

INTRODUCTION: ENTERTAINMENT AS SOCIAL CONTROL

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I

One of the more durable offshoots of the American New Left in the sixties was a revival of mass culture criticism, which by the eighties has grown into a full-blown theoretical movement. The distinctive emphasis of this movement is on the central role of the culture of everyday life in shaping political consciousness, not only through the subject matter of cultural works but also through their structures, genres, linguistic and perceptual patterns, and the class relations embodied in cultural institutions, creators, and audiences.

Other approaches to mass culture have, to be sure, proliferated in the academic world, under a bewildering array of labels: mass media, communications, popular culture, the popular arts, and so on. Unfortunately, *Media* and *Communications* seem to have carried the day as rubrics for university courses and markets for scholarly books, thus inhibiting a broader emphasis on cultural issues. The departmentalization of academic studies has further obstructed a coherent, humanistic perspective. Departments of journalism, communications, and speech—at least until recently—have typically focused mainly on media institutions and technology, and their curricula have emphasized empirical research or pre-professional training more than criticism.¹ Media sociology and political science have produced a large, useful body of scholarship, but here again, much of it has consisted of “value-free” and quantitative studies detached from critical evaluation.² Mass culture has become a productive but still small subfield in history, philosophy, and American Studies. In English, popular song lyrics have been studied as poetry, while film, science fiction, comic books, and other popular genres have been studied for dramatic, semiotic, or social-psychological significance. Freshman English anthologies have incorporated various popular writing genres as models for expository techniques, style, and rhetoric, and essays *about* mass media as models for critical analysis. Mass culture as a whole, however, remains extremely marginal in English undergraduate and graduate curricula and in the professional organizations and prestige critical journals—especially considering how many leading twentieth-century literary figures have written criticism on the subject.

In these various academic approaches to mass culture, the prevalent attitude has been the accepting, often affirmative, and even celebratory one best exemplified by the Popular Culture Association and the *Journal of Popular Culture*, which were founded in 1969. This approach tends to reject or ignore the distinctions earlier critics made among highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture and between folk or popular culture—the spontaneous expression of common indi-

viduals, directed to their peers—and mass culture, manufactured and marketed commercially by impersonal business interests. (I will henceforth use the term *popular culture* in reference to critics to designate the affirmative position, in contrast to *mass culture*, connoting the more negative attitude.) The sources for the popular culture attitude include Marshall McLuhan, Susan Sontag's "One Culture and the New Sensibility" (both of which have been somewhat oversimplified and vulgarized), the countercultural mutations of the 1960s, and "new journalists" like Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson, who satirize but ultimately validate mass culture by appropriating its own language.

The popular culture approach has provided a legitimate corrective to criticism by such cultural elitists as Ortega y Gasset, Q. D. and F. R. Leavis, Dwight Macdonald, T. S. Eliot, Ernest van den Haag, and the Marxists of the Frankfurt School, a body of criticism that considered the effects of mass culture to be wholly negative. Certainly national publications, film, radio, television, and the phonograph, along with the spread of higher education, have made millions of Americans, especially in provincial locations, more worldly and critical-minded. The last few decades in particular have seen the most widespread diffusion of cosmopolitan tastes in American history—one positive feature of the "yuppie" (young urban professional) phenomenon. The old highbrow/middlebrow/lowbrow and popular culture/mass culture distinctions have had to be revised at least somewhat as a result of the improved artistic quality in some products of commercial culture, such as Hollywood films and the more inventive popular music of the sixties, with a concomitant increase in appreciation of these forms on the part of highbrow critics. High art has increasingly incorporated popular culture and vice versa, often with vitalizing effects for both. Middle America has discovered Baryshnikov and Brie, while intellectuals praise "Hill Street Blues" and Larry Bird. In Los Angeles, long synonymous with everything lowbrow, the 1984 Olympics were accompanied with predictably vulgar hucksterism but also with a first-rate international festival of classical music, ballet, theater, folklore, and painting.

Even with all that is valid in the affirmation of popular culture, however, its recent advocates have tended to play down persistently troublesome aspects of the politics of culture. (In this respect the rise of the popular culture movement forms part of the general depoliticizing of American academic discourse, as well as of both high and mass culture themselves, that has characterized the cold war period.) In their intensified study of popular culture, left analysts have maintained a more critical political and aesthetic perspective than has the Popular Culture Association school—a distinction that tends to be ignored by the editors of journals like the *New Criterion* and *Partisan Review*, who seem to equate increased attention to popular culture with the abandonment of critical standards toward it. The scholars in the present collection bear little resemblance to the leftist intellectual straw man created by neoconservatives, who is alienated from and misunderstands everything American. On the contrary, they share with the popular-culturists an aficionado's immersion in the national lore that inescapably shapes us all, for better and worse; they are simply more cognizant of the worse, particularly on the political plane.

The changing critical focus has served to stimulate leftists to reformulate the political issues in ways that were overlooked by the older Marxist critics. The highbrow/lowbrow issue, for example, is no longer confined simply to distinguishing quality culture for the elite from kitsch for the masses. Recent left critics have attempted to systematically delineate in cultural works, producers, and audiences the relation of "taste cultures" (Herbert Gans's term for highbrow, lowbrow, and intermediate levels of aesthetic appreciation) to social class and political attitudes.³ Some have focused on how corporate capitalism has appropriated high- and middlebrow culture, as in Timothy Brennan's "Masterpiece Theatre and the Uses of Tradition" (Part 5), which discusses the takeover of the Public Broadcasting System by corporate Medicis like Mobil Oil and the ideological consequences in programming. Others have similarly analyzed the recent co-option by capitalism of the modernist and avant-garde culture that was championed by Macdonald and the Frankfurt School. (Conversely, neoconservative critics have seen high culture as being corrupted neither by capitalism nor by the pretentiousness of "midcult," as Macdonald saw it, but by the left-leaning counterculture that peaked in the sixties; this controversy could provide a sequel to the present volume.)

Some flavor of the popular culture approach can be conveyed by looking at one textbook, the widely adopted *Popular Writing in America* (1974), edited by Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan, and one professional journal, an *Arizona English Bulletin* issue entitled "Popular Culture and the Teaching of English." Both volumes intentionally skirt the issue of the commercial production of mass culture, with the resulting possible oppositions of interests between producers and audience. McQuade and Atwan explain that their selections "were intended to illustrate how various kinds of writing shaped by quite different commercial purposes and intended audiences interact with and modify each other to produce what we can reasonably call a common culture." They go so far as to avow, "We wanted to avoid introducing such essentially futile, if not paralyzing, questions as 'Is the news truly objective?' and 'Is advertising an abuse of language?'"⁴ In his introduction to "Popular Culture and the Teaching of English," Michael T. Marsden of Bowling Green University, home of the Popular Culture Association, writes, "If Popular Culture is a reflection of our society, as indeed it is, then the products it produces can be said to be mirrors of that society. The mirrored images may be somewhat distorted, but the image will be generally accurate. We can know a people by what they consume, and we are what we enjoy!"⁵ Again, the unquestioned assumption is that the mirror reflects the values of the people, not the values the producers impose on them.

In presenting a section on advertisements as models of popular writing, McQuade and Atwan proclaim, "Advertisements constitute a lively repository of American vocabulary, idiom, metaphor and style, in short, a fairly reliable index of the state of public discourse."⁶ At the risk of raising "futile, if not paralyzing, questions," one must observe that if "Reach Out and Touch Someone" and "Times Like These Were Made for Taster's Choice" are McQuade and Atwan's idea of a reliable index of the state of our public discourse, either they have a tin ear or, if they are correct, the fact is cause for distress, not celebration. To the

extent that some people now do talk like commercials, they have learned their language from those commercials, not lent it to them. Marsden is even more rhapsodic about advertising as literature:

The television commercial, for example, which I have christened the sonnet form of the twentieth century, operates much like a sonnet within very definite and strict limitations. . . . Like the sonnet, the television commercial is a highly rigorous structure within which there is immense freedom for the creative mind. . . . It is not difficult to find commercials that beautifully illustrate the writing techniques of comparison and contrast, argumentation and persuasion, and even more esoteric devices such as definition and classification. What better examples of good description are there than television commercials?⁷

Authors like McQuade, Atwan, and Marsden undoubtedly believe that by regarding advertising and mass culture in general simply in literary terms, they are legitimately keeping their discussion within the boundaries of English and out of political science or economics. However, by taking for granted and tacitly endorsing the role of mass culture in the American political and economic status quo, these authors are in effect taking a partisan position that validates that status quo. Furthermore, the prevalence of this and other approaches restricted to one or another isolated dimension of mass culture has contributed to a lack of attention, inside and outside the academic world, commensurate with the preeminent role of mass culture as a whole in contemporary society. (The radical right wing has, to date, been the most vocal group in calling public attention to the all-pervasive influence of news and entertainment media. The validity of the rightist critique will be examined in Part I.)

II

The critical tradition that has dealt most fully with the politics of mass culture is Marxist theory. Foremost among its continuing appeals is that it is one of the few critical schools still viable that maintain the organic worldview of nineteenth-century humanists like Matthew Arnold in insisting on seeing life steadily and whole. Even the breadth of concerns of such neoconservative cultural critics as Daniel Bell, Norman Podhoretz, and Daniel Boorstin owes much to the influence of Marxism in their backgrounds. To be sure, there is always the danger in a comprehensive philosophy like Marxism of degeneration from totalism to intellectual totalitarianism, a procrustean bed of reductionism and dogma. In its more refined exponents, however, Marxist theory has produced distinctive perceptions about problems such as the various kinds of fragmentation in both modern culture and academic study referred to above; it has further provided a plausible explanation both of the major cause of this fragmentation—capitalist division of labor and social organization—and of its consequence—helping to reproduce the social order by impeding the articulation of a coherent oppositional consciousness.

Applied to any aspect of culture, Marxist method seeks to explicate the manifest and latent or coded reflections of modes of economic production and social organization, political ideology, relations of class and power (racial or sexual as well as political and socioeconomic), and the political consciousness of people in

a precise historical or socioeconomic situation viewed as a moment in the dialectical flux of history. (Although Marxist critics sometimes apply the judgments “regressive” or “progressive” in interpreting such historical moments, the more refined contemporary critics use these terms not to lay down a correct party line but rather to delineate objectively the often complex and conflicted mix in cultural works of nostalgic appeal to obsolete values and acknowledgment of dialectical change. For example, Kate Ellis, in her analysis of contemporary popular women’s fiction (Part 3), traces the strains between evocations of precapitalist familial and sexual roles and accommodations to feminist advances.) Marxist criticism frequently includes a corollary critique of other schools of thought that neglect the above subjects of study, bringing to light the significant gaps and mystifications this neglect leads to, as in my above discussion of the shortcomings of the popular culture school and other mainstream academic thought in addressing the political dimensions of cultural topics.

Marxist analysis has provided an incisive tool for studying the political significance in every facet of contemporary culture, including popular entertainment in television, film and photography, music, mass market books, advertising, newspaper and magazine features, comics, fashion, tourism, sports and games, architecture and city planning, as well as such acculturating institutions as education, religion, and the family. For example, Fredric Jameson, the most distinguished contemporary American Marxist literary critic, has also written highly nuanced interpretations of films, including *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *The Shining*, and *Diva*, in terms of their reflections—largely unintentional—of recent changes in class relations and world political economy and of corresponding shifts in the consciousness of their creators and characters. Indeed, the significance of Jameson’s insights has frequently transcended the ephemerality of the films themselves.⁸ Stanley Aronowitz can ingeniously explicate children’s games,⁹ methods in different countries of painting a door, or the sexual-political folkways of a San Francisco billiards bar. In England, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and the critics associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham have emphasized the problematics of the relation between working-class culture and mass culture.¹⁰ Roland Barthes devoted one book, *The Fashion System*, to the semiotics of fashion, and another, *Mythologies*, to such diverse topics as wrestling, striptease, cars, toys, margarine, and plastic. T. W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, John Berger, Raymond Williams, Ariel Dorfman, Armand Mattelart, and their followers in this volume have studied the embodiment in mass media of our ideologically determined perceptions of time and space, the natural and the artificial, work and leisure. Sociolinguistic studies such as those by Lev Vygotsky and A. R. Luria on cognitive differences between oral and literate cultures or by Basil Bernstein on language and class have been applied to media discourse and audience reception, as Claus Mueller does here (Part 6). Marxist feminists, represented here by Kate Ellis (Part 3), Carol Ascher (Part 1), Jane Gaines (Part 5), and Tania Modleski (Part 4), have focused on cultural reflections of historical moments in the political economy of sex roles; they have also scrutinized the

distinctive mediation between patriarchy and capitalism and its shaping of our thought, language, and cultural forms.

A large body of cultural criticism has come out of structuralism, semiology, deconstructionism, and the Marxism of Louis Althusser and his followers.¹¹ Much of this work derives in part but also departs from the lines of Marxism emphasized here. Barthes and Umberto Eco in particular have written many useful, concrete analyses in the semiotics of mass culture. Many structuralist and Althusserian works, however, are at a level of abstract theory irrelevant to the concerns of this collection. At its worst, this kind of metacriticism seems to consist mainly of endless dreary permutations of the jargon of Saussurean linguistics, phenomenological philosophy, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Whatever concrete insights such works contain rarely derive directly from linguistic-phenomenological theory, and stripped of their verbal excess baggage, they rarely make points significantly different from more accessible Marxist criticism, such as Gaye Tuchman's jargon-free structural analysis of television news (Part 5) or Norman O. Brown's psychoanalytic-Marxian interpretation, in *Life Against Death*, of the relation between the development of childhood language, gender identity, and adult neurosis, which in 1959 anticipated much of Lacan and Derrida but which seems to have been read by few of the fashionable French theorists or their American acolytes. Moreover, the structuralists' separation of the phenomenological from the sociological and historical study of language and consciousness runs contrary to the essential integrativeness of Marxism. And although their emphasis on the generation of ideology by impersonal social structures is valid in itself, it has led to underestimation of the deliberate efforts the culture industry makes toward social control (surveyed in Part 1). The dubiousness of the claims of structuralism and deconstructionism to be politically radical modes of thought was confirmed by their eager assimilation, in the most politically sanitized versions, into the American academic mainstream during the seventies and eighties. For this collection, then, pieces have been selected—most notably those by Tania Modleski (Part 4), Dana Polan, and Jane Gaines (Part 5), and my introduction to Part 5—that present some of the more concrete themes common to structuralist analysis, such as the revelation of ideological effects hidden in conventional structures of cultural perception and of significant absences in those structures. These pieces also convey a clear political thrust, and their analytic points are not smothered by excessively abstract theory or vocabulary.

III

The most prominent theme in Marxist and other recent left cultural criticism is the way the prevalent mode of production and the ideology of the ruling class in any society dominate every phase of culture, and more specifically, at present, the way capitalist production and ideology dominate American culture as well as the cultures of countries throughout the world that have been colonized by American business and culture (see Part 7). In the left view, this domination is perpetuated both through overt propaganda in political rhetoric, news reporting, advertising, and public relations and through the often unconscious absorption of

capitalist ideology by creators and consumers in all aspects of the culture of everyday life.

The preeminence of ideology as a means of political control was emphasized early in the century by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, in which he analyzed the false consciousness that capitalist ideology imposed on the working class, causing them to accept beliefs against their own self-interest, and by Antonio Gramsci in his formulation of “ideological hegemony,” whereby the interests of the capitalist class are made to appear to all other segments of society as the natural, immutable order of the world. By the 1930s the role of modern mass culture as a key agent of ideological hegemony became a central concern of the Frankfurt School, which included Max Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, all of whom (except Benjamin, who died fleeing the Nazis) emigrated to the United States after the rise of Hitler and subsequently focused their attention on American mass culture.¹² The Frankfurt School critics perceived that, in the twentieth century, mass culture has surpassed the church and challenged the family and the state (with which it has increasingly merged) as the most influential socializing forces. They also saw certain similarities between all modern mass societies, whether in totalitarian dictatorships or capitalist democracies. Whereas in fascist and communist states police repression and blatant propaganda are used to control the masses, in ostensibly free countries like the United States mass production and communication have created the less heavy-handed and brutal but equally efficient weapon of cultural conditioning, whereby capitalists are able to regiment mass consciousness toward a society of compliant citizens, workers, and consumers through what Marcuse terms “the systematic moronization of children and adults alike by publicity and propaganda.”¹³

Similar critiques of mass society were, of course, made through the forties and fifties—by Orwell in *1984* and Huxley in *Brave New World Revisited*, by C. Wright Mills and Fromm (preeminently in the underestimated *Sane Society* in 1955) and by the “New York intellectuals” associated with journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, the early *Commentary*, and *Dissent*, including Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, Edmund Wilson, Paul Goodman, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy, Norman Mailer, and James Baldwin. Thus the views on mass culture of the New York intellectuals and the Frankfurt School dominated the monumental 1957 collection *Mass Culture*, edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. Most of the New York intellectuals, however—with the exception of Goodman, Baldwin, and, to some extent, Mailer—by the fifties had backed away from their earlier Marxism and muted their criticisms of capitalism and the United States under the exigencies of cold war anticommunism; they now, like the elitist cultural conservatives, tended to hold the masses themselves, rather than their capitalist manipulators, responsible for their benightedness.

The decreasing emphasis on political manipulation as a factor in mass culture that characterized “end of ideology” criticism during the cold war can be seen in three versions of the same passage written between 1944 and 1960 by Dwight Macdonald—even though Macdonald remained more critical of capitalism than

most cold war liberals. "A Theory of 'Popular Culture,'" published in 1944 in Macdonald's journal *Politics*, compared traditional folk art with "Popular Culture," a term he later replaced with "mass culture" and still later with "masscult":

Popular Culture is imposed from above. It is manufactured by technicians hired by the ruling class. . . . It manipulates the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit for their rulers. . . . Politically, Folk Art was the common people's own institution, largely independent of their masters' culture; while Popular Culture is an instrument of social domination. . . . If one had no other data to go on, a study of Popular Culture would reveal capitalism to be an exploitative class society and not the harmonious commonwealth its apologists say it is.¹⁴

In the second version, "A Theory of Mass Culture" (1953), *businessmen* is substituted for *the ruling class* in the second sentence, and a revision of the next sentence reads, "The Lords of *kitsch*, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule—in communist countries, only the second purpose obtains."¹⁵ In the third version, "Masscult and Midcult" (1960), the corresponding passage begins: "Masscult comes from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen." (The change from *is imposed from above* to *comes from above* is typical of cold war semantics, in which American political issues were depersonalized and fault displaced from specific agents.) Neither of the earlier versions of the next sentence, about the manipulation or exploitation of the cultural needs of the masses, appears in this text, although phrases from it appear in the next paragraph, in the context of a relatively benign judgment of American masscult in comparison with the Russian version, which exploits the masses "for political rather than commercial reasons."¹⁶ The favorable contrast with Russia, where "it is as if Hearst or Colonel McCormick ran every periodical," is well taken, but Macdonald's disjuncture here between political and cultural or commercial manipulation in America is evasive and unsupported. This evasion runs throughout the essay, visible in several other changes from the earlier essays where, without justification, terms like *class rule* and *exploitative* get cut or transferred to a cultural rather than political context.

A similar rejection of the manipulation thesis is apparent in David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) (see the introduction to Part 1 below) and Daniel Boorstin's *The Image* (1962). Boorstin, after a brilliant 260-page exposition of mind manipulation by business and politicians, concludes lamely, "While we have given others great power to deceive us, to create pseudo-events, celebrities, and images, they could not have done so without our collaboration. If there is a crime of deception being committed in America today, each of us is the principal, and all others are only accessories. . . . Each of us must disenchant himself, must moderate his expectations, must prepare himself to receive messages coming in from the outside."¹⁷ This conclusion is a classic example of the "What You Mean 'We,' Paleface?" evasion that Richard Ohmann analyzes in "Double-speak and Ideology in Ads" (Part 2). In rejecting the manipulation thesis, cold war liberal critics prepared the way for the popular culture school, which, with McLuhan as mediator, simply focused on the positive rather than the negative

aspects of what McQuade and Atwan accept as the “common culture” of commercial producers and consumers.

After the virtual moratorium on criticism of the United States and capitalism during the cold war, the New Left movements of the sixties—in civil rights, campus protest, opposition to the Vietnam War, and feminism—charged that this moratorium had blinded intellectuals and the public to the manipulateness, dishonesty, and increasingly monopolistic power of the American state and corporate capitalism. Beginning with Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* in 1964, the titles of several subsequent books indicate this renewed concern among cultural critics: Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s *The Consciousness Industry*, Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Stanley Aronowitz’s *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*, Herbert Schiller’s *The Mind Managers and Communication and Cultural Domination*, Stuart Ewen’s *Captains of Consciousness* and (with Elizabeth Ewen) *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, Bertram Gross’s *Friendly Fascism*, and Patrick Brantlinger’s *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*.

In the eighties, the cycle has been repeated with the reheating of the cold war and attendant conservative attempts to stifle or denigrate left criticisms of America and capitalism. Neoconservative sociologist Nathan Glazer wrote a book about the sixties entitled *Remembering the Answers*, based on a quip by a former Old Leftist from the thirties that it had been so long since he had heard the left arguments that were being revived in the sixties, he had forgotten the answers. It seems that each side must periodically make the effort to remember and reformulate its answers. The present volume marks such an attempt: a left response to the current conservative offensive.

IV

The French situationist Debord’s notion of *la société du spectacle* has become central in recent left cultural criticism. As Norman Fruchter puts it,

The spectacle is the continuously produced and therefore continuously evolving pseudo-reality, predominantly visual, which each individual encounters, inhabits and accepts as public and official reality, thereby denying as much as is possible, the daily private reality of exploitation, pain, suffering and inauthenticity he or she experiences.¹⁸

The colonization of leisure time in the twentieth century, the manufacture of mindless distraction to fill people’s every spare moment, is a more pervasive means of keeping the masses diverted from critical political consciousness than any bread and circuses devised by earlier ruling classes—even though the culture industry’s immediate motivation may not be political control so much as the maximizing of profits through what Henri Lefebvre, in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, terms “the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption.” In the fifties, American households averaged four hours of television viewing a day; by the eighties, it was seven hours. The majority of Americans (certainly the majority of college students I have taught) are more knowledgeable about and

emotionally involved in the latest television melodrama, sports championship, electronic game, or pop music superstar than they are about their society's most urgent problems.

This value system is both pandered to and perpetuated by the whole system of commercial mass communication. Critics of mass culture are frequently accused of wanting to replace the lowbrow dictatorship of the market with that of their own highbrow, puritanical, or commissarial tastes. This accusation misrepresents most current left critics, who seek not to restrict media content but to expand it and who would not wish to eliminate trivia but simply to prevent it from eclipsing quality culture, as almost inevitably happens in commercial media needing to maximize audiences and profits. The unfulfilled potential of television drama, for example, to address issues of social substance is illuminated by the rare exceptions like "Roots" and "The Day After." The artistic or ideological merits of these programs may be debatable, but they are significant in that, for at least a few days after their showing, all around the country people could be heard discussing race relations or nuclear war instead of pro football. This response provided a hint of what a civically conscious American common culture might be like.

Not even the staunchest defenders of the commercial mass media can deny the inadequacy of these media as our primary source of public information. Especially on television, trivia expands endlessly, to the exclusion of broadcasts of legislative deliberations, investigative reporting and documentaries, in-depth commentary, forums and debates, and unrestricted questioning of public officials by opponents or press beyond the charade of presidential press conferences and "Meet the Captive Press."¹⁹ An hour-long discussion or lengthy print analysis of a current political issue, commonplace in the academic world and serious journalism, is rare today in the mass press, television, or radio (network radio at least used to feature daily, fifteen-minute commentaries before the television era)—although the Cable News Network, C-Span, and the "MacNeil-Lehrer Report" on PBS did make some progress in this direction in the eighties. Our public information system is what the public schools would be if education were made a commercial enterprise, with teachers and course content selected for their entertainment value as measured by Nielsen Ratings among students.

Another aspect of the spectacle is that today politics is show business and show business is politics. Statesmen responsible for world survival run for election on the basis of physical glamor, ritual appearances at sports events, and association with entertainment celebrities. Election campaigns are packaged by advertising agencies; campaign oratory has largely been reduced to glitzy, thirty-second spot commercials accessible only to candidates who can afford to pay for the production and air time; and televised "debates," consisting of hurried exchanges of platitudes and unsupported claims, are judged by press pundits and voters mainly on the basis of the candidates' acting performance. It was in the normal course of events that in 1982 Gen. Alexander Haig stepped from the office of secretary of state to the boardroom of MGM-United Artists Entertainment Company. And no one remarked on the incongruity when an earlier secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, was interviewed by Howard Cosell on the telecast of the baseball play-

offs and declared in his German accent, "I've been a Yankee fan all my life." All political sectors, from the president to the Symbionese Liberation Army, have learned every trick for getting maximum media exposure. One of the Croatian nationalists who skyjacked a jetliner to publicize their cause summed it up when, on surrendering, he broke in half the fake stick of dynamite he had used to terrorize the passengers, and cracked, "That's show business." For the television generation, the lines have become blurred between reality and make-believe, between news, drama, and advertising. The events of Watergate did not have the full stamp of authenticity in the public's mind until they were aesthetically shaped on film as *All the President's Men*; the real reporters Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein were fated ever after to look like second-rate imitations of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. The ascent of Ronald Reagan from sportscaster and movie actor to president epitomized show business politics. Regardless of his merits as a politician, it is unlikely that he would have gotten anywhere in politics without his celebrity identity; indeed, his skills in substituting image manipulation for substantive policies and in viewing world politics in the good guys versus bad guys terms of a western were virtues in the eyes of a public conditioned to accept a B-movie vision of reality.

As news mingles with entertainment and advertising, political issues succumb to planned obsolescence along with other material and cultural commodities. Both politicians and news media set the public agenda with an eye to issues that can be presented in a catchy, tabloid manner. The professional consultants who developed the rapid-fire "top-forty-stories" format for local newscasts justified it by claiming, "People who watch television the most are unread, uneducated, untraveled and unable to concentrate on single subjects more than a minute or two."²⁰ William Safire reports that when he was a speechwriter for President Nixon, Nixon told him, "We sophisticates can listen to a speech for a half hour, but after ten minutes the average guy wants a beer."²¹ One issue at a time gets singled out for headlines and possible legislative action and then gets shuttled out of sight, often falsely implying that the problem has been resolved. Since the sixties this sequence has included the issues of civil rights and black power, poverty, campus protest, Vietnam, feminism, environmentalism, abuse of power by security agencies, nuclear power, and opposition to nuclear weapons. As I write, the decline of public education is getting the headline treatment, after decades of political neglect; by the time this book is published, however, the issue will probably have receded once again into oblivion.

As Stanley Aronowitz argues in "Mass Culture and the Eclipse of Reason: The Implications for Pedagogy" (Part 6), the ultimate "literacy crisis" today is not the decline of mechanical skills stressed by the back-to-basics movement, but the socially induced destruction of the capacities to learn, remember, think critically, and distinguish meaningful language from doublespeak and hype. Indifference to the quality of language and reasoning is further engendered by the one-way communication of mass media; the absence of personal interaction between audiences and distant celebrities, politicians, corporate officials, news reporters, and advertisers stifles dialogue, debate, and any sense of control over public policy. Other readings in Part 6, "Media, Literacy, and Political Socialization," docu-

ment the authoritarian effects of the restricted linguistic patterns of television and other mass media. As Neil Postman and George Gerbner's research group report, even the capacity to have genuine emotions may be diminished by the culture of the spectacle. Gerbner suggests that the most detrimental effect of violence in media is not in provoking violent behavior in audiences but in deadening sensitivity to real-life violence. After the graphic depiction of nuclear war on "The Day After," teachers reported disappointed reactions from junior high students to the effect that "it wasn't as gory as *Friday the Thirteenth*," and viewing videotapes of the fatal 1986 explosion of the Challenger space shuttle has reportedly become a form of entertainment among teenagers.

All these aspects of the society of the spectacle—the arbitrary obsolescence of every issue, confusion of the important and the trivial, fragmented discourse, audience passivity, deadening of sensitivity by the glut of senseless violence in television and film entertainment, the sheer overload of media messages—are bound ultimately to leave people in a state of confusion and apathy, unable to make critical distinctions or to engage in meaningful political action. These states of mind in high school and college students are all too familiar to teachers struggling to enable them to develop, or even care about developing, critical thinking abilities.

V

Current left analysts do not unanimously accept the Orwellian-Marcusean vision of an irremediably stupefied, controlled society, which some consider undialectical in its bleakness. These critics, including several in Part 4 and elsewhere here, argue that the bureaucratic agencies of state and corporate control are too cumbersome and internally conflicted to be completely effective. The hegemony of these agencies is "leaky," as Gitlin puts it, and faces constant challenges from unpredictable historical currents and audience responses. These critics acknowledge a substantial presence in mass media of progressive political views and liberatory aesthetical appeal; they also cite cases in which the media inadvertently generate oppositional forces and, emphasizing areas where the hegemony of the dominant powers is contestable, point to instances of indigenous expressions of working-class culture and "counter-hegemonial practices." Some look to the progressive potentialities in new communications technology as well.

These openings certainly must be acknowledged; leftists can ill afford to ignore any progressive possibilities in mass culture. But neither should the chronic leftist predisposition toward wishful thinking about prospects for the Revolution allow such possibilities to be overestimated. No one today except the most paranoid leftists and rightists believes that the media are monolithic in intent or effect. If television was largely responsible for the selling of President Nixon and the Vietnam War, it later was also largely responsible for their unselling. And the most inane feature of mass media can backfire on their producers. The insertion of commercials in "Roots" and "The Day After" brought home to audiences the grotesqueness of commercial sponsorship. For example, a commercial on "Roots" showing a suburban woman taking Roloids to ease her upset stomach during an

exciting furniture auction, which followed the harrowing depiction of an eighteenth-century slave auction, inadvertently dramatized the contrast between the affluence of middle-class society and the degradation that blacks past and present have suffered. It can equally well be argued, however, that the triviality of the commercials nullified the programs' dramatic and political power.

As for the "revolution" in communications technology, although the proliferation of cable and satellite TV systems and home video recorders has, at this writing, somewhat weakened the monopoly the networks and major producers have enjoyed in television, programming remains safely within corporate hands, dictated by commercial ends. The democratizing potential of the new communications systems has also been limited so far because of high cost and restricted geographical access. Further, the expansion of these media has been offset by a general tendency toward oligopolistic concentration of ownership, as Walter Powell documents in "The Blockbuster Decades: The Media as Big Business" (Part 1).²²

There is no denying that, in general, freedom of cultural expression has expanded in America since the dismal period of the fifties. Hollywood films, television dramas, and documentaries dealing with serious political issues now appear with some frequency, and conservatives are correct in claiming that most of them express liberal viewpoints. These films include *Network*, *The Godfather* (especially Part II), *Chinatown*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *The China Syndrome* (and most of Jane Fonda's other films), *Serpico*, *Prince of the City*, *Reds*, *Missing*, *Ragtime*, *Daniel*, *Silkwood*, and *Under Fire*, and the television programs "The Selling of the Pentagon," "Return to Manzanar," "Fear on Trial," "Love Canal," "Roots," "The Day After," "A Case of Rape," "A Matter of Sex" (about job discrimination against women), "60 Minutes," "Lou Grant," and several documentaries, mainly on PBS, critical of United States policy in Vietnam, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The eventual popularity of "Hill Street Blues" and "Cagney and Lacey," after initially low ratings, was also a progressive sign, not because these programs had a strong leftist viewpoint but because their breaking down of the stereotyped content and technique of most previous dramatic serials and the relatively high caliber of their writing, direction, and acting challenged commercial TV's stupefying norms.

The expansion of free expression in America is somewhat cyclical, though, and must be constantly fought for. Every assertion by the cultural left is countered by a strong reaction from the right—in the late sixties by the Johnson and Nixon administrations and in the eighties by Reaganites, the Moral Majority, and a host of organizations attacking alleged left-wing biases in education, news, and entertainment media. The inevitable cultural backlash is now visible in films like *Red Dawn* and *Rambo* or television programs like "Amerika," their version of anticommunism as infantile and hypocritically exploitative as the "red menace" films of the fifties. (The right turned Sylvester Stallone, like John Wayne before him, into a patriotic hero for the Vietnam vigilantism of his Rambo character, even though Stallone, like Wayne, never saw military service, having managed to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War.)

Moreover, pointing to any number of disorganized oppositional tendencies

does not amount to concluding that the system as a whole is shakable. From the Marcusean viewpoint, social control has been so highly developed that the ruling powers can allow opposition a fairly loose rein; they thus perpetuate the semblance of a free, pluralistic society while ensuring that the opposition lacks sufficient force to break through the constraints of the society of the spectacle. The history of the sixties shows that the system is willing to tolerate opposition precisely to the extent that it poses no real danger. When the Johnson and Nixon administrations began to feel seriously threatened by the New Left, repression was quickly instituted; after the Vietnam War ended and militant protest subsided in the seventies, tolerance reemerged.

It must be stressed that Marcuse never denied that repressive tolerance is vastly preferable to straight repression; and American leftists today have universally repudiated the attempts by some in the sixties to provoke repression as a means of priming the dialectical pump. Leftists can be grateful for and take advantage of the present degree of cultural freedom while maintaining a realistic sense of the limits of leftist expression in America and the multiple ways in which oppositional messages get disarmed in mass media. Some of the more optimistic leftist critics lack this sense, as do the conservative cultural critics who view with alarm the same tendencies leftists are hopeful about. (Their arguments are addressed in Peter Dreier's "The Corporate Complaint Against the Media" and my "Conservative Media Criticism: Heads I Win, Tails You Lose," in Part I.)²³

VI

Whatever degree of freedom and effectiveness opposition culture has in the United States, its ultimate constriction is the stifling of any mass-circulated, fundamental questioning of the capitalist economic system or advocacy of socialist alternatives. The model of socialism advocated by most recent American leftists and assumed throughout this book is a libertarian mixed economy in which the largest, monopolistic industries and corporations would be socialized and operated on a nonprofit basis, owned or democratically controlled by workers, voters, and communities, at the local level wherever possible. The profit motive in business and professions, though not entirely supplanted, would be restrained in favor of eliminating extremes of wealth, poverty, and power differentials by means of electoral politics, tax policy, guaranteed employment and minimum income, free or low-cost health care (including preventive medicine) and education at all levels, child-rearing and old-age benefits, and other such necessities as economic progress allowed. Under this system, small businesses and farms would be encouraged with government subsidies, as against the present American system, in which big business has the advantage; food production would be undertaken for nationwide and worldwide need, with no farmer being discouraged from raising crops to prop up profits while much of the world goes hungry. The defense and arms industries would be socialized to eliminate conflicts of interest and profiteering from war or weapons trade. Financial incentives would be used to reduce geographical inequities by developing depressed areas and relieving con-

gested ones. Environmental protection, not high on past socialist agendas, is now moving to the fore as it becomes manifest that the artificial stimulation of demand and unrestrained growth of modern capitalism is destroying the earth's resources and ecological balance and working against population control. (Socialism, like capitalism, must face conflicts in which conservation has to be balanced against increasing production in areas of actual need, but a socialist economy can at least aim at striking that balance without having to artificially stimulate demand or restrict supply.) Other democratic countries have long since taken for granted many of these policies that have been made to seem out of the question in the United States (for example, public ownership of communications media, utilities, and transportation) and, in at least some cases, most notably in Scandinavia, have implemented basic welfare services and income equalization that have proved more effective than American efforts in this direction. The standard response—that American free enterprise is better at delivering the goods—has been weakened in recent decades by the relative decline of the American economy and quality of life; indeed, the Scandinavian and other quasi-socialist countries have equaled or surpassed America's standard of living.

The actual history of socialism to date has undeniably fallen short of democratic socialists' hopes, though it has never been fully implemented, either in the European countries with social democratic parties implementing controls on an essentially capitalist economy or—least of all—in states headed by Communist dictatorships. Indeed, socialists have often been socialism's own worst enemy. Socialism has not, however, been the total disaster painted by capitalist propagandists, especially in unbiased comparison to the more sordid chapters in the past and present of capitalism; in fact, a strong case can be made that capitalism has owed its survival to the incorporation of socialist measures. By the same token, many socialists acknowledge that a mixed economy may at present be the most workable policy and best guarantee of political and cultural freedom. In any event, socialism is far from being a dead issue throughout the contemporary world; socialist ideas and ideologists certainly merit something better than the facile chorus of ridicule, even toward modest social democrats like Irving Howe and Michael Harrington, that has become the American conventional wisdom of the neoconservative age.

The pros and cons of socialism itself, however, are not at issue in this book; the central point here is that socialist criticisms of capitalism, though often substantial, are excluded from the agenda of mass public discourse in contemporary America, to the detriment of the health of democracy. Organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America and journals like *Socialist Review*, *Dissent*, *In These Times*, *The Nation*, *New Politics*, and others, including those in which many of the articles in this volume first appeared, serve as forums for much valuable information and for exchanges of opinions that are frequently representative of a broader ideological range than is allowed in the bland mainstream media—as proved by the fact that the major media frequently pick up stories or report on disputes at second-hand from the left press (see Peter Dreier's "The Corporate Complaint Against the Media" in Part 1). Yet socialist views are currently limited in their circulation to a small audience, mainly of intellectuals.