# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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# NOTES ON AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Unlike any other type of culture, popular culture—a full-fledged style of living with a distinct pattern of feeling, thinking, believing, and acting—was made possible and in the end necessary by mass production. Unless the requirements and effects of industrialization are fully grasped, popular culture does not become intelligible.[1]

## THE INDUSTRIAL SETTING

In the last two centuries, machinery and specialization have immensely increased economic productivity—the amount of goods produced per man-hour—in Europe and America. This process has gone farthest in America,

1. Crucial as the differences are in other respects, popular culture is a by-product of industrialization whether under democratic or dictatorial auspices, and regardless of whether the economy is planned or unplanned. Totalitarianism would compel composers to compose in the popular manner. A non-totalitarian system induces them to do so by rewards rather than positive punishment. In human terms, the difference is enormous; but popular culture may be produced in either way. (However, in a non-totalitarian industrial society, individuals not sharing popular culture can survive physically. Totalitarian industrialism makes survival even in the interstices of society doubtful.)

where popular culture too has gone farthest. Although enrichment led to a vast population increase, production per head rose stupendously and is still rising. Everybody benefited materially, but the main beneficiaries were the poor. Their income rose most. Furthermore, if the income gap between poor and rich had not narrowed as it did, an expanded national income distributed in unchanged proportions still would have augmented the welfare of the poor disproportionately. If the income of poor and rich alike increases by 50 per cent, the welfare of the poor is raised far more than that of the rich. Our progressive tax system—which taxes additions to the income of the poor less than additions to the income of the rich—is based entirely on this roughly[2] correct view.

Mass production has magnified the power of the poor as well as their income. The establishment of a progressive tax system itself eloquently testifies to the mounting political power of the lower income groups.

Since so much more is produced in less time, more time is left over to spend rather than earn income.[3] This, too, probably has benefited the poor most—the work time of the rich has scarcely declined. Indeed, partly because of inheritance taxation, partly because of loss of prestige, the leisure class which supported the high culture of the past has dwindled as a separate group. In general, although the material need is less, ideological changes have caused the gainfully employed proportion of the population to grow as technology improved.

The increased productivity which bore these fruits also lessened physical toil during the abridged work time. But drudgery was intensified. Owing to specialization and mechanization, work for most people is standardized and less varied, its pattern and rhythm inflexibly set by machinery with little scope for individual intelligence or initiative and for spontaneous action.[4] Organized production lines which feed machinery and are fed by it depend on a bureaucratic organization and demand of each worker only a small, endlessly repeated manipulation. Monotony is made more dreary by the vastness of production lines which weakens the relationship of each

2. There is no actual proof of the diminishing "utility" of successive additions to income, particularly when the comparison is interpersonal. The idea becomes doubtful indeed once the income of the poor is high enough to satisfy the most compelling needs.

3. Fewer hours per day are spent working than before, and fewer days per week. As a proportion of the lifespan, work time has shrunk beyond this. People live longer but start work later and retire earlier.

4. Mass production is distinguished in this respect from work on small farms and in small firms. The farm population has dwindled as has the share of total output produced by small firms and farms. Note further that specialization has reached a high degree in the surviving small unit.

worker to the end-product and indeed to production as a meaningful process. Emotional attachment to production tasks and to products also is loosened as each contribution becomes insignificant and the end products are uniformly bereft of identifying marks of individual skill or imagination. Once the techniques of mass production are highly standardized, they require more self-repression than self-expression from workers.

Actually, by helping machines, workers increasingly produce something abstract and shapeless for themselves: money income and time in which to spend it. Life falls into two compartments: work—a means; and play—an end.

The burden of enjoyment and of personal experience falls heavily on the extended proportion of life left over from work. But the longest period of time spent on any one thing is still spent on work. The deadening effect of the meaningless drain on energy carries over and influences the kind of play experience sought. Though condemned to pleasure, people often find themselves out on parole, craving to be "distracted from distraction by distraction."[5] Monotony depletes people psychologically and makes them weary and restless. The spontaneous imagination needed for recreation seeps out through non-use during working hours.[6] Thus "recreation" often becomes a search for excitement—vicarious or direct—to offset the monotony of work and give a feeling of "living." But excitement pursued for its own sake only exhausts eagerness and impulse without creating anything. The wish for the creation of personal experience is overwhelmed perhaps but it is not satisfied once it has degenerated into greed for sensation.

In addition to shortening work time and toil, lengthening playtime, and increasing fatigue and income, mass production has heightened and spread mobility. Population is concentrated in metropolitan areas to an unprecedented degree. Even where the population is dispersed, ubiquitous, swift, and cheap transportation leads to far more frequent and varied contacts outside the home than in former times and to congestion and crowding as well. Airplane or bus rides already throw together people from distant areas and groups on their way to distant places. The multiplicity of contacts is compounded by the ubiquity of means of communication. Movies, television programs, newspapers, and magazines link vast heterogeneous publics and establish constant contact among people. They bring about

5. T. S. Eliot. "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartettes*, III, 15.

6. Though physically fewer, working hours become psychologically longer through the repetitiveness of tasks.

some uniformity of attitude and a blending of customs and beliefs.[7] However, most contacts are casual and transitory or, in the case of mass media of communication, generalized, vicarious, and abstract. They do not replace personal relationship to things or people, but make it harder for them to grow. No man is an island—everybody is at sea, though, and the electrically amplified bell tolls so deafeningly for all that conversation degenerates into shouting.

Mass production for a market not only makes mobility possible, it also makes it necessary. Changing techniques, markets and products, the expansion and contraction of industries—in short, innovation—cannot proceed unless people can be induced to go from one residence and occupation to another, exchanging one group of friends for another, and sometimes their status, role, and social class.

Industrialization also grinds down the autonomy and intensity, the numerical size, the duration, and the functions of primary groups such as the family, and expands the role of fluid secondary groups. The influence of mass media rises correspondingly. The unprecedented spread of formal mass education contributes to the readiness for change. Education brings together the offspring of heterogeneous groups and subjects them to a homogenizing curriculum. The main effect is to weaken any differentiating heritage and to prepare each generation for mobility in pursuit of ambitions such as success or happiness, by means of the newest techniques.

As contacts multiplied and geographical distances shrank, so did social distances. Most of the things produced by modern industry tend to shorten the span between rich and poor. The poor read, travel, wear nylon stockings, and see the same television programs in their homes as do the rich. With regard to the kind of things consumed, the monopoly which distinguished the rich has been broken. To be wealthy means chiefly to have more rather than different things and often only to have more command over things. We can do no better than to quote John Stuart Mill, a prophetic witness, on the whole friendly, to the industry which blurred the contours of society by leveling the elevations and filling in the chasms that formerly divided it into remote non-competing segments.

7. To call popular culture heterogeneous is correct with reference to its origins but incorrect with reference to the smooth blend that constitutes it, and that makes American society remarkably homogeneous. Social distances dividing groups horizontally and vertically are smaller than within any European country. The contrary impression comes about because fluidity is great and contacts frequent. Thus individuals experience differences more intensely and more often though the differences are fewer and less steep than elsewhere. Hence the illusion shaped by many sociologists. (The latter may magnify group differences also because of occupational and ideological bias.)

The circumstances which surround different classes and individuals, and shape their characters, are daily becoming more assimilated. Formerly, different ranks, different neighborhoods, different trades and professions, lived in what might be called different worlds; at present to a great degree in the same. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, listen to the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties, and the same means of asserting them. Great as are the differences of position which remain, they are nothing to those which have ceased. And the assimilation is still proceeding. All the political changes of the age promote it, since they all tend to raise the low and to lower the high. Every extension of education promotes it, because education brings people under common influences, and gives them access to the general stock of facts and sentiments. Improvement in the means of communication promotes it, by bringing the inhabitants of distant places into personal contact, and keeping up a rapid flow of changes of residence between one place and another. The increase of commerce and manufactures promotes it, by diffusing more widely the advantages of easy circumstances, and opening all objects of ambition, even the highest, to general competition, whereby the desire of rising becomes no longer the character of a particular class, but of all classes. A more powerful agency than even all these, in bringing about a general similarity among mankind, is the complete establishment, in this and other free countries, of the ascendancy of public opinion in the State. As the various social eminences which enabled persons entrenched on them to disregard the opinion of the multitude gradually become levelled; as the very idea of resisting the will of the public, when it is positively known that they have a will, disappears more and more from the minds of practical politicians; there ceases to be any social support for nonconformity—the substantive in society which, itself opposed to the ascendancy of numbers, is interested in taking under its protection opinions and tendencies at variance with those of the public.[8]

The increased income and power, the shortened work time of the lower income groups; the mechanization of work; the increased mobility, the lessened social distances, and the weakened and abridged primary groups; and finally the rise of mass communication—all these things are direct effects of industrialization and direct causes of the erosion of folk and high cultures. Cumulatively, they create the attitudes and ambitions, the sensibilities and insensibilities which prepare the market for popular culture.

Folk and high cultures flowered simultaneously in different strata of many past societies. But popular culture[9] when fully developed penetrates

8. *On Liberty*, chap. iii.

9. This threefold classification is meant to be exhaustive. However much cultures differ, they fall into one or several of these types. For instance, all American Indian cultures were folk cultures; and Europe had a combination of folk and high cultures in antiquity and from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. Note that folk cultures fall in the first half of the usual

all strata about equally and without significant variation of its main qualities. As society becomes fully industrialized it becomes the most universally shared type of culture and colors most aspects of individual and social life. High and folk cultures retain only marginal influence on private and social life. They become islands lapped at and often swamped by popular culture. They are isolated and dry up in institutions or regions cut off from social development. If they are not isolated, high and folk cultures tend to become denatured.[10]

## THE ECONOMICS OF TASTE

Most of the goods monopolized in the past by the privileged few are now available to the many not only because they have more time and money but also because the goods themselves are mass produced and have become cheap.[11] Quality has changed but not necessarily for the worse. Our dental fillings and eyeglasses are better than those available to George III or Louis XIV. Our food, to judge from the increased lifespan, is not less nourishing and it is more plentiful. Lighting, heating, cooling, and transportation are far superior. More books are more available to more people, not to speak of television, movies, the radio, and phonograph records. Even in live entertainment, George III probably could not get as much as our poor can afford. Surely he had nothing like Radio City Music Hall. The variety of entertainment available to any New Yorker might arouse the envy of many a prince.

However, only those things—good things or bad things—are cheap that are demanded by enough people to make mass production feasible. Things that are not mass produced are hard to find and very expensive. Anyone cursed with an unshared taste—be it good or bad taste—must rid

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dichotomies (Weber's "traditionalistic-rationalistic"; Tönnies' "community-society"; Redfield's "folk-secular"; Becker's "sacred-secular"). The second half of the dichotomies is *one* characteristic of all popular cultures. High cultures, finally, straddle the dichotomies by growing from the first into the second half. But the process affects only a small stratum of society—unless it is spread through industrialization. When this occurs, popular culture replaces both high and folk cultures. Finally, note that some elements of each culture type are usually contained in the other. Thus, wherever there was an urban proletariat, or some form of mass production, there also were elements of popular culture. But they did not prevail until the machine age came.

10. Fragments may be conserved, however, and mounted as quaint tourist attractions (for instance, Henry Ford's Greenfield Village and the great English country estates).

11. Remaining differentiation or privilege stimulates resentment the more for it sticks out on an otherwise level plane; yet it does not stick out far enough to remove the privileged from invidious comparison. Envy and the craving for equality feed on their own success.

himself of it or be prepared to pay an awful price. For the gap between the cost of an article which must be custom-made to supply an unshared taste and that of an article which can be mass produced to supply a widely shared taste is steadily widening.

The real income of a consumer who cleaves to an individual taste has declined precipitously, and is much lower than that of a person who never formed one. Though the material and workmanship of his specially made suits, china, furniture, or house are no better than the material and workmanship of mass produced ones, he has to spend more for them.[12] If he makes as much money as someone lacking individual taste, the individualist must buy fewer things, or forego indulging his personal taste by buying mass produced articles. But since these yield less satisfaction to him than they give the person whose widely shared preferences they meet, the individualist would still have a lower real income. He cannot benefit from the economies of mass production; on the contrary, he must pay for the factors which mass production has made expensive: work time and overhead. As mass production techniques improve, the gulf between the real income of consumers with shared tastes and of consumers with unshared tastes opens wider and wider.

The industrial system penalizes individual taste economically regardless of what goods or services are affected. Either your life is styled in conformity with mass tastes or it becomes a series of deprivations, material if you cling to your taste and forego some purchases to pay for it, psychological if you don't. That much can be said without in the least suggesting that individual taste is necessarily more sensitive to aesthetic values than mass taste or that the mass taste is necessarily bad, but merely that it is not individual.

### THE FORMATION OF MASS TASTE

How is the mass market, on which popular culture is sold, formed and perpetuated? In the first place, individual taste has become uneconomic for the purchaser and for the seller and this effectively stunts its growth. People are prepared accordingly throughout the educational process. Group acceptance, shared taste, takes the place of authority and of individual moral and aesthetic judgment and standards. But as we mentioned, people often move from group to group. Any taste that cannot be sloughed off—an "in-dividual" taste, not easily divided from the person in whom it

12. The idea that the custom-made article is better is based chiefly on the snob appeal of rarity and expensiveness. Often both quality and taste are worse.

dwells—becomes an obstacle to adaptation. Success is hindered by a discriminating personal taste which expresses or continues an individual personality, and success is fostered by an unselective appetite.

Numerous precautions are taken, beginning in the nursery school (itself hardly an individualizing institution) to avoid elaboration of personal discernment and to instill fear of separation from the group. Group acceptance is stressed through formal and informal popularity contests, teamwork, and polling. Education altogether stresses group instruction. For instance, the size of his classes and the class average, not the qualities of individual pupils, are often considered the measure of the teacher.[13] The student himself is so much treated as part of a group that, except in higher education (which is only partly immune), he may be automatically promoted with his group regardless of individual achievement or variation. Finally, the surviving individual talent is instructed not to cultivate but to share itself. The writer gives writing courses, the scholar lectures and writes popularizations, the beauty models or appears on TV, and the singer deserts the concert hall for the juke box.[14]

## ADVERTISING

The aggregate effect of advertising is to bring about wide sharing of tastes. The actual social function of advertising is not to mold taste in any particular way, or to debase it.[15] This goes for manufacturers, publishers, and movie makers, too. They are quite content to produce and advertise what people want—be it T. S. Eliot or Edgar Guest, Kierkegaard or Norman Vincent Peale, "September Morn" or mobiles. It does not matter what people want to buy as long as they want to buy enough of the same thing to make mass production possible. Advertising helps to unify taste, to de-individualize it, and thus to make mass production possible.

There is no evidence to support conspiracy theories which hold that wicked capitalists, through advertising and mass media, deliberately (or stupidly) debauch the originally good, natural taste of the masses. Mass production—capitalist or socialist—demands unified taste; but efficiency

13. Santayana recounts in his *Character and Opinion in the United States*, how he was made aware of this at Harvard University.

14. We shall turn to compromises below.

15. The molding of taste may be among the motivations of individual advertisers—though at least in the long run they are often as equally motivated to mold the product to the prevailing taste. At any rate, we are interested in function, not motivation, and in aggregate cumulative effects, not in a particular campaign.

(or profitableness) is independent of the nature of the taste and dependent only on its being shared by sizeable groups.[16]

THE NATURE OF MASS TASTE

Can one say anything about mass tastes beyond saying that they are widely shared? Are they homogenized on the "lowest common denominator"? There seems to be no good reason to assume that the lowest tastes are most widespread. One may say something of the sort about some crowds united temporarily by crude, common appetites at the expense of reason, restraint, and refinement. But why consider consumers a crowd? Even the fare offered by the entertainment media is usually consumed by people separately or in very small groups. (Except for movies; but movie goers are isolated from each other though they are together.)

Producers have no interest in lowering taste or in catering to low rather than high taste. They seek to provide for a modal average of tastes which by means of advertising they try to make as congruent with the mean average as possible.[17] Neither average can be identical to the "lowest" common denominator.

Yet in one sense consumers are treated as a crowd: their individual tastes are not catered to. The mass produced article need not aim low but it must aim at an average of tastes. In satisfying all (or at least many) individual tastes in some respects, it violates each in other respects. For there are—so far—no average persons having average tastes. Averages are but statistical composites. A mass produced article while reflecting nearly everybody's taste to some extent is unlikely to embody anybody's taste fully. This is one source of the sense of violation which is rationalized vaguely in theories about deliberate debasement of taste.

The sense of violation springs from the same thwarting of individuality that makes prostitution (or promiscuity) psychologically offensive. The

16. In a capitalist system, some men might use their wealth to express a personal, even though unprofitable, taste. This is less likely under socialism. Socialist planners would be under moral obligation and political pressure to use public money to satisfy the most widely shared taste. Further, capitalist producers can take risks which they might not be allowed to take with public money under socialism.

(If planners have not been subservient to mass desires in Russia, it is because the Soviet Union is not a democracy.)

17. The average taste cannot be easily calculated. It is subject to fashion. Indeed, popular culture is far more fickle and eager for the new than any other type of culture. There would be no risk for song-writers or movie producers if appeal could be calculated mechanically. But there is. Indeed, it takes a special talent to sense what might appeal—the talent the editor of a popular magazine and the advertising man and the "stylist" must possess, and an equally special talent to produce it—the talent of the writer of bestsellers and the popular entertainer.

cost of cheap and easy availability, of mass production, is wide appeal; and the cost of wide appeal is de-individualization of the relationship between those who cater and those who are catered to, and of the relationship of both to the object of the transaction.

Now, the depersonalizing effects of the mass production of some things —say electric clocks—may be minor as far as consumers are concerned and more than offset by the advantages of cheapness. The same cannot be said for mass entertainment or education. And though some individuals may, society cannot, have one without the other. The effects of mass production on people as producers and consumers are likely to be cumulative. Besides, even goods that seem purely utilitarian include elements of non-utilitarian, of aesthetic and psychic (e.g. prestige) appeal. Indeed, less than half of consumer expenditure goes for the satisfaction of simple biological needs. (More perhaps in the lowest income groups and much less in the higher ones.) Distinctions of this kind are necessarily hazy, but if cigarettes, newspapers, television, drinks, shaving lotion, or lipstick, the prestige location of one's apartment, the fashionableness of one's clothing, etc., are taken to satisfy non-biological needs—and we can do without them biologically—then we are motivated by psychic needs in spending most of our money. This, of course, is not in itself objectionable—except that the processes by which many of these needs now arise and are stilled bring to mind the processes by which bread is now mass produced.

In milling and baking, bread is deprived of any taste whatever and of all vitamins. Some of the vitamins are then added (taste is provided by advertising). It is quite similar with all mass produced articles. They can no more express the individual taste of producers than that of consumers. They become impersonal objects—however pseudo-personalized. Producers and consumers go through the mass production mill to come out homogenized and decharacterized—only it does not seem possible to reinject the individualities which have been ground out the way the vitamins are added to enriched bread.[18] The "human relations" industry tries to do just that and it doubtlessly supplies a demand and can be helpful just as chemical sedatives or stimulants can be. But it seems unlikely that any assembly line—including one manned by human relations counselors—can give more than the illusion of individuality.

To produce more, people work under de-individualizing conditions

18. Though books on "How To Become an Individual," "How To Acquire a Personality" —books in short that insist that by following a general recipe you will bake an original cake—abound in popular culture, as do restaurants advertising "home-cooked" meals.

and are rewarded by high income and leisure. Thus they can and do consume more. But as consumers, they must once more rid themselves of individual tastes. The benefits of mass production are reaped only by matching de-individualizing work with equally de-individualizing consumption. The more discontinuous income earning and spending become physically, the more continuous they seem to become psychologically. Failure to repress individual personality in or after working hours is costly—in the end the production of standardized things by persons demands also the production of standardized persons.

In a material sense, this assembly line shaping, packaging, and distributing of persons, of life, occurs already. Most people perch unsteadily in mass produced, impermanent dwellings throughout their lives. They are born in hospitals, fed in cafeterias, married in hotels. After terminal care, they die in hospitals, are shelved briefly in funeral homes, and are finally incinerated. On each of these occasions—and how many others?—efficiency and economy are obtained and individuality and continuity stripped off. If one lives and dies discontinuously and promiscuously in anonymous surroundings, it becomes hard to identify with anything, even the self, and uneconomic to be attached to anything—even one's own individuality. The rhythm of individual life loses autonomy, spontaneity, and distinction when it is tied into a stream of traffic and carried along according to the speed of the road, as we are in going to work, or play, or in doing anything. Traffic lights signal when to stop and go, and much as we seem to be driving, we are driven. To stop spontaneously, to exclaim "Verweile doch Du bist so schoen" (Stay, for you are beautiful) may not lose the modern Faust his soul—but it will cause a traffic jam.

One motive for delinquency—a way of getting out of line—is, possibly, a preference for occasional prison terms to imprisonment by routine. Crime, by its ultimate irrationality, may protest against the subordination of individual spontaneity to social efficiency. Three further reactions to anonymity may be noted:

1. The prestige of histrionics has risen. We long to impersonate, to get a name—better a pseudonym than to remain nameless; better a borrowed character than none; better to impersonate than never to feel a person. The wish to be oneself does not occur, for the only self known is empty and must be filled from the outside.

2. The attempt to become "interesting" (no doubt unconsciously to become interested) by buying a readymade individuality through "sending for," "enrolling in," or "reading up on" something or "going places."

3. Impersonal and abstract things and utilitarian relationships are cozily "personalized" as though to offset the de-personalization of individual life.

De-individualization, however, should not be viewed as a grim, deliberate, or coercive process. It is induced gradually by economic rewards and not experienced as de-individualization at all—though the symptoms are demonstrable. Most of the people who are nourished with homogenized pap never had solid food on which to cut their teeth. They feel vaguely restless and dissatisfied, but do not know what they are pining for and could not masticate or digest if they had it. The cooks are kept busy ransacking all the recipes the world has ever known to prepare new dishes. But the texture is always the same, always mushy, for the materials are always strained, blended, beaten, heated, and cooled until it gets that way.

### MASS MEDIA: THE EXCLUSION OF ART

Let us, briefly, tour the institutional kitchens where "recreation" is cooked up—movies, radio, television.

Mass media cannot afford to step on anyone's toes—and this implies a number of restrictions which, though less significant than the positive prescriptions, are not negligible. We can forbear rehearsing tiresome minutiae—forbidden words, topics, situations, actions;[19] but the countless dangerous associations mass media must avoid deserve some scrutiny.

No religious, racial, occupational, national, economic, political, etc., groups can be offended. Hence: can an evil man be Jewish? Lefthanded? Pipe-smoking? Can a good man be an atheist or a bigamist? Can he perish in an airplane accident? Can a villain have any qualities shared with non-villains and a hero have disapproved traits? In short, can either be human? The playwright or script writer may not mean to say that Jews are evil or all evil men lefthanded, or pipesmokers; he may not intend to advocate bigamy or to suggest that airplanes are dangerous or that we ought to be atheists. Joseph Conrad did not intend *The Nigger of the Narcissus* as an anti-Negro tract any more than Shakespeare intended *Othello* as a tract against handkerchiefs (in favor of Kleenex?). No matter.

There is a danger that the play will be so understood. In Shylock and Fagin:[20] Shakespeare and Dickens created individuals, experiences, and

19. Modesty is spared ritualistically. But in a suggestive, voyeuristic, and, at times, nauseatingly coy way, programs can be quite pornographic. It is actually the sentimentality and the clichés of the audience that are spared religiously: "To hell with Christmas" causes more of a television scandal than the sexiest wiggle.

20. Note the controversy when *Oliver Twist* was filmed. And controversies over dialect stories, etc.

ideas and, unlike copywriters or propagandists, did not intend them to instruct on how to act and think. Yet the groups that press restrictions on the mass media are not wrong. For the audience tends to react as though such instructions had been received.

The audience of mass media always expects to be sold goods, stereotypes, and recipes for living—a new vitamin for that tired, listless feeling, or a new line for romance. And the audience is usually right: the same actress who just implored a soap opera husband not to leave her and the kids turns and implores one and all in identically sincere and personal tones to buy insurance or perfume. The small boy's heroes admonish him to get mommy to buy this or that (and even if the heroes didn't, someone will sell Davy Crockett caps to the small boy). In many breakfast and news shows, advertising recommendations are deliberately mixed in with "actual" expressions of opinion. Even non-professionals—society leaders, well-known novelists, successful and "average" common men ringingly declare their profound personal convictions on brands of soap or beer or God: "This I believe." The line dividing views and characters presented as fiction and as "real" becomes hazy and the audience necessarily muddled about separating advertisements, pleas, and recipes from art. In such a context, the audience cannot receive art as individual experience and perspective on experience. Art becomes irrelevant. It is not perceived in its own terms, but first reduced to, then accepted or rejected, as a series of rules and opinions on what to expect or do.

The idea that something must be sold is held by the media managers as fervently as it is held by the audience. It transcends the commercial motives which begot it. Thus public or educational stations, which do not accept commercial advertising, spend nearly as much time on (non-commercial) attempts to sell something as do commercial ones. They sell themselves, or their program, or next week's offering—anything at all, as long as something is sold: "please listen again tomorrow," "please send for our booklet," "please do this," or "don't do that"—the listener must always be hectored, sold on, or wheedled into, something.[21]

How then could the audience see that a character like Shylock simply is? A character in the audience's experience always exists for a purpose; a character is invented to sell something, a point of view, or a product, or him-

21. Note further that within institutionally set limits, non-commercial stations try to enlarge more than to instruct or delight their audiences. Classical music—but whenever possible, the popular classics in popular versions—and with all the advertising techniques, including the "theme" (trademark) stripped from some symphony to introduce all "symphony hours," including also the outrageous mutilations of works of art, etc.

self. It is never an end in itself. Hence the audience always asks: should we buy his line?—and it is nearly impossible to present something without suggesting by implication that it be bought. Art, like love, can be experienced only as a personal, continuous, cumulative relationship. Else, art becomes entertainment—dull entertainment often—just as love is reduced to sex or prestige. Not that art should not be entertaining; but it is no more deliberately aimed at entertainment than love is. Art (and love) must be felt—they cannot be manufactured by someone to suit the taste of someone else. Yet mass media fare is prepared for consumers devoted to amusement; not, as art (and love) must be, devoted to the work (or person) itself.

The circumstances which permit the experience of art are rare in our society anyway and they cannot be expected in the audience of mass media. That audience is dispersed and heterogeneous and, though it listens often, it does so incidentally and intermittently and poised to leave if not immediately enthralled and kept amused. Such an audience is captured by loud, broad, and easy charms, by advertising posters, by copywriter's prose. And the conditions and conditioning of the audience demand a mad mixture of important and trivial matters, atom bombs, hit tunes, symphonies, B.O., sob stories, hotcha girls, round tables, and jokes. It jells into one thing: diversion.[22] Hence, what art is presented is received as entertainment or propaganda. Shylock would be understood as an anti-Semitic stereotype. The mass media may as well fit their offerings to the audience which they address and, knowing the limitations of that audience, it would be irresponsible of them to disregard the kind of understanding and misunderstanding their offerings will meet. They must omit, therefore, all human experience likely to be misunderstood—all experience and expression, the meaning of which is not obvious and approved. Which is to say that the mass media cannot touch the experiences that art, philosophy, and literature deal with: relevant and significant human experience presented in relevant and significant form. For if it is such, it is new, doubtful, difficult, perhaps offensive, at any rate easily misunderstood. Art is not concerned with making the obvious and approved more obvious and approved—it is precisely after this point that art begins and the mass media stop.

When attempting to be serious, the mass media must rig up pseudo-problems and solve them by cliché. They cannot touch real problems or

22. Again, non-commercial stations do the same thing, though more insipidly, by mixing dentistry and Dante.

real solutions. Plots are packed with actions which obscure the vagueness and irrelevance of meanings and solutions. Similarly, to replace actual individuality, each character and situation is tricked up with numerous identifying details and mannerisms. The more realistic the characteristics, the less real, usually, the character or the situation, and the less revealing. Literal realism cannot replace relevance. Mass media inveigh against sin and against all evils accepted as such. But they cannot question things not acknowledged as evil or appear to support things felt as evil. Even *Rigoletto*, were it a modern work, could not be broadcast since crime and immorality pay and the ending is unhappy for everybody but the villain.[23]

Combatting legal censorship, organized group pressures, and advertising agencies is gallantly romantic—and as quixotic as a man's rage against his own mirrored image. These agencies are interested only in presenting what is wanted and in preventing what might offend people.[24] They are nuisances, perhaps, but things could not be very different without them. Policemen do not create the law though they become the target of the few who would defy it.

The very nature of mass media excludes art and requires surrogation by popular culture. Though the Hays production code applies only to movies, its basic rule states a principle which all mass media must follow: "correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment," must be upheld. Doubtless, "correct standards" are those standards most of the audience is likely to believe correct.[25] They authorize whatever does not upset or offend the audience—and nothing else. "Correct standards of life" must exclude art (except occasional classics).[26] For art is bound

23. Classics can be presented occasionally since they are sterilized by remoteness. Tolerance is a tribute ignorance pays to reputation.

It is remarkable that the original censor objected to the possibly subversive *political* implications of *Rigoletto*. Victor Hugo's play was suspected of casting aspersions on monarchy or monarchs. It did not occur to the censor to object to the essential content of the play, to its view of the human predicament, of love, crime, violence. The situation has been significantly reversed. We could not wish for a better illustration of our argument.

24. They are not always right in their estimates. But who would be? They have an interest in gauging correctly—apart from fairly small side interests favoring organized opinion. On these we invoke *de minimis non curat scriptor*.

25. Though they do not necessarily observe these standards in practice.

26. Past audiences were fairly homogeneous and accustomed to the artistic traditions being developed, whereas the mass audience comes from many traditions or no tradition. Therefore, some segments of it would be shocked by a presentation which, though not actually offering anything new, offers what is new and shocking to them. Hence, the mass media usually present even classics in mutilated form, sometimes to the point of disembowelling them or reversing the moral. For instance, Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* had to be recalled to the studio to make it palatable by introducing a happy ending.

to differ from the accepted, that is, the customary moral and aesthetic view, at least as it takes shape in the audience's mind. Art is always a fresh vision of the world, a new experience or creation of life. If it does not break, or develop, or renew in significant respects the traditional, customary, accepted, aesthetic, and moral standards, if it merely repeats without creating, it is not art.[27] If it does, it is incompatible with the "correct standards of life" which must control mass media.

Mass media thus never can question man's fate where it is questionable—they cannot sow doubt about an accepted style of life or an approved major principle. To be sure, mass media often feature challenges to this and that, and clashes of opinion. These are part of our accepted style of life—as long as challenges do not defy anything but sin and evil in the accepted place and manner. The mass media must hold up "correct standards of life" whereas art must create, not uphold, views. When filmed or broadcast, the visions of the playwright or novelist cannot deviate from the accepted "correct standards" and they must be entertaining. They must conform to the taste of the audience; they cannot form it. Virtue must triumph entertainingly—virtue as the audience sees it.

### THE POWER OF CONSUMERS

The poets, Shelley thought, are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Shelley's poets wrote for a few who would take the trouble to understand them.[28] They addressed an audience that knew and shared the common traditions they were developing. High culture was cultivated in special institutions—courts, monasteries, churches, universities—by people who devoted their lives to the development of its traditions, and who were neither isolated nor surrounded by masses wishing to be entertained. (Besides, there were no means of addressing a mass.) There was no need and no temptation for the artist to do anything but to create in his own terms.[29] Poets, painters, or philosophers lived in and were of the group for whom

27. It is not suggested that the new view is better. Only that it is new.

28. The understanding of art has always been troublesome. "Wise beyond doubt, I hold him who divines what each word in my song means," the Provençal troubadour, Marcabru, wrote. The average Athenian hardly understood the tragic mysteries (any more than the average Roman Catholic fully understands the Mass) or the average Roman, Horace, who indeed wrote: "Odi profanum vulgo et arceo." No; modern poetry is not more obscure *per se* than poetry has always been. What has happened is that more people less well equipped demand to understand it without wanting to take the necessary trouble. And if they find it hard, why it's the poet's fault. The evidence is very plain in, for instance, I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*.

29. There was censorship at times and desires of specific patrons had to be considered. But though they restricted expression, they seldom prescribed it. And, in particular, they did not insist on things being made easy.

they produced, as did most people, were they peasants, artisans, or artists. The relations between producers of culture and its consumers were so personal—as were the relations between producers and consumers generally—that one can hardly speak of an impersonal market in which one sold, the other bought.

In both high and folk cultures, each bounded and autonomous universe, court, or village relied on the particular cultivators and inventors of its arts and sciences no less than the latter relied on their patrons. Each region or court relied on its musicians as it relied on its craftsmen, and vice versa. The mutual personal dependence had disadvantages and advantages, as has any close relationship. Michelangelo or Beethoven depended on irksome individual patrons more than they would today. On the other hand, whatever the patrons' tastes or demands, they were individual and not average.

Folk culture grew without professional help. High culture was cultivated like an orchard or garden. But both folk and high cultures grew from within the groups they distinguished and remained within them.

High culture was entirely dominated by people with more than average prestige, power, and income—by the elite as a group, who also dominated politics and society in general.[30] This group determined what was to be produced, culturally and otherwise; and they took their toll often by oppression and spoliation of the mass of people whom they ruled.

With the development of industry, the elite as a group lost its power. The great mass of consumers now determines what is to be produced. Elite status, leadership in any form, is achieved and kept today by catering to the masses—not by plundering or oppressing them. The nobleman may have become rich by robbing (taking from) his peasants.[31] But the industrialist becomes a millionaire by selling (exchanging with) washing machines to farmers. And his business is helped by giving his customers via television the entertainers they want. These in turn reach elite status, like politicians, by appealing to the masses.

The elite then no longer determines what is produced, any more than it dominates society in other respects. Rather, the elite becomes the elite by producing the goods that sell—the goods that cater to an average of tastes. With respect to culture, the elite neither imposes any taste nor cultivates one of its own. It markets and helps homogenize and distribute popular culture through the mass media. The changes in income distribution,

30. The distance between the elite and other groups was greater and the mobility less than today in all major pre-industrial societies.

31. As well as protecting them from other robbers and each other.

mobility, and communication, the economics of mass production already discussed, have caused the power of individual consumers to wane. But the power of consumers as a group has risen and that of producers as a group has dwindled.

With the invention of mass media, a mass market for culture became possible. The economies yielded by the mass production of automobiles became available in the mass production of entertainment. Producers of popular culture supply this new mass market. Popular culture does not "grow" within a group. It is manufactured by one group—in Hollywood or in New York—for sale to an anonymous mass market. The product must meet an average of tastes and it loses in spontaneity and individuality what it gains in accessibility and cheapness. The creators of popular culture are not a sovereign group of "unacknowledged legislators." They work, for Hooper ratings, to give people what they want. Above all, they are salesmen—they sell entertainment and produce with sales in mind. The creators of high culture are no longer insulated from the demands of the mass market by an educated elite—as they still were during the nineteenth century (and there are no stable isolated communities in which folk culture could grow).

They do not create for or have personal relationships with patrons whom they can lead as a man may lead in a conversation. A personal tutor is much more dependent on a few persons than is a television lecturer. But his influence on his pupil is also much greater than the influence of any one television lecturer on any one pupil.

Today's movie producer, singer, or writer is less dependent on the taste of an individual customer, or village, or court, than was the artist of yore. But he does depend far more on the average of tastes and he can influence it far less. He need not cater to any individual taste—not even his own. He caters to an impersonal market. He is not involved in a conversation. He is like a speaker addressing a mass meeting and attempting to curry its favor.[32]

32. The increased power of consumers noted here is the major point of Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses*. De Tocqueville too speaks of the ascendancy of "public opinion" though focussing on political causes and effects.