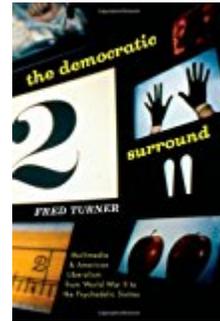


H-Net Reviews

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Fred Turner. *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 376 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-81746-0; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-32589-7.



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Fred Turner's *The Democratic Surround* is both an impressive follow-up and a prequel to his first book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (2006). *The Democratic Surround* will be of interest to scholars in cultural studies, media studies, visual culture, American studies, art history, and communication(s). Aspects of it will also be of interest to those in museum studies.

In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Turner links the tech utopianism of the early 1990s to the back-to-the-land communalism of the late 1960s. In the new book, he goes farther back to trace multimedia art and presentation formats from the late 1930s to the familiar avant-garde faces of the 1960s. Turner's main argument is that the counterculture of the 1960s was not the radical break in values and art it is commonly thought to be. Instead, its core values (those of tolerance and freedom) and its artistic practices (multimedia, immersive environments, and nonhierarchical viewing experiences) owe themselves to a "movement" thirty years prior: the US government's efforts to fight fascism. Turner pieces together this fascinating (and heretofore missed) story through extensive archival research and primary sources. In doing so, he convincingly locates the beginnings of the 1960s counterculture expressed through and in its art

in the efforts of anthropologists, sociologists, Bauhaus refugee artists, and politicians to promote the American "democratic personality"—conveyed through new, multimedia forms Turner coins "democratic surrounds"—as a stalwart against the "fascist personality," thought to be cultivated through the one-to-many format of mass media.

Turner is a joy to read; his writing is fluid and entertaining, and he states his point clearly and often. His lucid prose means that, lacking time, a serious read of the introduction and conclusion (chapter 8) will give a good understanding of his overall argument. Chapters 6 and 7 on *The Family of Man* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 (chapter 6) and the following "world-tour" of democratic surrounds in multiple world fairs in the second half of the 1950s are cornerstones of Turner's argument. In them, he demonstrates how multi-screened, nonhierarchical media had successfully become mainstreamed and the platform du jour to spread the ideals of the American democracy globally. However, chapters 3, 4, and 8, "The New Language of Vision," "The New Landscape of Sound," and "The Coming of the Counterculture" respectively, are really where Turner shines outlining the significant connections that exist between 1930s governmental aides, members of the stiffly named Committee

for National Morale, and the 1960s counterculture (in a few cases there are direct mentor lines). Here, too, he brings into full richness how the idea of the democratic personality was theoretically encouraged and realized via art and media.

Poignant is the career of John Cage. Cage is most famous for his work in the early 1950s: the silent composition 4'33" and staging the first Happening—the multi-sensorial, experiential, immersive environments of performance and sound. But it is Turner's digging into Cage's early career (chapter 4) that brings a new lineage to light. Cage visited Europe in 1930 as a young man and was taken with the Bauhaus school. A decade later, he spent a summer teaching at Oakland Mills College with the likes of László Moholy-Nagy and other prominent Bauhaus refugees. Afterward, Turner writes, Cage "described his work to potential funders as 'a counterpart in music to the work in visual arts conducted at the School of Design, which is the American Bauhaus'" (p. 121). A year later, teaching at the University of Chicago, Cage turned his composition work "toward patterns of thinking and acting specifically marked as 'democratic'" (p. 122). In his compositions, he sought to "negate his own power to impose his will on sounds and through them, on his listeners" (p. 116). In other words, Cage became fully steeped in the efforts and theories of the push toward the democratic personality.

During the 1950s, Cage rose to prominence, lecturing all around the world and, notably, at the World's Fair alongside (metaphorically, if not physically) the US government's democratic surrounds. At the end of the decade, it is Cage, teaching a class in experimental composition at The New School for Social Research in New York City, who became a mentor to the likes of Allan Kaprow and Dick Higgins (chapter 8). Kaprow, inspired and encouraged by Cage, went on to bring Happenings to the burgeoning counterculture. Then, in the early 1960s, it is again Cage, living at Gate Hill Cooperative in Stony Brook, New York, who influenced Stan VanDerBeek (who moved there to be near him). VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drone*, one of the first coming-together of the immersive performance and screens, began to pave the way for psychedelia.

An important undercurrent to Turner's work is the way in which efforts to produce the democratic personality through democratic surrounds also aligned with contemporaneous explorations in managerial control. Control comes in two forms in the book: the more obvious choreographies of museum exhibit and world-fair exhibition planners, who traded in structured experi-

ences; and the more covert forced distraction of avant-garde media makers. About the latter Turner makes the point that democratic surrounds that overwhelmed the viewer with pure choice—such as the electronic frenzies of Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, the carefully crafted Happenings of Kaprow, or even the slick media blitzes of Ray and Charles Eames—were actually the opposite side of the same coin; on the flip side were the tame museum exhibitions where viewers were allowed to roam, within reason. The mechanisms (my word, not his) of "pure choice" ostensibly allowed viewers to roam anywhere their minds and senses pleased; they gave more freedom. However, Turner points out, because it was impossible to take in everything, audiences were forced to choose only particular pieces (or sensations) to pay attention to. This bombardment of the senses became a sort of insidious fake choosing, one not made from an integration in the personality of "emotion and reason, intellect and will, evaluation and action" (p. 44)—the hallmarks, according to earlier advocates, of the democratic persona. It is in this way that *Democratic Surround* is a masterful use of Foucauldian genealogical techniques, while doubly serving to illuminate Michel Foucault's "capillaries of power" in places that are probably further down on the list of where we have come to expect them.

Lest there be the impression that Turner is comprehensive in his linking of governmental forces to utopic counterculture, he is not. First, there are the connections that Turner skips altogether: a looming example is the relationship of art and the counterculture to the Vietnam War. Admittedly, this is a prequel to the book where Turner does address the affiliations of counterculture to technological advances, many of which were funded by the government and most of which were put to use in the war (so the latter is not left completely unattended). However, this book does not deal very much with how democratic surrounds were turned against the government that he argues in many ways produced them. Second, and related to the last point, Turner acknowledges that the persons involved in 1960s counterculture viewed themselves as forging a new path away from a culture they felt was stale and stagnant. He, himself, even feels that "the 1960s counterculture marked a new and permanent opening in American society, a cultural revolution even" (p. 293).

The brilliance of the book, however, is that under Turner's skillful hand the debt the so-called children of the 1960s owed to their predecessors and perhaps—horror of horrors!—to their parents emerges so convincingly that it leaves one wondering how this has not been the story all along.

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