THE MASS CULTURE DEBATE:
LEFT PERSPECTIVES
by Henry T. Blanke

In a provocative recent article, Michael Harris has argued that librarianship, a feminized but male-dominated profession, has been complicit in the production and reproduction of patriarchal cultural values through adherence to a rigidly hierarchical and sexist literary canon. This paradox of a profession of women promoting male-defined standards of esthetic value is expressed in the antagonism between female librarians and "the most voracious and perhaps the most literate group of American readers — those middle-class women who read what librarians like to term 'trash'" (Harris 1992, 2). Harris cites feminist research claiming that the involvement of these women with romance fiction represents a valid though veiled protest against sexism and expresses utopian longings for a more egalitarian condition. However, given the enthusiasm with which public libraries today dispense the hottest new mass market books and videos as if they were so many Big Macs, Harris' image of the censorious librarian guarding the canons of Western culture seems dated. Furthermore, Harris fails to acknowledge the position on these matters that is critical of both the canon as presently constituted and the products of the mass culture industries. Commercial popular culture is no less instrumental in the production of ideological hegemony than is canonical high culture.

These specific objections aside, however, Harris' piece is interesting because of his efforts to interpret library issues within the broader context of American culture, politics, and economics. He uses cultural theory to conceptualize the linkages between library conflicts and larger social struggles. Similarly, Herbert Schiller, John Buschman, and Harris himself throughout an exemplary body of work, have explored the politics of librarianship and information as a vital site within the contested terrain of American cultural politics. How do escalating trends toward the commercial privatization of information reflect the logic of American culture and political economy? What role is played by the media, schools, libraries and other cultural institutions in the reproduction of existing distributions of wealth and power? Are mass media products irredeemably manipulative or can they be appropriated for progressive purposes?

In order for radical librarians and others struggling for substantive cultural democracy to adequately address these and other crucial questions some familiarity with the major Left theoretical perspectives on the nature of mass culture and its relationship to political consciousness may be useful. Toward that end this article will survey the work of several prominent cultural theorists beginning with the enormously influential Frankfurt School. In many ways this group set the terms for the mass culture debate in this country and their theories have been engaged by critics representing generations and ideologies ranging from Cold War liberalism to New Left radicalism. The reception of "culture industry" theory by the Frankfurt School's contemporaries and successors on the Left, both critical and affirmative, will be discussed as will the antagonistic response of the liberal mainstream.

Culture Industry Theory:
Entertainment as Social Domination

Concomitant with the technological, economic and political changes which marked the transition from the pre-industrial era to urban industrial society, there evolved new forms of popular culture geared toward the newly urbanized masses. The shift toward mass production and a consumption oriented mass market economy had its cultural counterpart in the emergence of large-scale commercial leisure activities. The growth of mass culture, as it accelerated into the 20th century with the development of popular magazines, radio, cinema, sound recordings, advertising, and eventually television, evoked the ire of intellectual commentators. The first group of 20th century intellectuals to critique popular or, in their more pejorative designation, mass culture were largely conservative, even aristocratic, in their sensibility. These writers, best represented by Jose Ortega y Gasset and T.S. Elliot, saw in mass culture a brutish trampling on esthetic and cultural values, standards, traditions, and authority, in short a vulgar degeneration which threatened the very foundations of Western civilization.

However, by the 1930s a critique of mass culture had
emerged from the socialist end of the political spectrum. Among the first radical intellectuals to seriously analyze popular culture and the mass media were those associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. These thinkers had experienced a series of events and historical developments which shook the foundation on which they had built their hopes for the creation of a more rational and humane social order. The capitulation of the European working classes to the militaristic nationalism of the First World War, the failure of post-war revolutionary activity in Germany, the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into bureaucracy and repression, and the rise of fascism all seemed to underscore the failure of socialist theory and practice. Furthermore, Western capitalism was stabilizing and had evolved into a highly organized, centralized, and monopolistic form. All this demanded a thorough reevaluation and revision of Marxist theory, a project which was taken up with great originality by the Frankfurt School thinkers first in Germany and subsequently in the United States.

Among the more important revisions of orthodox Marxist thought undertaken by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and their colleagues was their emphasis on commercial culture and the mass media as key institutions of ideological domination and social control. Although culture and ideology had always been a concern of theirs, immigration to the United States illustrated the centrality of the new mass media in socializing the populace away from critical thought and action and toward passivity and acceptance of the status quo. Frankfurt School theorists worked out their ideas on mass culture in many writings spanning several decades, but the most important and suggestive statements of their views on these matters are Horkheimer's and Adorno's essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" and Adorno's subsequent clarification "Culture Industry Reconsidered" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1974, 158). The authors coined the latter term as an alternative to popular or mass culture to make it clear that under contemporary conditions culture does not arise from the masses or satisfy their genuine needs and desires, but is imposed on them from above in the interest of profit and ideological domination (Adorno 1990, 275). The culture industry functions to directly reap a profit for its owners while, at the same time, creating an ideological climate promoting corporate capitalist society as the best of all possible worlds. Of course, the profit function and the ideological function of the media are mutually reinforcing.

The products churned out by the culture industry, although carrying a superficial air of novelty and originality, are in fact thoroughly standardized and interchangeable. Successful formulas are endlessly repeated and production and distribution techniques are mechanical and rationalized.

Not only are the hit songs, stars, and soap operas cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types, but the specific content of the entertainment itself ... only appears to change. The details are interchangeable.... As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end.... In light music, once the trained ear has heard the first notes of the hit song, it can guess what is coming ... The average length of the short story has to be rigidly adhered to (Horkheimer and Adorno 1974, 125).

The constant bombardment of entertainment of this type induces stupefaction and passivity on the part of the audience. The deadeningly uniform and trivial products of the mass media occupy all of people's leisure time leaving no space for critical reflection, independent thought, or the free play of the imagination.

The culture industry exploits real needs for relief from the drudgery and tedium of the work world. By providing temporary relief through mindless and distracting entertainment it reinforces the passive mentality required for alienated labor and militates against the kind of critical thinking and action neces-
sary for social change. Because the products of the culture industry are so standardized and mechanical and require so little effort or initiative for their consumption, they serve to reinforce the rationalized, tedious workplace even as they offer a brief but unsatisfying respite from it. Whereas the art of previous eras maintained a degree of autonomy from the social order and preserved images of the hope for greater happiness, mass media entertainments are merely extensions of an exploitative and irrational social world. The social order as it exists is endlessly reproduced on movie screens, in advertisements and throughout the mass media and thus made to appear natural and unchangeable (Horkheimer and Adorno 1974, 126-27, 137, 144-45).

Ultimately, Adorno sees the effect of the culture industry as impeding “the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (Adorno 1990, 281). Its power derives from and reinforces feelings of dependence, powerlessness and anxiety. The cumulative message of the culture industry is one of conformity, obedience, and acquiescence to power.

Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s ideas on the role of the culture industry in the reproduction of advanced capitalist society are supported by their colleague Herbert Marcuse. For Marcuse a society based on alienated labor requires repression of the individual’s instinctual orientation toward pleasure and sensuality. During the early development of capitalism what little leisure time people had was dulled by the length and routine of the work day necessitating a purely passive recouping of energies for the next day. However, the expanding realm of free time allowed for by the greater productivity of advanced capitalism now threatens to overthrow the limits on pleasure required for labor discipline. Consequently “the technique of mass manipulation developed an entertainment industry which directly controls leisure time...” (Marcuse 1966, 47-48).

In his “one-dimensional man” analysis, Marcuse posits a view of contemporary industrial society in which all segments of the population, including potentially oppositional elements, have been manipulated and integrated into a total system of administration, efficiency, and relatively comfortable domination. He sees the culture industry as a central agent of social control and integration, its “irresistible output [transmitting] prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly...to the whole [social system]” (Marcuse 1964, 12).

Whereas great art traditionally had a subversive potential because it preserved images of freedom and happiness denied by social reality, today art has become a commercial product indistinguishable from other commodities and thoroughly absorbed into the system. Thus the traditional antagonism between artistic ideal and existing reality has been flattened out. The commodity form of mass culture reinforces capitalist values, integrates its consumers into the social order and militates against a critical sensibility.

Not all of the theorists and critics associated with the Frankfurt School were so pessimistic in their evaluation of mass culture, however. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” one of the School’s peripheral members, Walter Benjamin, argues with some degree of ambivalence for the emancipatory potential of mass culture. Benjamin is interested in the changes wrought on the production of art by technological innovation. In particular, the reproductivity characteristic of photographs and films destroys the sense of uniqueness and authenticity (“aura”) traditionally associated with art. The origin of art in magical and religious practices imbued it with a quality of authority, awe, and distance from the people. These qualities continued to be associated with artistic productions in later secular movements which romanticized the artist and his work. However, now for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.... From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic print” makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics (Benjamin 1969, 224).
Benjamin sees film in particular as having progressive political potential through its ability to invite a mass audience to critically scrutinize the hidden details of the social environment and to comprehend both "the necessities which rule our lives" as well as "an immense and unexpected field of [political] action: Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices...and factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison world asunder..." (236).

Although recognizing that at present the film industry promotes "the phony spell of a commodity," he feels that film techniques such as montage and the conditions of mass audience viewing erodes the traditional solitary, passive contemplation of art. The collective experience of cinematic "shock effects" leading to a "hightened presence of mind" could promote critical thought and collective action (231, 238).

Ironically, Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will premiered in the same year (1936) as the original publication of Benjamin's essay. This film was politicized art in the service of a passive consumption of mystical aura and mass spectacle. It showed how easily film could be used for purposes precisely the opposite of those Benjamin hoped for. At the same time a film industry was developing in the United States which 'promoted not critical distance and scrutiny of everyday life, but escapism, the aura of fantasy and emotional identification. Some leftist critics of subsequent generations would draw inspiration from Benjamin in their appreciation of the progressive possibilities of popular culture. But it was the pessimistic formulations of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse which had the more significant initial impact. Their influence on American cultural criticism is evident in the first major anthology of its kind published in the United States. In Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America (1957) there appear essays by Bernard Rosenberg, Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe and others strikingly similar to culture industry theory. Adorno himself contributed a content analysis of some popular television programs and his Frankfurt School colleagues Leo Lowenthal and Siegfried Kracauer were also represented (Rosenberg and White 1957).

The Frankfurt School's influence is most clearly evident in Dwight Macdonald's essay "A Theory of Mass Culture." Macdonald distinguished mass culture from folk or popular culture, the former being "solely and directly an article for mass consumption." Whereas folk art was a spontaneous expression of the people intended to suit their own needs, "mass culture is imposed from above.... It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers" who don't participate in the creation of their culture. The purveyors of mass culture exploit the needs of the people in order to make a profit and to maintain their privileged class position (Macdonald 1957, 59-60). For Macdonald, as for the Frankfurt School theorists, the effect of the culture industry is to integrate the masses into an exploitative system, thus serving as an instrument of political domination and control.

However, Macdonald shared not only the political radicalism of the Frankfurt School, but also its elitist cultural sensibility. At the risk of oversimplification, the differences between conservative and radical critics of mass culture can be boiled down to the fact that conservatives blame the masses themselves for despoiling high culture while the radicals see the masses as being manipulated by those who own and control the media for the sake of profit and control. At times, however, this distinction becomes blurred by a common elitist sensibility. Thus, in terms reminiscent of Ortega y Gasset, Macdonald decries the disastrous cultural consequences of the "eruption of the masses onto the political stage." The situation would not be so bleak if there was a clear boundary between Kitsch for the masses and high culture for the elite, but Kitsch obliterates all cultural values and distinctions and threatens to drown out high culture "by its sheer pervasiveness, its brutal, overwhelming quantity" (61). For Macdonald the question of which came first, the mass demand for a trivial and debased culture or the stimulation and satisfaction of that demand for profit and domination, is unanswerable. What is important is that people are now caught in the inexorable workings of a self-perpetuating cultural machine.

The Cold War Liberal Polemic

Given the ideological climate of the United States in the
late 1940s and 1950s, a critique of American capitalist culture as trenchant as that of the Frankfurt School and the more radical of the *Mass Culture* contributors could only meet with a hostile reception. In a sharply polemical review of the *Mass Culture* anthology, Edward Shils attributes the Left critique to the frustration and disillusionment of radicals in the face of the proletariat's refusal of the revolutionary vocation which they had assigned to it (Shils 1957, 590-91). He accuses them of romanticizing the organic folk culture of pre-industrial society and of overestimating the meretriciousness and vulgarity of contemporary popular culture.

According to Shils, changes brought about by economic progress and "the efforts of liberal and humanitarian reformers" of the 19th century have allowed the majority of the population to escape from the degraded life it was condemned to in the past. Only now do most people have the opportunity to become full members of their society and to exercise some degree of cultural taste. "Only the frustrated attachment to an impossible ideal of human perfection, and a distaste for one's own society and for human beings as they are, can obscure this" (604, 606). Presumably, however, the 19th century reformers championed by Shils did not accept people and society as they were or they would never have mustered the efforts to change it. For the Frankfurt School theorists accepting the status quo precludes the possibility of a higher mode of human existence and a better society. Ideals of human and social perfection serve as normative standards by which to critique existing conditions and which can inspire action towards their realization.

Shils repeatedly excoriates the radical critics for blaming the masses for not embracing high culture (606, 608). While the elitism of the mass culture critics does seem to open them to this charge, Shils does not address the central tenet of the culture industry thesis which blames rich and powerful elites for manipulating and dominating the masses in order to further their own interests.

Similar liberal affirmations of American culture would recur in subsequent years. For instance, Herbert Gans, in his 1974 defense of cultural pluralism *Popular Culture and High Culture*, rejects the mass culture critique on grounds similar to Shils'. The critique overestimates the negative effects of mass culture, it romanticizes pre-industrial folk culture, it is out of sympathy with the tastes of ordinary people who, for the first time, are fully integrated into their society (Gans 1974, 55-60). While briefly noting the division between conservative and socialist camps among the mass culture critics, he emphasizes their similarities and downplays the significant distinctions between their respective analyses. He does mention Marcuse's distinctly radical analysis only to reject it on the grounds that the mass media has little real impact on the behavior and attitudes of people and that even a revolutionary popular culture would not inspire them to eliminate social ills (48-49).

According to Gans' easy pluralism, people have a right to the cultural artifacts appropriate to their own economic and educational levels and all levels of culture are equally valid. Culture industry theory would argue that social-economic stratification should not be so easily accepted. Also, people are not free to choose the culture which they enjoy but are subject to the logic of a system which manipulates their desires and imposes on them a narcotizing culture.

However, not all liberal scholars during the great American celebration of the 1950s were as sanguine about the state of American culture as Shils (and, later, Gans). In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Daniel Boorstin offers a perceptive critique of mass culture in this country. Like Shils, he rejects the idea that the masses are manipulated by capitalist culture, but for him that culture is anything but benign and he blames the American people themselves for this fact. According to Boorstin, America's great wealth and technological achievements have had the unintended consequence of grossly inflating our expectations of the world and experience. Because the real world simply cannot satisfy our craving for exciting news, novelty, heroism, and adventure, we have fabricated an illusory world of pseudo-events, spectacles, and celebrities. Boorstin traces the technological wherewithal necessary to create such a culture of pseudo-events to the advent of what he calls the Graphic Revolution of the mid-19th century. Revolutionary developments in printing were followed by photography, radio, motion pictures, sound recordings, and television. The development of
these mass media had the effect of both momentarily satisfying and further stimulating a growing national appetite for spectacular happenings and easily digestible art and entertainment to the point where “making illusions...has become the business of America” (Boorstin 1961, 5).

From the perspective of the present moment of MTV and infotainment periodicals and television, Boorstin’s tour of American mass culture seems prescient. Journalists, desperate for stories to fill daily papers and news programs, use the spotlight of media scrutiny to manufacture events. Politicians conform to the needs of the media with the result that vital matters of public policy and debate are distorted around the conventions of nightly news programs. Where once society honored its heroes for their courage and monumental deeds, increasingly in this century the public clamors for details of the foibles and latest sexual escapades of celebrities (defined by Boorstin as “a person who is well-known for his well-knownness” [57]). At times Boorstin interprets these developments as a lamentable, but acceptable, consequence of the American democratic and egalitarian ethos. For instance, the laudable goal to make art, literature, and music accessible to all has resulted in a situation where great art is abridged and popularized and cultural products are created according to marketability. In short, Americans expect more novelty, greatness, and strangeness than there is in the world and, in trying to satisfy these exaggerated expectations, the mass media has fabricated a world where image and pseudo-event overshadow real experience.

The Image is far more critical of mass culture than the qualified affirmations of Boorstin’s fellow Cold War liberal Edward Shils or the simple pluralism of Herbert Gans. In fact his descriptions of the American cultural scene often converge with those of Leftist critics. His entire chapter on contemporary developments in art, literature, and music accessible to all has resulted in a situation where great art is abridged and popularized and cultural products are created according to marketability. In short, Americans expect more novelty, greatness, and strangeness than there is in the world and, in trying to satisfy these exaggerated expectations, the mass media has fabricated a world where image and pseudo-event overshadow real experience.

Boorstin’s book, critical of American culture, yet ultimately pulling its punches, was followed by an explosion of scholarly activity by a new generation of intellectuals associated with the New Left movements of the 1960s. Stanley Aronowitz’s far-ranging study of working class history and culture, False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness, is representative of the kind of radical analysis that marked the end of the virtual moratorium on critiques of capitalism (outside of the work of the Frankfurt School and other mavericks, such as C. Wright Mills) characteristic of the 1950s. An earlier generation of Western Marxists had tried to account for the failure of socialist revolution in Europe despite the presence of objective factors Marx believed necessary for such events. They found an answer in subjective factors, specifically the ways in which the values and assumptions of capitalism are reproduced in the conscious-
ness of the proletariat through cultural institutions.

In analyzing the American context, Aronowitz follows the lead of his European predecessors by examining how institutions such as the school, church, family, and especially the mass media have historically functioned to prevent the development of a revolutionary consciousness among workers. He explains how late 19th century advances in industrial technology necessitated a more educated and disciplined labor force at the same time as it rendered child labor superfluous. While the enactment of child labor laws and the establishment of free compulsory education did have a humane effect, schools were used to socialize children according to the needs of changing socio-economic circumstances. In addition to reading, writing and math, children learned discipline, respect for authority and hierarchy. While schools promoted an ideology of social mobility through education, they also used tracking to inculcate in working class children a sense of their place in the division of labor (Aronowitz 1973, 72-76).

Aronowitz traces the development of advertising and mass culture in response to the demands of an increasingly consumption-oriented economy for new markets and for the stimulation of new consumer needs. Furthermore, the mass media developed to occupy an increase in leisure time generated by more highly developed forms of production. By the post-World War II period, traditional working class institutions and patterns of life had eroded and been replaced by a mass mediated consumer culture. According to Aronowitz, the media have superceded the family and schools as primary agents of socialization (95).

Consumerism supplies spurious replacements for the creative satisfactions denied in the authoritarian workplace. The spectacles provided by television, movies, spectator sports, etc. distract people from social injustice and inequality as they reinforce feelings of political impotence, atomized individualism, national chauvinism, and material affluence as a reward for social obedience. Much of this territory had already been covered, with even greater theoretical sophistication, by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, but Aronowitz counterbalances the highly abstract approach of the latter theorists with a greater attention to empirical detail. His close reading of the middle class biases in the TV program “All in the Family” and his examination of the conservative views of human nature depicted in popular movies such as “Straw Dogs” and “A Clockwork Orange” are excellent. So is his demonstration of how even children’s games become infused with capitalist values as elements of hierarchy, seriousness and competition replace spontaneous joyful play.

Finally, *False Promises* is especially insightful because of its author’s insistence, in disagreements with his Frankfurt School forebears, that popular culture is contested terrain where moments of creativity and rebellion struggle against commercial and ideological exploitation (118-124). Adorno and Horkheimer saw mass culture as irredeemably meretricious and imposed from above on a hapless populace. Aronowitz shares much of this evaluation, but, echoing Benjamin, he also recognizes the adversarial vitality and utopian aspirations in current popular forms which preserve the future hope of a truly liberated culture. This ambiguity with regard to the political effects and potential of the media is characteristic of much New Left thought. For instance, while former SDS president Todd Gitlin claims that television aims “to narrow and flatten consciousness - to tailor everyman’s worldview to the consumer mentality,” he criticizes Marcuse for failing to “show how one-dimensional forms could generate at least the seeds of their negations,” for missing “the ambiguity of television’s effects” (Gitlin 1972, 351).

Even more optimistic in his assessment of the progressive possibilities of popular culture is the German critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Enzensberger claims that, with the exceptions of Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, Marxists have seen only the capitalist manipulations of the mass media and have been blind to its oppositional and emancipatory potential. Seeing the media only in terms of manipulation reflects a sense of impotence and leads to defensiveness and defeatism. Enzensberger indict both the older and New Left for a culturally archaic and puritanical refusal to appreciate the extent to which the consumerist and hedonistic esthetic of the media addresses, albeit in distorted form, the legitimate needs and desires of people (Enzensberger 1974).

The Left’s fear of cooptation and refusal to work with the messy contradictions of popular culture has ceded the important
sphere of media experimentation and innovation to apolitical avant garde groups. Enzensberger calls for a socialist strategy which addresses the contradictions between the technological and social potential of the mass media and its present constitution under capitalist control. Such a strategy should focus on the enormous power of the media to mobilize people for collective social action. "For the first time in history, the media are making possible mass participation in a social...process" [97]. The present concentration of political and economic power in monopoly capitalism is reflected in media monopolies which broadcast their programs to a passive, atomized audience. The current constitutions of the media allows for no feedback and thus no real communication. Technically, however, there is no reason why every media receiver can't also be a transmitter. A decentralized system of interactive communication and feedback is prevented only by political considerations.

However, the prospect that anyone can become a media producer is not enough to release the democratic potential of the mass media. As long as media experimentation remains at the level of "individual tinkering" it is apolitical and socially irrelevant. "Any socialist strategy for the media must, on the contrary, strive to end the isolation of the individual participants from the social learning and production process" [Enzensberger 1974, 109]. A subversive use of the media demands and facilitates self-organized collective action. The presence of decentralized, collective media activity at all sites of social conflict would be a highly effective means of political education and would serve to promote a more democratic and equitable society.

While Enzensberger imagines a radical transformation of the media and communications system, another New Left critic, Douglas Kellner, argues for an appreciation of the oppositional and subversive elements within mainstream media culture [Kellner 1982]. Kellner also favors radical alternative media activity and revolutionary art but, because the situation in the United States is far from revolutionary, he argues that moments of critique and protest in popular culture as presently constituted should be taken seriously. Kellner blames the influence of the Frankfurt School for the Left's scorning of popular culture as uniformly manipulative and stupefying and for failing to recognize its emancipatory aspects.

Blues and folk music, people's theater, radical newspapers and other forms of traditional popular culture always contained elements of protest against oppression. It is crucial "to appreciate the ways in which these traditions...remain alive within the contemporary productions of the electronic media" [Kellner 1982, 405]. The anarchic comedies of Keaton, Chaplin and the Marx Brothers, the cinematic alienation of James Dean and Marlon Brando, the erotic energy of rock music all express protest against authority and repression. By the 1970s television, perhaps the most conservative medium, was producing realistic and critical programs which challenged idealistic depictions of American life.

Kellner analyzes several documentaries which expose poverty, racism, and corruption in government and business, and failures of American foreign policy. He shows how contemporary miniseries "have dealt with class conflict, racism...imperialism, and oppression.... They have often sympathetically portrayed the ...poor, minorities, and workers, and presented capitalists... as exploiters [thus] reversing the usual content of television codes." Recent television comedies (especially Norman Lear's) have introduced controversial issues, engaged in social satire, and used humor and irony "to suggest that something is profoundly wrong with current society" (412, 418).

Kellner recognizes that most television and other mass media products function ideologically to reproduce and reinforce the status quo. Even the most progressive mainstream TV programs rarely, if ever, treat social problems as endemic to the capitalist system or propose alternative social systems. Furthermore, audiences may interpret critical and progressive content in apolitical or conservative ways. Nonetheless, given the centrality of the electronic media in the everyday lives of most people, the Left must support critical elements when they surface. The Left must find ways to intervene in popular culture, using traditional dramatic and comedic forms if necessary, in order to communicate subversive and emancipatory content to large audiences.

In a critical reassessment of culture industry theory, Kellner
argues that the media “reflect, express and articulate social reality” and thus must portray “an often nasty and conflicted reality in order to gain an audience and credibility.” Consequently, the culture industry may “unwittingly engage in social critique and ideological subversion” (Kellner 1984, 203). Failure to appreciate this process left culture industry theory unable to account for the upheavals of the 1960s when a generation raised on the mass media revolted against the status quo. Today the logic of the culture industry compels it to desperately pursue profit by increasingly targeting marginal audiences and thus undermining social homogenization and opening up space for alternative perspectives.

Mass Media: Instruments of Control or Tools of Liberation?

Much of the mass culture debate on the Left has oscillated between the antagonistic positions established by Adorno and Benjamin. Enzensberger and Kellner are representative of a growing contingent of radical critics who, following the lead of Benjamin, see progressive, even revolutionary, potential in the mass media. They reject, albeit to varying degrees and with qualifications, the Frankfurt School view of the culture industry as monolithic and intractable. However, beginning with Benjamin, there is an element of wishful thinking in the way these critics overestimate the extent to which advancements in media technology and isolated pockets of critical media production can effectively challenge the system. It is almost as if they believe that the mere existence of advanced technology (photography and film for Benjamin; cable TV, video recorders etc. for Kellner) can revolutionize art and society regardless of the ways that dominant values are built into the very structure of technology in a capitalist society.

Moreover, the impact that small disorganized elements of critical and progressive media production (both within and without mainstream culture) can have on mass social consciousness should not be overestimated. This is especially true given the importance of both the form and context of media messages as well as the conditions of audience reception. Kellner advocates using conventional mass media forms (TV melodrama, situation comedy, music videos) to advance radical content without sufficiently considering the influence that standardized commodity forms have on audience interpretation of content. Even the most radical content when surrounded by the inexorable flood of standardized mass produced images may simply blend in and dissolve. Furthermore a politicized social climate must exist for audiences to recognize and properly interpret radical messages. Political and countercultural media and art had some impact during the 1960s because the overall atmosphere of social conflict and political debate made clear the different positions and worldviews being advanced.

It may be true that cultural freedom has expanded and that there is more diversity, presence of marginal social groups and realistic treatment of controversial issues in mass culture since the period when Adorno and his colleagues formulated their theories. It is also the case, however, that there has been an increasing concentration of corporate ownership of the mass media. The last decade has seen an acceleration of the process whereby most television, films, radio, records, books, magazines, and newspapers have come under the ownership and control of a handful of transnational conglomerates (Bagdikian 1989). This development alone should be enough to dampen the hopes of even the most optimistic of radical cultural theorists and activists. In fact, the corporate colonization of everyday life has accelerated to the point where the present postmodernist culture of image consumption, commodity aesthetics, and global spectacles (coinciding with new, more fluid, high velocity forms of transnational capital accumulation) bears a similar relation to Adorno’s culture industry, as MTV bears to a ‘50s television series. Still, the core insight of culture industry theory, concerning how the imposition of the commodity form on cultural products (standardized production of art and entertainment for market exchange rather than for aesthetic meaning and use) in itself reinforces the system of alienated labor over and above whatever specific messages the capitalist media wishes to impart, continues to be of crucial relevance.

Even the relatively marginal sphere of librarianship has not escaped the steady infiltration of market forces into all areas of social and cultural life. Partly because of its social marginality and partly because of a principled adherence to the ideal of...
information as a public good, historically the library has somewhat escaped the process of cultural commodification. However, the increasing prominence of information as an economic resource, so characteristic of post-industrial social developments, have generated forces which are changing the nature and role of libraries. The privatization of public information, entrepreneurial library management strategies, the uncritical embrace of costly new information technology, and the cozy alliance between libraries and the commercial information industry all signal the logic of commodification as applied to librarianship. We are now witnessing the annexation of the library by the culture industry.

While the essentials of the culture industry analysis remain valid, efforts at critique and revision have been necessary to correct the exaggerations, theoretical blind spots and biases of Adorno et al. Any critical evaluation of the Frankfurt School must take into account the fact that its foremost theorists had witnessed fascism’s use of the mass spectacle as an instrument of totalitarian control. Upon emigrating to the United States at a time when mass culture was proliferating and a rabid Cold War mentality was about to seize the country, they were bombarded by the products, often put to reactionary political purposes, of the capitalist entertainment industries. The shock of these experiences may account for their profound pessimism and for the sense of overkill in their writings which describes the mass media in terms of an “iron system,” an “absolute master” which dominates individual consciousness and imposes a “ruthless unity” on all aspects of cultural and social life (Horkheimer and Adorno 1974, 121, 124). Certainly the events of the 1960s contradict this view that advanced capitalism is a total system which neutralizes all social conflict and that its culture industries have created a population of completely passive, narcotized consumers.

Adorno’s infamous (and uninformed) attack on jazz reveals an esthetic sensibility utterly out of sympathy with any forms of popular culture. With the exception of Marcuse during his brief appreciation of the 1960s counterculture, Frankfurt School theorists were too categorical in their dismissal of culture which did not meet the lofty standards of Schoenberg, Kafka, Beckett and their other favored models of autonomous art. Consequently they were unable to make distinctions among the very diverse artifacts and expressions of popular culture. For them, presumably, the music of Tin Pan Alley hacks and that of the Beatles, the most banal soap opera and a program such as “Roots,” supermarket romance novels and Toni Morrison’s bestseller Beloved are all equally debased and stupefying.

This esthetic narrowness and elitism prevented Horkheimer, Adorno, Macdonald et al. from understanding the genuine gratifications provided by popular culture and from appreciating the vitality, expressiveness, joy, and rebelliousness of, for instance, blues music, jazz and rock. By seeing in the mass media only ideological domination and social control, they failed to recognize the extent to which popular culture is disputed ground on which authentic, vital, and sometimes subversive popular expression (often originating from marginal and oppressed groups) comes into conflict with the commercial and ideological imperatives of the corporate capitalist media. Consequently culture industry theory did not analyze the positive relationship between progressive popular culture and mass political consciousness and mobilization. It did not develop strategies by which a subversive and emancipatory popular culture could be forged and the conservative and oppressive effects of the culture industry could be countered.

The Left today can ill afford not to take advantage of whatever subversive possibilities may exist within mass culture. Constructive engagement with mass media as well as the development of alternative, experimental approaches to media is vital given the powerful socializing effects of mass culture in contemporary society. A politics of the media and mass culture should be a part of any Left strategy in the United States today. However, Leftists engaged in media politics must be aware of the limits to such an approach. They must be aware of the various and complex ways in which the mass media trivialize and disarm radical messages. Cultural theorists and activists must understand how the mass media tolerates some degree of dissent, giving the impression of being open and pluralistic, only to absorb and neutralize it. The culture industry theory of the Frankfurt School continues to be an indispensable source for
such an understanding of the workings of mass culture in contemporary society.

Works Cited


