach of companies through new media outlets. In fact, contrary to his writings, McLuhan took on a considerable amount of consulting work for these corporations, the humor of which was not lost upon Tom Wolfe:

> One of *the* big American corporations has offered him $5000 to present a closed circuit—ours!—television lecture on—oracle!—the ways the products in its industry will be used in the future. Even before all this, IBM, General Electric, Bell Telephone were flying McLuhan in from Toronto to New York, Pittsburgh, God knows where else, to talk to their hierarchs about … well, about whatever this unseen world of electronic environments that *only he sees fully* is all about.[49]

Whether in spite or because of his consulting work, McLuhan simply dismissed the "Madison Avenue frog-men-of-the-mind" in his writings,[50] and thus ignored one of the most vital contributions to his worldview: the supply and demand of contemporary communications technologies is fueled just as much by the industries that create them as the users who will

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[47] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 282.

[48] Theall, *The Medium Is the Rear View Mirror*, xv–xvi.

[49] Tom Wolfe, "Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Pavlov—what if he is right?" in *McLuhan: Hot and Cool*, ed. Gerald Emanuel Stearn (New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1967), 16, original emphasis.

[50] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 306.

participate in the global village—in other words, consumers. While mass media has indeed altered the fabric of communication, it does not change an important factor in McLuhan's theory: "the content of any medium is always another medium."[51] McLuhan does not seem or want to give credence to the effort of industries, marketing, and economies to shape media as products for consumption; if anything, the privatization and deregulation that occur in the late twentieth century indicate that media are becoming only consumables. Far from the subversive tools McLuhan envisioned, media can only be understood in the form of commodity.

This blind spot in analysis still gave way to entire generations of media and social theorists who used McLuhan to address the shifting social landscape and ubiquity of media and their influence. Rosenberg explained a vital extension of McLuhan's theories: "After *Understanding Media*, it should no longer be acceptable to speak of 'mass culture' as a single lump. Each pop form, this work demonstrates, has its peculiar aesthetic features."[52] This simple conclusion recuperates the monolithic reading of *Understanding Media*, and calls for a more measured application of its ideas. The production and consumption of media are not abstracted concepts, but rather complex matrices of social interaction, economic practice, and cultural desires and anxieties.

These explicit gaps in McLuhan's argument concerning economic forces remain, however, and they are precisely the topic discussed by Herbert Marcuse; it is also what will allow performance-makers of the era to begin to approach media with insightful and reflexive perspectives.

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[51] Ibid., 19.

[52] Rosenberg, "He is a belated Whitman singing the body electric with Thomas Edison as accompanist," 198.

Marcuse: Thinking in Multiple Dimensions

Published the same year as *Understanding Media*, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* had an enormous impact upon Marxist and other leftist ideologies proliferating in the tumultuous 1960s. Marcuse works from a vital premise: "a mature and free industrial society would continue to depend on a division of labor which involves inequality of function," and, granting this, "Liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination."[53] Marcuse's work throughout the 1960s is derived from his work during WWII with the U.S. government, which employed Marcuse from 1942–1951. A member of the expatriot Frankfurt School, Marcuse was hired as an expert on German culture and politics for various government intelligence agencies. Douglas Kellner documents, "In a handwritten letter dated November 11, 1942 from Washington […] Marcuse told Horkheimer that he was negotiating for a position in the intelligence Bureau of the Office of War Information: 'My function would be to make suggestions on "how to present the enemy to the American people," in the press, movies, propaganda, etc.'"[54] While McLuhan worked in academia and consulted with businesses, Marcuse filed reports to recommend counter-propaganda strategies in Germany. Marcuse was a part of the same military-industrial complex that led to a variety of consumer technologies, ideologies and, thus, reactions to the cycle of innovation and destruction. The Marxist reevaluation that Marcuse formulated paralleled the counterculture ideologies that emerged from Roszak's Age of Affluence.

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[53] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man,* 44, 7.

[54] Douglas Kellner, "Technology, War and Fascism: Marcuse in the 1940s," in *Technology, War and Fascism*, Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume 1, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1998), 16.

Marcuse's wartime reports and theorizations fostered a bleak discourse, in which any thought of rebellion or subversion is absorbed or appropriated by the system that gave rise to the thought or action, much like counterculture's tug of war with technology: resistance cannot exist without production, and production cannot innovate without resistance. *One-Dimensional Man* was in this sense a reaction against Marcuse's and the U.S.'s ideological failures in the wake of WWII. Kellner recounts,

> Marcuse felt that the efforts of him and his colleagues to produce a more democratic and socialist society after World War Two failed in the dismal atmosphere of the Cold War, but nonetheless his 1940s work should be read as an attempt to politicize critical theory, to link theory with politics, and thus to make theory an instrument of practice and social change.[55]

While his work for the U.S. government was, at base, a job and paycheck, the booming postwar economy furthered Marcuse's convictions in the oppressive forces of capitalism. Charles Reitz writes, "Marcuse believed that the theory of alienation required revision especially in light of his conviction that capitalism had become a society of plenty rather than scarcity, and because the structural role of the working class had fundamentally altered."[56] Postwar affluence and prosperity escalated the one-dimensional life, technological rationality.

But the technologies that came about in the 1960s, the ones that helped to impose this sense of alienation, worked against Marcuse's title: a one-dimensional object is simply a point in space, and so the concept seems misguided, given Marcuse's Gramscian-inflected thinking, the binary of hegemony/counter-hegemony. Marcuse seems obsessed with technological projections of culture, that "private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality: mechanical mimesis" and asserts that labor becomes an integral part of leisure, resulting in the

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[55] Ibid., 36.

[56] Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities: A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 143.

joining of sexuality and labor into "one unconscious, rhythmic automatism."[57] Both of these arguments evoke binaries; Marcuse is haunted not by one dimension, but rather by two—surrounded by screens that render the contemporary citizen passive, as screens become almost anthropomorphic oppressors through their successful folding into the everyday.

But it was not the media objects that were the instruments of domination, but rather how they were used, undoubtedly inspired by Marcuse's work for the U.S. government. The failure of one-dimensional society was not its two-dimensional screens, but rather what those screens conveyed; the message is the medium. Here one finds the singular opportunity to overcome contemporary alienation: the aesthetic imagination. Reitz continues, "Though Marcuse is convinced that art, alone, is powerless to actualize its institution of the truth, he believes it has a 'chance' […] of effecting sociopolitical process against the alienation and one-dimensionality of advanced industrial society, if it can be coupled with the transformative capacity of technology and science."[58] This is Marcuse's theory at its most hopeful and vulnerable: he acknowledged the aesthetic imagination's potential for change, but, once clarified, the potential is more of a utopian ideal or critical exercise. The greater socioeconomic forces would maintain content, unless that content were obliterated entirely: "Free the form from its hostile content, or rather make the form the only content, by making it the instrument of destruction."[59] For Marcuse, this destruction

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[57] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 10, 27.

[58] Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, 154.

[59] Herbert Marcuse, "Some Remarks on Aragon: Art and Politics in the Totalitarian Era," in *Technology, War and Fascism*, Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume 1, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1998), 202.

needed to be absolute; he declared the avant-gardist negation of the early twentieth century inadequate.[60]

Without the aesthetic imagination fully seizing the media in order to destroy oppressive content, Marcuse argued that as products—material goods and ideologies—are made available to more and more populations, more and more classes, they thus become an integral part of the everyday, which renders one-dimensional thought and behavior "in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their consent, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension."[61] Marcuse inhabits the gap left by McLuhan: whereas McLuhan implicitly trusts the consumers to become activists (in the broadest of senses), Marcuse claims that any attempt to do so is rendered inert by market forces. To McLuhan, individuals are potential participants in a global village; to Marcuse, individuals are "products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression."[62] To McLuhan, media are extensions of man; to Marcuse, men are extensions of media.[63]

But Marcuse's two-dimensional dystopia is just as problematic as McLuhan's utopia, as Marcuse's theory seems to compare dominant culture to a black hole: a force that absorbs or neutralizes any resistance or encounter. Despite the very immediate forces, people, and events that he wrote about during WWII, the forces he theorized in the aftermath were entirely abstract:

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[60] Ibid., 202.

[61] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12.

[62] Ibid., 5.

[63] I claim this despite Marcuse's similar semantic turn to McLuhan's, writing that "this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable." Ibid., 9.

"Domination is enforced by the overwhelming, anonymous power and efficiency of the technological society."[64] If McLuhan was somewhat blind to the production side of economics, Marcuse virtually ignored consumption. Without the acknowledgment of multimedia's presence as an economic and social force, McLuhan's utopia is a false consciousness, one that plays into the very hegemonic forces that participants willfully, happily, ignore; but if this social force is allowed an autonomous, oppressive existence as Marcuse does, a vital aspect of commodity culture is entirely repressed.

While Marcuse adds class as an essential framework to the discussion, his subjects, no matter which class, are automata. He establishes a play on the word "techno-logy," in which thought has been rendered "instrumental" due to technology's ubiquity in everyday life; one-dimensional man thinks and acts to the point where "domination perpetuates and extends itself not just through technology but *as technology*."[65] And indeed this is how McLuhan and Marcuse can be contrasted as antagonists: one champions the interconnectedness that media provide while the other fears the appropriation and mobilization of media as a type of enslavement.

And although, historically contextualized, Marcuse's antagonism between capitalism and communism, with cultural tensions mounting between democratic and communist nations, underlies his ideology, he does little to distinguish these technological extensions of post-industrial technologies from a dangerously universal argument that technological extensions are absolute modes of domination, an argument that would have to begin with the earliest of tools and productive processes. In other words, the main idea that Marcuse derives from his reevaluation of Marxism is the understanding that the process of technology is a political

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[64] Ibid., 226.

[65] Ibid., 158, original emphasis.

process, an understanding Mumford had written about precisely three decades earlier.[66] McLuhan's theories of technology, on the other hand, read as politically disinterested, which, of course, they cannot be. Both readings, I argue, are not only reductive, but also share qualities of determinism and ideology. Both *Understanding Media* and *One-Dimensional Man* are products of culture in the wake of postwar industrialization and the integration of new media communication into the everyday.

The value of Marcuse's text is the continuation of Mumford's and Benjamin's projects; *One-Dimensional Man* is an analysis of mechanical reproduction that has extended beyond the totalitarian state Benjamin feared, forming a complicated alliance with consumerism and capitalist ideology. Curiously, Benjamin's warning that mankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art," bears an uncanny resemblance to Marcuse's thesis that "the more blatantly irrational the society becomes, the greater the rationality of the artistic universe."[67] In other words, both statements posit that one-dimensional thought undermines art, which leads to political manipulation and domination of artistic forms themselves. Marcuse's utopian conclusions were never to be though; the liberation of the one-dimensional society could come only from the fantasy that technics enabled: "Marcuse believed that emancipation through art could be an historical possibility today because of the achievements of technological civilization that have allowed certain of humanity's most fanciful and utopian aspirations (flight,

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[66] Ibid., 168; see also Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*.

[67] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 242; Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 239.

telecommunication, and automation) to be realized."[68] The aesthetic imagination could not fully dominate the one-dimensional regime already in place, however, and so the increasing production of media and technologies for the consumer and infiltration of these technologies into the everyday defied Marcuse's hopes and increased McLuhan's celebrity.

McLuhan serves as a strong example of Marcuse's claim, as McLuhan read the appropriation without an explicit eye for politics. Both McLuhan and Marcuse are early products of a multimedia environment, where the screens and communications available and accessible are not read as overt political forces, but rather a seamless part of contemporary existence. As Kostelanetz writes, "Because of the impact of contemporary design, most of us experience more consciously designed art per day than our historical predecessors. […] Today, art is everywhere, impressing our sensibilities all the time."[69] And while Kostelanetz's object of study is multimedia performance (the theatre of mixed means), one could just as easily replace the word "art" with "media" for McLuhan or "capitalist spectacle" for Marcuse. The fact of the matter is that all three attempt to understand this new economy in which industries no longer sell products for consumption, but the desire to consume. The postwar boom is driven by an ideology of marketing that adapts industrial forces already in production as products for savvy consumers who have new levels of expendable income and new modes of entertainment and communication, many thanks to industrial advances made through wartime research and production.

Thus, these theorists attempted to make sense of postwar communication and media that stemmed from wartime technologies. The new look of communications and entertainment, far

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[68] Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, 169.

[69] Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 36.

from the "home of the future" that Henthorn discusses as lost, was one that blended into the home of a more integrated evolution. In place of bubble cars and two-way communication screens, postwar technologies continued a much subtler shift in the perception of multimedia technologies. The groundwork had been laid during the war, and the momentum after brought about the rhetoric of the domicile to marketing and design. Strangely aligned with these subtle shifts was an artistic movement, one designed to bring art into the everyday: the happening. But ideology of the happening was also one that championed multimedia because of happenings' integrated practice and despite its ideological basis.

Free-Market Happening

A few years after one of the very first performances cited as a happening, the "Untitled Event" at Black Mountain College in 1952, and mere months before Allan Kaprow staged *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, the U.S. Information Agency staged its own multimedia happening in the form of The American National Exhibition in Moscow. From July to September 1959, three million citizens of Communist Russia

> streamed through the 30,000 square-foot display marveling at frozen foods, radios, color televisions, phonographs, and other consumer goods. They read placards describing American cultural, scientific and technical achievements. They admired automobiles and full-scale models of typical U.S. homes. They peppered USIA guides with thousands of questions about unemployment, race relations, living standards, and other aspects of the United States.[70]

Ahead of the performance curve, market forces displayed the power of the aestheticization of the everyday. While very little of the American National Exhibition idealized chance operations or artistic experimentation, the resonances with happenings are myriad: the display, use, and even

[70] Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*, 88.

celebration of everyday activities and ephemera, a framework of the everyday as exceptional and aesthetic, and of course the inclusion of multimedia as not merely augmenting experience, but a natural part of daily existence. And, much like happenings in the U.S., the exhibition was an ideological representation of the everyday in America, but necessarily not by dint of its context and presentation.

Most important, however, is the focus upon the idealization of multimedia as everyday. Much like happenings, the ideal of the exhibition was implicitly white, upper-middle class America: not everyone had a fully furnished kitchen from Macy's; not everyone had a color television. This presentation was more focused on generating desire among Russian citizenry: not so much about the product but the desire to consume the product. Fostering this desire to consume was not only to sell products, but also to sell democracy. The exhibition was designed to communicate that the ability to obtain these goods, this everyday lifestyle, was possible only in a capitalist, democratic society. Much to the surprise of the U.S. coordinators, though, the Russians were underwhelmed by the spectacle. The multimediated everyday in the U.S. did not excite them, and so, "Rather than downplaying American affluence, U.S. information strategists realized that future exhibits should emphasize the economic opportunities that democratic capitalism afforded U.S. citizens."[71] In other words, the Russians found multimedia's role banal—the American National Exhibition performance was not exceptional enough. If anything, the outright acceptance of technologies such as new media communications proved that media's quotidian place in contemporary society was well established. In both politics and performance, producers would have to adapt to the cultural understanding and further the notion of multimedia

[71] Ibid., 92.

as a separate, consumable addition, and ideology that would inspire and be inspired by theorists such as McLuhan and Marcuse.

This striking and amusing reaction to the exhibition emphasizes a culturally reflexive moment—the marketing of national ideologies during the Cold War had become so common that the Russian people were not willing to accept a normal, familiar picture of the U.S. They, too, wanted to see a "home of the future," a country so advanced, it was only recognizable as fantasy. This example points to how overwrought the desire had become—to Russians and Americans alike—and how out of step the ideal of media culture was with reality. Perhaps it was this disconnection between expectation and reality that allowed a savvier world of marketing and consumer culture, one that understood and exploited consumer desire for fantastical worlds, to flourish. But this left a gap in a more pragmatic and realistic portrayal of everyday media.

An important result of the dissonance between the banality of technology and its fantastical, futuristic potentials, and the expectations that follow both, is an art form that attempts to break down art into the everyday, one that became an unexpectedly pioneering force in multimedia ideology: happenings.

Happenings: Defining the Everyday

"*The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.*"[72] This famous line, penned by Allan Kaprow in an essay entitled "Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings" (1966), describes a foundational ideology of what practitioners

[72] Allan Kaprow, "Excerpts from 'Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings,'" in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), 235, original emphasis.

and critics (though mostly critics) had begun to call "happenings." After emerging from a visual arts background, Kaprow envisioned a new type of performance that did away with the bourgeois logic of conventional theatre by abandoning narrative and psychology. The happening, though not really codified even by its most famous proponents, was a key to understanding the commodity culture of the time in practice. Though rhetorically technophobic, happenings artists and performers provide some of the greatest insights into the actual technological culture of the time.

The word "happenings" was first presented in Kaprow's seminal essay, "The Legend of Jackson Pollock," in which he wrote of how Pollock's performative style of painting would alter the artistic landscape: "Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us, but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard of happenings and events found in garage cans, police files, hotel lobbies … and on the streets …."[73] The term was appropriated to reflect the aesthetic of the mundane—something that simply happens—divorced from the theatrical, ostensibly making use of chaos and chance operations. But even by the mid-sixties, many of the critics and seemingly all of the practitioners of happenings cast doubt on such a name for the genre. Kostelanetz noted, "The new movement has generally been called 'Happenings,' which is hardly appropriate, for not only do all examples of the new theatre have some kind of script, but very few use chance procedure, either in composition or performance, and even fewer depend upon improvisation, or entice an audience to participate."[74] Happenings were not practiced in the same way by any two people; Kaprow's manifesto served more as an ideological call than an instruction manual to most of the artistic

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[73] Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003 [1993]), 1–10.

[74] Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 4.

community. Kaprow himself was jaded quickly by how critics and the press had come to refer to nearly everything as a happening, a word he claimed to use as "an accidental occurrence."[75] Robert Whitman discussed the labels for his performances as a matter of marketing: "The idea of 'theatre happenings' in the advertisement for *Prune. Flat.* [sic] has a lot to do with my compulsion to talk about it as theatre work and the producer's interest in using the word 'happenings' for its commercial value."[76] Much like the genesis of the term multimedia, happenings became shorthand for generating interest and sales.

With the lack of consensus among artists and critics, Goldberg observes, "The only common denominator of these diverse activities was New York City, with its downtown lofts, alternative galleries, cafes and bars that housed the performers of the early sixties. Outside America, however, European and Japanese artists were developing an equally large and varied body of performances at the same time."[77] Goldberg is selling short the value of community at the moment and overlooks some significant historical occurrences that helped to drive happenings. On a very practical level, a community of artists was grappling with the relevance of its work, as Mildred Glimcher points out: "the Abstract Expressionists were no longer relevant to the optimism of the United States as it moved beyond the privations of the postwar world. In all media—visual arts, literature, poetry, theater, music—artists sought to connect with life as they were living it and to find the means to make their world resonate in their work."[78] The exchange between ideas and gallery shows was formalized when John Cage taught his Experimental

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[75] Ibid., 111.

[76] Ibid., 240.

[77] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 132.

[78] Mildred L. Glimcher, *Happenings: New York, 1958–1963* (New York, The Monacelli Press, LLC, 2012), 13.

Composition class at the New School for Social Research in 1958. Artists from a variety of backgrounds worked together and showcased performances, including Jackson MacLow, Al Hansen, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, and Kaprow.[79] All of these artists began working together outside of the New School, mostly on works that could be considered happenings, and Kaprow continued educating artists in his own work as a professor at Rutgers University.[80] Thus, New York City functioned very much as a center of happenings in discourse and practice.

Although happenings were an international phenomenon, the U.S. was a particularly fertile environment in which to create these everyday performances. Take for example Glimcher's very useful definition of the genesis of happenings:

> the performance works known as Happenings should be considered part of a worldwide reexamination of culture and society in the decade following the end of World War II. During the 1950s, humanity emerged from deprivation and scarcity into abundance, self-confidence, and economic security. Yet always present was the possibility of annihilation because of nuclear weapons and the advent of the Cold War. Although the generation that fought the war still held the reins, those who had been adolescents at the time were now in their twenties and beginning a search for a new cultural and political point of view. The world had become smaller with the commercialization of air travel and communication; televisions were in most American middle-class homes in 1952. *Time* and *Life* brought the world to America through photographs and news stories. There was a love affair with speed, with all things new and technological; while rockets could deliver bombs, they could also send humankind into space.[81]

Despite her recognition of the "worldwide reexamination," note that most of her description is uniquely American, whether explicit (middle-class homes) or implicit (the very American phenomena of *Life* and the moon landing). Glimcher repurposes the double nature of the Age of

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[79] Henri, *Total Art*, 89.

[80] See Geoffrey Hendricks, ed., *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia, and Rutgers University, 1958–1972* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

[81] Glimcher, *Happenings*, 11–12.

Affluence for her definition of the artistic environment. This argument is furthered by the work of Judith F. Rodenbeck, who writes,

> The imbrication of corporate and industrial money in a nostalgic (imaginary) "reenactment" of early modern (preindustrial and early industrial) privated life, as administered by the state (especially in the case of [colonial] Williamsburg), had regulatory implications for everyday consumption and certainly for leisure consumption—including the consumption of a bracketed "everyday life"—in the 1950s.[82]

Glimcher and Rodenbeck make the case for the uniquely American aesthetic from which happenings derived: a postwar restlessness and revaluation of contemporary experience and communication.

While happenings were being created abroad by the likes of the Gutai Group in Japan, Vostell in Germany, and Tadeusz Kantor in Poland, Kostelanetz frames the happenings movement within an anti-European, anti-classical sentiment, writing, "not only does the new theatre display a rough surface texture and hybrid quality that is so unlike the smooth prettiness typical of European art, but formally it recreates all the visual diversity and discontinuity of our culture—a disordered order that invariably strikes the European organicist mentality as 'chaos.'"[83] The struggle for cultural understanding was at its most fervent in New York City, and the artists working in that community in the 50s and 60s were among the most productive and vocal. Goldberg recounts this distinction between U.S. and foreign artists as an actual political schism, noting that a number of artists, including Henry Flynt, George Macunias, Ay-O, Takaka Saito, and Tony Conrad, picketed a 1963 performance at Carnegie Hall, "regarding the foreign import as 'cultural imperialism.'"[84] No matter the extent of this schism, it is clear that the New

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[82] Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes*, 88–90.

[83] Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 29.

[84] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 133.

York community of happenings artists had forged a geographically and aesthetically delimited identity.

Michael Kirby was one of the first critics to codify New York happenings, retrofitting a definition for his anthology that discusses two main elements of the form: compartmentalized structure and nonmatrixed performance. Compartmentalization describes the nonlinear form of performance. Aligning the structure of happenings with circus or vaudeville, Kirby notes that the performances under consideration function discretely, without narrative arcs, abandoning the vanity and convention of theatre in favor of multiple perspectives and almost endless possibilities for interpretation.[85] The corporal corollary is nonmatrixed performance: a type of task-based performance the focuses on quotidian gesture and non-psychological characters.[86] While Kirby may disagree with Kaprow's call for the erasure between art and the everyday, the form of happenings certainly highlights the banal within an artistic endeavor.

Most critics agree that the first full-fledged example of the happening occurred at Black Mountain College in 1952: the "Untitled Event," coordinated by John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Goldberg amalgamated accounts of the evening:

> Preparation for the performance was minimal: performers were given a "score" which indicated "time brackets" only and each was expected to fill out privately moments of action, inaction and silence as indicated on the score, none of which was to be revealed until the performance itself. In this way there would be no "causal relationship" between one incident and the next, and according to Cage, "anything that happened after that happened in the observer himself."[87]

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[85] Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1965), 13.

[86] Ibid., 16.

[87] Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 126.

The piece emphasized chance operations over the quotidian, but the aesthetic of those such as Cage and Cunningham gravitated toward the pedestrian, the everyday. Despite the ideology expressed by Cage, the performance was carefully crafted by the independent artists, who incorporated a variety of media into their respective sections of performance; the event featured paintings, projections, records, and film clips manipulated by Robert Rauschenberg, a piece for radio by Cage, not to mention readings of poetry and music played by David Tudor on a "prepared piano."[88] While many previous performances had utilized such media, this unscored event was a proto-multimedia, proto-happening piece, one that acknowledged the aesthetic and cultural value of everyday media events. But as performance investigated the interaction between performer and media further, Kirby's notion of compartmentalization was abandoned in favor of a more integrated understanding of media within the everyday.

By pushing the conventions of performance and making few if any purposive claims, happenings such as the Untitled Event and those that followed reevaluate simple notions of time and space. Removing the limitations of theatre, the more abstract performances of the everyday allowed artists to investigate and interpret the shifting perceptions of time and space in the wake of new technologies of communication. Richard Schechner wrote of this benefit:

> Being in the world, the artist reciprocates and tries to make his Happening an image of the world, particularly of its busy-ness. The multifocus complexity of these pieces is astounding, and offensive to those schooled in theatre's single-focus. […] The result, generally, has not been the Absurdist cry against a complex world, but a celebration of the world's complexity.[89]

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Richard Schechner, "Happenings," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), 218.

But Schechner's notion of "complexity" incorporates everyday existence: how does an artist grapple with the ways in which we view the world? Certainly, newer media forms were paramount for a new understanding of perception. Kaprow, with an almost religious asceticism, claimed that media should remain outside the purview of happenings, writing, "The media are still too undigested for us to feel at home with them. This is essential: to be profitably involved in an activity of arrangements, the materials arranged must not command attention."[90] This statement not only overdetermines the definition of happenings and ignores much of the work by Kaprow's colleagues, but it is also a remarkable moment of pastoral nostalgia that we may consider one of the foundational criticisms that would decades later turn into the debate over liveness. Kaprow eliminates the notion that performance is, in and of itself, a medium, that it is apart from other, "new" media of mass communication. More precisely to Kaprow's point is the fact that performance belongs outside the economic structure of media—happenings were an ideology seeking to escape the commodity spectacle of theatre. Despite Kaprow, however, the denial of media could not have been further from what happenings accomplished with multimedia, because the media were already part of the everyday, not only in the arts, but also for U.S. culture at large. Rodenbeck goes so far as to point out the contradiction between Kaprow's writing and practice, positing:

> Kaprow himself came increasingly to focus his critical attention on the mediation of behavior by socially inculcated habit and by the camera (photography, film, and video). Thus, when Kaprow spoke of a 'blurring' between art and life, he was articulating not simply Cagean optimism; rather—and more pointedly—he was waging an intentionally aggressive attack on spectacle culture.[91]

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[90] Ibid., 243.

[91] Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes*, xiii.

Despite the discourse, happenings artists adapted media culture as a part of this everyday aesthetic.

As Kaprow traces in "Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings," most of the artists associated with happenings had backgrounds in the visual arts, and thus one of the most significant shifts toward multimedia performance is the entrance of visual arts into performance. A logical progression can be made from painters' experiments in collage to the retooling of performance, and more importantly, the ability to incorporate various elements to redefine genre. Take for example Pablo Picasso's or Georges Braque's incorporation of newspaper articles, wallpaper, and fabric swatches into their paintings; or the Dadaists' photomontages, which combined photography, painting, and collage, with a penchant for chaos; or Marcel Duchamps' readymades.[92] As film and television became more popular in the cultural everyday, these elements were brought into visual arts as well. But due to the spatial and dynamic elements of film and video, they began to take on a life of their own, notably in the performance art of the 1960s and 70s. In the cases of collage and media art, both were challenges to conventions of genre, both gave little credence to "high" versus "low" art, and both began to recognize the performative aspects of the visual arts. What separated happenings from earlier works that incorporated media were the ideology of communication and the role of the audience. Rodenbeck characterized these distinctions well, writing

> Bypassing the (revolutionary) psychoanalysis of surrealism and the (revolutionary) voluntarism of Dada, happenings instead adopted an experimentalist approach to art materials and art making and, in turn, to (art) experience that revealed a fundamental split between habit and consciousness. The happenings' construction of experience, rather than being conciliatory, provided a strong and canny critique of contemporary sociality.[93]

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[92] See Clement Greenberg, "Collage," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989 [1961]), 70–84.

[93] Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes*, ix.

The split between habit and consciousness extended from the artistic gesture to the interaction with the audience, which "figured participants—*and* attention *and* senses—as objects, collage elements, exchangeable tokens."[94] Rodenbeck's analysis demonstrates that happenings are an extension from collage—according to Henri, "chance is used, but the resulting combinations are then fixed"[95]—but goes beyond earlier forms in her treatment of performers and spectators as active objects within that collage. Since this collage incorporates temporality, objects and people are art in addition to a variety of media both old and new.

The proliferation and accessibility of consumer electronics reinforced engagement with performances, even those with limited budgets and means. Film and video work was common beginning with the release of the Sony Portapak in 1965; artists began documenting and experimenting with the video formerly available only in the commercial sphere.[96] Now video works by Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, and others were being championed in the U.S. art scene. Also significant was Germany's Vostell, whose dé/collages were among the first to feature televisions as sculptural elements, as opposed to simple modes of communication. He would also be an active participant in the American Fluxus movement.[97] It is this very impulse, to experiment with and incorporate the object as a mode of understanding the medium, that made happenings one of the most insightful forms by which to investigate media

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[94] Ibid., 164, original emphasis.

[95] Henri, *Total Art*, 89.

[96] See Giesekam, *Staging the Screen*, 72–73.

[97] See Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I.B. Taurus and Co. Ltd., 2005); John G. Hanhardt, *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Layton, UT: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1987); and Kaye, *Multi-Media*.

technologies. But instead of treating technologies of communication with technophobic or technophillic eyes, as did Kaprow, McLuhan, or Marcuse, many artists such as Paik and Vostell treated media as everyday elements, as in collage, acknowledging their role in cultural literacy.

These objects or elements were not high art: they were mundane pieces of everyday existence. They were quotidian, boring—popular. They were just as deserving of artistic study, and indeed, after collage, were considered legitimate parts of that study. This line of thinking was vital to finding alternative meanings or tracing cultural impulses that would never have been noted if media had been left to commercial forces alone. It took the ideology of the everyday and its permeation of the visual and performance art world to thoroughly investigate multimedia as a phenomenon. McLuhan and Marcuse provide clues to how this transition occurred; both texts attempt to deal with the overwhelming presence of the media in everyday culture. McLuhan in particular expresses an anxiety shared with Marcuse when he notes that "All electric appliances, far from labor-saving devices, are new forms of work, decentralized, available to everybody."[98] The tension between the liberation and oppression that everyday media creates was investigated in happenings as a struggle for modes of contemporary communication and expression.

Many branches of the arts were appropriated by happenings to push the boundaries, the definitions of artistic genre. Painting was not relegated to the two dimensions of the canvas, visual art was not limited to the final product (as Jackson Pollock displayed in his action paintings), and performance was not relegated to the control of the playwright, the actor, or even the stage-space. All three attempted to alter or even erase the line between art and life, remove boundaries separating artistic virtuosity, genius, and resources. Somewhat ironically, it is this form of performance and art, one that embraces the everyday, that allowed multimedia as an idea

[98] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 229.

to establish itself. By utilizing various media in performance, happenings validated mediated performance, the type against which later movements and impulses would rebel.

Another practitioner who was heavily involved in the happenings community in New York, Robert Whitman, was instrumental in celebrating and troubling the role of media in contemporary performance and communication. Whitman, as one of the most commercially and critically successful practitioners, mobilized media as a signal of shifting everyday expression and engaged with media in performance as a necessary component of performance.

Robert Whitman: Multimedia Redefining the Everyday

Robert Whitman often incorporates newer media into his visual, architectural, and performance pieces in an effort to reimagine the everyday. Whitman attended Rutgers University, where he studied art with Allan Kaprow in the 1950s. He began an MFA at Columbia, but never completed the program. He was also one of the driving forces behind Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), a group that attempted to unite the arts and engineering in the 1960s.[99] Like many of the early happenings artists, Whitman was trained as a painter, eventually making his way to performance.[100] He calls these performances "theatrical events," but they could easily be categorized in any of the other movements named earlier, even happenings. And indeed, Whitman was categorized as a member of the happenings "club" by

[99] See Calvin Tomkins, "Onward and Upward with the Arts: E.A.T.," *The New Yorker*, October 3, 1970, 83–133.

[100] Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 219.

critics such as Glimcher, Henri, Kirby, Kostelanetz, and others.[101] Like many of his contemporaries, Whitman tried to remain aloof from any defining categories. I argue, in fact, that Whitman's *Prune Flat* in particular exemplified many of the ideals of the happening. The performance engaged with the politics of the everyday, playing with the cultural and economic forces of production and consumption theorized by those such as McLuhan and Marcuse, examining how these technologies reinvent everyday spaces, and situated the performance as a harbinger of performances to come, embracing and investigating what multimedia performance could be or accomplish.

Whitman's works are engagements with space, reevaluations of how bodies, given a variety of restrictions, move and inhabit space. Through his use of the pedestrian and mundane, actions become abstracted, fostering new ways of seeing. As Whitman wrote, "At a certain point, fantasy is an object in the physical world. […] The fantasy exists as an object, as a central physical entity, and as part of the story that you tell about other objects."[102] In other words, performance is a way of reframing perception to the point of phantasmagoria, and through this reframing the audience can defamiliarize itself from the everyday to see how it operates. This eye toward the everyday bridges the schism that began in the late 1950s, when the tools of multimedia communication and entertainment became integral to the everyday, and fantastical in the idealization of multimedia's potential, as both a tool of marketing (such as the failed American Exhibition) and of utopian change (as suggested through the discourse of McLuhan, Leary, and even Marcuse). The work of Robert Whitman during the same period investigated the

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[101] See Glimcher, *Happenings*; Henri, *Total Art*; Kirby, *Happenings*; and Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*.

[102] Robert Whitman, *Playback* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2003), 17.

fantasy in order to discover behaviors, attitudes, and uses that escape everyday experience. Multimedia, for Whitman, was vital to understanding how a body inhabits space.

And while much of his work engages with multimedia and new media, Whitman does not treat media as exceptional; rather, "new" media help reinforce an image just as light, sound, and costume do. As Lynne Cooke writes, "technology has, for [Whitman], only been a means to an end. [… W]hat counts are the abstract relationships that specify and individuate an experience—color, form, rhythm, structures of time and space, condensed and distilled into his definition of the implicit 'image' of the work."[103] Performance is a composite of media, theatre included, designed to reevaluate the everyday. *Prune Flat* was, by this standard, an exemplary work of the happenings genre.

Prune Flat, a piece written for three performers and two films, explored the tensions between mediation and embodiment, two- and three-dimensionality, and fantasy and the everyday. It was commissioned for the Expanded Cinema Festival at the Filmmakers' Cinematheque, a small movie theatre and performance space, in December 1965.[104] The performance featured Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, and Mimi Stark, all dancers involved heavily in the happenings and postmodern dance movements. *Prune Flat* was positively, if not emphatically, received by critics such as Jill Johnston, who notably reviewed the piece under the heading of "Dance," and Richard Kostelanetz, critic of the mixed-means theatre and expanded

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[103] Whitman, *Playback*, 46.

[104] My account of *Prune Flat* is a composite of Whitman's original score (reprinted in *Playback*) and a video of a restaging at Le Centre Pompidou in 2001, featured in *Robert Whitman: Performances from the 1960s*, directed by Robert Whitman (New York: Artpix, 2003), DVD.

cinema.[105] The performance has been held up as one of the most successful happenings not only due to this critical reception, but also because of its transition to an Off-Broadway run at the Martinique Theater and Circle in the Square in June of 1966.[106] For the piece, Whitman filmed in a variety of locations—the streets of New York City, forests—sometimes with the performers, and then proceeded to choreograph the live performance alongside the edited footage. Throughout the piece, the live performers silently and subtly moved in front of the movie screen, onto which two separate films were projected simultaneously. Forti, along with Whitman, retrospectively compiled a "score" for the piece, divided into two columns: the left a list of shots and edits of the film, the right the movement and blocking of the performers.[107] The score illustrates a spatial concern with the interaction between the body and media, and reflects some of the issues raised by both McLuhan and Marcuse with postwar technology and communication and the body's role in these concerns. Whitman set a very practical tone when he described his wishes for the piece, saying, "I want people to understand that world was manufactured. It is an object world. There are a lot of funny things that happen between what's going on onstage and what's going on in the back where the projectors are. It's very important for me to have people know that those are projectors back there and that they're making noise and shooting light out."[108] The object world—screens, cameras, projectors, bodies, lights—were all the subjects of

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[105] See Jill Johnston, "Dance Journal: Three Theatre Events," *Village Voice*, December 23, 1965, 11, 25; and Kostelantez, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*.

[106] Another well-known performer, Lucinda Childs, replaced Hay for the Off-Broadway run. See Robert Whitman, *Playback*, 208.

[107] Ibid., 34–43.

[108] In Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 240.

Prune Flat and were exposed equally for aesthetic and critical interrogation. How these objects, both bodies and media, were meant to work together is where the tension lies.

The opening image of *Prune Flat* was a film projection of a movie camera, which might indicate that *Prune Flat* was an investigation of film, but this belies the piece's complexity, which involved multiple forms in conversation with one another. To take even this simple image of a camera, with no competing live bodies on stage, one could consider the simple, metonymic image: camera, film. But then consider the fact that there is a camera filming the camera: we see the object that should be our frame into the world we are witnessing, reminding us of McLuhan's claim that "the content of any medium is always another medium."[109] Here, the audience was faced with multiple layers: film as the content of film as the content of performance. The camera was cannibalizing its own purpose. The mechanism was revealed, and Whitman immediately problematized the stage-space and denaturalized the media with which the audience was presented.

A second film was then introduced, projected onto the first. The first, the "larger" one that took up the entire screen, projected a variety of images and settings, while the other, "smaller" film, was projected at the bottom of the screen and was often used as a superimposition on the live performers once they entered. Because the performers were wearing plain white outfits, almost shrouds, the smaller film could project a variety of outfits onto the performers like paper dolls. One moment, a woman was wearing a stylish go-go dress; the next she was naked. The movements of the performer were meant to sync with the movements of the projected performer, though of course they never matched precisely. Some moments of

[109] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

mismatched movements were eerie, a type of cinematic ghosting.[110] Sometimes the smaller film just went white to emphasize the live performer by washing out the larger film being projected around her. Thus the film created its own barrier between its filmic world and the live performance. The larger film projected a number of unconnected images: a film projector, fruits being sliced, settings in a forest and on the streets of New York City. These produced a number of effects for *Prune Flat*, predominantly to explore the tensions between filmic and live realities.

The first series of scenes in the large film included an orange, a tomato, and a pepper, each cut in half to reveal, respectively, ball bearings, glitter, and feathers on the inside. In regard to the film itself, the images spoke to the confounding of the everyday; the conflict between what is expected and what occurs; the interior betraying the exterior. It was also a tongue-in-cheek celebration of film's fantastical capabilities, albeit with a low-tech aesthetic. But more significant than any reading of the isolated film were the interactions between the film and the live bodies. Lacking a coherent narrative, the piece found its main tension in between the performers and the moving images on the screen. Indeed, the film could certainly be considered a fourth character. When the orange was opened to show the ball bearings, two people slowly sidestep on to the stage. Their movements were fluid, subtle, so that their entrance would hardly be noticed, save for the slight undulations of the film screen.[111] The result was a play of space in motion, as ball bearings rolled against the slow entrance of the performers. When the pepper was cut open and

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[110] For a detailed analysis of media and ghosting in Whitman's work, see Branden W. Joesph, "Plastic Empathy: The Ghost of Robert Whitman," *Grey Room* 25 (Fall 2006): 64–91.

[111] Here is another distinction between Kaprow and Whitman; the latter employed professional dancers for *Prune Flat*. While much of the movement in the piece is simple and quotidian, it was very carefully choreographed and timed to match the movements of the film.

glitter spilled out, the silver sparkles shined, but also waved due to the slight movements of the performers standing in front of the screen.

Whitman toyed with this dimensional tension. In contrast to the magical scene of *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) in which Buster Keaton's projectionist seamlessly jumped between the live and filmic worlds, *Prune Flat* accentuated the difference between the flatness of the screen and the three dimensions of the performers, though at moments the performers disappeared in the busy projection. For an audience member, it is very difficult to surrender the expectation that stage and screen are separate spaces.[112] Branden W. Joseph writes of the piece that, "At work is a generalized spectacularization that dissolves the performers into the projection, disembodies them such that they carry no particular weight in contradistinction to it."[113] Joseph situates Whitman's critique of the commodity within a very Marcusian framework, that the performer (the individual) was folded into the instrument of technological domination. Joseph argues that Whitman did succeed in restoring "some measure of its uncanniness," but it was in spite of the disembodiment.[114] And while ethereality was created by some of the interactions among films and performers, I believe it overreaches to claim that the dissolution of the body constituted the entire aesthetic.

Unlike Joseph's analysis and its counterpart in *Sherlock Jr.*, *Prune Flat* emphasized the conflict and dissonance between the screen and the performer; more to the point, the simple *trompe l'oeil* of the various textures of film projected onto white costumes, and sometimes naked bodies, toyed with the audience's perception. When another, filmic body was projected onto a

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[112] *Sherlock Jr.*, directed by Buster Keaton and Roscoe Arbuckle (1924; New York: Kino Video, 2010), DVD.

[113] Joseph, "Plastic Empathy," 75.

[114] Ibid., 86.

performer's, the slight differences in movement and permutations of bodies were unsettling and confusing; when a blank spot from the smaller film overtook a part of the frame, the live body was surrounded by the filmic world, dwarfed even; fruit appeared larger than the performers, while women frolicking in the forest examined their half-sized counterparts in the live space.

Finally, two women in the larger film lowered a bare light bulb, examined it, appeared troubled by it, and finally destroyed it by throwing water on it. The bulb exploded, and two live performers then repeated the scene: they lowered a light bulb from the ceiling—diffusing the film—examined it, and proceeded to destroy it.[115] The film ended, the two performers sat and faced each other in continued silence for a few, long minutes, without projected light to surround them, and the performance came to an ambiguous end. Indeed, this is a commentary on light and space and cinema, for cinema is nothing more than flickers of light that the audiences interpret as having its own reality. Without light, there is no filmic world. And in *Prune Flat* the identities of the live performers were dependent upon and yet at odds with the film screen. The performers' identities were determined in part by what happened on screen: their clothes, their surroundings, their movements, their emotions, depended upon an interaction with the forces on screen. When the live performers reenacted the destruction of the light bulb, they were left without cues or motivations, and were forced simply to sit and stare. Was this a political act of rebellion to cut the ties of an oppressive, one-dimensional society? Was it a meditative return to the self, one idealized by pastoral nostalgia? Or was it acceptance, joining of the worlds so that no distinction could or should be made between mediated worlds?

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[115] Water did not seem to work for the live performers in 2001, and so they broke from the scenario and hit it with the water glass until the bulb shorted out. Perhaps the light bulb was not hot enough to explode; no reason is given for the deviation.

For Whitman, *Prune Flat* was an investigation into flatness. The piece was the artist's first attempt to work inside a conventional proscenium setup. Whitman stated, "I got involved with a certain flatness—with certain movie ideas, in the way that I think about movies. Movies are fantasies. They do things to the space. They flatten it out. When you project on people, you flatten them out. […] They can disappear and reappear."[116] Whitman was intrigued by such a flat space, one that clearly divided audience and performers. For an artist who sculpted space, worked with environments and happenings (utilizing Kaprow's definition), this traditional theatre/cinema space in which he was commissioned to work was at best fairly uninteresting and conventional, and at worst the disembodiment of which Joseph writes. But Whitman decided to embrace the disconnection, meditate upon it, and force the audience to grapple with its own everyday spectatorial practices. Just as the performers were subjects of light and dark, so too was a proscenium audience. Just as the performers took their cues from shifts in light and dark, so too did the audience. Kostelanetz observed of *Prune Flat*, "projecting a filmed image upon a live performer produces strange effects upon both the film and the person. In that kind of situation, a mixed-means artist is taking a fixed product—a print of film—and putting it in an unfixed process-situation; and that produces not only singular patterns of integration but also a greater diversity of response."[117] This strangeness was a result of the defiance of a quotidian relationship between the audience and contemporary media, namely film. The passive engagement with film was troubled by the tension with the live bodies; this was the site of struggle within the aesthetic of the piece and the audience's relationship to that piece.

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[116] Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, 224.

[117] Ibid., 22–23.

The impulse toward passivity in a proscenium theatre, even more extreme when associated with the cinema, is troubled by the conflicts in perceptual expectations: instead staging a simple performance with clear cultural cues to follow, Whitman played with the tension between the second and third dimensions, which demanded at least an acknowledgment of confusion and conflict between one realm or the other—two dimensions of a screen or three dimensions in performance. Neither was entirely settled upon, and the physical attributes of each were exploited to confuse perception and trouble cultural passivity in viewing all types of aesthetic work. *Prune Flat* challenged the audience to decode the very experience they were experiencing.

Some of the methods were remarkably simple—a body can appear two dimensional when projected upon, a screen can appear three dimensional when obstructed. A body can be a screen, a screen can be (part of) a body. Objects perform—the film, the camera; the unseen can perform—the projectionist, the people who created the film, the stagehands. But the confrontation at the heart of the piece was in its title: Whitman claimed the title was derived from his first impression of the Cinematheque: crinkly, rippled, old.[118] But he also allowed for the function of a prune—sustenance that evokes scatology. The prune enforces the secretion of waste, unstops the system. An everyday act—indeed, a necessary act—that is undiscussed, taboo, despite its integrity to the regular bodily functions.[119] The same may be said of watching: Whitman played upon the audience's everyday experiences, of watching, of navigating an existence with screens, the desire that screens may evoke, and, most significantly, their

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[118] Robert Whitman, "Interview," in *Robert Whitman: Performances from the 1960s.*

[119] This idea is further reinforced by a segment of the film that shows close-ups of the exterior and interior of a vagina. The close shots have an abstracting effect: though the audience should know what it is looking at, it is never given full visual confirmation. The everyday subject is abstracted for aesthetic and spatial expression.

(a)synchronicity with everyday, three-dimensional movement. With the filmic element, Whitman transported the audience to a forest, to the city streets, and forced the audience to focus upon simple gestures to which most are accustomed. But throughout the piece, the "live" world reminded the audience of the illusion of physical interaction while simultaneously evoking the impulse of *gestalt*, of the cultural completion of the circuit between and among bodies and technologies, in this case with film. Two cultural codes of the suspension of disbelief—film and theatre—interrupted and yet informed one another when placed in conversation. The conflict of these codes is what makes *Prune Flat* an exemplary multimedia performance of the mid-1960s. The body's encounter with film resonates with McLuhan's "extension of man" and simultaneously Marcuse's technological domination—the piece could be read as an example of both philosophies, as they similarly extend from technological determinism. But Whitman's emphasis on the dynamism of the interaction—the movement, misalignment, and reconfiguration of bodies in relation to film and film in relation to the body—points to the potential lack of connectivity championed by McLuhan and the instrumentality of domination feared by Marcuse.

Annette Michelson, in "Film and the Radical Aspiration," contextualized Whitman's work succinctly, tracing its roots in the Age of Affluence and the military-industrial complex that allowed the technologies at work in happenings and multimedia performance to flourish: "In a country whose power and affluence are maintained by the dialectic of a war economy, in a country whose dream of revolution has been sublimated in reformism and frustrated by an equivocal prosperity, cinematic radicalism is condemned to a politics and strategy of social and aesthetic subversion."[120] Although Whitman made no claim in this early work to the radicalism that Michelson espoused, *Prune Flat* was the result of these economic, social, and cultural forces

[120] Annette Michelson, "Film and Radical Aspiration," in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1967), 101.

that not only enabled the practical creation of the piece, but also the ideological impulse behind the tension between the live body and film.

With this simple conflict, Whitman staged an acknowledgment of technology's folding into everyday life. Neither a utopian vision of enhancement or biosynthesis with these technologies, Whitman was working outside popular theoretical, economic, and aesthetic notions of technology's role. Rather, he presented the audience with the dissonance created by such interactions. The unvirtuosic use of film countered the industrial and economic championing of technology that leads to a better life and the fear that technology will lead to alienated oppression. The affinities and interactions between the performers and projections represented the cultural practices and expectations that affected the audience's ways of seeing. Media are here to stay, *Prune Flat* suggested, and deterministic attitudes are reductive. Performance becomes a forum to defamiliarize the audience from quotidian viewing practices, a place to evaluate how and why we accept and utilize these technologies.

The quotidian and practical choreography of *Prune Flat*, along with Whitman's associations with happenings practitioners, place the piece on the happenings branch of performance's family tree. Whitman, featured in almost every critical account of the happenings movement, grappled with visual and cinema artists' desire to break free of specific form and the non-psychological, non-narrative attributes of performance art. What separated Whitman's work, however, was a head-on confrontation with technology: not relegated to the background or as raw materials like other happenings artists such as Kaprow and Cage, while not implicitly vilified as in the work of Vostell, or even Paik. Technology was neither the subject nor object of Whitman's work; rather it was a character or, at the very least, an integral part of Whitman's

performance-scape. Multimedia was a necessary tool for engagement with the contemporary world.

Conclusion

The postwar culture in the United States had the financial resources, industrial momentum, and cultural literacy to begin bringing new modes of media communication into the everyday. While most forms were being happily adopted into the home and culture through the savvy marketing strategies of corporations and consumer desire, many cultural theorists and art practitioners furthered a discourse of technological determinism. But even with rhetoric fearful of media culture, such as that of Marcuse and Debord, and even of artists such as Kaprow, multimedia was being integrated into the aesthetic as it was in the everyday. But the work that ensued did not for the most part adhere to McLuhan's philosophy of media's integration; rather, much of the work, following Whitman, explored the tensions between the forces that create contemporary technologies (production) and the audiences that engage with these technologies (consumption). These tensions emerged from militarized technology, new consumer bases, nationalistic narratives, and critical and aesthetic engagements with these trends. The rhetoric served to further what would become the liveness debate, concerning the integrity of live performance, but performance practice was more concerned with the potentiality of technologies and how they were already part of everyday perception. The acknowledgement of performance as part of the commodity structure, though implicit in and at times shunned by performance work, grappled with forms of expression in a newly forming environment where multimedia was fully integrated.

With newer media firmly grounded in the everyday, the progression of social and political attitudes led to an era of further development, innovation, and regulation. Technological advances in the late 1970s and early 80s, such as satellite communications, fiber-optic cable, and of course the home computer, along with financial reform of communications markets during the Reagan administration, quickly brought the word multimedia into the vernacular. No longer quietly marketed as part of the home, new media was openly understood as an integral part of the everyday, and multimedia's mobilization in performance would reach a high point. In the discourse surrounding the arrival of 1984, as the realization of Orwell's dystopian state was hotly contested, technological determinism would become even more visible. But along with the rhetoric and practice of the postwar boom, multimedia was already seamlessly integrated into the everyday and indispensable for contemporary modes of communication, including performance.

In the next chapter, I will explore this shift from multimedia's struggle to integrate into the everyday to multimedia as a vital term that described contemporary experience and consumption—multimedia became a buzzword and hot ticket in the 1980s. To maintain the nationalist narrative, the paradoxical figure of William Benton is replaced by the quixotic figure of Ronald Reagan, who utilizes performance to dramatically reshape the landscape of media communications. The commercial use of satellite, video, and digital technologies also affect national attitudes at large, and are quickly and openly adopted by artists such as Nam June Paik and Laurie Anderson. I will put their performances in conversation with another genre gaining popularity and authority in the United States—postmodernism—which, as a field of study, helps to illuminate the historical moment, and texts by Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard provide insight into fears and potentialities faced by these new modes of communication and new methods of multimedia performance.

Chapter 3

1984 (We've Been Here Before)

> We *live* mythically but continue to think fragmentedly.
> —Marshall McLuhan[1]

Laurie Anderson stands alone on the stage of the opera house at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. She is dwarfed by the empty space around her as well as the projection screen behind. The beginning of her seven-hour opus, *United States*, begins with a quiet, static spoken-word piece entitled, "Say Hello." Despite the simple presentation, Anderson's parable swings wildly from the meteorological inaccuracies of the Old Testament (pre-Flood biblical civilization would have lived in upstate New York, locating the Garden of Eden "roughly in New York City") to a generic experience of feeling lost during a nighttime drive.[2] And be it the simplicity of quotidian experience or the dubious geography of Judeo-Christian myth, Anderson finds them all cut from the same cloth: loss, confusion, and (lack of) direction. Whether we have lot our way home or our faith, we begin with the same question:

"Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?"

But a problem arises in Anderson's performance: this is a question with no one to answer it. The performer projects her existential crisis out into the ether. It would certainly be a leap to imbue the audience as engaged receiver of this message; they remain conventionally deferential—that is, silent and unwilling partners. This mantra, repeated throughout the piece, can represent a double meaning; that is, not only a search for direction, but also this search emerging from the loss of self in space. Anderson, alone in the dimly lit, cavernous space, stands

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[1] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 42, original emphasis.

[2] Laurie Anderson, *United States* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), n.p.

in for modern, existential being, lost among the cables, screens, and information silently imposing their presence upon the infinitesimal human body. Considering the fragmentary and episodic form of the lengthy performance, with projections, animations, devices, and texts fracturing Anderson's performance-persona, *United States* as a whole could be considered an extended meditation upon a shifting notion of selfhood during the rise of the digital era. Although the emergence of new media forms brought ever more information, entertainment, and practical convenience to the quotidian experience, the resulting rhetoric revolved much around isolation and fragmentation—the paradox that the more of the world that became visible and accessible, the less users were inclined to venture out and be in that world; political forces sought to hide technological forces from cultural consciousness, while marketers busied themselves convincing the same public that technology helped forge a better world. Questions regarding media's integrity to the everyday and the increasingly complex construction of the self with and amongst media resulted from the rise of communications technologies, radical economic telecommunications policies, and the consecration of the postmodern turn in the academies. The contemporaneous spread of cable television, satellite broadcasting, and emergent personal computers enabled and problematized new modes of communication, economy, entertainment, and destruction.

If the previous chapter concerned itself with situating media as everyday—technologically, aesthetically, and economically—this chapter will extend into a period during which these domestic technologies began to convey and communicate with an exponentially greater number of choices, forms, and messages aimed at the consumer and citizen. In turn, various media forms became more integrated through the savvy of advertising and marketing techniques and their relation to burgeoning media conglomerates. Entertainment, information,

and economics blurred further, forms became more and more indistinguishable despite the wealth of new outlets—on cable television, with portable music, on the personal computer. Debord was prescient in citing the spectacle (in 1967) as the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production.[3] This is to say that the images that are now commodity forms present themselves as liberation, freedom, but end up isolating and numbing more than freeing. Debord, resonating with McLuhan, writes, "Spectacle unites what is separate, but unites only in its separateness": as new media came to dominate more and more the modes of communication, the process is increasingly understood as commodified, and fragmentation occurs both interpersonally and reflexively for the individual.[4] The election and policies enacted by Ronald Reagan added to this environment of expanding modes of communication and the race to deregulate industry, allowing the invisible hand of the market to determine and aid in the expansion of technologies. In other words, the Reagan administration signaled a turn from the military-industrial complex to private enterprise as the leader of technological and economic development, as well as a shift from the president understood as a person to a commodified, multimedia form—a body electric.

Alternatively, whereas technological advancement had been developed, celebrated, and even advertised by the participants in the military-industrial complex, the election of Reagan and the heightening of Cold War rhetoric led to technologies situated out of sight. The move of these technologies was due in part to the immateriality of new modes of communication (digital information, computers, and satellites, for example), but also the shift from explicitly effective service technologies (the kitchen of the future, the materials of a more durable and efficient

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[3] Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 13.

[4] Ibid., 22.

home) to the subtler, nearly invisible technologies of information processing, surveillance, and telecommunication, not to mention entertainment.

In the thick of this economic exchange (much of it invisible to the average consumer), the word multimedia began to take root in the vernacular, mostly due to the public relations efforts of the computer industry. Artists such as Anderson, much like Whitman, brought a unique and alternative perspective to the increasingly complex terrain of media and consumerism. In this chapter, I will explore the emergence of the multimedia ideology within a cultural moment involving mass instantaneous communication, postmodern discourse, a renewed fascination with bizarre capabilities in outer space, an actor-president, and artists who both celebrated and warned against the seemingly infinite potentialities of new technologies. As the Reagan administration heightened the narrative of the Cold War with a renewed sense of myth and drama, postmodern theorists, such as Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, questioned narratives such as that of the military-industrial complex, as well as the consumer society that new technological production encouraged. Artists like Anderson struggled to understand and challenge the roles and effects of media communications, posing their own disjointed, postmodern narratives. Much as Anderson created a thematic pastiche in *United States*, I argue that narratives and anxieties concerning global media networks were driving forces behind cultural and economic production and discourse, rooted in the ideology of pastoral nostalgia that shaped postwar discourse. If earlier rhetoric engaged with folding media into the everyday, the zeitgeist of 1984 feared that the everyday was in danger of losing itself within media forces.

Media: One of the Family

Multimedia was catapulted into the American imagination primarily through television. Remote access to sports, arts events, and dramas of all kinds were broadcast to nearly every corner of the country. The television set quickly transformed from a luxury item to a fixture in most American households—from an estimated 8,000 sets in 1948 to 97 percent of 68 million American households in 1974.[5] Cable television and satellite broadcasting increased the breadth and variety of programming. Indeed, the object had become so pervasive, that one critic points out, "The images coming through its screen and the sounds coming from its loudspeaker join the rest of the family at mealtimes and bedtimes, at times for working and relaxing, when visitors come or when the family is alone."[6] What better argument for the naturalization of the medium than for an individual to have a more intimate knowledge of TV families than his or her own?

The proliferation of electronic screens led to a flurry of Orwell-mania in the New Year 1984. All sorts of speculation, critical reevaluation, and utopian and dystopian prophecies were thrown about in fear that global citizens had indeed been overtaken by the images on their screens. But the totalitarian regime did not show itself; the society of the spectacle smacked of too much totalitarianism and surrender. And while Orwell himself was incredibly fearful of a fascist regime—"Power is not a means; it is an end"—he vastly underestimated the population's complicity in capitalist expansion, much more accurately writing, "We are different from all the

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[5] Alan Wells, "Television," in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. Alan Wells (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1979 [1972]), 125–6.

[6] Rose K. Goldsen, "Changing Channels: How TV Shapes American Minds," in *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World*, ed. Gary Gumpert and Robert S. Cathcart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 313.

oligarchies of the past, in that we know what we are doing."[7] At the top of 1984, with the actor-President Ronald Reagan and the promise of an "MTV generation," the U.S.'s relationship with multimedia became a happy and insatiable feedback loop of consumption, and access to a variety of media and the integration thereof became tantamount to a new cultural literacy. As Neil Postman acutely lamented, "Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision of *Brave New World*, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."[8] Postman's illuminating distinction recognized the perceived threats of contemporary technologies.

Two of the most significant television events of early 1984 toyed with this very notion of displaced fear with opposite goals: Nam June Paik's *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* and Apple's "1984" commercial for the new Macintosh personal computer.

1984, High and Low

At noon on January 1, 1984, PBS viewers were treated to a peculiar and ambitious project. An eight-bit animation of the title appeared along with a similarly rendered mouth that voiced the title in robotic monotone: "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell. [Animated lightning and thunder.] Bonjour, Monsieur Orwell. Good Morning, Mr. Orwell. [Animated lightning and

[7] George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Books, 1977 [1949]), 263.

[8] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, vii.

thunder.] Bonjour, Monsieur Orwell."[9] And so began Nam June Paik's salute to, mockery of, and contribution to the zeitgeist of 1984.

"What you're about to see, however," American host George Plimpton pointed out, "are positive and interactive uses of electronic media, which Mr. Orwell, the first media prophet, never predicted." Or, as Paik wryly called it, "a global disco."[10] The television special focused on interaction: Paik, tired of television as a one-way, lowest-common-denominator form, attempted to harness the power of such vast communication networks to bring together, in a sense, performers, technicians, studio-heads, art stars, and, of course, audiences. *GMMO* promised something for everyone: the Thompson Twins, a recent pop music sensation, performed (lip-synced) their popular new single, "Hold Me Now"; Yves Montand performed a simple-to-the-point-of-ridiculous soft-shoe routine; *Saturday Night Live* cast members Leslie Fuller and Mitchell Kriegman satirized their more haute-couture co-stars, such as Plimpton and John Cage, with their fake debate program, "Cavalcade of Intellectuals" (they were "filling in" for Michel Foucault and Susan Sontag); John Cage created electronic music with a feather while Joseph Beuys tinkered with the insides of a piano while workers at Le Centre Pompidou set off fireworks outside (though the audio for each never, sadly, overlapped as planned). And although these extremes are laudable and fascinating to juxtapose in this pastiche of performances, such as the slow fade from Merce Cunningham's dance to the flamboyant threesome that comprised the Thompson Twins, what may be the most useful to examine is Paik's selection of two acts that straddled both the "high" and "low" art scene (at least to American audiences), namely, videos featuring a duet between Peter Gabriel and Laurie Anderson and new wave band Oingo Boingo.

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[9] Nam June Paik, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (New York: WNET, 1984), VHS.

[10] Ibid.

The opening piece for *GMMO* was a pre-recorded music video featuring Peter Gabriel and Laurie Anderson. Gabriel had attained international fame as the front person for the progressive-rock band Genesis as well as two hit solo albums, while Anderson, a known personality in art-rock and performance art, had just recently reached out to the mainstream via a record deal with Warner Brothers and an acclaimed, epic performance entitled *United States.* Their song and video, "This Is the Picture (Excellent Birds)," fit nicely within Paik's oeuvre of East-meets-West sensibility: repetitive, almost meditative lyrics set against abstract, computer generated backgrounds, with our guides, clad all in white, alternatively sitting and watching the spectacle around them and spastically dancing in an effect designed to make them look as though they defied gravity. The opening image that Paik, Anderson, and Gabriel presented the audience with was the two musicians seated, facing away from the camera, contemplating a barren, cloudy landscape in the distance. Contemplating the era that the audience was entering, it neither welcomed nor feared Orwell's dystopia. In a similar, particularly striking moment, the singers were in a digital house, "watching the snow fall"; but the snow looked more like blips from the Pong video game or, more precisely, television static. "This Is the Picture" seemed to be a celebration of iconography of the mundane type—birds, snow, people (rising up, falling down, on their heads), residual impulses from the happenings of the 1960s. All the while, however, Gabriel and Anderson appear artificial: between the early chroma key technology and the obvious manipulation to create the "anti-gravity" effect, the humans do not fit in this universe. At worst, they appear trapped in their world of pictures, not just casual observers. But the title acknowledged and celebrated the power or omnipresence of screens in contemporary culture. "This Is the Picture" also participated in the new, popular culture of the music video; though still in its early days, Music Television (MTV) had tapped into the growing presence of media

technologies, including flashy special effects, cable television, and the shifting conception of art and commerce. Robert M. Collins posits, "MTV altered the traditional mix of advertising and programming by removing the programming; it was effectively all advertising, all the time. A more thorough commercial operation would be hard to envision."[11] Anderson's and Gabriel's video, however, a triumph of early music video technology, betrays itself, celebrating a multimedia aesthetic that it cannot yet fully harness, contextualized in Paik's art event that may have examined the commodification of art and media, but was certainly not designed to achieve commercial success. The pop status of Gabriel, attempting to legitimate himself in the art world, and experimental capital of Anderson, emergent in pop, reflects Paik's attempts to use technology as a tool to bring ordinary and extraordinary, high and low, together.

In a similar vein, Oingo Boingo, unlike the Thompson Twins, actually performed a song entitled, "Wake Up (It's 1984)," broadcast live from San Francisco. The band appears on stage magically by dissolve as singer Danny Elfman immediately begins to move about convulsively, belting an anti-Orwell anthem: "(Wake up), it's 1984 / (Wake up), but we've been here before / (Wake up), it's 1984 / (Wake up), but we've been here before (here before)."[12]

Oingo Boingo, a new wave octet that combined quirky theatrics and lyrics with electronic music influenced by musical forms from around the world, used their manic, complex sound to convey the dissolution of Orwell's prophecy with lyrics that reflect a sense of ennui: "Big

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[11] Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 164.

[12] Paik, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*.

Brother's watching, we watch him back / We see right through his disguise / He tries to scare us, with angry words / But we all know that they're lies."[13]

The refrain is one of the most lucid ruminations on 1984 panic: "we've been here before." While perhaps a reference to Orwell's conception in 1948, the date of the novel's first publication, the lyric can be read as a much more tongue-in-cheek critique of contemporary culture. It simultaneously invokes a reinvention of the techno-determinist wheel and consumer culture's remarkable acceptance and savvy regarding the spread of technological communications, not only giving in to the dystopia, but "watching back" as active and knowing participants.

Because participants were savvy and in touch with the technologies with which Paik was experimenting, the response from viewers and critics was one of disappointment or confusion. The *New York Times* article on *GMMO* was titled "The Headache of the Day After," comparing the dizzying and somewhat chaotic experience of the broadcast to a New Year's hangover: "The satellite transmission kept going on and off. Both sides were left to improvise, and wound up with two different shows instead of the one intended."[14] Paik was no stranger to chance and circumstance in art: his early work with Fluxus somewhat ironically celebrated the combination of Buddhism and experimental art, with pieces such as *Zen for Head* (1962), *Zen for Film* (1962), and *Zen for TV* (1963). Even W-NET station president John Jay Iselin attempted to spin

[13] Ibid.

[14] Susan Heller Anderson and Maurice Carroll, "Avant-Garde Improvisation: The Headache of the Day After," *New York Times*, January 2, 1984, Section 1, page 27.

and recuperate the performance: "Wasn't it great? Nothing worked, but it was wonderful."[15] And while the malfunctions could be celebrated in hindsight, they were, in the moment, malfunctions.

Paik's project to present "positive and interactive" uses for new broadcast technologies was practically and financially a struggle, its dissemination remarkable, but ultimately lost among the more spectacular, 1984 consumer culture. The capital and power available to forces of marketing and government far outperformed *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, leading to significant shifts in multimedia's presence in the cultural imagination and politics.

Much more notice was paid three weeks later to Super Bowl XVIII, played by the Los Angeles Raiders and the Washington Redskins, on January 22, 1984.[16] Although a fairly famous game in Super Bowl annals (the big defeat of the favored Redskins generated the name "Black Sunday"), the game is much more famous for a thirty-second commercial broadcast during a time-out in the third quarter: Apple Computer's introduction to the Macintosh personal computer.

Directed by Ridley Scott, famous for helming futuristic-dystopian films *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), the commercial took Orwell's *1984* as a platform to market their new product, the Macintosh. The commercial is set in a grayed-out city of the future, with hordes of people (androgynous men and boys for the most part) marching to a theatre to be indoctrinated by a man on a giant screen, à la Big Brother in Orwell's novel. The masses watch the screen agog, as Big Brother praises the oncoming age of the "Unification of Thoughts." Throughout the

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[15] Ibid.

[16] The Super Bowl was seen by an estimated 77 million people, while *GMMO* was seen by about 500 thousand. See Edith Decker-Phillips, *Paik Video* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, Inc., 1998), 176; and Bill Gorman, "Super Bowl TV Ratings," Zap 2 It, January 18, 2009, accessed February 20, 2011, http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/01/18/historical-super-bowl-tv-ratings/11044/.

speech, a blond, buxom woman runs through the same tunnel system, pursued by a quartet of men who look like stealth riot police—our track and field star is clearly set up as the (bizarrely sexualized) heroine. When she reaches the theatre, she spins as one would for the hammer throw competition, launches it at the screen, and shatters it, leaving the masses dumbstruck, while smoke and wind blow through the rows of seats, implying liberation from the forced doctrine of Big Brother. We're finally given the message: "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984."[17]

The commercial created a narrative of the hegemonic forces in computers at the time: Big Brother represents IBM, while the hammer-throwing heroine represents Apple Computer, sent from who-knows-where to deliver the brainwashed masses from deindividuation. This is a common analogy CEO Steve Jobs would use in the early years of the company: tropes of the underdog, the savior, the alternative, and the rebellion were utilized over and over.[18]

More importantly, however, is the epic nature of the commercial. By far one of the most extravagant and spectacular commercials to date, everyone paid attention to the commercial as it won award after award, from a Clio (advertising's highest award) to being named the "Greatest Super Bowl Ad of All Time" and the "Greatest Commercial of all Time."[19] The commercial had tapped into the zeitgeist of 1984 culture in the U.S.; displaying both a fear of totalitarian regimes and the confidence in the American industrial superiority (via a blond model) to break the spell,

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[17] CNET TV, "1984 Apple Commercial," accessed May 1, 2013, http://cnettv.cnet.com/1984-apple-commercial/9742-1_53-15243.html.

[18] "1983 Apple Keynote—The '1984' Ad Introduction," YouTube video, 6:41, April 1, 2006, accessed February 20, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSiQA6KKyJo.

[19] Stuart Elliot, "The Media Business: Advertising; A new ranking of the '50 best' television commercials ever made," *New York Times*, March 14, 1995, accessed November 11, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/14/business/media-business-advertising-new-ranking-50-best-television-commercials-ever-made.html.

Apple's commercial paralleled Oingo Boingo's message, that 1984 was never to have been a problem for the 1980s population. And all of these messages were conveyed through elaborate, multimedia events.

Although the Macintosh was not the commercial success the company had hoped for, the desire to shrink the size and price of the personal computer became the focus for computer companies throughout the 1980s. Apple had started a space race all its own—one that competed to create more space in order to sell more product, an ideology that led to software revolutions in the years to come.

Much quieter than the 1984 commercial was Apple's profound influence in bringing the term "multimedia" into wider usage. While the history leading up to the computer era was varied and significant, the implementation was haphazard, scattered, and indefinite. But the combination of hardware and software sold to consumers needed a name to help sell it, and Apple brought awareness to the force that is multimedia. Sueanne Ambron, head of Apple's Multimedia Lab in the 1980s, explains: "Everyone at Apple wanted to call the technology 'hypermedia' … but I knew teachers wouldn't feel comfortable about 'hyper' anything. So I suggested multimedia, because teachers would be more comfortable with that word."[20] With the sheer public exposure Apple had, the newest work put out by the company entered the public lexicon almost instantaneously, and the word multimedia was being used to describe almost any artwork, technology, and experience that involved technological intervention.

The marketing savvy of Apple stands in strong contrast to the messy and experimental global disco that Paik had staged a month earlier. Multimedia as moniker is a direct product of business-speak and carefully considered advertising campaigns, but multimedia as form is

[20] In Wise, *Multimedia*, 46.

explored much more thoroughly and freely in the work of artists such as Whitman and Paik. Commercial entities championed multimedia in order to contain and manage the uses and imaginary of technology (the discipline of the word to reflect the discipline of education, for example); artists, however, often worked against any singular description of performance that utilized and engaged with technology, preferring instead to shift, challenge, and blur the boundaries set by marketers.

But Apple wasn't the only marketing powerhouse of 1984. One of the other more notable commercials of the year was for the reelection of President Ronald Reagan.

Reagan: Media as Myth and Fragment

"Morning in America" also gets recognition as one of the great television advertisements. The sixty-second ad features a montage of smiling American men, women, and children going about their everyday lives: getting the morning paper, going to work, raising their American flags, bringing home new purchases, getting married. A soothing, male voice narrates, "It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?"[21]

The premise is that America has greatly improved since Jimmy Carter's America, and that average citizens now go about their daily lives with joy; and these quotidian, ostensibly universal American rituals may proceed, looking "forward with confidence to the future," guided

[21] "Ronald Reagan TV Ad—'Its morning again in america [sic]," YouTube video, 0:59, November 12, 2006, accessed February 2, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwSY.

by the capable, current administration.[22] The imagery illustrates an attempt to define, unify, and encourage desire for this brand of normalcy, mobilizing a rhetoric of what Barthes called the fallacy of the "Great Family of Man": "a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way."[23] This unity not only communicates political and national ideologies, but also perpetuates all of these forces—work, marriage, home maintenance—as the "natural" and proper thing to do as a valued American citizen.

The commercial is shot in soft focus, with an almost sepia tone, invoking nostalgia for a peaceful, prosperous country, with an appropriately gentle, legato soundtrack. Ironically, the Reagan campaign invokes a narrative tinged with pastoral nostalgia, one free of technological and political threat, via a carefully crafted television advertisement. Jan Hanska writes, "Reagan's media strategists noted that Reagan was the perfect messenger and decided that 'governing was to involve the presentation of image—not of the self but a projection.' The Reagan team understood the power of images in the television age and produced pictures that were better than the real thing."[24] Using media technology to manipulate pastoral nostalgia is illustrative of an aesthetic that Hanska theorizes as Reagan's construction of the heroic American mythology:

> Reagan's storytelling aimed at not making some glorious hero the focal point of identification for the people, but rather by the means of narration turning normal, boringly average people into heroes for people to identify themselves with. […] every

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 11.

[24] Jan Hanska, *Reagan's Mythical America: Storytelling as Political Leadership* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 28.

> American becomes one of the heroes Reagan constantly talked about: "And those who say we're in a time when there are no heroes, they just don't know where to look."[25]

In this sense, the homebuyer, the bride and groom, and the businessperson are all heroes of the same variety as the hammer thrower in Apple's 1984 commercial; thus, these heroes all drive market forces as well. In "Morning in America," these natural events of the everyday and life cycle perpetuate hegemonic market forces. Most revealing in the commercial is an explicit juxtaposition of the institution of marriage and the market: "This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation less than half of what it was four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future."[26] The mythology of the commercial normalizes the unification of family units, politics, and finance.

Barthes writes that these events and ideologies must be actively naturalized over time, the appearance of the universal is in fact "signs of an historical writing."[27] And it is exactly the writing of history that is fascinating in "Morning in America," not so much for the quotidian folks and events it features, but rather what the piece does not feature. Nowhere in the piece does the viewer see anything technological (the most advanced visible technology is a wood-paneled station wagon) nor Reagan himself (unless one counts his headshot at the very end). By composing a portrait of the American Everyman, Reagan is in turn effaced. This gesture of absence is remarkable considering how vital multimedia was to Reagan as a man, a celebrity, and a politician. The ad situates Reagan as the hero from technological interference by mobilizing a rhetoric of technological determinism: by humanizing economic stability in the

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[25] Ibid., 19.

[26] "Ronald Reagan TV Ad—'Its morning again in america [sic]."

[27] Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," 12.

form of social and cultural ritual, technology would be a disruption. The hero *lives* the proper life; he or she does not passively watch it on television or in the movies, the very same ones that helped to shape Reagan's character in the cultural imaginary. By removing displays of technological forces from the television campaign, the Reagan administration uses this technological determinism as a tool to propagate political, economic, and social values. In terms of "Morning in America," Wise and colleagues explain the phenomenon well: "The ideology of the information age is a convenient myth for politicians since it explains current economic troubles (falling real incomes, job insecurity and unemployment) as the inevitable result of technological change while at the same time promising a better future without the need to change existing economic arrangements."[28] But it was this same rhetoric that Reagan used to further economic forces of deregulation and the attitude of technological determinism. In order for these heroic American archetypes to happily go about their everyday lives, industries needed to flourish and drive the economy forward, which required the government to allow free market capitalism to reign, according to Regan's economic plan.[29] Collins points out how swiftly Reagan worked:

> Reagan came into office promising to provide regulatory relief for American business. To underscore that commitment, his first official act as president on inauguration day was to sign an executive order removing the federal government's remaining price controls on oil and gasoline, and he also moved promptly to institute a temporary freeze on all pending regulatory orders.[30]

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[28] Wise, *Multimedia*, 199.

[29] Robert Britt Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5–6.

[30] Collins, *Transforming America*, 81.

It is simple for this ideology to appeal to the public, as business practices are already in place before regulation may occur, creating a narrative of a market that works and functions autonomously. Collins argues that Reagan did not act in a vacuum, but rather continued a phenomenon of the 1970s, adapting to inflation and a shifting economic environment.[31] But as Robert Britt Horwitz points out, all of the industries that underwent deregulation under Reagan were those of infrastructure, or industries that pervaded and were necessary to everyday life. The importance of Reagan's deregulation of the telecommunications industry cannot be overstated then, as it writes a history that considers these modes of communication—phone, television—essential to American life. What is worth noting, of course, is that these are the very industries that enabled Reagan's political ascent: Reagan believed in the power of the communications and entertainment industries to restore faith and power to everyday Americans by removing restrictions and fostering a free market. Furthermore, Reagan's rhetoric of the free market appealed to many citizens because "it satisfies the contradictory demand for a unified plan of national development within a system of private property."[32]

The Reagan administration's expertise was in fostering the image of this functional economy, one that worked both ways. The flip side of the economic coin was to keep social programs statutorily intact, but render them inert through budget cuts and strategic appointments.[33] Whereas so much of the computer and cable television industry was new under Jimmy Carter, Reagan took his cues from the lessons that Carter's administration had learned the hard way. Reagan and company knew how to write history, leading Frances FitzGerald to

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[31] Ibid., 82.

[32] Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform*, 13.

[33] Ibid., 209–10.

observe, "To study this period is to reflect upon the extent to which our national discourse about foreign and defense policy is not about reality—or the best intelligence estimates about it—but instead a matter of domestic politics, history and mythology."[34] Much like the continuing history of the multimedia genre, politics was based upon storytelling, narration, mythmaking, and performance. Reagan was the media savvy president, in terms of regulation, image and his own celebrity. Reagan was, per Timothy Raphael, The President Electric.

Reagan and the Body Electric

Ronald Reagan, the fortieth president of United States, is typically celebrated as the country's first actor to be elected president. Various acting skills became required of a president in the media age: poise, clarity of speech, connection with the audience, and a good coat of makeup.[35] But Reagan was especially well suited for the position going back to his younger days as an actor-cum-politician.

After Reagan got his start as a sportscaster on the radio, and gained fame for a short-lived, mildly successful stint in Hollywood, it was television that saved Reagan's floundering career: Reagan was contracted to host *General Electric Theatre* from 1954 to 1962. This synthesis is the subject of Timothy Raphael's fascinating study of Reagan, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (2009). One of Raphael's main

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[34] Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There In the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 167.

[35] Most cite the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate, the first televised presidential debate, as this huge paradigmatic shift in the form and content of politics in the U.S. See Gary A. Donaldson, *The First Modern Campaign: Kennedy, Nixon, and the Election of 1960* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), chapter 9.

contentions is that, "In retrospect, this union of Ronald Reagan, General Electric, and Hollywood marks a pivotal moment in the relationship between corporate capitalism, consumer culture, and electronic media."[36] Reagan's work as the television host aided presentation skills and his looks of folksy sincerity, but it is Raphael's account of Reagan's work for G.E. off camera that provides more insight. As part of his contract, Reagan traveled all over the U.S. to G.E. factories and offices, delivering speeches about the vitality of the company, and the importance of its work in creating an America of tomorrow. The similarities between Reagan's tours and the American National Exhibition in Moscow are striking, as both presented images of America that did not yet exist, using fantasy more than reality as a means to persuade a skeptical audience. This touring circuit exposed Reagan to the political life, connecting with the Everyman, and gave him invaluable practice as an orator. Indeed, Reagan used the experience and similar rhetoric to become and hold the presidency of the Screen Actors' Guild (SAG) from 1947 to 1952 and again from 1959 to 1960, when he was known for an anti-union bias and belief in trickle-down economics, even in the entertainment industry. Swept up in the furor of McCarthyism, Reagan immediately took exception to the fact that the unions were made up of many Communist sympathizers; as FitzGerald writes, "For Reagan, there was nothing abstract about the Red Scare."[37] Thus, Reagan crossed the picket line of the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) strike in 1946: "Reagan decided that [Painter's Union leader Herb] Sorrell was a Communist and afterwards paid no attention to bread-and-butter issues or to the merits of the CSU case."[38] Reagan began the charge that led to the collapse of the CSU that fall. SAG was the perfect

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[36] Raphael, *The President Electric*, 162.

[37] FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 49.

[38] Ibid., 50.

platform upon which to cultivate his persona: between performance and politics, fiction and reality, Reagan developed his character in the entertainment industry, all the while rehearsing for the national political scene.

In order to maintain this persona, he carried over this political agenda developed with SAG into his speeches made on behalf of General Electric in the ensuing years, and these underlying ideologies in turn bled into his presidency of the country.[39] Raphael studies this progression well, writing, "Renowned as the first actor to become president of United States, Ronald Reagan was, more significantly, the product of an exhaustive education in the performance *techne*—the techniques and technologies—of electronic media."[40] Here we have a return to media as techne—art and craft—and Reagan as the figure that returns the rhetoric from history to myth, from fact to image, from substance to style. Reagan was part of a media-savvy administration, in an environment where "our engagement with politics is now thoroughly mediated by culture."[41] In a sense, Reagan understood this from his earliest days as a radio announcer, and thus had been rehearsing his role as president for four decades in both form and content. As he delivered thousands of speeches—first for SAG, then G.E.—he developed a narrative of the U.S. he envisioned, a pastoral nostalgia for a sincere, hard-working America, like that portrayed in "Morning in America." The problem with this nostalgia, as Outka notes, is that it yearns for a time that cannot be and never was. Reagan exploited this desire to be prosperous,

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[39] The political xenophobia is clear in his "A Time for Choosing" speech of October 27, 1964, the launch of Reagan onto the national political stage. See Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing (The Speech—October 27 1964)," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html.

[40] Raphael, *The President Electric*, 2.

[41] Ibid., 12.

yet authentic; to transcend the cold, modern world of industry yet somehow succeed within it.[42] The narrative was a compelling one for voters, especially those who were suffering due to the contemporary shifts in economy and production. And so candidate Reagan focused on mythical America, a country that once existed, supposedly, and could be again under his leadership. Due to the fact that Reagan rarely spoke of the present (only to acknowledge the dire straits the country was navigating), his political campaigns were more akin to acting—storytelling, as Hanska writes:

> Because so much of Reagan's policies centered on stories and telling them, it is natural that he was himself drawn into the storyworld creation of his citizenry and was partially recreated there anew into a picture of what the story recipients wanted to see in their president. Essentially Reagan was the narrator and reasonably successful controller of the stories he told, and thus more a speaking figurehead created to respond to the call of the citizenry.[43]

Reagan was renowned for being a superb storyteller, and he had a lot of practice in addition to innate talent in crafting a story so exciting, so idyllic, that a large majority of U.S. citizens wanted to participate in creating a "shining City on a Hill," Reagan's reference to an idyllic America.

In addition to the content of the stories Reagan developed, he had also paid careful attention to form. This was partially routine for him due to his career as a performer. As he wove a story of mythical America, he incorporated himself as the hero, not so much by explicitly stating it, but by embodying the heroes he had played in the movies. By the time he reached the White House, "Reagan consciously sought to portray himself as a real-life politician simultaneously embodying all traits of action figures engaged in heroic acts of leadership on the

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[42] Outka, *Consuming Traditions*, 21.

[43] Hanska, *Reagan's Mythical America*, xv.

silver screen."[44] The careers of a film star and prominent politician are not mutually exclusive: in many ways, Reagan proved that they were inseparable, and Reagan-as-icon (cowboy, soldier, politician, et al.) was a potent figure for a postmodern media culture.

But if his acting career has been cited as part of his success, it has also led to intense scrutiny and criticism. Reagan has been described as confused and somewhat delusional, distant. Biographer Edmund Morris pathologizes Reagan's confusion as a result of his career as an actor, "a person who moves from one production to another. An actor's life consists of entrances and exits, shorter or longer scenes, takes and retakes, and productions. […] An actor lives for the future and remembers forward, not backward like most of us."[45]

Between the myth-making that Reagan formed and the aesthetic of the actor-hero, Reagan clearly understood and exploited the form of media politics; but for the same reasons his vision and promises were archaic and romanticized: "Hedrick Smith of the *New York Times* wrote that Reagan approached the world with 'a basic philosophical outlook which is a throwback to the 1950s when American power was paramount.'"[46] Power for Reagan was synonymous with image, and Reagan was selling this image. How the administration achieved this image was not of great concern to the president. This is clearly at work in "Morning in America," and the rest of the 1984 campaign; many historians have cited the president's lack of interest in message, and vested interest in how to sell it to the American people; Reagan was concerned more about how he looked and acted on camera, how he delivered a message, than the message itself. John Sears, Reagan's political strategist, remembers how the president would

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[44] Ibid., 24.

[45] Ibid., 22.

[46] In FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 74.

evade or ignore questions of policy or strategy from advisers, and would often answer with a job description: "He'd say, 'That's your business. I'm out here selling it. You tell me.' Well, he used to say sometimes that he was a salesman, and he was!"[47] The conflation of commodity and policy deepened to the point of indeterminacy. Reagan, through his form and salesmanship, brought an explicit example of the Society of the Spectacle to presidential politics. The effect even began to obscure the presidential body itself (hence Raphael's title), as Reagan himself not only sold, but also was simultaneously bought and sold by the cultural-political system. The 1984 presidential convention "functioned more as a trade show than a coronation. Reagan's performance was a product launch designed to dazzle the gathered delegates and consumers watching on TV with the new media campaign for the revamped product line that would be marketed through the Reagan brand."[48] The analogy of a product launch resonates once again with Apple's launch of the Macintosh: Reagan was a postmodern figure, and like postmodernism, was a product of late capitalism. The president was understood as a system of commodities enmeshed with many (often incommensurate) ideologies.

The extension of late capitalism into politics had fully matured: by 1984, Ronald Reagan had become transformed: no longer a man, a politician, a statesman, or even an actor—he was a pastiche of iconography. Iconographic-Reagan ushered in an era of postmodernism to the wider political arena, a part of the larger cultural imaginary. Between the deregulation of telecommunications and heightened Cold-War rhetoric, the postmodern president united U.S. citizens through narrative, but separated them from the rest of the world and from each other through economics, to reference Debord. Cold War strategies of détente based on calculations of

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[47] Ibid., 103.

[48] Raphael, *The President Electric*, 154.

M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction), shaped American foreign policy: "The idea of exerting power at a distance—or exerting power while remaining isolated—was, after all, the whole project of 'imperial isolationism.'"[49] By combining images of enemies abroad, namely the U.S.S.R., with images of fantasy and Hollywood, of black-and-white xenophobia with shorthand references from film and television, Reagan constructed both ideological and practical myths for an America that was more cinematic than real, at least according to older definitions of realism.

In order to strengthen the narrative with ideological enemies, Reagan gave a famous speech in 1983, referring to Soviet Russia as "the evil empire," which led to a joke among journalists of the president's "Darth Vader speech." But this proved to be no joke: two weeks later, Reagan announced his plan for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which would set up a system of nuclear-interception missiles on the ground across the Heartland of United States as well as in space, with armed satellites orbiting the Earth. The concatenation of speeches led to pieces of SDI being nicknamed "Star Wars."[50] The rhetoric of such technological achievement was made the subject of numerous jokes, such as the Star Wars nickname, but the ideology fit well with heroic mythology: "Technology was all but neutral in the Reagan era, and space served not only as a new basis to 'start American dreaming again,' as Reagan claimed, but also as a guidance for the context of those dreams."[51] SDI was an attempt to shoot the cowboy into space, as it were, a frontier to be explored much as in the earlier days of the U.S. Manifest Destiny. But the ambition for SDI was certainly much more fantastical, and fits more within a postmodern view of the blurring between entertainment and politics.

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[49] FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 78.

[50] Ibid., 244.

[51] Hanska, *Reagan's Mythical America*, 25.

Adviser Martin Anderson notes the great influence of Reagan's visit to NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command) as a presidential candidate in 1979, which is steeped in pop and consumer cultural references, a link to the future president's belief in the political-as-cinematic:

> Toward the end of the day we were ushered into the command room, the center where all the information comes together. It is a very large room, several stories high, and *looks just like such command centers do in the movies*. Completely covering one end of the room is a huge display screen showing an outline map of the United States and the surrounding airspace. Seated in front of the screen each one facing a video display console complete with dozens of switches and lights, were the young men and women who constantly monitor these displays for the first sign of a sudden nuclear attack.[52]

Where the "set" ends and the strategic command center begins, one capable of catapulting the world into nuclear war, is unclear in how Anderson and, subsequently, Reagan mobilize the work of NORAD. Finally, and most evocatively, FitzGerald returns us to Barthes' writing of history as myth, or McLuhan's contention that we still live (desire to live) mythically, as the pastiche-discourse shifts from epic science fiction to epic classical mythology. FitzGerald describes NORAD thusly:

> The NORAD command center in the core of the mountain recalls the caves of the Nibelungen in Wagner's Ring and the caves of Norse mythology, where the dwarves, the "smiths," forge magical weapons: swords and spears which can never be broken and never miss their mark. In this setting the story is clearly that of the birth of the hero, or the moment when the pure youth receives his mission and sets forth on the difficult and dangerous quest. Here Reagan becomes Siegfried setting out to end the reign of the mischief-making dwarves and to restore the gods to their rightful place, bringing order once again to the world.[53]

The discursive and rhetorical turns in this passage is significant. The operatic melodrama referred to not only heightens the rhetoric of Reagan's "quest," but also creates a confusing set of

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[52] Martin Anderson, *Revolution: The Reagan Legacy*, expanded and updated ed. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990 [1988]), 81, emphasis added.

[53] FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 352.

metaphors: if Reagan is Siegfried, what is Valhalla? Who constitutes it? And how does it lead to the destruction of the home of the gods? Whether the allusion works or not, it does have significance for the mythological rhetoric that was being mobilized at the time, as well as the development of Reagan's world-view. One can almost picture the postmodern candidate, standing before the mammoth command center, rehearsing for the role he would play for the next eight years. Privately, the metaphor was more literal than the public imagined, as "Reagan sometimes spoke of nuclear war as the biblically prophesied battle called Armageddon."[54] Whose gods NORAD was serving depended upon perspective. But to the public, Reagan perpetuated the cinematic motif, as Michael Schaller describes:

> In August, 1984, while he engaged in banter with technicians before delivering a Saturday morning radio talk, Reagan spoke into a microphone that he did not know was activated. "My fellow Americans," he began, "I am pleased to tell you today that I've just signed legislation that will outlaw the Soviet Union forever. We begin bombing in five minutes."[55]

The "pleasure" Reagan took in delivering this improvised, false script illustrates the postmodern turn Reagan takes with this rhetoric, and how embedded it was in ideology and aesthetic.

SDI, with its epic scope and other-worldly basis not only elevated Reagan to the stance of a "divine being," intervening to save the world from the Communist threat, but also by extension linked "individuals to infinity"—that is, wove the citizenry into the mythos Reagan was narrating.[56] This power was enabled by Reagan's body electric, a term Raphael borrows from poet Walt Whitman: "'I sing the body electric,' Walt Whitman rhapsodized in *Leaves of Grass*,

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[54] Michael Schaller, "Reagan and the Cold War," *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2007), 31.

[55] Ibid., 5.

[56] Hanska, *Reagan's Mythical America*, 17.

extolling the capacity of the human body to electrify others, to 'charge them full with the charge of the soul.'"[57] Raphael historicizes the term by pointing out the contemporary fascination with electricity, one coterminous with an era in which "political orators, religious evangelists, poets, and musicians shared the same stage, and audiences regularly attended both Shakespearean and minstrel performances" obliterating the distinction between "high" and "low" art, a democratization of both the citizen and the culture in which that citizen participated.[58]

Thus, Reagan's narrative called upon U.S. citizens to participate in his performance: "Under conditions of electronic mass mediation, government becomes increasingly dependent on the techne of the body electric for reproducing its body politic. However, a century later in the postmodern state, the final arbiter of legitimacy for the statesman is television, and the critical standard for leadership is not veracity but belief."[59] Raphael concludes with the provocative claim that, for a postmodern president, "*Lying* is no longer the antonym of *truth telling* but of *believing*."[60] To contextualize the presidential agenda within the various narratives of mythology—Wagnerian, evangelical Christian, cinematic—was no longer an agenda based in fact, reason, or, in the case of SDI, production (Star Wars was impossible to build at the time and never came to fruition), but rather was one of performance, of involving citizens in the drama that was economic liberation in the face of the Communist antagonists. Necessary to this performance was an entire media presence, involving advertisements, television, satellites, cinema, and computers. Reagan harnessed his abilities as an entertainer and mediated presence

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[57] Raphael, *The President Electric*, 3.

[58] Ibid., 3.

[59] Ibid., 222.

[60] Ibid., original emphasis.

and fully enmeshed them with his administration's politics. This situates Reagan as a postmodern president.

The pastiche world of the postmodern, which came to the fore in the early 1980s, shaped an understanding of the world mostly through infinitely deferred rhetoric ("Star Wars"), actors who were presidents becoming presidents who were actors, citizens who were audiences and protagonists; all of this perpetuated under the umbrella of culture (including politics and the development of multimedia technologies) as commodity. The scope and abstraction of multimedia communications was part of the shift to a postmodern politics.

Politics, Media, Postmodernism

> It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment […] can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.
> —Fredric Jameson[61]

Since the mid-twentieth century, the word "postmodernism" has greatly expanded in use, most notably for architecture and literature; but until the 1970s, the word was still relatively obscure. Thanks in large part to French philosophers attempting to understand the aftermath of the tumultuous protests and violence of 1968, "these experiences of rupture helped produce a readiness, an openness, to the discourse of historical breaks and discontinuities."[62] The sentiment

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[61] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 44.

[62] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 4.

of discontinuity was furthered by the proliferation of mass media such as television and the advent of the digital, to bring the popular to a mass audience; thus postmodernism became a part of the popular imagination.[63] Andreas Huyssen links this definition to technological progress, writing, "postmodernism's critical dimension lies precisely in its radical questioning of those presuppositions which linked modernism and the avantgarde to the mindset of modernization."[64] Huyssen points out the explicit tension between modernism and pastoral nostalgia: postmodernism was in part a critical effort to combat the narrative of technological progress and its effects upon the art world. Thus, artists and academics legitimated and made fashionable the term in the 1980s, and theories were almost continuously generated and hotly debated.

Perhaps the trickiest and most illuminating facet of the postmodern turn is the fact that no two conceptions or mobilizations of the term are the same. While most theorists agree that it is a framework reacting to the precepts of high modernism—shunning market forces, art for art's sake, the autonomy of the work of art, while embracing cultural relativism—the debates as to whether it is a continuation of the Enlightenment project, a totalizing force in and of itself, or a codified aesthetic remain contested. C. Barry Chabot expresses a common claim: "it is equally plausible that what some are calling postmodernism is actually a late development or mutation within modernism itself" because of lack of a lack of consensus, derivation from modernism, and

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[63] For histories of postmodernism, see Paul A. Bové, ed., *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982 [1971]).

[64] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 183.

impoverished critical and popular characterizations of modernism.[65] Chabot criticizes the postmodern as a totality in and of itself, but presents one concession, "Nonetheless, postmodernism does not press for or impose order, even one limited to the aesthetic realm; instead, the contingent world is simply accepted."[66]

The reaction against reinscribing an absolute system was and continues to be an anxiety of the legacy of 1960s critical and literary theory. David Harvey eloquently describes the breakdown of some of the most significant rhetoric, including that of McLuhan, Marcuse, and Debord: "We can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated."[67] What happens to the system of hegemony when all forces—dominant and oppressed, high and low, enlightened and alienated—are understood as purely constructed and relational? In this sense, postmodernism posed a threat to earlier systems of political and critical thought, including pastoral nostalgia, divorce of media from the self and, by extension, performance.

One of postmodernism's most outspoken critics, Terry Eagleton, unwilling to accept such a dramatic shift, posits that postmodernism was just as dialectical a theory as its predecessors, writing,

> Postmodernism is radical in so far as it challenges a system which still needs absolute values, metaphysical foundations and self-identical subjects; against these it mobilizes

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[65] C. Barry Chabot, "The Problem of the Postmodern," *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*, ed. Ingebord Hoesterey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 37.

[66] Ibid., 26.

[67] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1989), 53.

> multiplicity, non-identity, transgression, anti-foundationalism, cultural relativism. The result, at its best, is a resourceful subversion of the dominant value-system, at least at the level of theory.[68]

In order to accept postmodernism as a reaction against modernism, a binary must form, and antagonists are necessarily pitted against one another, rendering postmodernism not relative, but rather binaristic. Eagleton accepts postmodernism as a useful frame by which to engage in critical theory, but, in the Marxist tradition, cannot accept that the theory dismantles the potentialities of or is discontinuous from political theory that had come before. Ironically, Williams, who also works from a Marxist framework, theorizes social phenomena as contingent within historicism.

The lack of consensus, while frustrating and stymieing to certain scholarly pursuits, is also helpful in that it is symptomatic of the age and environment that generated the concept. Whether part of or break from modernism, postmodernism emerges from the expansion of the digital age, when data, information, and global culture proliferate and are available to the public at dizzying rates, growing exponentially. What was once a set of quotidian technologies and practices extends to sensory overload and rampant consumerism, the likes of which Benjamin and even McLuhan could not have predicted from their historical perspectives.

For the purposes of this investigation, I will examine the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, namely for their texts' standings as preeminent and influential to the academy and larger cultural thought. They are a part of the narrative of postmodernism and have become iconic within postmodern discourse. In addition, Lyotard's relation of the postmodern to the teleology of technology and scientific discourse and Jameson's to consumer culture and aesthetics situate their work within a consideration of media and art, the military-industrial

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[68] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1996), 132.

complex, and consumer cultures. Setting them in contrast with one another will reveal a number of cultural shifts and values that emerge in the late 1970s and early 80s that aid in historicizing the production and reception of multimedia products, from cable and satellite television to the personal computer to the arts. They also provide useful frameworks by which to understand president-electric Reagan and the mythmaking of the administration, as well as the myth-making effects upon art and culture, such as Anderson's *United States*. In understanding these phenomena, we may come to a better understanding of how multimedia shifted from material technologies to immaterial modes of communication and, more significantly, a part of the cultural lexicon.

Lyotard: Information, Narrative, and Power

Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* was published in 1979 and translated into English in 1984, the same year of the Orwellian fervor discussed above. Lyotard's concern is the ontological status of "knowledge" in the wake of increasing amounts of data created, policed, conducted, approved, and disseminated more and more by global corporations. What becomes of knowledge within late capitalism and what are the implications? Lyotard discusses what is at stake:

> The relationship of suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume—that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its "use-value."[69]

[69] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5.

Lyotard creates an analogy that the competition for information is the imperialism of the post-industrial era: the hoarding and selling of information (knowledge) determines power, which is inevitably tied to commodity structures. Definitions of power ultimately amount to Lyotard's deceptively simple criterion: "who will know?"[70] Compare this to the shift from the Office of Information during the 1950s and reinforced by Reagan-era defense, the dream of Star Wars, satellites, and amassing huge amounts of data on enemies abroad; not to mention Reagan's status himself as the first postmodern president, an amalgam of celebrity, rhetoric, and mediated image. *1984* is understandably a paradigmatic text for the early 1980s, and Apple's 1984 commercial, alongside Paik's tongue-in-cheek treatment, are engagements with modes of knowledge gathering and communication.[71]

Lyotard's concern for the production and dissemination of knowledge leads him to examine the process, the feedback loop that is created, namely through a close reading of scientific discourse and the ostensible objectivity of the scientific method. Far from the Heisenberg principle, in which the observer's presence affects outcome, Lyotard reframes the whole problem of science's claim to objectivity: "Scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse."[72] That is to say, that the rhetoric of science is not a one-way stream of information, facts disseminated from the truth of investigation; rather, science is a conversation, a process of legitimation which requires many spheres to both create, affirm, and generate demand for this type of information. This makes the process almost identical to that of narrative, to storytelling

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[70] Ibid., 6.

[71] See Raphael, *The President Electric*, 7.

[72] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 3.

as a method of creating norms and conventions; Reagan's myth-making mobilizes narrative as political discourse, legitimating budgets and defense projects as necessities to complete the drama. Lyotard compares legislation (narrative), the creation of a law that continues the story of the citizens' best interests, to scientific knowledge: "In this case, legitimation is the process by which a "legislator" dealing with scientific discourse is authorized to prescribe the stated conditions (in general, conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification) determining whether a statement is to be included in that discourse for consideration by a scientific community."[73] By acknowledging science's participation in not discovery but rather creation of knowledge, Lyotard finds science inextricable from a matrix of social, cultural, and, vitally, economic forces that demand, legitimate, and consume knowledge, a frame that could just as easily be applied to political discourse. Thus, Lyotard makes his all-important thesis, acknowledging that scientific and political discourse are not autonomous, and to treat them as such perpetuates dangerous hegemonic forces, that through this narrative civilization may find progress, when in fact it is a similar force that Benjamin warns of: "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."[74] Lyotard, however, turns on earlier discourse of hegemonic alienation, such as that propagated by Benjamin and Marcuse, by negating the autonomous subjectivity as discussed by Harvey: indeed by narrating U.S. citizens as heroes, Reagan renders citizens not only incapable of alienation, but rather as complicit in the formation of these power structures.

Lyotard's ultimate conclusion, the one that drives his definition of postmodernism, is one of profound skepticism: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity to

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[73] Ibid., 8.

[74] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 242.

metanarratives."[75] By opening the door to the fallacy of singular discourse, Lyotard implicitly allows dramatic alterations to the uses, purposes, and messages conveyed by multimedia performance. Media can be recontextualized, rehistoricized, and brought a plurality of perspectives through indefinite, subjective, and aesthetic styles. In other words, the narratives employed by companies such as Apple and politicians such as Reagan are metanarratives to control knowledge and therefore power. The power of postmodernism, then, is that it "attests to the extent to which the singular, contingent, and far from ideal events of history retain a remainder that cannot be appropriated into such edifying metanarratives."[76]

Lyotard is the bridge between McLuhan and multimedia performance; to return to the quotation that opens this section, performance accentuates our mythical treatment of and relationship to newer media. Through performance we can take in multiple perspectives and evaluate our dynamics with media, which includes but is certainly not limited to a scientific understanding of function and use value. Laurie Anderson, much like Paik, is an example of an artist writing a counter-narrative to 1984 panic, presenting a space and time viewed through a postmodern aesthetic, "not as a determinate temporal epoch, but as a mode of relating to—or recounting—events."[77] Lyotard helps to illuminate the compulsions to narrate the U.S. as a power struggle to control knowledge; Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, helps to situate this struggle within a socio-economic struggle through a lens of late capitalism.

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[75] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

[76] Kent Still, introduction to *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Claire Nouvet et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), xv.

[77] Ibid., xiv.

Jameson: Second Nature

Mere months after Paik's PBS art-event, the premiere of Apple's 1984 commercial, and the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in English, Fredric Jameson published his essay, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in the *New Left Review*. Jameson, whose background and propensities were allied with Marxism, had a vastly different approach, attitude, and critical motivation, not to mention definition, of what postmodernism is and what its implications may be. The foundations and genesis of postmodernism, for Jameson, come about in the era of late capitalism, whose definition Jameson derives from the work of Ernest Mandel, namely a final, most "pure" stage of capitalism, in which capitalism enters the realm of the immaterial, breaking beyond the production of goods and ignoring the simplicity of class struggle. In late capitalism, commodification becomes a way of life, and concepts such as "culture," "style," and "art" are all bought and sold:

> So, in postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity is any of the items that includes which in itself: Modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity in the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as the process.[78]

To help illustrate what postmodernism demands of its audience, Jameson invokes the television sculptures of Nam June Paik. Pondering the pieces that incorporate dozens, if not hundreds of televisions, all on at once, displaying many different channels of programming, the postmodern viewer, Jameson claims, "is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference."[79] The gaze is thus distracted, overwhelmed, or

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[78] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, x.

[79] Ibid., 31.

apathetic to the individual messages conveyed by each screen in Paik's work. To take in the whole is to recognize the impossibility of focus and the production of meaning in the face of information overload. While one can examine each individual screen and moment of a piece such as *Electronic Superhighway* (1995), one loses the forest for the trees, so to speak, and the content overtakes the form, when in fact it is the conflict of content, the vying for attention that is so powerful in Paik's style and political message. Even in a single-channel work such as *Mr. Orwell*, the conflicting synthesis of content, not to mention the numerous technical errors, pointed to the impossibility of viewing or consuming a singular piece. For Jameson, this results in the crisis of postmodernism, an ideology akin to that of Debord: "The incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects."[80] In many ways, Jameson's rhetoric seems an update of *The Society of the Spectacle*, where the alienation theorized by Debord is displaced by apathy and ignorance. The individual, as a result of the inability to comprehend the information and discourse at play in late capitalism, is alienated from these networks and the production of meaning. How may messages be conveyed when the process of consumption is the primary commodity, and culture (also commodity) is now "second nature"?[81]

After the tireless work of government, industry, and the arts to incorporate media into the everyday, success had finally arrived, it seemed to these theorists of postmodernism. Through the technological capabilities produced by late capitalist forces, as well as the form of the production and dissemination of knowledge, the U.S. had achieved an implicit social understanding that culture was part and parcel of these everyday modes of communication, no matter how prolific.

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[80] Ibid., 44.

[81] Ibid., ix.

The relationship between the individual and the market is muddy in the piece: the bridge between the inundated subject (audience) and the larger sociological consequences of postmodernism is unclear in Jameson's argument. Perhaps the individual has surrendered; perhaps the commodification of the individual experience has overtaken political potential; but Jameson argues that culture has become so quotidian that culture itself has become a commodity, resulting in a loss of historical context and political efficacy. Intertextuality, the free and liberal borrowing and adaptation that has become common practice, is a direct cause of ahistoricity: "We are now, in other words, in 'intertextuality' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history."[82]

Here, Jameson relates the dizzying experience of postmodern pastiche to Lacan's description of schizophrenia, which similarly renders isolation in the subject through immediate, decontextualized perception: "With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time."[83] The postmodern viewer is subject to a barrage of dehistoricized imagery and ideas, all as commodified present.

The news is not all bad, however: Jameson does acknowledge that postmodernism, particularly in architecture, draws attention to "difference itself," allowing for new and insightful readings of cultural forms. The aesthetic experience in late capitalism is also part of McLuhan's idealization of the global village, allowing artists and spectators access to imagery and ingredients that were not available before. But these same technological and social forces lose

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[82] Ibid., 20.

[83] Ibid., 27.

impact because of the very same form, namely, in the spectator, whose experience "takes the form of an impossible imperative to achieve that new mutation in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness."[84]

That technology has become a part of contemporary perception, which McLuhan once saw as an extension of the human, an ethical imperative to understand others, Jameson treats with a more Marcusian eye; forces of production and consumption have overtaken individual agency. Culture produced is culture consumed, and the potential for the individual to take action is rendered inert by the inherent deluge of information that these technological extensions give him or her access to.

In addition to the use of the term postmodernism, Jameson's conceptualization of the commodification of cultural discourse, the acknowledgment of global capital's effects upon immaterial forces is the only strong link to Lyotard's formulation, the dissemination of knowledge. Steven Hemling characterizes Jameson's project thusly:

> "The cultural logic of late capitalism" triumphant, "the postmodern" itself, that is, seems, in Jameson's writing, to mark a period of revolutionary failures and capitalist successes so demoralizing as to bring "interpretation" itself under the full force of the devaluation expressed in the eleventh thesis of Feuerbach—as if our impotence to "change" the world can now be adequately expressed only as impotence, also, even to "understand" it.[85]

The metanarratives that Lyotard questions are reframed by Jameson as interpretation. Late capitalism has encouraged forces that render culture itself relative, subject to modes of power through consumption just as any individual artwork, political campaign, or defense system; the

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[84] Ibid., 31.

[85] Steven Hemling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 119.

process of commodification, and its interpretations by critics, is a part of the false narrative that Lyotard theorizes.

Otherwise, Jameson's definition and concerns are radically different, as evidenced by Jameson's foreword to the English translation of Lyotard, which, while respectful, is harshly critical. Jameson writes that Lyotard's framework in which scientific and narrative discourses are at odds and narrative wins out in the postmodern conditions, is a metanarrative in itself:

> This parenthesis once again complicates the arguments of The Postmodern Condition insofar as it becomes itself a symptom of the state it seeks to diagnose—its own return to narrative arguments being fully as revealing an example of the legitimation of crisis of the older cognitive and epistemological scientific world-view as any of the other developments enumerated in the text.[86]

Jameson's critique of Lyotard resonates with Eagleton's wholesale critique of postmodern theory, making Jameson's a very curious foreword indeed. Despite both Jameson's and Lyotard's popularity based upon theorizing the postmodern, their divergence in ideologies leads to what is for the most part a foundational attack by Jameson in his introduction to Lyotard's text. But even more ironic is that by critiquing Lyotard's framework, Jameson ends up finding more possibilities and optimism within the postmodern project than in his own monograph. Culture is markedly absent from *The Postmodern Condition*, which Jameson finds evocative and frustrating. But Jameson posits that perhaps this may be due to Lyotard's "commitment to the experimental and the new […] that is far more closely related to the traditional ideologies of high modernism proper than to current postmodernisms."[87] Most cutting is Jameson's conclusion that Lyotard's postmodernism is not postmodernism at all, "but rather as a cyclical moment that

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[86] Fredric Jameson, foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xi.

[87] Ibid., xvi.

returns before the emergence of ever NEW modernisms in the stricter sense."[88] Whereas Lyotard claims that postmodernism includes modernism, Jameson turns the formulation on its head, claiming that Lyotard's rubric situates postmodernism *within* modernism. Thus Jameson makes the case for the study of culture in the postmodern age, even if he is wary of the conditions in his own rhetoric.

Postmodern skepticism, however, is just as rooted in the tension between destruction and creation in the development of multimedia technologies. Lyotard's distrust of scientific discourse and Jameson's fear of decontextualization both stem from similar concerns voiced by Benjamin, Bush, Fuller, and McLuhan. In Jameson's rhetoric: "This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror."[89] The new wave for Jameson is late capitalism, an extension of forces of the military-industrial complex that developed new technologies and new cultural desire for those technologies in the post-WWII period. Jameson's underlying history resonates with Fuller's ephemeralization: in order for the postmodern to emerge, residual production and ideologies of technological communication and development are required.

Jameson's framework is problematically dialectical, rooted in the failure of Marxism; as Hemling describes, "He projects critique as an 'impossible task,' and insists that it be written in 'dialectical sentences' that not merely analyze or expound, but enact, perform—indeed *suffer*—the contradictions of their subject matter, the predicament of society and culture in general, and

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[88] Ibid., xvi, original emphasis.

[89] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 5.

the 'inevitable failure' of the socialist tradition in particular."[90] Jameson necessarily embraces the failures of critical theory in order to situate postmodern aesthetic and critique, subject to the fallacy that Eagleton sets up:

> It is a striking feature of advanced capitalist societies that they are both libertarian and authoritarian, hedonistic and repressive, multiple and monolithic. […] The logic of the marketplace is one of pleasure and plurality, of the ephemeral and discontinuous, of some great decentred network of desire of which individuals seem the mere fleeting effects. Yet to hold all this potential anarchy in place requires strong foundations and a firm political framework. The more market forces threaten to subvert all stability, the more stridently one will need to insist upon traditional values.[91]

Jameson's dialectics, even in their inherent failures, still maintain this system of hegemony to which Eagleton similarly clings. The passage echoes the analysis of the Reagan administration's myth-making: in order to create the idealized narrative of America, a force must be positioned as the other, the antagonist. The sentiment of Jameson's "decentered subject" requires an idealized, utopian force to aspire to or, more appropriately, for which to wax nostalgic. Hemling writes, "Jameson shares the utopian longings of theory, but his own more fastidiously pained writing implicitly renounces such enthusiasm as at best premature, at worst an unseemly bourgeois complacency while the revolution still suffers its time on the cross."[92] For Jameson, much like Marcuse, Debord, and others before who utilized some sort of Marxist framework, even a relative and empty discourse requires a totalizing ideology for contrast—the technological struggle between Apple and IBM in the 1984 commercial, the Communist threat to the Reagan administration—one that implicitly creates a metanarrative in order to create and exert power.

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[90] Hemling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson*, 4.

[91] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 132.

[92] Hemling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson*, 11.

Where Jameson's theory falls short is the lack of agency his critique allows for; Chabot expresses this tension, writing, "Since Jameson is attempting to develop a period concept that encompasses all social life, he presumes that changes occur across a broad front and thus discounts the conditions specific to discrete cultural spheres."[93] Despite the mobilization of pastiche and blank, ahistorical parody that results from complete commodification of culture, this in no way prevents the scholar, the citizen, or the artist from engaging with these postmodern practices. And to Lyotard, just because a story is impossible to tell, impossible to perfect through technological production or consumption, that does not preclude these figures from engaging with this impossibility. To theorize the cultural forces at work in United States is impossible in the same way that painting a complete portrait of United States is impossible. And it is exactly this impossibility that Laurie Anderson addresses in her *United States*.

Laurie Anderson as Postmodern Subject

> We always live in an uncertain world. What is certain is that United States will go forward over time.
> —Warren Buffett[94]

> *United States* was presented in four parts: Transportation, Politics, Money, and Love. It was designed to be a portrait of a country, but the more I worked on it, the more elusive it became. The idea of portraying a subject that is constantly moving became an integral part of the piece.
> —Laurie Anderson[95]

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[93] Chabot, "The Problem of the Postmodern," 35.

[94] Alex Crippen, "CNBC TRANSCRIPT: Warren Buffett on Recession, Taxing the Rich, and Capitalism's 'Regenerative Capacity,'" CNBC.com, September 23, 2010, accessed December 10, 2012, http://www.cnbc.com/id/39321868/CNBC_TRANSCRIPT_Warren_Buffett_on_Recession_Taxing_the_Rich_and_Capitalism039s_039Regenerative_Capacity039.

One of the central images of *United States* is a large projection of a time-zone map of the United States, somewhat cartoonishly rendered. At various moments, the map is animated with the superimposition of the arcade game *Asteroids*, in which the player rotates a spaceship and shoots at oncoming asteroids to avoid destruction. The result is a postmodern turn: considering the animated map, the personnel, and the wealth of gadgetry scattered across the stage, the performance art of Anderson resonates with the performance art of Reagan, as the Brooklyn Academy of Music appeared as a site of central command much like NORAD appeared as a theatre, or Apple's dystopian commercial appeared as politics. These similar setups were inspired dramatic effects: to Reagan, it invoked cinematic ideals of satellite communication and digital technologies, both to eliminate enemies abroad and entertain citizens at home; to Anderson, it was a postmodern pastiche that blurred the lines between technological communication, politics, and art. Both Reagan and Anderson celebrated the body electric, though with vastly different objectives.

Even in its basic design and presentation, *United States* was the paradigmatic performance of multimedia's next stage of evolution. Multimedia technologies were now in a majority of homes, as they explicitly worked to make lives more efficient and convenient. A more connected world became a more dangerous world; the technologies of necessity and convenience took on a more ominous tone in the cultural imaginary, one of Orwellian politics, surveillance, and threats from abroad. Whereas Robert Whitman had helped lay the foundations of the global village, Laurie Anderson set out to investigate how extensive the system had become.

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[95] RoseLee Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 86.

Anderson herself was part of multimedia's etymological history. If Whitman was creating, experimenting, and performing during the postwar years, the Age of Affluence, Laurie Anderson was a child of this era. Anderson earned her MFA in sculpture from Columbia in 1972, studying the performance art and happenings of the recent past.[96] As a result, Anderson's early performances were tinged with influences from performance forms such as happenings and Fluxus in addition to the visual movements of minimalism and conceptual art, as well as experimental and classical music. The role of the body within and against technology became an interest, as many of her early pieces toyed with technologies of film and projection, technologies that are simultaneously new in regards to form and role in the consumer market, but quite old with regard to content and the basic medium of light. As RoseLee Goldberg wrote of these pieces, "This work was above all an exploration of light—how to freeze it, bend it, enter into it. In some instances she became part of the projected shadow, in others a surface onto which images were projected."[97] One early piece of particular interest is *For Instants: Part 3, Refried Beans* (1976–7), which featured two projections running simultaneously. As Anderson moved about the space, her body would block one projection, revealing a "hidden" image behind her from the other.[98] This basic but haunting effect is similar to that employed in Whitman's *Prune Flat* a decade earlier. The performance situated the body as both organic element but also as obfuscation; both establish the body as a medium at play in performance. And while Anderson continued her exploration of folding herself into the media with which she worked, her materials

[96] Ibid., 32–33.

[97] Ibid., 50.

[98] Ibid., 56.

and subjects of inquiry became much larger in scale, and far more expansive in the potential reach of their communication.

In the late 1970s and early 80s, Anderson began workshopping and performing a series titled *Americans on the Move, Part I*, which later became *United States*. Non-linear and loosely structured, the performances were less narratives or explanations than imagistic and sonic impressions, meditations, and musings on experiences and emotions Anderson created about the vast subject of "the United States," much like Hemling described Jameson's theory: "less an 'answer' to these questions than an enactment of them."[99] Anderson later described these enactments as landscapes: "I've tried many times to picture the United States, which is also a background for everything my work is about: memory, language, technology, politics, utopia, power, men and women."[100] Anderson's preoccupation seems to be more of an American imaginary than physical setting; after all, any attempt to define the United States as a totality, a metanarrative, is doomed to failure. In line with the impossibility of narrative as written about by Lyotard, Anderson created a performance that resonated with the American sensibility: expansive, ambitious, fevered, and at times absurd, painful, and alienating.

Anderson enacted and even celebrated working outside the discourse of power by eliminating the narrative of the United States, instead creating an indefinite, abstract, and relative portrait of the country distinct from Reagan's mythologizing. Anderson's strategy played upon the desire of contemporary politics, as written by the president, for a country that yearned for a heroic past, idealized through pastoral nostalgia, addressing an underlying anxiety expressed by

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[99] Hemling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson*, 103.

[100] Laurie Anderson, *Stories from the Nerve Bible: A Retrospective 1972–1992* (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1994), 7.

Lyotard: "the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything."[101] Anderson served as an antidote to Reagan's political, cultural, and economic metanarrative; with an open an indefinite performance loosely themed, Anderson created a performance that recognized what Harvey asserts as "the multiplicity of the objective qualities which space and time can express, and the role of human practices in their construction."[102]

United States premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February of 1983, performed in sections across two evenings. Instruments both familiar and unusual were strewn about the stage, and the accompanying wires, outlets, and extensions gave the impression of complex chaos, an electronic mess. The only other set pieces of note were a large projection screen and, for the second half, a diving board extending over the orchestra pit.[103] The screen was the clear focal point for much of the iconography of the evening, and indeed many of the central images, animations, and texts were projected onto it, such as the aforementioned time-zone map.

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[101] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

[102] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 203.

[103] I must note here that my analysis of *United States* is limited by the documentation available. The greatest irony I have encountered in this project is that one of the most savvy and canonical multimedia performances in history, with its incisive deconstruction and analysis of television, the digital, music, film, computers, et al., was never captured on video (see Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 113). The only visual documentation that exists is in still photographs and critical descriptions. Some visual elements of the piece did carry over into *Home of the Brave* (1986), and the abridged audio performance is available in a five-LP album from Warner Brothers (the CD set released in 1991 is even further cut). This is a vital acknowledgment to make, not only in the name of responsible criticism, but also as an important issue in the performance world, even at this moment: namely, how documentation affects performance, its reception, and its legacy. What statement is made by a performance so holistically intertwined with media, yet unavailable in the most obvious or useful archival form? This will be explored more in the debates concerning liveness in the next chapter.

All of these elements existed on a large scale to enhance a similar device in Whitman's *Prune Flat* and Anderson's earlier *For Instants*: in order to serve the piece, all elements simultaneously interrupted, confused, and conflated in order to convey meaning. But it is precisely this sense of scale that distinguishes *United States*: in terms of duration, size, and subject, the piece is expansive to the point of overwhelming. These technologies that enable such scale also tend to confound the individual; the screens are constructing the country as much as Anderson is. Thus, like "Say Hello," many of the pieces are frantic searches for meaning in an increasingly confused culture. "Say Hello" bookends the lengthy performance, and therefore sets up imagery, ideas, and functions that will resonate throughout the performance. Anderson, alone below the giant projection screen, contributed to the feeling of not only being lost in space, but also the struggle of the small individual against a very large nation, and a larger, even less forgiving universe. To say "hello" is to search for a connection or meaning within all of the static. Anderson, as a part of the multimedia stage, represents the crisis of the subject that Jameson expressed: the individual's inability "to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects."[104] *United States* was in part an attempt to map that network, even if the effort was doomed to fail.

Despite this bleak impression, Anderson accompanied the setting with a discussion of one of the most mundane, basic modes of communication in America: "hello." She explained, "In our country, this is the way we say Hello. It is a diagram of movement between two people. It is a sweep on the dial. In our country, this is also the way we say Goodbye."[105] While she

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[104] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 84.

[105] Anderson, *United States*, n.p.

described the gesture of hello, she frantically waved her violin bow up and down with what she refers to as a "third arm," creating a screen.[106] The screen is a reversal of cinematic technique, exploiting persistence of vision to create the medium—the screen—as opposed to the content, the projections. Animations of waving hands and an empty room were projected onto this impromptu screen. At the very outset of the performance, Anderson complicated the meaning of both words and images: for the most basic form of greeting also means its opposite, the accompanying gesture can mean either indiscriminately, and the very screen upon which the audience was asked to contemplate this semiotic conundrum did not even exist except as a trick, a play on the vulnerabilities of human perception.

All of these phenomena were expressed through multimedia techniques, further complicating communications and aesthetics. It is no wonder the larger theme within "Say Hello" is of dislocation, of feeling lost. Anderson, at the beginning of the seven hours, invoked the Great Flood and left the audience out at sea. In addition, she compared the gesture to the sweep of a dial, like changing stations on a television or stereo. This simplistic mode of communication is also one attached to communication technology; a shift in meaning is a shift in frequency or output. Anderson began to establish her body as emblematic of a body electric.

More material than the bow-screen is the large projection screen hovering above, utilized throughout most of the performance with a system called the Duck's Foot Dissolve, developed with electronics engineer Bob Bielecki and artist Perry Hoberman:

> Able to emphasize either flatness or deep recession, the system transforms the screened image into a slight variation of itself. The Duck's Foot Dissolve can make a flat image appear to transpose or translate itself in space, can leach binocular depth into (or out of) an

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[106] In Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 81.

> image, or can flip flop the plane right to left, top to bottom. This system works to show things as images, as overladen with themselves.[107]

In other words, this system of projection played with perception as much as any other tool in Anderson's kit; it just happened to be the largest. The projections throughout the performance ranged from maps and landscapes to money to animated films of dogs. The screen was utilized as a setting, an iconographic complement, or a red herring, meant to confuse more than elucidate.[108] The layers, montages, and rapidity of images offered to the audience enhanced the confusion. The screen was given the ability to appear as three dimensional as the performers or as transparent and flat as the bow-screen; it was as real as the performers and as phantasmagoric as immaterial light. It was also as meaningless (or at the very least meaning-deferred) as the language Anderson describes. Finally, as Stephen Melville describes, the screen was used just as much as negative space, with shadow play both in front of and behind the screen.[109]

The final image of "Say Hello" was derived from an image placed on board the Pioneer 10, an American spaceship sent to Jupiter in 1972. Conceived by Carl Sagan, Linda Sagan, and Frank Drake, the image is of a man and a woman, nude (for scientific, biological objectivity), with the man extending his arm ostensibly to signal "hello" while the woman attends demurely at his side.[110] The engraving, which was included with a number of other "human artifacts," was

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[107] Stephen Melville, "Between Art and Criticism: Mapping the Frame in 'United States,'" *Theatre Journal* 37, 1 (March 1985): 32.

[108] Anderson's accompanying art book based upon the performance contains many of the images used in performance, and is a useful artifact by which to analyze *United States*, despite Bonnie Marranca's contention that the book may be "unwittingly cheating her audience out of a text which honors the performance aspects of her work as much the visual ones." See Bonnie Marranca, "United States by Laurie Anderson," *Performing Arts Journal* 8, 3 (1984): 118.

[109] Melville, "Between Art and Criticism," 41.

[110] Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 95.

sent in the Pioneer in the event that the satellite was intercepted by an alien species. Anderson gestured to it and, playfully simplistic, asked: "Do you think that They will think his arm is permanently attached in this position? Or, do you think They will read our signs?"[111] Anderson slyly points to the tunnel vision of this image, how a basic form of communication, once again, is polyvalent, ambiguous. The human form itself is satirized, that basic modes of communication are in no way universal, no matter how ambitiously or simplistically they are rendered. As Goldberg writes, Anderson's play with the Pioneer image implicates its imperialism, chauvinism, and irony.[112] The slippage in meaning is not only an existential crisis in *United States*, but also a political parable, one reflected in the other technology introduced at the outset of the performance: the vocoder.

The vocoder is an electronic device that receives information from speech (sounds, pauses, phonemes), processes them, and rebroadcasts the information through a synthesizer.[113] In Anderson's case, she commonly uses the vocoder in performance to raise and lower the register of her voice. In the majority of the pieces, as in "Say Hello," she lowers her voice to create an "authoritative," somewhat computerized voice that presents information. The voice that is heard is typical of Anderson's persona that has been presented thus far—extended, on screen, narrated—in that the voice is both Anderson and not-Anderson, information that is transmitted through a filter and broadcast by digital means. Scott Cummings argues that the vocoder is eventually decoded by the audience: the filters, the distortions, are characters and thus,

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[111] Ibid., 95.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Scott Cummings, "*United States Parts I–IV* by Laurie Anderson," *Theatre Journal* 36, 2 (May 1984): 252.

"technology is humanized."[114] Stephen Melville posits a more complicated and varied experience of the technology, that, "Her electronics—the keyboards and microphones and vocoders—are explicitly unconcealed, their mediation always visible, sometimes pointed to ('this stuff doesn't grow on trees you know') and sometimes made dramatically internal to the person we call the (unmediated) performer 'herself' (Anderson mikes her skull and plays that instrument)."[115] While Cummings has a point, that Anderson's aesthetic brings the ideology of the human into the technologies she uses, the picture is incomplete. The technologies in *United States* also work the other way; they inform and inflect the human, shaping the body electric. Anderson could not convey her performance without these filters, extensions, and embellishments to her body. Thus, the technologies affected how Anderson performed: she must adjust to the projections, their timing, the wiring along the ground, the sounds and the speed of her tools. This returns to Goldberg's point that Anderson is constantly attempting to fold herself into technology.

A good example of this technological symbiosis is the piece "Closed Circuits," during which Anderson very simply sat cross-legged in the dark, lit only by a single light bulb, symmetrical to the microphone into which Anderson spoke, as the vocoder brought a digital interference to the timbre of her voice:

> And don't think I haven't seen all those blind A-rabs
> around. I've seem 'em around.
> And I've watched them charm that oil
> right out of the ground.
> Long black streams of that dark electric light.
> And they said: One day the sun went down
> and it went way down, into the ground.
> And three thousand years go by
> and we pump it right back up again.

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Melville, "Between Art and Criticism," 34.

> ‘Cause it’s a closed circuit, baby.
> We can change the dark into the light
> and vice versa.[116]

In this brief passage one can see many of the important themes at work in *United States*: much as in “This Is the Picture,” Anderson presents a series of “closed circuits” as almost Buddhist parables, circular structures to time and space that inform contemporary life. In this instance, she discusses the natural resources that humans exploit for political, economic, and technological gain, not to mention the air of entitlement that comes along with this logic. Once again, Anderson presented a simple, natural process that becomes fraught with international intrigue, couching it in terms that are half meditative, half digital. After all, a closed circuit is used to refer to an electrical current that contains its own complete, circular path; this may also refer to digital information. The storyteller Anderson weaves all of these elements together in this and many other numbers throughout the performance, and includes her own body electric as an integral component to *United States*.

“‘Technology,’ Anderson insists, is ‘the least important thing about what I do.’”[117] This hyperbolic statement is, to a degree, posturing on Anderson’s part. She has mentioned in many other interviews, writings, and encounters that technology is vital to what she does.[118] The statement reflects her belief that technology, as an integral part of the process and performance, is not a featured element, but one among many visual, acoustic, and performative elements involved, such as set or lighting design, text or music.

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[116] Anderson, *United States*, n.p.

[117] Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 15.

[118] As one example in the same book: “For me, electronics have always been connected to storytelling. Maybe because storytelling began when people used to sit around fires. For me, fire is magic, compelling, and dangerous. We are transfixed by its light and by its destructive power. Electronics are modern fires.” In Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 105.

Anderson uses this rhetoric because she was creating large-scale, technologically savvy performances at a moment when dystopian visions of *1984* pervaded the zeitgeist, and the U.S. president championed satellite surveillance and a missile defense system in space. This moment was markedly different from that of Whitman's *Prune Flat*, revealing a number of important shifts in the conception and proliferation of multimedia as ideology and how these shifts influenced and were influenced by performance.

Far from technology marketed as the everyday in the years immediately following WWII, Anderson's performance is a symptom of a time when technology is already seamless with day-to-day living. Auslander theorizes the conflation of performance, media, and the everyday with regard to *United States*, writing, "Anderson has entered the flow of commodity culture in ways that make her work potentially as much a part of the audience's perceptual world as the television screen, the stereo, and the radio."[119] This commodity structure had become so ingrained by the mid-1980s that critics had come to view the technologies as threats, overtaking lives, consciousnesses, politics. Despite a social anxiety concerning media technologies, the social landscape that seemed only mildly concerned with how it might be affected by these factors. Even though, through deregulation and a politics of fear and heroism, Reagan trumped up America's defense with plans for a shield made of satellites and laser beams, these same technologies brought cable television into the home; weapons against the apocalypse and MTV were conveyed through the same media.

Thus, *United States* stands as an epitomizing work of the mid-1980s: focused upon the theme of an ever-changing American landscape, the performance is both a thrilling result of and reaction against economic boom and technological advancement, especially with regard to

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[119] Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 61.

communications technologies. Laurie Anderson's characteristically calm, soothing tone is one of Zen-inflected rumination, cool downtown irony, as well as indictment of apathy and bourgeois sensibility. The performance is therefore a symptom of the climate discussed earlier, one in which communications technologies are becoming more a part of the home, which, combined with the anxiety of *1984*'s prophesies, leads to fear concerning the invasiveness and ubiquity of technology; meanwhile the production and access to all this knowledge call into question notions of authenticity when it comes to politicians, language, and power in the form of postmodern ideologies.

As a participant in *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, Anderson situated herself within a similar ideology to Paik's: one that celebrated technology through the acknowledgment of problems, miscommunication, and malfunction. Artists such as Anderson and Paik are amazed by the scope, breadth, and power that multimedia communications have; they communicate personal conversations, presidential addresses, and music videos. From high art to low entertainment, both Paik and Anderson address the holistic functions of multimedia: that is, media are an integral part of daily existence, not some sort of outside threat or promise; they are part of the problem and part of the solution; most importantly, we could not navigate daily life nor communicate with one another without a multimedia existence.

Anderson expressed this integrity with Gabriel in *GMMO*, as well as within *United States*, in which high art and pop culture were scrutinized with the same degree of criticism, wit, and music. At one point in *United States*, the Warner Brothers logo was projected to overwhelm the stage, a gesture to Anderson's success and misgivings about success after "selling out" to a

major record label.[120] Anderson could not compromise the two so much as acknowledge the coexistence of reaching an audience and participating in a corporate system of media distribution. Rather than getting lost in the interstices of the two ideologies, Anderson acknowledged the interplay of the two worlds—art and pop—and implicitly satirizes the notion that one could exist without the other. What Jim Morrison had failed to compromise, Anderson navigated with deft reflexivity. During "Difficult Listening Hour," Anderson satirizes the success of art-rock in general:

> Good evening. Welcome to Difficult Listening Hour.
> The spot on your dial for that relentless and
> impenetrable sound of Difficult Music
> So sit bolt upright in that straight-backed chair,
> button that top button,
> and get set for some difficult music.[121]

The discomfort and difficulty of "enjoying" high art is the target of this particular moment, with Anderson's soothing voice echoing DJs who play smooth jazz or soft rock. This is pervasive throughout the performance, from the artists who create this difficult music ("New York Social Life" in Part III) to the audience that has to pay exorbitant amounts of money only to trek out to Brooklyn and remain captive for seven hours in order to experience *United States* ("Telephone Song" in Part IV).

The discomfort is best emphasized in the piece that followed "Difficult Listening Hour," "Language Is a Virus from Outer Space." With a title borrowed from William S. Burroughs, the piece was both genuine exploration and critical satire of communication and expression. One of

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[120] Anderson quipped, "A couple of years later, this process was known as 'crossing over' and was looked on more favorably by the avant-garde. By the time it was considered a 'smart commercial move' in the mid-'80s, there was no longer much of an avant-garde left to comment on it anyway." Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 92.

[121] Anderson, *United States*, n.p., original emphasis.

the more violent, driving pieces of music, Anderson's voice contained a jazzier, more upbeat tone, as she relayed a story: "Well, I was talking to a friend the other day, and I was saying: I wanted you … and I was looking for you … but I couldn't find you. And he said: *Hey* … are you talking to me … or are you just practicing for one of those performances of yours?"[122] Anderson confused the high and low to an extreme: not only did she acknowledge the conflation of high and low art, she similarly blended the everyday with the commodity of these artistic endeavors, accentuating the discontinuity between autobiography and performance. This discontinuity, the "desemanticization of language," is one important factor in defining postmodern theatre, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte:

> advanced through the dissolution of the spoken language on the one hand from a "character" and on the other from the actor's body. The sounds, words, or texts are spoken by the actor at the same time as they are transmitted on tape through a loudspeaker. In this way, they are disengaged from the body of the actor—the language creates its own acoustic space. In so doing, however, language becomes incapable of functioning as the sign of character: speech is deconstructed not only as part of a meaningful dialogue but also as the sign of character. Speech is presented as phonetic phenomena and fragments of text which can neither be linked to one another nor to the body of the actor in a meaning-generating semiosis.[123]

Unlike Cummings, who claims that Anderson "humanizes" technology through the voice, Fischer-Lichte argues that language is "disengaged" in postmodern performance—that language has no inherent meaning and rather serves to trouble the autonomous role of the body or the character in performance. The desemanticization of language is one of Anderson's primary strategies in performance—through her stoic spoken word pieces, meditative musical numbers, and the collapse of everyday and performance.

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[122] Ibid.

[123] Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Postmodernism: Extension or End of Modernism?" *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy,* ed. Ingebord Hoesterey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 224–25.

As an example, her everyday encounters became fodder for performance, so much so that this exchange with a friend had myriad complicated semantics. In "Language Is a Virus," Anderson speaks to her friend in such vague clichés, that one cannot be certain even about what is being discussed; an audience could not tell if whether this story, enacted within the fictive world of performance, had actually occurred. The deconstruction of language expands to the everyday, the art world, and the market forces that drive each; language is a postmodern virus.

Herman Rapaport makes a compelling argument that ties Anderson's texts and subjects to their modes of communication, writing that "the collision of elitist and vernacular styles is emphasized through the engagement of ordinary talk with sophisticated electronic equipment."[124] In other words, Anderson employs a postmodern aesthetic by becoming a body electric, much like Raphael's construction of Reagan. Drawing from the everyday occurrences that similarly were utilized by happenings, Anderson embraced the quotidian but extended it through technological and rhythmic, musical filters, problematizing the notion of multimedia performance as a permutation of the everyday. This connection to these large and technical tools of expression is precisely how Anderson's performance is a link between Reagan's body electric and the politics and aesthetics of postmodern thought.

Anderson is an art-world icon, beyond a simple artist, and she is both unabashed and self-critical when it comes to such status. Anderson recounted how she wrote *United States* in part because so many of her downtown-art friends were writing operas: "You'd be walking down the street, see a friend and say, 'So how's your opera going? Yeah well mine's coming along

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[124] Herman Rapaport, "'Can You Say Hello?': Laurie Anderson's 'United States,'" *Theatre Journal* 38, 3 (October 1986): 342.

too.'"[125] Anderson, through such downtown culture, which she discussed quite a bit in *United States*, as well as her recent contract with Warner Brothers, understood the expectations of art and the art market, not to mention the tastes of critics and audiences. Instead of fighting against them or pretending to be oblivious, Anderson engaged with the conflation of forces head-on. The very image of Anderson on BAM's large stage, a projected image overpowering the solo body, is already commentary on Anderson as artist, persona, and celebrity. Jon McKenzie ties together these elements of Anderson's performance style very specifically and at length:

> First, she supplements living behavior with film, video, tape, synthesizers, and computers to enhance the building and playback of her idiosyncratic archive. Through her electric body, she connects cultural performance to other performances, such as those of high performance computer systems. Second, she plugs her electric body into corporations, here specifically, Warner Bros. Records, HarperCollins, and Voyager, who mass produce her work and in turn plug her through various media blitzes. Through such corporate bodies, she thus links up with the language game of bureaucratic performance: profitability and cost-effectiveness, market shares and public relations, downsizings and reengineerings. The twists of her work lie in the path she cuts across these three terrains of performance: cultural, technological, and bureaucratic.[126]

The connections McKenzie finds, both explicitly and implicitly, are remarkable: he refers to Anderson's "body electric" much like Reagan as the "president electric"; he ties the multimedia set and Duck's Foot Dissolve projection system with those of NORAD and corporate computer servers; and his numerous references to bureaucratic and corporate culture are illustrative of performance within Jameson's period of late capitalism. McKenzie's explanation of the Anderson's performances connects the celebrity that Anderson embodies and criticizes, much

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[125] In Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 86.

[126] Jon McKenzie, "Laurie Anderson for Dummies," *TDR* 41, 2 (Summer 1997): 31. While I agree with McKenzie's larger idea, his notion of Anderson as corporatized body does seem to be a bit of a stretch; he is rehearsing the arguments for his book-length study of this phenomenon. See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

like that of Reagan, and the postmodern concern for control of knowledge and narrative in an era of late capitalism.

Anderson recognized and played with notions of celebrity and corporate culture, pop and experimental music, artist and character. By collapsing these binary oppositions, she challenged each of their narratives. She became the postmodern art commodity that reflexively addresses postmodern commodities, a phenomenon that Jameson describes as "the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of the current culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern."[127] Both knowledge and commodity, especially those of politics and culture, were used as material to challenge, document, and confuse the audience.

By discussing and conflating high and low, Anderson was able to construct an epic performance that engaged with a country that is impossible to define, one that was caught up in a fervor of Reaganomics, Star Wars, *1984*, postmodern aesthetics, and an insatiable appetite for consumption of entertainment, technology, communication, and, of course, artists. The landscape Anderson claimed to create was in fact a moving target. Instead of providing a narrative form to her exploration, which would fix the landscape in time and space, Anderson opted to create an impressionistic guided meditation on these subjects, with a reflexive lack of coherence. Her strategy is in part a response to one of Hemling's quandaries in approaching postmodern criticism, namely, "how can we critique what we cannot represent?—or (if our program is hermeneutic) interpret what is not represented or representable?"[128] Echoes of Lyotard are in Rapaport's discussion of power dynamics at work in *United States* in order to understand

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[127] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2.

[128] Hemling, *The Successes and Failures of Fredric Jameson*, 118.

Anderson's strategy: "she must perform in a way that stresses copying, imitating, borrowing, assimilating, appropriating, taking on styles, phrases, attitudes, forms, notions which come form outside—from a culture that prefers not to express domination in terms of subjecthood, in terms of naked power."[129] Rapaport cites Anderson's postmodern critique in her diffuse subjectivity, that Anderson's riffs on pop cultural phenomena and political trends leverage citation against metanarrative.[130] Anderson's use of the vocoder, the pillow speaker, and the body mic allow Anderson to be Anderson and not-Anderson, while the screens, cables and instruments further mediate the performance and persona of Anderson. Fischer-Lichte refers to this juxtaposition in postmodern performance as the "desemanticization of the body": "The actor's body no longer represents or means anything, and finds satisfaction in being presented next to its co-objects."[131] Anderson is a medium much as the screen and projections are media. To weave these ideas together, Anderson is a body electric.

Postmodern performance situates the body in a fashion similar to Moholy-Nagy's idealization, that the body should be "employed on equal footing with other formative media."[132] Thus, the multimedia guide throughout the performance is difficult to locate in time and space, a reflection of Jameson's critique of the postmodern subject's inability "to map the great global

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[129] Rapaport, "Can You Say Hello?" 354.

[130] Rapaport goes on to conclude that Anderson "'performs' the hegemony's illusory unifications and subtly reveals its dissonances and discrepancies, but without necessarily enacting a critical stance of her own." Ibid., 348. Anderson's body electric, however diffuse, was inherently political in form. Confounding the notion of a unified narrator is political in itself, and there were still morals, parables, and criticisms throughout *United States.* Anderson would later muse: "I'm not even sure I'm an artist any more. More like a thinly disguised moralist." In Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*, 85.

[131] Fischer-Lichte, "Postmodernism: Extension or End of Modernism?" 225.

[132] Moholy-Nagy, "Theatre, Circus, Variety," 21.

multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects."[133] The narrator obeys no unities, for the United States has no unities, despite attempts to narrate otherwise.

The constantly shifting landscape Anderson refers to is also reflected in the form of the performance. Anderson's body electric is a citizen of Reagan's U.S.: subject to the absurdities of deregulation, consumer culture and marketing, mythic narratives, and extreme political threats. At the end of the first evening, Anderson concluded with a piece entitled "Finnish Farmers," in which she explained how the United States military compensated farmers throughout the country to allow for the construction of silos, some of which contained Minutemen missiles, while others were simply decoys that the farmers called "Scarecrows"; many of these silos were rumored to be connected by "hundreds of miles of railroad in an underground shuttle system."[134] This theme was clearly connected to one brought up later in a song called "Song for Two Jims," in which Anderson discussed holes dotting the Kentucky countryside, where oil companies had similarly exploited local families and their land. One is militarized, the other is privatized; both were about Americans under financial hardship, surrendering private property to a "greater cause"—the "heroes" of Reagan's mythology burdened by their own heroism.

The conundrum of "To whom does this land belong?" was complicated by Anderson's postmodern critique. The farms of America's heartland were rendered as postmodern territories that represented the private and the militarized, sites of growth and destruction, portraits of pastoral nostalgia and dystopian menace.

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[133] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 84.

[134] Anderson, *United States*, n.p.

All of these issues, songs, and themes in *United States* concluded and collapsed in "Lighting out for the Territories," a reprise of the opening "Say Hello." For the final scene, all lights went black, save for the two that emitted from goggles Anderson wore. The lights shined like revelatory irises, but, practically speaking, blinded Anderson. She slowly made her way out on to the diving board, cautiously feeling her way with her feet, arms thrust out like Frankenstein's monster, as the performer felt around for balance and location. She summed up the performance with a quiet warning:

> You've been on this road before.
> You can read the signs.
> You can feel your way.
> You can do this
> in your sleep.[135]

Anderson completes the postmodern gesture, collapsing the stories of the performance, the storyteller, and those bearing witness to the stories: we've been here before. The audience was placed in Anderson's position: like her, the audience is familiar with the territory, the language, and yet they are, by implication, as blind as the storyteller. Much like the feeling of being lost with which Anderson opened the piece, she reveals that they remain lost; in a postmodern country, one is necessarily dislocated.

Conclusion

As corporations and national politics competed for attention regarding multimedia development, the economic boom and capital pumped into research and development for both the home computer and Star Wars completed a cycle begun by consumer electronics following

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[135] Ibid.

WWII. What was once innovative and the wave of the future became normalized, and its scope became feared for its dystopian potential. Anderson's voice represents that feeling of individual blindness, of being uncomfortably familiar in one's loss of awareness in space. But what ties these subjects together, whether serious, tongue-in-cheek, or some combination of the two, is the scale, the pomp and circumstance. The sheer vastness of information systems led to this image of Anderson, overwhelmed by but part of screens, gadgets, and wiring. Paik attempted to connect cultures through satellite systems. Reagan and his team understood the president not as a person, but as an entity, a commodifiable media persona. As multimedia evolved in the social imagination and communications technologies became normalized, however, this loss of self, this techno-existential crisis ended in an unusual fashion, and one performance group was all too happy to bury it.

Chapter 4

A Net, a Blue Man, and the End of Multimedia

In the fall of 1988, nine people dressed in ill-fitting suits marched into Central Park carrying a small, graffiti-covered coffin that was filled with a number of representative tokens of the past decade—a piece of the Berlin Wall, a small baggie of cocaine, a "deconstructed" painting, a Ronald Reagan punching hand puppet.[1] Arriving in the middle of the park, the group stood ceremoniously around a black oil drum, as one spoke up and began the funeral for the 1980s.

"It's a little early," he conceded, "But let's face it: this decade's pretty much dead."[2] These symbols, along with those for postmodern architecture, "Ramboism," and yuppie television, were stuffed in the drum and set ablaze. Somewhere between the ancient practices of mourning and sacrifice, the service was an archetypal ritual of transition. In a gesture of hope, the participants stuffed a life-sized yuppie effigy in the drum, proclaiming, "Let's give him an honorable ceremony, an honorable funeral, and let's get him buried for good and get a running start on the 90s."[3] The ceremony is part community tribute and part political guerilla theatre. Is the piece comedy? Politics? Spiritual surrogation? Of course one cannot have a funeral in the middle of Central Park; it is nontraditional to say the least to hold a funeral for concepts,

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[1] See Vicki Goldberg, "High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group," *New York Times*, November 17, 1991, accessed May 25, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/17/theater/theater-high-tech-meets-goo-with-blue-man-group.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm; Mimi Avins, "True Blue to an Artistic Vision," *L.A. Times*, March 4, 2001, 5.

[2] "MTV News: Burying the 1980's," Blue Man Group: BMG History Video (New York: Blue Man Group, n.d.), VHS.

[3] Ibid.

ideologies, and strategies; these are rendered even more problematic and confused when all of the mourners are painted blue.

This performance was the first public appearance of the Blue Man Group (BMG), a collective of musicians and artists that was attempting to shift the conversations on performance art, community, and technology. The group's timing was serendipitous: its performances that disrupted everyday happenings and idealized a return to live presence tapped into larger cultural concerns as the isolating technologies of the 1980s—namely, the personal computer and VCR—were about to become far more complicated by Internet service providers and the World Wide Web. The line between isolation and connection would be problematized and challenged, from utopian visions confirming McLuhan's global village and validating an end to identity thanks to the web, to further concern from technophobes that the Internet would foster a civilization of drones that would never leave their computer terminals.

After an engagement with the dislocated subject and fear of technological control as presaged in *1984* in pieces such as *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* and *United States*, BMG illustrated a shift in the politics and aesthetics of multimedia technologies. Anderson's attempt to reclaim myth and disrupt metanarratives of power was part of a cultural imaginary that deeply mistrusted many of the communications technologies it used on a daily basis; the BMG, while still troubled by the effects of these technologies, adopted a more celebratory and liberal style.

One other symbolic funeral was vital to the transition from the politics of *1984* to those of the Information Age: the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. On December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev ceded power to Boris Yeltsin, enacting the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and marking an end to the mythic antagonism with the U.S. brought to its acme by Reagan in the

1980s.[4] This shift away from Cold War competition ended a significant effort by the U.S. military-industrial complex to develop weapons of defense and technologies of communication, shifting economic production to the private sector and ostensibly beginning a new phase of a global economy. Economists Ann Markusen and Joel Yudken characterized the stagnating economy immediately following the Cold War as a result of anachronistic spheres of production. What was required, they claimed was a "technology transfer": "As military-directed research gets increasingly esoteric, its commercial spin-offs get fewer and fewer. Military innovation can no longer be counted upon to drive commercial technology advances. Rather, the reverse is now true."[5] Between this economic, cultural, and technological shift from public to private development and Reagan's deregulation of industries leading up to the end of the Cold War, McLuhan's global village expanded and reformed for the Information Age.

The Blue Man was a citizen of a networked era, one in which consumer technologies were an integral part of the everyday and communication; Blue Man was an iteration of the body electric—not an exceptional, mythical figure such as the one developed by Reagan, but rather an electric body more akin to the one Walt Whitman wrote about—the everyman, a citizen of the global village who was all but required to participate in a global, media culture. As the body was increasingly mediated on a daily basis—part of the forces of consumer culture—and critics such as Phelan and Auslander theorized the performing body from a place of pastoral nostalgia, one

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[4] Francis X. Clines, "End of the Soviet Union; Gorbachev Plans to Give up Power to Yeltsin Today," *New York Times*, December 25, 1991, accessed December 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/25/world/end-of-the-soviet-union-gorbachev-plans-to-give-up-power-to-yeltsin-today.html?pagewanted=2.

[5] Ann Markusen and Joel Yudken, *Dismantling the Cold War Economy* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 245.

that escaped modes of reproduction, the BMG embraced the return to the body electric—problematizing and investigating the implications of the body and performance in media culture.

The BMG's first commercial success, *Tubes* (1991), was prescient in its evaluation of a burgeoning web culture, and the Blue Man stands as an emblematic figure of an era that attempted to redefine notions of community, communication, and the value of live presence. The Blue Man is the definition of the body electric, a body inextricable from its cultural and technological construction, acknowledgment that the body (and performance) is always already multimedia. The cultural anxiety concerning the body electric was expressed in the performance theory of the 1990s—namely, the discourse on liveness as most often cited in the work of Phelan and Auslander. As performance groups such as BMG began to understand and create nuanced multimedia aesthetics, discourse on the ideology and value of liveness in performance rose in urgency. The normalized body electric troubles performance's defining feature in a media age—live presence—and so critics worked to understand liveness's role in contemporary performance. I argue that the performances of BMG and the rhetoric of liveness indicate the full circle of multimedia, from always already a part of experience to exceptional technological determinism and back again. The Blue Man is the multimedia citizen, evolving and morphing in order to adapt to relentlessly shifting technologies and their impact upon communication; while discourse about liveness expressed cultural anxieties of performance's obsolescence as a result of this return to the mediated subject. Ironically, this anxiety expresses the obsolescence of multimedia as a genre instead, and these phenomena of the late twentieth century thus represent an end to the usefulness of the term "multimedia performance."

The Acquisition

Within a month of the Blue Man's funeral performance, another vital development in multimedia occurred: cigarette manufacturer Philip Morris bought Kraft Foods for $12.6 billion.[6] Naomi Klein points out that the price was six times more than the company's worth, and explains the discrepancy: "The price difference, apparently, was the cost of the word 'Kraft.' […] a huge dollar value had been assigned to something that had previously been abstract and unquantifiable—a brand name."[7] Klein tracks the history and development of the brand in *No Logo* (2000), citing the meteoric rise of the brand in the late 1980s and early 90s in large part thanks to the deregulation of Reaganomics, the neoliberalization of global trade, and the resulting global culture fostered by newer modes of communication such as cable television and computers.[8] This paradigmatic shift in marketing was in part a practical strategy for this increasingly globalized communication: "Logos, by the force of ubiquity, have become the closest thing we have to an international language, recognized and understood in many more places than English"[9]; but the shift was also an ideological one, as the consumption of goods by the prosperous Baby Boomer generation, those who had reaped the benefits of the Age of Affluence, had grown restless and disillusioned with contemporary advertising practices: the

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[6] See Claudia H. Deutsch, "Case Study: The Philip Morris-Kraft Merger; Why Bigness May Not Matter," *New York Times*, October 23, 1988, accessed February 1, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/23/business/case-study-the-philip-morris-kraft-merger-why-bigness-may-not-matter.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

[7] Klein, *No Logo*, 8.

[8] Ibid., 163.

[9] Ibid., xl.

postwar generation, "blind to the alluring images of advertising and deaf to the empty promises of celebrity spokespersons, were breaking their lifelong brand loyalties and choosing to feed their families with private-label brands from the supermarket—claiming, heretically, that they couldn't tell the difference."[10] A new strategy was needed to appeal to the lifestyle, and the corporate response was the brand.

The primary tenet of branding is visibility—the brand should become so integral to the cultural imaginary that it becomes a part of people's everyday experience. The goal of branding resonates with the ideology of the happenings in the 1960s: to refashion Kaprow's law: "The line between brand and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible." Indeed, marketing firms began to script corporate "happenings" to increase brand visibility, and a new "experience economy" became a trendy marketing tactic.[11] Klein recounts a particular happening in 1997 staged by Mattel in Salford, England, for which the company painted an entire street pink—"houses, porches, trees, road, sidewalk, dogs and cars"—in an effort to raise awareness of the Barbie brand during what the company proclaimed "Barbie Pink Month."[12] More extreme than simple billboards or product placement, this artistic, corporate stunt brought a brand into the everyday, literally incorporating the brand into the architecture and aesthetic of a town. Barbie Pink Month illustrates the adoption of integrated consumerism through happenings in an effort to shift the consumer experience from a focus on material goods to that of a lifestyle. Branding brought consumption into a normalized, everyday experience and cultural signifier.

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[10] Ibid., 13.

[11] Sally Beatty, "Interpublic Acquires Jack Morton, Entering Corporate Event Arena," *Wall Street Journal,* April 14, 1998, B6.

[12] Klein, *No Logo*, 9–12.

Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore theorized an "experience economy," which echoed Klein's analysis of the Baby Boom generation. Pine and Gilmore write, "Just as people have cut back on goods to spend more money on services, now they also scrutinize the time and money they spend on services to make way for more memorable—and more highly valued—experiences."[13] For both branding and the experience economy, the focus of commerce shifts away from material goods and toward experience and lifestyle—the commodification of the everyday. Advertising spending in the U.S., which had totaled less that $10 billion mid-century, had skyrocketed in the branding era to $196.5 billion in 1998[14]; much of this was focused not on the product, but on the name and logo in order to fold the brand into the consumer's everyday experience.

With profound implications for world economics and consumerism, branding engenders the diminishing significance of manufactured goods. Klein sums up the legacy of deregulation and advertising thusly:

> And so the wave of mergers in the corporate world over the last few years is a deceptive phenomenon: it only *looks* as if the giants, by joining forces, are getting bigger and bigger. The true key to understanding these shifts is to realize that in several crucial ways—not their profits, of course—these merged companies are actually shrinking. Their apparent bigness is simply the most effective route toward their real goal: divestment of the world of things.[15]

Klein explicates this fascinating trajectory of consumer trends over the course of the late twentieth century: from nationalistic maintenance of the military-industrial complex following WWII to the post-industrial, globalized emphasis on maintaining a market of desire and lifestyle.

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[13] Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business is a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 12.

[14] Klein, *No Logo*, 8–11.

[15] Ibid., 4.

The seeds that had been sown by U.S. corporate advertising, as Kilbourne notes, focused on creating a market for these goods after the war, and the phenomenon had come to a head with branding, as consumption is made integral to the everyday. This divestment of things, the focus on the consumption of immaterial goods and services and commodification of lifestyles, was a major force in the cultural imaginary of the 1990s. Branding further solidified the false consciousness of consumerism: to return to Kilbourne, "advertising's power comes from this belief that advertising does not affect us."[16] Branding is part of consumer culture, in which the rise of the World Wide Web, cyberspace, and the performance experiments that investigated these paradigms of immateriality was part of a cultural fascination and anxiety concerning the effects of technology and media upon politics, expression, and communication. Consumer modes of communication, such as the Internet, depended more upon invisible information, the same information theorized by Lyotard. These ideologies of immateriality created a sense of crisis among performance critics concerning the significance of the body and live performance. The Blue Man Group, which was catalyzed by consumerist forces of the art market and social alienation, both satirized and was subsumed by these emergent technologies. Whereas Laurie Anderson was the postmodern subject of dislocation, the Blue Man was integrated fully into the system of communications and consumerism; if Laurie Anderson warned of becoming a "closed circuit," the Blue Man connected to an almost infinite number of other circuits. In engaging with themes of networks and consumption, BMG itself became a brand name. The most significant factors that helped BMG become an international phenomenon were the computer and the newest mode of communication and commerce, the Internet.

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[16] Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 27.

High-Performance Media

Less than a month after the commercial opening of BMG's *Tubes*, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the High-Performance Computing Act, H. R. 656, on December 9, 1991, of which he proclaimed, "The development of high-performance computing and communications technology offers the potential to transform radically the way in which all Americans will work, learn, and communicate in the future. It holds the promise of changing society as much as the other great inventions of the 20th century, including the telephone, air travel, and radio and TV."[17]

The act had been two years in the making, initiated by then-Senator Al Gore, Jr., who understood the potential of an Internet for both national and private interests. The bill was designed to "provide $1.75 billion over three years to finance a data network that would link the nation's universities and supercomputer centers."[18] And even though Gore and supporters began to champion an "electronic superhighway," the term had been used over fifteen years earlier by none other than Nam June Paik, who, in a 1974 report to the Rockefeller Foundation, wrote

> The building of new ELECTRONIC SUPER HIGHWAYS will become an even huger enterprise. Assuming we connect New York with Los Angeles by means of an electronic telecommunication network that operates in strong transmission ranges, as well as with continental satellites, wave guides, bundled coaxial cable, and later also via laser beam

[17] George H. W. Bush, "Remarks on Signing the High-Performance Computing Act of 1991," George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, accessed January 4, 2013, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=3723&year=1991&month=12. The concept of high-performance computing resonates with McKenzie's analysis of performance in relation to power and corporatization. See McKenzie, *Perform or Else*.

[18] John Markoff, "Creating a Giant Computer Highway," *New York Times*, September 2, 1990, accessed January 4, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/02/business/creating-a-giant-computer-highway.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

> fiber optics: the expenditure would be about the same as for a moon landing, except that the benefits in term of by-products would be greater.[19]

Of course, the Internet took decades to develop and, much like the computer and satellite, was developed by the U.S. military, and extended to the private sector once the groundwork had been laid and industry could expand its uses. While the "by-products" Paik presages is not defined, electronic superhighways would be a powerful force in developing brand presence and new forms of consumerism in addition to the art and critical engagement that Paik practiced.

The first prototype of the Internet was ARPANET; beginning in 1958, government funding was made available to ARPA to create a system of communications amongst computers in the Pentagon, spearheaded by Robert Kahn. Kahn then began to work with engineers from universities, and ARPANET was successful in linking the Pentagon to MIT to UCLA.[20] In addition to linking researchers with complementary projects, one of the driving forces to develop the ARPANET was precisely the same as the impulses that drove the American Exhibition in 1959—technological and cultural competition during the Cold War. In fact, packet switching, the process by which digital information is broken into small "packets" and sent separately to a destination, was devised by Paul Baran, a private computer engineer in California who had been experimenting with methods of telephone communications in the event of nuclear war.[21] A network of information would be decentralized in order to prevent the entire system from

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[19] Nam June Paik, "Media Planning for the Postindustrial Society—The 21st Century is now only 26 years away," Media Art Net, accessed January 24, 2013, http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/33/. He would later translate this term into the piece *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii* (1995), a 600-square-foot installation of televisions and neon in the shape of the country. See John Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (NY: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2000), 172–3.

[20] Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 264; Wise, *Multimedia*, 74.

[21] Markoff, "Creating a Giant Computer Highway."

collapsing in an attack. The ARPANET system was in this sense a more significant counterpart to Reagan's SDI: instead of a defense against physical missiles, ARPANET was a defense that mobilized information, most illustrative of the power Lyotard had theorized in *The Postmodern Condition*. The shield that Reagan had idealized was not made up of satellites and lasers, but rather telephone lines and computers. National defense was best maintained by consumer, multimedia communications systems.

Until this point, the usage of the term multimedia had been extended from Apple's definition to a descriptor of mostly digital technologies that employed text, sound, image, and video, such as CD-ROMs, video games, and the like, but by the early 90s the definition began to extend even further with the potential of the information superhighway. The metaphor of the superhighway was apt: the Internet would bring all of these media within immediate reach of users, and media were no longer conceived of as tangible goods. In the hands of both amateur and professional creators, multimedia technologies were poised to proliferate exponentially.[22] But before these communities could join in the development of the Internet fully, there were three large obstacles to overcome: one, the technology was not yet user friendly, and computers were mostly the domain of programmers and engineers who understood the "language" of computing; two, the limited speed of available technologies severely limited commercial viability and uses; and three, the difficulties that the military had obtaining funding for the development of this new network. It is this last factor that is most significant, one that will illustrate the larger cultural impulses that lead to performances such as those of BMG and the end of multimedia.

[22] See Wise, *Multimedia*, chapter four.

Unlike most other technologies discussed thus far, the Internet is vastly different in one vital respect: cultural visibility. In the cultural imaginary, unlike radio, television, video, and personal computers, the Internet is more infrastructure than hardware; in addition, that hardware is made up of components that are mostly ignored within the computer and the cables—coaxial, fiber-optic—that send the information from one node to another. While the earlier innovations were also composites of various technologies and systems, they were at least visible to the consumer-user, while those that were not, such as satellite, radio, and television broadcasts, were not under the control of the everyday consumer.[23] The Internet, on the other hand, is culturally understood as invisible. Information, communication, and knowledge are transmitted as immaterial forces—translated into binary code, broken down into packets, then transmitted and reconstituted. As John Seely Brown, a computer scientist at the Xerox Corporation, put it, "Funding infrastructure in general is hard, but when it's invisible it's even harder."[24]

This difficulty was rendered more complex by Reagan-era politics: the combination of deregulation of industry alongside government program cuts and visible presence in defense with initiatives such as SDI, ensured that systems such as the ARPANET would hit a wall in development and capability. Funds dried up, and private enterprise became a necessary partner if the technology were to move forward: the production of the Internet would need to shift to the private sector. The biggest distinction of these new initiatives worked against Reagan's strategy

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[23] Consumers did have a modicum of control over the airwaves in the earliest days of radio and television, leading to a discourse of democratized information and communication nearly identical to that of the earliest days of the Internet. But broadcasting capabilities were quickly usurped by corporate forces. See Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Boddy, *New Media and the Popular Imagination.*

[24] Markoff, "Creating a Giant Computer Highway."

of myth-making and power: the invisible Internet was not an effective, visible marker of the U.S. narrative that Reagan employed. John Markoff observed, "during the 80's, DARPA's freedom to fund pure research was increasingly curtailed by political pressures that dictated that Pentagon-funded research be closely linked to weapon systems."[25] The Internet was not deemed a (visibly) offensive tool for national security, and so it had to be expanded through legislation and privatization. Its purposes and uses would need to reach a community larger than the military and a handful of university engineering programs in order to be considered viable by the contemporary, consumer-driven ideology. Much like the preparation of the consumer market following WWII, the public needed to be primed for use, and corporations needed to develop a narrative of everyday presence for their products. Thus the High-Performance Computing Act of 1991 was created.

> The act set aside funds for provisions such as
>
> (1) the expansion of Federal support for research, development, and application of high-performance computing in order to—
> (A) establish a high-capacity national research and education computer network […]
> (E) promote the more rapid development and wider distribution of computer software tools and applications software […]
> (J) encourage cooperative programs between industry and high-performance computing centers to enhance industrial competitiveness.[26]

This last provision, one that put the onus of development onto corporations, is credited with the development of the first web browser, Mosaic, whose creators later developed Netscape Navigator. The web browser allowed the layperson to connect to other networks by rendering the information sent and received visible; it attempted to universalize the language of code and thus

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[25] Ibid.

[26] "Bill Text: 102nd Congress (1991–1992), S.272.ENR," THOMAS (Library of Congress), accessed January 24, 2013, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c102:3:./temp/~c102cz1ks1::.

be available to anyone who wished to access information from the nascent World Wide Web. In late 1994, Netscape was the first private distributor of this software, which became a tool to surf the web for anyone who had access to a network.[27]

By taking the immaterial information and translating it into a visual, navigable network, the web browser was a technology that promised new modes of communication, connection, and presence. What had been a culturally invisible network for military and expert computer engineers was thrust into cultural consciousness. Nowhere is this more apparent than in an internal memo at Microsoft, issued by Bill Gates on May 26, 1995. Entitled "The Internet Tidal Wave," Gates expressed his astonishment at the rapidity with which the Internet was growing and, more so, how an enthusiastic consumer base was actually more efficient and effective at using it than private companies: he wrote, "Amazingly it is easier to find information on the Web than it is to find information on the Microsoft Corporate Network. This inversion where a public network solves a problem better than a private network is quite stunning."[28] The Internet was idealized as a space where all were authors, and information was controlled by any and all its users, somewhat akin to McLuhan's global village; information would not be disseminated by those in power, but rather could be generated and exchanged through a non-hierarchical

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[27] See John Naughton, *A Brief History of the Future: From Radio Days to Internet Years in a Lifetime* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2000), 248–52.

[28] Bill Gates, "The Internet Tidal Wave," USDOJ: Antitrust Division Antitrust Division Case Filings Index, May 26, 1995, accessed January 5, 2013, http://www.justice.gov/atr/cases/exhibits/20.pdf.

system.[29] Herein lies the concept of convergence, a term that typically refers to technologies and media. Wise defines convergence further:

> "Convergence" has become a cliché of the information age. In its current usage it refers to two distinct though related phenomena: (i) the way that all transmission media become bit-carriers so that different "network platforms" can carry similar kinds of services; and (ii) the tendency of the previously separate worlds of broadcasting, film, telecommunications, publishing and computing to become involved in each other's businesses.[30]

Convergence is a direct successor to Williams's analysis of emergent technologies as a cultural form: a constellation of scientific and technological realities that are amalgamated to develop new modes of communication. The computer became a television, map, radio, directory, game, word processor, and archive all in one machine—but convergence also refers implicitly to the users. This technology of mass reproduction was in fact being reproduced at staggering rates by consumers as well as by producers, as the line between creator and user was blurring.[31]

Once the media tools had been developed, the use and continuing evolution of the Internet was in large part adopted by many who used the medium. The Internet's tendency toward convergence could be considered a symptom of multimedia's last gasp. The ubiquity of technologies of communication had reached out to be a part of the quotidian experience, from information to communication to entertainment to shopping—the list goes on. These technologies were seamless with everyday transactions and became a part of the cultural

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[29] This would be referred to as a "rhizomatic" system by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[30] Wise, *Multimedia*, 107.

[31] Convergence of users is responsible for innumerable Internet phenomena such as *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopedia, and Kickstarter, an online fundraising site. The term "crowd sourcing" has also come into vogue as a descriptor of the multitude of users improving media and services from the ground up. See, for example, Clay Shirkey, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

imaginary to an extent not seen since the coinage of "multimedia," and mass media before it. This extended not only to the use of these technologies, but also to the generation of information and production of knowledge by any and all users. While technologies of communication did not democratize the processes entirely, they did reflect a more postmodern economy of late capitalism.

Therefore, to refer to an experience or an artistic piece as "multimedia" was becoming increasingly obsolete. Not only had the term enabled computing devices to incorporate almost every other "new medium," but it had also enabled its users to communicate and express themselves with tools that had until then been the realm of professionals. Everyone with access had converged to become, in this spirit, multimedia performers, even if these performances were rarely (or unintentionally) for audiences that were present with the performer. This moment marked a return to a period before the use of multimedia was necessary. In this shift, if all experience could be constituted as multimedia, it did not need to be differentiated from other experiences. The Blue Man Group examined this shift and the integrity of media to performance and returned to an understanding of performance as always already multimedia. All of these technologies enabled communication and expression of the everyday, and as these mediated forms of expression became increasingly normalized, the use and ideology of mediated performance became deeply troubled, leading many critics to struggle with the live/mediated binary and the ontological status of live performance. Critics such as Phelan and Auslander expressed a bias toward the live, but these theories only reinforced the obsolescence of the binary and as such represent the last gasp of multimedia as a genre of performance.

The Liveness Fallacy

As the rise of consumer Internet service providers sparked manifestoes, warnings, and utopian visions concerning consumer society, identity politics, and global communications, many performance practitioners and theorists joined in the conversation.[32] The Internet was theorized as a space and economy of decentralized power and discourse, where conventional narratives could be destabilized and reconstituted; in its most extreme, the theory was that the Internet was an immaterial space that subverted traditional modes of economic exchange, the physical markers of race, gender, and ethnicity, and hegemonic production of political and cultural power.

What could computers and the Internet signify or provide for theatre creation and ontology? Roger Copeland's "The Presence of Mediation" (1990), Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991), Johannes Birringer's *Media and Performance: Along the Border* (1998), and Steve Dixon's many writings on telematics and the digital (which he would compile in *Digital Performance*) are all foundational works that explore the impact of the digital upon performance.[33] Common issues explored in each include the troubled ontologies of the body, socio-economic and national borders, and the question of whether performance could exist

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[32] See, for example, Ted Nelson, "Computer Lib/Dream Machines," in *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, ed. Randall Packer and Ken Jordan, 160–72; Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); and Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[33] Roger Copeland, "The Presence of Mediation." *The Drama Review* 34, 4 (Winter 1990): 28–44; Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*; Johannes H. Birringer, *Media and Performance: Along the Border* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Dixon, *Digital Performance*.

without materiality. Many of these texts acknowledge the remediation at work in digital performance; indeed, at its most basic, a digital avatar is remediation of a character portrayed by an actor.[34] But all of the texts take up issues of screens on stage, instantaneous interaction, and immaterial performers, and how these shift notions of theatre and performance. This crisis of immateriality generated a body of critical theory that attempted to reinforce the live/mediated binary to ensure performance's privileged status, and even presented live performance as a remedy against a disconnected media culture.

One text that does not get mentioned in this wave of discourse is Peggy Phelan's seminal *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993). Although the book makes no mention of computers, the Internet, or the digital, *Unmarked* is a significant product of the same social, cultural, and technological forces. Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999) is more commonly discussed alongside the above texts by scholars, and oversimplified as the ideological rival to *Unmarked*. The dichotomy that has been forged by and about these texts, while significant to the field in its historical moment, is a fallacy, a symptom of anxiety surrounding the ontology of performance when immateriality is idealized as the newest, most efficient form of communication and, by extension, expression. The debate over "liveness" and its position against mediation is at most a discursive exercise; implicitly however, it signals the end of multimedia as a genre in performance. As performance theorists struggled to isolate live from mediated performance, they reveal the distinction's obsolescence. While digital technologies do create a number of basic practical shifts for performance, the ideologies and forms of expression are no different than those expressed in the era of television, video,

[34] Copeland justifiably compares the hologram to Artaud's Body without Organs, writing, "perhaps the era of the totally persuasive technological simulation […] is what Artaud was really seeking all the while." Copeland, "The Presence of Mediation," 41.

satellites, cable, VCRs, or PCs, not to mention other technologies that predate and make up these more complex ones. The liveness debate is the rehearsal of practitioners and theorists trying to understand the place of performance in contemporary Internet culture, but is ultimately a symptom of liveness's obsolescence.

Phelan: Representation without Reproduction

Though it goes unacknowledged in her book, the rise of personal computing and digital technologies are primary forces underlying Phelan's *Unmarked*. Her overarching argument, that performance's ephemerality is a potent tool by which to subvert hegemonic systems of power, is a philosophical treatise on the role of immateriality for both identity politics and performance. Phelan sets out on the very first page: "By locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible, I am attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable."[35] Phelan aligns power in contemporary culture with "visibility," and argues that a superficial display of identity engenders a false sense of community and, as a result, exclusion from that community.[36] Utilizing a Lacanian framework, Phelan sets out to understand the political and aesthetic consequences of access to an "image of the other." This foundation is often ignored when considering the book's most-analyzed chapter, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction." The result is a discourse

[35] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

[36] Ibid., 7.

that is decontextualized and undertheorized by scholars and a missed opportunity to set *Unmarked* within larger strategies for understanding theatre and performance.

"The Ontology of Performance" is a foundational work for performance studies as both discipline and ideology. The chapter posits that performance's political power is its ephemerality. The oft-quoted assertion begins the chapter: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representation *of* representations: Once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[37] Phelan argues that performance's inability to be reproduced allows it to escape the false consciousness of truth through visibility. Performance is fleeting and thus cannot be captured, cannot be used to reinforce normative identity. Phelan's analysis of performances such as Angelika Festa's rehearses the disappearance of the body. Phelan locates agency within the body itself, and the disappearance of the body in time is control of one's subjectivity.[38] Performance is simultaneously mourning, loss, and celebration of the individual; the ephemeral is the powerful means of agency. She further situates this power by discussing Jacques Derrida's evaluation of performativity, namely that the "performative displays language's independence from the referent outside itself."[39] To reduce Phelan's argument to one of its assumptions, the ontology of performance is inherently immaterial: it escapes reproduction and exists only in the temporal sphere.

Phelan's analysis of contemporary culture's obsession with truth-in-visibility expresses the anxiety over the loss of the self in a media-saturated culture, and this anxiety is only possible

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[37] Ibid., 146, original emphasis.

[38] Ibid., 152.

[39] Ibid., 149.

when the body and language have become immaterial. In a curious turn, the ontology of performance is aligned with systems of information and knowledge in the digital age. The position of the storyteller in Laurie Anderson's performance, for example, is recapitulated in *Unmarked* as a political force; Anderson may unmake the narrative that had been expertly crafted and enforced by the Reagan administration. Lyotard's position that power is in the hands of those who control knowledge is reconfigured as those who control image, and by performing identity that typically exists as Other, Phelan claims the performer may be able to "redesign the representational real," that is, dictate the knowledge and reclaim identity from the false consciousness of the visible-real.[40] Much like the ideological underpinnings of early Internet politics, users of the web had the potential to recreate systems of power and dissemination of knowledge.

Significantly, the simultaneous rise of the brand at the time of *Unmarked*'s writing and publication both contradicts Phelan's position and ties it to performance. Branding is by definition a play for more cultural visibility, enacting a truth-effect of the brand's place in everyday life, claiming power in visual and cultural ubiquity; however, branding is also a "divestment of the world of things," and emphasizes power through the erasure of conspicuous consumption and the incorporation of consumerism into an everyday lifestyle. This ideology of integration is also seen in happenings of the 1960s, which idealized the everyday as aesthetic expression, but also necessarily utilized technologies of reproduction. As mentioned above, corporations were staging their own happenings in an attempt to erase the line between life and commerce.

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[40] Ibid., 3.

The Internet and computing, therefore, also confounded Phelan's argument in that Internet performers could express themselves in the present, for an audience, while the immaterial means of expression—information—was in most cases rendered visible and infinitely reproducible. In many ways, computer languages such as HyperText Markup Language (HTML) and JAVA are performative gestures that mobilize reproductive technologies via immaterial forces—that is, producing representations of texts, images, and bodies that can be co-present in time but not space, problematizing the distinction of "liveness." Not only that, but technologies of convergence also allowed these performances to occur for large audiences, within and across multiple media. This is a paradox for Phelan's rubric: at once mediatized performance is of the moment, but the referent adheres, less so as the visible-real than as projection both contemporaneous and recorded. Performance in the Internet age is both live and infinitely reproducible, ephemeral and deferred. Phelan's definition of performance could not apply to these new understandings of multimedia expression.

But the comparison between the ontology of performance and the immateriality of digital multimedia goes only so far. Unlike performance, digital communication is designed for and produced through reproduction: packets of information are created, marked, sent, and reassembled in a mathematical language so that such information may be shared across time and space. But the tie that binds is information's and cultural identity's immateriality; simultaneously, neither information nor cultural identity can escape cultural reproduction. The subjectivity produced by computer language and the construction of the visible-real for systems of power are part of the cultural imaginary that idealizes each as immaterial, that which escapes reproduction. In fact, both are still products of a culture that reproduce themselves to participate in media culture, despite their ostensible foundations in pastoral nostalgia.

But Phelan did not concern herself with the mediatized body about which so many scholars have since taken her to task; her concern was reproductions in culture, the control of images. But it is the shared anxiety that Phelan shares with cyberspace theorists that led to others reinterpreting "The Ontology of Performance" as technophobic, when there is almost no evidence for this. These anxieties concerning immaterial forces is what proves *Unmarked* to be a direct result of early digital culture, a taste of discourse to come; a cultural imaginary in which everyday experiences are always already multimedia, critical theory reflected a final attempt to reclaim liveness.

Auslander: Representation as Reproduction

Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* was originally published in 1999, and his brief analysis of and answer to Phelan's "Ontology of Performance" led many to characterize *Liveness* as an ideological adversary to *Unmarked*. On the surface, this relationship is understandable: whereas Phelan theorized performance as that which escapes reproduction, Auslander claims that performance had become inextricably bound to technologies of reproduction: "It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of mass media."[41] Auslander's contention is that performance is intrinsically a part of a media culture and that Phelan's argument is untenable in the contemporary cultural economy. This reductive opposition, however, proves to have its own limitations. Auslander recounts a humorous result of the discourse in theatre and performance studies in his preface to the second edition in 2008,

[41] Auslander, *Liveness,* 45.

claiming that a colleague shouted at him, "Aren't you the guy who hates live performance?"[42] Auslander justifiably claims this is not the case, but a further examination will reveal that the arguments in *Liveness* are more aligned with *Unmarked* on an ideological level, and are the symptoms of similar cultural anxieties concerning reproduction and performance. Ultimately, Auslander's concern with the "live" is a semantic cultural concern, and although Auslander's scholarship is insightful and useful, it is ultimately a historical product of performance theory's increasing fear of obsolescence. He attempts to deconstruct liveness's dependence upon mediatized reproductions, but does not go far enough: he situates media products alongside live performance, reinforcing the live/mediated binary.

The basic claim of *Liveness* is that "the relationship between live and mediatized forms and the meaning of liveness [should] be understood as historical and contingent rather than determined by immutable differences."[43] In other words, performance has no definite ontology, and performance's role and definition is ever shifting, especially in relation to modes of media reproductions; multimedia performance is not a paradigm shift, but rather a part of performance's trajectory as a form. This is Auslander's most significant contribution to the understanding of performance, one that has been taken up and positioned by scholars as essential to understanding contemporary performance. What is strange about the text is how Auslander attempts to prove his assertion and the evidence he uses. Auslander uses examples such as television, rock concerts, and court trials to prove that media products have come to serve as legitimation and reinforcement of liveness, that liveness can only be understood as distinct from media production. Liveness and media presence form a symbiotic relationship of sorts, in which

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[42] Ibid., xi.

[43] Ibid., 8.

each serves to culturally verify the other. Auslander does not dismantle the binary, but rather argues that the live and mediated are a part of the same cultural forces and imaginary. In many ways, the support and ideologies at work undermine the central premise and ultimately do a disservice to multimedia performance. As with *Unmarked*, *Liveness*'s position is a cultural barometer of the moment as opposed to an ontological definition. Although these texts are the most recent that I have examined at length, they are still well over a decade old and need to be read as historical documents.

On the very first page of *Liveness*, Auslander sets up a bias that runs throughout the book, claiming unequivocally that "at the level of cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners."[44] The statement reveals a number of contradictions in logic. The first is that live performance and mass media are separate spheres, at least economically. While shifts will always occur in the wake of newer media, theatre is not threatened by newer or "mass" media. If anything, new technologies such as radio, television, cinema, and the Internet have prompted greater interest in theatre around the world.[45] While the ticket sales for theatre cannot possibly compete with movie ticket sales because of film's mass reproduction, ticket income accounts for only one very limited criterion. In fact, the proliferation of social media and new trends in bringing Broadway performances to cinema may actually be helping theatre: Broadway, for example, continues to break records each year, topping one

[44] Ibid., 1.

[45] See Lyn Gardner, "A New Stage Age: Why Theatres Should Embrace Digital Technology," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2010, accessed January 17, 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2010/mar/23/stage-theatre-digital-technology-ished.

billion dollars in 2012 for the third year in a row.[46] It is limiting to say the least to compare the economies of performance and media independently of one another—it is in fact counter to Auslander's larger argument. This opening assumption leads Auslander to spend much of the book discussing examples that disprove his assumptions. After discussing *Pôles*, a performance by Pps Danse of Montreal, in which live performers dance alongside digitally projected ones, Auslander writes, "we now experience such a work as a fusion, not con-fusion, of realms, a fusion that we see as taking place within a digital environment that incorporates live elements as part of its raw material."[47] Auslander is willing to concede that the contemporary audience understands the live and the digital as a holistic experience, but does not extend this cultural understanding to a larger social, aesthetic, or economic sphere; instead, he maintains a divide and claims that a mass media aesthetic, as rival, consumes the live experience: "live performance is now a recreation of itself at one remove, filtered through its own mediatized reproductions."[48] Auslander works with these spheres as distinct, and does not entertain the possibility that they are the same artistic, economic, and cultural forces.

Thus, Auslander concerns himself with the aesthetics of performance, divorcing technological advancement from performance's development. However, performance has always attempted to incorporate newer technologies to enhance the performance experience, from flying

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[46] See Roma Torre, "2012 Theatre Year in Review: Broadway Ticket Sales Top $1 Billion for Third Straight Year," NY1.com, December 19, 2012, accessed December 19, 2012, http://www.ny1.com/content/ny1_living/theater_reviews/174196/2012-theater-year-in-review--broadway-ticket-sales-top--1-billion-for-third-straight-year; Patrick Healy, "High-Priced Tickets Help Make for a Record Year at the Broadway Box Office," *New York Times*, May 29, 2012, accessed December 19, 2012, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/high-priced-tickets-help-make-for-a-record-year-at-the-broadway-box-office/.

[47] Auslander, *Liveness*, 42.

[48] Ibid., 35.

machines to gaslights to cinema to the Internet. Not only does theatre benefit from new tools and techniques, but throughout history new technologies have been considered integral to performance's development; and, much like aesthetic forms and basic technologies, audiences adapt to using and understanding these technologies as a part of everyday life. Performance would actually further separate itself from the cultural imaginary and discourse to maintain technophobia. So when Auslander points to performance looking ever more like media technologies, he is part of a trajectory of critics attempting to understand the role technology plays for cultural imaginary. It is similar to a strategy put forth almost fifty years previous by Mumford, attempting to find a balance between art and technology that would serve and interrogate cultural forms:

> The fact is that the organic and the creative, the mechanical and the automatic, are present in every manifestation of life, above all within the human organism itself. If we tend to exaggerate one phase and neglect the other, it is not because civilization inexorably develops in this fashion, but because, through a philosophic foundation of mainly false beliefs, we have allowed our balance to be upset, and have not actively regained that dynamic equilibrium in which state alone the higher functions—those that promote art, morality, and freedom—can flourish.[49]

Mumford was writing in a very distinct cultural moment: as discussed earlier, many writings on art and technology following WWII were concerned with reclaiming technology as a force for creation rather than destruction. But Mumford's belief in a "dynamic equilibrium" is more accommodating than Auslander's stricter rubric.

Finally, Auslander claims that a byproduct of live performance emulating mediatized culture is the fact that liveness is a fantasy, the work of pastoral nostalgia: "Live performance thus has become the means by which mediatized representations are naturalized, according to a simple logic that appeals to our nostalgia for what we assumed to be the im-mediate: if the

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[49] Mumford, *Art and Technics*, 145.

mediatized image can be recreated in a live setting, it must have been 'real' to begin with."[50] This statement represents the primary fallacy of the book's argument: despite Auslander's implication that liveness is predicated on a "real" that does not exist, he discusses the live and mediated as distinct epistemologies throughout the rest of the text; his gesture toward the deconstruction of the live/mediated binary is not executed in his analysis. He therefore establishes that live performance is a privileged form that is both distinguishable from mass reproduction (like Phelan) and has the cultural ability to legitimize the mediatized as a result.

In summation, *Liveness* is an important and savvy reading of the "live" as a constructed cultural phenomenon, but its methods and examples reveal similar cultural anxieties that drive much of Phelan's argument in "The Ontology of Performance." The immateriality of the information that creates mediatized images and sounds is a threat to the conventional understanding of live performance and, for Phelan, subversive identity politics. Auslander rarely discusses computers and the digital in the first edition of *Liveness*, but adds a number of examples and acknowledges its importance, albeit briefly, in the second. The central medium in *Liveness* is television and the televisual's effects upon liveness and vice versa. He is correct to claim that he could not revise the text to "replace the central paradigm of the televisual with the digital," as this would be a different study altogether.[51] The fact that the digital (computers, the Internet, etc.) did not factor into the study in 1999 already reflects a gap in the original text. But the update he provides is sparse and anachronistic even for its moment, and discussions of the digital are ineffective as a result. After discussing the competition among television, telecommunications, and the Internet for dominance in information and engagement, he states,

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[50] Auslander, *Liveness*, 38–39.

[51] Ibid., xii.

"It remains to be seen how this struggle will play out."[52] Only four years later, the indeterminacy of Auslander's statement seems comical, as social networking, smart phones, and other technologies have become hubs of information and exchange for billions of users worldwide.[53]

One digital technology Auslander adds to the second edition is the chatbot, software that emulates conversation with a human user. According to Auslander, the chatbot's performative element is that of interactivity—a dialogue between performers (user and interface). Liveness is "reframed as a discussion of the ontology of the performer rather than that of the performance."[54] But within Auslander's brief rubric, the computer needs to give the impression of reacting to the user, of being personal, in the moment, and impulsive in real time. In 2012, Auslander wrote an essay amending the digital's impact on liveness, as he was "no longer satisfied" with the above conclusion concerning liveness in relation to digital performers.[55] But instead of broadening his argument of historical context and contingency, Auslander chose instead to focus on his subject with an even more phenomenological frame. Utilizing Hans-Georg Gadamer's strategy of the "claim" in aesthetics, Auslander revises his definition of liveness as a personal contract of expectation and, to an extent, faith. He writes, "Just as artworks from the past do not simply disclose themselves to us as contemporaneous but become so only as a conscious achievement

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[52] Ibid.

[53] And I must acknowledge that my statement may be equally outdated in another five years. So go the perils of writing about contemporary technology.

[54] He fallaciously contrasts this with recording technology: "even if you are listening to a recording, there is usually little doubt that it is a recording of a performance by a human being." Ibid., 71. Recording programs that sample and use filters such as Auto-Tune have called this boundary into question.

[55] Philip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ* 34, 3 (2012): 3.

on our part."[56] Accepting media technologies as live experience is entirely dependent upon the phenomenological encounter, some type of indefinite affective experience.

The Obsolescence of Liveness

Notions of power shifted greatly from the visions of McLuhan and Marcuse to the debate concerning liveness. As consumer technologies brought the conversation concerning the potential of communications to the everyday, media were sold to a new demographic after WWII, and notions of the efficient home influenced multimedia as a novel addition to social interaction. Once these had been established and technologies of communication brought reproduction and communication to a global level, the dystopian sentiment of *1984* was revitalized in discourse, as the personal computer, cable TV, and the VCR emphasized the relation of the home to a global community, technologies that could look and answer back and get sent into space; moreover, these technologies troubled the live-mediated binary. Champions and critics acknowledged multimedia as a force with an almost infinite reach, as communication technologies were integrated into everyday interactions and discourse, such as an electric president who deregulated much of the telecommunications industries and postmodern theory. The deferment of meaning and the ideology of decentralized information were reflected in theory and performance. Both of these moments reveal shifting ideologies of selfhood and their increasing dependence upon new media communications.

It is no wonder then that the works of Phelan and Auslander were part of a generation of discourse surrounding technologies of reproduction and expression and the way these

[56] Ibid., 8.

technologies impact the ideology of performance. Both texts are implicit responses to McLuhan's observation that the body can no longer depend upon physical organs as "protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism."[57] For Phelan, this meant that reproductive media shape the images of identity politics, and that political change rests with the ability to escape a Marcusian vicious circle of commodified exchange. For Auslander, the live emulates the mediatized in an effort to survive at the level of cultural economy. The fallacy that both these texts reinforce is one of pastoral nostalgia, an insistence that multimedia technologies are separate from a cultural understanding of performance. Media, always already part of performance, shape and influence aesthetic and political expression. Far from a threat to the continuation of performance, media have helped insure performance's relevance and reflection of cultural trends, troubles, and anxieties.

For an era in which connection has become a foregone conclusion, in which media no longer need to be sold as everyday but rather are understood as a social necessity, the liveness debate is a symptom of a final discursive effort to maintain an ontological separation between "performance" and "media." If anything, performance theory lagged behind the everyday use of media and its role in the cultural imaginary. Auslander situates the live as historically contingent and constructed, but his methodology expresses concerns and biases shared by Phelan's ontology. By extension, this framework signals the fact that multimedia, as a separate species of performance or even an external factor that is somehow absorbed into performance, is just as contingent. The same biases that foster an attachment to the live are the complement to the biases that foster a separation of multimedia in an effort to recuperate the significance of performance

[57] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 65.

in a media culture. But this culture had already returned to the assumption of multimedia as always already part of communication and everyday experience.

Multimedia, then, has a history, with a beginning, middle, and now an end. The need for the term as a distinct genre or form was coming to a conclusion. The understanding of media as integral to performance—an assumption of artists that predated the twentieth century—had returned. The interdependence and common history that media and performance share was expressed in the BMG's performances, both in their construction and how the performance, the Blue Man, and its organization evolved contemporaneously alongside the discourse of liveness.

Blue Man Group: Performance as Network

If the discourse of the 1990s centered on the ontology of performance and its liveness, BMG exemplified a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of the role media played in the cultural imaginary. Far from worrying about an escape from hegemonic forces of reproduction and the visible-real, BMG deconstructed media culture by reclaiming the body electric as an everyday celebration and franchising its performances. Blue Man Group created itself reflexively as a media product, and examined the practical technologies and modes of communication in an Internet culture, the body's role within that culture, and how performance was necessarily a part of the cultural imaginary, including experience as always already multimedia. The company subverts the binary that liveness engendered through its critique of media culture and the branded, franchised body. While BMG performances are problematic, mobilizing pastoral nostalgia to idealize presence and community, they are also celebrations of the postmodern subject, one that has the potential to deconstruct hegemonic narratives through

the acknowledgment of the integrity of media culture to everyday experience. Through this aesthetic, BMG signifies the last gasp of multimedia as a category separate from performance.

Between two scenes of *Tubes* by the Blue Man Group, a video plays, with animation that looks schematic, like an engineering project, as an authoritative voice narrates:

> Right now, there is a virtually invisible network, which links together millions of people who would otherwise be completely isolated from each other. This exciting technology has grown to become an incredibly complex web of connections that is so large and difficult to track, it would be practically impossible to estimate its total size. And even though most of us live alone, in urban isolation, this system represents one of the few ways all of our lives are intertwined. This system is … modern plumbing.[58]

The satire of the piece is illustrative of the Blue Man ideology: the audience is set up to expect that the system in question is the Internet, only to have its expectation defied by the basic, even more invisible, naturalized system of modern plumbing. In a sense, the Blue Man Group points to the remediation of the Internet, that the desire and infrastructure of the Internet expresses the same desires for connection and technological achievement as plumbing does; what is new is old again. The Blue Man's satire of and insight into contemporary technology and its uses is the key to their performance strategy: by defamiliarizing themselves from technology, the audience is in turn defamiliarized, and is presented with a fresh perspective on the tools they take for granted.

Though there were nine men and women who performed in the 1988 funeral march, three men claim to be the originators and instigators: Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton, and Chris Wink.[59]

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[58] "Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube," *How to Be a Megastar Live!*, directed by Blue Man Group and Candace Corelli (2006; Burbank, CA: Rhino Entertainment Company, 2008), DVD.

[59] I use the word "claim" due to the BMG's contested history. The founders are very quiet and scripted about these earliest days, and there has been one major lawsuit against Blue Man Group Productions regarding authorship and royalties for *Tubes*. For an account of these early controversies, see Stephen Harrick, "From the Avant-Garde to the Popular: A History of Blue Man Group, 1987–2000," (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, manuscript).

Goldman and Wink were childhood friends, and Wink met Stanton while working for a New York City catering company. Frustrated with the performance art scene in the city, the three began hosting Sunday morning salons to explore new avenues that, according to them, eschewed the identity politics and negativity that pervaded the scene.[60] They would discuss favorite works of art, texts, and shared interests in computers, music, and communication. The performers donned bald caps and greasepaint makeup, and, foregoing the elitism of avant-garde performance institutions, they began to stage more interventions in public places like Central Park.

Influenced by the happenings of the 1960s, the Blue Man went further by interrupting the everyday, at times to draw simple attention to the norm, while other performances were designed to be more satirical.[61] One of the well-documented early performances took place in front of the popular Copacabana nightclub, where BMG velvet-roped off a piece of the sidewalk that they deemed "Club Nowhere," which anyone could enter for free, so long as they obeyed the one rule: move about frantically in any manner for one minute.[62] Equal parts Dada, Fluxus, and situationist, these Blue Man trial performances were directly engaging the everyday, drawing attention to the absurdity of social norms (waiting in line for hours to pay money to dance with others) as well as performance art stereotypes (three bald, blue men performing for free in the middle of the street).

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[60] Sid Smith, "The Invasion of the Blue Men," *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 1997, accessed June 5, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1997-10-05/news/9710050256_1_blue-man-group-blue-men-mask.

[61] For history and other influences, see Blue Man Group, *Resonance*, unpublished training manual, n.d.

[62] Michael Saunders, "Blue in Your Face: Boston gets a look at the art/comedy/music of the Blue Man Group," *Boston Globe,* October 1, 1995, Arts and Film, 57.

Much like Robert Whitman and Laurie Anderson, the Blue Man has been concerned with the distinctions, or lack thereof, between the vocabularies of high and low. The group claims that, while its inspirations come in great number from the arts, sciences, and philosophy, it mines them to get to a basic understanding, as Wink said in an interview: "People can theorize all they want, talk about Derrida and Foucault and justify their experiments, but it doesn't take anything from the fact that we like to dance around the fire. It's who we are."[63] This philosophy-averse attitude aligns with a complicated ideology the BMG has concerning new technologies as well, although this ideology surfaced a bit later.

The Blue Man continued through the late 1980s to hone their skills and skits at their private salons and public interventions, and soon they were invited by downtown institutions to perform for an intrigued, paying public. The result was a performance that, at the time, defied description: a trio of blue men, performing vaudevillian feats and comedy sketches, interspersed with music played on organs made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipes. The Blue Man Group made the rounds on the downtown performance circuit—La MaMa, P.S. 122, Franklin Furnace, the Kitchen—before being commissioned to perform for a Lincoln Center fundraiser, where they were approached to mount a full-scale Off-Broadway production. The performance, entitled *Tubes*, opened in November 1991 and slowly gained momentum as one of the premiere Off-Broadway performances, winning Obie and Lucille Lortel awards for the original production.[64]

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[63] Ibid.

[64] "1991 Award Winners," *Village Voice*, accessed January 24, 2013, http://www.villagevoice.com/obies/index/1991/; "1986–2000 Nominees and Recipients," The Lucille Lortel Awards, accessed January 24, 2013, http://lortelaward.com/previous_nominees_and_recipients.htm#two.

The Blue Man and *Tubes*, despite their clear successes, have not entered academic discourse much beyond mainstream media's fascination with the strange aesthetic and the BMG's various cameos and advertising campaigns.[65] But *Tubes* is indicative of a popular cultural phenomenon, one worthy of consideration in the history of multimedia performance, not only for the incorporation and understanding of and interaction with a variety of media, but also for the figure of the Blue Man itself, a body electric *par excellence*, one that recognizes media's presence in everyday communication and interaction, and also one that became a brand, a franchised body, interconnected with a media empire; a body electric that no longer can be distinguished from an ideology of "liveness."[66]

Tubes premiered in 1991—just as consumer Internet service providers were launching and one month before the High-Performance Computing Act—and, much like the work of Phelan and Auslander, reflects a fascination and engagement with connectivity. The early guerilla performances of Blue Man were also searching for a connection through the disruption of the everyday; BMG viewed a technologically connected world as a humanistically isolating one.

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[65] The Blue Man Group appeared numerous times on *The Tonight Show* and the sitcom *Arrested Development*, as well as in a series of commercials they co-produced with Intel. See Eric Spitznagel, "20Q: David Cross," *Playboy.com*, February 14, 2012, accessed December 10, 2012, http://www.playboy.com/playground/view/20q-david-cross; Liz Welch, "How We Did It: The Blue Man Group," *Inc. Magazine*, August 2008, 112.

[66] To illustrate the relevance and influence of this moment, one only needs to look to U.S. Senator Ted Stevens (AK), who was satirized relentlessly in 2006 for explaining, "the Internet is not something that you just dump something on. It's not a big truck. It's a series of tubes. And if you don't understand, those tubes can be filled and if they are filled, when you put your message in, it gets in line and it's going to be delayed by anyone that puts into that tube enormous amounts of material, enormous amounts of material." When juxtaposed with BMG, Stevens's explanation may not be as far-fetched as it was made out to be. Of course, most do not believe Stevens was working on the level of metaphor. See "Your Own Personal Internet," *Wired,* June 30, 2006, accessed December 19, 2012, http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2006/06/your_own_person/.

They expounded upon their example of modern plumbing in their training manual/history, *Resonance*, which mentions the "pervasive insularity" of New York City: "We did not so much live in apartments so much as compartments that were connected by nothing more than a hidden network of plumbing pipes that coursed through them. We would often be in the proximity of other people, but there would be little or no contact; no sense of community."[67] The resulting aesthetic engaged with connection even before the rise of the Internet as an everyday tool, and they fortuitously employed the metaphor of tubes as this basic web of connection. One critic noted the lobby of the Astor Place Theatre, where the walls were covered floor to ceiling with plastic piping, observing, "Even the lobby tubing is metaphorical, representing three communication networks, those of the Industrial Age, the digital age and the human body. They embrace the latter, suggesting they're a technopop triumvirate with a humanistic mantra."[68] The Blue Man lobby is an immediate immersion in the Blue Man ideology: everyday experience and spaces are laden with technologies of expression and connection, even if the technologies typically are unnoticed or hidden. Much like the "home of the future" in the 1960s, Blue Man has constructed its own space that engages with Marvin Carlson's question: "how do theatres mean?"[69] In this case, the theatre exposes the infrastructure of a connected, media culture.

During the performance, the Blue Man Group employs a number of technologies, both basic and advanced: shadow play, computer animation, LED tickertape signs, video, fiber-optic cameras, paint, and, most famously, analog and digital musical instruments and devices. The

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[67] Blue Man Group, *Resonance*, n.p.

[68] Smith, "The Invasion of the Blue Men."

[69] See Carlson, introduction to *Places of Performance*, 1–14.

most iconic of the Blue Man's performances features the performers drumming music on their PVC instruments. Conceived by the BMG, the instruments employ basic Pythagorean geometry to create tone and harmony: the longer the length of tube, the deeper the tone when hit. The same dynamics apply to the lute, xylophone, and piano. What distinguishes the PVC instruments is their modern material and uses: the Blue Man has taken something new and used it to engender a sense of community that is very old, much like the ancient principles utilized to create the Blue Man's instruments. They have, literally, refashioned modern plumbing.

The group claims it got the idea for the instrument after "watching an Australian musician whack the ends of two plastic tubes."[70] The percussive elements convey a simultaneously mystical but contemporary sound, what Wink describes as tribal rock, "with a kind of spaghetti western theme."[71] He "describes their music as an expedition for the crossroads where the indigenous and industrial meet: 'There's a tribal feel we're trying to get, but not literally.'"[72] The universalizing ideology of Blue Man is rife with pastoral nostalgia, a longing for community uninterrupted by the isolating technologies of the present, but the group's embrace of technology and its uses is more complicated. The communal ideology incorporates media as always already a part of the storytelling and social critique at work in *Tubes*. This understanding of media is allegorized in the figure of the Blue Man.

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[70] Neil Gladstone, "Am I Blue?" *CMJ New Music*, July 2000, 77.

[71] In Vicki Goldberg, "Blue Man Joins the Las Vegas Collection," *New York Times,* April 30, 2000, accessed August 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/30/theater/theater-blue-man-joins-the-vegas-collection.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

[72] Gladstone, "Am I Blue?" 77.

Without speech, defined features, and an alien-like appearance, many consider the BMG universal, or archetypal.[73] The founders even claim that they consider the Blue Man a single entity with three bodies on stage, hence the proper reference to the performers is always singular: the Blue Man.[74] The founders typically evade questions of gender, though in *Resonance* they state it is not meant as a commentary or avoidance of the subject, but rather that the Blue Man seemed less cumbersome than "Blue People" (again, avoiding the plural) and was in part a reaction to the rampant political correctness of the early 1990s.[75] While the subject of identity politics is implicit in the character of the Blue Man, it takes a backseat to the more explicit concern of the body and technology.

The BMG formulated its alien character as an outsider, or as they like to comment a jester or trickster figure, allowing the Blue Man to examine technology and convention with fresh eyes and unbiased expression.[76] As Michael Saunders sees it, "Blue Man is both everyone and no one, he is free to act without inhibitions and think without preconceptions. He shreds pop culture by showing exactly how we wallow in it."[77] Every encounter for the Blue Man is a discovery—instruments, televisions, art, cell phones, tablet computers—each is approached with

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[73] Saunders, "Blue in Your Face," 57. After the appearance in Central Park, the Blue Man became mute.

[74] Goldberg, "High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group."

[75] See Blue Man Group, *Resonance*, n.p. Lian Amaris claims that the Blue Man's affinity for converting the digital to analog in performance extends to gender, writing that the Blue Man illustrates a "spectrum of gender," rather than a digital understanding of man *or* woman. But Amaris's analysis of the digital and analog at work in BMG is only metaphor, and as such is more a critical frame than cultural insight. See Lian Amaris, "Approaching an Analog-Digital Dialectic: The Case of the Blue Man Group," *Theatre Journal* 61, 4 (December 2009): 568.

[76] Blue Man Group, *Resonance*, n.p.

[77] Saunders, "Blue in Your Face," 57.

equal amounts of caution, wonder, and experimentation. By defamiliarizing themselves and the audience from the objects in question, the Blue Man reveals how integral the media are to connection, communication, and expression.

One particular interaction that expresses this relationship begins with three LED tickertape signs. The signs relay messages in total darkness, including a string of advertising claims, and meta-textual analyses of advertising. As the signs vie for the audience's attention, they slowly begin to move in a wave-like pattern, becoming not only messages, but also kinetic sculpture.[78] As the stage is illuminated, the Blue Man is revealed to be holding the signs, the music swells, and the signs are repurposed: the Blue Man uses the signs as mallets to hit large drums. By misusing these signifiers of commerce as instruments of percussion, the Blue Man opens the definition of these largely textual electronic machines, and gestures to a basic function of media—the rhythm of the drums is analogous to the rhythm these machines create in everyday culture. Largely unremarkable in the everyday, the refashioning of the signs draws the Blue Man's and audience's attention to how media, information, and consumption have been normalized. The sign-mallets, much like happenings or Laurie Anderson's staging of cliché and communication, frame objects of the everyday in order to defamiliarize them and examine convention and effects upon social forces. In the case of *Tubes*, the Blue Man works largely with the media that have become naturalized. Despite the fact that BMG makes the invisible visible, resonant with Phelan's truth-effect, the exposure of media forces reinforces the integrity of media to everyday experience.

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[78] "Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube." For more about the Blue Man and play with attention, see Amaris, "Approaching an Analog-Digital Dialectic," 569–73; and Steve Luber, "Your Attention Please: Attention, Media, and *The Complex*," *Scene* 1, 2 (July 2013): 257–70.

During the finale of *Tubes*, after the audience has been "connected" to the performers via a sea of crepe-paper streamers, the Blue Man returns to the shadows (they open the performance by drumming, backlit behind screens as well[79]), their forms projected upon a video of 3D animation of the DNA double helix. By positioning themselves within the building-block of organic material, this final image demonstrates the idea that the Blue Man, media, music, and all, make up the stuff of contemporary communication; no matter how isolating they may seem by conventional standards, the media are integral to aesthetic, expression, and connection. The discourse of liveness is untenable with regard to BMG performances: the distinction between performers and media collapses in on itself and is rendered obsolete.

Raphael's evaluation of Reagan as the president electric situates much of Reagan's power and influence in his understanding and exploitation of media apparatuses: "During his presidency the skills Reagan mastered working in radio, film, television, advertising, and public relations formed the basis for a presidential character fully equipped to exploit the dominant cultural media of the day."[80] In a similar fashion to Reagan, and with a degree of irony, the media that the BMG works with were also the tools by which the performance was catapulted into the international spotlight. Multimedia platforms such as video, Internet, and animation allowed BMG to shift from downtown performance artists to branded icon. The growth was a relatively gradual one, from one show to three (others followed in Boston [1995] and Chicago [1997], all

[79] The shadows in the opening are in fact videos; the Blue Man is not playing. There are many of these moments that confound notions of presence and mediation, though the performance attempts to cover this up, furthering Auslander's point that the live has seamlessly adopted the mediatized. But the performance carries this notion further by expressing the obsolescence of this distinction through trickery and experimentation. The line between live and mediated is, in *Tubes*, irrelevant to performance, but significant to communication. The BMG highlights the complexity of this relationship.

[80] Raphael, *The President Electric*, 21.

of which were the same), then expanding to a record of their music (*Audio*, 1999). The company's multimedia marketing strategy, combined with a new spectacle in Las Vegas, *Blue Man Group: Live at Luxor* (2000), and appearances on television variety programs such as *The Tonight Show*, poised BMG to become a household name; ultimately, however, it was computers that put the company over the top, and BMG became not only a performance phenomenon, but also an international brand.

In 2000, BMG was approached by Intel, a company that manufactures semiconductor chips for computers, to appear in a rebranding campaign. They gave BMG almost complete artistic control of one of the largest marketing campaigns seen at the time. The commercials featured the Blue Man interacting with computers and the Intel Pentium chip logo. The most iconic and direct was the implementation of the BMG style of painting—with paint-filled balloons and bodies—to create the logo. And to complete the gesture of cross-promotion, all commercials featured BMG music.[81] The Las Vegas show alone went from ten shows a week at half capacity to fourteen shows at full capacity.[82]

In many ways, BMG's choice to bring their experimental style to a computer chip is apt: the processing chip is present in many of the tools used on a daily basis—computers, phones, music players, TVs, video players—but remains, on the whole, unnoticed by the average

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[81] One skeptical journalist, referring to the ads as "crap," used the label "performance art outfit" as a derogatory one, citing the irrelevance of BMG and Intel's missteps (pouring money into ads for the Pentium 3 processor one month before the launch of the Pentium 4, as well as ignoring the BMG's recent appearance on Apple's website promoting a competitor's processors). However, BMG later were featured in ads for the next two generations of processors, the 4 and Centrino. See Andrew Thomas, "New Intel TV Ads 'Complete Crap,'" *The Register*, October 24, 2000, accessed January 3, 2013, http://www.theregister.co.uk/2000/10/24/new_intel_tv_ads_complete/; Welch, "How We Did It: The Blue Man Group," 112.

[82] Welch, "How We Did It: The Blue Man Group," 112.

consumer, much like plumbing or fiber-optic cable.[83] In a strange twist of irony, Walter Bardeen, one of two men awarded the Nobel Prize in 1950 for the development of a solid-state amplifying device, a predecessor to transistors and computer chips, was "appalled that the users' main fare was rock music. Like Edison before him, he was uninterested in the 'trivial.'"[84] Much like Laurie Anderson, BMG succeeded in incorporating Bardeen's technology in both digital communications and rock music—ostensibly, high and low. The chip is as much a part of the Blue Man's performances as lighting, sound, and video, as it is to communication and practices of daily life; the BMG needs processors to run its shows much as audience members need them to check e-mail, social networks, type, etc. The chip, in size and power, is a testament to technological advancement yet is culturally invisible. BMG performances are no more "multimedia extravaganzas" than everyday connection.

Though the themes of the BMG performances have not changed much, the form and model of BMG has become almost unrecognizable: since the days of three men squirting toothpaste at one another in their shared apartment, the Blue Man has grown into a multinational media and entertainment company, which currently has six permanent shows running on any given night as well as a rock concert tour and a performance on Norwegian Cruise Lines' EPIC ship. They have a workforce of about 900 people, an approximately $90 million annual gross,

[83] For the past few years, companies have been extending this model to even more unexpected "smart" uses, from refrigerators, to lighting systems to washer-dryers, even to glass surfaces. See Sam Byford, "Tweet My Fridge: The Bizarre Home Appliances of CES 2013," Verge, January 16, 2013, accessed January 20, 2013, http://www.theverge.com/2013/1/16/3867932/evernote-on-your-fridge-ces-home-appliance-insanity.

[84] In Briggs and Burke, *A Social History of the Media*, 239.

and, significantly, an army of 70 blue men.[85] The Blue Man Group has been appropriately described as "the embodiment of an oxymoron: the successful performance artist."[86] There are countless critical pieces on the group, many of which discuss the integrity and artistic vision of the group in the face of expansion and corporatization. The same critics are happy to employ the descriptors "avant-garde" and "hip" in the same breath. Even downtown stalwart C. Carr concluded that BMG had "absolutely not" sold out, and a feature in the *LA Times* entitled "Brave Blue World," is dedicated to the shared fascination of an experimental group that had become a multimillion dollar industry without "losing their souls."[87]

Whether BMG has sold out is not a concern for this project. What is at stake is the expanse of the Blue Man empire: in creating a multinational performance company, much energy and resources have been put into forging a consistent Blue Man aesthetic, ideology, and body. Dozens of Blue Man performers are on stage each night, and so they must undergo a rigorous audition process and an even more rigorous training program, including a 120-page manual as to how to perform the Blue Man character and each individual scene.[88] In an effort to spread their

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[85] Bhaskar Chakravorti and Shirley M. Spence, "Blue Man Group: Creativity, Life and Surviving an Economic Meltdown," *Harvard Business Review*, March 2, 2010, 1–27.

[86] Gladstone, "Am I Blue?"

[87] C. Carr, "Ready for Primetime: X-treme Performance Art Moves from the Margin to the Mainstream," *The Village Voice*, December 5, 2000, accessed November 1, 2012, http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-12-05/news/ready-for-prime-time/; Mimi Avins, "True Blue to an Artistic Vision."

[88] For a discussion of the corporatization of BMG, see Harrick, "From the Avant-Garde to the Popular."

forms of expression the Blue Man has become a brand. Far beyond a simple franchise, the Blue Man body has become a mass-produced entity.[89]

One of the earliest proponents of the BMG was magician Penn Jillette of the duo Penn and Teller. Jillette saw the production in 1991, and Goldman recounts how excited the magician was backstage, not as much by the show as by the opportunity. Jillette said, "Oh my God! You guys can do what Teller and I can never do! You can clone yourselves!"[90] The Blue Man body is the body electric, one that is understood as part and parcel of a multimedia culture, that identity is interconnected with communication and its technologies. Blue Man Group has become a cultural icon through its satire and exploitation of social understanding, through communication, tools, and expression. The body electric does not adhere to Phelan's claim that performance's life is in the present, that performance escapes reproduction; but it also negates Auslander's contention that liveness is a function of mediatization. Rather, the body electric acknowledges that performance is a function of cultural mechanisms and connections that expand far beyond empirical circumstances of performance.

Conclusion

The BMG is paradigmatic of a media culture in which liveness is no longer a productive phenomenon. By integrating the body with mediatized forces and reproducing the performances as franchises, BMG proves that performance cannot escape reproduction, nor can it be

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[89] Auslander discusses performance franchises, such as *Tamara* or *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding*, in which liveness functions as a novelty in a reproducible commodity, but the binary of live and mediatized ignores the larger cultural implications of reproducing performance. See Auslander, *Liveness*, 51–3.

[90] Rob Walker, "Brand Blue," *Fortune Small Business*, March 2003, 54.

distinguished from mediatized forces. The performances draw attention to the integrity of networks and media to everyday experience. As media technologies had shifted from the production of technologies for the home to a global network that connected its users, multimedia was naturalized as everyday experience. The immateriality of information produced by media technologies further complicated the discourse of multimedia production and the epistemological distinctions maintained by the discourse of liveness. By defying the opposition of Phelan's and Auslander's theories, BMG is illustrative of the obsolescence of liveness in the cultural imaginary. Liveness itself has become a historical phenomenon, one that, at present, seems archaic. Multimedia technologies are not in opposition to performance, but are always already a part of it; performance's liveness and escape from reproduction are fallacies.

As the twentieth century came to a close, multimedia was so ingrained in everyday practice and artistic expression, particularly art that engaged with this normalization, that the use of multimedia as adjective became increasingly redundant. Connection and expression that was once produced, marketed, and theorized as exceptional was now pedestrian, and, as artists and performers looked ahead, "multimedia performance" was at best a semantic curiosity, and at worst a delimiting annoyance. The need for these distinctions still exists in performance theory, but the role of multimedia as a distinct aesthetic and ideological sphere is obsolescent in performance practice and the cultural imaginary.

Conclusion

Last Gasp

In the winter of 2000, I walked into New York City's Port Authority Bus Terminal to be greeted by a two-story-tall banner that featured a woman in a flowing purple gown, standing on a grassy hill and smiling peacefully at the horizon. The banner was an ad for an allergy medication. The ad was striking not only due to its immense size (there also were accompanying signs and banners throughout Port Authority), but also its location; pharmaceutical advertisements were commonplace in magazines and newspapers, but not in public spaces. I had experienced part of the first wave of a marketing blitz from pharmaceutical companies following the revised regulations of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in regard to Direct-to-Consumer Pharmaceutical Advertising (DTCPA). In 1999, the FDA relaxed its guidelines for this type of advertising, "Now, advertisers had to include only 'major risks' and provide an 'adequate provision' that would direct viewers elsewhere to access complete 'brief summary' information (from a toll-free number, a health care provider, a Web site, or a print ad)."[1] After the FDA discarded the need for a "brief summary" of all the risks involved in taking a particular medication, the ability to communicate a quick advertising message—on a billboard or a thirty-second TV spot—was now possible. Pharmaceutical companies had been lobbying for fewer restrictions for the better part of the twentieth century; their time had come at century's close.

The trajectory of marketing presence—from the *New York Times* classified for an "Idea Man" in 1950 to the multimedia presence of pharmaceuticals in 2000—is emblematic of the full

[1] C. Lee Ventola, "Direct-to-Consumer Pharmaceutical Advertising: Therapeutic or Toxic?" *Pharmacy and Therapeutics* 36, 10 (October 2011), accessed February 2, 2013: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3278148/#b4-ptj3610669.

circle of multimedia in the cultural imaginary. This new campaign for an allergy medication signified the brand's—and media's—ubiquity in the everyday. Channeling the corporate happenings discussed by Klein, the messages advertised via other technological modes of communication—television, print, online—and marketers reinforced their superior understandings and mobilizations of media forces. The notion of a multimedia campaign was now redundant, fully integrated into the everyday modes of communication. The interconnectedness of media technologies had returned the cultural imaginary to an understanding of multimedia as an assumption of everyday experience; the economic sphere that helped create the phenomenon of multimedia had systematically rendered the phenomenon obsolete. Far from being exceptional to the everyday, these new media campaigns were understood as an integral part of everyday experience.

The new FDA regulations also coincided with the most significant example of convergence to date: the smartphone. Palm introduced the Kyocera 6035 in 2001, bringing the power of web browsing, text messaging, and, anachronistically, fax to a handheld phone[2]; the biggest cultural phenomenon to date has been Apple's introduction of the iPhone in 2007, prompting a wave of innovations including applications (apps), video chat, global positioning systems (GPS), and, of course, mobile shopping.[3] This single connected device brings together all the technologies discussed in this study, including film, television, audio recording, video, satellites, computers, and the Internet. There is now more computing power in a single mobile phone than was used to send the U.S. Apollo missions, symbols of Cold War competition, into

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[2] "Kyocera QCP 6035 Smartphone," Palm Info Center, March 16, 2001, accessed February 1, 2013, http://www.palminfocenter.com/view_story.asp?ID=1707.

[3] Fred Vogelstein, "How the iPhone Blew Up the Wireless Industry," *Wired*, January 9, 2008, accessed February 2, 2013, http://www.wired.com/gadgets/wireless/magazine/16-02/ff_iphone.

space.[4] This is the coalescence of complex forms that Raymond Williams promoted, as well as the development of multimedia technology from emergence to dominance. Multimedia technologies, now in the pockets of many U.S. citizen-consumers, were integrated into everyday usage and the cultural imaginary to such an extent that they became an assumed presence for communication and the construction of the self; in the early twenty-first century, it is difficult already to envision a world without them.[5]

The convergence of technologies and their place in the cultural imaginary has filtered into performance: the Blue Man Group is one example of the cultural forces that have rendered the notion of multimedia performance obsolete: in order for performance to be deemed "multimedia," performance must be situated as distinct from technology, a live form that incorporates another, mediatized one. What is more, critics and practitioners have pushed the divide further, maintaining the pastoral nostalgia that performance is not a medium in and of itself, attempting to separate performance from its classic understanding as techne. Multimedia is a term that fosters the divide between media and performance, when in fact performance is always already multimedia. Thus, the performances discussed in this dissertation are not exceptional, but rather touchstones that provide insights into how the genre of multimedia has been constructed in the past half century. Robert Whitman challenged the economic and aesthetic distinctions between live performance and film in *Prune Flat*; Laurie Anderson situated herself as the postmodern subject, constituted by the technological forms feared and embraced during the 1980s such as satellites and computers; the Blue Man Group defamiliarized the networks of

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[4] "Do-It-Yourself Podcast: Rocket Evolution," NASA, accessed November 17, 2012, http://www.nasa.gov/audience/foreducators/diypodcast/rocket-evolution-index-diy.html.

[5] See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

the Information Age, and reclaimed the body electric as part of the everyday. All of these artists examined the role media played in the creation of a culture that was always already multimedia, embracing an understanding of performance that was resisted by the utopian and dystopian visions of the 1960s, like McLuhan and Marcuse, the crisis of the postmodern subject and metanarratives theorized by Lyotard and Jameson, and the politics of the ontology of performance that fueled the discourse of liveness for Phelan and Auslander. Artists challenged the narratives forged by these critics, the development of the military-industrial complex, and the creation of markets that encouraged consumer culture.

The performers, critics, and scholars that othered multimedia as a genre expressed an anxiety concerning the social, aesthetic, and economic impact of theatre and performance, especially anxieties stemming from the prolific production of technologies following WWII. Pastoral nostalgia, the anxiety that aesthetic modes of cultural production should exist outside of technological modes, is a fantasy of a time and culture that never existed, much like Reagan's idealization of a "shining City on a Hill"; and this nostalgia is collapsing. Performances by those such as Whitman, Paik, Anderson, and the Blue Man Group are indicators that media technologies have always been inherent to performance's engagement with basic understandings of community, technology, and communication; to refer to performance as "multimedia" is, and has always been, a fallacy. The troubling of borders among performance, visual arts, dance, and digital art is symptomatic of this the obsolescence of multimedia; as technologies of communication converge, so do artistic values and genres that explore and challenge these modes of expression and communication. Media technologies are no longer distinct from or incorporated into performance, but rather have converged back into the very constitution of performance.

While scholars and critics continue to maintain these borders, they will find it increasingly difficult to assume, and should begin to acknowledge their divisions between performance and media as necessarily arbitrary. The moniker of "multimedia performance" has played itself out, and the larger social forces that affect the creation and reception of performance are in less and less need of such rubrics: multimedia is life and life is multimedia.

Contemporary performance-makers have folded these everyday technologies into their aesthetics: groups such as the Wooster Group, the Builders Association, and Temporary Distortion engage with the challenges, obstacles, and disruptions that media layer on to contemporary communication[6]; others such as Complicité, Cynthia Hopkins, and Robert Lepage experiment with these technologies as tools with which to create illusory and fantastical worlds within their performances.[7] Both approaches are part of the theatrical tradition going back to ideologies of techne and the alliance of art and technology.

For Bob Goldstein's Lightworks of 1965, one of the first performances labeled "multimedia," critic Albert Goldman profiled the artist and asked why one would want to create a performance that was equally theatre, dance, film, photography, music, and, in all, a nightclub. Goldman noted that Goldstein "sees current sensibility as reaching out hungrily to devour every

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[6] The Wooster Group has engaged with technology since its inception, but I would argue only begin to work with technologies in a fluid and integrated style in the 1990s with pieces such as *Brace Up!* (1991) and *House/Lights* (1999). For a discussion of the Wooster Group and technology see David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986); and Andrew Quick, ed., *The Wooster Group Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 2007). For the Builders Association, see Giesekam, *Staging the Screen*, chapter six; for Temporary Distortion, see Caridad Svich, "Haunted Nowhere: An Interview with Kenneth Collins," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 20, 3 (2010): 381–84.

[7] See Robin Stone, "*A Disappearing Number* (review)," *Theatre Journal* 60, 3 (October 2008): 489–91; Steve Luber, "The Impossibility of Cynthia Hopkins Or, Can Autobiographical Musical Performance Save the Space Program?" *PAJ* 32, 1 (January 2010): 76–82; and Joseph I. Donohoe and Jane M. Koustas, eds., *Theater sans Frontières: Essays on the Dramatic Universe of Robert Lepage* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2000).

fascinating sight and sound. When the world has been ransacked for its treasure of images and these have been whirled about in kaleidoscopic mixes, the culture as we have known it will be destroyed—but it will also have been reborn."[8]

Performances that express a sense of technophobia are, at best, engagements with how technology and media have affected certain social spheres. But performance as practice would be shortsighted and counterproductive if artists shunned the potentials of media and media's integrity to the definition of performance and the cultural imaginary.

The ravenous culture that Goldman alludes to has come and gone: rising like a Phoenix is a culture that understands communication through media as integral to live performance. Academic discourse should shed its pastoral nostalgia and embrace the practices of performance in order to better engage with the technological, economic, and political cultures that shape contemporary performance. To distinguish media from performance is as detrimental as divorcing mediae, breath, from performance. Multimedia has had its last gasp, and performance can be reborn with a wealth of potentiality, experimentation, expression, and, as always, a frame by which to better understand the world.

[8] Goldman, *Freakshow*, 45.

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