

# Popular Culture and the Illusion of Choice

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**H**is attention fixed on a stale and pointless debate between “high culture” and popular culture, Herbert Gans has missed the point of my argument. It is not my position that “if commercial popular culture were eliminated, workers could and would become intellectuals.” Why should workers become intellectuals? I can’t imagine a less attractive prospect than a society made up of intellectuals. Nor do I argue that “capitalistic mass media continue to keep the masses in their ‘age-old intellectual torpor.’” Gans lifts that phrase from a passage characterizing the very belief I’m trying to refute—“the belief that if democratic institutions were to prosper,” as I wrote in summarizing the opinions of nineteenth-century reformers, “the masses would have to be roused from their age-old intellectual torpor and equipped with the tools of critical thought.” As I went on to explain, this belief rests on the premise that only people who have thrown off ancient folkways can achieve the enlightened self-interest required for democratic citizenship—a model of enlightenment, I repeat, that needs to be discarded.

One of the nineteenth-century liberal’s principal articles of faith, the assumption that the masses have to be uprooted from the “idiocy of rural life” and its lingering aftereffects has continued to inform left-wing debates about culture in the twentieth century. In general, two positions have emerged, both of them unsatisfactory. The first position—the one Gans for some reason attributes to me—holds that the industrial masses, beguiled by bourgeois ideology, religious superstitions (the “opiate of the people”), and pre-scientific habits of thought, suffer from “false consciousness.” Workers fail to become revolutionary, on this reading of recent history, because they lack a true understanding of their class interests. Those who reject this position, like Gans, nevertheless accept most of the assumptions behind it. They too regret that “alas, most middle- and working-class Americans are far more traditional,” as Gans puts it, than appearances might suggest. They differ from the critics of “false consciousness” only in their contention that the conditions of modern life in themselves promote the “critical thought,” in Gans’s phrase, which makes it possible for people to understand and defend their economic interests. Accordingly those who take the second view of

mass culture "see little cause for alarm." Modernization is an irresistible process, in their view, because the proliferation of consumer goods and the comforts made possible by modern technology generate an appetite for "washing machines over washboards and riverbanks." In the jargon of modernization theory, the "demonstration effects" of modernization dramatize the contrast between rich and poor and lead to demands for equal access to goods and services hitherto monopolized by the rich. Because it uproots people from familiar routines and opens their eyes to new possibilities, new ways of doing things, and new standards of living, modernization has inherently democratizing effects on society. It creates a taste for better things.

Unfortunately the same changes that have liberated mankind from a slavish subservience to routine (or at least created the material possibility of a more satisfying and democratic way of life) have in many ways made it more difficult than ever for people to exert any control over their immediate environment. Those changes have made communities less self-sufficient and increased their dependence on the market both for their livelihood and for their culture. Soon they find that the expanding array of choices provided by the market is an illusion. As the market is organized into larger and larger units, commodities become increasingly standardized, and the mounting cost of producing commodities for a mass market, moreover, discourages innovation and experimentation. While industrialization in its initial stages may promote variety, in the long run it brings uniformity and lower standards. The rise of a "communications industry" illustrates the effects of industrialism on culture. Corporate conglomerates swallow up publishing companies, motion picture studios, newspapers, magazines, television channels, and radio stations; the production of books or movies or television programs gives way to a "total manipulation of package," as one Hollywood executive puts it; and ideas for "literary properties" increasingly originate not in the brain of a single author but in corporate board rooms. Just as industrialism long ago eliminated the artisan's contribution to the production of goods, so it now eliminates his contribution to the production of ideas. The "concept" now comes first, then an author is chosen to carry it out—one whose name is sufficiently well known to command immediate recognition. Books are no longer written, they are "developed," as Thomas Whiteside shows in his study, *The Blockbuster Complex*.<sup>1</sup> Their production represents merely a single stage in a promotional sequence, an "entertainment discovery," in the words of another communications executive.

<sup>1</sup> First published as a three-part series in *The New Yorker* (September 30, October 6, and October 13, 1980), Whiteside's articles have now appeared as a book (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).

The most important feature of such “discoveries,” of course, is that they say nothing new, stick to formulas already tested. The greater the investment, the greater the need to minimize risk. High volume, moreover, requires high turnover, so that cultural “discoveries” come to be valued for their immediate impact on the market rather than for their lasting contribution to public edification or enjoyment. Titles that don’t sell briskly are quickly remaindered, publishers’ backlists shrink to the point of invisibility, and chain-store retailers displace small proprietorships. Whiteside writes:

More and more it seems that books are being regarded as interchangeable products somehow possessing, because of the manner of their promotion, a strange sort of uniformity. What is particularly striking to me about the frantic mass-merchandising and big-book promotions is the *undifferentiated* quality of what is being hawked once those books not singled out as potentially big money-makers have been, in effect, thrown into the discard.

Mass marketing has just as bad an effect on movies as it has on books. “The studios no longer make movies primarily to attract and please moviegoers,” writes Pauline Kael; “they make movies in such a way as to get as much as possible from the prearranged and anticipated deals.” In their eagerness to minimize risks, the conglomerates that now control the major studios spend most of their time trying to duplicate past successes, to attract established stars to a given script, to promote the product through arrangements with publishing houses and other media, and finally to sell it to television. Kael deplures

the change in book publishing and in magazines and newspapers and in the movies as they have passed out of the control of those whose lives were bound up in them and into the control of conglomerates, financiers, and managers who treat them as ordinary commodities.

She adds that “this isn’t a reversible process.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Why Are Movies So Bad? or, The Numbers,” *New Yorker*, June 23, 1980, pp. 82–93. Here again recent developments in the culture industry recapitulate the earlier history of capitalism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one industry after another passed from entrepreneurial to corporate control, with a resulting concentration of power in the hands of the great investment bankers like J.P. Morgan—men who knew nothing at first hand about the enterprises they now controlled. Naturally they did not attempt to impose their own judgment over every phase of these operations; instead they relied on the organizational skills and everyday know-how of managers, technicians, and former entrepreneurs—just as the media conglomerates that now control publishing concede a certain amount of “editorial independence” to the publishing companies they have acquired. Because this “independence” is exercised, however, within the constraints of the marketing policies set by larger corporations, editors rapidly take on the mental habits of corporate promoters. According to Aaron Asher (quoted in Whiteside’s *Blockbuster Complex*), “You find more and more that editors are people whose title is a misnomer. . . . The acquisition of rights has become the primary part of an editor’s job.”

What these developments threaten is not "high culture" but the production of new ideas, new works of art, new works of political and historical analysis, new philosophical speculations that have the power to illuminate contemporary events and to give a focus to public discussion. The possibility that "high culture itself is often profitable," as Gans reminds us, or that it occasionally attracts government or corporate subsidy, doesn't alter the situation in any important respect. It does nothing to arrest our present cultural stagnation to recycle the acknowledged masterpieces of the past or to insist that they become objects of veneration. The cult of "great art" is objectionable anyway, because it obscures the dependence of art on craftsmanship and of "high culture" on vernacular culture. Historically the cult of art has reflected efforts by dominant classes to advertise their superior status and to set themselves up as exclusive arbiters of public taste. More recently it has been identified with the notion that the heritage of art, in particular the heritage of critical modernism, represents an "intellectual's tradition" and that intellectuals alone are capable of defending it against official interference and against the relentless popular pressure for lower standards.<sup>3</sup>

The point about mass culture is not that it isn't "high" enough but that it is produced for a mass market—as opposed, say, to a local or regional market (or no market at all). Mass production means shoddy products, on the cultural exchange as on the commodity exchange. My criticism of mass culture doesn't take the position that "people who now learn from and enjoy popular culture are morally and emotionally impaired." Here again, Gans misses the point. My point is that they have the right to something better. It is the products, not the consumers, that are "morally and emotionally impaired." Indeed I think this fact is now recognized by the very people who "enjoy" popular culture, according to Gans. Far from enjoying it, they suspect they are being short-changed. They have something of the same contempt for NBC that they have for Chrysler and General Motors, based on an awareness that all these corporations peddle unmistakably second-rate wares. The popular audience can see (unless we assume that it is blind to everything) that popular culture isn't popular at all except in the sense that masses of people consume it in the absence of anything better. Certainly it isn't popular in the sense that ordinary people themselves have any share in designing it or even in the sense that it depicts a world they can recognize. Television's por-

3 On the ideology of modernism and the ascendancy of the critic over the public and even over the artist, see Casey Blake, "Aesthetic Engineering," *democracy* I, no. 4 (October 1981), pp. 37-50. On the "intellectual's tradition," see—for one of the earliest statements of this idea—William Phillips, "The Intellectual's Tradition," *Partisan Review* VIII (November-December 1941), pp. 491 ff.

trayal of working-class life remains notoriously superficial and condescending; its attitude toward the family swings between sticky sentimentality and a liberated rejection of family involvements; its preoccupation with sexual innuendo and bathroom humor has touched off a widespread popular revolt; and its unwavering commitment to the happy ending, the painless resolution of conflicts that are spurious to begin with, necessarily offends people who live with irreconcilable conflicts and unhappy endings.<sup>4</sup> We can't assume that people "choose" blandness and condescension, without offering them anything else, any more than we can assume that people choose cars and washing machines and television sets that break down on schedule merely because they buy these products in the absence of better products.

In culture, as in everything else, the only corrective to mass production is decentralization and local control—not "critical thought" or a "universal high culture" or, on the other hand, a bogus egalitarianism which assumes that political decisions call for "technical information" and predictive sciences beyond the comprehension of the ordinary citizen. In his muddled account of my position, Gans is right about one thing: I do advocate a "drastically different economy and society," based on regional autonomy and small-scale production. This vision seems utopian, I trust, only to those who stand solidly behind the kind of "political and economic change" that would leave things pretty much the way they are.

4 Gans sees every attack on mass culture as an attempt to impose the intellectual's values on everyone else. Actually it is the mass media themselves that are doing this, in a sense. They disseminate, not to be sure the "intellectual's tradition," but a debased version of the culture of modernism, a bland ideology of toleration, sexual freedom, "women's liberation" (not to be confused with feminism), and upward social mobility into the professional-managerial class. Complaints that the mass media see the world with a liberal or "humanist" bias contain the kernel of truth (along with a great deal of nonsense) that they reflect the point of view of people who have turned their back on the ethnic ghettos, developed a cosmopolitan outlook and cosmopolitan tastes through higher education (and reading *Cosmopolitan*), and now look back on their origins with a mixture of superiority and sentimental regret. Thus programs like "All in the Family" (and to a lesser extent its sequel, "Archie Bunker's Place") help to reinforce the collective self-esteem of a new class of professionals and managers whose cultural ascendancy rests not on the secure command of an intellectual and political tradition but on its imagined superiority to the average unenlightened American bigot. For further analysis of this point, see my article, "Archie Bunker and the Liberal Mind," *Channels* I, no. 4 (October–November 1981), pp. 34 ff.