Saturday Review
JUNE 18, 1960

THE INDIVIDUAL IN A MASS CULTURE

By GEORGE GERBNER, *associate professor at the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois.*

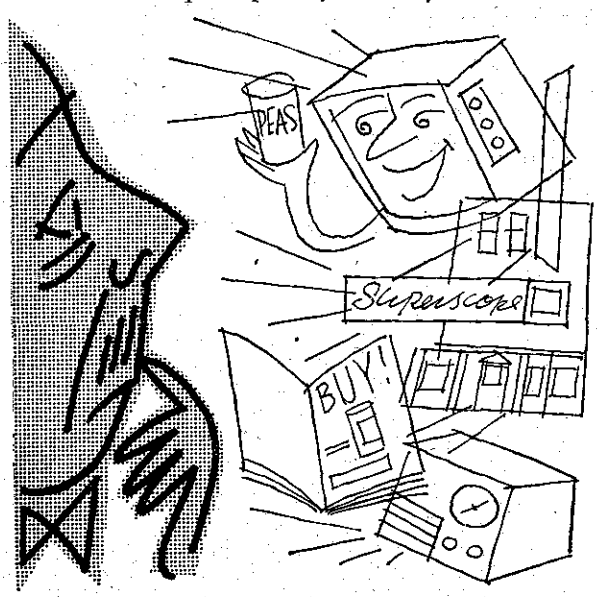
IT TAKES 17,000 different job classifications to produce an ordinary can of peas. Thousands more are needed to market the millions of cans that must be sold to pay the producers and to make a profit. A small army of specialized talent must convince us, therefore, that one brand of ordinary peas is like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

Mass culture today has absorbed and utilized previously existing forms and functions of high and folk and class cultures, developed new forms 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 a 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 400 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 the pattern. It is unique especially in its symbolic representation and re-creation of the human condition. This symbolic representation and re-creation—whether 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 culture 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 har-

nessed 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 a 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 owned, 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 implications? 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 responses 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 with the highest forms of life we get a 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 the 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 existence 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 impart to these institutions, and certain overriding myths, themes, and images.

Man was first defined in the image of his tribe. His first glimpse of individual identity in Western culture was the figure of the Greek hero in conscious separation from the tribe. The separation led to conflict, conflict to tragedy. Not until greater personal control over the means of livelihood made a larger measure of individualized existence possible did we regain a clear vision of individual identity. This came when the accumulation of some private property made independence, self-reliance, and even equality at least conceivable. But the awareness was rooted, as it had to be, in a denial of cultural forms out of tune with new social realities. Begin by doubting everything, said Descartes, arguing against medieval philosophy and ecclesiastical authority. Get rid of your assumptions and preconceptions. This will force you to acknowledge only one thing: that you doubt. Good. You have just affirmed your existence as an individual. "I think, therefore I am."

THIS proof of separate existence hardly fortified the individual, now cast adrift from the moorings of the old certainties and social patterns, for what was to follow. The industrial system gave private control over the means of livelihood, and over the dominant interpretations of the meaning of life, again to a few. Today less than two-tenths of 1 per cent of all American corporations employ half the people who produce all the nation's wealth. An even smaller percentage employ or subsidize most of those who create the bulk of cultural output consumed by almost all the people. Food for our thoughts and even for our doubts has become a mass-produced commodity.

This brings us back to the question posed earlier: What are the implications of mass-produced culture for the individual, and for his awareness of individuality?

Mass culture is mass-production of popular-culture commodities and their rapid or instantaneous distribution to widely dispersed, heterogeneous audiences. Inherent in the centralization, speed, and scope of mass culture are some basic transformations affecting our view of time, space, life, and the social process.

Time has been compressed, chopped up into fragments, and telescoped into the present. Yesterday's "news" lines our garbage cans before we have an opportunity to place it in perspective. History must be written before it is made. Montaigne could say four centuries ago that "The only good histories are written by those who had command

in the events they describe." But today command over the *description* of events gives a large measure of command over the events themselves. We compete for the right to represent the "spirit of our age" while we still live it; the prize for the dominant description is influence in the age we purport to represent. David Riesman notes the tendency for intellectuals to create myths of themselves by writing autobiographies while still quite young, "as if the principle of buying on credit and living now rather than later was extended into all spheres of intellectual life."

Not only has our image of the world been telescoped into the present, but the process of description and image-making has also been short-circuited. Margaret Mead recently called attention to a whole new dimension of learning: "the lateral transmission to every sentient member of society of what has just been discovered, invented, created, manufactured, or marketed."

Here we are dealing not only with time but also with space and the social process. Instead of the slow filtering-down process, we have the almost simultaneous introduction of ideas and products at all levels of society. The distant and strange becomes familiar and the "new" commonplace; space becomes flexible, and the flow of influence appears lateral because everybody can be exposed to the same sources.

IN the new contexts of time, space, and mass-produced representations of the social process, the individual's symbolic environment is unquestionably enriched. In their studies of society in transition, Daniel Lerner and his associates found the "traditional personality" with low or no exposure to mass culture often incapable of conceiving of being anyone else or living anywhere outside his village or having opinions on matters outside his ken. Experience mediated through mass culture, Lerner suggests, "simplifies perception (what we 'see') while greatly complicating response (what we 'do'). In this way the media have helped to shape the modern, highly responsive self-system. This is the style of life partially characterized by David Riesman as "other-directed." But the term "empathy," Lerner writes, "more nearly does justice to the elements of skill and the positive social functions of other-direction. Empathy enables people to respond efficiently to strange and varied stimuli; in so doing it enlarges the self-system of ordinary people. By enabling them to 'see' the other fellow's situation more readily, empathy provides the psychological underpinning for the participant lifeways of modern society."

So far we have looked at some implications of the existence of modern mass culture about which there is relatively little controversy among critics, scholars, and researchers. But what I call the "silver lining" school of thought among students of popular culture goes beyond these observations. It goes on to chastise "disappointed intellectuals" for lamenting the failure of a cultural millennium to follow material abundance; it calls attention to the achievements of our consumer-oriented society of "comfort and fun," including achievement of the new human right—"the right to be constantly entertained." It considers lives and tastes to be improved as well as enriched by mass culture. And it claims that whatever is wrong with mass culture is just the price we pay for all that is right—we must take it or leave it as a whole.

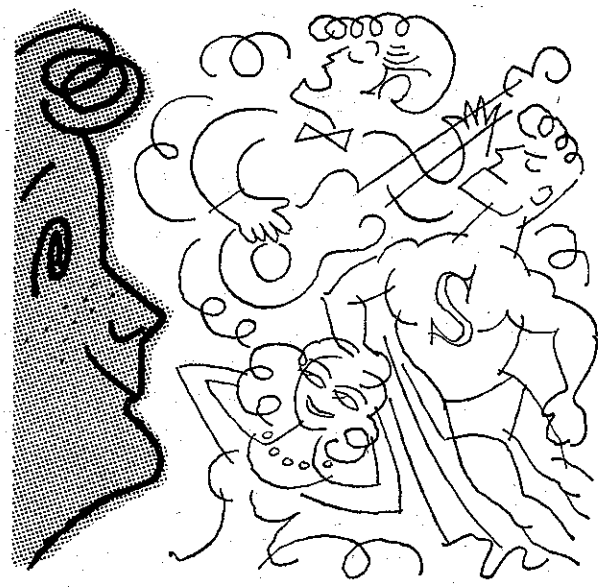
Those who have their eyes fixed on the cloud rather than the silver lining present a very different diagnosis. They assert that by obscuring and distorting the structure of social relations, mass culture isolates man from society and robs him of his sense of productive usefulness to others.

The transformation of publics into audiences and mass markets for popular culture relegates the citizen to the role of consumer, the critics charge. The consumer may accept or reject what is offered but he can only come to terms and never to grips with the structure of his society. "Men in masses are gripped by personal troubles," writes C. Wright Mills, "but they are not aware of their true meaning and source." The consumer of that can of peas finds it easier to develop brand loyalties and attachments to corporate images than to feel any sense of kinship to the nameless and faceless thousands who in fact make his living possible.

The chief media of cultural industry "not only continue to affirm the *status quo*," write sociologists Lazarsfeld and Merton, "but, in the same measure, they fail to raise essential questions about the structure of society. . . ."

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 a 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 the public requirements of developing critical judgment and of defining essentials of a useful life in society.

Not least among the paradoxes confronting "people of abundance" having "comfort and fun" in the "affluent society" is the shadow of *want* 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 the 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

(*Continued on page* 36)

Mass Culture

Continued from page 13

to others, in which he can find the representations and points of view necessary to judge and change reality in the light of human values.

And so the issue is joined. But perhaps the two sides are not entirely irreconcilable. Is it not possible to enrich the range of individual responses and even extend awareness of the self while at the same time limiting the bases of individual self-direction? Allen Wheelis in his stimulating book "The Quest for Identity" suggests that such indeed might be the fate of the individual in a mass culture. He finds that the range and variety of experience have been extended but that it is less stable and less integrated than before. Modern man has become more sensitive to hidden motivations in himself and in others; he *has* to know which way every wind blows because his own compass and rudder—his own coherent sense of self—is deficient. A war in Korea, a play on Broadway, a new philosophy in France—all these are experienced more quickly and widely than ever before. The elements we are called upon to integrate are more numerous, less homogeneous. But what common assumptions do they provide about life, man, and the world? A coherent sense of self, writes Wheelis, "depends upon the awareness that one's endeavors make sense, that they are meaningful in the context in which life is lived. It depends upon stable values, and upon the conviction that one's actions and values are harmoniously related. It is a sense of wholeness, of integration, of knowing what is right and what is wrong and of being able to choose." The change in the experienced quality of life in the mass-produced culture that has come upon us in the last fifty years makes such an identity harder to achieve and harder to maintain.

SOCIAL research in communications and popular culture has amply demonstrated that long-run consequences, remote satisfactions, public rewards, or generalized social benefits of whatever survival value make cash registers jingle only if they can be shown to relieve a felt individual want, fear, or anxiety. We are unable to mobilize much cultural support for aims which do not yield an immediate payoff for somebody producing some commodity for some market. Public agencies are effectively excluded from the mass-cultural field. This leaves the field clear for the privately controlled consumer-oriented media to play the roguish, indulgent uncle. Already the pre-school child senses, and through parental restrictions and teacher admonitions will surely learn, that of all the major socializing agencies he encounters, only the mass media are unreservedly and untiringly "on his side."

Being on the side of the individual who is mobile, searching, suspicious, and aware of many of the paradoxes but rarely of the social roots and structure of his existence—this has become an increasingly scientific art, and one to which more and more energy is being devoted.

Let me offer a case in point. Adult minds and adult money are heavily invested in what the trade calls the "youth market." Recent studies show that 16,000,000 boys and girls between fourteen and nineteen years of age have a combined spending power of $9 billion a year; in five years this market is expected to number 24,000,000 youngsters with $14 billion in spending money.

THIS is a gigantic plum, considerably more than what we spend for all public and private schools for these same people. As competition for this market becomes more intense, the appeals used become more insistent, attractive, and compelling. Every swell of teen-age interest from pajama parties to horror films is scrutinized for mass-media and merchandising tie-in implications. If the signs are auspicious, the ripple may be fanned into a tidal wave that sweeps across the country. Clearly, it pays to formulate some principles about whom and what the young customer of mass culture will perceive as being "on his side."

The trade journal *Motivations* formulated such principles two years ago in a series of summaries of adolescent motivations research. Any market appeal, explained one report, is "the more successful the more it is 'on the consumer's side.' But to no other group in society will the appearance of someone 'who is on my side' be as welcome as to the adolescent." Another report stated the challenge to strategy in these terms: "A young man with a guitar rises from out of nowhere to become—through recorded sales, movies, TV appearances, and all the tie-ins from clothing to fan magazines—a multimillion-dollar business. Why?"

Let me summarize their answers. They begin with the well-known observation that adolescence is a prolonged transitional state of anxiety, uncertainty, skepticism, and even brand-disloyalty. The teen-ager is suspicious of double standards, preachiness, exaggerated assertions. "He has discovered that his parents can be wrong, narrow, and rigid; that other families and groups have other standards," the researchers note. His is a "'twilight world' where

what is done clashes with what *should be* done." The only standards the adolescent can trust, advise the researchers of motivation, "is the notion 'if everyone else does it, wears it, likes it, it *must* be good.'" The evidence indicates, they assert, that "the adolescent group remains wholly captivated by the appeal which tells him 'This is the right thing; this will show that you belong; this will prove that you are in the know.'"

In this context, and from this point of view, that "young man with the guitar" presents a very different picture from the more customary adult image. "The Appeal of Elvis" is seen as a multimillion-dollar response to the adolescent's need to "resonate" with *something* in our civilization.

> Man needs to resonate, to respond "in tune with" his world and his society [write the motivation experts]. This universal need for responding in fullness of emotion, in concert with others, is seen operating in the "primitive" ritual dance, the blood-stirring powers of the military march, etc.
>
> But to what, in modern life, *can* the young respond in concert with their fellows? Too excitable, too total a response at home is frowned upon. School life offers little opportunity for a response of total being.
>
> So the youngsters . . . find in the musical forms and in individual stylists (both of which originate in the restlessness of society) those external rhythms which match and bring out their own internal stirrings, and they "resonate," quite literally "in tune with" these rhythms. When interviewed, they said to us: "His voice just *thrills* you inside." Or, "He has a way that gets right into you." The music arises from needs very like their own.

This is a description of the cultural process which some social critics describe as mass-manipulation and regard as totally antagonistic to the democratic ideal of individuality. But what appears to the critic as cultural totalitarianism, the trade researchers see as "total response." They conclude with the following observation:

> Presley's songs, all in one way or another, express the theme of (a) "respond to me totally—allow me to respond to you totally." (b) "Don't push me around—I am an independent person." (c) "I can tell off the world if I feel like it."

In the cozy embrace of mass-marketed culture, young people are most likely to find the choice of all consumers: "Respond totally in concert with others, and you can, at the same time, tell off the world if you like." They are least likely to find the choice of the citizen: "Reflect upon your world if you like, and, in concert with others, change it."

The dominant market-orientation of mass culture limits its major functions to cashing in on the *status quo* and merchandising such gratifications as can be profitably cultivated under the circumstances. With all his psychic mobility and extended self-awareness, the young American today is in desperate search of identity because the satisfactions he is compelled to cultivate make him an increasingly *private* animal. Careful studies of students' attitudes show that their goals in life are couched almost entirely in terms of self-reference such as personal amusement, consumption, and diversion. Even among college freshmen, only 3 per cent chose usefulness to others or to one's community as an achievement to be "most proud of." "We find other evidence," wrote James M. Gillespie and Gordon W. Allport, "that the American student, by and large, manages to separate himself from the political and social context of his existence. The term *privatism* has been used to label this particular state of mind."

The complexity of the structure of our relationships to others 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.

Overprivileged as a consumer and undernourished as a citizen, the purely private individual is a perpetual Walter Mitty. His daydreams of identity represent flight from insight into the broader context of his existence. From his ranks come addicts of the schizophrenic images of Superman. Mass-produced sadism and irrational violence are his staple diet. These afford private gratification in their cheapest, and therefore most profitable, form; they can thrill him while he "tells off 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 stirrings"; he can "resonate" but not reason. There, by the grace of mass culture, goes a challenge to all of us.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

Column Two should read: 6, 8, 9, 5, 1, 10, 2, 4, 3, 7.