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.

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

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. 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.

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

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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.

Patrick Brantlinger

Bloomington, Indiana
BREAD AND CIRCUSES