

To See the World. Ethnography *vis à vis* Film and Mass Culture

The FIFA World Cup is watched by millions of people all over the world. Concerts of pop stars attract tens of thousands of fans worldwide. *Rambo* entertained a mass audience in China, while the Chinese actor Bruce Lee became a major film icon in Europe and America. Jeans, Coca Cola, rock music think nothing of borders and are everywhere. Bond or Madonna are just two examples of well-known figures popular on a scale unimaginable in the world of serious high art. Naturally, this is the field of mass culture, one of the most characteristically modern phenomena analysed so often and from so many angles that, to quote Stefan Morawski, *it is impossible to recount even the most important reasoning*.¹

I believe that ethnography too can add to this vast group an interesting image of mass culture. As befits its nature ethnographic description will not be tempted to imitate or opt for comprehensive portrayal. Rather, it will aim at emphasising the most crucial points for a caricature and not a portrait, to use a metaphor devised by Ludwik Stomma. This is why an ethnographer should focus on the phenomenon itself, attempting to find the specific organising principle decisive for its external shape. Only after the main narrative threads of the discussed phenomenon are revealed along with a catalogue of protagonists and the qualities attributed to them that we can begin contemplating their sense and meaning. This is when one can transcend the interpreted phenomenon towards historical reality and refer to man's existential problems. Even then, however, it is best to adopt a distinct perspective. After all, we are examining mass culture from the inside by following its rules and truth. Such a description opposes the traditional perception of cultural phenomena that, to cite Ricoeur, falls victim to three illusions – the illusion of the source, the creator and the audience.² Now, a quick look at what these illusions consist of.

It is assumed that the meaning of a phenomenon can be comprehended by referring to the reality in which it was created, to its social, political and aesthetic determinants. Another type of genetic inter-

pretation involves linking the subject with its author. Consequently, his biography, plans and intentions are supposed to provide the foundation of comprehension. A phenomenon may be also explained by drawing attention to the audience. In this case it is not the cause but the effect that is the most important factor for formulating final conclusions. Cause-and-effect explanations are the most frequent method of treating mass culture.

I would like to use several standard examples to show how the three illusions hidden in the foundation of these popular strategies exert a decisive influence on the perception and assessment of mass culture. Only in this light will it be possible to evaluate the chance offered to ethnographic description, an opportunity inspired by an awareness of the traps that sociologists and art historians collectively fall into.

The works of Marshall McLuhan are an extreme but thus an instructive example of explanation *via* sources.³ McLuhan believed that to understand mass culture is to comprehend the meaning of electronic mass communication media since their emergence is to lead to a new quality of civilization. A global electronic village has replaced the galaxy of Gutenberg. The change is radical because it affects not only media but *de facto* has an even larger impact on the transmitted content. According to McLuhan the method of transmission becomes synonymous with its content – hence his classification of hot and cool media. Regardless of its content the meaning of a message is already determined by the way it is transmitted. This would mean that *Batman* is closer to Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* than to the comic book it was based on just because it is a motion picture.

Defending this conviction poses a difficult challenge. One can legitimately claim that the carrier is one of the factors shaping information. The thesis proposed by the Canadian philosopher, however, is certainly stronger by arguing that what has been manifested depends fundamentally on the media carrying the information. If this were actually true then it would be impossible to explain evident differences observed within the reality created by the same media. The division into mass and high culture would have to be considered absurd. After all, mass culture obviously exists above the divisions discussed by McLuhan. Figures characteristic for its world move freely from the movies to comic books, from literature to films, and exist simultaneously on the stage and in the press. To put it differently, Donald Duck is defined by a specific reality of mass imagination that must be respected by authors using all techniques. This is why *Batman*, *Dick Tracy* – contemporary films based on classic comic books – render old plots so faithfully, adhere to character profiles, and even try to evoke the atmosphere of the drawings.

Civilisational transformations – and mass media changes undoubtedly belong to this group – say little about the essence of mass culture. After all, an analysis of the mass media does not tell us why the products of American dream factories are watched all over the world contrary to their Soviet counterparts. Moreover, it will not explain the sources of the remarkable popularity of archaic forms, e.g. fables, or of characters from a totally different world, such as demons, ghosts, sorcerers and angels. Naturally, the views of the electronic village prophet are an extreme example of thinking in which the base (source) decides about the superstructure. It is impossible to uphold a conviction about a sole causative reason setting into motion an entire structure. Nevertheless, a more subtle form of this particular style of thinking remains highly widespread.

The number of factors influencing the reality from which mass culture emerged tends to grow. Urbanisation, industrialisation, mass education – these are the forces that together with the new media gave rise to the phenomenon in question.⁴ It is possible to present these processes in numbers and to express them in tables and charts, thus rendering them objectively perceptible and a better analysis foundation than the intuitive belief that print leads to a more fragmentary world perception and TV to a comprehensive grasp. The fact that the number of TV sets has increased considerably does not explain why *Dynasty* won a mass audience and *Seventeen Moments of Spring* did not. The expanding opportunity to transmit all types of contents does not account for the universal acceptance of some and the slender approval of others.

Why then do Indiana Jones, Madonna, soccer, Stephen King novels, or images of attractive buttocks and breasts get the upper hand, and not films by Tarkovsky, avant-garde music and scientific speculations? After all, the civilisational frames accompanying their creation are identical, and the transmission media – similar. And yet two opposite phenomena – mass and high culture – emerge on the very same ground. Surprisingly, while origin is supposed to entirely determine the former it does not seem to have a larger impact on the latter. Genetic explanations are not helpful in solving this mystery. An interpretation of mass culture based on its sources is not particularly productive. It shows why cultural contents can spread rapidly and widely but is incapable of pointing out the reasons why some take advantage of this opportunity while others fail to do so.

The explicit insufficiency of the above option calls for a backing. Therefore, the focus switches from sources to the audience. From the very beginning critical opinions relating to mass culture have been accompanied by an illusion pertaining to the audience, the conviction that the nature of mass culture

depends on the people who consume it. The reflections of Jose Ortega y Gasset, cited up to this day, are a classic expression of this concept.⁵ Gasset outlined a highly determined picture of the mass-man:

*The mass is the average man (...). The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will. (...) This leads us to note down in our psychological chart of the mass-man of to-day two fundamental traits: the free expansion of his vital desires, and therefore, of his personality; and his radical ingratitude towards what has made possible the ease of his existence. These traits together make up the well-known psychology of the spoilt child. (...) That man is intellectually of the mass who in face of any problem is satisfied with thinking the first thing he finds in his head. (...) For the basic texture of their soul is wrought of hermetism and indocility; they are from birth deficient in the faculty of giving attention to what is outside themselves, be it fact or person. They will wish to follow someone, and they will be unable. They will want to listen, and will discover they are deaf. (...) Hence we apply the term mass to this kind of man – not because of his multitude as because of his inertia.*⁶

Primitive, lacking taste and morality, seeking exclusively consumption and amusement, desiring power but avoiding all types of responsibility, opposed to everything autonomous and different, the mass-man, whom the Spanish philosopher additionally linked with communism and fascism, poses a threat to all authentic values.⁷

Works by Ortega y Gasset do not consider the cultural environment of the mass-man but shift their focus from civilisational transformations straight to mental traits. And yet a definition of a representative of the masses also indirectly describes his culture. The principles of the homogenization of contents and the lowest common denominator apply only when it is possible to define the basic recipient. After all, it is he who sets the level of images aimed at mass imagination. Mass culture envisaged as the realisation of the needs of the average man is the key to understanding the phenomenon. Take a look at some examples.

Just as its name suggests mass culture is aimed at the masses of average consumers, everyman devoid of aesthetic culture or possessing it to a slight degree. (...) Mass culture is based on already worn out aesthetic and non-aesthetic stereotypes, on epigonic consciousness so obvious in popular belief that the discussed stereotypes seem to be eternal. (...) [Dominated by] mass-produced conventional commonplace values, with a definite aesthetic aura replaced by the climate of banality, something to be used and used up quickly, and no deliberate distinction; on the contrary, differences between an art product and everyday items are obliterated. On the one hand, appreciation for individuality, uniqueness, talent, genius, innovation, and originality,

together with the breaking of conventions and the questioning of stereotypes at the very least, and on the other hand, a longing for the stereotypical and the conventional; the epigonic approach does not offend and talent is not sought after contrary to accessibility, i.e. communicative contents and old, reliable communication forms.⁸

Mediocre people strive for mediocrity. This equation leaves no place for doubt. By opposing uniqueness the mass scale creates, on the one hand, horror of the “terrible bourgeois” and on the other hand – kitsch in art, banality and stereotypes in thinking, an apotheosis of passivity and consumption. This “aristocratic” perception is at its very basis entangled in assumptions that in advance determine description and assessment. There is no proof to support the view claiming that the original and the extraordinary are superior in any way to the common and the average. Ethnography shows that in “cold” or folk-type cultures we encounter a completely opposite situation. Well-known and traditional objects and behaviour are wise, beautiful, good, and desirable. Even in high European culture the extraordinary career of originality did not begin until Romanticism. Taking as granted the historical conviction that elitist means high, valuable, and significant, while commonplace is synonymous with low, banal, and degraded is to say that mass culture does not exist as a characteristic and original phenomenon. It is affected by special ethnocentrism, i.e. a process of measuring with reference standards treated as if they were universal and absolute. Cultures considered primitive were once perceived as first stages along a path leading to the culture of the West, but now mass culture is recognized as the latter’s infantile phase. The world of the elites is obviously supposed to be immersed in a strong, exemplary emanation of Western culture.

The time and space proximity of mass and high culture probably generates the method used to describe pop concerts, action films, or sports events. It consists of psychological identification and produces many attributes reflecting emotional states, e.g. pleasant, easy, carefree, or obvious. It may be also the reason for the lack of interest in contents creating this “little world”. They seem to be familiar and similar to a reproduction or an inferior copy do not require reflection.

Without granting mass culture a separate manner of existence we have to assume that quantitative and not qualitative differences are the only thing separating a researcher from a participant. Both experience in a similar way, albeit some less and others more consciously. By perceiving in the same way, though more acutely and extensively, it is possible to formulate binding opinions and define what is banal and childish and what is noble and creative. The imperfection of this manner of interpreting is perhaps most obvious upon the example of Ortega y Gasset’s predictions of

the future of societies dominated by mass culture. His prophesies of an imminent collapse turned out to be an obvious mistake in the light of the progressing mass-scale Americanization of the world. Ortega y Gasset also missed the mark when linking mass culture with fascism and communism. After all, democracy is at its strongest in a reality dominated by the blue jeans-style culture, whereas the worst examples of tyranny and barbarity are encountered wherever elites shaped the framework of life.

The history of film is yet another proof of misunderstandings caused by the recipient illusion.⁸ At its onset, film was plebeian, fairground entertainment created with the masses in mind. The same pictures that used to universally entertain and move, such as those with Chaplin, are now treated as significant artistic achievements. This career of elements creating Cosmos with Bond in the coat of arms is no longer unusual. Post-modern art readily applies quotes, techniques, and patterns derived from lowbrow culture. A vivid example of succumbing to illusions are attempts made by art historians maintaining that a work whose form and content are of a decisively mass origin, but which was created by a renowned artist and circulates within high art, is substantially different than the basis from which it originated. The reason supposedly lies in the awareness of the author and the audience as well as in the distance, irony, etc. assumed by both parties. The conviction that in order to understand a work of art it is more important to define the experiences of a concrete, historical audience than to analyse the work itself is embedded in precisely such beliefs. In this psychological reception the analysed phenomenon does not exist objectively but depends on the readers even though they continue to change and elapse while it continues to persist in the same shape. In other words, the recipient’s error inclines to absolutize a single perception and opinion. In mass culture such an illusion must be additionally intensified because it is difficult to define its consumers. This remarkably heterogeneous milieu includes representatives of the most diverse cultures, age groups, and professions, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate. Mass culture is their only common denominator, and the sole quality that we can attribute to them definitely is that they are numerous, a mass. If these designations are not treated from the vantage point of evaluation – by accepting assumptions determining a description but certainly not arising from it – but from the point of view of description then the fact that *Batman* was watched by millions and *The Sacrifice* by thousands will say nothing about their value and significance. Meanwhile, the view claiming that popularity is connected with shallowness and that the nutriment of the common man is bland says more about the image of the reality of those making such assumptions than about the phenomena

in the centre of their attention. In this instance, mass culture becomes a pretext to lecture on which values are important and which judgments are true, and is supposed to conceal confessions.

The author's illusion stays closely connected to the observation made *via* the audience. It was particularly favoured by critics of the Western consumption lifestyle and designers of *the socialist version of mass culture*.⁹ The belief that a text says what its author intended it to say constitutes the centre of this illusion. It is the author's intention that is supposed to decide about the meaning of a given work. If he knows how to win over the audience then he is also able to impose his views, assessments, and perception of reality. Such reasoning leads towards treating mass culture as a great tool of manipulation, a subtle device invisible for those that succumb to it. The American sociologist H.I. Schiller wrote in his symptomatically titled *Mind Managers: For manipulation to be most effective, evidence of its presence should be non-existent. When the manipulated believe things are the way they are naturally and inevitably, manipulation is successful. In short, manipulation requires a false reality that is a continuous denial of its existence*.¹⁰

According to Schiller, the qualities that make it possible to impose this false vision include lack of criticism, excessive value assigned to consumption, and belief in unchanging human nature.¹¹ All this corresponds well with the already discussed qualities of the average man, a consumption-starved citizen of a country dominated by poverty, violence, mawkishness, pandemonium, and puerile ditties. We should not blame, therefore, viewers of films made by Walt Disney Productions and readers of *National Geographic* (examples analysed by Schiller¹²), originating from precisely these circles, for not being able to perceive in such products American imperialism and activities consolidating the binding *status quo*. The inclination of the mass-man to succumb to manipulation is reinforced by the fact that certain sources of information making it possible to assess the actual situation belong to scarce elites distributing only certain beneficial images and not allowing others to be revealed. The commercial success of music, literature, and films originating in protest against existing reality seems to suggest quite the opposite. Exploiting the dark sides of existence, highlighting the disadvantages of the system, and emphasising injustice can be a good way to reach Batman aficionados, punk rockers, and football fans. After all, this world is full of figures representing all types of denominations, professions, convictions and skin colours, with the most contrasting opinions attributed to them. Indians can be depicted as good, noble and brave or terrifyingly despicable and cruel. Stories are told about good bandits, innocent prostitutes, corrupt policemen and the horrifying world of business. Natu-

rally, tales about the infernal evil forces of violence and superhuman good law enforcers also exist. In their perfidiousness the authors of popcorn entertainment went so far as to clad Arnold Schwarzenegger – a pop cinema star – in the uniform of a Soviet police officer, endow him with all suitable attributes, and show him battling the Soviet mafia together with American law enforcers in the USA. To make things even more perfidious this Soviet police functionary towers above his American colleagues and unmasks the incompetence of the local administration of justice. If Donald Duck is an apology of middle-class America then *Red Heat* must be praise of socialism and the USSR. After all, a search for the author's hidden intentions can lead to even such a risky thesis.

If one believes that it is the author who decides about the meaning of a work then there is nothing absurd in the conviction that after captivating the audience he will be capable of incapacitating it, and thus rendering it subordinate to the forces he serves or represents. If this were actually the case, if a work were not autonomous, then becoming commercially successful would be extremely simple. Familiarity with the preferences of the mass audience, and such familiarity is taken for granted, should make it easy to complete the author – communiqué – audience relation. However, this is not the case, as sufficiently proven by the frequent financial bombs of products developed for the mass audience. The already bygone history of the so-called socialist version of mass culture may be an even better example. When an author determines the message of a text he either surrenders to the audience's taste in order to become successful or tries to oppose the audience and impose his own project. The former approach supposedly dominated mass culture in capitalist countries. Those discussing mass culture in the socialist bloc believed that the latter attitude could win. After all, when authors do not depend on the market, mass culture could be applied for the purposes of social pedagogy. Having all the mass media and accommodating executors at their disposal, the leading forces in those states hoped to mould the "average man" any way they wanted. The result was rather mediocre. The success of the *Four Tank-men and a Dog* TV series and the adventures of Captain Kloss did not influence the attitude towards the prevailing system or intensify Polish-Soviet friendship. The upright characters of Party secretaries evoked laughter, as did the exploits of editor Maj, a Polish James Bond combating neo-fascists. Competing with its Western counterpart socialist mass culture was losing in all fields. Even though various enlightened forces were demonstrating in myriad ways how degrading it is to enjoy pop music, action films, fashion or gossip from the *grand monde*, consumption of this forbidden fruit was a favourite pastime from the Elbe to Vladi-

vostok. It became something more: as Tyrmand and Bukovsky emphasised in their memoirs, adherence to mass culture seemed to be a specific form of a battle for independence and the right to different opinions and tastes. It is difficult to assume that when writing their songs the Beatles anticipated that they would be used in a crusade against communism. It is also rather unlikely that designers of colourful socks intended to turn them into a weapon in the battle against a hostile system. And yet the phenomena in question gained precisely such connotations. This example demonstrates how each phenomenon applying the language of inter-subjectivity and using symbols reveals new and unexpected meanings in a novel historical and social context, meanings whose existence the author was unable to predict. Mass culture pointedly reveals that the horizon of a work goes infinitely beyond the intentions of its author. This is also one of the reasons why it does not have to concern itself with boundaries.

While describing how three interpretation illusions determine the shape of a presented image we obviously did not assume that transformations of civilisation, audience and author are insignificant for comprehending the phenomenon. A satisfactory presentation of mass culture, however, has to focus on culture itself; otherwise, the discussion merely concerns a new dimension of civilisation, mass audience, and authors working for its sake. To put it differently, other issues are being considered. After all, mass culture is predominantly synonymous with a collection of texts that have a mass audience. This is its core and true reality. The texts, recorded in various systems of signs, should be interpreted and only in the light of the knowledge contributed by this exegesis can we discuss the relation between mass culture and mass communication media, the reasons for this culture's universal acceptance and, finally, the traditions inspiring its authors. Critique of illusions is thus the starting point of an ethnographic description of mass culture, showing that its specific character does not involve civilisational conditions because they also give rise to opposing phenomena. Nor is it the mythical "mass-man", a theoretical construct whose pure form has never existed anywhere. Finally, it is impossible to characterise mass culture as the product of third-rate authors capable only of iterating well-worn models and enjoying commercial success by pandering to the public.

Once again: mass culture is a collection of texts that are, or used to be read on a mass scale. To participate in it is to read those texts and interpret them while discovering their meaning. Their world is entered only for the duration of reading and we stay in it only as long as we read. This is why it does not have any permanent residents and is inhabited by passers-by.

Childishness, banality, kitsch, and inauthenticity are some of the numerous designations attributed to

the phenomenon of interest to us. The assessments contained therein seem to be off the mark, but the intuition they share is unquestionably apt. It emphasises the chasm between mass culture and everyday "normal" life, a dissimilarity caused by a different form of existence. The extraordinary character of mass culture must be connected with its complete textuality. If the conviction maintaining that this is how the phenomenon actually exists is correct then the question of the structural homology of the texts creating it becomes crucial. Does the mass public, a factor making it possible to notice the existence of the phenomenon and determining its borders, have its fundamental counterpart within the texts? What are the mutual relations of the two denominators? These are the questions that an ethnographic description should answer. Its point of departure includes books, films, fashion, and concerts because it knows that this is where the meaning is hidden.

Endnotes

- ¹ S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie od sztuki do po-sztuki*, Kraków 1985, p. 89.
- ² P. Ricoeur, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 334-335.
- ³ M. McLuhan, *Wybór pism*, Warszawa 1975.
- ⁴ A good example is: A. Kłoskowska, *Kultura masowa*, Warszawa 1983.
- ⁵ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Bunt mas i inne pisma socjologiczne*, Warszawa 1982.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 7, 13, 63, 69.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 82.
- ⁸ A. Jackiewicz, *Moja filмотeka*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 32-41.
- ⁹ For a review of the Polish authors of such concepts see: P. Kowalski, *Parterowy Olimp*, Wrocław 1988, pp. 7-60.
- ¹⁰ H.I. Schiller, *Sternicy świadomości*, Kraków 1976, p. 25.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 22-35.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 113-143.