My consumers, are they not my producers?

James Joyce

In the 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most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents?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 recreate 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

I researched and wrote this essay while I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and delivered an earlier version as the first of three Merle Curti Lectures at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in April 1991. I am extremely grateful to my colleagues at both institutions for their help and comments. I am also indebted to Michelle Ferrari for her research assistance, to the many Berkeley students—graduate and undergraduate—who were always willing to join me in puzzling out these fascinating and perplexing problems, and to Cornelia Levine, Robert Middlekauff, James Oakes, Madelon Powers, and Lauren Smith for their perceptive readings of the final version.

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 have 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 have 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 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. I have been reminded publicly more than once that routines such as the following from Duck Soup (1933)

Groucho: “Give me a number from one to ten.”
Chico: “Eleven.”
Groucho: “Right.”

were mere vehicles of mirth, not of ideas.5 "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 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 is 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 did not really handle it at all. Historians, in fact, deal relatively poorly with this question at every level, 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 importuned to answer it. Nevertheless, resentment and rhetoric are not going to make the question go away. Whether it is fair or not, we are being asked to justify the use of popular culture as a historical source, to explain why these materials

5 The script for Duck Soup has been reprinted in The Four Marx Brothers in "Monkey Business" and "Duck Soup" (Letchworth, Eng., 1972), 158.
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 not dealing with just 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—regularly distrusted and denigrated. 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. The medium of 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 audience . . . 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. He 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.9

Indeed, even the practitioners of popular culture—who are of course also part of the larger society—have expressed this view. 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.10 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.”11 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.”12

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 have 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 or 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 does not 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 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.13


10 The source for this is my memory of remarks Marx made in his later years to a reporter. I have not been able to find the exact quote.


13 These comparisons were not totally unknown during the Great Depression itself. In a study published in 1941, two psychiatrists concluded: “Comic books can probably be best understood if they are looked upon as an expression of the folklore of this age. They may be compared with the mythology, fairy tales and puppet shows, for example, of past ages.” See Lauretta Bender and
To accomplish this goal, 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 on the homes and apartments others build for them and 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 have argued elsewhere, has made it virtually impossible to perceive that Shakespearean drama or opera was popular culture in the nineteenth-century United States.  

14 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 1930s film, radio, comics, fiction, and art fits this description, and it is this material I am studying in order 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 not all mass culture was popular. Many mass-produced books went unread, many films unseen, many radio programs unheard by substantial numbers of people. This distinction is crucial: not everything mass produced for the American people was 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 meaningful, 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 compre-


hending that the culture they were examining or critiquing was not all formulaic pablum with no substantive or stylistic distinctions.\textsuperscript{15}

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:

First, 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"\textsuperscript{16} 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.

Second, 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 \textit{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. Popular culture, of course, has no monopoly on the formulaic. The reason we remember Schubert and Beethoven and Dvorak 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 typically 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 \textit{Public Enemy}, \textit{It Happened One Night}, \textit{Night at the Opera}, \textit{The Wizard of Oz}, and \textit{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

\textsuperscript{15} After receiving a number of passionate letters protesting derogatory remarks he had written about detective stories, Edmund Wilson undertook a new review of the genre. He concluded that there were no substantial distinctions within it and advised his correspondents to stop importuning him to read novels and stories, which were "wasteful of time and degrading to the intellect." "With so many fine books to be read, so much to be studied and known, there is no need to bore ourselves with this rubbish." Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" in Rosenberg and White, eds., \textit{Mass Culture}, 149–53.

\textsuperscript{16} The term is Janice Radway's. See her superb discussion of how the adoption of such assumptions has caused critics to be "hermatically sealed off from the very people they aim to understand"; Janice A. Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature} (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), introduction.
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 give us insight into their attitudes and feelings. Having said this,
I must add 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 Johan 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.

Third, 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, 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 on. Those who attended films and plays, tuned in to radio programs,
read novels and magazines, went to 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 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 1930s expressive culture did that, but also whether and
in what ways it allowed them to cope with the effects of those realities.

Fourth, 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 do not 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 and give its audiences a sense of recognition and community.\textsuperscript{19}

Fifth and last in this list of attitudes returns 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 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 with which they interact. Aesthetic worth and substantive complexity are not inextricable 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 will not 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 mid-century 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 share not only styles but experiences, attitudes, folk wisdom, and 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 camps 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.”

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 that began in Nashville in the late 1920s and became a national institution in the Depression years, left a list of his repertoire 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 repertoire 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 repertoire 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.”

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.” “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 from going on relief but lost everything we possessed doing so. So thanks for the songs, for they make life seem more like living.” “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.” 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

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20 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 217–39.
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 thousand miles away, the radio would be cold and unresponsive to me, and I in turn would sound the same way to you."\(^{25}\)

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. "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."\(^{26}\) 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


\(^{26}\) Palter, "Radio's Attraction for Housewives," 251, 254.
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."

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."

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 Injuns 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 the audience often imposing themselves on the expressive culture they are 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."

Roland Barthes has argued that "mass culture" has to be distinguished "like fire from water, from the culture of the masses." 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

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& night,” William Blake observed more than 170 years ago, “But thou read’st black where I read white.” Until recently, however, scholars have been strangely diffident 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.” 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 that 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 of 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’ respondents commented. 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 on 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.

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 preselected the culture they exposed themselves to by learning to decipher reviews and coming attractions, by understanding the propensities of authors, actors, and directors to whose work they had been exposed 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 taste they trusted—was by far the most significant influence. Random dialing, advertisements, and parental advice lagged far behind in importance.

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33 Alan Dundes, “Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics,” in Dundes, Interpreting Folklore (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), 34–35.
34 Herbert Gans, The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans (Glencoe, Ill., 1962), chap. 9.
35 Radway, Reading the Romance, 46 and passim.
listeners had limited or no choice, such as in 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."

"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."

RECENT LITERARY THEORY SEES NEITHER THE READER NOR THE TEXT AS NECESSARILY CONTROLLING BUT RATHER PLACES EMPHASIS ON THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE TWO. It is precisely in this realm that we have to understand the process of popular culture: not as the imposition of texts on passive people who constitute a tabula rasa but as a process of interaction between complex texts that harbor more than monolithic meanings and audiences who embody more than monolithic assemblies of compliant people. Audiences are in fact complex amalgams of cultures, tastes, and ideologies. They 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' 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." Thus the control any creator has over the manner in which her or his creation is received is always incomplete and 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

58 See, for example, Wolfgang Iser: "The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of the text and imagination"; Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in Ralph Cohen, ed., New Directions in Literary History (Baltimore, Md., 1974), 130.
59 Roland Champagne, Literary History in the Wake of Roland Barthes: Re-Defining the Myths of Reading (Birmingham, Ala., 1984), 58–60.
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 there is not even a single rendition or reading that is necessarily authentic. Both the performer and the audience have a role to play in determining the meaning and nature of the production as collaborators with the creator. But we balk somehow at transferring this understanding to the realms of popular culture. Yet, until we do this, we will continue to misunderstand the relationship between popular culture and its public.

To give a simple illustration of the ways in which people viewed popular culture through the filters of their lives, listeners of 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 that 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."40

Soap operas were one of the Depression's most ubiquitous and popular genres precisely because they were part of what the playwright Paddy Chayefsky called "the marvelous world of the ordinary." People could relate to daytime serials in terms of their own existence; they 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...soap-opera characters grow: They marry, have children, mature, even die."41 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."42 "I like Myrt and Marge," a Manhattan youngster reported in 1934, "because it consists of real life happenings, and they are very exciting to hear."43 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."44

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 lifelike. It was also what made them kin to such folklore cycles as Brer Rabbit stories, which also mimicked life by having no closure. In any specific tale, Rabbit might win a victory over stronger animals, but by beginning the next story in the cycle with

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43 Eisenberg, Children and Radio Programs, 91.
Rabbit once again in the weaker position, the folk cycle underlined the truth that, in life, rabbits do not triumph over wolves permanently. 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 ultimately triumphs. 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. In soaps as in blues, people learned to handle their frustrations, adversities, and misadventures and cope with life. Like the blues, soaps fostered a sense of community, a sense of sharing troubles and solutions. "If you listen to these programs and something turns up in your own life, you would know what to do about it," one listener asserted. "You learn about life from the radio stories," a twelve-year-old New York girl affirmed. "The stories are like life . . . and so you learn how it is when you are grown up." Another listener observed of soaps, as she well might have said of the blues: "I learned that if anything is the matter, do not dwell on it or you go crazy." Two other listeners commented more specifically:

"I think Papa David [of Life Can Be Beautiful] helped me to be more cheerful when Fred, my husband, comes home. I feel tired and instead of being grumpy, I keep on the cheerful side. The Goldbergs are another story like that. Mr. Goldberg comes home scolding and he never meant it. I sort of understand Fred better because of it. When he starts to shout, I call him Mr. Goldberg. He comes back and calls me Molly. Husbands do not really understand what a wife goes through. These stories have helped me to understand that husbands are like that. If women are tender, they are better off. I often feel that if my sister had had more tenderness she would not be divorced today. I saw a lot of good in that man."

"I like Helen Trent. She is a woman over 35. You never hear of her dyeing her hair! She uses charm and manners to entice men and she does. If she can do it, why can't I? I am fighting old age, and having a terrible time. Sometimes I am tempted to go out and fix my hair. These stories give me courage and help me realize I have to accept it."

This identification between the audiences and the soap operas was not fortuitous. Rudolph Arnheim, who studied forty-three daytime serials in the spring of 1941, concluded: "The producers of radio serials take no chances in trying to meet the taste of their customers. Letters in which the listeners express approbation or protest are carefully studied. Telephone surveys determine the approximate size of the audience of each serial. On the basis of such data, and with a good deal of flair for what suits the purpose, the plots, the characters, the settings of the serials are made to order. That is why a content analysis of the serials can be expected to yield not only something about the programs, but also something about the listeners. These stories are likely to offer a picture of the world such as a particular social group would wish it to be."  

46 Interestingly, his own conclusion that these shows were what their audiences wanted made
Although the evidence certainly points to the validity of Arnheim’s conclusion, life was not always this cut and dried for popular culture audiences. They are not invariably handed meaning on a silver platter. “Writing,” Laurence Sterne observed in _Tristram Shandy_, “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.”47 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 interstices 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, is not the passive reception of a given text but rather a question of translation; fitting the text into a meaningful context.48 Many of those who listened to Orson Welles’ radio dramatization of H. G. Wells’ _War of the Worlds_ on Halloween night, 1938, panicked because they thought the show was an authentic news account of an invasion in progress. 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:

“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.”49

Arnheim uneasy, and he held out a standard for popular culture that one assumes he would not have advocated for high culture. After protesting against “presenting the world as one huge, catastrophic mess,” he insisted that “there is no point in describing the problems and tragedies of life unless such a description is based on a belief in its positive values. Discord and conflict must be evaluated against the background of man doing his job constructively, peacefully, and cheerfully.” In a footnote to this remark, he continued: “Why not apply some lightheartedness? View with detached, smiling wisdom these problems now overburdened with pathetic seriousness? Why the masochistic insistence on the moaning of despair, the Wagnerian vibrations of the pipe organ which so aptly create the hot, stuffy atmosphere of sterile emotion?” Rudolf Arnheim, “The World of the Daytime Serial,” in Lazarsfeld and Stanton, eds., _Radio Research_, 1942–43, 34–35, 82–83.


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."50 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’ 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 St. 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.”51

In this manner, folklore encourages listeners to become not merely participants but even creators of meaning when 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” (Figure 2), perhaps the single most widely reproduced and popular photograph in our history, accomplished precisely what Lange sought 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 massive federal intervention, and a justification for the transformation of American politics during the 1930s. This is certainly the way in which the photo was most often used. In its issue of October 17, 1936, for instance, Midweek Pictorial employed Lange’s image of Thompson to stir the conscience and fears of the nation (Figure 3). 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 is possible to see qualities besides that of the victim in photos like this. Roy Stryker, who directed the photographic section of the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration) for which Lange worked, mused some years later about the nature of the photographic file he had compiled: “The faces to me were the most significant

50 “Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light. Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves.” Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader,” in Suleiman and Croxman, eds., Reader in the Text, 110–11.

51 During World War II, a version of this joke featured Hitler attempting to enter heaven only to be confronted by a voice with a Yiddish accent. Dundes, “Projection in Folklore,” in Dundes, Interpreting Folklore, 59–60.
part of the file. When a man is down and they have taken from him his job and his land and his home—everything he spent his life working for—he's going to have the expression of tragedy permanently on his face. But I have always believed that the American people have the ability to endure. And that is in those

Figure 3: Midweek Pictorial, October 17, 1936. FSA Scrapbook, FSA-OWI Written Records, Library of Congress.
faces, too.”52 Stryker saw what we can still see: an overriding tension in Lange's portrait; a tension that Stryker, alluding to the work of his photographers in general, referred to as "dignity versus despair."53 Was "Migrant Mother" a portrait of desperation or fortitude, victimization or resiliency, or was its popularity based on its astute amalgam of these polarities?

The same conundrums are raised by another popular photograph of the period, Gordon Parks' portrait of Ella Watson, a charwoman who cleaned federal government offices in Washington, D.C. (Figure 4). In his autobiography, Parks, the first black photographer who worked with the photographic section, called this photograph "unsubtle" 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 5 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."54 But even 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. 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' 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' 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 unraveling its meaning.55

Even in such relatively finite works of expression as photographs, there is a great deal of room for audiences to insert themselves, and this was even truer of other modes of expressive art such as feature films. Two films from 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 I to her great success as the author of a best-selling

52 Roy E. Stryker and Nancy Wood, In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs (Greenwich, Conn., 1973), 14, 17.
53 Stryker and Wood, In This Proud Land, 14, 17.
55 For a more extended discussion of some of these questions, see Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," in Fleischhauer and Brannan, eds., Documenting America, 15–42.
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 administrator 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

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56 This quote and my later quotes from *Ann Vickers* and *Sullivan's Travels* come directly from my viewing of the films.
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 (played by Joel McCrea), 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. At first, Sullivan is not able to become much more than a voyeur until a series of mishaps puts him on a chain gang. Then 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 and allowed to see a Walt Disney cartoon. 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 on 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 will, 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 a woman's fundamental place in society, could not in one fell swoop wipe out everything that preceded it concerning Vickers' strength, talent, independence, competence, her important contributions, and the fact that her gender was hardly incidental to all of this but was the basis for much of it. Indeed, this was exactly the judgment of Time.
magazine's reviewer, who wrote of Vickers' sudden confession that she had been trapped in the prison of ambition: "Tying the story up with this platitude does not seriously weaken what has preceded it—an intelligent study, over-solemn but affecting, of a mature woman at work and in love."\(^{57}\)

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 them 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."\(^{58}\) 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. When the representations become embodied in theater, tales, radio, movies, they become forms of reality themselves. I do not mean by this that audiences necessarily confuse them with reality. Indeed, I think the opposite is more often true.\(^{59}\) Rather, the entire setting constitutes an important form of reality in which many essential things are realized: lessons are learned, values enunciated and repeated, modes of behavior scrutinized, social institutions and their effects explored, fantasies indulged. We forget far too easily that, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has observed, "language is action, both speaking it and also listening to it." Using, or even simply hearing, other people's words is not invariably a passive act. There are times when what Smith calls "fictional discourse"

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\(^{57}\) *Time*, October 9, 1933.


\(^{59}\) Barbara Herrnstein Smith has put this well: "As we view the canvas, the myriad spots of paint assume the guise of natural objects in the visual world, but we are nevertheless always half-conscious of them as spots of paint. As we watch the play, the stage recedes and the personal identities of the actors yield to those of the fictions whom they portray, but when, at the final curtain, we clap our hands, it is not Hamlet whom we are applauding, but the performers and the playwright himself. The illusions of art are never delusions. The artwork interests, impresses, and moves us both as the thing represented and as the representing itself: as the actions and passions of Prince Hamlet and as the achievement of William Shakespeare, as the speech of men—and as the poet's fiction." Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago, 1978), 39–40. See also Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, trans. (London, 1967), 29–34, in which Barthes observes of the novel: "Its task is to put the mask in place and at the same time to point it out." "The whole of Literature," he adds, "can declare Larvatus prodeo. As I walk forward, I point out my mask."
is the only type of discourse available to people. Throughout history, slaves or peasants or workers turned to their lore—their proverbs, tales, songs, religious practices, and jokes—to say things they could not say under the normal rules of discourse. Brer Rabbit and Brer Wolf, Moses and Pharaoh, could express verities their slave creators and audiences would have had difficulty getting past external and internal censors. There is every reason to believe that people in urban industrial societies use their popular culture in precisely the same ways. In this sense, a film, a daytime soap opera, a comic strip are all forms of reality, all a structural part of life.

We have yet to explore sufficiently the ways in which the technologies of the mass media were able to foster and not just weaken or destroy a sense of community. To reiterate a point I made earlier, it is not sufficient merely to focus on the substance of the popular culture; we need to understand how audiences confronted it. We forget too easily that going to a movie and listening to the radio are in and of themselves events and that we may have as much to learn from the process, the ritual, surrounding the expressive culture as from the content of the culture itself. I have argued elsewhere that content is not the sum of the folk process; it is merely an ingredient of it. The antiphonal—call and response—manner of singing, for example, speaks volumes about the state of the black community during and after slavery. Similarly, the ways in which tales and jokes were recited makes it clear that African-American culture did not divide easily into creator and audience. The black folk process was not an individual process but a group process. Similarly, the contemporary behavior of fans at baseball or football games makes it clear that these are not docile recipients but knowledgeable participants who give their advice and opinions and judgments freely and frequently. The process, then, can be as enlightening as the substance once we learn to pay more attention to what people do when they watch movies or listen to radio programs and phonograph records.

Radio, for example, was by no means antithetical to a sense of folk or community. We have already seen this by examining the interaction of audiences with daytime serials. The ways in which Father Coughlin, Huey Long, and Franklin Roosevelt used radio to build communities of followers during the Depression makes the process clearer still. Long, calling himself "Kingfish" after a character in the immensely popular radio show Amos 'n' Andy, speaking a vernacular common to many of his listeners, quoting freely from the Bible and

60 "Fictive discourse allows us to speak the unspeakable—but only if we agree not to say it .... Produced in the theaters of language or displayed in its galleries, fictive discourse is not subject to the economics of the linguistic marketplace. Thus, the poet can use language and his audience can respond to it without the constraints that would otherwise shape and confine the behavior of each of them. Though this may appear to be a tendentious way of describing 'poetic license,' its implications are considerably more far-reaching than what the cliche suggests. For the licensing that I am speaking of here extends to the audience as well as to the poet, and it involves not merely formal or even thematic features of the utterance, but quite fundamental aspects of the linguistic transaction itself." Smith, On the Margins of Discourse, 105, 110–11.

61 For copious examples, see Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness.

62 Ibid.
from the body of folk and popular culture, would begin his broadcasts by asking his listeners to become participants and reach out to their networks of friends and acquaintances: “I want everybody to get on the radio tonight and listen to me... This here's gonna be the best program on the air tonight. Now you get on the phone right now and ring up your neighbors. Tell 'em Huey P. Long, United States Senator from Louisiana, is got something to tell them. I'm gonna cover everything you ever heard of—and lots of things you ain't never heard of. Get ready to listen to me.”

FDR, who was capable of pausing in the midst of a Fireside Chat on the problems of relief, asking for a glass of water, sipping it audibly, and remarking: “My friends, it's very hot here in Washington,” was able to convert his periodic radio reports to the American people into such comfortably familiar events that millions of listeners wrote him and his wife in terms more often reserved for immediate members of their communities. “Your speech tonight made me very happy,” one of his correspondents confided. “You know somehow you seem very close to me like a very old friend.”

When in the midst of another Fireside Chat, Roosevelt invited his audience to “tell me your troubles,” Ira Smith, White House chief of mails, testified that large numbers of them “believed implicitly that he was speaking to them personally and immediately wrote him a letter. It was months before we managed to swim out of that flood of mail.” Hundreds of thousands of letters arrived beginning: “Dear Mr. President, I am worried about how we are going to...” “Dear Mr. Roosevelt, The children have no shoes to wear to school...” “Dear Frank, I've been driving a hack for ten years but now...” “They came in so fast,” Smith commented, “we couldn't count them, but within a week I had some 450,000 letters stacked all over the office.”

Closely related to the sense of community that both charismatic politicians and successful genres like soaps seem to have evoked was the circumstance that people did not necessarily experience the radio in isolation. They often listened in the company of friends or relatives and, as we have already seen, shared the programs they listened to with others. “We live on a ranch in the most remote part of Ontario, Canada,” Hugh and Ann MacNabb wrote the Nashville-based magazine *Rural Radio* in 1938. “Radios are not too plentiful here. [We] have seen as many as twenty or thirty [people] gathered in our home on Saturday night to enjoy the Saturday Night Barn Dance.” Leone Neises wrote the same magazine in 1936, “I live way up here in the 'sticks' in northwestern North Dakota. Saturday night is the 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 evenings of Joe

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66 Ira R. T. Smith with Joe Alex Morris, *Dear Mr. President...*: *The Story of Fifty Years in the White House Mail Room* (New York, 1949), 156, 213–14.

Louis's fights and punctuated the radio announcers' descriptions 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.68

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.69 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."70 Similarly, Hadley Cantril and his associates, who studied the listeners who panicked during Welles' 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."71

Radio 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."72 Nevertheless, radio was not unique. Other forms of popular culture—films, plays, sermons, speeches, vaudeville acts, musical performances—were also frequently experienced in social settings where the "contagion" of other people's reactions—their laughter, rumblings, anger, movements, shouts, ecstasies—was a factor as well. Indeed, Janice Radway has shown that even the solitary act of reading could become a social event. The women she studied met regularly to discuss the romance novels they were reading.73 Before, during, and after the

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69 A study conducted in 1934 among secondary school students in Oakland, California, found similar patterns of listening behavior. Eisenberg, *Children and Radio Programs*, 29–30, 162–63.
71 Cantril, *Invasion from Mars*, 139–49.
72 Cantril, *Invasion from Mars*, xii.
73 Radway, *Reading the Romance*. 
Great Depression, people enjoyed popular culture not as atomized beings vulnerable to an overpowering external force but as part of social groups in which they experienced the performance or with which they shared it after the fact. In the early 1930s, a college sophomore recalled that when he was seven or eight he and his friends would crowd the movie theaters on Saturday mornings to watch the latest episode of an action serial: "All the children of the district used to attend . . . During the showing of the picture itself we used to be worked up to a terrific high state of emotion, yelling at the hero when danger was near, hissing at the villain, and heaving sighs of relief when the danger was past."⁷⁴

Hollywood regularly made use of audience reaction to give their films a last fine-tuning. "You don't know what you've got until the very last minute," Frank Capra told an interviewer. "Until you've spent all the money and put the picture together, you don't really know what you've got and you worry . . . you don't know what you've got until you play it before an audience. You really do not know. There's no way of knowing."⁷⁵ Capra's own *Lost Horizon* (1937)—at $2 million, by far the most expensive movie he or Columbia Pictures had yet made—illustrates his point. Capra had the film previewed in Santa Barbara,  

⁷⁴ Blumer, *Movies and Conduct*, 120.
where, following ten minutes of silence, the audience "began to titter, where no titters were intended. The titters swelled into laughs, where no laughs were intended." After several days of anxiety, Capra decided to simply cut the first two reels from the film and held a second preview in San Pedro. "There was not one laugh or titter in the wrong place," Capra reported. "The audience was spellbound." Only then did Columbia release Lost Horizon, which became one of the most profitable and acclaimed films of the year. For Capra, the lesson was evident:

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 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 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 could not 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 clear that Capra was not unique. When preview audiences laughed in surprise at the appearance of the comedic actress Zazu 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 head of production at Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 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

76 Frank Capra, The Name above the Title: An Autobiography (New York, 1971), chap. 10.  
77 Capra discusses his difficulties with John Doe in Schickel, Men Who Made the Movies, 78; and in his autobiography, The Name above the Title, chap. 16.
Haven.” Both techniques 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 cultural object. 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.

The question James Joyce posed in the epigraph to this article has remained my point of reference: the boundaries between cultural production and cultural consumption, or, to use terms I find more meaningful, cultural creation and cultural reception. Students and critics of popular culture have made the mistake of drawing the lines between popular culture and its audiences too rigidly and exclusively and consequently of cutting themselves off from the dynamic cultural relationships that allow us to use popular culture to help recreate the attitudes and values of those no longer able to speak to us directly. If the playwright Tom Stoppard went too far in having the Player in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead declare, “Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in,” the statement remains useful in reminding us that audiences do have expectations; and, while they may be willing to transcend them, those expectations constitute boundaries that the creators, producers, and performers of culture cannot afford to ignore. The good news, the folklorist Bruce Jackson has announced, is that “all our stories are coauthored. 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

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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 series of often divergent points of view and competing voices. Disparateness 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 have 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 truer still 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 awareness is crucial, but it does not negate the fact that whatever patterns we find will have to exist alongside the inconsistencies, tensions, and cacophony of voices that 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.