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The Culture Industry

Selected essays on mass culture

Edited and with an introduction
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THE SCHEMA OF MASS CULTURE

The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear. Aesthetic semblance (Schein) turns into the sheen which commercial advertising lends to the commodities which absorb it in turn. But that moment of independence which philosophy specifically grasped under the idea of aesthetic semblance is lost in the process. On all sides the borderline between culture and empirical reality becomes more and more indistinct. Thorough efforts in this direction have long been underway. Since the beginning of the industrial era an art has been in vogue which is adept at promoting the right attitudes and which has entered into alliance with reification insofar as it proffers precisely for a disenchanted world, for the realm of the prosaic and even the banausic, a poetry of its own nourished upon the work ethic. Goebbels then prescribed it in the form of an iron romanticism for totalitarian purposes. It was not without good reason that writings like 'Hinter Pflug und Schraubstock' ('Behind Plough and Vice') and even 'Soll und Haben' ('Debit and Credit'), which were recommended to the young as particularly suitable fare, enjoyed such popularity in Germany. Such works are sited around the fundamental fracture within bourgeois education. Officially

this education is oriented towards the realm of the ideal, towards 'alles Schöne und Gute' ('Everything that is beautiful and good'), it encourages admiration for the heroic individual and glorifies the values of candour, unselfishness and generosity. And yet from our earliest youth all of this is only admitted on the condition that it is not after all to be taken seriously. With every gesture the pupil is given to understand that what is most important is understanding the demands of 'real life' and fitting oneself properly for the competitive realm, and that the ideals themselves were either to be taken as a confirmation of this life or were to be immediately placed in its service. Enthusiasm for Schiller meant sowing one's wild oats in good time and an enthusiastic essay on *The Maid of Orleans* was a sure promise of time-saving promotion into the higher class at Easter. Herein lies the tacit understanding between teacher and pupil which binds them so firmly together in spite of all other conflicts. The so-called teacher's witticisms and the fraternal gatherings of teachers and students at drinking parties and the like may deceptively conceal the misery of hierarchical subordination but they simultaneously reveal that identity on the basis of which the hierarchy is built. Nevertheless the very inexperience of the young, which is so tirelessly impressed upon us, can always mislead them into taking the ideals with which they have been pragmatically presented seriously: one can never be quite sure that the proper integration has been accomplished as early and as radically as it should have been. This is where the likes of Eyth and Freytag so promptly and helpfully step in. Beneath the mantle of adventure they smuggle in the contraband of utility and the reader is persuaded that he does not have to renounce any of his dreams if he eventually becomes an engineer or a shop assistant, those dreams which in a class society are already in thrall to the world of things and directed towards the imago of the train driver and the pastry cook even before the reliable 'children's literature' has been unleashed upon him. Perhaps the fantastical figure of Robinson Crusoe was already no different, who represented the very model of 'Homo oeconomicus', being transported by a fortunate shipwreck out of the system of bourgeois society only to reproduce it again 'through his own effort', as the children's literature likes to put it.

Everything, including war, has its own poetry, if only Eyth's lyrics and the products of the 'worker poets'. Starting with 'Das Flaggenlied'

(‘The Banner Song’) such poetry points the way, *mens sana in corpore sano*, towards colonial expansion and workers associations. Today total mass culture has replaced the ‘Neue Universum’ (‘New World’). The most stylish photographs of aeroplanes soaring above the clouds, the brilliant play of light on moving machinery, the furrowed brows of well-chosen representatives of the ‘common folk’ emulate that perfidious innocence of ‘The Golden Book of Technology’ that lies resplendent among the Christmas gifts of the modern liberal child. In the cinema, this misalliance between photography and the novel, such pseudo-poetry becomes complete; it is now so present in every detail that it no longer even needs to express itself as such. It is solely the power which stands behind this everyday poetry today and impresses us with its colourfast and lavish presentation that can still deceive adult human beings about the extended childhood that is only prepared for them so that they might function in all the more ‘adult’ a fashion. A poetic tremor is expected of every example of emphatic objectivity. The ‘Oh!’ of astonishment which the objective close-up still stifled is blurted out by the lyrical musical accompaniment. The tremor lives off the excess power which technology as a whole, along with the capital that stands behind it, exercises over every individual thing. This is what transcendence is in mass culture. The poetic mystery of the product, in which it is more than itself, consists in the fact that it participates in the infinite nature of production and the reverential awe inspired by objectivity fits in smoothly with the schema of advertising. It is precisely this stress upon the mere fact of being which is supposed to be so great and strong that no subjective intention can alter it in any way – and this stress corresponds to the true impotence of art in relation to society today – that conceals the transfiguration against which all sober objectivity gestures. Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication. This is how the technological veil and the myth of the positive is woven. If the real becomes an image insofar as in its particularity it becomes as equivalent to the whole as one Ford car is to all the others of the same range, then the image on the other hand turns into immediate reality. We no longer even approach the much vaunted aesthetic image-consciousness. Any achievement of imagination, any expectation that imagination might of its own accord gather together the discrete elements of the real into its truth, is repudiated as

an improper presumption. Imagination is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism which determines whether the latest image to be distributed really represents an exact, accurate and reliable reflection of the relevant item of reality. The only remnant of aesthetic semblance here is the empty abstract semblance of a difference between culture as such and practice as such, the division of labour as it were between different departments of production. The actual power of aesthetic image-consciousness with respect to the reception of works of art has always been highly questionable. It was bound up with educational privilege and conditions of leisure and in its pure form belonged more to the philosophical concept of art than it did to the social fate of works of art and the social conditions of their production. The prevalent concern with the material stratum of works of art, a persistent symptom of the failure of bourgeois civilisation, also betrays something of the untruth of aesthetic autonomy itself: its universality remains allied to ideology as long as real hunger is perpetuated in hunger for the material in the aesthetic domain. But if works of art have only intermittently been perceived as such, then mass art has taken that alienation of the masses from art, blindly sustained in life by society, up into the process of production as its presupposition, lives from it and deliberately reproduces it. The work of art becomes its own material and forms the technique of reproduction and presentation, actually a technique for the distribution of a real object. Radio broadcasts for children which intentionally play off image and reality against one another for the sake of advertising commodities and in the next moment have a Wild West hero proclaiming the virtues of some breakfast cereal, betraying the domination of image over the programme in the process, are as characteristic as the identification of film stars with their roles which is promoted by the advertising media, 'The lovers of "Burning Sarong" matched again' etc. The affair of Orson Welles' broadcast 'Invasion from Mars' was a test performed by the positivistic spirit to determine its own zone of influence and one which showed that the elimination of the distinction between image and reality has already advanced to the point of a collective sickness, that the reduction of the work of art to empirical reason is already capable of turning into overt lunacy at any moment, a lunacy which the fans who send trousers to the Lone Ranger and saddles to his horse already half affect. The

successful fusion of waking life and dream life however can allow itself a certain tolerance with regard to ideals. They are accepted as an ahistorical given along with others and the honour which they owe to their opposition to life becomes a means of vindicating them as legitimate and successful elements of real life. A great poet is almost as good as a great inventor or talent scout, just as long as the standing of the work protects us from having to read any of it.

With the liquidation of its opposition to empirical reality art assumes a parasitic character. Inasmuch as it now appears itself as reality, which is supposed to stand in for the reality out there, it tends to relate back to culture as its own object. The monopolistic hold on culture, which forbids anything that cannot be grasped, necessarily refers us back to what has already been produced in the past and institutes self-reflection. This is the source of that glaring and yet ineliminable contradiction between the presentation, elegant technical finish and modish procedures on the one hand, and the old-fashioned traditionally individual and culturally derived decayed contents on the other, the contradiction that is revealed in the standardization of what is individual. The bourgeois works of art which mass culture withdraws from circulation on account of their defective fidelity to the real did not take pleasure in themselves precisely because of their strict formal immanence: Kant's doctrine of the sublime is the most striking expression of this. The mass culture which is so true to the facts absorbs the truth content and expends itself in the material but all it has left as material is itself. Hence all those musicals and biopics and all the biographies about artists etc. Self-reflection is provoked by the techniques of the sound film which can only introduce song into the action in a realistic manner by turning singers into the heroes who first lose and subsequently regain their voices. But the true source of self-reflection lies in the fact that decisive aspects of reality today elude representation through the aesthetic image. Monopoly scorns art. The sensuous individuation of the work, to which mass culture must continue to lay claim precisely if it is to be able to perform its complementary function profitably in a standardized society, contradicts the abstractness and self-sameness to which the world has shrunk. In so far as a film only recounts the fate of an individual, even if maintaining the most extreme critical awareness, it already succumbs to ideology. The

case which is presented as one which is still worth recounting becomes for all its desperate nature an excuse for the world which has produced something so worthy of being related; while the real desperation expresses itself mutely in the fact there is nothing more to be recounted and that all we can do is recognize it for what it is. Perhaps the gesture of the narrator has always had something apologetic about it, but today it has become nothing but apology through and through. Even a radical film director who wished to portray crucially important social developments like the merger of two industrial concerns could only do so by showing us the dominant figures in the office, at the conference table or in their mansions. Even if they were thereby revealed as monstrous characters, their monstrosity would still be sanctioned as a quality of individual human beings in a way that would tend to obscure the monstrosity of the system whose servile functionaries they are. Yet if the director were to proceed in the most modern fashion and interrupt the life-story of the characters with montage technique in which the ominous balance sheets of the steel concern are intercut with images of the might and greatness of the plant itself, and both those intercut with images of the general director himself, this would not only be unintelligible and tedious for the audience but would also automatically transform itself into an artistic ornament on account of its arbitrary psychology. Finally, the magnate would come to acquire a negative symbolic function for those viewers with the least sociological awareness.

Anxious concern over the deplorable state of affairs agitates for reform and a society that is generous enough to anticipate its own critique: the ghost town of yesterday implies the full employment of tomorrow. No ideology even needs to be injected. Ever since the pressure from above has ceased to tolerate any longer the tension between the individual and the universal, then what is individual can no longer express the universal and art becomes a form of justification or at least a means of eliminating the period of fruitless expectation. This is not to say that art should seek its true vocation solely in the representation of the relations of production for precisely this is in all probability impossible for it.¹ But mass culture expressly claims to be close to reality only to betray this claim immediately by redirecting it to conflicts in the sphere of consumption where all psychology belongs today from the

social point of view. The conflict which was once located in the realm of the superfluous now appears itself as a luxury: fashionable misfortune is its own consolation. In its mirror mass culture is always the fairest in all the land.

The self-reflection of culture brings a levelling down process in its wake. Inasmuch as any and every product refers back to what has already been preformed, the mechanism of adjustment towards which business interest drives it anyway is imposed upon it once again. Whatever is to pass muster must already have been handled, manipulated and approved by hundreds of thousands of people before anyone can enjoy it. Loudspeakers are installed in the smallest of night clubs to amplify the sound until it becomes literally unbearable: everything is to sound like radio, like the echo of mass culture in all its might. The saxophones stand in pre-established harmony with the sound of canned music in so far as the instruments themselves manage to combine individual expression and mechanical standardization, just as this is accomplished in principle throughout the process of mechanical reproduction. The 'digest' has become a particularly popular form of literary distribution and the average film now boasts of its similarity with the successful prototype rather than trying to conceal the fact. All mass culture is fundamentally adaptation. However, this adaptive character, the monopolistic filter which protects it from any external rays of influence which have not already been safely accommodated within its reified schema, represents an adjustment to the consumers as well. The pre-digested quality of the product prevails, justifies itself and establishes itself all the more firmly in so far as it constantly refers to those who cannot digest anything not already pre-digested. It is baby-food: permanent self-reflection based upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place. Traditional cultural goods are treated in just the same way. Nothing is left of them except the crudest materials of political and cultural history and the lustre of the great names handed down to us, those names to which all the 'top people' of today cling with unconditional solidarity. Through constant contact with the sold-off spirit 'amusement' in turn is elevated until it degenerates into dutiful exercises in the appreciation of cultural values. The difference between 'serious' and 'light' culture is either eroded or expressly organized and thus incorporated into the

almighty totality. In the case of the socio-critical novels which are fed through the best-seller mechanism, we can no longer distinguish how far the horrors narrated in them serve the denunciation of society as opposed to the amusement of those who do not yet have the Roman circuses they are really waiting for. Schubert polished up to the highest finish now resembles Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov. Gershwin's hits have derived their harmonic recipes from these sources and are accounted great art as a reward for having reconciled popular appeal with cultural distinction. There is no longer either kitsch or intransigent modernism in art. Advertising has absorbed surrealism and the champions of this movement have given their blessing to this commercialization of their own murderous attacks on culture in the name of hostility to the same. Kitsch fares no better as hatred towards it becomes its very element. Sentimentality is robbed of its implausible character, of that touching but impotent Utopian moment which for an instant might soften the hearts of those who have been hardened and take them beyond the reach of their even harder masters. The imported French director who cannot have too many bright ideas immediately takes back with glossy irony the tears almost as soon as they appear. To the jazzed-up classics there now belong the screen actresses of 'grande passion' who are undressed and depicted in compromising situations; no longer witnesses to passion, they are debased along with passion itself: the usual hazards of passion must play along with the universal 'fun'. It is true that such exhibitions do not alter the acceptability or respectability of what is made fun of. With the sense of order characteristic of a dominant housewife careful watch is kept lest the realistic harmony between image and object be disturbed, this flotsam and jetsam of the nineteenth century to which we remain truer the more we mock the beards and the fashions of the past. The tradition in question is that of the comfortable second-hand realism of the humanly accessible which was formerly administered by feature journalism and purveyed on a big scale by essayists from Sainte-Beuve right down to Herbert Eulenberg. Art which informs us about reality was always accompanied by 'instructions for use' which inform us about art and today both have been conflated. Empathy with the object not only reconciles us with it but with every object. No one should think themselves better than they are. The viewer is persuaded of the merit of

his own averageness and he may one day receive the supreme prize as 'Mr Average Customer'. Not even the oldest are repelled by the modernism of mass culture and its presentation: they pour into the cinema as avidly as they read the novels of Werfel. What David Friedrich Strauss, who could write about Jesus as if he were Emil Ludwig even though he was wounded by Nietzsche's attacks, what he undertook on his own account today is performed irresistibly from above without any risk whatsoever. There is no longer a single idea which cannot be neutralized by recourse to the fate or psychology of its author so that the latest doctor can bask in the claim that his hysterical wife resembles Queen Elizabeth I of England and his jealous colleagues resemble those of Paul Ehrlich. Not enough that faded aristocratic values are fed to the fraternal millions, they are simultaneously translated into egalitarian terms and the jargon of unlimited communication. Spiritual nobility of soul and the sense of fraternity have melted together into slogans for the workforce.

But every individual product is levelled down in itself as well. There are no longer any real conflicts to be seen. They are replaced by the surrogate of shocks and sensations which seem to erupt from without and generally have no real consequences, smoothly insinuating themselves into the episodic action. The products are articulated in terms of episodes and adventures rather than in acts: the structure of the 'funnies' is overtly reproduced in the women serials and in more refined form in the class A picture. The defective power of recall on the part of the consumer furnishes the point of departure: no one is trusted to remember anything that has already happened or to concentrate upon anything other than what is presented to him in the given moment. The consumer is thus reduced to the abstract present. Yet the more narrowly the moment has to vouch for itself, all the more must it also avoid being burdened with calamity. The viewer is supposed to be as incapable of looking suffering in the eye as he is of exercising thought. However, even more essential than transparent affirmation is the pre-determined resolution in the 'happy ending' of every tension whose purely apparent character is revealed by the ritual conclusion. Every specimen of mass culture in its very structure is as historical as the perfectly organized world of the future could wish it to be. It is the 'variety act', the techniques of which are clearly recalled by jazz and

film as the two most characteristic forms of mass culture, that provides the model here. It was certainly no accident that the variety act was once so prized by those avant-garde writers who were so critical of the liberal bourgeois work of art, that is, the work determined by the idea of conflict. What really constitutes the variety act, the thing which strikes any child the first time he sees such a performance, is the fact that on each occasion something happens and nothing happens at the same time. Every variety act, especially that of the clown and the juggler, is really a kind of expectation. It subsequently transpires that waiting for the thing in question, which takes place as long as the juggler manages to keep the balls going, is precisely the thing itself. In variety the applause always comes a fraction too late, namely when the viewer perceives that what was initially imagined to be a preparation for something else was just the event of which he has been cheated as it were. The trick of the variety act consists in this betrayal of the temporal order, just as the event when it finally comes always displays a tendency to assume the character of a frozen pose or tableau, a symbolic suspension of the action to the accompaniment of the drum roll while all other music is stilled. Consequently the viewer who always comes too late can never be tardy after all: he jumps up as if to mount the merry-go-round, and in its first beginnings the cinema still resembled the fairground shooting-booth that you entered as you chanced upon it. The major film is too good for this, of course, but by technical necessity and especially in its more respectable examples it is constantly driven in the same direction. However, the trick is played upon time itself and not merely upon the viewer. Thus variety already represented the magical repetition of the industrial procedure in which the selfsame is reproduced through time – the very allegory of high capitalism which demonstrates its dominating character even as it appropriates its necessity as the freedom of play.

Variety celebrates the paradoxical fact that in our advanced industrial epoch there is still such a thing as history, while its archetypes, the first chimney and the first top-hat, already suggest the idea of technical control over time in which history comes to a standstill. Surrealism lives off the obsolescence of that which has no history and which presents itself as obsolescent, as if it had been destroyed by some catastrophe – this paradox is celebrated by the variety show. The act,

the performance becomes the model of mechanical repetition and thus absolves itself of its nugatory historicity. Perhaps it was this disenchanting truth in 'variété' which outweighs any semblance of the historical, a semblance to which the bourgeois work of art still clung even in the advanced industrial age, which inspired Wedekind and Cocteau, Apollinaire and Kafka to praise the form so much. Impressionist music, a spurious synthesis of painting and music, imitated the procedure and it was not for nothing that Debussy chose the variety act as one of his musical subjects. With Debussy, who described his most mature piano pieces as 'Preludes' and 'Etudes', the inexperienced listener might well be tempted to take everything here as a prelude and wait for it all to begin, as with a firework display – which is what the last of the Preludes is actually called. As the form which subsumed the heritage of impressionist music for the purposes of mass culture, jazz was never so faithful to that style of music as in this: that as has been noticed before in a jazz piece, all the moments which succeed one another in time are more or less directly interchangeable with one another, that there is no real development, and that what comes later is not one whit richer in experience than what has preceded it. Both variété and impressionism objectively speaking represented an attempt to render the concept of industrial procedure serviceable for the autonomous work of art or to conceive of it, emancipated from every end, in *abstracto* as the pure domination of nature.

In so far as they made mechanization their privileged theme as it were, they attempted like Chaplin to play a trick on it and transform the shock of the eversame into a Bergsonian laughter. But mass culture falls victim to its pre-ordained fate inasmuch as it adopts its law and simultaneously obscures it. Mass culture treats conflicts but in fact proceeds without conflict. The representation of living reality becomes a technique for suspending its development and thus comes to occupy that static realm which revealed the very essence of variété. This can be seen in those sectors in which dynamic bourgeois art is subjected to adaptation. Simply by virtue of what it does to the original the technique of mechanical reproduction as such already betrays the aspect of resistancelessness. Whatever problems of psychological fate the film may present, through parading the events past the viewer on the screen the power of the oppositions involved and the possibility of freedom

within them is denied and reduced to the abstract temporal relationship of before and after. The eye of the camera which has perceived the conflict before the viewer and projected it upon the unresisting smoothly unfolding reel of film has already taken care that the conflicts are not conflicts at all. In so far as the individual images are played past in an uninterrupted photographic series on the screen they have already become mere objects in advance. Subsumed as they are, they pass us impotently by. Like the child who reads an adventure story in the first person and is relieved to know that nothing has happened to the hero since otherwise he would be unable to narrate his story in the first place, so it is to a certain extent with one who watches a filmed version of a novel as well. It is true that the hero may die but he cannot at least instigate anything and a filmed death is only half a death after all. It is similar with the biographies of great individuals: nothing can happen to them which didn't happen to them anyway and the finished story takes care of this. The historical accounts which so zealously exploit the fame of their heroic subjects decisively help to procure for them that Olympian existence which they had already begun to assume with their translation into the pantheon. Certainly every finished work of art is already predetermined in some way but art strives to overcome its own oppressive weight as an artefact through the force of its very construction. Mass culture on the other hand simply identifies with the curse of predetermination and joyfully fulfils it. Thus the technological changes which have been brought about with the advent of radio have inflicted a loss of history upon music.² Even the performance ideal of serious music in the sense of a perfect account of the work that takes no risks, as this has developed under monopoly conditions, has fallen under an iron grip of rigidity despite the ostentatious appearance of dynamism: the performance of a symphony in which nothing can go wrong is also one in which nothing happens any more either.³ The favoured compositions of mass culture are specifically selected in accordance with this trend. The best sellers here are the late romantics like Tchaikovsky and Dvorák for whom the symphonic form is simply a face. They already weakened symphonic form by turning it into a pot-pourri of melodies arbitrarily connected with one another. The symphonic schema no longer performs any real function here and all that is left of the dynamic form of the symphony, antiphonic motivic elaboration

and thematic development, are the interludes of noisy excitement which unpleasantly interrupt the potpourri until it is resumed as if nothing had happened, as if everything could begin all over again.

The lack of conflict which in mass culture stems from the all-encompassing concerns of the monopoly can even be seen today in great art within those very works which most resolutely resist the cultural monopoly. Schoenberg's dodecaphonic technique has put in question the principle of development from which it first arose, and Brecht's epic theatre, which has taken to constructing conflict specifically for the purpose of social critique and for the sake of a materialist dialectic, has actually cancelled a dramatic dialectic: the idiosyncratic sensitivity towards the concept of climax is the most obvious expression of this. The montage effects which Brecht introduced into drama implies the almost complete interchangeability of time and the explicit captioning which refers to 'Life' and 'Rise', for example, in the titles of his plays seems to deprive the dramatic characters of action and transform them into experimental objects of a predetermined thesis. Thus in spite of its discontinuous nature this procedure comes to resemble the lack of resistance of cinematographic technique, just as in fact all Brecht's innovations could be read as an attempt to salvage the theatre in an age of film after the disintegration of psychology. This approach presupposes in the viewer, envisaged as someone smoking at ease who is not supposed to be 'centrally' moved, as a political issue just that feebleness of thought and recall which mass culture has produced: epic theatre is both a response to mass culture and mass culture's own reversed consciousness of itself. This theatre demonstrates how the relationship between the work of art and its immanent temporality is changing. The overcoming of time represented the most crucial concern of drama and symphonic music, as is revealed not only by the Aristotelian doctrine of the unity of time but by the actual procedures employed in the great dynamic works of art themselves. The empty passage of time, the meaningless transience of life was to be seized upon through form and brought into participation with the 'idea' by virtue of the totality of this form. It was precisely this thematization of time which allowed its heteronomy to be excluded from the aesthetic domain and which permitted the artist to inject into the work of art at least the appearance of a timelessness. This appearance transformed the

work into the essence and pure reflection of mere existence and thus served to express transcendence. Conflict was the means by which time was overcome through sustaining intra-temporal tension within the work. Conflict concentrates past and future in the present. Ibsen's dramaturgy expressed this with the formula: the measure of conflict is the power of the past in the present as the threat of the future. In the very idea of drama the interconnection of intra-temporal moments becomes so condensed and the relationships between them so comprehensively articulated that the mere passage of time takes on form and shape as a powerful configuration of meaningful relationships on the level of conflict before ultimately finding resolution. The temporality of absolute drama would be the instant which reveals itself in a flash from the crystallization of all the temporal relationships within the action. It is no different in the case of the symphony which by means of its universal motivic elaboration, the musical equivalent for the dramatic dynamics of conflict, not merely fulfils its own time but actively imposes meaning upon it and causes it to disappear: Beethoven's Seventh Symphony provides an exemplary case of the dialectical arrest of time. Yet this intention has only ever represented one side of bourgeois art: the truth concerning the existence of pre-history, a truth which is constituted in reflection upon the timelessly governing unity of time, as timeless truth becomes a lie, as governing truth always becomes an injustice and the dams it has erected are constantly and repeatedly broken by the time it has tried to exorcise. By virtue of its overcoming of time art remains impotent really to accomplish the transcendence of existence in the mere commemoration of it. Consequently the demand to transcend existence through the integration of time has always been accompanied by the other demand to renounce all pre-ordained meaning and through an unfettered, as it were passive, 'empiricist' abandonment to the temporal element which we have given up trying to master and thus to allow this absence of meaning to emerge and reveal it precisely in its very negativity: 'the rest is silence'. From Shakespeare's chronicle dramas through the struggles of Lessing and the Swiss school against classicist poetics right up to the psychological novel this tendency, under the massive shadow of bourgeois culture, has become more and more powerful. Today it has sprung over into the two poles of the avant-garde on the one hand

and mass culture on the other. The last great novels, namely those of Proust and Joyce, surrender themselves so unreservedly to time that time itself, the meaningless passing of which still constitutes the real content of the novel in Flaubert's work according to Lukács, now becomes as dissociated as the individuals who live through it. The renunciatory surrender to the purely temporal explodes the temporal continuum. The temporal moments into which the narrative has disintegrated now even begin to escape from the relationship of temporal succession and through the power of memory draw all temporal events back into themselves like a whirlpool. Finally, Brecht's dramatic procedure already presupposes the collapse of time as well as that of the individual. The epic element is supposed to cut through the intensive unity of the dramatic action and reveal its illusory and ideological character, but it is certainly not intended to replace the unity of action with that of the temporal continuum. The Brechtian drama is governed by a kind of time-space, an experimental time which more closely resembles that of the repeatable 'laboratory experiment' than it does the time of history. It is true that this experimental time is no more protected from the irruption of empirical time than is its counterpart of dramatically contained time. For empirical time, which is the most profound expression of the relations of domination within the field of consciousness, persists as long as domination lasts and lies embedded in art itself because art is constituted in the protest against the time of fate. While such time is excluded by the relationship of spatial simultaneity created by the 'mounted' scenes, it creeps into the conflictless succession of events. As long as drama in general remains bound to the principle of succession it becomes all the more subject to abstract time the more resolutely it refuses to wrap up time by means of the dramatic action. Mass culture which tolerates neither conflict nor any obvious form of montage must pay tribute to time in every one of its products. This is the paradox of mass culture. The more ahistorical and pre-ordained its procedures are, the less temporal relationships become a problem for it and the less it succeeds in transposing these relationships into a dialectical unity of temporal moments, the more craftily it employs static tricks to deceive us into seeing new temporal content in what it does, then the less it has left to oppose to the time beyond itself and all the more fatally does it fall victim to that time. Its ahistoricity

is the tedium which it affects to relieve. It evokes the question whether or not the one-dimensional time which is characteristic of the blind course of history is even identical with the timelessness of the ever-same, identical with fate.⁴

Yet the liquidation of conflict in mass culture is not merely an arbitrary matter of manipulation. Conflict, intrigue and development, the crucial elements of autonomous literature and music, are unconditionally bourgeois as well. It is no accident that ever since the time of Attic comedy drama has looked for its intriguers among the bourgeois. As an attempt on the part of the powerless to acquire power through their own intelligence, intrigue is the aesthetic cipher for the bourgeois triumph over the feudal order, the triumph of calculation and money over the static wealth of land and the immediate repression through armed force. The business and bustle of the intriguer, as this could still be perceived in the early period of great symphonic music in Haydn, in genially confident affirmative form before, with a critical turn, it came to constitute the essence of Beethovenian humour, originally derives from the unlimited effort demanded by competition, that zealous and conscientious industriousness which unintentionally put the noose around the neck of anyone who couldn't keep up. The intriguer is the negative image of the bourgeois individual and embodies the inevitable contradiction with solidarity that such an individual implies, just as the hero and his spirit of freedom and sacrifice is supposed to represent the very same individual. They both belong to one another like two fragments of a broken world which have been welded together, one might almost say welded together like the bourgeois world and art itself. Today the life of both is at stake as they draw ever closer together. The hero no longer makes any sacrifices but now enjoys success. He does not come of age and assume freedom through his deeds for his career is simply the revelation of his conformity. Thus he is the intriguer who has 'arrived', whose confiscated appearance reveals itself with all its irresistibility in the form of Clark Gable. Monopoly establishes the successful competitor in just the same way. Thus the petty intriguer disappears along with the small competitor: his conspiracy would only be a bankruptcy. His success is sanctioned as a fate which renders all action illusory and pre-ordained. The last intriguers were the triumphant ones who helped bring the Fascists to the

reins of power and establish them firmly in the Kaiserhof through the secret dealings of the banker Shroder, who advanced on Rome by sleeping-car, and who took part in the murder of the old guard [in the Night of the Long Knives].

Nobody is deceived by intrigue any more now that its law has established itself directly in all its omnipotence. Mass art registers this fact inasmuch as it repudiates conflict as outmoded or if it borrows it from the store of traditional culture removes it from the realm of genuine spontaneity by predetermining its character. The bourgeois types generally associated with intrigue and conflict seem to appear in the prison clothing which they are supposed to have acquired in the liberal past. The word 'banker' has become a term of abuse even in the United States, like 'lawyer' and 'professional politician', and the dissatisfied ambitious woman fares no better when she is depicted as a vamp. Reporters and impresarios are still tolerated as comic relics. History is extruded from tales which have become cultural commodities, even and especially there where historical themes are exploited. History as such becomes a costume identified with the individual concealing the frozen modernity of monopoly and state capitalism. Hence the emergence of that false reconciliation, the absorption of every negative counter-instance by an omnipotent reality, the elimination of dissonance in the bad totality. Lack of conflict within the work of art ensures that it can no longer endure any conflict with the life outside itself because life banishes all conflicts into the deepest hidden places of suffering and keeps them out of sight with pitiless force. Aesthetic truth was bound to the expression of the untruth of bourgeois society. Art really only exists as long as it is impossible by virtue of the order which it transcends. That is why the existence of all the great forms of art is paradoxical, and more than all the others that of the novel, the bourgeois art form *par excellence* which the film has now appropriated for itself. Today with the most extreme increase of real tension the possibility of the work of art itself has become utterly questionable. Monopoly is the executor: eliminating tension, it abolishes art along with conflict. Only in this consummated conflictlessness does art wholly become one moment of material production and thus turn completely into the lie to which it has always contributed its part in the past. Yet at the same time it here approaches more closely to the truth than those remnants

of traditional art that still continue to flourish, to the extent that all preservation of individual conflict in the work of art, and generally even the introduction of social conflict as well, only serves as a romantic deception. It transfigures the world into one in which conflict is still possible rather than revealing it as one in which the omnipotent power of production is beginning ever more obviously to repress such a possibility. It is a delicate question whether the liquidation of aesthetic intrication and development represents the liquidation of every last trace of resistance or rather the medium of its secret omnipresence.

'One doesn't do that sort of thing', says the smart court official Brack when Hedda Gabler shoots herself. The monopoly now assumes his position. It disenchants conflict and the individual by means of its plain objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*). The omnipresence of technology imprints itself upon objects and everything historical, the race of past suffering in men and things it taboos as kitsch. Prototypical here is the actress who manages to appear fresh and painstakingly made up with her hair perfectly arranged even in the midst of the most appalling dangers, in a tropical typhoon or in the clutches of white slave traders. She is so closely, so precisely and so pitilessly photographed that the magic which her make-up is intended to exert is heightened by the lack of illusion with which it is thrust before the viewer as literally true and unexaggerated. Mass culture is unadorned make-up. It assimilates itself to the realm of ends more than to anything else with a sober look that knows no nonsense. The new objectivity which it apes was developed in architecture. In this purposive domain it defended the aesthetic rights of purposiveness against the barbarism which the semblance of purposivelessness brings with it in that context. It has made standardization and mass production into a matter of art, where its opposite scorns every law of form that is derived from without. The practical is all the more beautiful, the more it repudiates the semblance of beauty. But as soon as objectivity is wrenched free of ends, it degenerates into precisely that kind of ornamentation which it had originally denounced as a crime. Wherever film and radio abandon themselves to technocratic visions and Utopian techniques, they resemble that advanced architecture before it made its peace with the world, when it still dishonestly struggled against it with all its might. If we wish to compare the mass-produced music 'Tin Pan Alley' with architecture,

we should not think of those plain new rows of dwellings but rather of the detached family houses which fill such a large part of Old and New England: standardized mass products which even standardize the claim of each one to be irreplaceably unique, to be a villa of its own. It is not the standardization as such which makes these houses from the nineteenth century look so uncanny today as much as the relentless repetition of the unrepeatable, all those pillars and bay windows, little stairs and turrets. We can perceive this atmosphere of 'presentation' in all its first bloom in every product of mass culture and the process of consumption under monopolistic direction only reveals it all the more clearly year by year. Mass culture is incompatible with its own objectivity. It constantly refers back to materials whose essence resists such an objective presentation. At the same time it demonstrates its connection with the prevailing practice from the first by borrowing industrial methods through which it produces objectivity as style. The relationship between objectivity and the object itself is not an objective one: it is determined and disrupted by calculation. The perfection of the technical 'how', of trick and presentation, combined with the indispensable fatuity of the 'what', is the ultimate expression of this. The virtuosity of the jazz band which abandons itself to the eight-bar rhythms of the hit composer like a wild animal in a cage, the clever camera shots which can create to order the sensitive cloud effects of the nineteenth-century novel, the frequency modulation which allows us to hear Gounod's 'Ave Maria' with such astonishing clarity, all of this represents more than a mere disparity between moments that find themselves at different stages of development. The time lag itself arises out of the compulsive quid pro quo of dream and purposiveness in mass culture, just as old-world German national costume and folk-dancing were instigated not in spite of the reality of the tank but because of it. In a highly industrialized society, so it is argued by the new realists in the name of mass culture, the intellectual and cultural needs of the consumer adapt themselves to material needs. They are subject to exactly the same standardization and it would surely be retrogressive to try and avoid this process which is the technical presupposition of the realistic attitude. The Ford model and the model hit song are all of a piece. But the very thought of such adaptation already implies the acceptance of the manipulation of needs by the might of

production. Yet the spirit which is supposed to adapt itself in this way has the tendency and not merely the opportunity to resist such manipulation. The difference between practice and culture, upon which the monopoly lays such value by turning it into the administrative problem of co-ordinating the appropriate departments, consists precisely in the denial of co-ordination and the supremacy of those purposes dictated by the relations of production. Since in order to assert itself in its departmental character this co-ordinated culture must take account of this fact, it gets caught up in an irresolvable contradiction which it must constantly admit despite itself in every attempted evasion. Even the current hits, the most contemptible of standard products have something immaterial as their subject. They all obey the absurd slogan which one of them once advertised as a title: 'Especially for You'. In view of such close interconnection it is not enough merely to point out this ineliminable opposition between art and the real purposes from which such objective art adopts its standards. For mass art lives precisely from the fact that it maintains the opposition between practice and culture in a world where that opposition has become an ideology. Mass art falls victim to the realm of practice through its insistence over against material life upon the thing-like and fetishized character of the cultural goods which it has packed up and dispatched for use.

Permanent self-reflection is good for it in this respect. On the other hand that art which is seriously concerned with the critique of bourgeois purposiveness focuses upon a world which has been wholly claimed by purposiveness. It must measure itself against that world not only materially but in accordance with its own formal constitution. If objective art finds itself in danger of degrading its purposive forms into a false façade for the sake of its own purposelessness, then non-objective art which avoids the transposition of purposive forms betrays a tendency towards the apologetic. Its poetry confidently complements the jauntiness of its opposite and thus both antagonistic schools get along amicably with one another. The Wiener Werkstätte and suchlike right up to Rilke and T.S. Eliot with their attempts at the preservation of the soul are actually no further from monopoly capital than the streamlined products which nestle up to the soul all the more obligingly as its ornament to the extent they imitate monopoly more literally. Every yellow-bound Ullstein novel, every film produces the required

synthesis. The cracked surface of the commodities betrays the fracture of all art today. Responsible art sees itself confronted with a paradoxical choice: either it develops purposive forms so unrelentingly in their purposiveness that they come into open conflict with all external purposes when pursued to the bitter end, or it abandons itself so unreservedly to describing the existent without paying the slightest attention to special aesthetic considerations that its very refusal to intervene in the aesthetic formation of the object actually reveals itself as a purer law of form free of any decorative ingredients. Mass culture is not to be reproached for contradiction, any more than for its objective or non-objective character, but rather on account of the reconciliation which bars it from unfolding the contradiction into its truth. Its objectivity is not that which belongs to the immanent necessity of all the moments in a work but is merely the reflection of an objective style of life and perception. Its non-objective character on the other hand does not declare war upon the world of business but merely exploits its worn out expressive schemata – the myth of personification and platitudes about ‘humanity’ as a crude material resource. The objective practices are designed from the first to serve the promptness and precision of the information which is conveyed to the captive consumer. Reduced as it is to the pursuit of cultural goods, the spirit demands that these goods themselves are not genuinely experienced. The consumer must only know how to deal with them in order to justify his claim to be a cultivated person. Even the solemn transmission of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, much publicized and impressively mounted as it is and never missing an opportunity to present itself as a truly historic event, is more concerned with instructing the listener about the event he is about to witness and the powers that have staged it than about encouraging him to participate in the work itself.

The current practice of musical commentators who prefer talking about the history of the work’s conception to telling us about the specific nature of its construction is tailored in advance to this tendency. What we are actually informed about is mass culture itself. All genuine experience of art is devalued into a matter of evaluation. The consumer is encouraged to recognize what is offered to him: the cultural object in question is represented as the finished product it has become which now asks to be identified. This universal informational

character sets the seal upon the radical alienation between the consumer and the inescapable proximity of the product. He finds himself dependent upon information when his own experience proves inadequate and the apparatus trains him to appear well-informed on pain of losing prestige among other people and to renounce the more arduous process of real experience. If mass culture has already become one great exhibition, then everyone who stumbles into it feels as lonely as a stranger on an exhibition site. This is where information leaps in: the endless exhibition is also the endless bureau of information which forces itself upon the hapless visitor and regales him with leaflets, guides and radio recommendations, sparing each individual from the disgrace of appearing as stupid as everyone else. Mass culture is a system of signals that signals itself. The millions who belong to the underclasses formerly excluded from the enjoyment of cultural goods but now ensnared provide a welcome pretext for this new orientation towards information. But this grandiose system of elucidation, transmission and rapid familiarization in the sudden shock of imposition destroys everything that the ideology of cultural products claims to promote so widely. The jokes which were made in the symptomatic programme called 'Information Please' not only express the truth about the system of information but also the truth about what the information is about. Information emphatically promotes the decay of the aesthetic image. Even the entertainment film becomes a newsreel and an extension of its own publicity: we learn what Lana Turner looks like in a sweater, how the latest cinematographic techniques of Orson Welles actually work, whether FM transmission is really so different from the old radio sound. The type of concert-goer who only notices whether the piano is slightly out of tune or not, as a direct or indirect consumer of the latest innovations dispensed by the monopoly, has been turned into the ideal object for those cultural commodities which he has come to resemble so closely. The products are all the more respectable the more they recommend themselves to the world of information: they become unbearable on the other hand when they attempt to restore information as what is obscured by its over-illumination, through aesthetic form-giving in the work.

Information counts upon curiosity as the attitude with which the viewer approaches the product. The indiscretion formerly the

prerogative of the most wretched of journalists has become part of the very essence of official culture. The information communicated by mass culture constantly winks at us.

In an edition of millions the popular magazine disseminates its 'inside stories' with an air of self-importance and the camera concentrates upon every physical detail just as the old opera-glasses used to do. With an illusionless mien and a bad conscience both wish to encourage the subject in the illusion that here too he is in on the act, that he is excluded nowhere. Heidegger accorded a place of honour to curiosity as an invariant feature in the 'fallenness' of human existence, as a fundamental existential-ontological 'constitution' within the 'ontological tendency of everydayness'.⁵ Although he clearly saw the function of curiosity as the cement of mass activity, probably expressing a diluted form of collective mimesis of the desire to equal everyone else by knowing everything about them, he nevertheless committed an injustice upon mankind by ascribing curiosity to man as such and virtually making the victim responsible rather than the jail-keeper. Whatever Aristotle knew about the intrinsic desire to see, today visibility is thrust upon everything that can possibly be seen. This is the anthropological sediment of that monopolistic compulsion to handle, to manipulate, to absorb everything, the inability to leave anything beyond itself untouched. The less the system tolerates anything new, the more those who have been forsaken must be acquainted with all the latest novelties if they are to continue living in society rather than feeling themselves excluded from it. Mass culture allows precisely this reserve army of outsiders to participate: mass culture is an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else, a totality of public secrets. Everyone who is informed has his share in the secret, just as under National Socialism the privilege of esoteric blood-brotherhood was actually offered to everyone. But the tendency towards extortion in which both curiosity and indiscretion find their fulfilment is a part of that violence which the fascist is always ready to employ against the underprivileged. The satisfaction of curiosity by no means serves only the psychological economy of the subject, but directly serves material interests as well. Those who have been thoroughly informed lend themselves to thorough utilization. The German hit song from the era of incipient fascism 'Kannst du tanzen, Johanna?

Gewiss kann ich das' ('Can you dance, Joanna? I certainly can'), in which the erotic accomplishments of the object of desire appear as qualities in a saturated labour-market, has preserved this historical aspect of curiosity in a particularly drastic form. Such curiosity belongs to those deformations of human behaviour produced by the market economy which have become independent since the demise of the latter and attained a diseased pitch of irrationality. In the epoch of total anti-semitism, everyone has chosen little Moritz as an idol: this has become an institution among the quiz kids and their ilk. This curiosity is perfectly attuned to the information which in turn socializes curiosity. It refers constantly to what has been preformed, to what others already know. To be informed about something implies an enforced solidarity with what has already been judged. We agree with the majority about it, yet simultaneously we wish to deprive them of it and take possession of it ourselves. With the gesture for which one is always prepared and which exercises a dictatorial power from the joke to the social research project, namely that of 'But we know that already', one doesn't merely ingratiate oneself with the system personally, one also simultaneously disparages anyone who tries to persuade us of inconvenient facts which are devalued instantly since we know them ourselves already. Curiosity is the enemy of the new which is not permitted to exist anyway. It lives off the claim that there cannot be anything new and that what presents itself as new is already pre-disposed to subsumption on the part of the well-informed. The passionate intensity with which curiosity comes on the scene squanders in the process of reproduction and appropriation the very power which might have contributed to the experience or the creation of something really new. The blindness of this passion renders the data towards which it is directed indifferent and irrelevant. However useful it might be from a practical point of view to have as much information as possible at one's disposal, there still prevails the iron law that the information in question shall never touch the essential, shall never degenerate into thought. This is ensured by the restriction of information to what the monopoly has supplied, to commodities, or to those people whose function in the business world has turned them into commodities. But as if this were not enough, there is a taboo against inaccurate information, a charge that can be invoked against any

thought. The curiosity for information cannot be separated from the opinionated mentality of those who know it all. Today the curious individual becomes a nihilist. Anything that cannot be recognized, subsumed and verified he rejects as idiocy or ideology, as subjective in the derogatory sense. But what he already knows and can identify becomes valueless in the process, mere repetition, so much wasted time and money. This aporia of mass culture and the science affiliated to it reduces its victims to its own kind of praxis, namely a blunted perseverance. But this hopeless figure of curiosity is wholly determined by the monopoly. The attitude of the well-informed derives from that of the buyer who knows his way about the market. To this extent it is directly related to the advertising business.

Advertising becomes information when there is no longer anything to choose from, when the recognition of brand names has taken the place of choice, when at the same time the totality forces everyone who wishes to survive into consciously going along with the process. This is what happens under monopolistic mass culture. We can distinguish three stages in the developing domination of needs: advertising, information and command. As a form of omnipresent familiarization mass culture dissolves these stages into one another. The curiosity which it kindles brutally reproduces that of the child which already derives from compulsion, deception and renunciation. The child becomes curious when its parents refuse to provide it with genuine information. It is not that original desire to look with which ontologies ancient and modern have obscurely connected it, but a gaze narcissistically turned upon itself. The curiosity which transforms the world into objects is not objective: it is not concerned with what is known but with the fact of knowing it, with having, with knowledge as a possession. This is precisely how the objects of information are organized today. Their indifferent character predestines their being and they are incapable of transcending the abstract fact of possession through any immanent quality of their own. As facts they are arranged in such a way that they can be grasped as quickly and easily as possible. Wrenched from all context, detached from thought, they are made instantly accessible to an infantile grasp. They may never be broadened out in any way but like favourite dishes they must obey the rule of identity if they are not to be rejected as false or alien. They must always

be accurate but never true. Thus they tend towards deceit and the journalist's canard and the feeble invented anecdotes of the radio reporter are merely an explosion of the untruth which already lies within the blindness of the facts themselves. The curious individual who falls victim here, the raving autograph-chaser at the film studio, the child under fascism who suffers under the new-fangled disease of compulsive reading, is simply the citizen who has come to consciousness of himself, the person who has learnt how to come to terms with reality and whose apparent insanity merely confirms the objective insanity which men have finally succeeded in catching up with.

The more participation in mass culture exhausts itself in the informed access to cultural facts, the more the culture business comes to resemble contests, those aptitude tests which check suitability and performance, and finally sport. While the consumers are tirelessly encouraged to compete, whether by virtue of the way in which goods are offered to them or through the techniques of advertising, the products themselves right down to the details of technical procedure begin to exhibit sport-like characteristics. They require extreme accomplishments that can be exactly measured. The task of the screen actor breaks down into a set of precisely defined obligatory exercises each of which is compared with the corresponding one in the work of all the other competitors in the same group. And then in the end we have the final spurt, the ultimate exertion which has been kept in reserve all along, the culmination without antecedent intensification isolated from the previous action, the opposite of the dramatic climax. The film is articulated into so many sequences but its total duration, like that of the hit song, is regulated as if by stopwatch. In a space of one and a half hours the film should have knocked out its audience as planned. The detective story actually organises a match not merely between criminal and detective but between author and reader as well. The paradigm of this cultural sport is the competition, that ancient challenging of feudal style and bourgeois spirit. Here the integrity of memory, the substance of individuality, is fragmented and torn from the protective cover of oblivion, caught up in the dynamics of exchange value and free competition and finally disposed of as supposed knowledge. The wretched fate here is like that which befalls the joke specially committed to paper so that we can remember it. The bourgeois citizen comes to terms with

spirit by inscribing it among the world of facts. It all comes down to making himself sufficiently like that world on the one hand while, as a small property owner, making a sufficient bed to lie on out of it on the other: 'He knows such a lot' as they say. This knowledge is then tried and tested in competitions. Mass culture has finally rewritten the whole of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in accordance with the principle of the competition. The sensuous moment of art transforms itself under the eyes of mass culture into the measurement, comparison and assessment of physical phenomena. This is most clearly to be seen in the case of jazz which is directly indebted to the sport of competitive dancing although it has gone its own independent way by pursuing this debt far beyond the real possibilities of the dance. If we may seek the enjoyment of the dancer at a jazz event in the obsession with syncopation as the very formula of his own crippling which he does not allow to confuse him about his collective function, then the enjoyment of the jazz player should be compared with that of the sportsman who also labours under testing self-imposed conditions. All bourgeois art has preserved this moment in the phenomenon of the virtuoso performer. 'The bourgeois class demands something astonishing, something mechanical which I cannot offer them. The refined and much travelled world is arrogant but also cultivated and discriminating when it is prepared to consider something more closely. But it is so occupied with a thousand other things, so imprisoned in its conventional tedium, that it is a matter of complete indifference to it whether the music which it insists on hearing from morning till night is good or bad.'⁶ So wrote Chopin in 1848. In the last hundred years since then the bourgeois class has quite lost the privilege of not having to listen to music all the time although it has not relinquished the need for mechanical and astonishing display. It is simply the case that this need has become so universally widespread that the mechanical moment has utterly consumed the element of the astonishing. The romantic dissolution of the pre-conceived unity into its details, something which once pressed the right of the individual against the inflexibility of the totality, nevertheless harboured its opposite, the process of mechanization, in its very principle: the emancipated detail first becomes an effect and finally a trick. Under the sign of such details the work of art has fallen into the hands of competing specialists, a victim of that division of labour

whose hegemony it tries to challenge. The original, authentically bourgeois reduction of truth to what we have the power to do, as Bacon formulated the idea,⁷ affects the content of the work of art. This content is sought in the fabrication of the work itself, social production as such is glorified and the untruth of this form of production, the cult of labour conspicuously embodied in consumer goods, conceals the appropriation of its own surplus value in the products.⁸ When mass culture exhibits itself it also loves to show how its products are made and how everything in it functions. For the citizen the free capacity to produce replaces the idea of a life free from domination and he seeks in the world of achievement the human significance that this realm specifically denies him. Virtuosity, which can yet never be detached wholly from art to the extent that a moment of nature-domination inheres in all art, has always pointed towards accomplishment and achievement. In mass culture such virtuosity is all that remains. In this respect, of course, it differs fundamentally from the virtuosity which was characteristic of an earlier liberal century. Ultimate achievement now consists not in triumphing over difficulty but in a process of subordination. It produces an aesthetic attitude which cannot be disturbed by external contingency or any other obtrusive factors. Whenever possible the disturbing factors are expressly produced without even allowing any longer the image of an autonomy which might master the alien elements as something not already preformed and thus establish its rule from out of freedom itself. If the piano virtuoso still recalled the acrobat or the juggler, who would only appear for money after the most arduous preparation, the jazz musician without entirely relinquishing these models comes more and more to resemble the goalkeeper. The virtues required of him are undistractability, attention, preparedness and concentration. He becomes an improviser in a compulsory situation. The illusionlessness of his performance is turned into that sporting facility which consists in being unsettled by nothing. Nothing is more frowned upon than rubato. Under monopoly conditions the heir to the virtuoso is he who accommodates himself most efficiently to the team. In so far as he does stand out personally in any way, this is regulated by the function which he performs in the team, in the ideal case by effacing himself, leaping to save a goal and thus serving the collective. The jazz musician and everyone in front of the

microphone or the camera are forced to inflict violence upon themselves. Indeed the most rewarded are those who do not even require this violence to be exercised upon them in the first place, those who are so utterly compliant with the expected behaviour that they can even simulate the signs of resistance spontaneously precisely because they no longer feel such resistance in themselves.

The sporting events from which the schema of mass culture borrows so many of its features and which represent one of its favourite themes have divested themselves of all meaning. They are nothing but what they are. So it is that 'sportification' has played its part in the dissolution of aesthetic semblance. Sport is the imageless counterpart to practical life. And aesthetic images increasingly participate in this imagelessness the more they turn into a form of sport themselves. Indeed one might perceive in this an anticipation of a kind of play which in a classless society might do away with semblance along with the principle of utility whose complement it is. But if in fact the principles of the classless society do mature under the conditions of monopoly capitalism, they certainly do not do so in such a way that they only need liberating from the fetters of domination before being realized. Monopoly does not merely abuse these principles but actually inhabits them. They contain future possibilities mediated by the unbearable opposition which is still burned into the traces of freedom. Sport itself is not play but ritual in which the subjected celebrate their subjection. They parody freedom in their readiness for service, a service which the individual forcibly exacts from his own body for a second time. In the freedom which he exercises over his body the individual confirms what he is by inflicting upon this slave the same injustice he has already endured at the violent hands of society. The passion for sport, in which the masters of mass culture sense the real mass basis of their dictatorial power, is grounded in this fact. One can play the master by inflicting the original pain upon oneself and others again symbolically through a kind of compulsive repetition. While the act of repetition schools obedience, it absorbs the fateful damage in the perpetual potential for anxiety, and so it continues. At the same time the border line between acting and suffering, between internal and external force, is eliminated in the symbolic performance. This is the school for that integration which finally succeeded politically in

transforming the powerless into a band of applauding hooligans. One is allowed to inflict pain according to the rules, one is maltreated according to the rules and the rule checks strength in order to vindicate weakness as strength: the screen heroes enjoy being tortured on film. The rules of the game resemble those of the market, equal chances and fair play for all, but only as the struggle of all against all. Thus it is that sport permits competition, now reduced to a form of brutality, to survive in a world in which competition has actually been eliminated. While sport does indeed express competition as a form of immediate activity, it also expressly thematizes a historical tendency which has done away with competition proper. From being a kind of deception or trick practised upon others it has become a coup. But the record achievements in which sport culminates already proclaim the undisguised law of the strongest which arises so naturally from the competitive domain precisely because it has always dominated that domain so relentlessly. In the triumph of this practical spirit, far as it is from the acquisitive pursuit of the necessities of life, sport becomes a pseudo-praxis in which those who are practically active are no longer capable of helping themselves but now turn themselves once again into the objects they have already become. In its naked literalness, in the brutish seriousness which hardens every gesture of play into an automatic reflex, sport becomes the colourless reflection of a hardened callous life. Sport only preserves the joy of movement, the thought of bodily liberation, the suspension of practical ends in a completely external distorted form. Yet perhaps because the violence which sport inflicts upon people might help them towards understanding how they could one day finally put an end to violence itself, mass culture takes sport into custody. Even if the sportsman might possibly be able to develop certain virtues like solidarity, readiness to help others or even enthusiasm which could prove valuable in critical political moments, nothing of this kind is to be found in the spectator. Here a crude contemplative curiosity replaces the last traces of spontaneity. But mass culture is not interested in turning its consumers into sportsmen as such but only into howling devotees of the stadium. In so far as mass culture reflects the totality of life as a complete system of open or covert sportive competitive struggles, it enthrones sport as life itself and even eliminates the tension between sport on the Sunday day off

and the wretchedness of the working week, a tension in which the better part of sport used to consist. This is what it achieves with the final liquidation of aesthetic semblance. Mass culture even neutralizes this pseudo-praxis into the image-quality which is simultaneously renounced in the sportification of the product.

Under monopoly conditions the more life forces anyone who wishes to survive into deceit, trickery and insinuation and the less the individual can depend any longer upon a stable profession for his living, upon the continuity of labour, then all the greater becomes the might of sport in mass culture and the outside world in general. Mass culture is a kind of training for life when things have gone wrong.

The schema of mass culture now prevails as a canon of synthetically produced modes of behaviour. The following which mass culture can still count on even there where tedium and deception seem almost calculated to provoke the consumers is held together by the hope that the voice of the monopoly will tell them as they wait in line precisely what is expected of them if they want to be clothed and fed. The first commandment of course is that one should already be properly dressed and tolerably well fed. The good manners which the system teaches them presupposes all this. Anyone who fails openly to parade their freedom, their courtesy, their sense of security, who fails to observe and propagate the established guidelines, is forced to remain outside the pale. It is not so much that misery is concealed in the medium of film for example, indeed it is often enough depicted with some relish, but that the viewer is taught to behave everywhere as if there really were no such thing. In spite of all sententious humanitarianism the obedient adept becomes ever colder, harder and more pitiless. The more industry exhausts what has already been perverted into commodities in the very name of culture, the more the omnipresence of culture proclaims itself. The shots of leading figures in economic life and other prominent people in their straw hats and padded suits can only be distinguished from those of gangsters by the fact that they take their hats off when they enter the room while they exploit the robust speech of the gangster for the sake of popularity. Thus they prepare the *fata Morgana* of a fine society which once again reinforces in the medium of the image the actual destruction of society proper and the transformation of its members into the mannequins of the society page even as it

denies them. Mass culture only recognizes refined people. Even the slang of the street kids that can never be reproduced too realistically merely serves to ensure that the laughing viewer is never tempted to use such language himself. The totality of mass culture culminates in the demand that no one can be any different from itself. The scientific tests upon which employment depends simply follow its example in this. The monopoly shuts its doors on anyone who fails to learn from the cinema how to move and speak according to the schema which it has fabricated: because of their position in the productive process women are particularly susceptible in this respect and this may partially explain why they are so dependent upon the dismal pleasures of screen entertainment. The old slogan of bourgeois entertainment, 'But you must have seen this', which just represented a swindle in the market place becomes a matter of deadly seriousness with the elimination of amusements and the market alike. Formerly the supposed penalty merely lay in not being able to participate in what everyone else was talking about. Today anyone who is incapable of talking in the prescribed fashion, that is of effortlessly reproducing the formulas, conventions and judgements of mass culture as if they were his own, is threatened in his very existence, suspected of being an idiot or an intellectual. Looking good, make-up, the desperately strained smile of eternal youth which only cracks momentarily in the angry twitching of the wrinkles of the brow, all this bounty is dispensed by the personnel manager under threat of the stick. People give their approval to mass culture because they know or suspect that this is where they are taught the mores they will surely need as their passport in a monopolized life. This passport is only valid if paid for in blood, with the surrender of life as a whole and the impassioned obedience to a hated compulsion. This is why mass culture proves so irresistible and not because of the supposed 'stultification' of the masses which is promoted by their enemies and lamented by their philanthropic friends. The psychological mechanisms involved are secondary. Today the rationality of adjustment has already reached such a point that the slightest jolt would be sufficient to reveal its irrationality. The renunciation of resistance is ratified by regression. The masses draw the correct conclusion from their complete social powerlessness over against the monopoly which represents their misery today. Through this

adjustment to the technical forces of production, an adjustment which the system imposes upon them in the name of progress, men become objects that can be manipulated without further objection and thus fall far behind the potential which lies in the technical forces of production. But since as subjects men themselves still represent the ultimate limit of reification, mass culture must try and take hold of them again and again: the bad infinity involved in this hopeless effort of repetition is the only trace of hope that this repetition might be in vain, that men cannot wholly be grasped after all.

As a focus of regression mass culture assiduously concerns itself with the production of those archetypes in whose survival fascistic psychology perceives the most reliable means of perpetuating the modern conditions of domination. Primeval symbols are constructed on the production line. The dream industry does not so much fabricate the dreams of the customers as introduce the dreams of the suppliers among the people. This is the thousand-year empire of an industrial caste system governed by a stream of never ending dynasties.⁹ In the dreams of those in charge of mummifying the world mass culture represents a priestly hieroglyphic script which addresses its images to those who have been subjugated not in order that they might be enjoyed but only that they be read. The authentic images of the film screen as well as the inauthentic ones encountered in hit melodies and the well-worn written phrase appear so rigidly and so frequently that they are no longer perceived in their own right but only as repetitions whose perpetual sameness always expresses an identical meaning. The looser the connection in the sequence of events or the development of the action, the more the shattered image becomes an allegorical seal. Even from the visual point of view the sudden evanescent images of the cinema come to resemble a sort of script. The images are seized but not contemplated. The film reel draws the eye along just like a line of writing and it turns the page with the gentle jolt of every scene change. On occasion aesthetically crafted films like Guitry's *Perles de la Couronne* have emphasized this book-like character of the film as an explicit framework. Thus the technology of the mass work of art accomplishes that transition from image to writing in which the absorption of art by monopolistic practice culminates.¹⁰ But the secret doctrine which is communicated here is the message of capital. It must be secret because

total domination likes to keep itself invisible: 'No shepherd and a herd'. Nonetheless it is directed at everyone. Its meaning has little to do with the ephemeral character of the cultural product and the very frailty of this product calls out to be deciphered. When a film presents us with a strikingly beautiful young woman it may officially approve or disapprove of her, she may be glorified as a successful heroine or punished as a vamp. Yet as a written character she announces something quite different from the psychological banners draped around her grinning mouth, namely the injunction to be like her. The new context into which these pre-prepared images enter as so many letters is always that of the command. The viewer is required constantly to translate the images back into writing. The exercise of obedience inheres in the fact of translation itself as soon as it takes place automatically. The more the film-goer, the hit song enthusiast, the reader of detective and magazine stories anticipates the outcome, the solution, the structure and so on, the more his attention is displaced towards the question of how the nugatory result is achieved, to the rebus-like details involved, and in this searching process of displacement the hieroglyphic meaning suddenly reveals itself. It articulates every phenomenon right down to the subtlest nuance according to a simplistic two-term logic of 'dos' and 'don'ts', and by virtue of this reduction of everything alien and unintelligible it overtakes the consumers. The emergence of this tendency towards the hieroglyphic represents a decisive stage in the previous history of mass culture for it marks the transition from the silent film to the sound film. In the older type of film images and written signs still alternated with one another and the antithesis of the two lent emphasis to the image-character of the images. But this dialectic like every other was unbearable to mass culture. It has expelled writing from the film as an alien presence but only to transform the images themselves completely into the writing which they have then absorbed in turn. Chaplin's patient sabotage of sound film, especially the forlorn neon light advertisement with which he prefaced *Modern Times*, proved itself as a conscious expression of this process in the medium itself. But the speaking images are only masks. The 'Ur-phenomenon' of this latest pictorial script is the same as the oldest of all. Through fixation the mask transforms what is utterly un-thinglike, expression itself, into horror over the fact that a human face can be so arrested, and then

transforms the horror into obedience before the mortified face. That is the secret of the 'keep smiling' attitude. The face becomes a dead letter by freezing the most living thing about it, namely its laughter. The film fulfils the old children's threat of the ugly grimace which freezes when the wind changes or the clock strikes. And here it strikes the hour of total domination. The masks of the film are so many emblems of authority. Their horror grows to the extent that these masks are able to move and speak, although this does nothing to alter their inexorability: everything that lives is captured in such masks.¹¹ As far as mass culture is concerned reification is no metaphor: it makes the human beings that it reproduces resemble things even where their teeth do not represent toothpaste and their care-worn wrinkles do not evoke cosmetics. Whoever goes to a film is only waiting for the day when this spell will be broken, and perhaps ultimately it is only this well concealed hope which draws people to the cinema. But once there they obey. They assimilate themselves to what is dead. And that is how they become disposable. Mimesis explains the enigmatically empty ecstasy of the fans in mass culture. Ecstasy is the motor of imitation. It is this rather than self-expression and individuality which forcibly produces the behaviour of the victims which recalls St Vitus's dance or the motor reflex spasms of the maimed animal. The gestures are not identical with those in transports of ecstasy and yet they are the most impassioned expression of these same human beings: under the force of immense pressure the identity of the personality gives way, and since this identity itself already originates in pressure, this is felt as a liberation. When people dance to jazz for example, they do not dance for sensuous pleasure or in order to obtain release. Rather they merely depict the gestures of sensuous human beings, just as in a film individual allegorical gestures on their own represent modes of behaviour in general, and that is precisely the release. They fasten on the culture-masks proffered to them and practise themselves the magic which is already worked upon them. They become a collective through the adaptation to an over-mastering arbitrary power. The terror for which the people of every land are being prepared glares ever more threateningly from the rigid features of these culture-masks: in every peal of laughter we hear the menacing voice of extortion and the comic types are legible signs which represent the contorted bodies of

revolutionaries. Participation in mass culture itself stands under the sign of terror. Enthusiasm not merely betrays an unconscious eagerness to read the commands from above but already reveals the fear of disobedience, of those unconventional desires from the suspicion of which the sex murderer who kills his own beloved passionately strives to cleanse himself. This anxiety, the ultimate lesson of the fascist era, is already harboured within the very medium of technological communication. Anyone who has not yet been wholly inured by the oppressive self-importance of big business is unnerved to receive a telegram. The mutilated language condensed to carry the maximum information combined with the urgency of delivery imparts the shock of immediate domination in the form of immediate horror. The fear of the disaster which the telegram might announce is only a mantle for the fear of the omnipresent disasters that can overtake us at any time. Above all on the radio the authority of society standing behind every speaker immediately addresses its listeners unchallenged. If indeed the advances of technology largely determine the fate of society, then the technicized forms of modern consciousness are also heralds of that fate. They transform culture into a total lie, but this untruth confesses the truth about the socio-economic base with which it has now become identical. The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it.

NOTES

- 1 In the attempt to denounce class society in a non-psychological manner, the best Russian films, above all *Battleship Potemkin*, have not actually depicted the process of material production at all but the realities of war and of political-military oppression. They maintain aesthetic concreteness by showing what is immediately inflicted upon human beings rather than by depicting what takes place in the abstract order of property relations. But in so far as these films present men as objects of domination who become subjects in the struggle against such domination, they penetrate to what is essential. The success of

such films is of a highly paradoxical and precarious kind when we consider how in the subsequent Russian cinematographic tradition it was the war subjects which proved most susceptible to being transformed into patriotic propaganda.

- 2 Cf. T.W. Adorno (1941) 'The Radio Symphony. An Experiment in Theory', in P.F. Lazarsfeld and F.F. Stanton (eds) *Radio Research*, New York, pp. 110ff.
- 3 Cf. T.W. Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening', Chapter 1 of this book.
- 4 Cf. 'Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment' in M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder & Herder, pp. 43ff.
- 5 Martin Heidegger (1927) *Sein und Zeit*, Halle, p. 170, English Translation, pp. 214ff.
- 6 Frédéric Chopin (1928) *Gesammelte Briefe*, edited by Alexander Guttry, Munich, pp. 382ff.
- 7 See 'The Concept of Enlightenment' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, op. cit., pp. 4–5.
- 8 The fact that as far as the mature bourgeois work of art is concerned the way in which it is produced must be completely obscured, that it must appear as a 'second nature', merely expresses the deification of the process of fabrication itself. The opacity of labour belongs to its sanctification: if the semblance of sacredness were to dissolve, then labour itself would reveal itself as the labour of others. See T.W. Adorno (1981) *In Search of Wagner*, translated by R. Livingstone, London: New Left Books.
- 9 In this connection Huxley coined the motto of 'Identity, Community, Stability' which certainly captures the innermost tendency of emergent state capitalism, even if it was chosen with the apologetic intention of defending the individual in such a way that it works to the advantage of the monopoly itself.
- 10 See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, op. cit. pp. 17ff.
- 11 In the account of dreams in his *Tage und Taten*, the only work in which he describes his most profound experience of it, Stefan George singled out the image of the speaking mask as one of the utmost horror: 'I had been given a clay mask which was now mounted on the wall of my room. I invited my friends to come and see how I incited the head to speak. I requested aloud that the head tell me the name of the one to whom I was pointing. When it refused to speak I attempted to force open its lips with my finger. Suddenly it distorted its features and bit my finger. In a state of extreme agitation I now repeated aloud my original demand and pointed at someone else. Thereupon the head named the name. Horrified we all left the room and I knew that I would never again set foot inside it.' – Stefan George (1933) *Tage und Taten. Aufzeichnungen und Skizzen*, Gesamt-Ausgabe, vol. 17, Berlin, p. 32. This is a prophecy of sound film.