

The Individual in a **MASS CULTURE**

George Gerbner

IT TAKES 17,000 different job classifications to produce an ordinary can of peas. Thousands more are needed to market the millions of cans that must be sold to pay the producers and to make a profit. A small army of specialized talent must convince us, therefore that one brand of ordinary peas is like no other brand of ordinary peas. Finally, we need a detachment of the artists, performers, and technicians to create the popular cultural atmosphere in which the vibrant image of the brand the corporate profile of its provider may

be etched in the public mind. All this is genuine aspect of mass culture.

Mass culture today has absorbed and utilized previously existing forms and functions of high folk class cultures, developed new form of its own, and transformed the whole into a historically new phenomenon. The facts of this transformation are so obvious that we often take them for granted. Parents used to wonder how they spent their time before they had children. Today they are equally apt to ask, "What did we do before television?"

As a nation we now devote more time to the consumption of mass-produced communications than to paid work, or play, or anything except sleep (and the "late show" is cutting into that too). Television alone, only ten years old as a mass medium now demands one-fifth of the average person's waking life. Comic books, twenty years old, can sell one billion copies a year at the cost of \$100 million — four times the budget of all public libraries, and more than the cost of the entire book supply for both primary and secondary schools. Movies developed within a lifetime, reach 50 million people who still go to theatres each week. The same number stay home and watch movies on TV each night — a total of 50 million a week.

But such facts and figures illuminate only one facet of the transformation. They do not reveal anything about changes in the structure, context, and orientation of popular culture.

HOMO SAPIENS became a recognizable human being through collaboration, community, and communications. Of these, communication is the most uniquely human element in its symbolic representation and re-creation of the human condition. This symbolic representation and re-creation — whatever we call it news, information, or entertainment — is

the heart of popular culture. This is the shared communicative context of messages and images through which society reveals to each of its members the varieties limitations, and potentials of the human condition.

The basic social function of popular culture is, therefore, to make available to all members of the species the broadest range of meanings of their own humanity that society makes possible, and, in turn, to help them build such societies as new conceptions of the human potential may require.

Popular culture can fulfill such functions to the extent that it makes available representations and points of view that enable men to judge a real world, and to change reality in the light of reason, necessity, and human values.

To that extent, popular culture also forms the basis for self-government.

Men's experiments with self-government are predicated on a historically new conception of popular culture. This new conception assumes that men have such consciousness of existence as they themselves provide for in communications; that reason confronts realities on terms cul- makes available; that societies can be self-directing only to the extent, and in ways, that their popular cultures permit them to be so.

Much has happened since some of these assumptions found expression in the First Amendment. Popular culture has come to be mass-produced and harnessed to the service of a marketing system.

The founding fathers made life, liberty, and property subject to law but tried to protect freedom of speech and press from the main threat they knew—government. They did not foresee the revolutionary cultural development of our time: the transformation of public communication into mass-produced commodities protected from the laws of the republic but subjected to the laws of property and of markets.

Today the words of Andrew Fletcher, uttered in 1704, reverberate in the halls of the Academy (and, at times, of Congress): "I believe if man were permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of the nation." For ours is a revolution in the making of all the ballads.

The "ballads" of an age are those vivid dramatic accounts and images which compel attention for their own sake and which, in so doing, provide common assumptions about man, life, and the world. They are the means through which society communicates to its members.

Today these means are big, few, and costly. They are own-

ed, controlled, and supported by industrial enterprises of mass communication. These enterprises, and the industries that support them, bear central responsibility for decisions affecting popular culture. It falls to them to safeguard the freedom to reflect on the requirements and dreams of a real world. But there are neither Constitutional guarantees nor alternative forms of support to protect the mass media in carrying out these responsibilities and in safeguarding these freedoms.

The strategy of private-enterprise mass production is geared to careful assessment, cultivation, and exploitation of marketable desires. A detachment of intelligence specialists probes public fancy; reconnaissance brings in the sales charts, cost-per-thousand figures, consumption statistics; corporate headquarters issues a series of battle orders; an army of popularity engineers prepares compelling messages designed to make the public want what it will get. Then vivid images of life roll out of the "dream factories", produced to exacting specifications to sell the public what it wants. These are the images and messages through which millions see and judge and live and dream in the broader human context. And the conditions of sale are implicit in the content and quality of the dream. What are these im-

lications? How do these conditions of sale affect the individual's image of himself? How is that image changing?

Individual means indivisible, a single separate person. Individuality is the sum total of characteristics that set one individual apart from all others. What leads to differentiation and uniqueness of individual existence? One factor is the range of response required by the environment. Life probably began in the depth of the oceans where food can float to the simplest organism with little effort or sensation on its part. A higher form of differentiation is required when the organism can float against the current, as well as with it, in search of food. But the highest forms of life we get tremendously more complicated pattern because of the operation of another factor: social life. Specialization in the performance of socially necessary tasks leads to further differentiation and uniqueness. When 17,000 different job classifications go into canning of peas we have an intricate social network both relating and differentiating ways of making a living, which is the material basis of individualized existence.

But existence by itself is not consciousness of existence. Between human existence and our consciousness of existence stand the symbolic representation and imaginative re-creation of exist-

ence that we call culture. Culture is itself a historical process and product. It reflects the general productive structure of society, the role and position of communications institutions, the dominant points of view their role and position may impart to these institutions, and certain overriding myths, themes, and images.

EDUCATORS especially wonder about the consequences inherent in the commercial compulsion to present life in salable packages. They observe that in a market geared to immediate self-gratification, other rewards and appeals cannot successfully compete. They are concerned about subjecting young people to dramatically heightened impact of the adult environment as the target audience of consumers presumably wishes to see it. There is fear of distortion and moral confusion in the image of the human condition that might emerge. And there is suspicion that the appeal to juvenile fantasy, role experimentation, curiosity, and even anxiety and revolt, may be based more on the private necessity of developing habits of consumer acceptance than on public requirements of developing critical judgment and of defining essentials of a useful life in society.

Not least among the paradoxes confronting "people of abun-

dance" having "comfort and fun" in the "affluent society" is the shadow of what rather than surfeit in our midst, and around the world. The soothing voice titillates lethargic consumers while muted government reports speak of as many as one out of every five American families living in stubborn pockets of permanent poverty. And before the message is over, somewhere within half a day's jet-range of the voice a spider-bellied child whimpers and lies still forever. The image of the human condition reflected in the selective mirror of mass culture defies full moral comprehension; it can be grasped only in terms of privileges of the market place, of purely private rewards of the moment, dangerously divorced from the world of crying needs with which the present market structure cannot effectively connect.

The charge of the critics is, in brief, that for all its attractions and private satisfactions, our mass culture does not link the individual to that real world of existence in which he can become an autonomous person, in which he can base his direction on an awareness of the existing structure of his relations to the others, in which he can find representations and points of view necessary to judge and change reality in the light of human values.

The complexity of the structure of our relationships to other places on popular culture increasing demands to illustrate, illuminate, explain, and dramatize the meaning of being a man in a collective society. Whether we call it information, entertainment or even escape, I think it is basically this quest which explains the alacrity with which we embrace every basic innovation in popular culture. But the "privatized" individual finds his hidden thirsts increased rather than quenched.

Over privileged as a consumer and undernourished as a citizen, the purely private individual is a perpetual Walter Mitty. His daydreams of identity present flight from insight into the broader context of his existence. From his ranks come addicts of schizophrenic images of Superman. Mass-produced sadism and irrational violence are his staple diet. These afforded private gratification in their cheapest, and therefore most profitable, form; they can thrill him while he "tells of the world" without having to enter into any consequential relations with it. The purely private individual cannot think in Descartes' sense of critical reflection; he can only salivate to clues that evoke his "internal stirring"; he can "resonate" but not reason. There, by grace of mass culture, goes a challenge for us all.