CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

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With an Introduction by

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BEACON PRESS BOSTON

First published as a Beacon Paperback in 1964 by arrangement with D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

International Standard Book Number: 0–8070–6199–9
Fourth printing, April 1971

Beacon Press books are published under the auspices of the Unitarian Universalist Association

This book is the collective work of a group of social scientists, creative artists, representatives of the mass media, critics, historians, and philosophers. It is based on papers presented and discussed at a seminar sponsored jointly by the Tamiment Institute and *Daedalus*, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and held at Tamiment-in-the-Poconos in June 1959. All the essays except those by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Arthur Berger, and Leo Lowenthal have been published previously in *Daedalus* and are used with its permission.

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The Artist and the Museum in a Mass Society

ONE SHOULD PUT ASIDE at the outset the notion that there is any essential threat in the mass media to the genuinely creative artist or to genuine art. The artist, qua artist, is an individualist, and the quality of his art lies in its individuality. A work of art is the concrete record of an artist's discovery of himself, first to himself, then at a second remove to the world around him. In this sense, what may from one point of view be seen as a "monologue" may also be regarded as a hypothetical duologue or conversation.

The true artist does not feel the need to address a mass meeting to have the sense of conversing with his fellow man. He speaks to an ideal audience, but what speaker succeeds in envisaging his audience otherwise? Consequently, for the advantages of audience the mass media may offer, the true artist will not be tempted, nor will the true artist's work suffer, in a culture given its broad color by those advantages. Only the current equivalents of pseudo-artists who in the past have sacrificed their individuality to other temptations will suffer from the seductions of mass media.

Any suggested threat to the creative artist through mass culture does, however, serve very frequently to obscure the true issue. For the real present danger is not to the creative artist or to creative art, but to the conditioning of the public in its response to creative art, particularly in the field of painting and sculpture. As S. E. Hyman has pointed out: "The technological revolution does not yet seem to have brought the plastic arts into mass culture. . . . Mass-produced copies of pictures and sculptures 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."*

Whether or not long-playing records have had any profound effect on musical discrimination, if the test is not merely one of recognizing accepted works, is difficult to say. It seems evident that an ear educated only by long-playing records would be as far from the real experience of a musical work as any eye trained by color reproductions would be from the sensuous experience of actual painting. In Hyman's linking the influences of paperbacks and long-playing records, it seems to me he has slightly mixed his categories of reproduction. The paperback is merely a less luxurious form of book, for the text is, or should be, the same; but between a long-playing record and a live rendition there is a difference in sense stimuli, just as there is between a painting and a printed reproduction of a painting—perhaps not a wide difference, but an essential one.

What both long-playing records and color reproductions basically provide is "information" about the works of art in question, not an immediate experience of either the music as played or the actual painting. In painting and sculpture the danger lies in the confusion which can so readily develop between information about a work of art and the experience an immediate sensuous contact with a work of art provides. And a true appreciation of works of art in these fields can only come through direct experience.

Reproductions of painting and sculpture speak to the eye of the observer through materials different from those of the original. The material in which an artist works is an essential element of his expression. Materials different from those employed in the original must provide different relationships in the result. At best, the reproduction can only resemble or suggest the original, although at times it misleads the uncritical observer by its pretension to do more.

Reproduction in the mass media will never supply a truly adequate equivalent for the immediate experience of a painting or a sculpture. What might be achieved is an equivalent expression within the limitations of the medium, much as one had hoped (and still hopes) for a color cinema which would set out, not to reproduce effects, but to exploit the potentialities of creating new forms through color and light effects—fresh expressions of visual order rather than the imitation of already existent expressions. But because the technological

* Stanley E. Hyman, from an earlier draft of his article, as delivered to the participants of this symposium.

revolution has not yet found a way either to bring the pictorial and sculptural arts into mass culture, or to create a fresh expression within the various media which might be analogous, information is offered as a substitute, and the indolent public is readily led to accepting it, with the resultant danger of eventual confusion between the two.

The general educational approach to the appreciation of painting and sculpture is in part a consequence of mass culture and the influence of mass media; in part, it is a result of indolence. I refer to a general emphasis on the informational approach in schools and even in museums where there is so little excuse for it. It is easier to approach painting or sculpture through the ears than through the eyes: our temptation today is to lean on the accepted authority, rather than to look for ourselves and respond directly to the sensory stimuli of the work of art. Yet when we speak of accepted authority with regard to a work of art, this can only refer to a work of the past. The viewer who leans on accepted authority can never depend on such a crutch in the case of a truly fresh work, nor can he ever experience a direct communication between a work of art and himself: it must always be at second hand.

The indolent approach to the visual arts is now generally encouraged as a result of the hasty democratization of education of the past century. Everyone has a right to know and appreciate all; therefore, everyone ought to know and appreciate all, and if one does not, it is cause for shame, and one should pretend to be a connoisseur. Art is long; time is short; therefore, any means toward creating this impression of familiarity is welcome, whether it actually interferes with a true, direct appreciation of a work or not.

Museums and educational institutions in general for the past three or four decades (those in which mass media have been developing apace) have fallen deep into this betrayal of the public in the field of the visual arts. Perhaps museums, as looked upon by certain museum trustees, are primarily intended as instruments of popular education along mass media lines. The interest of museum trustees in popular attendance would point this way. Attendance statistics would readily show them that an exhibition of painting or sculpture in an idiom familiar to the public and by an artist or artists whose name it knows will draw crowds. By contrast, the attendance at an exhibition of work by a less known or less publicized artist, or artists, even though more interesting in quality and freshness to the exploring gallery-goer or connoisseur, will suffer. To catch and hold the

attention of the indolent visitor, elaborate biographical, critical, explanatory labels, even canned lectures over earphones, are provided, like aesthetic water wings, so one may dabble about without getting too deep into the water. Art should never be spoon-fed nor offered in capsule, digested form. Yet this is what is being essayed in our museums today, simply because museum trustees or perhaps even museum directors are ambitious to embrace the broadest possible public and, in our democratic age, have not the courage to face the fact that the highest experiences of art are only for the elite who "have earned in order to possess."

In the case of a commercial television station, one can adopt a degree of leniency toward this attitude: profits are involved. To a certain extent, the public is bound to dictate the editorial policies if the station is to succeed financially. But in the case of a museum there is no such ground for exculpation. A museum is a nonprofit organization which should be responsible only to its own standards. There is no comparison between the freedom which a museum or a publication like *Partisan Review* should enjoy in maintaining these standards and the responsibility of a television network to its consumers.

The function of a museum is the encouragement of the enjoyment of art and through this the indirect encouragement of the creative artist. Visual art is basically a sensory experience, one of relationships of form, of colors, and of associations, physical, unconscious, or representational. Therefore, the first step in a museum's educational process is the confrontation of the spectator with the actual work of art, so that the artist can speak directly to the spectator. The immediate sensory experience of a work of art is the only direct approach to the artist's communication. Mass media cannot provide this experience, but the museum can and should. On this foundation of a direct sensory acquaintance, the experience of a work of art may be soundly enriched by its peripheral associations. It is the responsibility of the museum to stimulate the indolent public to approach art directly through aesthetic experience, pleasurable and enjoyable, and to incite the visitor to make the effort, always more or less arduous, which is necessary for him to enter into communication with the artist through the artist's personal expression. For it is this interaction between the observer and the creative artist that makes it possible to maintain or raise standards of judgment and appreciation.

A lowering of standards would appear inevitable when all or most energies are expended toward raising the lowest or broadest common denominator. In turn, this will encourage a broadening and a dilution of culture, as indeed has been the case over the past thirty years, not only in our own country, but in others where the mass media have developed.

If the general trend lies in this direction, and if even such non-profit institutions as museums widen their embrace to attract the broadest possible number (fit or unfit as the case may be), where are we to look for standards of aesthetic quality in this new culture? Here is where the creative artist must play his part. For if the mass media have no influence on the true artist, who by his essential nature is a seeker, an explorer, always apart and in advance of his fellows, it is he who provides what the mass media fail to give: standards of quality and integrity for our culture as a whole.

RANDALL JARRELL

A Sad Heart at the Supermarket

THE EMPEROR AUGUSTUS would sometimes say to his Senate: "Words fail me, my Lords; nothing I can say could possibly indicate the depth of my feelings in this matter." But I am speaking about this matter of mass culture, the mass media, not as an Emperor but as a fool, as a suffering, complaining, helplessly nonconforming poet-or-artist-of-a-sort, far off at the obsolescent rear of things: what I say will indicate the depth of my feelings and the shallowness and one-sideedness of my thoughts. If those English lyric poets who went mad during the eighteenth century had told you why the Age of Enlightement was driving them crazy, it would have had a kind of documentary interest: what I say may have a kind of documentary interest.

> The toad beneath the harrow knows
> Exactly where each tooth-point goes;

if you tell me that the field is being harrowed to grow grain for bread, and to create a world in which there will be no more famines, or toads either, I will say, "I know"—but let me tell you where the tooth-points go, and what the harrow looks like from below.

Advertising men, businessmen, speak continually of "media" or "the media" or "the mass media"—one of their trade journals is named, simply, *Media.* It is an impressive word: one imagines Mephistopheles offering Faust media that no man has ever known; one feels, while the word is in one's ear, that abstract, overmastering powers, of a scale and intensity unimagined yesterday, are being offered one by the technicians who discovered and control them—offered, and at a price. The word, like others, has the clear fatal ring of that new world whose space we occupy so luxuriously and precariously; the world that produces mink stoles, rockabilly records,