

CARROLL COLLEGE

**THE INFLUENCE OF MASS CULTURE AND TELEVISION  
ON THE POSSIBILITIES FOR  
EFFECTIVE SOCIAL CRITICISM  
IN AMERICA**

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## Introduction

# The Dynamic of Social Change

People in the United States cherish freedom. Because we place such a great emphasis on freedom, many of us reject claims that we are not really free. However, there is a group of social theorists who claim that our freedom is largely an illusion. This group is called the Frankfurt School, and they are concerned with restoration of individual liberty in advanced industrial societies.

Herbert Marcuse, a Frankfurt theorist, opens the initial chapter of *One-Dimensional Man* with the following statement, “A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress” (Marcuse 1964). The kind of “unfreedom” to which Marcuse is referring does not correspond to the vision of oppression held by most people. He does not intend to imply that Americans suffer under physical coercion of the type exhibited by the police states of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. Marcuse claims that domination in our society is much more subtle and therefore more effective.

Most of the work by Frankfurt theorists regarding domination of the individual in advanced industrial societies is influenced by the social and political works of Max Weber and Karl Marx. Consistent with Weber’s theories, they agree that this domination results from the expansion of instrumental rationality. Consistent with Marx’s tenets, they also believe that social revolution is the only way to overcome this domination.

But how does one change society in order to insure maximum individual liberty? According to Marx two conditions must be met. First,

the *objective* conditions — the severe economic inequalities — must exist. Secondly, the *subjective* conditions must exist. This means that individuals must recognize these inequalities and realize the need to alter the social relations to match the productive capabilities.

The objective conditions already appear to exist in America. Our advanced industrial society seems capable of producing enough material and wealth for everyone. However, in accordance with capitalist requirements, this material and wealth is not spread evenly throughout society.

The subjective conditions are absolutely fundamental to social change. In order to change society, at least some people must be aware of the need to change. However, creating the subjective conditions can be very difficult, especially when people are convinced that the current social relations are adequate.

The Frankfurt theorists believe that the subjective conditions may be stimulated through social criticism. People must be shown the inadequacies of the current social relations, so that they will realize the need for social change. However, some Frankfurt theorists — Herbert Marcuse in particular — feel that advanced industrial society is capable of preventing criticism.

Consequently, the main concern for the Frankfurt theorists is how and where criticism can be generated in advanced industrial society. Many philosophers consider the realm of culture to possess subversive potential in liberal democratic societies. Frankfurt theorists agree that culture has traditionally been the realm where social criticism is possible, because culture allows for individual creativity and imagination. However, the

Frankfurt theorists argue that the critical potentials within culture have been drastically reduced with the emergence of mass culture.

In this paper, I show that the possibilities for effective social criticism in American culture are disappearing. Specifically, I show that television is not only incapable of providing effective social criticism, but that it actually reinforces the status quo. Finally, I explore the broader possibilities for effective social criticism in America in light of the growth of mass culture and mass media.

I reach my conclusions by analyzing mass culture and television according to three criteria that I have determined are necessary for *effective* social criticism. It is important to keep in mind that I am talking about social criticism as a distinct, but necessary, precursor to social action. I interpret the goal of social criticism to be limited to accelerating the subjective conditions for revolution — the change in consciousness. I interpret social change to be the result of the change in consciousness coupled with the physical action required for revolution.

Although I consider the goal of social criticism to be a change in consciousness, I argue that social criticism is not effective if it does not encourage the action required for social change. Social criticism should not simply be a passing thought formed by someone having a bad day. Effective social criticism should stimulate a *genuine* desire to change society.

I argue that effective social criticism results when these three requirements are met:

1. the critique must present an accurate picture of the current social relations,

2. the critique must present the irrationalities<sup>1</sup> contained in the current social relations, and
3. the critique must stimulate rational alternatives to the current social relations.

I contend that the first requirement is the most important. If one lacks a clear understanding of the true social conditions, one has no basis upon which to formulate criticism. The second requirement is also necessary, because in order to realize the need for social change, one must see the self-contradictions inherent to the current social relations. Finally, the third requirement follows logically from the first two. After being presented with the problems contained in the status quo, one should be stimulated to conceive of rational alternatives. If all three requirements are met, the result will be the effective stimulation of the subjective conditions.

In the first chapter, I discuss why the Frankfurt theorists believe that individuals in advanced industrial society are not really free. I discuss the Frankfurt position that domination of the individual results from a restricted form of rationality called instrumental rationality or formal rationality. In my discussion of the subject, I describe Weber's theories on the emergence and social consequences of instrumental rationality. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the Frankfurt theorists' position that instrumental rationality can be defeated through criticism if individuals can overcome the barriers to criticism which exist in advanced industrial society.

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<sup>1</sup> The topic of rationality/irrationality has philosophical connotations that are not discussed, because they lie beyond the scope of this paper.

In the second chapter, I discuss the possibilities for criticism in the realm of culture. First, I briefly contrast high culture and mass culture. Then, I describe the rise of mass culture as presented in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Next, I present the Frankfurt perspective that mass culture perpetuates domination in advanced industrial societies. For this last section, I draw upon a work written by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno entitled *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Finally, I present the position that culture allows for liberation from instrumental rationality through cultural movements as described in Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.

In the third chapter, I discuss not only television's inability to provide effective social criticism, but television's tendency to enforce the status quo. I illustrate how television, as a product of mass culture, obscures insights into the true social relations and thus provides no foundation for criticism. Through an analysis of *The Cosby Show*, I show how television promotes acceptance to the current social relations. I conclude the chapter by illustrating the impossibilities for critical reform in television.

Finally, I conclude by exploring the broader implications of culture's inability to provide effective social criticism in America.

## CHAPTER 1

# INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY AS DOMINATION

In order to illustrate the individual's lack of freedom, it is necessary to illustrate the origin and nature of domination in advanced industrial societies. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt school argue that this domination stems from a restricted form of rationality called instrumental rationality, formal rationality, or technological rationality.

Many societies began placing great emphasis upon instrumental rationality during the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, this means-ends rationality had a subversive quality, because it was largely responsible for bringing the Middle Ages to a close (Held 1980, 151). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, some sociologists have grown increasingly concerned with the social consequences of formal rationality.

### **The Weberian Analysis**

Max Weber was one of the first social theorists to examine the role of instrumental rationality in capitalist societies. Weber notices that although capitalism originated in the highly individualistic societies of the West, the formal rationality employed in industrial production creates institutions which reduce individual social action (Mommsen 1989, 109).

Weber explains that capitalist societies place a great emphasis on the production principle which requires the producer to increase production and efficiency at the same time. He traces this emphasis to protestant asceticism, which demands the efficient use of time to do God's work.

Weber views capitalism as an extension of protestant asceticism but without the spiritual dimension (Weber 1904, 180).

Weber observes that in capitalist societies, bureaucracies emerge to supervise the production process and insure maximum efficiency. Because of their concern for efficiency, these institutions are compelled to use a means-ends form of rationality in their decision making processes (Mommsen 1974, 57).

Instrumental rationality is assumed to be more efficient because of its emphasis upon following established rules. However, Weber argues that by following pre-established rules, bureaucracies eliminate emotional and perhaps creative decision making (Mommsen 1989, 114).

Its specific nature, which is welcomed by capitalism, develops the more perfectly the more the bureaucracy is "dehumanized," the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. (Weber 1922, 215)

All decisions made by individuals in a bureaucracy must be made within the institutional boundaries. Consequently, Weber argues that bureaucracies have a tendency to become entrenched in their own rules and therefore unresponsive to needs and demands for large-scale social changes — changes which go beyond established guidelines (Mommsen, 1989, 114)

Weber not only argues that bureaucracies inhibit social change, but that they actually begin to influence social relations as well. Weber believes that instrumental rationality tends to expand beyond the production process and influences how people in society behaved toward each other (Mommsen 1989, 114). This phenomenon can be seen in the fact that

friendships are not always based upon mutual admiration or the desire to simply associate with a particular person. Many times acquaintances are created and maintained, because one or both of the parties stand to gain something. An example is the fact that when looking for employment it is not always *what* the applicant knows but *who* the applicant knows which determines whether he or she gets the job.

Although Weber is concerned with preserving individual freedom in capitalist societies, he does not believe that communist arrangements of society would provide increased liberty. Weber does not agree that the nationalization of the means of production is enough to eliminate the alienation of the work force. Weber believes that the domination is dependant on the control of the managerial positions within the bureaucratic structures themselves (Mommsen, 1974, xv).

In his final analysis, Weber became a strong defender of capitalism (Mommsen, 1974, xv). Nonetheless, he was very concerned with the preservation of maximum individual freedom in the context of the higher standard of living made possible by large-scale industrial production. Because he felt that capitalism and bureaucracy will become increasingly dominant in the future, he exclaimed in 1918 that individual social action will become inevitably constrained by the "iron cage" instrumental rationality:

The bureaucratic organization is about to produce the iron cage of future serfdom in which men will have to live helplessly, like the fellahin in ancient Egypt, if they consider an efficient, that is to say rational bureaucratic administration, which also provides for their needs, as the only and ultimate ideal that is to determine the nature of their own government (Baier et al. 1984).

## The Frankfurt Analysis

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt school based much of their writings concerning instrumental rationality on Weber's early analysis of the subject. However, unlike Weber, the Frankfurt theorists feel that the individual in society should not accept the domination that results from instrumental rationality. Instead, they feel that the self-contradictions, masked by the instrumental rationality, need to be exposed in the hopes that man can arrive at a broader definition of rationality based upon what is truly good for man as a social being. Critical theorists of the Frankfurt school believe that a new definition of rationality must go beyond empirical rule following to include a normative dimension (Marcuse 1964, 147).

The sociologists of the Frankfurt school concur with Weber's theories concerning the growth of instrumental rationality. They agree that the Enlightenment during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries played a large role in de-mystifying the universe and promoting instrumental rationality. It was during that time that man determined that science instead of religion was the key to understanding the world (Held 1980, 148).

They also agree with Weber's theory that capitalism tends expand bureaucratization and rationalization, and that the end result is the stifling of individual social action. Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, argues that the capitalist production process dominates society by creating social demands.

The analysis is focused on advanced industrial society, in which the technical apparatus of production and distribution (with an increasing sector of automation) functions, not as

the sum-total of mere instruments which can be isolated from their social and political effects, but rather as a system which determines *a priori* the product of the apparatus as well as the operations of servicing and extending it. In this society, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also needs and aspirations (Marcuse 1964, xv).

In *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology*, Marcuse summarizes the decline of individual freedom in capitalist societies. Marcuse writes that the notion of individualism was refined during the Enlightenment. At that time a free market economy and liberalism were enough to ensure individual liberty. However, increased capitalist production threatened to destroy this freedom. Marcuse writes that eventually individual achievement was determined according to his or her production capability. Consequently, the individual's actions were not motivated by his or her own standards but by "standards pertaining to predetermined tasks and functions" (Marcuse 1941).

Marcuse writes that as capitalist production increased, instrumental rationality expanded. Increased division of labor reduced the work force to atomized units that never see the entire production plan. Bureaucracies then emerged to supervise the whole production process. As the division of labor increases, so does the apparent need for bureaucracies which control the entire process. Thus, Marcuse argues that the division of labor creates the illusion that bureaucracy is justified. Because the individual performs a specialized task and never views the whole process, he or she must follow orders given by administrators (Marcuse 1941).

The private and public bureaucracy thus emerges on an apparently objective and impersonal ground, provided by the rational specialization of functions...For, the more the

individual functions are divided, fixated and synchronized according to the objective and impersonal patterns, the less reasonable it is for the individual to withdraw or withstand (Marcuse 1941).

Marcuse writes that the authority of the administrators is generally accepted without question, because in industrial societies one's entire conceptual apparatus is determined by instrumental rationality. Consequently, instrumental rationality (objective rule-following) is tacitly accepted as the *only* type of rationality (Marcuse 1941).

The objective and impersonal character of technological rationality bestows upon the bureaucratic groups the universal dignity of reason. The rationality embodied in the giant enterprises makes it appear as if men, in obeying them, obey the dictum of an objective rationality (Marcuse 1941).

If the individual does not follow the established rules, he or she seems to be acting irrational. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse writes that utopian alternatives, like socialism, are discarded by most people, because these alternatives appear irrational when compared to the widely accepted instrumentally rational rules of capitalism.

The world tends to become the stuff of total administration, which absorbs even the administrators. The web of domination has become the web of Reason itself, and this society is fatally entangled in it. And the transcending modes of thought seem to transcend Reason itself (Marcuse 1964, 169).

Marcuse explains that most people do not realize the extent to which their lives are controlled by instrumental rationality, because the production process has created a wide range of *false needs* (Marcuse 1964,

5) In advanced industrial societies most people believe that items like televisions, video recorders, microwave ovens, and cordless phones are necessities. The surest way to obtain these items is to make enough money by working. Consequently, most people are blind to the domination of the production process, because it is their participation in this process which allows for the fulfillment of false needs which were created by the production process in the first place.

We may distinguish both true and false needs. "False" are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs (Marcuse 1964, 5).

Although Marcuse acknowledges the barriers to critical thought, he argues that the objective conditions for social revolution already exist. He writes that there is already social wealth sufficient to abolish poverty and that technical resources exist to do the same (Marcuse 1972, 7). In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse writes that these resources could be directed toward humanitarian goals if more people recognized the difference between false and real needs (Marcuse 1972, 6). The Frankfurt theorists believe that if more people realize that capitalism has failed to provide real necessities such as food and shelter to everyone in society, they might become disillusioned with capitalism and become willing to change society.

Marcuse and other Frankfurt theorists believe that the possibilities for social change exist, but these possibilities depend upon more people in industrial societies recognizing the social domination which results from instrumental rationality. Effective social criticism can show the faults contained in advanced industrial society and stimulate people to actually desire social change.

While fueling critical energies by exposing the irrationalities of our instrumentally rational society is the goal of the Frankfurt theorists, it is also their most fundamental problem. According to Marcuse, it would appear that there are prospects for critique in industrial society, but on the other hand, he argues that industrial society is capable of containing criticism through the creation of false needs. The question then becomes: from where is social criticism to come? There is one sphere of society that has traditionally withstood the assault of instrumental rationality. That sphere is culture, and it might be an effective vehicle for criticism in society.

## CHAPTER 2

# CULTURE AND EFFECTIVE SOCIAL CRITICISM

### Mass Culture v. High Culture

When analyzing the critical potential of culture, it is important to make a clear distinction between high culture and mass culture. High culture traditionally refers to art that is produced by one individual. This art is not meant to be reproduced, and consequently embodies the artist's intentions in a unique space and time. Within mass culture one finds objects that attempt to *mimic* art objects, but the former have been simplified so they will be readily understood and easily liked. This material is mass produced and made to sell to the largest possible buying public. This material is referred to as *kitsch*, and the artist who produces this is often more concerned with market strategies than artistic expression.

Frankfurt theorists believe that high culture has the potential to provide social criticism (Held 1980, 81). They argue that autonomous art<sup>2</sup> is critical, because it has the ability to illustrate irrationalities in the current social system and at the same time provide visions of alternate social relations (Held 1980, 82). In other words, according to the Frankfurt theorists, autonomous art has the ability to fulfill all three requirements for effective social criticism. It can illustrate the current reality, show the self-contradictions of the current reality, and present alternate visions of reality. (The subject of autonomous art will be discussed in further detail toward the end of this chapter.)

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<sup>2</sup> The term *autonomous art* is used by the Frankfurt theorists to refer to works of art that contain aesthetic tension.

In the twentieth century, mass culture has increased in popularity, and this causes concern to some social theorists. Dwight MacDonald, in *A Theory of Mass Culture*, argues that the problem of mass culture is acute in the United States, because there is no boundary between the cultural elite and the masses. He argues that good (high) art competes with mass culture. In his words, "Serious ideas compete with commercialized formulae." He concludes that because mass culture is simpler and therefore more easily understood, it is more popular and drives out high art (MacDonald 1953).

### **The Rise of Mass Culture in America**

To many, mass culture seems to be a contemporary phenomenon. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville illustrates that mass culture has been in existence almost since the rise of capitalism. In the chapter entitled *Of the Spirit in Which the Americans Cultivate the Arts*, Tocqueville provides a penetrating analysis of the socio-economic origins of mass culture by way of contrast to artistic production in the aristocracies of Europe.

The first aspect of American culture noticed by Tocqueville was the fact that Americans tend to prefer useful objects to beautiful ones. He attributes this tendency in America to the absence of excessive wealth, a large middle class, and a common desire among Americans for comfort (Tocqueville 1835, 50). Tocqueville notes, "Democratic nations, amongst which all these things exist, will therefore cultivate the arts which serve to render life easy, in preference to those whose object is to adorn it" (Tocqueville 1835, 50).

Tocqueville writes that in aristocratic nations, where each profession exists as a tight class, the goal of cultural production is to create the best

possible goods. Conversely, he argues that in democratic countries, where each profession is open to everyone, the “social tie” is destroyed and the goal of each artisan is to “gain the greatest quantity of money at the least possible cost” (Tocqueville 1835, 50).

Tocqueville, not only noticed that artisans in America were different from those in aristocracies, but he also observed that the consumers of cultural goods were different. He writes that consumers in aristocratic nations, where wealth tends to be largely concentrated, demand the best goods available. Tocqueville even argues that this demand for quality is well-developed in the peasant class who would “rather go without the object he covets, than procure it in a state of imperfection” (Tocqueville 1835, 52).

Conversely, Tocqueville argues that in democracies, where social status and wealth are not fixed, there are always those who are rising on the social ladder and whose desires lay beyond their means. Those who are falling down the social ladder still cling to the vestiges of wealth. Tocqueville writes that the result of this social mobility is that people try to attain goods that are just beyond their fortunes. Consequently, he concludes that in democracies there are always people “willing to take up with imperfect satisfaction rather than abandon the object of their desires” (Tocqueville 1835, 53).

According to Tocqueville, artisans in democratic societies realize that most people are willing to accept lower quality as long as they can afford the objects they desire. As a result, the artisan makes an effort to sell his products at reasonable costs, so that a large number of people can purchase them (Tocqueville 1835, 53). Tocqueville writes that there are two ways of lowering the price of goods: 1) the discovery of shorter,

better methods of production, and 2) the manufacturing of a larger quantity of less valuable goods (Tocqueville 1835, 53). He felt that these economizing principles would result in the wide distribution of inferior commodities.

When none but the wealthy had watches, they were almost all very good ones; few are now made that are worth much, but everyone has one in his pocket. Thus, the democratic principle not only tends to direct the human mind to the useful arts, but it induces the artisan to produce with greater rapidity a quantity of imperfect commodities, and the consumer to content himself with these commodities (Tocqueville 1835, 52).

Through his analysis of utility in American cultural production, Tocqueville clearly describes the development of American mass culture and its susceptibility to domination by instrumental rationality. Tocqueville traces the tendency to employ instrumental rationality to the democratic nature of American society. Weber and Marcuse, on the other hand, argue that instrumental rationality originates from industrial imperatives. The two perspectives are actually quite similar. At the time Tocqueville made his observations, political and economic equality were largely the same, and most Americans had already accepted the instrumental rationality inherent to a developing capitalist society. By the time Weber and Marcuse were writing, the industrial revolution had increased production and, consequently, the legitimacy of instrumental rationality.

### **The “Culture Industry” and Domination**

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were among the first Frankfurt theorists to sound a warning against what they saw as the

complete domination of culture by instrumental rationality. They argue that the mass production of cultural goods is no different than the mass production of everyday items. Consequently, they refer to the process of cultural mass production as the “culture industry.”

In their chapter *The Culture Industry as Mass Deception*, contained in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they present an analysis of the mass production of cultural products. Horkheimer and Adorno argue — as did Tocqueville — that instrumental rationality, which is the dynamic of industrial production, has similarly become the driving force in the creation of cultural goods. Consequently, the dominating effects of instrumental rationality have been carried over into the cultural sphere.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the culture industry, like other industries, promotes repressive bureaucracies. They write that there are few production centers and a large number of widely scattered consumption points, so there appears to be a need for organization by management (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 121).

These bureaucracies not only control the production apparatus, but they also dictate demands for cultural goods. Horkheimer and Adorno write that the managers who determine what is to be produced or broadcasted base their decisions on “their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 121). Frequently, the managers are more concerned with “classifying, organizing, and labelling consumers” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 123). Consequently, the differences in the goods produced depend upon which social class is the target market.

Through advertising, managers influence conceptions of the criteria for social divisions. Advertisements convey the messages that rich people

own Cadillacs or yuppies wear suspenders. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that as a result, most consumers are drawn to cultural goods that identify a class to which consumers either belong or wish to belong (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 123).

The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 123).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the result of this categorization is that the consumer is manipulated by the managerial class (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 123). Individuals are organized according to age, income level, or other distinguishing characteristics. Then, their cultural “needs” are determined accordingly by the managers. Finally, advertising attempts to bestow those “needs” upon consumers.

Horkheimer and Adorno not only discuss the dominating results of instrumental rationality in mass culture, but they also discuss the inability of the products of mass culture to stimulate social criticism. They argue that the inability for criticism in mass culture stems from the fact that mass culture is the entertainment business. For mass culture to be successful, it must be purchased. For the products to be purchased, Tocqueville would argue that they need to be useful. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the use mass culture satisfies is entertainment (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 137). They write, “Nevertheless, the culture industry remains the entertainment business. Its influence over consumers is established by entertainment...” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 137).

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write that the desire for entertainment is especially strong in advanced industrial societies. They argue that the craving for entertainment stems from the desire by most people to escape the pressures of the workplace (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, p. 137). Horkheimer and Adorno believe that entertainment is like a tonic that allows people to keep producing in industrial societies, because it attempts to distract one's attention from the work process (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 137).

Adorno and Horkheimer claim, however, that the culture industry does not really allow escape but promotes acceptance of a world dominated by instrumental rationality. They point out that the majority of cultural goods available in industrial societies are mass produced by mechanical processes. The consumer's cultural experiences are actually dependant on the production process. Consequently, the attempt to escape actually results in the affirmation of the production process.

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. In front of the appetite stimulated by all those brilliant names and images there is finally set no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 139).

Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that the entertaining products of the culture industry lack *aesthetic tension*.<sup>3</sup> This the property that gives art the ability to provide social criticism. Aesthetic tension in art is achieved

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<sup>3</sup> Picasso's *Guernica* is an example of a work of art that contains aesthetic tension.

through the conflict of the object of the work of art and the artist's subjective interpretation of that object (Held 1980, 83). Horkheimer and Adorno believe that works of art like those of the Impressionist movement are capable of providing social criticism, because they re-present everyday situations in a manner which illustrates problems in the existing social relations and stimulates alternate visions of social reality (Held 1980, 87). Conversely, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the goal of the culture industry is total identity between the object and the artistic interpretation.

If the standards for effective social criticism are applied to Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of mass culture, it becomes apparent that mass culture most successfully fulfills the first requirement of presenting reality, but fails to address the second and third requirements, which are respectively, the representation of the irrationalities in the current social relations and the stimulation rational alternative social arrangements. Consequently, mass culture, because of its growing reliance on instrumental rationality, has become incapable of providing effective social criticism.

Nonetheless, the Frankfurt theorists argue that autonomous art can provide effective social criticism. Autonomous art is more complex than mass culture, and because autonomous art is produced singularly, it tends to be more expensive than the kitsch of mass culture. Consequently, autonomous art appeals only to those who have the depth of understanding to enjoy it in galleries or museums. The problem for the Frankfurt theorists, then, is how to disperse the critical qualities of autonomous art to more people in society so as to stimulate the desire for social change on a larger scale.

## Cultural movements and social criticism

Some social theorists argue that culture allows for the liberation of the individual in society through cultural movements. In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Daniel Bell argues that culture is distinct from the social structures in society and is therefore a realm where the individual in modern industrial society can rebel against instrumental rationality.

The basis for his argument is his belief that society cannot be looked upon as an organic whole nor as an integrated system which depends on one fundamental structure for social change (Bell 1973, 476). Instead, Bell argues that society can be divided into three distinct parts, each of which encompass different aspects of social action. One part is the *social structure*. This sphere includes the economy, technology, and the occupational system. The second part is the *polity*. This sphere administers the distribution of power and attempts to settle differences between the conflicting demands of individuals and groups. The third part is the *culture*. This is the realm of expressive symbolism and meanings (Bell 1973, 12).

Bell argues that each of these realms is governed by a different fundamental concern, or, in his words, “axial principle” (Bell 1973, 12). He writes that the axial principle in the social structure is *economizing*. This is the concern with efficiency in productivity or, simply, instrumental rationality. Bell asserts that the axial principle in the polity is *participation*. In the cultural sphere, Bell writes that the axial principle is “the desire for the fulfillment and the enhancement of the self” (Bell 1973, 12).

Bell also argues that during early capitalism, the three spheres of society were linked by a common value system. He believes, however,

that in modern times the axial principles which govern each sphere have become increasingly opposed to each other (Bell 1973, 12).

Bell believes that this widening disjunction between the axial principles was caused by industrial production. He writes that the economizing principle which governs the social structure originated from man's attempt "to master nature by technics" (Bell 1973, 477). He argues that this involved "delayed gratifications, compulsive dedication to work, frugality, and sobriety" (Bell 1973, 477). However, Bell believes that mass production has allowed for the immediate satisfaction of our desires. As a result, individuals in society are confronted with a widening disjunction between the economizing mode required in the work place and the hedonism created by the increased availability of consumer goods (Bell 1973, 478).

...the new modes of life, which depend strongly on the primacy of cognitive and theoretical knowledge, inevitably challenge the tendencies of the culture, which strives for the enhancement of the self and turns increasingly antinomian and anti-institutional (Bell 1973, 478).

Bell argues that during the sixties and seventies, as a result of the widening disjunction between the axial principles, there was a cultural backlash against instrumental rationality. Bell sees the modernist movement of the seventies — a movement concerned with imagination and artistic creativity — as a clear example of how individuals can rebel against instrumental rationality. He also argues that a counter-culture emerged which represented a change in lifestyle (Bell 1973, 479). This counter-culture lifestyle was one of personal freedom achieved through "the search

for polymorphic pleasure in the name of liberation from restraint” (Bell 1973, 479).

Bell writes that these changes in ideas and cultural styles “do not change history” (Bell 1973, 479). However, he argues that these changes are necessary preconditions to social change, because “a change in consciousness — in values and moral reasoning — is what moves men to change their social arrangements and institutions” (Bell 1973, 479).

Bell makes a key point when he argues that a change in consciousness must precede any social change. It would appear that the counter-culture of the seventies was an attempt to fulfill the subjective conditions for revolution by changing widely held instrumentally rational values. However, the counter-culture of the sixties and seventies failed to change American society.

Herbert Marcuse and Alexis de Tocqueville provide insights into the social criticism that developed during that era. Marcuse writes that individuals caught up in the system of instrumental rationality are forced to accept domination or starve (Marcuse 1941). Yet, the counter-culture of the sixties and seventies consisted largely of university students. Students are not yet completely entangled in the capitalist system, and can therefore *afford* to protest. Individuals participating in the market, however, have little choice but to continue working.

The problem for the student protestors was the stimulation of social criticism in the bulk of people who participate in the capitalist system. Tocqueville writes that this is an extremely difficult task. He argues that people who belong to the middle class in American society are very resistant to revolutionary change, because they feel that they have the most to lose in a revolution. He writes that because the middle classes are close

to prosperity, they strive to attain higher positions within the status quo. Tocqueville also writes that because individuals in the middle class of American society are relatively close to poverty, they place great importance on their possessions and do not want to risk losing them (Tocqueville 1835, 265).

As they are still almost within the reach of poverty, they see its privations near at hand, and dread them; between themselves there is nothing but a scanty fortune, upon which they immediately fix their apprehensions and their hopes. Every day increases the interest they take in it, by the constant cares which it occasions; and they are the more attached to it by their continual exertions to increase the amount. The notion of surrendering the smallest part of it is insupportable to them, and they consider its total loss as the worst of misfortunes (Tocqueville 1835, 265).

Tocqueville concludes that revolutions in America will become few and far between. The fundamental principle to which Tocqueville attributes the characteristics of American society is the general equality of condition that he believes exists. Tocqueville argues that Americans value their equality more than they value their freedom. Consequently, he concludes that revolutionary impulses will disappear as equality becomes more widespread.

Conversely, Tocqueville argues that inequality of conditions is a source of revolutionary energies.

Almost all the revolutions which have changed the aspect of nations have been made to consolidate or to destroy social inequality. Remove the secondary causes which have produced the great convulsions of the world, and you will almost always find the principle of inequality at the bottom (Tocqueville 1835, 264).

If Tocqueville is correct, then critical impulses might originate in minorities — such as women, blacks, and the gay community — all of whom desire equality. However, these minorities desire *assimilation* into the status quo. Once they have received the opportunity to participate equally in the instrumentally rational social relations, their critical energies will most likely disappear leaving the dominate social relations intact.

It appears that the cultural sphere is incapable of providing effective social criticism. Tocqueville writes that the social mobility which exists in America causes the emphasis of cultural production to be placed on utility rather than beauty. Horkheimer and Adorno take Tocqueville's argument to the extreme and write that instrumental rationality has indeed become the driving force in cultural production. Yet, they still maintain that autonomous art may provide effective social criticism. However, autonomous art has very limited appeal and is therefore largely ineffective. Bell argues that cultural movements allow for the liberation from instrumental rationality. Yet, the counter-culture of the sixties and seventies involved mainly students and not those completely entangled in the production process.

The problem of encouraging the bulk of people in society to distinguish between real and false needs is still the major barrier to effective social criticism. Mass culture with its broad appeal perpetuates false needs. The cultural movements of the sixties and seventies were unable to persuade the middle class of the necessity to reject false needs. In the next chapter, I analyze one of American society's main proponents of false needs — television. I discuss not only television's inability to provide effective social criticism, but also its role as an ideological tool which promotes acceptance of the status quo.

## CHAPTER 3

### Television and Effective Social Criticism

Television is one of the most familiar and dominant products of the American culture industry. It is estimated that ABC, NBC, and CBS are seen respectively in about 80,000,000 different households each week. It is also estimated that these households are tuned in to the networks for four hours per day (Gabelmann 1990, 22).

On the surface, television appears to supply harmless entertainment. Television viewing is often the pursuit of entertainment which, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is an attempt to escape from instrumental rationality by individuals in advanced industrial societies (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 137). Yet, television programming is also produced according to the standards of instrumental rationality which demand efficiency in entertainment. Consequently, in the case of television, it appears that Horkheimer and Adorno are correct in writing that the quest to escape — through culture — in advanced industrial societies results in submission to a society dominated by instrumental rationality.

#### **Instrumental Rationality in Television**

Although Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the entertainment provided by mass culture does not truly allow for the escape people are seeking, entertainment is still important to the television industry. It is absolutely necessary to produce entertaining programs. If programs are dull, people will not tune in and sponsors will spend their advertising money elsewhere.

Additionally, instrumental rationality demands the efficient production of programs. In *Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture*, Theodor Adorno writes that in order to meet the desire for entertainment, the television industry must produce a large volume of programs. To do this efficiently, programs are usually written by committees under restrictive time constraints. Consequently, the use of time-tested formulas which allow for the substitution of particular details is necessary. The end result of this production technique — as with industrial production — is standardization (Adorno 1954).

Although standardization is the rule in the television industry, viewers must not become bored. One technique that preserves entertainment in the face of standardization is the cultivation of special effects which can be placed anywhere in a ready-made formula (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 125).

Special effects promote the illusion of variety while still adhering to a rigid structure. In *The Luminous Image*, David Ross writes that the illusion of choice is clearly a marketing strategy.

This illusion of choice was so well developed that it actually promoted the notion that there was significant difference between the essentially identical offerings "competing" with each other for the lucrative privilege of capturing an audience. Of course, once captured, you (the audience of free individuals) were delivered to the same prisons--one in which your consumer desires would be rehabilitated *en masse* and your sense of self would be either perverted or retarded (Ross 1984).

In addition to special effects, Horkheimer and Adorno write that the television industry — like the entire culture industry — maintains its level of entertainment by attempting to restrain the amount of mental

energy expended by the viewer (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 137). In the case of the sit-com, this is commonly accomplished by attempting to portray "real-life" situations.

Recently, there has been an increasing trend to represent the trials and tribulations of the middle class in sit-coms. The January 27, 1991, installment of *Entertainment Tonight* featured a segment on the portrayal of lower-middle class families in television. Blue collar workers have become the subjects of sit-coms, as is the case with *Roseanne*, *Lenny*, *Married With Children*, *Family Matters*, and *You Take The Kids*. According to *Entertainment Tonight*, the eighties were the era of the rich and famous on television, but "today's prime-time fare is full of blue-collar jobs, beer, and bills" (Nuell 1991).

This trend to portray the everyday problems of the lower-middle class is driven by the attempt to capture more viewers. According to *Entertainment Tonight*, "Working class families are the backbone of the American T.V. audience, but prime time T.V. shows have mostly featured white collar workers, until now" (Nuell 1991). Bill Smitrovich of the television drama *Life Goes On* remarked, "T.V. actually reflects the times...for shows to be popular now, they've got to include the harsh economic realities that today's families really do face" (Nuell 1991).

In addition to realism, television programming attempts to restrict mental analysis through stereotyping. Adorno writes that a common form of stereotyping is *pseudo-personalization*. This is the practice of portraying complex issues in black and white terms defined by the personalities of particular characters. Often bad or evil concepts are personalized by stupid, fumbling characters. Conversely, good or true concepts are portrayed by witty, courageous characters who triumph

simply by the virtue of their goodness (Adorno 1954).

### **Television's Effect on Social Consciousness**

Of course, in real life good does not always triumph. Consequently, the result of stereotyping is that instead of doing justice to social issues, television often detracts from them by oversimplifying complicated matters.

This not only distracts from any real social issues but also enforces the psychologically extremely dangerous division of the world into black (the outgroup) and white (the ingroup) (Adorno 1954).

Pseudo-personalization is an example of the type of stereotyping commonly used to portray large issues. However, television also makes use of extensive small-scale stereotyping. Some examples of small-scale stereotyping are the “pretty girl can do no wrong” and the “bitch heroine” scenarios (Adorno 1954). These scenarios promote the idea that people may get away with obnoxious behavior simply by the virtue of their attractiveness.

Adorno concedes that stereotyping is a natural and essential part of gaining and organizing knowledge. He also admits that in the span of a thirty-minute program there is little time allowed for the spectator to make a lengthy probe of the psychology of particular characters. So to compensate, the authors are forced to portray the personalities of characters in neon lights (Adorno 1954).

Nonetheless, Adorno writes that the television industry's extensive use of stereotypes promotes passivity in the television viewer, and makes him or her less able to respond to change, because he or she is less able to perceive reality.

The more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present setup of cultural industry, the less people are likely to change their preconceived ideas with the progress of their experience. The more opaque and complicated modern life becomes, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés which seem to bring some order into the otherwise ununderstandable. Thus, people may not only lose true insight into reality, but ultimately their very capacity for life experience may be dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles (Adorno 1954).

As stated earlier, in the attempt to entertain efficiently, television — the sit-com in particular — portrays “real life” situations in simple, stereotypical fashion. Sit-coms aim at our near complete identification with the shows by portraying “the harsh economic realities that today's families really do face.” Yet, sit-coms present these harsh economic realities in stereotypical simplicity, which Adorno argues has the effect of blurring the viewer's insight into the true social relations.

If the standards of effective social criticism are applied, it becomes apparent that the attempt at realism in sit-coms comes close to satisfying the first requirement of presenting the current social relations. Yet, the second requirement of presenting the irrationalities of the current social relations is commonly ignored.

When irrationalities are addressed, however, they are done so in a comic manner. Leeza Gibbons of *Entertainment Tonight* remarked in a bubbly manner, “Today's families on T.V. face realistic problems and get a

laugh while they are doing it” (Nuell 1991).

By presenting the problems in the current social relations as sources of amusement, critical potential is obliterated. Horkheimer and Adorno write that we overcome our fears inherent in the capitalist system through our laughter.

The triumph over beauty is celebrated by humor. There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at. Laughter whether conciliatory or terrible, always occurs when some fear passes. It indicates liberation either from physical danger or from the grip of logic (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 140).

Because the second requirement for effective social criticism is either ignored or rendered impotent by comedy, there is no clear distinction between the “harsh economic realities” of the current social relations and the stereotypical resolution of complex issues which is accomplished in the context of the current social relations. The result is the creation of a *pseudo-reality* which falsely presents the current social relations as a simple world where problems are sources of entertainment, and where in the end the good often triumphs over the bad simply because of its goodness (Adorno 1954).

Almost every television sit-com creates a pseudo-reality. A glaring example of pseudo-reality and its effects on social criticism is *The Cosby Show*. The theory behind the show is that by creating black role models in the form of the Huxtable family, the black community would be given social goals (integration into white, middle-class, consumer society) (Matabane 1988). However, by creating a pseudo-reality where blacks go to college and become doctors and lawyers, *The Cosby Show* has, instead

of stimulating social change, enforced the notion that the status of blacks in the current social relations is equal to that of the white upper-middle class (Matabane 1988, 30). Consequently, many viewers are left with the impression that there is no need for social change.

The creation of a pseudo-reality can be illustrated by the analysis of the January 24, 1991, episode of *The Cosby Show*. The main character of this episode is a high school-aged, African-American woman named Pam, who is Mrs. Huxtable's cousin. Pam is the "real life" element in the series. She was raised — like many blacks — in a poor, single-parent household by her mother. Dr. and Mrs. Huxtable have become her legal guardians and provide her with a loving home while she attends high school.

During this particular episode, Pam is confronted with the realistic problem of whether or not to give in to sexual pressure exerted on her by her boyfriend Slide. Although the problem of promiscuity and teenage pregnancies is very real — especially in the black community — the problem on the show was presented in a pseudo-realistic manner (Black Americans 1990).

First, the problem was stereotyped. The pressure on Pam to have sex came only from Slide, who felt the need to impress his competitive friends who were constantly engaged in games ranging from handball to backgammon. Conversely, Pam's best friend supported her decision to resist the pressure (Kukoff 1991). The viewer is left with the impression that sexual pressure is exerted only by males partly as an attempt to impress their male companions. There was no hint that sexual pressure may be exerted upon females by their female companions who might be just as insecure about their sexual identity during adolescence as their male counterparts. As a matter of fact, during a conversation to Slide, Pam

remarks that all guys are alike — they are all overcome by their hormones (Kukoff 1991).

Slide begins to hint that if Pam does not give in to him, he will leave her for someone else. Pam thinks that she loves Slide, so she confronts Dr. Huxtable about obtaining birth control pills. After talking with Mrs. Huxtable, Pam decides that if Slide really loves her, he should be willing to wait for sex until she is ready. Pam tells Slide that she wants to wait, and Slide responds that her refusal to have sex is an indication that she does not love him. After being separated for a couple days, Slide apologizes to Pam, and everyone lives happily ever after (Kukoff 1991).

In this episode, the first requirement for effective social criticism was almost satisfied through the presentation of the confrontation between a young African-American woman from a single parent family with a real social issue. Yet, the second requirement of presenting the irrationalities of the current social relations was largely avoided. There was absolutely no mention of other factors which may influence teenage promiscuity such as alcohol use, drug use, or simply the desire to feel good.

When problems with the current social relations were presented, they were done so in comic fashion. During the episode, Pam and her best friend Charmaine were discussing the danger of becoming pregnant as a result of sex. Charmaine added that becoming pregnant is not the only problem, because there is always the possibility that the father will leave. She said, “Men are prone to do that from time to time” which stimulated laughter from the studio audience (Kukoff 1991). Consequently, the problem of single-parent families, which is common among the black population, is made to appear as a source of amusement instead of a social problem (Black Americans 1990).

By illustrating a complex social issue in a simplified manner, the viewer is left with the impression that true bliss is attainable with the current social relations. Consequently, the third requirement for effective social criticism, which is the stimulation of images of a rational alternate reality, is avoided. Pam was able to receive moral guidance from her adopted family, and because she stood up for a noble principle, her problem was solved. In the end, she even kept her boyfriend. The viewer is left with the impression that the social problem of teenage promiscuity and pregnancy is not a reflection of problematic social relations but is a matter of individual will power.

Paula W. Matabane, in *Television and the Black Audience: Cultivating Moderate Perspectives on Racial Integration* concludes that *The Cosby Show* actually hurts the quest for African-American social equality instead of helping.

*The Cosby Show*, for example, epitomizes the Afro-American dream of full acceptance and assimilation into U.S. society. Both the series and Bill Cosby as an individual represent successful competitors in network television and in attaining a high status. Although this achievement is certainly not inherently negative, we should consider the role television plays in the cultivation of an overall picture of growing racial equality that conceals unequal social relationships and overestimates of how well blacks are integrating into white society (if at all). The illusion of well-being among the oppressed may lead to reduced political activity and less demand for social justice and equality (Matabane 1988).

## **The Possibilities for Critical Reform In Television**

### ***Criticism through a change of television content***

The analysis of television by the Frankfurt theorists focuses on the social effects of television as a product of mass culture. Some of the

Frankfurt theorists argue that the technology behind television is neutral but is perverted by its association with the instrumentally rational capitalist economic system. For the theorists who hold this position, the critical reform of television is simple — change the content of television to further revolutionary goals.

Walter Benjamin argues that the ability of mass communications to reach people provides the potential for their mobilization (Held 1980, 108). Benjamin believes that a critical perspective could be restored to culture, if it was transformed by a “progressive intelligentsia — an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production” (Benjamin 1934). Benjamin argues that if mass culture was controlled by “enlightened” individuals, it could accurately show us the current social relations and the irrationalities contained therein, thus stimulating visions of a truly logical alternate reality (Held 1980, 108).

Benjamin’s argument appears to provide some answers concerning how criticism may be stimulated through television. According to him, if television were controlled by critically minded individuals, it would not project acquiescence to the status quo. However, I believe that this is precisely where Benjamin's argument is flawed.

Where, in a society dominated by instrumental rationality, are these “enlightened” individuals to be found? Even if one or two television producers wanted to transform television into a critical medium, they would be hampered by the requirement to provide entertainment, which attracts viewers, which results in good ratings, which finally results in acquisition of sponsors who finance the show. As Marcuse points out, individuals living in a society dominated by instrumental rationality are compelled by necessity to follow the rules. Consequently, Benjamin’s

argument is flawed, because, according to him, the critical potential of television depends upon the revolutionary rejection of instrumental rationality in the first place.

### *The deeper problems*

Television is not only a product of mass culture, but it is also a type of mass communication. Jean Baudrillard, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, argues that Marxism is ill-equipped to deal with theories of communication. He argues that the dialectical theory put forth by Marx only takes into consideration material production and ignores the production of symbols. Consequently, Marxists have taken the position that the media are simply means of distribution which are controlled by the ruling class (Baudrillard 1981).

As discussed earlier, some Frankfurt Theorists argue that if the media are stripped of its value as a commodity, it can be turned into a system of “open communication and unlimited democratic exchange” (Baudrillard 1981). Baudrillard believes that this Marxist theory is false. He writes, “...always the same dream haunts the Marxist imaginary: strip objects of their exchange value in order to restore their use value” (Baudrillard 1981).

Baudrillard argues that it is the very *essence* of the media — non-communication — that results in social control (Baudrillard 1981). He writes that true communication involves an exchange of ideas, but the media allow no response.

...they are what always prevents response, making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response simulation; themselves integrated in the

transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact). This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it (Baudrillard 1981).

Baudrillard argues that the non-communicative essence of television is the *function* of television, and therefore television cannot be considered a neutral medium (Baudrillard 1981). According to Baudrillard, the function of television is the presentation of images for consumption, and the role of the individual in consumer society is to take and not to give.

There is no response to a functional object: its function is already there, an integrated speech to which it has already responded, leaving no room for play, or reciprocal *putting in play* ... (Baudrillard 1981).

Baudrillard argues that in its presentation of subversive subjects, the media render them impotent. He writes, "...transgression and subversion never get 'on the air' without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralized into signs, they are eviscerated of their meaning" (Baudrillard 1981).

According to Baudrillard, television *by its very nature* (the production of images for consumption) is completely incapable of providing social criticism. Social control results, because people are limited to consuming the manufactured (and manipulated) images and are not allowed to respond.

A study conducted by G. Ray Funkhouser and Eugene F. Shaw explored the troubling theory that television not only influences opinions on specific issues but actually may distort an entire culture's outlook on reality. Funkhouser and Shaw argue that motion pictures, computers, and television "manipulate and rearrange not only the content but the processes

of communicated experience, thereby shaping how the audience perceives and interprets the physical and social reality depicted” (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 75).

The basis of their argument is that through its presentation of events, television creates synthetic experiences. They argue that — until the nineteenth century — a person’s actual experience was largely limited to occurrences which happened within range of that person’s natural senses. People could still receive news of events happening beyond their immediate surroundings, but the news represented symbolic information, not actual experience (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 78).

However, with the development of the mass media, people are given the opportunity to become “eye witnesses” to events that would normally occur outside their “natural sensory envelope” (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 78). Consequently, viewing the event through television or motion pictures takes on the quality of an actual experience (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 78).

Twentieth-century communication innovations — notably motion pictures, television, and computers and their allied technologies — differ crucially from all previous media and forms of communication. Introduced into one’s sensory envelope, they appear to extend it beyond its natural limits. Unlike speech, writing, drawing, painting, and even photography, they let mass audiences perceive, as quasi-eyewitnesses, events that happened in other times or in other places, or that never really happened at all. These kinetic media possess an immediacy of experience not essentially different from viewing life through a one-way mirror (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 79).

The most disturbing aspect of this argument is that people may mistake synthetic experience created through the manipulation and

distortion of television as real experience. Funkhouser and Shaw write, "Audiences tend to believe what they see on television" (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 79).

One hypothesis formulated by Funkhouser and Shaw is that by mistaking synthetic experience for real experience many people may develop a distorted view of real social events (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 84). Like pseudo-realism this would have the effect of preventing the fulfillment of the first requirement for effective social criticism which is the accurate presentation of the current social relations.

A more disturbing hypothesis put forth by Funkhouser and Shaw is that people may actually lose contact with reality and live an illusion based on synthetic experience. Funkhouser and Shaw argue that prior to the twentieth century, the distance people traveled was limited. Consequently, their knowledge of the world was gained through reports and stories. On the other hand, however, Funkhouser and Shaw argue that people had an "intimate" understanding of their immediate surroundings (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 84).

Today, mass media have given individuals increased access to the world through the presentation of occurrences which may happen half-way around the world. Consequently, the need for most people to experience reality first hand is decreased. Many people may simply take the distorted conditions presented on television as fact (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 84).

Today sight/sound media provide an easily accessed window to the outside world. But media depictions of "everyday life," plus the opportunity the media provide for avoiding involvement with it, leave us less in touch with the actualities of our own physical and social world compared to the people of bygone times. We may have a far broader picture of the world than did our forebears. But our wider range of "facts"

and perceptions may be largely false or distorted because of our own predilection for synthetic events electronically presented as synthetic experience (Funkhouser and Shaw 1990, 84).

This last hypothesis is devastating for critical thought, because according to Funkhouser and Shaw reality is not only distorted by television, but it may also be created. Many people might actually live an illusion which is built upon the images they receive through the mass media. Unlike pseudo-reality, which hinders the first requirement for effective social criticism, the creation of illusion actually obliterates the ability to see the actual social relations. If a person has a clear view of illusory social relations, any critical social analysis would be based on an illusion and would therefore be totally ineffective.

The “deeper” problems with television prove to be the most troubling for critical thought. According to Baudrillard and Funkhouser and Shaw, Benjamin's idea of changing the content of the mass media — which presupposes social change anyway — would be futile, because the very nature of television prohibits critical thought. Whether television is analyzed as a product of mass culture or a type of mass media, it appears that it will never serve a critical role, and in the meantime it will actually function to maintain the status quo.

## CHAPTER 4

**The Prospects for Effective Social Criticism  
in America**

The future for effective social criticism is not bright. Many social theorists believe that culture has traditionally played a critical role in society. However, with the growth of mass culture, critical potential is diminished. Because of its association with instrumental rationality, mass culture has inhibited the individual's ability to envision anything beyond the current social relations.

*Television as mass culture* further prevents effective social criticism by distorting the individual's ability to accurately see the current social relations. *Television as mass media* completes the destruction of effective social criticism by actually creating illusory social relations.

More disturbing, however, than the critical deficiencies of television itself are the ramifications for the possibilities of effective social criticism in America. The inability of television to provide effective social criticism and its tendency to actually reinforce the status quo reflects the larger problems that mass culture and mass media pose to the project of critical theory. After all, if one cannot see the true nature of the social relations, because it is obscured by mass culture, he or she cannot see the irrationalities contained therein. If one thinks that one can see the true social relations, but those relations are actually illusions synthetically produced by mass media, then any attempt at criticism has no real basis.

Consequently, I conclude that the possibilities for effective social criticism are disappearing. With the growth of mass culture, the cultural sphere appears unable to provide effective social criticism. Television,

with its mass appeal, is not only incapable of providing effective social criticism, but it actually promotes acceptance of the status quo. Minorities may be sources of social criticism, but their energies will be absorbed as they are assimilated into the current social relations. Perhaps we will never break free of the cold grip of instrumental rationality.

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