CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

Edited by

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With an Introduction by

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JAMES BALDWIN

Mass Culture and the Creative Artist

Some Personal Notes

SOMEONE once said to me that the people in general cannot bear very much reality. He meant by this that they prefer fantasy to a truthful re-creation of their experience. The Italians, for example, during the time that De Sica and Rossellini were revitalizing the Italian cinema industry, showed a marked preference for Rita Hayworth vehicles; the world in which she moved across the screen was like a fairy tale, whereas the world De Sica was describing was one with which they were only too familiar. (And it can be suggested perhaps that the Americans who stood in line for *Shoe Shine* and *Open City* were also responding to images which they found exotic, to a reality by which they were not threatened. What passes for the appreciation of serious effort in this country is very often nothing more than an inability to take anything very seriously.)

Now, of course the people cannot bear very much reality, if by this one means their ability to respond to high intellectual or artistic endeavor. I have never in the least understood why they should be expected to. There is a division of labor in the world—as I see it—and the people have quite enough reality to bear, simply getting through their lives, raising their children, dealing with the eternal conundrums of birth, taxes, and death. They do not do this with all the wisdom, foresight, or charity one might wish; nevertheless, this is what they are always doing and it is what the writer is always describing. There is literally nothing else to describe. This effort at description is itself extraordinarily arduous, and those who are driven to make this effort are by virtue of this fact somewhat removed from the people. It happens, by no means infrequently, that the people hound or stone them to death. They then build

statues to them, which does not mean that the next artist will have it any easier.

I am not sure that the cultural level of the people is subject to a steady rise: in fact, quite unpredictable things happen when the bulk of the population attains what we think of as a high cultural level, i.e., pre-World War II Germany, or present-day Sweden. And this, I think, is because the effort of a Schönberg or a Picasso (or a William Faulkner or an Albert Camus) has nothing to do, at bottom, with physical comfort, or indeed with comfort of any other kind. But the aim of the people who rise to this high cultural level—who rise, that is, into the middle class—is precisely comfort for the body and the mind. The artistic objects by which they are surrounded cannot possibly fulfill their original function of disturbing the peace—which is still the only method by which the mind can be improved—they bear witness instead to the attainment of a certain level of economic stability and a certain thin measure of sophistication. But art and ideas come out of the passion and torment of experience; it is impossible to have a real relationship to the first if one's aim is to be protected from the second.

We cannot possibly expect, and should not desire, that the great bulk of the populace embark on a mental and spiritual voyage for which very few people are equipped and which even fewer have survived. They have, after all, their indispensable work to do, even as you and I. What we are distressed about, and should be, when we speak of the state of mass culture in this country, is the overwhelming torpor and bewilderment of the people. The people who run the mass media are not all villains and they are not all cowards—though I agree, I must say, with Dwight Macdonald's forceful suggestion that many of them are not very bright. (Why should they be? They, too, have risen from the streets to a high level of cultural attainment. They, too, are positively afflicted by the world's highest standard of living and what is probably the world's most bewilderingly empty way of life.) But even those who are bright are handicapped by their audience: I am less appalled by the fact that *Gunsmoke* is produced than I am by the fact that so many people want to see it. In the same way, I must add, that a thrill of terror runs through me when I hear that the favorite author of our President is Zane Grey.

But one must make a living. The people who run the mass media and those who consume it are really in the same boat. They must continue to produce things they do not really admire, still less, love,

in order to continue buying things they do not really want, still less, need. If we were dealing only with fintails, two-tone cars, or programs like *Gunsmoke*, the situation would not be so grave. The trouble is that serious things are handled (and received) with the same essential lack of seriousness.

For example: neither *The Bridge On the River Kwai* nor *The Defiant Ones*, two definitely superior movies, can really be called serious. They are extraordinarily interesting and deft: but their principal effort is to keep the audience at a safe remove from the experience which these films are not therefore really prepared to convey. The kind of madness sketched in *Kwai* is far more dangerous and widespread than the movie would have us believe. As for *The Defiant Ones*, its suggestion that Negroes and whites can learn to love each other if they are only chained together long enough runs so madly counter to the facts that it must be dismissed as one of the latest, and sickest, of the liberal fantasies, even if one does not quarrel with the notion that love on such terms is desirable. These movies are designed not to trouble, but to reassure; they do not reflect reality, they merely rearrange its elements into something we can bear. They also weaken our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are.

What the mass culture really reflects (as is the case with a "serious" play like *J.B.*) is the American bewilderment in the face of the world we live in. We do not seem to want to know that we are *in* the world, that we are subject to the same catastrophes, vices, joys, and follies which have baffled and afflicted mankind for ages. And this has everything to do, of course, with what was expected of America: which expectation, so geuerally disappointed, reveals something we do not want to know about sad human nature, reveals something we do not want to know about the intricacies and inequities of any social structure, reveals, in sum, something we do not want to know about ourselves. The American way of life has failed—to make people happier or to make them better. We do not want to admit this, and we do not admit it. We persist in believing that the empty and criminal among our children are the result of some miscalculation in the formula (which can be corrected), that the bottomless and aimless hostility which makes our cities among the most dangerous in the world is created, and felt, by a handful of aberrants, that the lack, yawning everywhere in this country, of passionate conviction, of personal authority, proves only our rather appealing tendency to be gregarious and democratic. We are very

cruelly trapped between what we would like to be, and what we actually are. And we cannot possibly become what we would like to be until we are willing to ask ourselves just why the lives we lead on this continent are mainly so empty, so tame and so ugly.

This is a job for the creative artist—who does not really have much to do with mass culture, no matter how many of us may be interviewed on TV. Perhaps life is not the black, unutterably beautiful, mysterious, and lonely thing the creative artist tends to think of it as being; but it is certainly not the sunlit playpen in which so many Americans lose first their identities and then their minds.

I feel very strongly, though, that this amorphous people are in desperate search for something which will help them to re-establish their connection with themselves, and with one another. This can only begin to happen as the truth begins to be told. We are in the middle of an immense metamorphosis here, a metamorphosis which will, it is devoutly to be hoped, rob us of our myths and give us our history, which will destroy our attitudes and give us back our personalities. The mass culture, in the meantime, can only reflect our chaos: and perhaps we had better remember that this chaos contains life—and a great transforming energy.

STANLEY EDGAR HYMAN

Ideals, Dangers, and Limitations of Mass Culture

THE TERM "CULTURE" creates initial difficulties, I think. For Matthew Arnold it meant "the study of harmonious perfection" through the arts and the humanities. A character in a recent dialogue on the subject defines it as "the realm of art, manners, and morals." For the Soviet Russians and some of our own middle class, it appears to mean restrained public behavior, so that a noisy drunk in Moscow or Scarsdale is "uncultured." All of these uses, including the present one (which I think we get from the sociologists), are invidious, suggesting that culture is a good thing to have and that not everyone has it. For this reason, among others, some of us now try to confine the term to its usage in modern anthropology, where it means the whole of the non-biological inheritance, and is not invidious at all, since everyone partakes of it. For the subject of our present discussion, I should prefer "the popular arts" or "the mass arts." Since terms have agreed-on rather than innate meanings, however, there is no reason why we cannot agree to use "culture" here in the more limited sense of the popular arts and entertainments, use it consistently, and know what we mean when we say it.

Since I am in the position of proposing some tentative evaluations, I rely on earlier participants in the discussion to deal with the origins, nature, and functions of mass culture, to explore the problems of its producers and consumers, and to analyze the ingredients. I shall confine myself to a hasty survey of some current trends in the mass arts, choosing examples simply as they come to mind, following it with an attempt at some conclusions and a suggested role, or roles, for the critic.

In my own experience, the technological revolution is most visible, and perhaps most hopeful, in two areas, books and records. In books,

it is dramatically the rise of the paperback in the past two decades. At present some six thousand titles from about ninety companies are available, in fairly attractive and readable form, at prices ranging from twenty-five cents to two-ninety-five and averaging about a dollar. Among them are such coterie books as *Finnegans Wake* and Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. According to figures Clifton Fadiman recently published in the *Herald-Tribune*, *Waiting for Godot* has sold almost 100,000 copies, *The Lonely Crowd* over 300,000, *Patterns of Culture* over three-quarters of a million, *Catcher in the Rye* over a million. Not all of them sell that well, however. I understand that the selected poetry and prose of one of America's foremost living poets has sold fewer than ten thousand copies in paperback. Salacity apparently sells best, as in hardcover publishing, and *Peyton Place* and *God's Little Acre*, books of very different degrees of seriousness but equal salaciousness, share the paperback sales record at eight million each. Still, the audience for books, many of them good ones, has increased enormously, and with it the income of writers, along with the income of composers of science fiction and historical novels.

The other striking trend in current publishing is the mass marketing of remainders, and the related transformation of book clubs into discount houses, less interested in sponsoring a monthly selection than in furnishing almost any book at a reduction. Remainders are sold at prices comparable to those of paperbacks, with many under a dollar, and the clubs supply something like two books for the retail price of one. Readers priced out of the market by the high retail cost of books are thus priced back in again, at the expense of the author, whose royalty ranges from none, in the case of remainders, to a smaller percentage in the case of the book clubs. He is allowed to console himself with a greater public for his art, and can buy copies to give to his friends very cheaply. Other trends in publishing are less dramatic. I have written elsewhere about what it is convenient to call "pseudo-fictions," the increasing number of non-fictions disguised as works of the imagination and published as novels. The absence of any market whatsoever for most volumes of new poetry published in our time seems to me the single most depressing feature of current publishing, although now as always there are brave and ingenious efforts to remedy it, ranging from binding poets in bunches like carrots to a revival of pamphlet publishing. Almost equally depressing has been the progessive debasement of The Modern Library under Bennett Cerf. No one who remembers the early list, where one first

discovered de Gourmont, Andreyev, or George Moore, can welcome without writhing such current classics as Damon Runyon, Daphne du Maurier, James A. Michener, or Kaufman and Hart. Even Everyman's Library, which one would have thought immune to such stock-watering, recently replaced Sir Arthur Keith's scholarly introduction to its edition of *The Origin of Species* with an incoherent and spiteful introduction by a Canadian biological control official. He rejects the book, its arguments, and the whole theory of evolution by natural selection, on grounds that at first pretend to be scientific but soon emerge as supernaturalist.

The invention of tape-recording and long-playing records, with their booming production and sales, may turn out to be an even greater cultural revolution than paperbacks, and tapes and LPs have certainly done more for poetry than any form of publishing. Here literally hundreds of companies, some no larger than a label, produce countless thousands of records, making a wide variety of music available everywhere, and stimulating a growing demand for live music outside its familiar centers. Technically, in high-fidelity and stereophonic sound, the reproduced sound is of a quality and range unimaginable two decades ago. About the classic repertoire I am not competent to speak, although I am familiar with complaints that such favorites as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony are available in two dozen versions while relatively obscure music is still not available in one. About folk music and jazz I can speak with somewhat more authority. A single company, Folkways, has issued several hundred records of folk music, some of it as exotic and unlikely as *Eskimo Music of Alaska and the Hudson Bay* or *Temiar Dream Songs from Malaya,* and it is possible for anyone with the price to have a collection that could not have been matched by any of the world's great archives a generation ago. To take the example of an individual singer: Cynthia Gooding, who seems to me the most talented and exciting of American folk singers, if certainly not the best-known, has in a few years' time recorded almost a hundred songs, from a dozen different national traditions, on seven long-playing records. Not long ago, a lucky world traveler with an interest in such matters could hear that many folksongs in a busy lifetime.

The case of jazz is a more complex one because of its status as America's contribution to the world's arts, and its international-relations aspects, with jazz conventions in Melbourne, combos in every Swedish high school, and jazz magazines published in Tokyo and Reykjavik. In the indescribable welter of jazz records, to my taste the

great single contribution, rivaling that of Folkways in folk music, is the achievement of Riverside in reissuing old Paramount and Gennett "race" records on LPs, restoring to the world such obscure masterpieces as Jabo Williams playing and singing *Fat Mama Blues.* The future of jazz is endlessly debated by the archaizers, who argue that the way King Oliver played in 1922 is the way jazz must be played, and the progressivists, who believe the comparable fallacy that arts improve as they develop, and that the latest is thus necessarily the best.

It would be pointless to enter into this controversy, but it should be noted that the Negro folk form from which jazz derived, the vocal blues, seems to be far from extinct. In the raucous and travestied form of rock 'n' roll, it is again a mass art, and along with its uneducated white audience has an uneducated Negro audience singularly uninterested in Dixieland jazz (the educated Negro audience seems largely to have turned to modern jazz). The case of the singer who calls herself Odetta is a significant one, and she is a phenomenon some of us have been predicting for many years. Her voice is in the great line of Negro blues voices stretching from "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith to Mahalia Jackson, but she belongs to the first Negro generation so cut off from its folk roots as to be unfamiliar with the blues tradition, and she sings blues as though she had learned them at a German conservatory. Odetta may herald the eventual death of the blues, but the example of Jimmy Rushing, who after many years as an unexceptional vocalist for the Basie band has suddenly emerged, in a handful of recent records, as a blues singer as pure and powerful as any of the great pioneers, suggests that the death may be a long time coming.

After books and records, I speak more tentatively about other mass arts. Where the vulgarity of radio takes the form of the familiar soap operas and the endless monotonous popular tunes, the vulgarity of television takes new and amazing forms: blindfolded contestants taking lobsters out of a pail with their bare feet, learned panels competing in discovering which of three high school girls wrote an inane song hit, a popular program testing the broadmindedness of wives by giving a married man a young actress to take home with him. Where the value of radio lies in the good music and in such public services as Edward R. Murrow's famous investigation of the call girl as an industrial consultant, the achievements of television seem harder to characterize, and perhaps I should leave the problem to better-informed discussants. In a decade it has given this observer

a chance to see: the great clown A. Robins before his death, the hands of gangsters during the Kefauver investigation, some memorable sporting events and old films, and Mort Sahl saying things that seemed to me more often true and disconcerting than funny. The commercials are hard on the ears but appear to be of considerable cultural interest. One in which Lestoil emulsifies villainous Dirt is probably the only survivor of the *agitprop* drama of the twenties, in which the characters were called Worker and Capitalist. I know several people who found the events of the last World Series less interesting than a commercial they waited for in which a portly batter or golfer, on behalf of a ball-point pen reputed not to skip, swung impotently at the ball and cursed in engaging doubletalk.

I suspect that the art film and the documentary are past their peak, at least in this country, and that if the American film has a future apart from television it continues to lie with Hollywood. I get my look at the New Hollywood mostly from such reporting as Dwight MacDonald's in *Esquire*, from which I quote:

> Jerry Wald, a dark, plump, baldish, cigar-chewing type who talks rapidly and freely on any topic, was also full of cultural optimism. His walls were lined with Roualt prints and other O.K. modern art products, and he was just beginning a major production of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. "Mass audiences are hep now," he said. "There are twenty-five million college graduates. There's no such thing as highbrow and lowbrow any more. They get the best TV and radio shows. They can appreciate quality. I'm gonna do Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* next and I just bought *Winesburg*." I suggested that *Ulysses* would make a splendid movie. "I got an option on it!" he replied instantly, adding: "It's basically just a father searching for a son. Universal theme!"

My own experience with the New Hollywood as a moviegoer suggests that the principal new boldness is a more pervasive homosexual imagery, whether used to add resonances to serious meaning, as in the ending of *The Defiant Ones*, or played for laughs, as in the transvestite comedy *Some Like It Hot*. Certainly the eye-catching deformity of such stars as Jayne Mansfield seems the same sort of satire on heterosexuality that Mae West used to represent.

The encouraging renaissance of the drama, off-Broadway and throughout the country, probably does not have the proportions of mass culture, and perhaps the living drama no longer can. These matters are relative, however, and the enormous widening of the audience for such coterie playwrights as Beckett, Genêt, and Ionesco is surely relevant to a discussion of mass culture. Off-Broadway is

analogous to paperbacks and remainders as a device for again getting the product to an audience that had been priced out of the market, while Broadway, like hardcover publishing, finds costs so high that it must aim at surefire hits. This formula theatre produces something like Lindsay and Crouse's *Tall Story* from Howard Nemerov's superior novel *The Homecoming Game*, and in the realm of the musical, the world of decline and fall between Rodgers and Hart and Rogers and Hammerstein.

Our older mass arts, the newspaper and magazine, do not seem to be thriving. A. J. Liebling in *The New Yorker* and Francis Williams in *The New Statesman* and *Nation* echo and reinforce each other's plaints about the shrinkage of newspaper competition and the increasing substitution of syndicated boilerplate for independent and regional journalism. The genuine new art form that American newspapers produced, the comic strip, has mostly given way to adventure serials in outer space, and the few archaic survivors simply rehash their stock jokes. The audience for little magazines and literary quarterlies must be substantial, judging by their number, but no single magazine is apparently able to tap enough of it to be economically viable (perhaps the same few thousand people buy all the magazines). For the rest, each of the commercial magazines that has survived the competition of television seems to have found its formula, its precise stratum of intelligence and taste (or status and buying-power), and to be hewing to it far more rigorously than magazines did a generation ago. I for one find the resolute middlebrow coloration of the journals of liberal opinion like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, or of such cultural journals as *Harper's* and *Saturday Review*, worse than the slicks, and there is a distastefulness to the semi-commitment of people like Maxwell Geismar and John Ciardi that the non-commitment or wrong-commitment of the *Time-Life-Fortune* writers cannot equal. Below this level, on the newsstands, there is an infernal world one can hardly enter: magazines with one-syllable names full of comic drawings designed to give the purchaser a headache; magazines with two-syllable names consisting of naked girls and filler, like burlesque in its decline, when it ran movies to get the audiences out; magazines and comic books with no fixed names where you can live vicariously as a teen-age pusher or let a giant Martian have it right in the belly.

The technological revolution does not yet seem to have brought the plastic and pictorial arts into mass culture, except for the art of design, which has taken us all from tubular steel and plush to molded

plywood and plastic in my short lifetime. Mass-produced copies of pictures and sculpture have been around for a long time, and make all but the most contemporary work cheaply available in reproduction, but they seem to have had little of the impact on taste of paperbacks and long-playing records. I know some high thinkers who will not have copies of pictures or sculpture in their houses, although they have plenty of paperbacks and records, and I think it has something to do with the fact that there is a better original around somewhere, as there is not, in any realistic sense, with books and records. If the people who paint by numbers buy Braque and Klee reproductions, what they paint continues to be traditional landscapes and vases of flowers. An unlikely collaboration between the Metropolitan Museum and the Book-of-the-Month Club, formerly engaged in marketing tiny reproductions, is now engaged in marketing "Art Seminars in the Home," which will delve into such dangerous matters as the Expressionism of van Gogh and the abstraction of Picasso, but the lag seems enormous. Perhaps the true effect of modern painting and architecture, at least, on mass culture is in their filtering down into design, so that people who would not live in a house by Le Corbusier now have a blendor that looks just like one, and their place mats might be Pollocks.

I lack space to deal with those aspects of mass culture that are more properly entertainments than arts, among them sport, religion, hobbies, education, and politics. Some of them are very closely involved with the communication arts. If television has helped in the sordid commercialization of baseball and has largely killed boxing, it has done wonders for the entertainment value of politics and may remake education, if you can get up that early. As for the sort of religion that competes with sport on Sunday, no mass art is alien to it: it writes the best-sellers, blesses the song hits, and tops any secular showmanship. The new soft slogans of peace rather than a sword, and works without faith, have been sold to America like a detergent. *This Week* recently conducted a poll on "Pick the Sermon You'd Like to Hear," and the six leading choices, in order, were:

How Can I Make Prayer More Effective?
How to Increase Religious Faith
How Can I Make the Greatest Contribution in Life?
Happier Families Through Religion
How Can Religion Eliminate Worry and Tension?
What Can the Individual Do for World Peace?

Perhaps mass culture's final answer to its own importunities is the

do-it-yourself hobby, or turn off everything, go down into the cellar alone, and build a catboat.

If these are some of the visible trends of mass culture, what do they suggest of its ideals, dangers, and limitations? In my opinion, the most important ideal is pluralism, making a wide variety of aesthetic goods available, rather than lifting us all half an inch by the great collective bootstrap. That is why paperbacks and long-playing records seem so hopeful a tendency despite their defects; *Marjorie Morningstar* and *Witch Doctor* are available in their millions, but *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and *Don Giovanni* (not to speak of *Fat Mama Blues*) are available in their thousands. Even the magazine situation is dreary and discouraging but still triumphantly pluralist; there is a magazine, however tiny, subsidized, or absurd, to publish every kind of writing, to furnish any sort of reading or looking (within the limits of the law) that any few readers or lookers want. One has only to compare the situation with England, which has one little magazine to every fifty of ours, or with Russia, which has not had one since Mayakovsky's day, to see the virtues of pluralism. It is only when the expenses of production become prohibitive, with a newspaper or film company, a radio or television station, that a wide variety of aesthetic goods becomes impossible, and only ventures that will satisfy many thousands or millions are feasible. Then it is necessary to talk of improving standards, raising levels, educating public taste, taking the initiative for better quality, and such functions more proper to a benign tyranny than to our anarchic cultural democracy.

The second ideal, about which I am somewhat more dubious but still hopeful, is the natural evolution of taste, given a variety of possibilities. (In other words, it depends on pluralism, although pluralism, as a good in itself, would make sense even if taste were known to be static.) This is the assumption that a certain number of those who read and enjoy *The Subterraneans* will go to read, and prefer, *The Possessed;* that some will comparably graduate from rock 'n' roll to traditional blues. This naturally happens at school age (although not in every case), and the ideal assumes its happening at every age. Here the evidence is rather mixed. William Phillips, in an article in *Partisan Review* (Winter 1959) describes the question as "the old senseless argument about whether a man who listens to popular tunes has taken the first step to Schönberg." This may, however, be a very important question for the future of our culture.

A decade ago the Book-of-the-Month Club sent around a circular

listing its selections from 1926, the year of its founding, to 1949. The circular clearly made the point (which I do not think it was designed to make) that these had worsened annually, from books like Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and Elinor Wylie's *Orphan Angel* in 1926 to Frances Gaither's *Double Muscadine* and the Gilbreths' *Cheaper by the Dozen* in 1949. Over the decade since, despite (or because of) the presence of such learned fellows as Gilbert Highet on the board of judges, the selections seem to have continued to deteriorate. If someone had subscribed and taken the selections over the past thirty years, *his* taste would not have evolved onward and upward. But the turnover is very high; how could we find out about those who learned to read books for pleasure as subscribers, then resigned from the club to read better books on their own?

The BBC radio, with its three programs designed for three levels of taste, would seem a perfect device for encouraging this sort of cultural mobility. Yet I wonder what percentage of listeners of mature years graduated from family comedy on the Light to sea chanteys on the Home to translations of Bulgarian poetry on the Third? How many slid slowly downward? Now, unfortunately, the Third has been curtailed, and with the increased cost of television production and a competing commercial channel, it has not been possible for the BBC to set up anything of the sort for television. Here for the first time some planned range of availability was created in a mass medium, but we know too little about its cultural results.

The third ideal of mass culture I take from a letter Patrick D. Hazard wrote to me in 1958 in connection with some remarks I had published about the ironic mode. He wrote: "Now it seems to me that a great many intellectuals in America have achieved a viable irony, but I wonder how the great mass who are no longer folk and not yet people can find a footing for their ironic stance. Do any of the following seem to you footholds?" He then proceeded to list such newer comic performers as Mort Sahl and Jonathan Winters, such older comic performers as Groucho Marx and Fred Allen, and such miscellaneous phenomena as Al Capp, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *Humbug* magazine. His comment on the list was: "These things seem to question in one way or another some aspect of flatulence in popular culture, its sentimentality, fake elegance, phony egalitarianism, or its perennial playpen atmosphere."

I did not know the answer to the question then and do not know it now, but I present Hazard's question and comment to raise the

possibility of a third ideal. This is that mass culture throws up its own criticism, in performers of insight, wit, and talent, and in forms of irony and satire, to enable some of the audience to break through it into a broader or deeper set of aesthetic values. Again, I much prefer this sort of evolutionary possibility to types of patronizing enlightenment. We do well to be wary when a *Time* editor like Thomas Griffith writes *The Waist-High Culture* to ask whether we haven't sold our souls "for a mess of pottage that goes snap, crackle, and pop," or television producer David Susskind tells *Life*:

> I'm an intellectual who cares about television. There are some good things on it, tiny atolls in the oceans of junk. . . . You get mad at what you really care about—like your wife. I'm mad at TV because I really love it and it's lousy. It's a very beautiful woman who looks abominable. The only way to fix it is to clean out the pack who are running it and put in some brainy guys.

We assume that if Griffith ran *Time* it would crackle less, that Susskind is the sort of brainy lover TV needs. I would sooner rest my hopes in Groucho Marx, who does not describe himself as an intellectual, or the late Fred Allen, who had a cleansing bitterness and despair about the media themselves, and wasn't campaigning for David Sarnoff's job. If there are such footings as Hazard suggests for an ironic stance in mass culture, let them not crusade under our feet.

The dangers of mass culture are much easier to define than the ideas. The foremost one, which may negate all the ideals, is an overpowering narcotic effect, relaxing the tired mind and tranquilizing the anxious. Genuine art is demanding and difficult, often unpleasant, nagging at the mind and stretching the nerves taut. So much of mass culture envelops the audience in a warm bath, making no demands except that we all glow with pleasure and comfort. It is this that may negate the range of possibility (the bath is pleasanter at the shallow end), keep taste static or even deteriorate it a little, muffle the few critical and ironic sounds being made. That premature cultural critic Homer knew all about this effect, at various times calling it Lotus Eaters, Calypso, Circe, and the Sirens, and he just barely got our hero through intact.

An obvious source of danger is the cults. In one direction we have the cult of the folk. Some ten years ago I published an article called "The American Folksy" in *Theatre Arts* (April 1949), protesting that we were being overwhelmed by an avalanche of pseudo-folk corn. I turn out not to have been very prophetic. What I then

took to be the height of something like the great tulip craze can now be seen to have been only the first tentative beginnings of something so vast and offensive that it dwarfs historical parallels. I named half a dozen folksy singers of the time, but could not have guessed that a decade later there would be hundreds if not thousands, that magazines would be devoted to guitar and banjo styles, that the production of washtub basses would be an American industry. I certainly could not have predicted Elvis Presley. I mention this failure of imagination now only to explain why the ramifying vertical combine that lives by falsifying America's cultural past seems to me a major deterrent to any of the hopes for mass culture.

Opposed to the cult of the folk, which identifies (however falsely) with a tradition, and blows hot, or passionate, is the cult of the hip which denies (however falsely) having any tradition, and blows cool. (At the juvenile end it tells sick jokes, glorying in the impassivity of: "Mrs. Brown, can Johnny come out and play ball?" "But you children know he has no arms or legs." "That's O.K. We want to use him for second base.") At higher levels it admits wryly to Jules Feiffer's truths, professes Zen, or joins Norman Mailer in making what he called in *Dissent*,* "the imaginative journey into the tortured marijuana-racked mind and genitalia of a hipster daring to live on the edge of the most dangerous of the Negro worlds." At this point, obviously, cool has become pretty hot, an outlaw folk tradition has been established, and perhaps both these polar cults are recognizable as the same sort of fantasy identification. To the extent that mass culture permits, encourages, and thrives on these adolescent gratifications, it is as spurious and mendacious as its harshest critics claim.

One more danger inherent in mass culture, and perhaps the most menacing one, is the existence of a captive audience with no escape. In regard to art, it is not much of a problem; many will sit through worse than they expected, and a few will sit through better than they desire. As a machinery for selling us consumer goods, using all the resources of a prostituted psychology and sociology, it becomes more menacing, although here too mass culture seems to throw up its counterstatements. Against a million voices stridently shouting "Buy!" the tiny neo-Thoreauvian voice of J. K. Galbraith whispers, "Reduce your wants," and is immediately amplified by a book club

* "The White Negro (Superficial Reflections on the Hipster)," *Dissent*, Summer 1957, *4*:276-293.

and blurbs from a number of magazines that would not last a week if his advice were heeded. It is when the same technique is used to sell us politics that our status as a captive audience to mass media becomes menacing, an Eisenhower or a Nixon today but a Big Brother or a Big Daddy tomorrow.

At this point we are informed that the fashionable cult of New Conservatism, with its scorn for our worship of the mob and the mob's brittle toys, will save us, if only we elect to follow Burke and Calhoun instead of those demagogues Jefferson and Paine. The corrective here is reading the tribute to Roy Campbell that Russell Kirk published in *The Sewanee Review* (Winter 1956) and discovering that Kirk's heart's vision is not Edmund Burke orating nobly in the House of Commons, but Roy Campbell spanking a small, effeminate Marxist poet on a public lecture platform. In short, New Conservatism yearns masochistically for its fantasy storm troopers, and Kirk and his fellows are less the doctor than the disease.

Some of the limitations of mass culture have already been suggested. One absolute limitation is the Law of Raspberry Jam, that the wider you spread it the thinner it is. Another is the nature of art itself. As genuine art, advancing sensibility, stretching the limits of form, purifying the language of the tribe, it is always for an elite of education (which does not mean a formal education), sensibility, and taste. When its freshness has grown somewhat stale, diluted by imitators and popularizers, its audience widens, although if it is true art it will always continue to demand more than a mass audience cares to give it.

A special limitation, not inevitable and not universal, is the timidity of those in positions of authority in the mass media. Jerry Lewis, of all people, wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* for December 7, 1958:

> Unfortunately, TV fell into the well-manicured hands of the Madison Avenue bully boys, who, awed by the enormousness of the monster, began to "run scared." They were easy prey for the new American weapon —the pressure group.

Steve Allen's reply in the same symposium suggests that we confront no simple matter of pressure or censorship, that here horses break themselves with alacrity and great civic responsibility. Allen writes:

> There are, frankly, a few things I joke about in private that I do not touch upon on the air, but this implies no feeling of frustration. I realize

that some tenets of my personal philosophy would antagonize the majority without educating them; hence, no good could come of experimenting with such subjects.

Matching the timidity of the producers is the ignorance of the consumers. Who knows what they might want if they knew what there was to want, if they knew what they didn't know? This again is a special and perhaps transitory limitation. As education spreads and leisure increases, some of our mass audiences may acquire, if not what we call "taste," at least a wider knowledge of cultural possibility. The well poisoner is an unlovely figure, but the responsibility of those poisoning *these* reservoirs from which millions drink is comparably greater. What defense has an ignorant and eager reader, buying *The Origin of Species* in the Everyman edition, against its introductory assurance that authoritative scientists no longer believe these things? He has scarcely heard of Darwin, how is he to know that W. R. Thompson is not the voice of modern science? If he happens to read T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings' book attacking modern architecture and design, it is the confession of a contemporary designer to what he has always rather suspected; he is not apt to have encountered Mr. Robsjohn-Gibbings' hi-fi unit with Doric columns in a decorator's studio. Because it knows no better, in short, the mass audience is condemned to the fate of never knowing any better.

The final limitation of mass culture I would suggest is its tendency to sanctify the old, safe, and official. In his eighties, Robert Frost becomes poetry consultant to the Library of Congress and all America throbs to his absurd views about American painting and other matters. In his eighties, Carl Sandburg enthralls a joint session of Congress with a slushy eulogy to Lincoln. I quote what I take to be an innocent irony in the *Times* correspondent's account of the latter event:

> In its kindest of moods, Congress has little patience for poets, and normally it can scarcely sit still for Presidents or heads of foreign states. Mr. Sandburg, however, held them as they have not been held since General of the Army Douglas MacArthur's address to a joint session on April 19, 1951.

Any serious young American artist who could pack his audience into a closet (like young Robert Frost, who could not get his first book of verse published in this country), has the consolation of knowing that if he has the good fortune to live long enough he can become a Grand Old Man, and just at the time when he has nothing left to say a thicket of microphones and cameras will enable him to say it to the world.

We come finally to the matter of taking a stand or stands. Each of us confronts mass culture in a number of roles. My own include customer, parent, journalist, critic, teacher of literature. The role of teacher seems the best one from which to tackle the problem, since the college teacher of literature is not only assumed to be a custodian of traditional values, but must deal with the new values in his day-to-day contact with what students read and write. He cannot entirely ignore them or wash his hands of them. I would propose that there are at least six different things he must do about mass culture, varying with the quality and promise of the specimen involved, the differing needs of students, and his own needs and perhaps moods. I list them by the operative verbs, using literary examples as much as possible.

Reject. This is a traditional function of the critic of mass culture, and it can be performed in a variety of moods, from the high good fun of H. L. Mencken whacking one or another fatuosity of the booboisie to the owlish pomposity of recent *American Mercury* pundits. The best current example of rejection is Leslie Fiedler, who told a symposium at Columbia not long ago that the writer's proper role is a nay-saying and destructive one, that he should not hesitate to bite the hand which feeds him. Fiedler's slogan for Hollywood and TV was, "We must destroy their destructiveness." As a teacher, I would reserve this rejection for the real junk, Mickey Spillane and *Peyton Place.* Here, it seems to me, any sort of undercutting or resistance is legitimate, short of actually snatching the book out of the student's hands and pitching it into the garbage. Let the teacher rant and rave, appeal to his authority, the student's shame, or the ghost of Henry James. Let him expose and deride this pernicious trash in every way possible. The really hopeless is only a small percentage of the total output of mass culture, however, which allows the teacher to save some of his energy for other operations, and to contribute a small sum to a subscription to replace Leslie Fiedler's teeth when they wear out.

Embrace. This too is a traditional function, and we have had intellectual cults of the popular arts, of Chaplin or Keaton, Krazy Kat or Donald Duck, since there were popular arts. Reuel Denney's article on Pogo, reprinted in his book, *The Astonished Muse,* is a fine example of the passionate professorial embrace. Denney shows learnedly that the strip is "a study in the disintegration of the New Deal phase of the Democratic party," that "if the political stance of the strip is Democratic and Steffens-like, the literary stance is post-

Joycean, and the psychological stance is post-Freudian." Poor Albert Alligator becomes a parataxis of oral aggression, although at this point I begin to suspect that Denney is having a pull at the reader's leg. It was very shrewd of George P. Elliott to make his impossible sociologist in *Parktilden Village* the creator, as the result of his researches, of a cartoon strip that appealed to every cultural level. George Orwell was in something of this position, studying boys' books with loving attention, then himself writing a superior boys' book in *1984*, which sold its million copies in paperback. The products of mass culture one can wholeheartedly welcome and embrace are probably as small a percentage as those one ought wholeheartedly to reject. I would suggest such rare best-sellers as *Catcher in the Rye*, hovering on the edge of serious literature, such sparkling musical comedies as *Guys and Dolls* and *Pajama Game*, and comedians and comic strips to taste.

Ignore. This is perhaps more a teacher's dodge than any other. Several years ago at Bennington, David Riesman made some remarks (which I dare say he has since published) about the tyranny of the curricular. When he was an undergraduate, he said, his intellectual solace was that he could read Marx and Freud, which *they* (his teachers) didn't know about or didn't approve, and thus have an area of his mind and life that Harvard could not regiment. At a place like Bennington, he said, Marx and Freud would immediately be made the subject of courses, as would anything else in which the students showed interest.

I sat in the audience trying to get the arrow out of my throat, since that year I was teaching a course in Marx and Freud (along with Darwin and Frazer), and I had just organized a lively faculty seminar on rock 'n' roll, at which we told the students what it was all about. The only comfort I had was that however tyrannous the curricular, there was always *something* the students could block off privately; if they were being taught Marx and "Fats" Domino, perhaps they were pursuing Racine and Mozart on the sly. In any case, they had *some* underground culture the faculty would do best not to know about. I find this tactic of ignoring very useful in regard to West Coast poetry (I suspect that that book of verse called *Howl* circulates surreptitiously at Bennington, but I have never made any attempt to find out), in regard to the intricacies of modern cool jazz ("He doesn't dig *Mulligan*!"), and most particularly in regard to any combination of the two. Probably I would be better off, we would all be better off, ignoring more, letting them keep private whatever

current work speaks to their condition, letting education grow up without daily watering and all those infernal sunlamps.

Improve. Here we have the traditional pedagogic tactic of using what the student likes as a guidepost to something better. Ah, one can sigh in relief, at last some *constructive* criticism, not that irresponsible ignoring. It is this attitude of exploring mass culture for signs of hope and maturity that has distinguished *Commentary* over the years. I think of such articles as Robert Warshow's "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," reprinted in Rosenberg and White's *Mass Culture*, and Norman Podhoretz's "Our Changing Ideals, as Seen on TV," reprinted in Brossard's *The Scene before You*. A sign of the awareness of the problem by a group of English teachers is the recent organization of a new section of the Modern Langnage Association, dealing with Literature and General Culture. An organizing statement that was circulated before the meeting expressed the hope that by studying mass culture "we may come to learn what clearly separates the best-seller from the work of distinction, and, if our aims become in part educational, offer our students the necessary exercises in discrimination." Again, I am wary of the big battalions. Teaching this sort of discrimination has always been the teacher's function, as it has always been the critic's. The works that call for it are those mixed bundles that cannot be rejected or embraced and should not be ignored, works of genuine imagination flawed by crassness, hokum, or sheer want of craft. I think of the novels of Jack Kerouac and the plays of Tennessee Williams. What attracts the student or reader to them is better available in Dostoevsky and Chekbov, in Fielding and Shakespeare, but they may be precisely the bridges to get there, and in any case are worth study in their own terms.

Replace. Beyond all this, the college teacher of literature as a custodian of traditional value has to remember what he has in his custody. John Crowe Ransom, in his 1958 Phi Beta Kappa address, "Our Age among the Ages," reprinted in the *Kenyon Review* (Winter 1959), came to a civilized and pluralist but deeply pessimistic conclusion. He wrote:

> At any rate, the old ways of life have been disappearing much too rapidly for comfort, and we are in a great cultural confusion. Many millions of underprivileged persons now have income and leisure which they did not have before. They have the means to achieve the best properties of a culture, if they know how to spend their money wisely. And it is a fact that they spend handsomely on education. Now, I am

in the education business, and I can report my own observations on that. It is as if a sudden invasion of barbarians had overrun the educational institution; except that the barbarians in this case are our neighbors and friends, and sometimes they are our own children, or they are ourselves, they are some of us gathered here on this very fine occasion. We should not fear them; they are not foreigners, nor our enemies. But in the last resort education is a democratic process, in which the courses are subject to the election of the applicants, and a course even when it has been elected can never rise above the intellectual passion of its pupils, or their comparative indifference. So, with the new generation of students, Milton declines in the curriculum; even Shakespeare has lost heavily; Homer and Virgil are practically gone. The literary interest of the students today is ninety percent in the literature of their own age; more often than not it is found in books which do not find entry into the curriculum, and are beneath the standard which your humble servants, the teachers of literature, are trying to maintain. Chaucer and Spenser and Milton, with their respective contemporaries, will have their secure existence henceforth in the library, and of course in the love and intimate acquaintance of a certain academic community, and there they will stay except for possible periods when there is a revival of the literature of our own antiquity. Our literary culture for a long time is going to exist in a sprawling fashion, with minority pockets of old-style culture, and some sort of a majority culture of a new and indeterminate style. It is a free society, and I should expect that the rights of minorities will be as secure as the rights of individuals.

Ransom's prediction may be exactly accurate, yet the teacher cannot reconcile himself to a minority status for his values in his own classroom, however reconciled he is to it everywhere else. He must ceaselessly bring to the attention of his students the greatest literature he knows. It is not easy for an ill-educated man to teach Homer and Virgil, Greek drama and the Bible, Milton and Shakespeare, as I can testify, but it is essential, and in our curricula Darwin and Marx, ballads and blues, must have a place, but not the primary place. "The best that has been thought and known," as Arnold somewhat pompously put it, is even more vital for college students these days when they seem to come already knowing the worst.

Warn. Here the teacher as critic of mass culture needs a good stout voice, along with the prescience of Ortega y Gasset and the bitterness of Randolph Bourne. The evidence, from Q. D. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public* in 1939 to Margaret Dalziel's *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago* in 1959, suggests that in some significant respects the standards of mass culture are deteriorating over the centuries, and that instead of flying the kites of our hopes for evolution and awakening, we had better dig in and try to keep things

from getting worse than the Victorian penny dreadful. The notable voice here is Randall Jarrell's, and in "The Appalling Taste of Our Age" in the *Saturday Evening Post*'s Adventures of the Mind series, he warned us in the most violent terms that the digest and the revised simplified version menace not only high literary culture but the art of reading itself, the use of the written word. In the most terrifying chapter of *Das Kapital*, "The Working Day," Marx told us of English laboring children so brutalized and degraded by working twelve and sixteen hours a day in the mills that they did not know the name of the Queen, or the story of Noah, or where London was. Now Jarrell tells us of our own children, raised in comfort and love, getting the most expensive education in the world, who do not know who Charlemagne was, or the story of Jonah, or what comes before E in the alphabet. Warn? One should bellow and curse and call down doom, like the prophet Jeremiah.

Yes, but of course also reject and embrace, ignore, improve, and replace. The teacher and the critic of mass culture cannot simply reduce himself to one attitude, but must keep varying the attack, like a young pitcher learning to supplement his high-school fast ball with a curve and a change of pace. Among the dangers of mass culture is the danger to the critic of atrophy, not to call it *rigor mortis*, of hardening in one fixed position. The comparable danger to the writer or artist is being squeezed dry too fast, like a television comedian, or brought up into the big time too soon, like a young fighter. The defense in both cases is wariness, and periodic rites of withdrawal. The ultimate ideal of mass culture is the ideal of the whole culture (to return to the anthropologists' term), something nearer the good life for all mankind. Here Homer and the Athenian tragic dramatists are useful in reminding us of basic limitation, of man's flawed, blind, and mortal nature, and of the ironies of hope and expectation.

We are not the good society, but we do have a vision of it, and that vision is a pluralist one, in which many different forms of satisfaction, including clearly spurious ones, can coexist peacefully. Mass culture is here to stay, but so, I hope, are those of us who want another sort of culture for ourselves and for anyone else who wants it, or who can be educated, led, or cajoled into wanting it. In so far as all of mass culture represents someone's organization of experience into what he intends as meaningful and pleasurable patterns, it is all a kind of shabby poetry, but we dare not forget that there are other kinds of poetry too.