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Bread and Circuses

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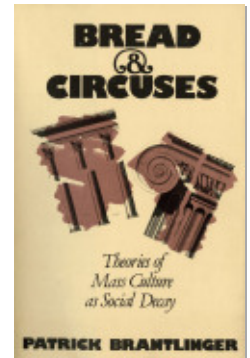
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Preface

FOR better or worse, the most powerful, influential instruments for the dissemination of values, knowledge, and art are today the mass media. Among artists and intellectuals, the cultural domination of radio, film, and television is normally viewed with apprehension. Teachers of literature, for example, often express the fear that books are an endangered species, that literacy is dying out, that it is giving way to what Jerzy Kosinski calls “videocy.”¹ Political theorists on both the right and the left argue that the mass media are “totalitarian” rather than “democratic,” that they are a major—perhaps *the* major—destroyer either of “individualism” or of “community.” Often these apprehensions are expressed in terms of a mythology that I call “negative classicism,” according to which the more a society comes to depend on “mass culture,” the more it falls into a pattern of “decline and fall” once traced by Rome and perhaps by other extinct civilizations. These apprehensions are not necessarily mistaken, but the mythology of negative classicism tends to obscure what is new and potentially liberating in our present situation.

1. See the interview with Jerzy Kosinski by David Sohn, “A Nation of Videots,” *Media and Methods*, 11 (April 1975), 24–31, 52–57. A recent study of responses to literacy and the forces that threaten it is Robert Pattison, *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Pattison’s book unfortunately appeared too late for me to consider it here. See also my essays “The Multiversity as a Mass Medium,” *Radical Teacher*, 13 (March 1979), 28–32, and “Mass Communications and Teachers of English,” *College English*, 37 (January 1976), 490–509.

The purpose of this book is to criticize negative classicism as it has been applied to mass culture not just in our electronic present but over the last two centuries. The most recent “bread and circuses” responses to television and the welfare state are hardly new; they echo the reactions of artists and intellectuals from as long ago as Juvenal’s age to the entry of “the common people” into the cultural arena, or to the imposition on society of a centralized or mass-produced culture. Negative classicism is the product of several traditions of culture theory, from offshoots of Burkean conservatism to the esthetic postulates of Marxism. My hope is that a critique of the mythology of negative classicism will help to open the way for new ideas about culture and society.

I do not wish to revive or defend older forms of culture, either “high” or “mass,” any more than I wish to champion the electronic mass media as they are now employed in both capitalist and socialist countries to distract, to narcotize, to sell toothpaste and beer, fascism and Soviet Marxism. The two major arguments in defense of the mass media which have developed over the last twenty years I find largely unacceptable. The first line of defense is that of Marshall McLuhan and his disciples; the second is the case for “cultural pluralism” as fully compatible with—indeed, as partly a product of—the mass media, an argument that Herbert Gans, for example, makes in *Popular Culture and High Culture*.² If McLuhan counters the mythology of negative classicism, it is only to substitute another mythology, equally suspect, based on the belief that the mass media are making the world over into an electronic utopia. Gans, on the other hand, represents a pragmatic liberalism whose main tenets have been directly challenged by the monopolistic, perhaps even totalitarian, tendencies of the mass media. Where others find the erosion of democracy, Gans finds an enduring vitality. His vision reconciles democracy and massification in a way that, I believe, cannot be squared with reality. A third defense of mass culture and the mass media might be expected to develop from Marxism, but the most influential versions of Marxist culture theory in Western Europe and America have treated the media in terms of reification, negation, monopoly capitalism, and therefore in

2. Raymond Rosenthal, ed., *McLuhan: Pro and Con* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969); Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic, 1974).

terms of “empire and decadence,” “bread and circuses”—as in Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*.

In my own reading and thinking about the mass media, I have wished to find some theory that would convince me that, somehow or other, in some not too remote future, mass culture and democratic community will coincide. They promise to do so, as Raymond Williams, among other theorists, has suggested; but that promise seems to recede just as fast as the mass media achieve new levels of power, influence, and sophistication.³ Given this disillusioning pattern, we may indeed be justified in using some version of negative classicism to understand where the mass media are leading us. But whatever liberating potential there may be in the technology of the media counts for little in an apocalyptic mythology that reads the doom of empires in what seem to be among the most constructive, original developments of the age. How can this contradiction be understood? The history of theories about mass culture—which is more often than not the history of negative classicism, Roman analogizing, “bread and circuses”—may provide at least some clues to the future toward which the mass media are propelling us, or to the future we may create for ourselves through learning to use the mass media in democratic ways.

Many people and several institutions have helped me complete this project. I am grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; their fellowship allowed me to spend 1978-79 at the University of California, Berkeley, beginning research that must have sounded strange and unlikely at the proposal stage. I am also grateful to Kenneth Gros Louis, John Reed, Jerome Buckley, and Patrick McCarthy for their support in the early going, and to Indiana University for the “leave without pay” and Summer Faculty Fellowships that added both free time and financial support to the Guggenheim.

I went to Berkeley in part because the University of California is blessed with two scholars, Leo Löwenthal and Martin Jay, who know

3. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966 [first published in 1958]); *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961); *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1975 [1974]). The influence of Williams’s thinking on my own will be apparent throughout this book.

more about the history of the Frankfurt Institute than anyone else. They offered me their time, ideas, criticisms, and even their libraries with great generosity. Both read parts of this book in early and embarrassingly rough drafts, and both offered suggestions that were astute, usable, and yet also encouraging.

Others—Ellen Anderson Brantlinger, Martha Vicinus, Eugene Kintgen, and Matei Calinescu—also read and criticized parts of this book at various stages. I am grateful to all of them, but especially to Ellen and Matei. Ellen not only helped and encouraged me in numerous ways, but patiently endured a good deal of absent-mindedness, sloppy housekeeping, and plain blue funk from me while I was writing. With his criticisms and suggestions about new books and articles to read, Matei helped me to sharpen most of the chapters, focusing my attention on the paradox of progress as decadence.

Some of the ideas in this study I first tried out in a graduate course at Indiana: L680, *Literary Theory*. I team-taught that course with Christoph K. Lohmann, whose knowledge of American writers helped me at the start of this project. During the semester we taught together, Chris brought many of my thoughts about mass culture into better focus. I also imagine that many of the comments and questions of our L680 students are registered in this book. Other students and colleagues have helped with suggestions, information, conversation, research, translating, and typing, including Marilyn Breiter, Joan Corwin, Linda David, Joseph Donovan, John Eakin, Catherine Gallagher, Camille Garnier, Daniel Granger, Donald Gray, Raymond Hedin, Joonok Huh, Lewis Miller, James Naremore, Robert Nowell, Marsha Richmond, Sheldon Rothblatt, Scott Sanders, Michael Sheldon, Anthony Shipps, Robert Smith, Elisa Sparks, Lee Sterrenburg, Paul Strohm, Timothy Wiles, and John Woodcock. I also thank Jerzy Kosinski for coming to my aid when a journal mangled an essay of mine, the better parts of which I have revived in this book. And both David Riesman and Michael Grant generously answered my requests for information.

Whom have I left out? Perhaps our television set, but it is occupied most of the time when I want to watch it by Andy, Susan, and Jeremy (no, they have not been transmogrified into “videots,” and they are not usually “barbarians” either). I suppose I have them to thank for keeping me at work those evenings when what I wanted to watch was

not what they were watching. And I can be even more thankful to them for another reason: someday they may read this book and understand why I wrote it for them.

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BREAD AND CIRCUSES

