

Pop Goes the American Culture

Richard Dey

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“Like nineteenth century capitalism, Mass Culture is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions.”

—Dwight Macdonald

I

The tribal psychedelic rock culture is today the ripest fruit on the tree of the popular arts, and its roots grope deeply into the much-plowed soil of mass culture. In the Beginning (almost), there was folk art, oral, iconographic, mythic. Industrialism and its inevitably mechanistic culture trampled down the past, creating an urban atmosphere in which the folk arts could not survive.

Dwight Macdonald once observed that folk art satisfied popular tastes, whereas the new media technology exploited them. The new culture hungered for fast, fast relief from boredom and despair, and the popular arts supplied it.

The new behemoth pre-digested the surface effects of the mainstream arts for an audience who now preferred to be acted upon rather than to act. With each passing decade we see a mass audience drifting further and further away from dynamic involvement in its pastimes.

Today, even driving down to the movie theater is too much trouble for many Americans—they can have Saturday Night at the Movies right at home on TV. But mass culture is a shortwinded behemoth; of late it has begun to stumble and gasp for breath. Toxic winds of change are blowing from new quarters.

II

In America, popular art has always been ashamed of itself. The movies periodically clean house via Production Codes and congressional committees; comic books purified themselves almost out of business until the Marvel group sparked the recent superhero renaissance; and now television, the self-proclaimed Vast Wasteland has strained frantically these last few months to uplift and enrich itself and its audience by thrusting prepackaged, predigested specials and quasi-mainstream drama into our drowsing faces.

But again, the medium is the message, and television is an exploitative medium whose function is to sell products. The entertainment is only to soften us up. In general then, mass media aims for the glands rather than the heart, and has periodically indulged itself in shortlived postures of remorse and holy passion.

It seems to me that we Americans have traditionally felt guilty about enjoying ourselves. The puritan undercurrent in American life makes most of us suspicious and uneasy about pleasure. Mass media has reinforced this neurosis by pouring out an avalanche of sensationalism and violence that justified itself for us by tacked-on platitudes.

Mainstream art does not pretend to solve problems or reinforce conventions and therefore can never take a dynamic part in traditional popular art. Popular culture, like folk art, demands simplification, but unlike folk art, it is denatured and presents not truth, but the easiest illusion of truth.

III

Until the 1960s mass culture was essentially a self-consuming process. Suddenly nostalgia became dynamic, and turned the cultural process inside out: the audience began to exploit the media.

The immediate result of the new sentimentality has been a mass stampede back into the recent past, followed immediately by media exploitation, which sought to re-establish the old equilibrium. While artists like Larry Rivers, Andy Warhol, the Beatles, Bob Dylan continued to close the gap between pop and mainstream art, the mass audience began trailing behind. It had been a false start for them.

The reasons for this are anybody's guess. Mine is that all Americans are brought up goal and achievement oriented, and that in recent years by the time they reach their thirties these material goals have been achieved, and boredom and a sense of futility set in. The need for cultural narcotics set in and the audience becomes past and pleasure-oriented. The old sense of guilt is still there, however, the old fear of embarrassment.

Sentiment is corny, passe, and therefore masquerades as Camp, which pretends to mock the past. The mind turns not inwards but backwards, to the trivia of childhood and early adolescence: Republic serials, Captain Marvel, pulp heroes, Shirley Temple cream pitchers, EC comics. But a mythology based on old media inevitably denatures itself.

I feel that the genuine cultural revolution is only just now upon us. Psychedelic culture is not just a phase, but a new life style in which tribal groups are creating their own mythology independent of the past. Chester Anderson's remarkable "Notes for the New Geology" in a recent issue of *Oracle* defines the new mythology:

"...rock has reinstated the ancient truth that art is fun...rock is a way of life, international and verging in this decade on universal; and can't be muted, modified or successfully controlled."

Pop music has been beyond the control of its media exploiters for some time, and thanks to the good work of pop art Fandom, archetypes and artifacts of the past are available for pleasure rather than profit to those of us who prefer to bypass the homogenizing media process in order to taste the natural unadulterated flavor of reality.

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