CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

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H. STUART HUGHES

Mass Culture and Social Criticism

CONTEMPORARY CRITICS of mass culture have gotten themselves into inextricable difficulties by refusing to admit to their own "snobbery." The original critics of the phenomenon, from de Tocqueville to Ortega y Gasset and Irving Babbitt, were frankly aristocrats who never thought of apologizing for the special and exclusive nature of their own standards. Indeed, it was precisely the fastidious distaste of the well born and the carefully educated that prompted the identification of mass culture at all. Culturally privileged elites have always resisted the invasion of the vulgar; there was no particular novelty in the fact that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries people of humanistic education reacted so sharply against the unfamiliar standards of the "half-educated." The novelty appeared only when (as Edward Shils[1] has explained) the intellectual leaders began to identify themselves with democracy or socialism and sought virtue in the cultural pursuits of the common man. From this latter point of departure, a bewildered disappointment could be the only result.

For our contemporary critics have been trying to apply two incompatible standards at the same time. They have clung to the special cultural definitions of a narrow elite—the insistence on a common core of "humanist" reading or artistic enjoyment, on the importance of foreign languages, ancient or modern, and on the elegant manipulation of one's own—maintaining all the while that these things are perfectly capable of mass dissemination. They have tried to combine elitism and democracy—things compatible perhaps in a Periclean or Jeffersonian sense of popular government led by "the best," but, under contemporary conditions, radical opposites.

In a word, I believe that contemporary democracy and contemporary mass culture are two sides of the same coin, and that our discussions of the latter phenomenon, now and in the future, will

get nowhere until we recognize this simple equation and the corollaries that stem from it. Few of us, I think, would be prepared to jettison democracy and to substitute some sort of aristocratic regime in its place. All sorts of reasons, both moral and technical, spring to our minds as counter-arguments. Hence, if we want to live in our world with some degree of equanimity, it is incumbent on us to make our peace with mass culture in at least a few of its more bearable manifestations.

By now it should be obvious that I agree with Messrs. Rosten and Shils that the mass media cannot be held responsible for "corrupting" popular taste. The taste of the masses, I believe, has always appeared more or less "corrupt" to the better educated, and I see no reason why this situation should change. I am also impressed with Mr. Rosten's argument that the media frequently produce or print things that are over the heads of their audience, and that the most serious limitation on them is the absence of talent to cope with the totally unprecedented demand for copy. At the same time (even under the most favorable conditions) I do not believe the media capable of performing the task of general education that their would-be reformers want to entrust to them. Or, more precisely, I think that only certain cultural values are susceptible of large-scale dissemination, and that certain other values, traditionally regarded as distinguishing features of the educated man, when subjected to such a process simply become diluted beyond recognition.

About twenty years ago I was first struck by Henry Adams' observation that the United States in 1800 possessed a cultural equipment that was almost exclusively restricted to theology, literature, and oratory. While these were frequently cultivated with intensity and finesse, the realm of the visual arts and music (the more sensuous gratifications of old Europe) were practically nonexistent.[2] As the years have passed since I first read those lines—and as our country has undergone the most profound social and cultural change in its history—I have watched Adams' words turn into their very opposite. Today it is the arts of language that have passed into disrespect: even the man of reasonable education can no longer handle English with any sureness of touch; we have become a nation of nongrammarians admirably represented by the curious syntax of our chief executive. At the same time, the enjoyment of music, the semi-professional theater, and even painting has become diffused in a fashion almost nobody anticipated a generation ago. The arts of sensuous consumption are prospering everywhere. In the sphere of

traditional music and the less difficult forms of the drama and the visual arts, popular taste has never been so well developed.

Now what the arts of sensuous consumption have in common (as opposed to reading, speaking, logical argument, or the more intellectualized forms of painting or music) is, of course, the passivity of their reception. This passive quality has been lamented again and again by the critics of our contemporary culture; they have repeatedly called for a return to the strenuous effort that they find characteristic of all true artistic or intellectual attainment. Here, I think, the critics have become impractical visionaries. For it is precisely the active, acute, finely perceptive elements of traditional culture that, *under contemporary conditions*, are incapable of mass dissemination. If spread too widely, they become unrecognizable. Or, perhaps more commonly, they produce boredom and a weary sensation of irrelevance.

Why is it that so much of what to us may seem the best parts of our cultural heritage strikes the majority of our countrymen, and even our students, as supremely irrelevant? The question is not as foolish as it sounds. And it is not to be answered merely by angry assertions of the greatness of a Virgil or a Milton. If almost no one cares to read Milton today, it is not just because we bave lost our feeling for traditional culture. It is because most of what an author like Milton has to say has in simple truth become irrelevant to our contemporary lives.

The passivity of our cultural response mirrors the passivity of the society in which we live. Ours is a world without issues—or rather with one issue, so vast and so frightening that people prefer not to talk about it at all. If our students yawn over the classics, it is not just that they are boorish and obtuse; on the contrary, many of them may be acute enough to realize that the subject matter of these great works has very little to do with their own lives. Heroic endeavor, "purity" and chastity, poverty and pestilence, the fine distinctions of theology, the duties of kingship, the perfect society—all these noble old subjects seem muted and remote to contemporary Americans. The hardest task of the historian of ideas is to convince his students or his readers that at one time people cared, even to the point of dying for them, about notions that today seem hopelessly arid and scholastic.

And so we have come to social criticism. Without it, I maintain, any analysis of mass culture is shallow and unprofitable. For I think that there is in fact a qualitative difference between the cultural

attitude of the ordinary man today and the plebeian standards within an earlier society. Both, of course, have been concerned primarily with sensual enjoyment. But in past ages the more perceptive and sensitive of the plebs had an uneasy awareness that their lives and standards were far from perfect: their consciences were not clear—at the very least, they felt excluded from the great stage where the major dramas of their time were being enacted. Today the ordinary man does not have the same sense of exclusion. Indeed, he is given a front-row seat: the media see to that. The only trouble is that nothing particularly exciting is going on, on the stage.

Hence there is no incentive to learn the fine points of the drama. If the audience is basically convinced that the great traditional issues of human life, both social and private, no longer have much meaning, if the public senses (as well it may) that the actors themselves are playing their roles mechanically and without putting much conviction into their lines, then its reception of the play will quite naturally be that of lazy-minded and passive spectators. How different things were a couple of generations ago! One has only to conjure up the image of half-literate European workers patiently listening to the exegesis of Marxian texts for hours at a stretch (a common scene around 1900) to realize the difference in cultural climate. These workers were obviously more poorly educated than their American counterparts of today: they had less capacity to follow a closely reasoned argument. But their inclination to do so was greater. For they were convinced that the lengthy and largely incomprehensible speeches of their leaders and teachers were of moment to them. The complex reasoning of these people from a loftier cultural sphere really mattered to their listeners: at some point (perhaps a very far-distant point), their auditors believed, it would make a difference in their own lives, or at least in the lives of their descendants.

Today most people have lost this conviction. They do not think that their own lives will get much better or even that their children will be happier than they are. Indeed, they suspect that the contrary may be true. At the conscious level, they repeat to themselves that they are already living in the promised land. Deeper down, they fear that the vision of such a land has vanished forever.

Unless we realize the full import of this loss of the vision of utopia, we shall never be able to understand properly our country and its culture—and along with these, the more general characteristics of twentieth-century society in the Western world. Without such a realization, we shall not be able to express what it is about mass

culture that we find so peculiarly depressing. For, as so many of our contributors have asserted, it is not its *mass* character as such that is novel and threatening: it is rather its slackness and meaninglessness. And this flaccid quality springs precisely from the wider nature of the society of which mass culture is simply the most obvious and flamboyant manifestation.

Let me reiterate that I do not think this to be exclusively an American question. The same socio-cultural complex has recently begun to appear in Western and Central Europe, perhaps with a certain time lag, but still with unmistakably familiar features. And this not through what the defenders of the old culture angrily attack as "Americanization": rather than being primarily an importation from outside, the vast social and cultural change that Europe has been undergoing since the Second World War gives every evidence of indigenous and spontaneous origin; the direct copying from America seems to be relatively superficial.

As I look over the social and ideological scene today, I am impressed with the great similarity among the dominant views in the major Western nations—with the possible exception of Britain, which shows remnants of an earlier pattern of clearly marked and significant differences of opinion. Elsewhere one encounters a kind of gray uniformity. The ideologies that call themselves Christian Democracy in Germany and Italy, Gaullism in France, and the bipartisan consensus in our own country, on closer inspection, turn out to be very much the same thing. They stand for an ideology that is the negation of ideology—and of utopia also. In name and in formal organization they are liberal and democratic, but in fact they seem dedicated to draining liberal democracy of its content. No longer do they have any particular enthusiasm behind them. They rest, rather, on material prosperity, and beyond that, and more important than that, on weariness, on apathy, on passive acceptance, on a tacit agreement not to discuss potentially "divisive" issues—on what still needs to be called "conformity," despite the excessive use of that term during the past half-decade of post-McCarthy breast-beating.

I am not surprised, then, that Mr. Shils has referred to this situation as a "culture of consensus." That is exactly what it is—with all the virtues and all the defects that the term implies. I do not want to be misunderstood: I find this culture more tolerant, gentler, and more humane than anything that the Western world knew before; it provides a setting in which the artist, however marginal and irrelevant he may feel himself to be, is seldom mistreated, and almost

never starves. One of our contributors has referred to the price we pay for democracy. I think that is a good expression—provided we recognize both that the price is worth paying and that it is a heavy price indeed.

A generation ago Karl Mannheim warned us of what it would mean to live without utopia—without any notion of transcendence in social and cultural pursuits.[3] He held up to us the vision of a cold, bleak world, a world drained of meaning. More recently writers like Lewis Mumford and Erich Fromm have echoed the warning. I do not agree with Mr. Hyman that we still have a vision of the good society. In fact, I could scarcely disagree more strongly. I believe we have lost that vision: most of us are quite satisfied with the ugliness of our cities, the waste in our economy, the cheerful incompetence of our leaders, the meaninglessness of public discourse, the general insensibility to the overwhelming danger that threatens us. Along with our vision, we have lost our capacity for indignation, our ability to feel a cosmic anger with what we see going on around us. And until we regain this vision, these capacities, our culture will continue to be what it is today—"weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable."

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3 *Ideology and Utopia* (London and New York, 1936), pp. 230, 236.