opinion

THE CHANCE FOR POPULAR CULTURE

For a decade now the critics have told us about the unfortunate state of popular culture, the culture of the mass-media. Previously this culture was attacked by the acute for particular political and moral tendencies, commercialism, aesthetic ineptitude. The difference in the later, usually socio-psychological, analyses is that the culture is now told off en bloc, as a hopeless state of mind, a general character-symptom of the social disease; the culture is inauthentic, superficial, falsely professional, coördinated, etc.; there is no point in singling out for attack details or trends or individual works. The critics are of course merely explicating in theory the long-time attitude and practice of most of the best artists of the twentieth century; indeed the artistic attitude of rejection and withdrawal goes so far back that its earlier rebellious insults are now, in reproductions, a great part of popular culture.

Much, even most, of this recent criticism is correct. But the critics do not sufficiently feel, I think, what a bleak and lonely prospect they envisage. To put it bluntly, if the critics were more frequently creative artists they would not so blithely observe, and annotate, the disappearance of a popular audience for good work; they would suffer anguish and shrink inward, as most artists have done, or fight back for our audience, as I hope we all shall do. The coldness of the critic toward this calamitous loss is itself a phenomenon of the superficial culture they assail; perhaps it is just this that is needed to sting the creative man to revulsion, to make liars of these wise- acres.

In the following remarks I am myself, as a poet, looking for a way out. First, to see the situation as it is, I summarize the gist of the usual, correct criticism of popular culture; but by looking at the case a little more simply than is usual, I think I can view it more charitably (more hopefully for myself). It is a maxim of our psychology that every symptom of disease is a sign of vitality.
There is more art — more art-works and more experience of them — in America at present than at any time or place in history. By “art” I mean simply the communication of feeling through images, stories, tones, and rhythms: the evoking and displacing and projecting of dormant desires by means of some representation. Half the population sees a two-hour drama every week; the radio nightly presents long hours of vaudeville to millions; records beat out music everywhere; there is no measuring the floods of printed matter, merchandising pictures, cartoons, that have, whatever else, an artistic purpose.

Now this sheer quantity itself is the first thing to explain. But the explanation seems to me to be obvious: people are excessively hungry for feeling, for stimulation of torpid routine, for entertainment in boredom, for cathartic release of dammed-up emotional tensions, etc. The life the Americans lead allows little opportunity for initiative, personal expression, in work or politics; there is not enough love or passion anywhere; creative moments are rare. But they are still feeling animals; their tensions accumulate; and they turn to the arts for an outlet. (I say they are “excessively” hungry for feeling because feelings alone cannot satisfy the lack of creative life, still less can the feelings released by even the noblest art.)

They are a passive audience; they do not strongly or overtly react, nor do they artistically participate themselves. There is, of course, no point in overtly reacting to a movie-screen or a radio; but it is the audience passivity that has made these canned arts become so important. They dance to music but do not make it; they hardly sing; and less and less frequently do they participate in religious or other ceremonials. Contrast, for instance, the musical spirit of a dancing party with a live pianist, where sooner or later people gather round and sing, with that of a dance where the music is supplied by a radio or phonograph. There is, again, less and less place in the mode of economic production for the expression of artistic feeling, craftsmanship. It is possible to conceive of a society equally rich in art-works where the art is active, for instance the society described by William Morris in *News from Nowhere*; but our America is drowned in passive art.
And this passive reaction is superficial—this is why it is perpetually sought for again. It does not unleash, like the tragic or comic theater of old, a violent purgation of the deepest crises and thwartings, death, lust, scorn. These things are not purged every morning and night. Rather, the American popular arts provide a continual petty draining off of the tensions nearest the surface. Their working can be fairly compared to chewing gum as a means of satisfying an oral yearning for mother love and sustenance.

The social role of this gum-chewing is not obscure: it is to make possible an easier adjustment to the air-conditioned world by quieting the nerves. The very conveniences and comforts of the American standard of living, the quarantining of suffering, and the lack of physical danger, are an emotional disadvantage, because they prevent the occurrence of real objects of effort, anxiety, and passion. The arts give imaginary objects. (The war, again, gives a real object.)

Lastly, works of popular art have the following form: they present an important emotional situation, of love, danger, adventure, in a framework where everything else is as usual. The detailed routine of life, the posture and speech-habits of the actor (and the audience), the norms of morality, the time-table of work, these things are not deranged by the plot; they are not newly assessed, criticized, x-rayed, devastated by the passionate situation. Therefore the aesthetic experience remains superficial; the passionate story releases a surface tense-ness, but there is no change in character, habit, or action. One does not sink into these works or return to them, for what is there to sink into or return to? and therefore again there must be more and more. (In the popular music the form is that the outer limbs are moved, even violently agitated, but no visceral sentiment or tenderness of the breast is touched.)¹ By definition art of such form can have no style, for style is the penetration of every least detail by character and feeling. Somehow the popular arts have won the reputation of having a "slick," professional style; but this is false, because the least scrutiny or attempt to feel the meaning with one's body or experience makes one see that the works are put together

¹ An important part of the popular culture is the large audience of concerts and records of Beethoven and Mozart. Let me say, angrily, that this is a cheap and safe emotion. What would those masters say of programs made up, as ours are, of works not written last week, of works whose passion has been absorbed and made safe by a century of habit?
with preposterous improbability. It is a Sophocles or a Shakespeare who is professional and workmanlike; in comparison with the style of The New Yorker, Dreiser is slick and neat.

2

In this ambience of too much art, what faces the good artist, the artist who draws on a deep dream and alters his character, the artist who means it, who has style, who, that is, experiences a world starred with his truth? His outlook is bad. (I do not mean, of course, so far as his creation is concerned — for this, at least in the limits of a discussion like this one, is simply mysterious — but so far as his action and happiness as a social animal are concerned.)

To begin with, he sees his productions swamped and drowned in the mighty flood of art-works; how can his win much notice? Among all this printed matter, how to win attention for what could be called a book? Also, quite apart from economic deprivation, which is likely not so appalling to a person who is daily justified in his work, he cannot fail to see that the stupid and preposterous are rewarded, and unless he is rarely philosophical this makes him bitter and envious and, by reaction, foolishly boastful.

But then, more important, he sees that the elementary passionate themes and the popular idiom have been preempted and debased by the multitudes of art-works, not to speak of advertising and journalism. Simple stories are "corny" and the language of the heart is devaluated. So in recent history we see that the good artists have turned to subjects and methods not immediately and directly communicable to average audiences. (I do not mean "private" subjects and language, for it will prove in a generation or so that just these works were the communicable and important ones of our day; certainly I mean "personal" subjects and language, but these belong to all good work of whatever kind or period.)

Let me hasten to say that if serious artists have avoided corn and directness, we are justified, for we work by an inner necessity. — In my own case, because of the chances of my life and the twists of my character, I most often find it so hard just to say what I mean and what presses uppermost, that I have no energy left to
bother also about whether you understand it or it is immediately important to you.

3

Well, all this is fairly familiar. This is the mass-culture analyzed by the critics and this is the plight of the honest artist. Everybody is blameless all around and we are all wretched.

The situation is outrageous and intolerable! I do not choose to endure it any longer. Why should we have robbed from us our elementary passionate themes? And why should we not dare to speak our dear English tongue? And what! are we never to get the heartenment and glow of pleasure that comes from our words being greeted by a roar of laughter, hushed attention, and gleaming tears?—but these greet only what is elementary and direct. The animal proof of the demonstration in the theater or the buzz that follows hard on publication. In this animal warmth it is possible to go on, next time, to what is more daring.

The question is this: how can the artist express himself, have style; and yet communicate to most people the elementary “corny” situation in a popular way? The answer is easy, easy in theory. Not it is easy in fact, easy to do. (If we do not in fact do it it is because of a moral defect.) What is necessary is to love the popular audience, a few members of the audience; to want to entertain them and to move them. Then the work is both the expression of deep feeling and is aimed to communicate directly to the few and the most. —If then the work fails to communicate, the situation is distressing and terrible, but it is not a cold distress.

When I tell a story to my child, I express my best feeling and use my best language, yet I carefully follow her comprehension, interest, and excitement (she is an active audience); there is no incompatibility because I am here concerned, in love. But I do not in fact feel the same toward the corner grocer;—I speak of him as the type of person with whom one has daily dealings, friendly but defensive, this is the average audience (of course there is no average audience). Now if I tried, this moment, to entertain and move him, I should likely begin talking down to him and I should
certainly bore him; but this is neither my fault nor his; it is simply that my relation to him is not concern, love—nor hot hate, which would serve almost as well. Therefore my subject and words would be not mine, but a presumptuous guess at his.

That one feels concern or not is a fact; but it is this fact—however caused—that determines whether or not one can be a popular artist, have style, and also be greeted by an audience; it is not considerations of debased language, corny themes, corrupted audiences.

Presumably there was a time when the artist turned to his audience as a matter of course, on a basis of love, respect, and fear, as one tried to please and show off to parents or wooed a notoriously fickle beloved. Concern existed as a matter of course, how strange that seems! just as the words communicated by convention. What is the case now of myself as an artist? I see no grounds for an intelligent man to respect the American public in its mania; yet thinking about it, I do not really take their mania seriously, nor do I think they do (if I'm wrong I'll get rapped for it); and this mania aside, I respect my brothers and sisters pretty well. What I find lacking in me is the desire to please; I want their love without giving myself to the wooing. Aha! it is the fear that is too strong. I do not love the audience because I am afraid of the corner grocer! Fear of rejection? fear of blows? fear of contact?

4

"The audience is corrupt." This statement must mean two things: that the audience is so accustomed to the stereotyped use of language that it cannot hear the ring of urgent presentness, and that the audience is so fearful of any feeling that might work a change that it freezes against giving in to unsafeguarded experience. Both these things are true of the popular audience. Yet if we state them thus, we see at once that the audience cannot be much corrupted. An art-hungry public is not unfeeling; in fact the Americans are too vulnerable because of their passivity (and ignorance), so that small novelties effect crazes and fads. When a man, or an audience, freezes against the deepening of feeling, the threat of its working
a change, the problem is a simple one: to find at just what point the freezing occurs and to sensitize that point. Surely the artist can recognize that point, he is not insensitive there, otherwise how is he an artist? And as to the language of communication: ultimately it is the English language of childhood and of occasional adult passion; the musical rhythms are those of walking and skipping, for those who still walk somewhat and used to skip.

Suppose a delegation of the taxi-drivers came and asked me to write a vaudeville to entertain the taxi-drivers. This would not be difficult; one could always, at least, have recourse to pornography. If one felt concern for this audience, the work would be beautiful and releasing (the pornographic raised to beauty and understanding). Suppose a couple of sensitive and intelligent gentlemen on the radio directly and feelingly expressed their convictions, without making it nice? Would not the effect be electric?

5

There is an obstacle in these pleasing fantasies. Between the artist and the public stand those who control the mass-media, the publishers, impresarios, etc.

It is important to remember that from time immemorial an essential characteristic of the great art-media (architecture excepted) is to be cheap: paper, mud, rock, tinkling, humming, talk, agitating the limbs. It is on these poor nothings that great spirits have lavished endless labor toward their immortality. The media of communication served as means, not as obstacles. But now suddenly, because of our peculiar social arrangements, a feature of the mass-media is expense; and expense is controlled by, let us say, "social policy."

Thus, if I want to move a million people, I must also persuade the editor of The Saturday Evening Post to let me. It is not a question of moving him aesthetically, as one member of the audience, but of stirring him to practical approval of the way he has been moved. This persuasion I could never accomplish. As an audience, he is a human-being; but as a controller of capital-means he is an intermediary something, not a human-being at all. For instance, he maintains a policy, and I don’t give a damn for his policy. As a
responsible agent he looks into my credentials, but I trust my poetic act has no credentials. As a business-man he has an empirical notion of what will appeal to many readers; but by now this empirical test is meaningless, for the readers get nothing else in the mass-media except what he gives them, so perforce they like what they get. But what they get and take demonstrably does not move them, make any difference to them, for we see that with so much art we have the society we have. In fact he does not know what will deeply move people, nor do I; but he can never know, whereas I might find out by inventing it. How to get by this fellow? He, like any member of the audience, is afraid to be moved; but because of his role he holds on to himself very tight, much tighter than they. No doubt he is afraid to have the audience be moved; (this is called “the storm of angry letters” and “cancellations of subscriptions.”) Is it the case that magazines have foundered in such storms?). He seems to me to have a certain lack of daring; there is no reason why a profitable institution should be daring, but at least let us not talk about “what the public wants.”

In the whole dilemma of popular culture, this difficulty of proprietary control of the media by the tribe of intermediary bureaucrats is, I think, the only fixed reality. The natural problems, of themes and language and taste, solve themselves by natural means. If the audience and artist are brought in contact, concern must follow, and following concern a deepening of communication. To the extent that editors, impresarios, etc., are human beings, they too are a part of nature; but most often one has to do with them as dummies of public policy and profits.

So we come, finally, to a hackneyed political issue. And frankly, as an unreconstructed anarchist, I still must consider the solution of this issue easy, easy in theory, easy in practice; if we do not apply it, it is for moral reasons, sluggishness, timidity, getting involved in what is not one’s business, etc. The way to get rid of dummy intermediaries is by direct action. Concretely, in the present context of popular art (I am always fertile in little expedients): let actors get themselves a cellar and act and forget about the critical notices; let writers scrape together a few dollars and print off a big broadside of newsprint and give it away to all likely comers on 8th Street; forget about Hollywood movies—they don’t exist—
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and how surprising it is to find one can make a movie for a couple of hundred dollars and show it off in a loft. I don’t want to lay stress on such particular expedients; but it is ridiculous to gripe about vast socio-psychological labyrinths when what is lacking is elementary enterprise and belief.

You see, I myself am waiting for my friends to open a little night-club where the talents that we know galore can enliven us, instead of our frequenting idiotic places that bore us; and where I myself, setting myself exactly to this task, with concern and love (and a little hot hate), can move an audience to the belly and be greeted by a roar of laughter, hushed attention, a storm of anger, gleaming tears.

“What’s this? he speaks of popular culture, mass-media, the state of society, and he ends up pleading for a little night-club where he and his friends and their hangers-on can display themselves!” Listen, here is my concern: I want to be happy; I am an artist, I’m bound to it, and I am fighting for happiness in the ways an artist can. If you, audience or artist, take care of yourselves, the intermediary somethings will get less take at their box-offices, and we’ll have a popular culture.

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