The Unpredictable Past

EXPLORATIONS IN AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY

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For all my children

Alex, Joshua, Isaac, Jennie, and Stephanie

with love
accurate when he wrote in 1973, "We provided some of the important mater-
ial out of which histories of the period are being written." And, it
should be added, will continue to be written, for one of the enduring con-
bructions of the photographers of the FSA and OWI is to help to introduce
the America of their generation to Americans of ours. They have provided
us with an unusually rich historical resource, which is flawed, certainly, as
all such bodies of materials are, but which affords us an unusual opportunity
to explore many of the past’s hidden dimensions if only we have the wisdom
to use their legacy with insight and sensitivity.

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The Folklore of Industrial Society:
Popular Culture and Its Audiences

In a sense this essay contains its own introduction. When I was invited to
deliver the Merle Curti Lectures at the University of Wisconsin, I decided
immediately that the first of the three-lecture series "Patterns of American
Culture during the Great Depression," would have to explain why popular
culture, which I focused on, was an appropriate and effective mechanism
for comprehending Depression America in the first place. At the outset of
the essay I explain in some detail why I felt it necessary to begin my Curti
Lectures with an elaborate rationale. Of course I had—and have—no illu-
sions that a single lecture, or even the entire three lectures, would convince
those deeply skeptical of the worth of Popular Culture as historical evidence
of what its audiences were thinking and feeling. Certainly I was directing
my remarks to those already favorably disposed to using such materials and
to those who were agnostic on the issue, but in retrospect I’m equally certain
that I was also speaking to myself.

Ultimately, perhaps, everything we write is for ourselves, but the de-
gree to which this is true varies according to the circumstances. Of all the
essays in this volume, this is the one most definitely aimed at its own au-
thor. I was the most obvious audience for this piece. This is not to say that
I didn’t hope or want to convince others, only that before I could do that I
had to convince myself that I could make an intellectual case for what I
believed was true from my own experiences, observations, and values. I
received a reassuringly positive response from my Wisconsin audience when
I delivered the lecture on April 2, 1991, and from my colleagues at the
Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where I tried out a
very early version in December of 1990. I should add that I found in Wis-
consin, as I have in Berkeley, that, while not a few students have already
learned to close their minds to the possibility that popular culture has any
scholarly value, there is a large reservoir of student interest in, and even
hunger for, learning how the materials of Popular Culture might be used in the reconstruction of the past. These various supportive reactions from colleagues and students alike encouraged me to expand the lecture into this essay which is the most recently published piece in this collection and appeared, in slightly different form, along with the commentaries of three scholars, in The American Historical Review, 97 (December 1992).

My consumers, are they not my producers?

James Joyce

In his novel Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison’s protagonist muses about the nature of history:

All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down...

...What did they ever think of us transitory ones?...birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; of natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents? We who write no novels, histories or other books. What about us...”

This remains one of the nagging questions for many of us who write history today. What does the historian do about what Ellison called “‘the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history’”? There are many approaches to this problem. In Black Culture and Black Consciousness, I attempted to use Folk Culture—songs, tales, proverbs, jokes—to re-create the voices and consciousness of the slaves and freedmen who left few if any written sources behind them. I found surprisingly little need for elaborate rationales or heavy theoretical underpinnings. There was an encouraging—and perhaps all too easy—acceptance of the proposition that by examining folklore one could recover the voices of the historically inarticulate. Underlying this acceptance was the widespread agreement that there was a valid correspondence between the creators and the receptors of folklore; since folklore came out of the community, scholars could use it to recover the common voice.

In recent years I’ve been trying to project this approach into the area of Popular Culture. More specifically, I have been attempting to recover the lost voices of large numbers of Americans during the Great Depression by a detailed examination of the mainstream Popular Culture they were exposed to in the books, magazines, and newspapers they read, the radio programs they listened to, and the movies they watched. I have learned unmistakably, in papers I’ve given and published, that this time around there will be no easy acceptance; that Popular Culture is seen as the antithesis of Folk Culture: not as emanating from within the community but created—often quite artificially by people with pecuniary or ideological motives—for the community or rather for the masses who no longer had an organic community capable of producing culture. Popular Culture, the critics argue—if it has to be invoked at all—should be used primarily to represent the consciousness of its producers not its consumers. I have discovered, for example, that my endeavor to find in the absurdist humor of Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx indications of the popular mood of the Great Depression, is precisely the kind of Marxism that distresses many of my colleagues the most. “We went to their movies,” a senior historian informed me after one of my lectures, “to be entertained, not to ponder important problems; we went to laugh.”

The real question for historians, of course, is less the intentions of the audience than why they laughed at what they did. This is precisely the issue my friend and colleague Gerda Lerner was attempting to get at when, following a paper I delivered on film and politics, she asked how I handled the relationship between the producers of the culture and their audiences. It’s an important question to which I gave a flip response: I handled that relationship, I informed her and the audience, just as brilliantly as historians have handled the relationships between the Puritan divine Cotton Mather and his parishioners, between the editor Horace Greeley and his readers, between the politician Franklin Roosevelt and his constituents. In other words, I didn’t really handle it at all. Historians, in fact, deal relatively poorly with this question at all levels, and I suppose I was resentful of the fact that it only seemed to be those of us who dealt with Popular Culture who were being impertinent to answer it. Nevertheless, resentment and rhetoric are not going to make the question go away. Whether it’s fair or not, we are being asked to justify the use of Popular Culture as a historical source; to explain why these materials reflect anything more than what those who produced them were thinking. To put the best possible face on it, I decided that if scholarly attitudes toward Popular Culture made it necessary for historians who used it to grapple with questions other historians were allowed to ignore or soft-peddle with impunity, so be it; it might even prove to be an advantage. Hence the genesis of this article.

We are, of course, not just dealing with an academic question. Scholars may well have their own internal disciplinary reasons for eschewing Popular Culture, but in addition to the academic cubicles they inhabit, scholars are members of a society in which Popular Culture is—and has been for some time—distrusted and denigrated regularly. To the Left, Popular Culture looked
like the attempt of the ruling classes to exert hegemony over the masses; to the Right, Popular Culture existed as confirmation of the fear that if the masses and those who cynically catered to their low tastes were given free rein the entire society would be awash in a flood of cultural trivia.

These interpretations were by no means mutually exclusive. An entire range of intellectuals combined the notion that Popular Culture was unvarying trash with the idea that its purpose was hegemonic. Radio, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno asserted in the 1940s, "turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same," resulting in "the stunting of the mass-media consumer's powers of imagination and spontaneity. The might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds." Similarly, they argued, "The sound film leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audiences. . . . they react automatically" and "fall helpless victims to what is offered them." A decade later the sociologist Bernard Rosenberg, in a single page of his introduction to the collection, Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, used the words "cretinize," "brutalize," "totalitarianism," "garbage," "ghastliness," "cultural pap and gruel," "illusion," "sub-art," and "pseudo-knowledge" to characterize the subject of the volume and concluded that "the electronic wonderworld and the rulers thereof . . . manage to debar the mass man they have created from any really satisfying experience." The art critic Harold Rosenberg felt so strongly about the debilitating effects of Mass Culture that in 1958 he begged his peers to "quarantine kitsch," to deny it "an intellectual dimension" by refusing to study it. "Every discovery of 'significance' in Li'l Abner or Mickey Spillane," he charged, "helps to destroy the distinction between kitsch and art. . . . If only Popular Culture were left to the populace!" And in our own day Allan Bloom has made a small fortune by disseminating the same views to a receptive public. Rock music, Bloom warned his extensive readership, was "junk food for the soul," a "gutter phenomenon" that transforms the lives of its young listeners "into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy," and permanently removes them from the realm of True Culture: "As long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf."

Indeed, even the practitioners of Popular Culture—who are of course also part of the larger society—have added to this thrust. Thus Groucho Marx was amused at the professors who professed to see significance in the routines he did with his brothers, when in fact they were just improvising without any grand purpose, just trying to make people laugh. The director Frank Capra attributed the success of his first Academy Award-winning film, It Happened One Night (1934), to the fact that it was "unfettered with any ideas, any big moral precepts or anything else. Just sheer entertainment, fun." More recently, the film executive Brandon Tartikoff, when he was head of television programming at NBC, expressed disbelief at academics seriously studying what he himself spent his life doing: "When I hear about college professors writing books about people who do prime-time shows," he told a reporter, "my natural cynicism says there's got to be courses for all these athletes to make them academically eligible to play football." Thus we have found it difficult to study Popular Culture seriously not primarily because of the constraints of our respective disciplines—which are indeed far more open to the uses of Popular Culture than we have allowed ourselves to believe—but because of the inhibitions inculcated in us by the society we inhabit. From an early age we've been taught that whatever else this stuff is, it isn't art and it isn't serious and it doesn't lend itself to critical analysis.

The point of my title and my argument is not that Popular Culture is folklore and that the term "folklore" should be defined in such a way as to incorporate it. My intent is not to change definitions, except to the extent that I would like to see us get away from rigid adjectival labels as much as possible and recognize that while culture may not be seamless it is connected; it doesn't exist—at least not outside the academic world—in neatly separate boxes waiting for the scholar's labels. Rather, my intention is to explore the degree to which Popular Culture functions in ways similar to Folk Culture and indeed acts as a form of folklore for people living in urban industrial societies, and can thus be used to reconstruct people's attitudes, values, and reactions.

To accomplish this it is important to regard culture in context. In a modern industrial urban society, people are no more likely to be the exclusive architects of their own expressive cultures than of their own houses or furniture or clothing. Modernity dealt a blow to artisanship in culture as well as in material commodities. But to say this is not to say that as a result people have been rendered passive, hopeless consumers. What people can do and do do is to refashion the objects created for them to fit their own values, needs, and expectations. We all know from personal experience and observation that people leave their own imprint upon the homes and apartments others build for them and upon the mass-produced furniture, clothing, and accessories they purchase and use. We have to begin to comprehend the extent to which this interactive process also exists between people and the mass-produced expressive culture their society puts at their disposal. Scholars who disregard this process end up with a culture they can neither understand themselves nor interpret for others.

We also must employ the term "Popular Culture" in a more consistent and less arbitrary way. What we call Popular Culture has been used most
frequently as an aesthetic category—to signify the mudsill of culture, the lowest of the low—and in this sense it has been a very misleading term which, as I’ve argued elsewhere, has made it virtually impossible to perceive that Shakespearean drama or opera were Popular Culture in the 19th-century United States. My own approach is simple and instrumental: Popular Culture is culture that is popular; culture that is widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read. A broad spectrum of Depression film, radio, comics, fiction, and art fits this description and it is this material I am studying to understand American attitudes and culture during the Great Depression. Most of this expressive culture was also what we call Mass Culture since it was disseminated throughout the nation by such centralized mechanisms as national magazines, syndicated newspaper features, Hollywood studios, network radio, Tin Pan Alley, and commercial publishing houses. It is important to remember that all Mass Culture was by no means popular. Many mass-produced books went unread, many films unseen, many radio programs unheard by substantial numbers of people. This distinction is crucial: everything mass-produced for the American people was not popular even if a substantial percentage of what was popular by the 1930s was mass-produced. The significance of this is clear: choices were being made; in every popular genre audiences distinguished between what they found significant and appealing and functional and what they did not. Only the aesthetic hubris of critics and scholars has allowed the automatic equation of Mass Culture with Popular Culture as if everything mass-produced was popular, as if the unwashed masses were incapable of distinguishing and choosing when in fact it was the critics and scholars who were often incapable of making distinctions, of comprehending that the culture they were examining or critiquing was not all one vast sea of formulaic pablum with no substantive or stylistic distinctions.

It is important also to rethink a series of attitudes and images that prevent or at least hamper the serious study of Popular Culture. Let me briefly discuss five of these.

1. The image of the Purely Passive Mass Audience ready to absorb, consciously and unconsciously, whatever ideological message those controlling the Mass Culture industry want to feed them. This image embodies two ideal constructs: the helpless, unknowing, unreflective, all-absorbing consumers of culture on the one hand and the powerful, prescient producers of culture, on the other, who know how to construct cultural products of such “irreducible givenness” that they are impervious to reinterpretation or alteration by the audience. Not until we divest ourselves of these ideal types—just as surely as we have largely disposed of such ideals as the pure hero, pure villain, pure victim—will we be capable of beginning to use Popular Culture effectively as a tool for comprehending the past.

2. The notion that of all the forms of culture only Popular Culture is so thoroughly formulaic that to know any part of a popular genre is to know all of it. Shortly after I returned from a summer of studying the scripts of radio programs from the 1930s, I was complaining to one of my colleagues about the unwieldiness of the sources I was confronted with, explaining that a single show like Amos ’n Andy had several thousand scripts for the Depression decade alone. My colleague’s response: “Oh, but I shouldn’t have thought you would need to read more than about eight of them.” The difficulty with this statement methodologically, of course, is that even if it were correct you would need to read large numbers of these scripts before you knew you only needed to read eight of them. But the real difficulty is that, although it is an unverified assumption, it is accepted by large numbers of intellectuals and academics. Popular Culture, of course, has no monopoly on the formulaic. The reason we remember Schubert and Beethoven and Dvořák string quartets is not because they are examples of a genre without formulas, but because of what these composers accomplished within those formulas. We have to allow the same possibilities for Popular Culture. If we remember such 1930s writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and John Steinbeck; such 1930s directors as Frank Capra, Ernst Lubitsch, John Ford, and Leo McCarey; such 1930s films as Public Enemy, It Happened One Night, Night at the Opera, The Wizard of Oz, and Gone with the Wind, it is not only because critics and scholars have kept them alive or resurrected them, but often because they were elevated to prominence by audiences of the 1930s who were perfectly capable of distinguishing them from the hundreds of other expressions in their respective genres. Audiences of the Great Depression were able to differentiate and choose among the myriad products of Popular Culture they were confronted with. It is precisely the choices they made that gives us insight into their attitudes and feelings. Having said this, it must be added that even the most solidly formulaic elements of Popular Culture have their satisfactions for the audience and their value for scholars. The obvious analogy here is with the world of games which, as Huizinga observed, gives pleasure by creating a place where the rules still work and where one can count on a certain order. Formulaic culture affords many of the same rewards. But not all is certainty; within the formulas there is room for variation and surprise. The ending may be guaranteed, but the route to it can take twists and turns that not only add the spice of surprise and variation but also have things to teach audiences about the world the genre is supposedly lifting them out of.
3. The notion that Popular Culture was and is invariably "escapist," which depends in turn on the notion that art is an entity apart from the "real" world. In fact, of course, artistic expression is neither detached from the world around it nor just a "reflection" of that world. Rather, it is an inseparable part of the larger world, one of the fundamental forms of communication and expression people engage in and depend upon. Those who attended films and plays, tuned in radio programs, read novels and magazines, attended sporting events, and frequented musical performances of all kinds were not "escaping" from the "real" world; they were partaking of some of its essential features. But even insofar as elements of escape—by which I suppose is meant relief from the pressing matters of everyday life—were involved, we tend to ask the wrong questions. The potential for "escape" is inherent in all forms of expressive culture; thus the fact that it may be a feature of Popular Culture tells us very little. What is essential, as Robert Escarpit has argued, is to "know from what and towards what we are escaping." Even in their escape people can be quite realistic in understanding what it is they need to do to maintain themselves; what kinds of fictions, myths, fantasies they require not primarily to escape reality but to face it day after day after day. Indeed, to "escape" a reality one cannot change is one way of altering that reality, or at least its effects. The question about the Popular Culture of the Great Depression, then, is not merely whether it allowed people to escape from the grim realities of the 1930s, since most forms of expressive culture in the thirties did that, but also whether and in what ways it allowed them to cope with the effects of those realities.

4. The notion that because Popular Culture may not generally be on the cutting edge of knowledge or style it is therefore not truly an art form. Those who understand Folk Culture don't make the mistake of assuming that "artists" are invariably those who break new ground. This is a modern fallacy contradicted by the centuries of folk artists who saw their function as embodying the beliefs and meanings of their cultures in language that could be understood by their fellows. "There is," Raymond Williams has asserted, "great danger in the assumption that art serves only on the frontiers of knowledge." Art can just as legitimately stand near the center of common experience giving its audiences a sense of recognition and community.

5. Finally, in this list of attitudes, let me return to the question of aesthetics. When confronting Popular Culture scholars have been virtually mesmerized by aesthetic matters. Historians, for example, who rarely, if ever, have much if anything to say about the aesthetics of political speeches, religious sermons, reformist pamphlets, legislative committee reports, judicial decisions, even novels and poems which they have tended to mine for content rather than structure and style, seem incapable of treating the materials of Popular Culture substantively and functionally, as they treat most other materials, rather than aesthetically. This inability to transcend the putative aesthetic poverty of Popular Culture, or kitsch, as intellectuals like to call it, has made it exceedingly difficult for historians to take Popular Culture seriously enough to comprehend the dynamic relationships that exist between the audience and the expressive culture they interact with. Aesthetic worth and substantive complexity are not inexorable partners. The aesthetic quality of an artifact does not necessarily determine its level of complexity or the amount of analysis essential to comprehend its meaning. One does not have to believe that aesthetically Superman rivals Hamlet or that Grant Wood compares to Michelangelo to maintain that Superman and Wood potentially have much to tell us about the Great Depression, that they therefore merit the closest examination, and that they won't necessarily be simple to fathom.

Once we get beyond some of these attitudinal and definitional obstacles, we can begin to perceive the extent to which what we call Popular Culture can and does function in many of the same ways and serves many of the same purposes as what we call Folk Culture. I have been surprised by the degree of antipathy with which folklorists from the turn of the century until at least midcentury tended to treat Popular Culture. If Black children admitted they had learned a rabbit tale from a published Joel Chandler Harris story rather than orally from a member of the community, if blues singers cited a phonograph record as the source for their blues, if a country musician sang a song she first heard on a radio show, it caused great consternation, engendered severe doubts about whether the material collected was really folklore, even if it looked and acted like folklore, and generated still more dire predictions about the imminent demise of the folk and their lore. In my work on Black folk thought I attempted to demonstrate that the effect of commercial blues recordings on folk blues was not at all what some folklorists feared. Undoubtedly, there was a disruptive effect on many local styles and traditions. Nevertheless, what primarily took place was not a total erosion of regional styles in favor of some standard commercial product but a blending process. Through recordings, local traditions could become quickly known to Blacks in every section of the country; the developments in the new urban centers could be spread throughout the South even while the traditional culture could be perpetuated and strengthened among the recent urban migrants. Blacks living far apart could now share not only styles but experiences, attitudes, folk wisdom, expressions. In this sense phonograph records could be seen as bearers and preservers rather than primarily destroyers of folk traditions. And at no point were the folk reduced to the role of mere ciphers; they continued to have a crucial influence. Zora Neale Hurston observed that when the jukebox made its way into the remote work
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Campaigns of rural Florida in the 1930s, regional songs began to give way to the recorded blues but with an interesting twist: "the original words and music [of the recorded songs] are changed to satisfy the taste of the community’s own singers." 19

Nor was this fascinating blend limited to Black music. At his death in 1936, Dr. Humphrey Bate, one of the most popular country musicians on the Grand Ole Opry, a radio program which began in Nashville in the late 1920s and became a national institution by the Depression years, left a list of his repertory of 125 songs. Of the 103 that could be traced, 34 were traditional fiddle tunes, 8 were other traditional tunes, 5 were hornpipes, 2 were marches, 13 were vaudeville and minstrel songs, 20 were popular songs from the late nineteenth century, 12 were popular songs from the 1920s, and 3 were ragtime tunes. This repertory indicates the dangers of categorizing Bate too easily. By virtue of appearing on an extremely popular radio program he could certainly be labeled a "popular" rather than a "folk" performer, yet more than half of his material consisted of traditional songs performed in a traditional style. The very eclecticism of Bate's repertory, in fact, places him in the tradition of folk performers who were always willing to utilize appropriate material wherever they found it. Folklorists might have been purists, the folk rarely were. George Hay, the director of the Opry, understood this when he observed, "The line of demarcation between the old popular tunes and folk tunes is indeed slight." 20

The fragile line between the worlds of Folk and Popular Culture is documented by those in the radio audience who seem to have regarded the radio as a welcome part of their community. "If I am tired of the voices around me," a listener testified, "I turn on the radio. There I hear a new voice . . . it is as if a friend had entered the room." 21 "I feel your music and songs are what pulled me through this winter," A Chicago listener wrote station WLS in June 1935. "Half the time we were blue and broke. One year during the depression and no work. Kept going on relief but lost everything we possessed doing so. So thanks for the songs, for they make life seem more like living." 22 "The radio," one researcher noted, is spoken to, cajoled, scolded with apparently little self-consciousness. It has become so much a part of the household that using it as another person—in fact, speaking of it as "company" and as "someone in the house"—is neither strange nor unexpected. 23

These feelings of community were often reciprocated at the other end of the airwaves. "When I sing for you on the air," the popular country singer Bradley Kincaid wrote in one of his mail-order songbooks, "I always visualize you, a family group, sitting around the radio, listening and commenting on my program. If I did not feel your presence, though you be a thou-

sand miles away, the radio would be cold and unresponsive to me, and I in turn would sound the same way to you." 24

Testimony like this makes it clear that we need to break through the rigid compartmentalization that automatically and rigorously separates Popular Culture from the oral tradition—which has played a crucial role in the generation and transmission of Folk Culture—when in fact the two intermeshed regularly. "My husband likes the same things I do," one listener testified:

And if he misses one [radio serial] I tell him what happened—or he'll ask me what happened, or what did Walter Winchell say on Sunday—and I'll tell him. Or what happened to so and so. And then he'll say, "Oh, for god's sake, we have to wait till next Monday to find out!" He keeps up with them just the same as I do. . . . We love to talk about the stories and he likes the same ones I do, so it's nice. 25

Speaking about the popular radio mystery show Ellery Queen, Anna B., a twelve-year-old from a lower-middle-class family living on the Lower West Side of New York, observed:

I listen to it and then I tell the story to the kids around where we live. Some of them don't have radios and some of them have to go to bed early so we all get around and I tell them the story of what happened just like on the radio and then they have to guess who the murderer is. Then I tell them. I tell them the story about some of the other programs too, but mostly Ellery Queen. 26

Popular Culture could become part not only of folk discourse but of folk performance. In the early 1930s a college sophomore recalled that after she had seen The Sheik when she was twelve or thirteen, my friend and I enacted the especially romantic scenes out under her mother's rugs, which made excellent tents even though they were hung over the line for cleaning purposes. She was Rudolph and I the beautiful captive, and we followed as well as we could remember the actions of the actors. 27

Jean S., a nine-year-old middle-class girl living with her mother and sixteen-year-old brother on New York's Upper West Side, described in 1940 how she and her playmates modeled their games on radio programs:

I started listening to the Lone Ranger when I was four. My brother started me. . . .

Then we'd play Lone Ranger in the park. My brother was always the Lone Ranger. I used to play with them. . . . I was the Indian girl or else I married Tonto the Indian. There were two other girls who played with us.
too but they were older. I was the youngest and I had to look out for myself. My brother would climb trees and swing on the branches, and shoot Indians and we'd pull on ropes to make the branches bend.

We stopped playing the Lone Ranger together when my brother was 12. He did not want to play it any more so I played it with girls after that."

Here we have a portrayal of interaction, with members of the audience often imposing themselves upon the expressive culture they're exposed to, restructuring it, changing details—such as giving Tonto women friends and even a wife—molding it to their own needs, and understanding it in terms of their own life experiences. "Yes, I like a happy ending," a twelve-year-old boy told an interviewer, "but once in a while I'd like to see the criminal get away. I have never really seen happy endings in real life." 29

Roland Barthes has argued that "Mass Culture" has to be distinguished "like fire from water, from the culture of the masses." 30 The testimony quoted above, however, demonstrates how narrow the line between the two can be, and often is. Before we attempt to separate and compartmentalize "Mass Culture" and the "culture of the masses," we need a much clearer and more precise understanding of the interconnections between the two.

This understanding will come not only through examining texts, but also through a clearer perception of audience behavior. Indeed, the audience remains the missing link, the forgotten element, in cultural history. The creation, the creator, and the context are often accounted for; the constituency remains shadowy and neglected. The notion of a profoundly close relationship between the audience and the meaning of a text is hardly new. "Both read the Bible day & night," William Blake observed more than 170 years ago, "But thou read'st black where I read white." 31 Until recently, however, scholars have been strangely indifferent about carrying this insight into their studies of culture. Here again Popular Culture resembles Folk Culture. "The history of folklore scholarship," Alan Dundes has written, in terms that could just as easily be addressed to Popular Culture, "is by and large a series of attempts to dehumanize folklore. . . . Considering 'folklore' without reference to 'folk' is commonplace in folkloristics." 32 Just as Dundes has referred to "the folkless study of folklore," we might speak of the "depopulated study of Popular Culture." But the people have not merely been removed from Popular Culture, they have been reduced to uncritical, acquiescent ciphers.

We need more empirical research like that done by Herbert Gans in the Italian working-class homes of Boston's West End in the 1950s. Although the television was on constantly, actual viewing was highly selective and was structured to filter out themes inimical to the life of the peer group and to accept those characters and situations which confirmed the group's values. "West Enders do not enjoy watching satire," Gans comments, "but they do enjoy creating their own in response to what they see." They made fun of the exaggerated claims of commercials, the promises of politicians, the depictions of middle-class people as moral or businessmen as more interested in the community than in profits. They rejected TV detectives who failed to show sympathy to working-class people, and family shows that failed to mirror their own values. "We heckle TV just like we used to heckle the freaks at the circus when we were kids," one of Gans's respondents commented. 33 Janice Radway in her pioneering study of the readers of romance novels, goes even further in exploring how women select novels from among the large number available "by learning to decode the iconography of romantic cover art and the jargon of back-cover blurbs," by insisting upon certain patterns of plot, coherence, and style, by choosing authors who had pleased them in the past, and by consulting each other and forming networks of readers. 34

I have found much the same patterns of audience selectivity in my own research on the Great Depression. People did not passively accept whatever Popular Culture was thrown their way; they pre-selected the culture they exposed themselves to by learning to decipher reviews and coming attractions, by understanding the propensities of authors, actors, and directors whose work they had been exposed to in the past, and by consulting members of their communities. New York City children queried in 1934, for example, revealed that in choosing radio programs the advice of other children—the peer group whose tastes they trusted most—was by far the most significant influence. Random dialing, advertisements, and parental advice lagged far behind in importance. 35 Even in those cases where listeners had limited or no choice, such as the radio commercials that accompanied the programs they listened to, passive acceptance was not inevitable, as the following three examples illustrate:

When the advertising comes, sometimes I turn it off. . . . it depends. If it's a short talk I'll leave it running, I might as well. I just don't listen until it's over. But if he keeps talking and talking . . . then I just turn it off.

I can't remember any of the commercials. . . . because I don't approve of the advertising at all; I hate it. I don't mind it so much when it's really short, but I always turn to another station the moment it comes on, except when it's news. The advertising makes me so darned mad. They talk to you as if you were a child of six.
Towards an Understanding of Popular Culture

Chipso, Ivory, Duz and all the others are just too ridiculous for words. They all come on, one after the other, in the morning. They all claim exactly the same things, and yet they do it as if you were too stupid to remember that five minutes ago someone else was claiming the same thing for another product. . . . That’s what makes me so mad about it. All they ought to do is to give a straight-forward account of the product, because everyone knows anyway that they are all the same. I often wonder whether they’re trying to kid me, or whether they’re trying to kid themselves. 36

Recent literary theory sees neither the reader nor the text as necessarily controlling but rather places emphasis upon the interaction between the two. 37 It is precisely in this realm that we have to understand the process of Popular Culture: not as the imposition of texts upon passive people who constitute a kind of tabula rasa, but as a process of interaction between complex texts which harbor more than monolithic meanings and audiences who embody more than monolithic assemblies of compliant people but who are in fact complex amalgams of cultures, tastes, and ideologies. Audiences come to Popular Culture with a past, with ideas, with values, with expectations, with a sense of how things are and should be. One does not have to subscribe to Roland Barthes’s dictum that “the text has no memory” to agree with his conclusion that a text is frequently “an old tune to which new words are given,” since the creator of a text “can only force himself fragmentarily into a life which is not his.” 38 Thus the control any creator has over the manner in which her or his creation is received is always incomplete, always fragmentary. A mechanical one-to-one correlation between the creator’s intentions (assuming these were clear to begin with), the shape and meaning of the creation, and the manner in which it is understood by its audience does violence to all three elements in this cultural process: the producer, the thing produced, and the audience for whom it is produced. We seem to have less difficulty understanding this complexity when we enter the realm of what we call High Culture. Many of us have finally come to understand that not only is there no single meaning to Beethoven’s late quartets or Shakespeare’s tragedies or Hemingway’s novels but that there is not even a single rendition or reading that is necessarily authentic. Thus both the performer and the audience have a role to play in determining the meaning and nature of the production and become collaborators with the creator. But we balk somehow at transferring this understanding to the realms of Popular Culture. Yet, until we do this we are doomed to misunderstanding the relationship between Popular Culture and its public.

To give a very simple illustration of the ways in which people viewed Popular Culture through the filters of their lives, listeners to Road of Life, which began in 1937 and was the Depression’s first medical Soap Opera, spoke of the central character, Dr. Jim Brent, in terms which related directly to their own situations. Thus a mother who felt she was sacrificing for an unappreciative family said the show was about “a doctor, his life and how he always tries to do the right thing. Sometimes he gets left out in the cold too.” A woman over forty with memories of a sad childhood called Brent “a wonderful man, taking such good care of a poor little orphan boy. He is doing God’s work.” A sick listener declared, “I like to hear how he cures sick people. It makes me wonder whether he could cure me too.” 39

Soap Operas were one of the Depression’s most ubiquitous and popular genres precisely because they were part of what the writer Paddy Chayefsky called “the marvelous world of the ordinary.” People could relate to daytime serials in terms of their own existence; could see themselves in them. The actor George C. Scott observed that the radio Soap Operas were the only form of broadcasting that incorporated a “sense of growth and continuity. . . .” 40 Soap-opera characters grow: They marry, have children, mature, even die.” One Depression listener made a similar point by calling Soaps “more real” than such other popular genres as film: “The things that happen in the movies seldom happen to people that I know. I like to listen about plain, everyday people.” 41 “I like Myrt and Marge,” a Manhattan youngster testified in 1934, “because it consists of real life happenings, and they are very exciting to hear.” 42 Thus listeners were probably not surprised when the announcer declared at the beginning of each episode of the daytime serial Rosemary: “This is your story—this is you.” 43

The functional similarities between Soaps and genres of folklore are striking. Soaps rarely offered any permanent resolutions; they had neither beginnings nor endings. This of course was one of the characteristics that made Soaps life-like. It was also what made them kin to such folklore cycles as Brer Rabbit stories which also mimicked life itself by having no closure. In any specific tale Rabbit might win a victory over stronger animals but the folk cycle underlined the truth that in life rabbits don’t triumph over wolves permanently by beginning the next story in the cycle with Rabbit once again in the weaker position. Thus for the slaves telling and hearing these stories regularly, the message of the entire cycle diverged from the message of the individual tale—and both messages had important lessons to teach. So too the Soaps reminded their listeners incessantly that while people can and do win victories over adversity, adversity is an inherent part of life over which no one wins ultimate triumph. Soaps also bore a striking resemblance to the African-American folk Blues. Both genres often piled crisis upon crisis upon crisis to the point of unreality, but the crises—infidelity, jealousy, failed ambition, sickness, economic distress, betrayal, loneliness—were common enough, and in Soaps as in Blues people learned to handle their frustrations, adversities, and misadventures and cope with life. Like the Blues, Soaps
is but a different name for conversation." The truest respect an author can pay to the reader's understanding, Sterne insisted, "is to... leave him something to imagine, in his turn, ... For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own." Sterne was far from unusual in this respect. Whether it is the creator's intention or not, it seems inevitable that the audience's imagination will be kept busy by any work of expressive art simply because so many expressive works are by their very nature incomplete—filled with inconsistencies that need connecting, ambiguities that need resolution, imprecisions that need clarity, complexities that need simplifying. The audience's role in Popular Culture, as it is in Folk Culture, then, is not the passive reception of a given text but rather a question of translation; fitting the text into a meaningful context. Many of those who listened to Orson Welles's radio dramatization of H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds on Halloween night, 1938, panicked because they thought the show was an authentic news account of an ongoing invasion. But even in their terror, a substantial number seem to have been able to make the material their own to the extent that they could rule out the things that were not credible to them as these four examples show:

I never believed it was anyone from Mars. I thought it was some kind of a new airship and a new method of attack. I kept translating the unbelievable parts into something I could believe.

I knew it was some Germans trying to gas all of us. When the announcer kept calling them people from Mars I just thought he was ignorant and didn't know yet that Hitler had sent them all.

I felt it might be the Japanese—they are so crafty.

I worry terribly about the future of the Jews. Nothing else bothers me so much. I thought this might be another attempt to harm them.

But the audience's role extends beyond the act of translation and entails the filling in of gaps or vacancies in the text. "What is missing," Wolfgang Iser has argued, "... this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said." Certainly, this is a central aspect of folklore. Alan Dundes relates the following joke he collected from a black Alabaman in 1964:

Governor Wallace of Alabama died and went to heaven. After entering the pearly gates, he walked up to the door of a splendid mansion and knocked.
A voice inside exclaimed, "Who dat?" Wallace shook his head sadly and said, "Never mind, I'll go the other way."
Dundes's interpretation of this African-American joke centers on the wishful thinking underlying Wallace's death and the sense of justice involved in banning from God's Mansion and consigning to Hell the very man who stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama as a symbol of his opposition to admitting Black students. But this by no means encompasses the entire meaning of the joke which Dundes argues functions for Whites as well as Blacks. Some whites interpreted the stereotyped dialect, "Who dat?" as meaning God or Saint Peter was black; others assumed it was a doorman or menial servant. Some Whites understood the joke to mean that Heaven was now integrated; others assumed that Heaven had been completely "taken over" by Blacks. "None of this is articulated in the joke proper," Dundes concludes, "but it is part of the joke as semiotic text."  

In this manner folklore encourages listeners to become not merely participants but even creators of meaning where the message is not explicit; to project themselves into the text in order to invest the empty spaces with meaning. Precisely the same process occurs in Popular Culture. Let me suggest a number of examples and begin with one of the Depression decade's most popular forms of expression: photography.

Dorothea Lange's portrait of Florence Thompson, which she called "Migrant Mother" (see figure 6 in essay 13), accomplished precisely what Lange wanted it to when she took it on a March afternoon in 1936: it became an icon of the victimization of millions of Americans during the Great Depression, an argument in favor of substantial federal intervention, and a justification for the transformation of American politics during the 1930s. But Lange's portrait continues to survive and continues to fascinate us because it, like most of the memorable photographs of the decade, is not quite so resolutely one-dimensional. It was possible to see qualities besides that of the victim in photos like this. Roy Stryker, who directed the photographic section for which Lange worked, saw what we can still see: an overriding tension in Lange's portrait; a tension which Stryker, alluding to the work of his photographers in general, referred to as "dignity versus despair."  

"Migrant Mother" a portrait of desperation or fortitude, victimization or resiliency, or was its popularity based upon its astute amalgam of these polarities?

The same conundrums are raised by another popular photograph of the period, Gordon Parks's portrait of Ella Watson, a charwoman who cleaned federal government offices in Washington, D.C. (figure 1). In his autobiography, Parks, the first Black photographer employed by the photographic section, called this photograph "unsuitable" and explained, "I overdid it and posed her, Grant Wood style, before the American flag, a broom in one hand, a mop in the other, staring straight into the camera." Parks remembered that when Roy Stryker saw the photograph "he just smiled and shook...
his head" and urged Parks to capture more of Watson's humanity by following her into her home, her church, her neighborhood. Parks heeded this advice and was proud of the later pictures he took of Watson (see figure 2 for an example). "That was my first lesson in how to approach a subject, that you didn't have to go in with all horns blasting away." But though Parks may have achieved greater subtlety in his later pictures of Watson, he reached far more people with his original photograph which remains to this day one of his best-known and most popular works. The reason, I think, is that there is greater nuance in this portrait than either Parks or Stryker initially understood. Parks captured the same dualities Lange had: the victim and the survivor, vulnerability and strength, exploitation and transcendence. And he captured these dualities in a format that allowed viewers to enter the process of investing the image with meaning. The fact that Parks's later photographs of Watson were less polemical should not blind us to the possibility that they may have also been less open to interpretation. The popularity of Parks's portrait (and indeed of Grant Wood's famous painting American Gothic, after which it was loosely modeled) may well be linked not only to aesthetic virtues but also to the scope audiences were given to project their own world view into the process of unravelling its meaning.  

This discussion makes it clear that even in such relatively finite works of expression as photographs there is a great deal of room for audiences to insert themselves. This was even truer of other modes of expressive art, such as feature films. Two films from different ends of the Depression era provide instructive examples. Ann Vickers (1933) traces the rise of a young social worker from the beginning of her career in an urban settlement house during World War One to her great success as the author of a best-selling exposé of women's penal institutions and as the director of an industrial home for women where she carries out influential prison reforms. Throughout it all she manifests great pride in being a woman, from going to jail for suffrage reform activities to her struggle for the safety and dignity of the women prisoners in her charge. She has an abortion rather than marry a man who lacks respect for her. Speaking of her unborn "daughter," she declares: "I've found a new modern virtue to name my daughter: Pride. The pride of life, the pride of love, the pride of work, the pride of being a woman. These will be her virtues. Pride Vickers!" She refuses to engage in the pursuit of a socially prominent man who is interested in her, telling one of her friends who urges her to be more aggressive: "I know! If I want a man I must lure, flatter, be ecstatically impressed by all he says and does. Be coyly aloof, wistful, be fluttered by his handclasp, arousing him to a conviction that I'm a swooning mystery which he must understand or die. No! I'll be hanged if I will." This film biography of a strong, interesting, intelligent woman ends on a very different note. Her career as a prison admin-istrator is shattered because of her affair with a married judge who is indicted for accepting bribes. Reunited with her lover, after he has served three years in prison, she declares that now they are both out of prison. To his protest, "But you were never in," she replies, "Oh yes I was. You're the man who brought me out of the prison of ambition, the prison of desire for praise and success for myself. We're both out, darling." This dramatic and totally unexpected renunciation of her former life is symbolized by a portrait of family bliss: the two lovers and their young son joyfully embracing as the film fades out.

Sullivan's Travels (1942) ends with a similarly abrupt transition. John L. Sullivan, a Hollywood director famous for such comedic films as Hey, Hey in the Hayloft, and Ants in Your Pants of 1939, is motivated by the Depression to change moods and make the contemporary drama Oh Brother Where Art Thou?. "I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions, stark realism, the problems that confront the average man. . . . I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a . . . true canvas of the suffering of humanity." To obtain material for his epic he disguises himself and becomes another one of the hungry unemployed on the city streets. The bulk of the film concerns Sullivan's attempts to escape his affluent life and experience privation. Through his eyes we see the misery of Depression America depicted with the documentary force characteristic of FSA photographs. In reality Sullivan is never able to become much more than a voyeur until a series of mishaps puts him on a chain gang. Now he personally experiences deprivation and degradation of the worst sort, which is relieved only when he and his fellow prisoners are taken to a black rural church to see a Walt Disney cartoon and they respond with healing, cathartic laughter which so impresses Sullivan that after he escapes from his predicament and is on a plane returning him to the security of Hollywood, he announces to his producers that he is abandoning his project to make a film reflecting the misery of the Great Depression. "I want to make a comedy . . . There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan." The film closes with the sights and sounds of the poor, the sick, and the suffering laughing.

The ostensible message of Sullivan's Travels may have been an elaborate apologia—a self-interested defense built upon the claim that all Hollywood need do to justify itself was to entertain people; to make them laugh. What is arresting, however, is that the film itself did much more than that: it helped to inform its audiences about the nature and extent of suffering in the United States. No final ending, no ultimate apologia could automatically erase the images of misery, despair, and hopelessness the film made available to the audience. Whatever final rationale was on the producers' minds,
these images, once released, became the property of the viewers who could do with them what they willed, make of them what their lives and experiences prepared them to make of them. Precisely the same is true of Ann Vickers. Its final formulaic ending, no matter how securely it may have fit in with traditional conceptions of woman's fundamental place in society, could not in one fell swoop wipe out everything that preceded it concerning Vickers’s strength, talent, independence, competence, the important contributions she made, and the fact that her gender was hardly incidental to all of this but was in fact the basis for much of it. Indeed, this was precisely the judgment of Time magazine’s reviewer who wrote of Vickers’s sudden confession that she had been trapped in the prison of ambition: “Tying the story up with this platitudinous does not seriously weaken what has preceded it—an intelligent study, over-solemn but affecting, of a mature woman at work and in love.”  

There is no cultural product—no book or symphony or film or play or painting—so overwhelming, so complete that it binds the audience to a single interpretation, a single angle of vision, a single meaning. Sullivan’s Travels as an artifact might have been the work of writer-director Preston Sturges, but Sullivan’s Travels as an affective vehicle, as a mode of meaningful discourse, was a collaborative work depending on the audiences’ experiences, needs, and expectations. In this sense Sturges was the singer and his audiences the folk that helped to mold the song and make it their own.

Both Ann Vickers and Sullivan’s Travels are examples of what Umberto Eco has called an “open text” which mandates the cooperation of the audience by compelling it to make a series of interpretive choices that invest the text with meaning and significance. While such choices are obviously not infinite, they are, as Eco puts it, “more than one,” and they transform the reader or viewer into “an active principal of interpretation,” who becomes “a part of the picture of the generative process of the text.” Thus audiences listening to or watching or reading such genres of Popular Culture as the films just discussed were not simply recipients but participants engaged in a complex dialogue. They were privy to the entire film and not simply at the mercy of formulaic endings which were often in stark contrast to what had preceded them.

It is a mistake, then, to divide the world up too easily into reality and representations of reality. The latter—the representations—when they become embodied in theater, tales, radio, movies, become forms of reality themselves. I don’t mean by this that audiences necessarily confuse them with reality. Indeed, I think the opposite is more often true.” Rather, the entire setting constitutes an important form of reality in which many essential things are realized: lessons are learned, values enunciated and repeated,
affair of affairs up here. Those who have no radio congregate at the homes of those who have and what an enjoyable evening!” During these same years, Black farmers and workers in and around the town of Stamps, Arkansas, gathered in the general store run by Maya Angelou’s grandmother on the nights Joe Louis fought and punctuated the radio announcer’s descriptions of the fight with comments and laughter. When an opponent sought refuge from Louis’s onslaught by forcing himself into a clinch, someone called out: “That white man don’t mind hugging that niggah now, I betcha.” When Louis was in trouble, Angelou remembered, “We didn’t breathe. We didn’t hope. We waited.” When Louis was victorious, there were celebrations that lasted more than an hour: “People drank Coca-Cola like ambrosia, and ate candy bars like Christmas. Some of the men went behind the Store and poured white lightning in their soft-drink bottles, and a few of the bigger boys followed them.” Those who lived far away stayed overnight with friends rather than risk the ire of Whites who had listened to the fight in their communities. Rural living was not a prerequisite for sharing the radio. Azriel Eisenberg found that among the sixth-grade pupils he studied in New York City in 1934, 81 percent of the girls and 72 percent of the boys listened to the radio in the company of their friends or family at least some of the time while 47 percent of the girls and 37 percent of the boys always listened with others.

Ernest Dichter’s study of reactions to radio commercials substantiated the social nature of radio listening:

The commercial is often the signal for the listener to use this minute for something more important. Even if one family member would want to listen to the commercial, he would have to overcome the social opprobrium attached to such an attitude. He would have to defend his interest in the commercial against the annoying and ridiculing remarks of his family guests.

Similarly, Hadley Cantril and his associates, who studied the listeners who panicked during Welles’s Invasion from Mars broadcast in 1938, found that the situation in which people listened helped to determine their reactions. What Cantril called “the corroboratory effect of other people’s behavior: the contagion of other people’s fear,” was crucial. “I don’t think we would have gotten so excited if those couples hadn’t come rushin’ in the way they did,” one of Cantril’s respondents testified. “We are both very calm people, especially my husband, and if we had tuned in by ourselves I am sure we would have checked up on the program.”

Radio, of course, was especially susceptible to this pattern since it was the only medium of Popular Culture in the 1930s capable of addressing millions of Americans simultaneously—creating, as Cantril observed, “the largest grouping of people ever known.” Nevertheless, radio was not unique.
motion picture can be made without the vital "third dimension" of a large audience being present."

Capra continued to consult the audience throughout his career. When he couldn't decide on an ending for Meet John Doe (1941), the final film in his great Depression trilogy, he circulated preview copies with different endings. "In Washington we had one ending, in New York one ending, in San Francisco another ending—trying to see if the audience would tell us which they preferred. None of those three was satisfactory, either to the audience or to me." According to Capra, the ending he finally used was suggested by a fan in a letter signed "John Doe."

Thomas Schatz's careful study of four movie studios makes it clear that Capra was not unique. When preview audiences laughed in surprise at the appearance of the comedic actress Zuzu Pitts in the dramatic role of the protagonist's mother in All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), Universal Pictures returned the film to production and replaced Pitts with another actress. Audience reaction to the previews of Frankenstein (1931) convinced the same studio to delete the deaths of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster and end the film on a more ambiguous note. The responses of preview audiences convinced Darryl Zanuck of Warner Brothers to create a more powerful conclusion for the classic early Depression exposé I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932). The influential MGM production head Irving Thalberg was so certain of the importance of showing the first cut of a film to preview audiences and of taking their responses seriously that he declared: "I would rather take the picture out [for previews] two thousand feet over length and cut it down afterwards." "They didn't figure when a picture was complete that it was finished," the director Clarence Brown commented. "That was the first cut—the first draft." Thalberg's insistence on audience input before the final cut was released for general viewing led to the Hollywood saying that at MGM movies weren't made, they were remade. Film previews, an MGM story editor observed, were "the equivalent of Broadway's 'taking a show to New Haven.'" Both techniques, of course, were predicated on the existence of the audience as an interactive, independent social entity.

In confronting Popular Culture, audiences did not necessarily encounter a coherent whole but a series of possibilities with which they could interact. The Marx Brothers gave their audiences not truths but situations in which they could perceive truths about their society and their lives. Audiences retained the possibility of choice. People could see in Lange's portrait of Florence Thompson the most obvious and compelling truth concerning victimization in the Great Depression or they could also react to the less clearly stated and perhaps more complex truths concerning reactions to victimization. Both possibilities—and doubtless many others—were inherent in the

A motion picture is aimed at communicating with hundreds, or, hopefully, thousands of viewers at each showing; . . . That is why big-time film critics are wrong in insisting that they view a film alone in private projection rooms . . . [because they claim] they can be more intelligent, more subjective, in their critical reviews if they are not influenced by the crowd reactions of the great unwashed. But crowd reactions are precisely what the film was made for in the first place, and no proper judgment of a
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series of often divergent points of view and competing voices. Disparateness, then, is not aberrant but is in fact Popular Culture's natural state. Those who have seen in Popular Culture an overriding instrument of hegemony have misunderstood its nature. Popular Culture does not present us with a single face or an orderly ideology. Certainly it is true that even in as heterogeneous a society as the United States, there can be deeply internalized points of view and these will inevitably be reflected in the Popular Culture, but there will be myriad fundamental disagreements and contradictions as well, as we've seen in the brief discussion of the photographs and films of the 1930s.

In my study of Black Folk Culture I found that there was no single overarching thematic matrix. Black folk in and out of slavery used different parts of their expressive culture for different purposes. If in matters of style and expression there was a recognizable African-American culture, this was not necessarily the case in matters of content which could vary widely depending on the genre, the situation, and the specific folk involved. If this was true for the Folk Culture of African-American slaves and freedmen, it is still truer for the Popular Culture of a much more diverse mass industrial society. But heterogeneity and variety do not necessarily connote chaos and loss of meaning. One has to look not for an unvarying central message but for patterns of meaning and consciousness across the genres and among different segments of the population. This is crucial but it does not negate the fact that whatever patterns we find will have to live alongside the inconsistencies, tensions, and cacophony of voices which help, far more than any putative unanimity and harmony, to reveal the cultural complexity of Depression America. Indeed, it is the very asymmetry and diversity in Popular Culture that should convince us it can be used as an indispensable guide to the thought and attitudes of an asymmetrical and diverse people.

No story exists out there by itself. The story takes life from two of us: the teller and the listener, writer and reader, actor and watcher, each a necessary participant in the creation of the space in which the utterance takes life, in which all our utterances take life.

If we interpret Jackson's phrase "two of us" not literally but as symbolic of the dialectic between Popular Culture and its audiences, then Jackson's news is good indeed for those of us seeking additional approaches to a better understanding of people in history.

But the news is not particularly good for those seeking simplicity. Adding the serious study of Popular Culture to the analysis of the past also adds to the complexity of the picture we have to decipher. This is true because Popular Culture seldom comes to us as a unitary voice. We can say of the Popular Culture of Depression America what the anthropologist Edmund Leach has said of the mythology of the Kachin peoples of Northeast Burma: "there can be no possibility of eliminating the contradictions and inconsistencies. They are fundamental." Myth and ritual, Leach continues, constitute "a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony." A language of argument, not a chorus of harmony, is precisely what we face when confronting the Popular Culture of the Great Depression which did not represent one point of view or one segment of the population but had built into it a cultural object waiting for viewers to bring them out. This is precisely why creators like Capra and Thalberg understood the necessity of focusing not merely on the cultural artifact they had helped to produce but also on the responses it initiated, the experiences it generated in its audiences. Scholars would do well to learn the same lesson.