Multimedia: Massaging Senses for the Message

By GRACE GLUECK

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

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

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

Visitors Participate

A new exhibition hall at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum, designed by Harley Parker, the museum’s director and an associate of Marshall McLuhan, departs from the usual “don’t touch” display technique. The hall, like 50 of the exhibitions at Expo 67, employs multimedia techniques and allows visitors to participate in a “multisensual experience” created by slide projections and color cartoons, flashing lights, sounds of gulls and thunder, and fossils they can feel.

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

Blitzing the Audience

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

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

The multimedia trend reflects varied influences—psychedelic drugs, which their users say, help to deepen and merge sensory experience and free the mind from the rational ordering of perception: the electric-information processes of our new technology, movies, television, the telephone, the computer and the urban environment itself, with its overload of sights, sounds, smells and activities.

Multiplicity of Stimuli

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

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

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

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