

Mass Media and Culture: The View from the Left

The Frankfurt School/17/1/2000/P.Covington/

A Paralysis of Criticism ...

Herbert Marcuse

The People recognize themselves in their commodities, they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism, which ties the individual to society, has changed, and the social control is anchored in the news needs, which it has produced.

Herbert Marcuse 1964

'Euphoria of unhappiness'

Herbert Marcuse

The hypnotic power of the mass media deprives us of the capacity for critical thought, which is essential, if we are to change the world.

Herbert Marcuse

Introduction:

The Frankfurt School has **claimed that contemporary societies are 'mass societies'**. By this they mean that social community has been lost, with the rise of mass communications, the media has become worthless.

Those who formulated this perspective on culture in an academic way are usually referred to as **The Frankfurt School**, a group of Neo-Marxists. They include writers such as...

- **T. Adorno** (1903-1970)
- **Herbert Marcuse** (1898-1978)
- **M. Horkheimer** (1895-1973)

The Frankfurt School: A Reaction to the Nazis

The Frankfurt school was set up in 1923. Its founders **tended to be left wing German, Jewish intellectuals drawn from the upper and middle-classes of German society**. The rise of the Nazi Party in German in the 1930's and its racist opposition of Jews together with totalitarian repression of the left meant that the members of the school were forced to flee to other parts of Western Europe and North America. The School was temporarily situated in New York in the early 1940's (although some members spent time in Los Angeles. It eventually returned to Germany in the late 1940's, along with its leading figures. Some members stayed in the USA, reverting to Liberalism, whilst others extended the Schools analysis of modern society to post-war capitalist America. (Marcuse).

The Theory Itself

Basic Beliefs: One Dimensional Life (Marcuse) under Capitalism

These writers are highly critical of capitalism, and for reasons, which at first sight appear similar. They believe that the working class was once both dynamic and progressive.

However, the capitalist system has made that class soulless and one-dimensional.

Big business and the state have replaced traditional centres of authority like the family. These provide a schooling system, lifestyle and entertainment's which make the working class passive, uncritical and unthinking. Believing they are free, people are really manipulated. Believing they are happy, people are really in a 'euphoria of unhappiness'

Bread and Circus via Mass Culture

In a sense this theory is a **more complex elaboration** of the idea that '**bread and circuses**' pacify the working classes. The rulers believe of the working class that all they need do is keep their bellies full and their mind's busy with entertainment and they won't give any trouble. The Frankfurt School sees the modern equivalent of bread **as being all the consumer items that modern capitalism can provide**. The **circuses** are the **many elements, which collectively comprise mass culture**. Page Three Girls, Royalty, TV stars, Football, soap operas, and so on.

Those in authority within capitalism are able to propagate the myth of **freedom** and of **choice**. The masses are kept happy. They do not recognize the repressive nature of their 'freedom'.

The hypnotic power of the mass media deprives us of the capacity for critical thought, which is essential, if we are to change the world. **Marcuse**

Again mass culture is the route to a mass society.

The Effect of Mass Culture for the Left

Others on the left such as the writer **George Orwell** and **Richard Hoggart** have also expressed concern about the nature and effects of mass culture. Hoggart for example, thought that authentic working class life was destroyed by 'hollow brightness', the 'shiny barbarism' and 'spiritual decay' of imported American culture so **that traditional values** were **being broken down** and replaced by

A Candy Floss World of easy thrills and cheap fiction

How Will Liberation be achieved; The Essential Irony? **Give Up Mass Culture**

Liberation, the end goal of the project of critical theory can in this view only be achieved through waging a war on consciousness- of showing the masses that they have to do to achieve critical thought, but to do so they must give up the comfort and security of mass culture delivered by the modern system of mass communications.

The Frankfurt school condemns this mass culture. The media products are seen to deliver 'low culture' as a commodity to be bought and sold for capitalistic profit, rather than concentrating on genuine expressions of taste, art and intellect. This low culture, characterised by its essential sameness, is consumed by the masses that in turn lose individuality.

The Frankfurt school hopes to take this idea to its logical conclusion. They place their hope in revolutionary change for society **in the hands of 'high culture'**. Critics of the school point out that whereas they wish to achieve a mass Marxist revolution, they put their hopes in the hands of a non-working class, cultural elite. As **Chris Jenks**, comments....

It is, in many ways, one of the grand paradoxes and ironies of contemporary social theory that a concerted, prolific and radical group of Marxist scholars should have constituted a thesis on the character, value and function of mass culture that is personified by condemnation rather than redemption.

Exercise One

The radical left argues that the main function of the media is to titillate and entertain, so that the attention and interests of the working classes are diverted away from serious issues such as their exploited position in modern capitalism. The extensive coverage of the royals does this particularly well. List the topics, which appear **regularly in the media**, both printed and broadcast which could be said to perform this function.

Exercise Two

What arguments could be used against this view that their purpose is to pacify the working class and keep them happy. Use the following to help you. In each case say whether the phrase supports or rejects the Frankfurt schools response to the media.

Sex and Scandal,
Watergate,
Cash for Questions,
Royalty,
The National Lottery,
Increased wages,
Football,
James Bond,
CD players,
Modern houses,
Three-piece suite
The Jonathan Aitkin Case

An Example 'The Permissive Society'

We can illustrate these ideas by looking at the concept of the '**permissive society**'. It was usually said about the 1960's that they were years, which marked the beginning of **new freedoms**. People could, for the first time, **explore their sexuality** and other previously repressed desires. Fashion and other styles were liberated from the constraints under which they had operated in the past. However, the concept of 'permissiveness' contains all sorts of internal contradictions. It implies that someone's is allowing (permitting) freedom. **But freedom is not really freedom** if it is merely sanctioned by some higher authority, perhaps temporarily.

For the Frankfurt school the liberation of the 1960's and later is an integral part of mass culture. Modern sexuality is not real sexuality, it is in a form which Marcuse refers to as '*repressive de-sublimation*'. To *sublimate* something is to repress it. To be *de-sublimate* it is therefore, to give it expression. But *repressive sublimation*, an apparent contradiction in terms, means to give expression to, for example, sexuality in a repressive way. An illustration would be the trivial sexiness and superficial eroticism expressed in the advertising world and in *The Sunday Sport*.

The aim of all this repression disguised as liberation is to **keep to people passive** and feeling content. The working class is potentially a revolutionary force, capable of overthrowing capitalism. The way to stop them doing so is to **give them material well-being and the illusion of freedom** The mass media, the welfare state and the consumer society are all crucial in this effort.

Marcuse is not too hopeful though!

Ultimately Marcuse was **pessimistic** about the **working class as an agent of overthrow of capitalism**. He suggested that most of the working class had been seduced **into accepting capitalism by higher living standards** and the **appeal of mass consumption**. Working conditions have become less harsh in advanced capitalist societies and the welfare state has relieved the worst excesses of poverty and other forms of deprivation. Marcuse portrays modern men and women as *happy robots* chasing false needs.

Exercise Three

Place the following statements under

- View from Right
 - View From Left
 - Pluralism
 - Both View From Right and View From Left
1. Mass culture all debased or coarsened the human experience and destabilised the social order.
 2. Actually, the audience 'read' the media in an active and critical way both in studying it formally and as 'ordinary' viewers, readers or listeners
 3. Tastes of all sorts are catered for in virtually every area of output.
 4. Hoggart for example, thought that authentic working class life was destroyed by 'hollow brightness', the 'shiny barbarism' and 'spiritual decay' of imported American culture so that traditional values were being broken down and replaced by *A Candy Floss World of easy thrills and cheap fiction*
 5. They place their hope in revolutionary change for society in the hands of 'high culture'
 6. The rulers believe of the working class that all they need do is keep their bellies full and their mind's busy with entertainment and they won't give any trouble.
 7. However, capitalism soon polluted this culture and replaced it with a plastic commodity culture -mass culture
 8. In support of their arguments, pluralists point to the way in which even 'high culture' now reaches a mass audience.
 9. Modern society has made most people literate and this has enabled them to be discerning consumers of an ever-expanding cultural output.
 10. All this has made the working class listless and alienated. They are no longer content with their condition in life. Many of the problems of capitalism (strikes, violence, riots, suicides, divorce, etc.) are partly due to the inauthentic nature of the culture created by the masses by the economic system.
 11. T.S. Elliot implies that the more sophisticated cultures are developed by higher social classes, rich in tradition and custom, which were associated with the era of rural and craft production.
 12. The Internet is a classic example of this theory in action, huge choice, control passing to the consumer with decentralised control.
 13. There is nothing intrinsically plastic or false about music, literature, and films and so on of today. To say that is merely a form of snobbery.
 14. However, the capitalist system has made that class soulless and one-dimensional.
 15. They believe that the working class was once both dynamic and progressive.
 16. It is not true that the working class had a 'true' or 'pure' culture that has now been subverted.
 17. Both these set of theorists suggest that the audience believe what they see on TV.
 18. According to them, only a small and educated cultural elite was capable of understanding and profiting from the descriptions of the human experience contained in the great works of art and culture. Only this small cultural elite can pass on this precious inheritance to the next generation, but their position and authority is threatened by the spread of commercialised 'mass culture', which panders to the lowest common denominator and undermines cultural standards.

The Differences between Right Wing and Left Wing Explanations of Mass Culture and its Affects

Here then, is the important difference between the positions taken by the right and the left. The first sees the **natural state of the working class as contented and static**. The second sees it as **discontented and dynamic**. The first sees capitalism as disrupting this natural state by causing ease and discontent. The second sees it as repressing the natural state by causing a sense of ease and well being.

Neil Postman, while not a Marxist agrees with many of the arguments of the Frankfurt school. While printed materials demand a lot from the reader and helped create a 'serious and rational public conversation' *television* in particular has meant that 'much of our public discourse has become **dangerous nonsense**'. The average length of a shot on network TV is only 3.5 seconds so that there is always something new to see. Television requires **minimal skills** to understand it and is aimed at the **emotions rather than the intellect**. Thinking and TV do not mix. The action begins to look unpolished if people start saying 'let me think about that' or 'what do you mean by that?'. TV is best at entertaining but the problem for Postman is that all subject matter is presented as entertaining.

We are urged by newscasters 'to join them tomorrow'. What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept newscasters' invitation because we know the 'news' is not been taken seriously, that it is all in fun. Everything about a news show tell us this - the good looking amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show...

While the Pluralists may argue that more people are more informed by the news, **Postman** argues that this is an illusion of information. He invites us to consider events in Iran, reported in the media. Most people hear about it, most have an opinion. Yet how many people know what language Iranians speak or what 'Ayatollah' means or implies, know any detail about Iranian religious beliefs or their political history, who the Shah was, where he came from and what happened to him? **People don't really have opinions they have emotions.**

Pluralism

Again there are two perspectives which counters the argument put above. Though they do not view the mass media as necessarily beneficial, neither sees the media as giving rise to mass culture or mass society.

D Bell and E. Shils

Pluralism supporters include D. Bell and E Shils. Many of those working in the media would subscribe to it. Pluralists **reject the view that there is a mass culture at all**, at least in the negative sense that other perspectives use the term. For Pluralists it is **not true that the working class had a 'true' or 'pure' culture that has now been subverted**. This is pure romanticism, they argue. The reality is that for working men and women in pre-industrial society life was **usually brutish**, nasty and short.

Pluralists Believe that Mass Culture has been a Good Thing

Modern society has made most people **literate** and this has enabled them to be **discerning** consumers of an ever-expanding cultural output. This includes not only literature in the conventional sense, but also TV and radio output films, journalism and so on. People are also far **more politically literate** and **aware of the world around** them than was the case in the past. This allows them to appreciate and choose from, a wide range of options.

Class distinctions have become less and **less important** and in influencing the choices made by individuals in this respect. Members of the working class are as likely to be watching *Panorama* as anybody else, while soap operas are now appealing to the middle-class as well as the working class.

In support of their arguments, pluralists point to the way in which even '**high culture**' now **reaches a mass audience**. With the advent of TV and radio, drama, music and opera have become more accessible to more of the population than was ever the case in the past. The use of these media by the *Open University* has additionally **brought higher education** to thousands who were unable to gain access to it before. The provision of public libraries has **expanded the reading public**.

The greater influence of the population in general has provided spare money for buying books and newspapers. Music recordings and reproduction technology has developed very quickly in this century so that modern HI-FI is almost available to all. The latest manifestations of the mass media perhaps challenge the notion of the mass culture. From the pluralist perspective they will mean....

- **abundant supply of culture** and information to almost everyone
- considerable **choice and diversity**
- control passing from **producer to consumer**
- Distinction between **producers and consumers becoming blurred**.
- **Decentralization** of media production and consumption
- **interactivity** not one-way communication

Plurality: We are Free to Choose

As well as this, one should take into account the **expansion in the range** of cultural output. Tastes of all sorts are catered for in virtually every area of output. Taking music as an illustration, there is easy access to the music of many nations as well as forms of music from Brahms to The Beatles, from **Metallica to Mendelssohn**. An individual collection is likely to contain a mixture of these.

There is **nothing intrinsically plastic** or false about music, literature, and films and so on of today. To say that is merely a form of snobbery. There are no objective standards to say that one is better than another. The individual simply has the **freedom to make his or her choices based upon personal preference**.

Pluralists concur with recent research findings based upon audience reception analysis, which stress that the audience does not receive media messages in a uniform way. The ideas implicit within the mass culture/mass society idea are based upon naive hypodermic model, seeing the media as narcotizing the population.

Pluralists Believe that 'We Don't Believe all we See on TV

Actually, the audience '**read**' the media in an **active and critical way** both in studying it formally and as 'ordinary' viewers, readers or listeners. The very fact that people like Medved and Althusser can critically address the media shows that this 'reading' process is in operation. If they can do it, anyone can do it, yet it is strange that these writers never stop to ask why it is that they, alone, are immune from the media's baleful influence.

Exercise Four

Theory	Conservative	Radical Left	Pluralism
What was Lost?			
Why			
The Problem of mass Culture is?			
The Effect of Mass Culture?			

Fit in the following words into the above table....

1. Folk Culture
2. It helps develop individual freedoms
3. There is no such thing
4. Working class ignorance and poverty
5. It is not authentic and has little involvement
6. A dynamic working class
7. Capitalism has polluted the working class; they have become passive recipients
8. It creates the illusion of freedom and destroys the revolutionary potential of workers
9. Capitalism is successful in providing for working class needs
10. It merely titillates and entertains
11. Capitalism distracts the workers and gives them 'bread' and 'circus'.
12. It alienates the workers and leads to strikes.

Mass Culture: Some Opposing Viewpoints

A Pessimistic View

Those who hold a pessimistic view of the role of the mass culture in modern society include the following...

Kornhauser believes it creates a totalitarian culture in which people are not able to think for themselves; as a result it undermines the operation of democracy. **Arendt** has a similar perspective, seeing mass culture as destroying originality and leading to a homogenous life. To **T.S. Eliot**, the famous poet it has resulted in a culture of mediocrity and is especially worrying in that its continued spread, most obvious in the growing Americanization of our cultural lives, threatens both high and intellectual culture. This general pessimism is best summed up by **Rosenbury** who believes that the ever growing influence of low grade culture,

At worst threatens not merely to cretinise our taste, but to brutalize our senses.

A Far more Upbeat View

Williams feels that all this criticism is just that of an elite patronizing ordinary people. **Halloran** too agrees with this but also suggests that it is difficult to distinguish between high and mass culture and that any attempt to do so will be confused. Finally **Hoggart** believes that mass culture is actually of some worth and that this just has to be realized yet. Others such as **Shils** suggest that attacks on mass culture are politically motivated.

Exercise Five

Ranking	Books	Music
Good	Shakespeare	Beethoven
Mediocre	Jeffrey Archer	The Beatles
Bad	Mills and Boon	Sex Pistols

- Is it possible to rank, art, literature and music in this way?
- If it is, what makes Shakespeare 'better' than Archer?
- If it is not, is beauty simply in the eye of the beholder, with all of equal worth?

Exercise Six

Looks at the following statements are they strengths or weaknesses of the Frankfurt school.

1. The analysis is based on limited historical evidence. For example, was life really better in societies of the past.
2. Most people have a one-dimensional view of society. They do not understand many issues that are tacked on T.V news and certainly do not question what is put in front on them.
3. Mainstream Marxists also point out that there is no real analysis of class in Marcuse's work. The Frankfurt school has been described as Marxism without the proletariat!
4. The group recognized the important role the media played in the rise of the Nazis.
5. The theory critically accepts the idea of the hypodermic syringe. In reality most people use the media for their own purposes and certainly do not accept all that is put in front of them by the media.
6. As Marcuse suggested once radical subject has become part of the system.
7. Far from leading to an uncritical mass, nowadays people are well educated and understand the issues that are presented to them, in a way that was not the case 50 years ago.
8. Although the Frankfurt school sees modern day society as a mass society where class differences have ceased to be important, important cultural as well as economic differences are still apparent.
9. The work sees very pessimistic, they offer little hope of change in the system and perhaps over-emphasize the power of the system to crush or neutralize the opposition.
10. People spend up to 24 hours a week watching television, much of which is uncritical and unchallenging.
11. Their views importantly link with the view of the hypodermic syringe model, as set up the debate about this model.

Resources Used in the Making of This Handout

Investigating the Media: **Paul Trowler**

An Introduction to Popular Culture: **Dominic Strinati**

Media Sociology: **David Barrat**

The Guardian

Exercise Three

Theory	Conservative	Radical Left	Pluralist
What was Lost?	FOLK CULTURE (1)	A DYNAMIC WORKING CLASS (6)	WORKING CLASS IGNORANCE AND POVERTY (4)
Why	CAPITALISM HAS POLLUTED THE WORKING CLASS, THEY HAVE BECOME PASSIVE RECIPIENTS (7)	CAPITALISM DISTRACTS THE WORKERS AND GIVES THEM 'BREAD' AND 'CIRCUS' (10)	CAPITALISM IS SUCCESSFUL IN PROVIDING FOR WORKING CLASS NEEDS (9)
The Problem of mass Culture is?	IT IS NOT AUTHENTIC AND HAS LITTLE INVOLVEMENT (5)	IT MERELY TITILLATES AND ENTERTAINS (10)	THERE IS NO SUCH THING (3)
The Effect of Mass Culture?	IT ALIENATES WORKERS AND LEADS TO STRIKES (12)	IT CREATES THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM AND DESTROYS THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF WORKERS (8)	IT HELPS DEVELOP INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS (2)

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