

THE WORLD AS PHANTOM AND AS MATRIX

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in: Dissent 3:1 (Winter 1956), 14-24.

I
Modern mass consumption is a sum of solo performances; each consumer, an unpaid homeworker employed in the production of the mass man.

In the days before the cultural faucets of radio and television had become standard equipment in each home, the Smiths and Millers used to throng the motion picture theaters where they collectively consumed the stereotyped mass products manufactured for them. One might be tempted to regard it as peculiarly appropriate that the mass product should be thus consumed by a compact mass. Such a view, however, would be mistaken. Nothing contradicts the essential purpose of mass production more completely than a situation in which a single specimen of a commodity is simultaneously enjoyed by several, let alone by numerous, consumers. Whether this consumption is a "genuine communal experience" or merely the sum of many individual experiences, is a matter of indifference to the mass producer. What he needs is not the compact mass as such, but a mass broken up or atomized into the largest possible number of customers; he does not want all of his customers to consume one and the same product, he wants all of his customers to buy identical products on the basis of an identical demand which has also to be produced.

In countless industries this ideal has more or less been achieved. Whether the motion picture industry can ever achieve it seems doubtful, because this industry continues the tradition of the theater: the commodity it produces is a spectacle designed for simultaneous consumption by a large number of spectators. Such a situation is obsolete. No wonder that the radio and television industries could enter into competition with the motion picture despite the latter's tremendous development: for the two newer industries benefited from the possibility of marketing, in addition to the commodity to be consumed, the

Note: This article is a slightly condensed version of the first of three articles on television which appeared in the distinguished German review, *Der Merkur*.

devices required for its consumption, devices that, unlike the motion pictures, could be sold to almost everyone. And so it came about that many of the evenings the Smith and Millers had formerly spent together in motion picture theaters, they began to spend at home. The situation that is taken for granted in the motion picture theater—the consumption of the mass product by a mass of people—was thus done away with. Needless to say, this did not mean a slowing-up of mass production; rather, mass production for the mass man, indeed mass production of the mass man himself, was speeded up daily. Millions of listeners were served the identical product; each of these was treated as a mass man, "an indefinite article"; each was confirmed in his character—or absence of character—as a mass man. But with this difference, that collective consumption became superfluous through the mass production of receiving sets. The Smiths consumed the mass products *en famille* or even singly; the more isolated they became, the more profits they yielded. The mass-produced hermit came into being as a new human type, and now millions of them, cut off from each other, yet identical with each other, remain in the seclusion of their homes. Their purpose, however, is not to renounce the world, but to be sure they won't miss the slightest crumb of the world as image on a screen.

IT IS WELL KNOWN that the principle of industrial centralization, which ruled unchallenged only a generation ago, has now been dropped, mainly for strategic reasons, in favor of the principle of dispersal. It is less known that this principle of dispersal is also applied in the production of the mass man. Although we have so far spoken only of dispersed consumption, we are justified in speaking of production because in this case both coincide in a peculiar way. As the German proverb has it, *Mensch ist was er isst*, "man is what he eats" (in a nonmaterialistic sense): it is through the consumption of mass commodities that mass men are produced. This implies that the consumer of the mass commodity becomes, through his consumption, one of the workers contributing to his own transformation into a mass man. In other words, consumption and production coincide. If consumption is "dispersed," so is the production of the mass man. And this production takes place wherever consumption takes place—in front of each radio, in front of each television set.

Everyone is, so to speak, employed as a homeworker—a homeworker of a most unusual kind: for he performs his work—which consists in transforming himself into a mass man—through his consumption of the mass product offered him, i.e., through leisure. Whereas the classical homeworker manufactured his wares in order to secure a minimum of consumer goods and leisure, the modern homeworker consumes a maximum of leisure products in order to help produce the mass man.

To complete the paradox, the homemaker, instead of receiving wages for his work, must pay for it by buying the means of production (the receiving sets and, in many countries, also the broadcasts) by the use of which he becomes transformed into mass man. In other words, he pays for selling himself: he must purchase the very unfreedom he himself helps to produce.

This conclusion may seem far-fetched. But no one will deny that for the production of the kind of mass man that is desired today, the formation of actual mass gatherings is no longer required. Le Bon's observations on the psychology of crowds have become obsolete, for each person's individuality can be erased and his rationality leveled down in his own home. The stage-managing of masses in the Hitler style has become superfluous: to transform a man into a nobody (and one who is proud of being a nobody) it is no longer necessary to drown him in the mass or to enlist him as an actual member of a mass organization. No method of depersonalizing man, of depriving him of his human powers, is more effective than one which seems to preserve the freedom of the person and the rights of individuality. And when the conditioning is carried out separately for each individual, in the solitude of his home, in millions of secluded homes, it is incomparably more successful. For this conditioning is disguised as "fun"; the victim is not told that he is asked to sacrifice anything; and since the procedure leaves him with the delusion of his privacy or at least of his private home, it remains perfectly discreet. The old saying "a man's own home is as precious as gold" has again become true, though in an entirely new sense. For today, the home is valuable not only to its owner, but also to the owners of the home-owners—the caterers of radio and television who serve the home-owner his daily fare.

II

Radio set and telescreen become transformed into a negative family table; the family into a miniature audience.

Needless to say, this mass consumption is not usually called by its true name. On the contrary, it is represented as favoring the rebirth of the family and of privacy—an understandable hypocrisy.

In actual fact, the type of mass consumption discussed here threatens to dissolve the family under the guise of fostering the intimacy of family life. For what now dominates in the home, thanks to television, is the outside world—real or fictional; and this outside world is so unrestrictedly dominant that the reality of the home—not only the four walls and furniture, but precisely the shared family life—becomes inoperative and phantom-like. When that which is remote becomes familiar, that which is familiar becomes remote. When the phantom becomes real,

reality becomes a phantom. The home tends to become a container, its function to be reduced to containing a video screen for the outside world. The realm of the phantoms is victorious over the realm of the home, without even the chance of a contest between the two; it triumphs the moment the television set enters the home: it comes, it is seen, it conquers. At once the ceiling is full of leaks, the walls become transparent, the cement uniting the members of the family crumbles away, the shared privacy disintegrates.

Decades ago it was possible to observe that the social hallmark of the family—the massive table in the center of the living room, which served as the gathering point of the family—had begun to lose its force of attraction, had become obsolete. Eventually the living room table was eliminated from the modern home. Now it has found its authentic successor, the television set, a piece of furniture whose social symbolism and persuasive power can measure against those of the former table. This does not mean, however, that the television set has become the family center; on the contrary, what the set embodies is rather the decentralization of the family, its ex-centricity: it is, so to speak, the *negative* family table. It does not provide a common *center*, but rather a common avenue of escape. Whereas the table was a centripetal force; its existence encouraged the members of the family seated around it to continue weaving the cloth of family life as the shuttles of interest, glances and conversations ran back and forth. The influence exerted by the television screen is centrifugal. The seats in front of the screen are so arranged that the members of the family no longer face each other; they can see or look at each other only at the price of missing something on the screen; they converse (if they still can or want to talk with each other) only by accident. They are no longer together, they are merely placed one beside the other, as mere spectators. There can no longer be any question of a world formed or shared by them. The only thing the members of the family do together—though never as an integrated family group—is to take excursions into a realm of unreality, a world they actually share with no one (for they themselves do not really share in it); or if they do share it, it is only with all those millions of "soloists" of mass consumption who, like them and simultaneously with them, stare at their television screens. The family has been re-structured into a miniature audience, and the home into a miniature theater modeled on the movie house.

III

Because the receiving sets speak in our place, they gradually deprive us of the power of speech, thus transforming us into passive dependents.

Television viewers, we have said, converse with each other only by accident—in so far as they still retain the will or the ability to speak.

This is true even of radio listeners. They too speak only by mistake. Their will and ability to speak decrease from day to day—and this does not mean that they become silent in the literal sense, but that their garrulousness has assumed a purely passive form. Since the receiving sets speak in our place, they progressively rob us of our ability to speak, of our opportunities for speaking, and finally even of our pleasure in expressing ourselves, just as the phonograph and radio have robbed us of live music performed in our homes.

The pairs of lovers sauntering along the shores of the Hudson, the Thames or the Danube with a portable radio do not talk to each other but listen to a third person—the public, usually anonymous, voice of the program which they walk like a dog, or, more accurately, which walks them like a pair of dogs. Since they are an audience in miniature which follows the voice of the broadcast, they take their walk not alone, but in company of a third person. Intimate conversation is eliminated in advance; and whatever intimate contacts take place between the lovers are introduced and even stimulated not by them, but by that third party—the husky or crowing voice of the program which (for is that not the very meaning of “program”?) tells both lovers what and how to feel or do. Since they do what they are told to do in the presence of a third party, they do it in an acoustically indiscreet situation. However entertaining their obedience may seem to the lovers, it is certain that they do not entertain *each other*; rather both are entertained by that third party which alone has a voice; and this voice does not entertain them only in the sense of keeping them occupied and diverting them, but also in the sense of providing them with support: as the third party in the alliance, this voice gives them that support which they, in their ignorance of what they can do with themselves, cannot give each other. Indeed, there is no reason to throw the cloak of silence over the fact that today even love-making often takes place to the accompaniment of the radio. The radio set that is admitted or desired in every possible situation is reminiscent of the torch-bearing female guide whom the ancients tolerated or invited as witness to their amorous pleasures; the difference between the two consists in this, that the modern guide is a mechanized public utility, that her torch serves to provide not only illumination but also warmth, and that under no circumstances must she keep her mouth shut, but on the contrary, is expected to talk her head off; she has to supply a background of noise in the form of songs or words and to silence that *horror vacui* which does not loosen its grip on the pair of lovers even *in actu*.

But the situation of love-making is only an example, the most

blatant. People keep themselves similarly “entertained” in every situation, even while they work; and if by some mistake they talk to each other, the radio voice speaks in the background as the main protagonist, giving them the comforting and reassuring feeling that it will continue to speak even after they themselves have had their say—even after they are dead.

For them words are no longer something one speaks, but something one merely hears; speaking is no longer something that one does, but something that one receives. No matter in what cultural or political milieu this development toward an existence without speech takes place, its end result must be everywhere the same—a type of man who, because he no longer speaks himself, has nothing more to say; and who, because he only listens, will do no more than listen. The initial effects of this development are manifest even today: the languages of all advanced countries have become cruder, poorer; and there is a growing disinclination to use language. But that is not all: human experience, and hence man himself, also becomes progressively cruder and poorer. For man’s inward life, its richness and subtlety, cannot endure without the richness and subtlety of language; man not only expresses himself through his speech, he is also the product of his language.

IV

We see the world only when we are inside our homes. The events come to us, not we to them.

The consumer goods by means of which such a transformation of human nature is achieved are brought into our homes, just as is gas or electricity. The deliveries are not confined to artistic products, such as music or radio dramas; they also include actual events, at least those events which are selected and processed to represent “reality” or to serve as substitutes for it. A man who wants to be “in the swim,” to know what is going on outside, must go to his home, where the events are waiting for him, like water ready to flow from the faucet. For if he stayed outside, in the chaos of reality, how could he pick out anything “real” of more than local significance? Only after he has closed the door behind him, does the outside world become visible to him; only after we have been transformed into windowless monads, does the universe reflect itself in us.

This brings us to the heart of our subject. For the fact that the events of the day—the events themselves, not reports of events—that football matches, church services, atomic explosions, *visit us at home*; that the mountain comes to the prophet, the world to man, that fact, next to the mass production of hermits and the transformation of the family into a miniature audience, is the revolutionary change brought about by radio and television.

The truly philosophic implications of this change will become apparent from the following tentative list of some of its consequences:

1. When the world comes to us, instead of our going to it, we are no longer "in the world," but only listless, passive consumers of the world.

2. Since the world comes to us only as an image, it is half-present and half-absent, in other words, phantom-like; and we too are like phantoms.

3. When the world speaks to us, without our being able to speak to it, we are deprived of speech, and hence condemned to be unfree.

4. When the world is perceivable, but no more than that, i.e., not subject to our action, we are transformed into eavesdroppers and Peeping Toms.

5. When an event that occurs at a definite place is broadcast, and when it can be made to appear at any other place as a "broadcast," it becomes a movable, indeed, almost ubiquitous object, and has forfeited its spatial location, its *principium individuationis*.

6. When the event is no longer attached to a specific location and can be reproduced virtually any number of times, it acquires the characteristics of an assembly-line product; and when we pay for having it delivered to our homes, it is a commodity.

7. When the actual event is socially important only in its reproduced form, i.e., as a spectacle, the difference between being and appearance, between reality and image of reality, is abolished.

8. When the event in its reproduced form is socially more important than the original event, this original must be shaped with a view to being reproduced: in other words, the event becomes merely a master matrix, or a mold for casting its own reproductions.

9. When the dominant experience of the world thrives on such assembly-line products, the concept "the world" is abolished in so far as it denotes that *in which* we live. The real world is forfeited; the broadcasts, in other words, further an idealistic orientation.

V

Because the world is brought into our homes, we do not have to explore it; as a result, we do not acquire experience. Modern man travels only as a last resort.

In a world that comes to man, man has no need to go to the world in order to explore or experience it; that which was once called "experience" has become superfluous.

Up until recently, expressions such as "to go into the world," or "to experience" have denoted important anthropological concepts. Since man is being relatively little endowed with instincts, he has been compelled to experience and know the world *a posteriori* in order to find his place in it; only in this way could he reach his goal and become "experienced." Life used to consist in a voyage of exploration; that is why the great *Erziehungsromane* ("educational novels") dealt with the ways man—although always in the world—had to travel in order to

get to know the world. Today, because the world comes to him—as an image—he need not bother to explore it; such explorations and experiences are superfluous, and since all superfluous functions become atrophied, he can no longer engage in explorations and become experienced. It is indeed evident that the type of "experienced man" is becoming increasingly rare, and that age and experience tend to be regarded as less and less valuable. Like pedestrians who have taken to flying we no longer need roads; in consequence, our knowledge of the ways of the world, which we formerly used to explore, and which made us experienced, is declining. Simultaneously with this, the world itself becomes a pathless wilderness. Whereas formerly we stored up experience by means of traveling, today the world is "stored up" for us like a commodity put aside for future use; we do not have to go to the events, the events are paraded before us.

Such a portrait of our contemporaries may at first sight appear distorted. For it has become customary to look upon the automobile and the airplane as symbols of modern man, a being whose essence is travel. What is in question is precisely the correctness of this definition. For modern man does not attach value to his traveling because of any interest in the regions he visits, actually or vicariously; he does not travel to become experienced but to still his hunger for omnipresence and for rapid change as such. Moreover, the speed of his movement deprives him of the opportunity for experience (to the extent that speed itself has now become his sole and ultimate experience)—not to mention the fact that the number of objects worthy of being experienced and capable of adding to his experience is continually decreased by his successful efforts to make the world uniform, and that even today he feels at home, in need of no experience, wherever he may land. A publicity poster of a well-known airline, utterly confusing provincialism and globalism, appeals to its customers with these words: "When you use our services, you are everywhere at home." Everywhere at home: there is indeed good reason to assume that today any trip (even though the man who takes it may sleep comfortably in his electrically heated cabin while flying over the North Pole) is felt to be an antiquated, uncomfortable and inadequate method of achieving omnipresence. Modern man still resorts to this method precisely because, despite all his efforts, he has not yet succeeded in having everything delivered to his home—something he has come to regard as his inherent right.

Such a situation points to a mode of existence, a relation to the world so extraordinarily perverse that even Descartes' malicious demon would be incapable of devising a comparable deception. Such a mode of existence may be described as "idealistic" in two ways:

1. Although we actually live in an alienated world, this world is

presented to us in such a manner that it seems to exist for us, as though it were our own and like ourselves.

2. We "take" (i.e., regard and accept) it as such, although we stay at home in our chairs. We do not actually "take" it, in the manner of a devouring beast or a conqueror, and we do not actually make it our own; but the average radio listener or television viewer looks upon the world that is served him in the form of reproduced sounds and pictures as his own. As a result he develops into a kind of Peeping Tom ruling over a phantom world.

VI

The world brought into our homes by radio and television is a debased, philistinized world; pseudo-familiarity is an aspect of alienation.

This is not the place to discuss the origin and symptomatology of alienation. The literature of the subject is enormous, and we must take this phenomenon for granted. The particular deception in question here consists in this, that the radio listener or television viewer, although living in an alienated world, is made to believe that he is on a footing of the greatest intimacy with everything and everybody. He is not invited to become acquainted with an unfamiliar world; instead, people, countries, situations, events, particularly the least familiar of them, are presented to him as though he had always known them; they are thoroughly philistinized in advance.

Whereas our next-door neighbors usually do not know us, and the distance between them and us remains unbridged for years on end, film stars, girls whom we never meet personally but whom we have seen countless times and whose spiritual and physical characteristics are known to us more completely than those of our co-workers, appear to us in the guise of old friends, of "chums." We are automatically on a footing of intimacy, we refer to them by their first names.

To bring about such a state of affairs, to enable the program consumer to treat the world as something familiar, the televised image must address him as an old chum. In fact, every broadcast has this chummy quality. When I tune in on the President, he suddenly sits next to me at the fireplace, chatting with me, although he may be thousands of miles away. (I am only marginally aware of the fact that this intimacy exists in millions of copies). When the girl announcer appears on the screen, she speaks to me in a tone of complete frankness, as though I were her bosom friend. (That she is also the bosom friend of all men is again only a marginal realization.)

All of them come to me as intimate or indiscreet visitors, all of them find me ready to be chummy with them. Not one of these people

who are transported into my house retains even an atom of unfamiliarity. And this is true not only of persons, but of everything else, of the world as a whole. Things, places, events, situations—everything reaches us with a chummy smile on its lips. We have now achieved a footing of intimacy not only with film stars but also with the stars of the firmament; we speak of "good old Cassiopeia" just as readily as of Marilyn or Rita. And this is not meant as a joke. The fact that laymen and scientists regard it as possible and even probable that the inhabitants of other planets who allegedly operate the flying saucers have, like us and precisely in our time, no other worry but to undertake interplanetary voyages, proves that we look upon everything in the universe as "one of our sort." This is a sign of an anthropomorphism against which the anthropomorphism of so-called primitive civilizations strikes one as timid. The purveyors of the vulgarized universe realize that unless they bring nature down to our level they will not sell it—which would be to miss a profitable opportunity. But we, the consumers, are systematically transformed into boon companions of everything on our planet and in the universe—no more than boon companions, for of course there can be no question of genuine fraternization or identification.

What we have said of things and persons distant in space, also applies to things and persons distant in time. The past too is philistinized. I shall not speak of the historical motion pictures in which such a treatment is the rule. But even in a serious, vividly written American academic book, Socrates is described as "quite a guy"—in other words he is put in a category that brings the distant great man seemingly close to the reader; for, needless to say, the reader too is "quite a guy." This label gives the reader the unconsciously gratifying feeling that Socrates, if he had not happened to live in that remote past, would be essentially like us, would not have anything to say that is essentially different from what we have to say, and in no case could claim greater authority than we do.

Others perceive historical figures as comical by definition (e.g., their reactions to historical films); this is so because such figures strike them as provincials in the realm of time, as creatures that have not grown up in the capital—the Now—and for that reason behave like village idiots of history or superstitious backwoodsmen; every electrical invention made since their time is looked upon as an eloquent proof of their inferiority. Finally, to many of our contemporaries historical figures appear as nonconformists, as suspiciously queer fellows, for it is obvious that they regard themselves as something quite special—namely, unlike every decent man who chooses to live in the present, they prefer to take up residence in a cavern of the past. (This is the source of comic effects in several pieces by Mark Twain). But whether a great man of

the past is regarded as "quite a guy," a queer fellow, or a provincial, these categories denote proximity, and hence are variations of the chum.

As for the typical case of "Socrates, the guy," the epithet here is obviously based on the great political principle formulated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, "All men are born equal," which has now been extended into the assertion of the equality of all citizens of the commonwealth of times past and present. Needless to say, such an extension of the principle of equality suggests not only a false historical proximity, but also a misconception of the common denominator of all mankind—for after all the essence of Socrates consists in the very thing that "our sort" is lacking. The method allegedly intended to bring the object close to us, actually serves to veil the object, to alienate it, or simply to do away with it altogether. For once you project history on a single plane of boon companionship, it has actually ceased to exist *qua* history—and this is perhaps even more plausible than our general thesis, that when all the various and variously distant regions of the world are brought equally close to us, the world as such vanishes.

Translated from the German by NORBERT GUTERMAN

ATTITUDES TO MASS CULTURE

Bernard Rosenberg

MORRIS Raphael Cohen, an extraordinarily gifted teacher, was best known as a critic of other philosophers. People would sometimes grumble about his "negativism": Cohen tore down systems of philosophy without offering a clear alternative. On one such occasion he is said to have answered this complaint as follows: "My first name is an Anglicization from the Hebrew for Moses, and like Moses, I can lead you through the wilderness without bringing you to the Promised Land." Students of "mass culture," whose subject matter is not the universe but only an increasingly significant part of it, should feel much as Cohen felt when he found himself unable to give sweeping answers to every question. Mass culture is not only a wilderness—with oases here and there—it is a largely uncharted one.

Moreover, at the end there may be no Promised Land. At present one can merely have hunches, and of these there is a plethora. Possibly the menace is greater than anyone supposed a few years ago. (I think it is.) Both academicians and detached intellectuals are finding it increasingly necessary to ask themselves whether the quality of American life has not been decisively altered by mass circulation magazines, comic books, detective fiction, movies, radio and television.

Geoffrey Wagner, an English writer and Fellow at Columbia University, is the latest to try an impressionistic interpretation of the popular arts.* Wagner deals serially with movies, comics, pin-ups, and TV, and makes marginal comments about other media. On a descriptive level, as "raw" material, his data are highly interesting. The author has a sharp eye for ripples on the tidal wave that is engulfing civilization. For instance, he notes the appearance of a new androgynous comic type parading in aprons and skirts. Dwight MacDonald has already commented on age and class homogenization as a characteristic of mass culture; since it also tends to femininize men and masculinize women, sexual homogenization may be added to the list. Mass culture is governed by a mania for simplification, which is ultimately expressed by an act like one to which Wagner alludes: elimination of the word "saga" from a famous title, *The Forsyte Saga*, as being too hard for the masses to understand.

Here and there Wagner displays a nice sense of irony. Having guided us through the comic books' chamber of horrors with its strangulations, flagellations and decapitations, Wagner observes that while "the above booklets

* *Parade of Pleasure. A Study of Popular Iconography in the USA*, by Geoffrey Wagner. Library Publishers. 192 pp. \$6.00.