

**INTELLECTUAL IDENTITY AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY:  
CRITICAL THOUGHT ABOUT INTELLECTUALS AND MASS  
CULTURE FROM ADORNO TO *SEINFELD***

by

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## Abstract

*Intellectual Identity and the Culture Industry: Critical Thought about Intellectuals and Mass Culture* discusses the life of the intellect and the intellectual as they relate, or fail to relate to, the problems of mass culture. In Chapter One, I evaluate the work of Theodor W. Adorno. I consider Adorno's critique of jazz as the prototype for his formidable assault on the culture industry at large and its role in the downfall of intellectual discourse. I identify comedy as a potentially subversive strain within mass culture. I advance what is not so much a methodological or historical approach to intellectuals and mass culture, but an attitude toward the phenomena under investigation, one that is, following Adorno, both uncompromising and intellectually rigorous. Chapter Two charts the fate of the intellectual both in and outside of academia, particularly as addressed by critiques of *The Last Intellectuals*. Russell Jacoby, Andrew Ross, Richard A. Posner and Noam Chomsky are discussed in terms of intellectual life in our time. Chapter Three surveys the mass cultural landscape, singling out the television comedy *Seinfeld* as exemplary of the best of what mass culture is capable of, demonstrating my own ability to 'do' Critical Theory, and to forward a cultural critique reflecting moral, ethical and spiritual criteria of judgment. The partial absence of a completely unified resolution between these two chapters resonates with an apprehension of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School as breaking with the intellectual tradition of foundationalism that emphasizes unity. As such what is presented is a critical alternative to the dominance of the intellectual tradition running from Descartes through positivism. I contend that the problem of intellectual life in relation to mass culture resists harmonious integration into a singular conceptual totality, because I maintain hope that the individual intellect can retain a degree of integrity and efficacy in spite of a monolithic cultural apparatus bent on deluding us at the juncture where culture comes to function as social control.

To the memory of my mother Edith

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Preface

Evaluating the meaning, quality and significance of a given cultural manifestation, singular or plural, is a demanding discipline. Such a process may well reveal as much or more about the critic responsible as the direct object of the critique. It has been with this in mind, the cultural critique as a discipline in its own right and how it reflects upon the intellect that produced it, that this thesis was written. My method is informed by the performance of scholastic duties in graduate courses, a broad range of readings in the area of cultural criticism and an ongoing close scrutiny of the mass culture I'm exposed to. Through the writing of this thesis I have sought to make explicit a model of what critical consciousness looks like when engaged in the particulars of evaluating a given cultural manifestation and the intellectual traditions that inform that critique.

Initiating my analysis is an examination of a few of the ideas of Theodor W. Adorno, that most worthy phoenix whose ideas persist in rising from the ashes of Marxism, psychoanalysis and a modernism that has long since been overtaken by an inferior successor. Adorno's jeremiads against popular music, severe critiques rooted in part in a bitter lament for the fall of popular values into the industrial model, provide a conspicuous starting point because it is there that we may view a prototype for all that he would later decry as being wrong with mass culture. For Adorno, the nature of musical production and reception under modernity degrades and commodifies music, perpetuating an ever increasing stunting of musical quality and stultifying the capacity for any authentic musical appreciation whatsoever. Adorno pulls no punches when it comes to indicting the mass audience as being every bit as idiotic as what he deems their



musical tastes to be. Following the recollection of that indictment, I go on to vindicate Adorno's arguments against popular music for their prophetic quality with regard to the more recent phenomenon of music videos. I consider the role of contemporary music as exemplary of what Adorno called "pseudo-culture" and how this theory of culture and mind relates to Adorno's comments on the sociology of consciousness. It is with respect to these latter considerations that I anticipate the broader argument of this thesis, that of a characterization of the dialectical relationship between intellectual life and mass culture.

In the second chapter of this thesis I address the problem of what two more current intellectuals have written on the subject of intellectual life in our time. Russell Jacoby, whose works include *Social Amnesia* (1975) *Dialectic of Defeat* (1981) *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America* (1994), *The End of Utopia* (1999) and *Picture Imperfect* (2005). For years Jacoby has been vitally involved in the issue of what he regards as the decline of the rigor and visibility of intellectuals in present day society. Jacoby's account of intellectual life, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, is largely an account of the academic containment of the intellectual. Jacoby's controversial writings are underscored throughout by his idea that the academic intellectual is somehow less than a *bona fide* intellectual.

Occupying far shakier critical ground than Russell Jacoby is Andrew Ross. In this thesis I contend that Ross's book *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989) exemplifies the kind of impoverishment of reason that criticism can fall prey to when it abandons any semblance of a moral centre and rushes headlong into the more delirious excesses of postmodern idealism. Despite his repeated claims to the contrary, Ross

does not—and perhaps ultimately cannot—validate the activity of intellectuals as being genuine labour. Hence, Ross's main point of commonality with Jacoby's arguments hinges somehow on an agreement that at least one major variety of intellectuals is lacking in proletarian legitimacy. Underlying the pronouncements of both Jacoby and Ross is the lingering suspicion that contemporary intellectuals are missing what might be termed an occupational identity, a sense of being and validation derived from whatever it is that they actually *do*. To Jacoby's credit, he does stake out a claim for the authentic intellectual-dissident who is not defined by academia. Alternatively, Ross, because of his unwillingness or inability to provide a credible definition of culture, is enigmatically amorphous on the subject of defining what constitutes an intellectual.

Throughout the entirety of this thesis the one irreducible question I have sought to answer from a variety of perspectives is simply this: what is the nature and significance of intellectual identity as it relates to mass culture? It is from within the context of criticizing culture that I have sought to move toward a resolution of this issue. I have seen and heard both Jacoby and Ross lecture at different locales in the Greater Vancouver area. Perhaps this helped to personalize their ideas for me. What struck me about *The Last Intellectuals*, the first of Jacoby's works that I read, was the extent to which he neglected to relate the history he chronicles with the mass culture corresponding to the times he discusses. This is in part the absence I address in my evaluation of his work. As for Ross, his is a more difficult case to deal with. His book, *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, displays an impressive scope in terms of the breadth of mass cultural phenomena that it covers, from the peaks to the sewers. Yet it may well be the very same virtuoso display of subject matter that obfuscates his lack of philosophical depth. Rather than pretend to have all the answers what I have tried to

present in this thesis are models of critical thinking, from an Adornonian model of the 1930s on how to respond to mass culture to the work of Russell Jacoby in the 1980s, 1990s and into the twenty-first century as a bearer of the Frankfurt School torch, from the all-too-affirmative postmodern embrace of “popular culture” by Andrew Ross in the late 1980s to Noam Chomsky’s proposals concerning the responsibility of intellectuals, proposals that span from the 1960s to present day. Rounding out the discussion and bringing this thesis more up to date is my critique of Richard A. Posner’s *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2003) a work that weighs the issues attendant to intellectual identity from a conservative perspective.

In chapter three I endeavour to make plain an example of precisely how a culture critique operates. As my case study I have chosen the immensely popular (albeit now out of production) television show *Seinfeld*. In part I have opted for the analysis of a television show because of the predominantly classless nature of the medium itself. As such, the teleology of this critique aims at a kind of universality in terms of its reception. *Seinfeld* is an especially instructive case study because of the way it relates to a theory of reception. Specifically, just as a society may reveal itself by what it throws away, it also reveals itself through what it laughs at. Like the works of Samuel Beckett before it, *Seinfeld* suggests the popularization of a secular existentialist outlook, presenting conditions whereby its characters “live in a universe empty of values.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, perhaps more than any other television show before or since, *Seinfeld* suggests the normalization of despair. The relevance of *Seinfeld* also extends to the fact that it is often resonant of a poststructuralist epistemology. Moreover, *Seinfeld* presents a

<sup>1</sup> David Marc, *Comic Visions, Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997) 202.

situational interplay of characters existing in a falsely presumed absence of empirical morality. As such, the proper critical response to *Seinfeld* is one that demands the recognition of criticism as a moral action.

It is my contention that Adorno's case against mass culture remains entirely relevant today. His vast wealth of cultural literacy coupled with his frequently iron clad logic have, in my estimation established him as a culture critic with few peers. Perhaps, as Russell Jacoby might have it, intellectuals ought to strive to cultivate public identities; but it remains to be seen whether the overall culture will be any the richer for it. Being an intellectual is a moral and ethical identity. However, it is not an identity that is dependent on the frequency with which one can manage to get his or her name in print or how often they can be found making intelligent noises in front of sizeable audiences.

I am far less taken by the ideas of Andrew Ross because, as I will demonstrate, as a historian he is unreliable and as a conceptual thinker he is worse. His notion of the intellectual as a 'tastemaker' in relation to popular culture bespeaks a characterization of the intellectual as a connoisseur of kitsch, shlock, camp and pornography.

Most of the work of Noam Chomsky has preciously little bearing on culture criticism. However, he remains an instructive source of inspiration in terms of the rigorous and uncompromising intellectual that he himself exemplifies.

Richard A. Posner is no intellectual lightweight either; at least, he manages to get published fairly prolifically. Yet I intend to demonstrate that Posner's vision is hampered by his subjugation to an overbearingly conservative ideological worldview. I leave it up to the reader to decide if my case against Posner is grounded in my response to him as an authoritarian personality or simple bristling at a person in authority (Posner is an

appellate court judge). I will conclude with a consideration of the value of television as a cultural and intellectual medium, especially as it relates to the future of the critique.

## **Introduction: Beyond Registering the Pollution**

In his essay "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism," the tough-minded art critic Harold Rosenberg forwarded the opinion that "the common argument of the mass-culture intellectuals that they have come not to bathe in the waters but to register the degree of its pollution does not impress me. I believe they play in this stuff because they like it, including those who dislike what they like."<sup>1</sup> However, as Bob Dylan observes in one of his more recent songs, "things have changed." Because of the increasingly dominant presence of mass culture, because of its ever-expanding penetration into virtually all social relations, and, not least of all, because of its role in the shaping of the consciousness of people almost everywhere today, the failure "to register the degree of pollution" on behalf of the responsible intellectual amounts to nothing short of gross negligence. Indeed, the very "liking of what one dislikes," the paradoxical schism in emotions that mass culture gives rise to among its more thoughtful audiences, is an intriguing prelude into the investigation of those matters which most concern the hearts and minds of people worldwide.

The global, contradictory movement of postmodernism, a phenomena that many have argued has cheapened aesthetic experience through its normalization of co-optation and degradation of historical consciousness in favour of a purportedly more

<sup>1</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959, 1960) 260.

democratic program of cultural de-stratification, necessitates that those intellectuals whose primary turf is the arts ought to be prepared to engage in as many arenas as possible and to whatever extent that common decency permits. What I have sought to accomplish with this thesis is not, as Rosenberg might have it, "*to add to kitsch an intellectual dimension*"<sup>2</sup> but rather to assess the increasingly problematic relationship between the life of the mind and some of its more pervasive sources of present-day recreation. If it holds true that one's emotions are at one and the same time the most intense and the shallowest part of the self, then liking or disliking is entirely beside the point. To be effective such a probing must be nurtured by reason and sustained by the will. Since mass culture was the primary culture that I grew up with, this exploration of mass culture and intellectual life is also a self-exploration, an attempt to come to terms with those avenues of diversion that have contributed to the shaping of my own feelings, thoughts and attitudes.

It is possible that when Rosenberg advocated that "There is only one way to quarantine kitsch: by being too busy with art. One so occupied is protected by the principle of indifference..."<sup>3</sup> it was still a viable option. Today, however, mass culture has proven to be too successful at infiltrating contemporary aesthetic experience to be overlooked. Moreover, our perceptions of even the art of the very distant past is unavoidably mediated by the cultural conditions of today. This is a function of what the Russian literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin has termed the dialogical imagination. Nor is it any longer realistic to adopt a foxhole mentality with regard to mass culture if we are

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 260.

to properly benefit from the examples of what Jacoby terms “public intellectuals,” those who wrote for and addressed themselves to an educated but non-academic audience.

Rosenberg admits there is at least one worthwhile purpose to the study of mass culture:

To affect the landscape is the only legitimate reason for investigating the processes of popular art. In other words, politics is the only legitimate reason. To study kitsch as propaganda is legitimate—e.g., analysis of the treatment of minorities in slick fiction—since the aim of the study is not knowledge alone but action ...<sup>4</sup>

Yet the proper investigation of so-called popular art should go beyond merely defending minorities—and I hasten to add that part of what follows is a consideration of intellectuals as a minority. Those sometimes referred to as ‘academic intellectuals’ are minorities with enormous privileges. Such investigations take as their starting point the recognition of the fact that the matter at hand is the exposition of a systematic program of indoctrination. Accompanying this recognition is the abiding acceptance of legitimate criticism as a moral action. If, as Rosenberg contends, the only legitimate reason for studying the processes of popular art is political, it stands to reason that most of what follows here is a political discussion. But as it should become apparent to the reader, my own political sensibility does not fit neatly into left wing, right wing or moderate schematizations. I regard this discussion as being *trans ideological*. For example, I would fault Rosenberg’s claim that that the only way to combat kitsch is by being too busy with art” as exhibiting a bias toward the culture of bourgeois conservatism, a disdain for play in favour of ‘busy-ness’ with what might be deemed more genuine art. Such an observation is undeniably rooted in a left-leaning class analysis. Yet it is not an

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 265.



observation that necessitates adherence to the Marxian sentiment that insists that labour is the inescapable essence of all human endeavour. Nor is such an observation contingent upon the advocacy of the proletariat as the primary mover and shaker behind all historical change. Moreover, to busy oneself with more genuine art entails the capacity to see where it is not and where its counterfeits are.

Seeking the truth through engagement with art is a worthy pursuit. The study of art trains individuals in the power of reflection. As Adorno points out, "...What (art) contributes to society is not communication with society, rather something very indirect, resistance."<sup>5</sup> These things are not at issue. I mean to draw attention to the idea that the study of the culture industry is not, nor should it be, a purely political activity. While it reveals how domination and manipulation work at a mass scale, it is also an analysis of *the corruption of the aesthetic* and how that corruption adulterates the very nature of perception itself. Presently, to claim total indifference to mass culture is to be indifferent to the billions who consume it. Such a claim can hardly be considered a moral position.

My limited adherence to what I regard as a Frankfurt School style of analysis is not so much a political platform as the intellectual constituent of a moral and ethical foundation for culture criticism. For example, I am less enamoured by Adorno's writings for their political tendencies than for their refinement of an apolitical aesthetic sensibility. Critical Theory in the sense in which I make use of it is an umbrella term for a broad, multidisciplinary approach to cultural, economic, psychological and sociological

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 335-36, quoted by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Forward," *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xviii.

phenomena. In his introduction to Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Trent Schroyer remarks that:

The intent of critical theory is to reconstruct the generation of historical forms of consciousness in order to demonstrate how they misrepresent actual social relations and thereby justify historical forms of domination. In this way dialectical reason is actualized by critical theorists who, in their reflective critiques of the basic categories of historical consciousness, seek to reconcile men and women to the actuality of their historical possibilities. So conceived, critical theory is a theoretical moment of the "class struggle."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Adorno's animosity toward mass culture is not that of an elitist but of someone whose life's work is grounded in the teleology toward the emancipation of the consciousness of all classes. Because mass culture is the primary culture that I and my generation have been raised on, the task of making some of the more salient aspects of Critical Theory less esoteric and more accessible to the layperson constitutes an attempt to assist others in overcoming their own mass culturally determined false consciousness, thereby helping others to become receptive to more legitimate aesthetic experience.

I initiate this task with a discussion of popular music, the most seemingly omnipresent manifestation of mass culture. The exact way in which the deterioration of music in modern society has contributed to the decline of a viable subjectivity is not easy to gauge; it is an emphatic but quite possibly ineffable relationship. Yet as I have sought to demonstrate in the initial chapter of the discussion, it has become an almost palpable reality. Proceeding from deductions Adorno makes in his essay "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938) I consider how the culture industry's sabotage of musical appreciation as an abstract form of cognition invades, makes literal

<sup>6</sup> Trent Schroyer, "Introduction," *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Fredric Will (Evanston, IL: North Western University Press, 1973) vii-ix.

and thereby incapacitates, intellectual activity. Just as his essay would become the prototype for all of his subsequent writings on the impact of cultural goods produced by the culture industry, it is also indicative of the new alienation of the critically minded individual.

Following from Adorno, contemporary popular music, jazz and rock and roll are emblematic of a new and pervasive realm of estrangement. What is at stake is not simply an issue of class struggle but the autonomy of the individual mind. By sustaining this line of analysis through a discussion of contemporary pop and rock and roll music into the domain of stereotypes and television comedy, I endeavour to reveal what it means to think in and through popular music and examine the social perception of the intellectual.

As an intellectual studying, writing, making art and teaching in a university, it was Russell Jacoby's book *The Last Intellectuals* that sparked in me a heightened self-critical awareness of my occupational identity. Was I meeting the obligations attendant to the freedoms and privileges I was enjoying? In my discussion of *The Last Intellectuals* and Jacoby's follow-up book *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America*, I assess his claims of the extent to which contemporary thinkers have failed to live up to the heritage of their public intellectual predecessors, examine the viability of the history he outlines and, not insignificantly, consider how much his conclusions are informed by capitalist liberalism and a variation of a Faustian archetype. I have also sought to scrutinize those aspects of Jacoby's arguments where he may have lapsed into mystification and metaphysical contingency. However, I have also tried to provide a balanced account of Jacoby's contribution to the question of intellectual identity. In his critique of the left, despite his own strong left-liberal sympathies toward it,

Jacoby manages to establish a thoroughly readable, provocative chronicle of intellectual history and academia.

A far more objectionable treatment of comparable subject matter is *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* by Andrew Ross. Identifying exactly what Ross means by the term “popular culture” is a tricky matter. In his introduction to *No Respect* Ross claims that “The struggle to win popular respect and consent for authority is endlessly being waged, and most of it takes place in the realm of what we recognize as popular culture.”<sup>7</sup> In other words it is implied that popular culture is a *territory* wherein contesting entities of would-be authority do battle for supremacy. Ordinarily, implicit to the term culture, popular or otherwise, is the concept of a development of sorts, a growth or refinement that is synonymous with the concept of civilization as an active, dynamic *process*. The etymology of the term ‘culture’ can be traced back to the Roman *cultura* which was derived from *colere*, to take care of, preserve and cultivate. The central premise of Ross’s book is that it is a work that explicates the real relationship between intellectuals and popular culture, a feat that he claims to accomplish by using the dubious criteria of taste as his divining rod. In order to sell his readership on the notion that this is in fact what he has succeeded in doing, Ross finds it necessary to substitute the idea of culture as a *process* with the idea of culture as a *place*, be it real, geographical, conceptual or purely abstract. Once this substitution has been enacted, popular culture is rendered into the specious likeness of a Darwinian–Nietzschean playground on which the battles for power, ascendancy and, not least of all, credibility are fought and won or lost.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 3.

Following the discussion of Andrew Ross is my analysis of both an interview with and an essay by Noam Chomsky. The significance of Chomsky's contribution to the debates surrounding American foreign policy and the role of intellectuals is undeniable; or, at the very least, he has not been anywhere near so ignored on that subject as he has often complained. I have tried to extrapolate from some of Chomsky's more common sense insights an enhanced definition of the culturally minded intellectual. While Chomsky does not write on cultural issues *per se*, his moralism as suggested in his essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" is instructive. What I mean to draw into question about Chomsky is the extent to which his anarchist idealism suggests a workable alternative to existing conditions. After presenting a critique of some of Chomsky's ideas I go on to consider the work of a prolific conservative, Richard A. Posner, and consider how the definition of 'public intellectual' fairs in the hands of someone on the ideological right of the political spectrum.

In the third chapter of this thesis I present a critique of the television show *Seinfeld*. In that critique I have brought to bear the full weight of a critical sensibility that is at once literary, psychoanalytical, and sociological upon a present day artefact of the culture industry. What results is, as I hope to demonstrate, not simply a critical exegesis of a cultural manifestation, but a characterization of the psychological, moral and spiritual condition of the mass audience and intellectual identity. *Seinfeld* is appropriate to this discussion not because of the fact that it belongs to the realm of mass culture but in spite of that fact. I will attempt to show the extent to which *Seinfeld*, in its own comedically subversive way, speaks the truth or truths about contemporary existence. Reruns of *Seinfeld* have been sufficiently prevalent in the years since it ceased production that the show may have become almost denatured to the regular viewer. Yet

*Seinfeld* still manages to skewer rather than assert intellectual pretension without being anti-intellectual—a pretty neat accomplishment for something done within the context of contemporary network commercial television. The subversive comedic content of the show endures and as such it maintains the potential to jolt a portion of its audience from their televisual stupor and possibly give thought to matters other than who or what is sponsoring what they're watching. As Walter Benjamin pointed out: "It may be noted by the way that there is no better start for thinking than laughter."<sup>8</sup>

What underscores the entirety of this thesis is a definition of the intellectual in terms of his or her duty to seek and to speak the truth in spite of a monolithic cultural apparatus that in most instances seemingly does everything in its power to undermine the realization of that duty. Failure to respond critically to the culture industry on behalf of those intellectuals whose domain is culture amounts to tacit approval of the falsification of social relations and historical domination the culture industry has been so successful in advancing. The alienation of the critically conscious individual is another theme that runs concurrently with this process of definition. To be openly critical of mass culture is to run the risk of further alienation. Perhaps alienation itself will one day prove to be the foundation upon which efficacious intellectual community is to be based. But such speculation is beyond the scope of this particular thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982) 267.

## CHAPTER 1: Theodor Adorno and the Intellectual's Song of Rage and Utopia

To whatever extent we may be said to have seen genuine Marxism at work, the Marxist experiment can readily be identified as one of the more monolithic failures of the twentieth century. Yet this failure on behalf of Marxism at large does not always hold true for some of the intellectual projects that drew, at least in part, upon Marxism for inspiration and insight. Most notable among these projects is the Critical Marxism of the Institute for Social Research or, as it came to be more widely known, the Frankfurt School. Anyone who aspires to write coherent, rigorous critiques of culture today would do well to consider the intellectual achievements in culture criticism of one of the giants in that field, Frankfurt School philosopher, sociologist and culture critic Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69) "a critical modernist who understood modernity in specific relation to its prehistory, especially the Western European nineteenth century, which was marked by astounding technological change that transformed society, culture, and the human subject ...."<sup>1</sup> While Adorno's intellectual legacy is quite diversified and crosses disciplines, it is in his blistering attacks on mass culture or "the culture industry" as he preferred to call it, that his work is of its greatest value insofar as it may tutor the individual in developing what he hoped would be utopic strategies of resistance toward a

<sup>1</sup> Richard Leppert, "Commentary," *Essays on Music*, T.W. Adorno (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) 230-31.

realm of delusion that has become as aggressive as it is ubiquitous. Regarding Adorno's concept of the intellectual, it has been stated:

he insists on the responsibility of the intellectual to 'be a critical, promotive factor in the development of the masses. 'The critical theoretician's role is to help change society by explaining it—but all the while remembering that his or her own position of relative intellectual privilege ironically exemplifies the very problem for which redress is sought.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, for Adorno the role of the intellectual is synonymous with the role of the critical theoretician. In true dialectical fashion Adorno defines this role as being grounded in a contradiction, that the intellectual must be committed to social change and part of that change is the realization of a condition where there is no longer any need for his or her services.

As early as the 1930s Adorno was launching assaults on the culture industry with such essays as "The Social Situation of Music" (1932), "On Jazz" (1936) and "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938). In that latter essay, at once both heartfelt lament for what he perceived as a loss of musical cognizance, and a ruthless indictment of popular music in the twentieth century, Adorno posits a parallel erosion between musical aesthetics and authentic individualism, first apparent in what he deems to be the obsolescence of personal taste as a criteria for aesthetic judgement:

Responsible art adjusts itself to criteria which approximate judgements: the harmonious and the inharmonious, the correct and the incorrect. But otherwise, no more choices are made; the question is no longer put and no one demands the subjective justification of conventions. The very existence of the subject who could verify such taste has become as

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 231.



questionable as has, at the opposite pole, the right to freedom of choice which empirically, in any case, no one any longer exercises.<sup>3</sup>

Adorno claims that the capacity for musical enjoyment on behalf of the listening subject is little or no better than mere recognition of what he hears: "The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it."<sup>4</sup> In this regressive climate it may well be asked who "music for entertainment still entertains...it seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all."<sup>5</sup> Through this observation Adorno underscores a theme that would resonate deeply throughout all of his later writings on the culture industry, the role of the culture industry as an agent of social and intellectual control. In this instance Adorno suggests that one of the roles of popular music is to prohibit free speech and, as a consequence he is quick to point out, "If nobody can any longer speak, than certainly nobody can any longer listen."<sup>6</sup> Why was music in particular of such vital importance to Adorno? As Richard Leppert points out in his insightful commentary to Adorno's *Essays on Music* (2002): "His own concern is driven by what he repeatedly terms an 'actual life relation with music', tacitly acknowledging his concern for music in the formation of humane subjects."<sup>7</sup>

Adorno speculates that on a more formalistic and economic level popular music sacrifices its aesthetic totality to engage the listener in an exclusive delight in the

<sup>3</sup> T.W. Adorno, "On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening", *The Culture Industry*, (London: Routledge, 1993) 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Leppert, "Commentary", *Essays on Music*, T.W. Adorno (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) 222.

moment or fetishism of the immediate, thereby conditioning the listener to function as consumer:

The delight in the moment and the gay façade becomes an excuse for absolving the listener from the thought of the whole, whose claim is composed in proper listening. The listener is converted, along his line of least resistance, into the acquiescent purchaser. No longer do the partial moments serve as a critique of that whole; instead they suspend the critique which the successful aesthetic totality exerts against the flawed one of society.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, Adorno alleges that the process whereby the individual is seduced into regressive listening and conditioned to be its consumer compensates that individual by absolving him of the necessity of performing the genuine labour involved in thinking critically about what he is hearing. According to Adorno, cultural goods that do not bear a critical relationship to society do not constitute a true culture because, as he points out elsewhere, "Culture is only true when implicitly critical, and the mind which forgets this revenges itself in the critics it breeds."<sup>9</sup> The problem of the culture industry is twofold. First, an uncritical, regressive and therefore unreal culture perpetuates itself in the inferior intellectual quality of the criticism it generates. Second and more importantly, when the individual gives cognitive assent to that which, superficially at least, performs the role of culture in society but bears no critical stance to society, he moves toward surrendering his capacity to think critically about society. For Adorno critical feelings are ontologically created by genuine art; we learn how to be critical. Adorno maintains that the net result of musical fetishism and regressive listening upon the individual is one of an alienation that is as radical as it is submissive:

<sup>8</sup> T.W. Adorno, "On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening", *The Culture Industry*, (London: Routledge, 1993) 29.

<sup>9</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Culture Criticism and Society", *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983) 22.

If the moments of sensual pleasure in the idea, the voice, the instrument are made into fetishes and thrown away from any functions which could give them meaning, they meet a response equally isolated, equally far from the meaning of the whole, and equally determined by success in the blind and irrational emotions which form the relationship to music into which those with no relationship enter. But these are the same relations as exist between the consumers of hit songs and the hit songs. Their only relation is to the completely alien, and the alien, as if cut off from the consciousness of the masses by a dense screen, is what seeks to speak for the silent. Where they react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven's Seventh or to a bikini.<sup>10</sup>

Implicit to this claim that contemporary popular music exists as the music of those deprived of any authentic relationship to music is the idea that what had previously been a force for social cohesion and the refinement of the individual, "the manifestation of impulse and the locus of its taming,"<sup>11</sup> becomes a means of social fragmentation, heightened alienation and stultification of the mass audience. Equally if not more intriguing is the extent to which Adorno's discussion of music here resonates as a caricature of the plight of the ivory tower intellectual: uprooted or "torn away," isolated, displaced, alienated and with what is at best a questionable relationship to social praxis, a plight that he himself lived and is echoed in the romantic stereotypes of the intellectual and genius alike. While his conceptual framework for the idea of musical fetishism clearly derives from Marx's and Lukacs' characterization of the reified commodity in capitalist society, Adorno's personal identification with the status of music suggests an even stronger affinity between what he regards as the fate of music and his own career as an intellectual. In a manner uncharacteristic of a true Marxist, Adorno in this case

<sup>10</sup> T.W. Adorno, "On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening", reprinted in *The Culture Industry*, (London, Routledge, 1993) p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

appears to have reserved his harshest invective for the audiences of what he deemed musical fetishism:

...it is contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at an infantile stage... They [listening subjects] are not childlike....But they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped but of the forcibly retarded... They are not merely turned away from more important music, but they are confirmed in their neurotic stupidity...<sup>12</sup>

Adorno likens some jazz fans to:

...many of the young disciples of logical positivism who throw off philosophical culture with the same zeal as jazz fans dispense with the tradition of serious music. Enthusiasm turns into matter-of-fact attitude in which all feeling becomes attached to technique, hostile to all meaning. They feel themselves secure within a system so well defined that no mistake could possibly slip by, and the repressed yearning for things outside finds expression as intolerant hatred and in an attitude which combines the superior knowledge of the initiate with the pretentiousness of the person without illusions. Bombastic triviality, superficiality seen as apodictic certitude, transfigures the cowardly defence against every form of self-reflection. All these old accustomed modes of reaction have in recent times lost their innocence, set themselves up as philosophy and thus become truly pernicious.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, Adorno likens the mentality of some jazz fans to that of know-nothing dogmatists who are impervious to genuine learning, intolerant, arrogant, hateful, estranged from self-knowledge and smug. Insofar as authentic culture is that which fosters critical self-reflection, Adorno seems to be intimating that jazz is anti-culture. Perhaps worst of all, this systematized profile is so crystalline and prolific as to be formalized as a philosophy. Yet contrary this perception of Adorno's work, his dismissal of jazz and other popular

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion—Jazz", *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983) 128.

music is not quite absolute. He conceded that there are a “few really good song hits”<sup>14</sup> and acknowledged that “hot jazz” was “relatively progressive.”<sup>15</sup>

## **Community, Jazz and Comedy**

Adorno's heroic diatribes against jazz were attempts to save civilization from what he regarded as the jaws of barbarism. To him, the popularity of jazz meant the liquidation of the authentic listening subject:

However much jazz-subjects, representing the music listener in general, may play the non-conformist, in truth they are less and less themselves. Individual features which do not conform to the norm are nevertheless shaped by it, and become marks of mutilation. Terrified, jazz fans identify with the society they dread for having made them what they are. This gives the jazz ritual its affirmative character, that of being accepted into a community of unfree equals.<sup>16</sup>

Again, the prophetic quality of Adorno's pontificating becoming reality is striking. Today the young and the not so young are getting tattooed and body piercings like never before. They are the initiation rights for belonging to that “community of unfree equals.” Regardless of whatever else one might say, one thing the appearance of the denizens of the ink blotter and multi-pierced bodies does not suggest is that they are lovers of classical music. Psychologically, this trend is something other than a fashion statement. Self-mutilation, highly aestheticized or otherwise, suggests the presence of an acute psychic trauma so pronounced as to be completely ineffable.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Leppert, “Commentary,” *Essays on Music*, T.W. Adorno (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) 344.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 355.

<sup>16</sup> T.W. Adorno, “Perennial Fashion—Jazz”, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983) 126.

Alternatively, perhaps this development suggests an even darker victory for popular culture, that it has given rise to generations for whom inner turmoil is universal, unspeakable, incommunicable and trivial all at the same time. As with the television laugh track's simulated audience response, what jazz appreciation seemingly endeavours to provide—and much of the other culture industry products—is a sense of community. Perhaps the most profound irony of this condition is that consumers are lured into finding social relevance through that which has little intrinsic social relevance whatsoever and that those same consumers are provided with a sense of community through an experience that is essentially based on a sense of isolation. Interestingly enough, television stand-up comedy virtually always includes the presence of a live audience whereas situation comedies are embellished with canned laughter. This distinction between “live” laughter accompanying stand up comedy and a laugh track accompanying the situation comedy implies two distinctly different roles for the viewer. In the case of stand-up comedy, the television viewer is comparable to a participating member of the audience with the best seat in the house. In the case of the canned laughter of the situation comedy, the audience remains invisible and the role of the viewer is by implication reduced to that of redundant voyeur.

The artifice of spontaneity is what holds much of the appeal of jazz. This feature is comparable to the function of the laugh track in a situation comedy; it embellishes the wit or attempted wit on display with the aura of something that is being made up on the spot. Examples in the field of television comedy have been the immensely popular improvisational comedy show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and, in the field of stand-up the comedy of Jonathan Winters and later Robin Williams. The success of this brand of

comedy darkly suggests that the figure of the fascist agitator is still very much with us if only as a clown:

In order successfully to meet the unconscious dispositions of his audience, the agitator so to speak simply *turns his own unconscious outward*. His particular character syndrome makes it possible for him to do exactly this, and experience has taught him consciously to exploit this faculty, to make rational use of his irrationality, similarly to the actor, or a certain type of journalist who knows how to sell their innervations and sensitivity. Without knowing it, he is thus able to speak and act in accord with psychological theory for the simple reason that the psychological theory is true. All he has to do in order to make the psychology of his audience click, is shrewdly to exploit his own psychology.<sup>17</sup> (emphasis mine)

The seduction of the audience is comparable to a magic act wherein the pleasurable moments are conjured from one moment to the next out of nothing. As with the laugh track in relation to comedy, improvisation, however contrived or artificial, imbues jazz with the character of immediacy. Murray Horwitz, head of cultural programming at (America's) National Public Radio, recognizes the commonality between improvisational jazz and Winters' comedic improvisation when he states: "He does all the characters right *there*, without any segues. The point is, the audience will go with you. There's a transition but it's very short. It's like bebop: when the musicians would hit the chord changes, they'd hit it big, and you'd hear it."<sup>18</sup> However, Winters' brand of stand up comedy with its jazz-like flourishes differs substantially from most traditional stand up. Together with Mort Sahl, the political comic, and Lenny Bruce, the dirty comic, Winters was at the vanguard of a revolution in stand up comedy that spanned from approximately 1953 to 1965 according to Gerald Nachman in his highly informative book

<sup>17</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1987) 133.

<sup>18</sup> Murray Horwitz (head of cultural programming for the American National Public Radio), quoted by Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) 240-41.

*Seriously Funny*. Nachman quotes *Los Angeles Times* critic Lawrence Christon's appraisal of Winters as follows:

He was a revolutionary who, with a can opener, opened up the fifties. His antic imagination was so fertile. There was nobody like him. He was like a midwestern lunatic. When a cop pulls him over and asks, '*Where's the fire?*' Winters says, '*In your eyes, officer!*'...He wasn't verbal, he wasn't urban, he wasn't intellectual—he was just pure impulse. He's a performer, and a lot of comedians are not performers, they're commentators.<sup>19</sup>

Winters never betrayed any indications that there was a cauldron of anger seething behind his comedic brilliance although two mental breakdowns, one in 1959 and a second in 1961, contributed to the ill-deserved reputation of being a madman. However, if wit is the outward manifestation of sublimated rage, Adorno might have made an excellent comedian. Indeed, many passages of his writing sparkle with keen humour. While rage may well have been at the heart of what compelled Adorno to write such impassioned criticism and saved him from collapsing into total despair, it also reveals his at times unbridled contempt for naïve Marxists. Adorno was never a doctrinaire Marxist. As J.M. Bernstein points out:

For Adorno, the Marxist belief that capitalist forces of production will generate a free society is illusory. Capital does not possess such immediately emancipatory forces or elements; the drift of capitalist development even the underlying or implicit drift of such development, is not towards freedom but towards further integration and domination. Hence, the Marxist history that places capitalism into a naive narrative of the progress of freedom and reason becomes, through its attempts to unify and integrate history, complicit with its object.<sup>20</sup>

While there is a utopian teleology in much of Adorno's writings, he was never prescriptive in terms of what form that utopia might take. It is a dialectic between rage

<sup>19</sup> Former *Los Angeles Times* critic Lawrence Christon, whose beat was the comedy scene from 1970 to 1995, *ibid.* p. 240.

<sup>20</sup> J.M. Bernstein, "Introduction," *The Culture Industry*, T.W. Adorno (London: Routledge, 1993) 3.



and utopia that informs Adorno's sensibility. Interestingly enough, in his utopian bent, as hinted at in his essay on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* one can also glimpse Christian tendencies:

In his critique of false needs Huxley preserves the idea of the objectivity of happiness. The mechanical repetition of the phrase, 'Everybody's happy now' becomes the most extreme accusation. When men are products of an order based on denial and deception, and that order implants imaginary needs in them, then the happiness which is defined by the satisfaction of such needs is truly bad. It is a mere appendage of the social machinery. In a totally integrated world which does not tolerate sorrow, the command from Romans (xii.15) 'Weep with the weeping' is more valid than ever, but 'Be joyous with the joyful' has become a gory mockery—the job the order permits the ordered feeds on the perpetuation of misery.<sup>21</sup>

The reference here to scripture is a telling one for while it does not appear within the context of a total endorsement on Adorno's behalf, he is clearly relying upon the moral and spiritual authority of scripture to make his point. Adorno was not a Christian, at least, not in any conventional sense in which that label is applied. And it is in part for that reason that Adorno stands as such a complex paradox of a man. As Adorno scholar Robert Hullot-Kentor observes "theology is always moving right under the surface of all of Adorno's writings."<sup>22</sup> Further evidence of theism bordering on a Christian sensibility in Adorno's thinking can be seen in his "Theory of Pseudo-Culture" (1959) wherein he states: "The authority of the Bible is replaced by the authority of the stadium."<sup>23</sup>

This dialectic between rage and utopianism reveals Adorno as being, at his core, a religious thinker in his thematic and formalistic parallel with Kierkegaard. Adorno's

<sup>21</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983) 110.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Foreward," *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, T.W. Adorno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) xxi.

<sup>23</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Theory of Pseudo-Culture," *Telos* (trans. Deborah Cook) Spring 1993: 16.

exhortation to us that we should "contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption"<sup>24</sup> is hardly the sentiment of an irreligious man. Despite Adorno's repudiation of Kierkegaard for his assertion of the religious mode of being over the aesthetic, truth for Adorno, like Kierkegaard before him, is not observable so much in synthesis as through the tense holding of opposites. It is in this tension wherein resides Adorno's deepest revelation of truth. Together with Max Horkheimer in their landmark collaboration *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) Adorno offers in passing a proof of the existence of God: "The denial of God contains an irremediable contradiction: it negates knowledge itself."<sup>25</sup>

There has been a wide berth for what might be said to constitute Marxist culture criticism since Marx himself never wrote culture criticism as such; he only made "one singularly fruitful distinction...that between mental and manual labour."<sup>26</sup> Precisely what the effect of the degradation of music is on intellectual life is not something that one can readily identify through the use of empirical evidence. Yet the significance of this equation to Adorno's critique can hardly be stressed enough inasmuch as the theme that underwrites the entirety of Adorno's writings on music is that music is a structure of cognition, the erosion of which signifies the erosion of the intellect and the dissolution of civilization into barbarism. Moreover, it does not require a huge conceptual leap to recognize that an infantile culture gives rise to an infantile consciousness:

<sup>24</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jeppcott (London: NLB, 1974) 247.

<sup>25</sup> T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) 115.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1987) 186.

There is actually a neurotic mechanism of stupidity in listening...the arrogantly ignorant rejection of everything unfamiliar is its sure sign. Regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice they demand the one dish they have already been served.<sup>27</sup>

As if musical consciousness had not been defiled enough, since Adorno's demise we have witnessed the emergence of the music video. Even at its worst, music had always appealed to the tendency of the individual imagination toward abstraction, music itself being the most organically abstract of all artistic media. With the music video the "listening viewer" or "retarded listener" receives a constant barrage of visual commands as to precisely what to think or imagine about what he hears by a steady, rapid-fire succession of images that tend to accompany each sound. Betraying their superficial function of enriching musical experience, music videos are the simultaneous splitting of cognition between image and sound; they are every bit advertisements for idiocy as they are commercials for musical commodities and those who seem to provide them. For every chord, every note, every beat, there is an accompanying image. Rarely do these images bear any rational relationship to what can be heard. Rather, in Adorno's sense, they are fetishized sounds: the vocal or instrumental histrionics of performing stars, commodities from fast cars to the latest fashions in clothing, hairstyles and dance steps, isolated and overexposed body parts, and the totemic display of an invention that must have traumatized Adorno, the electric guitar. His observation that "Music...in America today serves as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be

<sup>27</sup> T.W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993) 44-45.

able to hear music"<sup>28</sup> now rings more true than ever. Leppert amplifies these observations as follows:

Day after day what's emphasized in [the MTV audience's] assessments of particular hits is not the music but the sexiness of the musicians in the video image. Of course, such commentary does not indicate that no one is listening; but it does make clear that musical discourse as such hardly exists as a valorized practice. Discourse has been transferred instead onto musicians bodies, or body parts—ritualistically described as “hot”—in lieu of discursive language with which to discuss the music itself. Adorno's point here is to undercut Benjamin's claim as to the demystifying effect of mass art. Adorno insists that no such disenchantment occurs, that nothing survives in it more steadfastly than the illusion, nothing is more illusory than its reality.<sup>29</sup>

More than any other particular cultural manifestation, contemporary popular music exists as the primary form of what Adorno would later call pseudo-culture, “the omnipresence of alienated spirit.”<sup>30</sup> According to Adorno, pseudo-culture utterly permeates contemporary social relations, “Everything in it is caught in the web of socialization.”<sup>31</sup> Apparently because of the dominance of pseudo-culture in social relations, pseudo-culture also dominates consciousness: “Despite all enlightenment and the spread of information, indeed with their help, pseudo-culture has become the dominant form of contemporary consciousness; this what demands a more comprehensive theory.”<sup>32</sup> At this juncture that “which demands a more comprehensive theory,” the relationship between pseudo-culture and consciousness, can be perceived as an inconsistency in Adorno's theoretical work when examined in light of one of his

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Leppert, “Commentary,” *Essays on Music*, T.W. Adorno (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) 248.

<sup>30</sup> T.W. Adorno, “Theory of Pseudo-Culture,” *Telos* (trans. Deborah Cook) Spring 1993: 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

previous essays. In "The Sociology of Knowledge and its Consciousness" (1978) Adorno rebuffs the notion of socialization as a determinant factor in the formation of consciousness. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* editors Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhart preface that essay with the observation that "the sociology of knowledge failed to solve its central problem of specifying the nexus between social and cognitive structures."<sup>33</sup> It is primarily with respect to this theme that Adorno condemns the work of sociologist Karl Mannheim, asserting that Mannheim collapses consciousness into class structure, "the notion of the proletariat is formalized; it appears as a mere structure of consciousness, as with the upper bourgeoisie."<sup>34</sup> Whereas in "The Sociology of Knowledge and its Consciousness" he faults Mannheim for positing a false continuum between consciousness and social structures, in his "Theory of Pseudo Culture" Adorno appears to take the existence of an emphatic nexus between social structures and consciousness as a given. Presumably pseudo-culture, which "does not precede culture, but rather follows it,"<sup>35</sup> synthesizes with socialization to form the nexus between socialization and consciousness. And in this instance one can only presume this because while the problem of defining a nexus between pseudo-culture and consciousness as well as between social groups and consciousness remains constant, Adorno does not appear to hold pseudo or mass culture to the same strict Kantian standard of an immanent separation between mind and external reality that underscores his arguments concerning the relationship between social groups and consciousness.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1987) 452.

<sup>34</sup> T.W. Adorno, "The Sociology of Knowledge and Its Consciousness", *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1987) 457.

<sup>35</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Theory of Pseudo-Culture," *Telos* (trans. Deborah Cook) Spring 1993: 16.

Elsewhere Adorno seems to recognize this problem when he states "No causal nexus at all can properly be worked out between isolated 'impressions' of the hit song and its psychological effects on the listener."<sup>36</sup> The other agency in this process is culture itself, "...culture has a dual character: it refers to society and it mediates between society and pseudo-culture."<sup>37</sup> Yet this only hints at an expanded definition of culture; it does not address the problem of identifying or characterizing a nexus between either culture and consciousness or pseudo-culture and consciousness. Professor Jerry Zaslove has identified this situation as the Hegelian problem of mediation of spirit (mind) and the bad infinity of culture as the determinate of all historical culture.<sup>38</sup>

Given the ubiquity of pop and rock music today the question might well be asked if anyone is any longer even capable of hearing music as Adorno did, as having a totally authentic, non-reified relationship to music, at least insofar as the dominant modes of present day musical reception are concerned. While it is beyond the range of this discussion—and even the full range of Adorno's writings on the subject—to claim the existence of a clearly identifiable nexus between intellectual life and what Adorno might have considered legitimate music appreciation, or the lack of such appreciation, there is clearly a strong metaphorical relationship between the plight of music in the twentieth century and the plight of at least one kind of intellectual. It is also worth mentioning for the sake of responding to Adorno's detractors that his account of the degradation of music is not, strictly speaking, something akin to a paranoid leftist confabulation wherein the social situation of music is one entirely perpetrated by the architects of the culture

<sup>36</sup> T.W. Adorno, "On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening", reprinted in *The Culture Industry*, (London, Routledge, 1993) p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Theory of Pseudo-Culture," *Telos* (trans. Deborah Cook) Spring 1993: 16.

<sup>38</sup> Professor Zaslove shared this insight with me during a discussion earlier this millennium.

industry on an unsuspecting public. Rather, Adorno regarded the mass audience as being every bit as culpable as the culture industry for the decline of musical quality and, correspondingly, the decline of both genuine individualism and culture at large. That which is most crucial to Adorno's critique in terms of validating his claims concerning the role of the culture industry in determining the disposition of consciousness remains undefined. Music, however, is undoubtedly a central factor. While there may be significant credibility to the idea that in certain instances Adorno's vehement hatred of mass culture supersedes his dialectical rigor, there is much to be gained by the study of his ideas insofar as they may inspire in us an uncompromisingly critical attitude toward mass culture. Perhaps ultimately Adorno the sociologist cannot be brought into full agreement with Adorno the culture critic. He may have been aware of this inconsistency:

Near the end of his life Adorno drafted a memoir of his American experience. Writing about the Radio Project, he noted that he regarded his own endeavor to be at once philosophical and sociological, a reflection of the fact that throughout his career he "never rigorously separated the two disciplines"; he further indicated that "I considered it to be my fitting and objectively proffered assignment to *interpret* phenomena—not to ascertain, sift and classify facts and make them available as information."<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, what remains as being quite possibly the most compelling feature of his writing, as well as most instructive, is his passion. It is from this perspective that we may look beyond Adorno the disenchanted utopian to behold him as someone who might just have been motivated by something as simple as faith. The extent to which Adorno accomplished what he regarded as his duty as an intellectual persists as a subject of significant controversy, whether or not he did effectively 'promote

<sup>39</sup> Richard Leppert, "Commentary", *Essays on Music*, T.W. Adorno (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) 215.

development of the masses'. Yet his work continues to function as a prism through which he continues 'to help society by explaining it'.



## CHAPTER 2: Intellectuals on Intellectuals and Other Curiosities

Thus far my analysis has been chiefly concerned with those factors in mass culture Adorno addresses that mitigate against intellectual activity. Having affirmed much of his approach, I would now like to narrow the discussion to focus on what a few particular writers have had to say on the subject of intellectual life in our time. For the sake of both brevity and clarity I will limit my assessment to those works which I have found to be the most accessible to the subject at hand: the work of Russell Jacoby, from *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (1975)<sup>1</sup> to *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) to *Picture Imperfect: Utopian thought for an anti-utopian age* (2005), Andrew Ross's *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular culture* (1989), Noam Chomsky's essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" (1966) as well as an interview with Chomsky conducted by James Peck in 1987 and Richard A. Posner's *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2003). These writers do not exhaust the subject but they do provide a sample of liberal, anarchist and conservative perspectives on the subject matter under consideration. These writers differ substantially from one another both ideologically and in terms of what they appear to define as the role of the intellectual in a liberal democratic society.

<sup>1</sup> Due to restrictions of time and space Jacoby's book on a similar subject, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis, Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians* has not been included in this discussion.

## Russell Jacoby and the Decline of Just about Everything

Underscoring Jacoby's books in their entirety is a sense of loss and a lamentation of a radical intelligentsia in America. As far back as 1975 with the publication of *Social Amnesia*, Jacoby was establishing himself as an astute, acutely polemical historian and author. *Social Amnesia* is a critical investigation into what Jacoby terms the repression of psychoanalysis. Jacoby defines social amnesia as "memory driven out of mind by the social and economic dynamic of this society."<sup>2</sup> Fundamental to social amnesia is the Marxist concept of reification. Jacoby posits the crux of the relationship between reification and social amnesia as "...the psychological dimension: amnesia—a forgetting and repression of the human and social activity that makes and can remake society."<sup>3</sup> In this brief excerpt we can see that already as early as 1975, Jacoby was grieving over what he perceived as the loss of utopian potential, 'that [which] makes and can remake society'. The alternative, what we are left with and struggle against, is a social and psychological condition wherein:

The last preserves of the autonomous individual are under siege...the subjectivity that surfaces everywhere, be it in the form of human relations, peak experiences, and so on, is a response to its demise; because the individual is being administered out of existence—and with it individual experience and emotions—it takes more effort than ever to keep the last fragments alive...<sup>4</sup>

For the Russell Jacoby of 1975 the last bastion of defence against this debilitating encroachment on authentic individualism is Critical Theory: "...Critical theory as critique and negative psychoanalysis resists social amnesia and the conformist

<sup>2</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia, a Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975) 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

ideologies; it is loyal both to an objective notion of truth and to a past which the present still suffers.”<sup>5</sup> Jacoby contends that those who came in Freud’s wake undermined Freud’s legacy, that they were responsible for the repression of psychoanalysis: “Exactly what has been called the contribution of Adler and the neo-Freudians, the discovery of the self or personality, is the loss of the critique of the individual.”<sup>6</sup> As if anticipating his later pontifications on vanishing intellectuals, Jacoby says of ‘the modern individual’ that “[he] is in the process of disintegration. To forget this is to abet the process not aid the resistance.”<sup>7</sup> By the time of the writing of *The Last Intellectuals* some twelve years later Jacoby himself seemed to forget societal regression and the post-Freudians as precipitating factors in the disappearance of public intellectuals, those who addressed their work to an educated but non-academic public.

However, *Social Amnesia* characterizes tendencies that could not help but exacerbate such a situation:

The facility with which [the post-Freudians] present barren comments as wisdom cannot be explained by personal defects; rather it is derived from the movement of society that is squeezing out of existence autonomous mind and thought. What is happening is not only the decline of thought but its repression.<sup>8</sup>

To chart Jacoby’s progress as an author is, largely, to observe a repertoire of salvage operations, from the salvaging of Western Marxism, *Dialectic of Defeat* (1981) to liberal education, *Dogmatic Wisdom* (1994) to utopian thought, *The End of Utopia* (1999) and

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

*Picture Imperfect* (2005). Comparably, *Social Amnesia* is concerned with salvaging an objective critique of subjectivity:

...it has been Freud and his followers who, in their stubborn pursuit of the genesis and structure of the individual psyche have testified to the power of society in and over the individual. This is the authentic dialectic of psychoanalysis; apparently the opposite of the universal (society), psychoanalysis rediscovers society in the individual monad. The critical edge of psychoanalysis is rooted in this dialectic: it pierces the sham of the isolated individual with the secret of its socio-sexual-biological substratum.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Jacoby manages to avoid being all doom and gloom in *Social Amnesia*. In addition to the defences made possible by Critical Theory, the besieged individual can take refuge in monogamous erotic love as a bulwark against atomization:

The relation of two individuals, of loved and lover, belongs to the core of human freedom. The positive content of this is unclear, as it must be till the liberated society has arrived. Yet from Marx through Freud to the Surrealists to the Frankfurt School, unique and individual love and relationships have been seen as elements of freedom, the rejection of a repressive civilization.<sup>10</sup>

Further, Jacoby manages to conclude *Social Amnesia* on a note of cautious optimism. It is much to his credit that despite the dire conditions this book outlines, Jacoby can still find grounds for hope and chart a course for the future:

A critical psychology must not succumb...[to a mad society]; it must not forget the madness of the whole and ideologically flaunt the virtues of a human existence that is today inhuman. It must aid the victims—the lost, the beaten, the hopeless—without glorifying them. Shortly before the apparatus of Law and Order unleashed its bullets on the inmates and guards at Attica State Prison a prisoner was reported as saying: we are the only civilized men here. A psychology that is neither the cynical tool of

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 114.

adjustment nor the sincere but vacuous exponent of growth and sensitivity must reflect on that statement.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, Jacoby concludes *Social Amnesia* on a prescriptive note insofar as the form of psychology needed to heal the fractured, atomized self adheres more closely to an Adornonian line of reasoning, one not utterly hemmed in by an airtight pessimism but also mindful of the concept of 'truth content' in Adorno's sense of the term, 'a work's content of hope'.<sup>12</sup>

With *Dialectic of Defeat, Contours of Western Marxism*, however, despite being an impressively well-researched work, the 'content of hope' is decidedly more strained. Of course such a reading is largely influenced by the fall of Soviet Marxism. Still, in his support for the political underdogs of history, Jacoby manages to furnish highly informative and compelling reading. His aim here is an ambitious one: "This book challenges the ethos of success that has drained off the critical impulse of Marxism; it seeks to salvage a Western Marxism that rarely knew victory."<sup>13</sup> *Dialectic of Defeat* presents a concise history of the internal struggles between Hegelian Marxists and their purportedly more orthodox counterparts, between party bureaucracy and the more radical 'left' communism, the debate over the extent to which the late work of Engels was faithful to Marx, Rosa Luxemburg's disdain for Lenin's 'factory model' of the socialist state, and more. At the time he wrote *Dialectic of Defeat*, Jacoby's stance appears to have been that of an anarcho-Marxist. Despite a pragmatist's foundation he can still

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 151.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Foreward," *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, T.W. Adorno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) xxi.

<sup>13</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat, Contours of Western Marxism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 13.

make a strong case for the value of dialectical reasoning: "The threat of atomic destruction, the waste of resources, mental impoverishment, and brute force define the universe of discourse and action; in this universe, dialectical thought is critical and subversive."<sup>14</sup>

Jacoby doesn't blame Western Marxism for dropping the ball. Instead he points out that Western Marxism was forced to go underground because of fascism, Stalinism, World War Two and the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> He defends Adorno and other leftist intellectuals for the low profiles they kept respective to advancing revolutionary interests thusly:

Late in [Georg] Lukacs long career he denounced Adorno and other Marxist intellectuals for their pessimism and distance from revolutionary organizations. He charged that they preferred to remain in what he called the "Grand Hotel Abyss", a beautiful hotel where one could contemplate the void in first-class comfort. The designation has enjoyed a certain vogue. It inferred that Marxist intellectuals without a party of the proletariat lacked verve and commitment.

If Lukacs is allowed this denunciation, others who enthusiastically repeat it should not forget the few choices and options of the time. The risks were not only of falling in the front lines but of liquidation in the back rooms...If the Hotel Abyss can symbolize Western Marxism in the 1930s and 1940s, the Hotel Lux can symbolize Soviet Marxism. Unlike the Hotel Abyss, the Lux was not a metaphor but a hotel housing foreign Communists who resided in Moscow. A detailed guidebook might mention that the Lux offered a special service: Visitors were often spared the annoyance of checking out. Many foreign Communists were arrested in their rooms in the Lux.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Jacoby never shies away from taking sides on the issues he raises and a broad overview of his work reveals that, revolution aside, he remains consistent in his loyalties.

However, after having read a half dozen of his books one might wonder at his rhetorical

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 115: "Stalinism as a world phenomenon, the onset of fascism, World War II, and the Cold War more than sufficed to frighten into silence unorthodox Marxists."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 115-16.

strategy. It seems ill-befitting to someone coming out of an anarcho-Marxist tradition to be so conservative as to very rarely champion the work of anyone who isn't dead yet.

Generating significant controversy soon after its initial publication, Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* commences with the claim that an entire generation of intellectuals is missing. Jacoby argues that there appears to be no successors to those "public intellectuals, writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience,"<sup>17</sup> writers and thinkers who most notably made their presence felt in the 1940s and 1950s: "An intellectual generation has not suddenly vanished: it simply never appeared. And it is already too late—the generation is too old—to show up."<sup>18</sup> The net result of this absence is the impoverishment of the overall culture: "... more is at stake than an interesting observation; the issue is the vitality of a public culture."<sup>19</sup> Yet Jacoby avoids considering the extent to which the culture industry can be blamed for the deterioration of intellectual life: "The impact of network television or national newsweeklies on cultural life can scarcely be underestimated; but it is not the whole story. The restructuring of cities, the passing of bohemia, the expansion of the university: these also inform culture. They are my subjects."<sup>20</sup> In fact, Jacoby credits the expansion of universities for this decline to so great a degree that "Younger intellectuals no longer need or want a larger public; they are almost exclusively professors."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, intellectuals have lost their grasp of the vernacular: "As intellectuals became academics, they had no need to write in a

<sup>17</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

public prose; they did not, and finally they could not."<sup>22</sup> Economically, Jacoby attributes the disappearance of public intellectuals to "the increasing substitution of corporate employment for independent businessmen, workers and craftsmen; and the post-World War II 'explosion' of higher education."<sup>23</sup> He asserts that these factors altered the position of intellectuals from one of independence to one of dependency. Jacoby contrasts what he deems the turgid and often unreadable prose of newer generations of intellectuals against the accomplishments of those earlier intellectuals whose lives and work he lionizes—men like Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) Dwight MacDonald (1906-1982) and Edmund Wilson (1895-1972):

[They] represent classical American intellectuals; they lived their lives by way of books, reviews and journalism; they never or rarely taught in universities. They were superb essayists and graceful writers, easily writing for a larger public. They were also something more: iconoclasts, critics, polemicists, who deferred to no one.<sup>24</sup>

Subsidiary to Jacoby's concept of 'missing intellectuals' is his characterization of the 'cultural space' as 'shrinking'<sup>25</sup> and the analogy he draws between the western frontier and the cultural frontier. Jacoby maintains that he is not being strictly figurative when he states that "The dwindling space is not only a metaphor; it denotes the loss of living areas, the renovation of urban bohemia into exclusive quarters of boutiques and townhouses."<sup>26</sup> While Jacoby might not be a full-fledged postmodernist, the trend toward the making literal of metaphors and the end of a history, even the history of public intellectuals, are decidedly postmodern conceptual tendencies. Further augmenting

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp. 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 20.



Jacoby's claim that public intellectuals have 'disappeared' is his notion that the prerequisite space for thriving intellectual communities has also vanished: "Cheap and pleasant urban space that might nourish a bohemian intelligentsia belongs to the past. The eclipse of these urban living areas completes the eclipse of the cultural space."<sup>27</sup> Jacoby speculates that there is a strong, albeit ineffable connection between the existence of urban bohemia and the well-being of intellectual life. Jacoby points out those factors that precipitated 'the decline of bohemia' (the growth of universities, gentrification, the expansion of superhighways and suburbia) and goes on to suggest who now commands the attention previously accorded to public intellectuals:

The larger vision suggests that the years following World War II marked a swing period between two intellectual types: independents and bohemians receded before academics and professionals. Of course, intellectuals did not suddenly abandon their apartments and garrets for suburban homes and office complexes, but the accelerating trend in the 1950s left few untouched. By the end of that decade intellectuals and university professors had become virtually synonymous; academics even filled the pages of small magazines, once outposts beyond the campus. *Partisan Review* itself, the symbol of irreverent New York intellectuals, finally passed into university hands, its editors largely English professors.<sup>28</sup>

Jacoby concedes that the decline of bohemia may be yet another factor in the stultification of society: "The decline of bohemia may entail not simply the decline of urban intellectuals and their audience, but of urban intelligence as well."<sup>29</sup> As I will examine in the third chapter of this thesis, television has been a significant player in both precipitating and absorbing this 'lost intelligence'. Tracing the phenomenon of the beat generation through the 1950s and into the 1960s, Jacoby observes that "The beats ...

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 73-74.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

are the last bohemians, and the first of the sixties counterculturalists."<sup>30</sup> The beats were also the agency by which bohemia could be seen dissipating into suburbia: "they...anticipated the de-urbanization of America, the abandonment of cities for smaller centers, suburbs, campus towns, and outlying areas."<sup>31</sup> While Jacoby cites other intellectuals who regarded the beats as the embodiment of anti-intellectual impulses,<sup>32</sup> he does not appear willing to take sides on the issue, only going so far as to note in concluding his assessment of that period of American history that "[i]n the period of urban sprawl, the beats were the last bohemians."<sup>33</sup> Absent is any mention of the vibrant 1950s bohemia of Provincetown, Cape Cod, a well-established colony for writers, artists and actors like Tennessee Williams, Marlon Brando and Jackson Pollock. And although he chronicles it at length, Jacoby refuses to grant 1960s counterculture legitimate bohemian status, if only because it had "entered the mainstream":

Eventually bohemia, commercialized and popularized, surrendered everything but a few monuments in New York and San Francisco. By the 1960s intellectuals no longer responded to its pull; they no longer had to, since bohemia, renamed the counter-culture, had entered the mainstream. Moreover, the very fabric, the urban texture that sustained bohemia, had by the late 1950s unraveled, Bohemia had lost its urban home and identity. For the generations born in the 1940s and after, bohemia ceased to be either an identity or a place.<sup>34</sup>

Without appearing to take sides on the issue, Jacoby discusses the perception of intellectuals as a distinct class in society: "Where once there was talk of intellectuals as critics and bohemians, now there is talk of intellectuals as a sociological class. The shift

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. pp. 39-40.

in idiom illuminates the shift in lives.”<sup>35</sup> While quick to point out that this perception of intellectuals as a distinct class is hardly new, tracing this perception of intellectuals back through the Dreyfussards of the 1890s as well as the Russian intelligentsia of the 1860s, Jacoby asserts that the galvanization of this perception marks the transformation of the intellectual from one of independent thinker to class-bound dependent: “intellectuals live less as independent writers or poets and more as professional groups, interest coalitions, perhaps classes.”<sup>36</sup> These opinions, falling hard upon a discussion of the elevated status intellectuals, suggest that Jacoby’s analysis is predicated on the axiom of sacrifice; in order to enjoy greater social and economic status as well as crystallize as a distinct class, intellectuals found it necessary to surrender their independence. Seen in this context, Jacoby articulates the fate of intellectuals in the latter half of the twentieth century in terms evocative of a kind of Faustian pact. Latter day intellectuals have remained “invisible” precisely because they no longer possess identities to be made known.

This reading of *The Last Intellectuals* is further reinforced by Jacoby’s all-too-fleeting mention of the change in the prominent cultural tropes of the intellectual:

Not only the issue of intellectuals as a class signals the times; almost everywhere the iconography of the professor has been redesigned. Through the 1950s the professor appeared in American fiction as a harmless misfit wandering through society; he was Professor Prnin of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin* (1957), literally lost en route to a Friday lecture; or he was Professor Muleahy of Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe* (1952) whose car—“the roof leaked; the front window was missing; the windshield wiper was broken”—reflected his life.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 109.

Jacoby notes the obsolescence of this trope:

Perhaps these characters still exist but they have become too rare for fiction to employ, even to lampoon. Contemporary fiction needs material that smacks of the times. To cast a professor as scatter-brained pedant would damn a book as a quaint period piece; rather an absurd erotic or professional ambition imbues the current professor.<sup>38</sup>

Jacoby goes on to flesh out the bones of this observation by quoting a review of David Lodge's *Small World*, a recent satiric academic novel.

Today...the figure of the absent minded professor has been replaced by a pack of smoothies...Instead of retiring from the world of events, the new comic professor has the world too much with him. He craves big money, drives sporty cars, covets endowed chairs, and hops from conference to conference in pursuit of love, luxury and fame.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Jacoby fails to notice is the extent to which this latter depiction resonates with a Faustian archetype. Instead of elaborating on this observation, Jacoby allows it to stand on its own. Moreover, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that professors are any more motivated by the "pursuit of love, luxury and fame" than those in most any other occupation. Most importantly, what both new and old stereotypes cannot account for—and something that Jacoby avoids discussing—is that what defines intellectuals as intellectuals, academic or otherwise, is the simple fact that *ideas* are the irreducible coin of their realm, regardless of however much their particular occupations might be adulterated by worldly desires. As with his insistence on an ineffable but undeniable relationship between a thriving bohemia and a healthy environment for public intellectuals, what governs Jacoby's take on the emergence of intellectuals as a professional class is a capitalist primitivism that is grounded in the laws of equivalence

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, Review of David Lodge's *Small World*, *New Republic* 15 April 1985: 30, quoted by Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 110.

and exchange. While he provides the superficial appearance of examining the complexities of discrete, organic factors in the formation of these social constellations, something he achieves primarily through the inclusion of mini-biographies, the undercurrents that inform Jacoby's sense of history posit a geographically specific bohemia as *the price* of a conducive climate for public intellectuals and vice-versa; the loss of an individualized public identity and a non-academic audience is *the price* of elevated status and social cohesion among academics. Nor does Jacoby seem concerned with the intensification of resentment that colours the newer representations of the intellectual/professor. Examining this resentment could go a long way toward explaining why academia is not simply, as Jacoby might have it, a form of containing public intellectual life, but also of protecting it. Perhaps this is the great paradox of universities, that they simultaneously nurture and isolate the individual intellect.

Jacoby states that the "last intellectuals," those who never or rarely taught at universities, born in the first decades of the twentieth century "possessed a voice and presence that younger intellectuals have failed to appropriate."<sup>40</sup> One reason for the failure of such an appropriation, possibly something that Jacoby might have done well to have examined further, is that "A reading public may be no more. If younger intellectuals are absent, a missing audience may explain why."<sup>41</sup> It is entirely possible that more contemporary audiences tend to resist serious intellectual engagement. The dominant trends in the pervasive cultural vehicles of television, radio, popular music and the persistence of kitsch all anathematize genuine critical reflection. Of the intellectuals of the 1950s Jacoby points out:

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. ix.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

...on a single but absolutely critical quality, the fifties intellectuals far surpassed their successors: they mastered a public prose. Not only Lionel Trilling (1905-75) Paul Goodman (1911-72), and John Kenneth Galbraith (1908- ), but Irving Kristol (1920- ) and William F. Buckley, Jr. (1925- ) loom large because of their public idiom. Fifties intellectuals were *publicists*: they wrote to and for the educated public. The following generation surrendered the vernacular, sacrificing a public identity.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, today being an intellectual seems one of the least likely ways of establishing a public identity. It seems questionable, however, as to the extent to which the blame for the loss of the vernacular ought to be placed exclusively at the feet of academia:

Academic intellectuals did not cherish direct or elegant writing; they did not disdain it but it hardly mattered. Most scholarly literature included summaries of the argument or findings; the fact of publication far outweighed any quibble over style. These imperatives increasingly determined how professors both read and wrote; they cared for substance, not form. Academic writing developed into unreadable communiqués sweetened by thanks to colleagues and superiors. Of course, crabbed academic writings is [sic] not new; again, the extent, not the novelty, is the issue.<sup>43</sup>

In all fairness to academia and academic intellectuals it ought to be noted that other factors have played a significant role in usurping the vernacular. Yes, intellectuals lost their grasp of the vernacular but the vernacular was being transformed by forces beyond their control. The culture industry has been a major participant in the advancement of this mass scale regression. If we can consider language a medium, it seems fair comment to suggest that there is no legitimate emancipation to be found in the normalization of obscenity, something that in truth signifies the failure of language and engenders among those who embrace it a failure to communicate; this is symptomatic of

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 16.

the powerlessness that the culture industry endeavours to impress upon its audience: "According to (Oskar) Negt and (Alexander) Kluge, the modern culture industry robs individuals of 'languages' for interpreting self and world by denying them the media for organizing their own experiences."<sup>44</sup> This development is a harkening back to Jacoby's comments about the beleaguered state of the individual in *Social Amnesia*. Perhaps even more devastating to the vernacular has been the influence of more direct economic forces:

If the "pressure of capitalistic language" were paranoid, systematic, argumentative, articulated", which [Roland] Barthes denies, then one could argue against this pressure concretely and with a language that posits new meaning. Capitalistic language is, however, "an implacable stickiness, a *doxa*, a kind of unconscious: in short, the essence of ideology."<sup>45</sup>

If we are to give the preceding statement credence it would follow that Jacoby's attacks on academia for undermining clear and graceful prose is something of an overstatement. The loss of the vernacular by intellectuals has not been accomplished primarily through colleges and universities; rather, it has been, at least for the time being, a logical outcome of market functions. The concept of the university as a haven of sorts for intellectual life is one that is readily undermined by the constraints placed upon intellectual freedom, what Jacoby refers to as "professionalization": "What is most often obscure in the history of academic freedom is its almost inverse relationship to professionalization....When academic freedom succumbs to professionalization, it becomes purely academic."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreward," *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Peter Bürger (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1984) xxviii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. xxx.

<sup>46</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 130.

Jacoby goes on to cite numerous examples of intellectuals who were either ostracized by their university employers or failed to receive promotions or tenure for the simple transgression of writing for a broader public audience. Although he does not give it his overt endorsement, Jacoby seems to be in basic agreement with Thorstein Veblen's opinion that "American universities continued to encourage publications largely for the sake of institutional prestige, reward mediocrity as often as merit, and exert enormous pressure on dissident faculty to conform."<sup>47</sup> The dominant influence on Jacoby's characterization of the university is that of an institution that possesses the capacity to absorb or otherwise neutralize every dissenting faction that has sought to find a place in it, despite however left-leaning or radical it might be:

What happened to the swarms of academic leftists? The answer is surprising: Nothing surprising. The ordinary realities of bureaucratization and employment took over. The New Left that stayed on the campus proved industrious and well-behaved. Often without missing a beat, they moved from being undergraduates and graduate students to junior faculty positions and tenured appointments<sup>48</sup>

Once again, Jacoby raises the spectre of a generation of intellectuals of dubious integrity: "A conservative who wandered into the American Philosophical Association convention was pleasantly surprised: radicals had made hardly any impression."<sup>49</sup> Advancing the idea of colleges and universities as places for the containment of intellectual life, Jacoby asserts that embracing a more academic style of writing meant the surrender of the vernacular by New Left intellectuals, thereby further estranging them from writing for a broader public audience:

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 139.



The extent of [New Left] literature, the outpouring of left academics, is extraordinary, without precedent in American letters. In several areas the accomplishments of New Left intellectuals are irrevocable. Yet it is also extraordinary for another reason; it is largely technical, unreadable and—except by specialists—unread...While New Left intellectuals obtain secure positions in central institutions, the deepest irony marks their achievement. Their work looks more and more like the work it sought to subvert. A great surprise of the last twenty-five years [up to 1987] is both the appearance of New Left professors and their virtual disappearance. In the end it was not the New Left intellectuals who invaded the universities but the reverse: the academic idiom, concepts, and concerns occupied and finally preoccupied young intellectuals.<sup>50</sup>

Strengthening Jacoby's argument is his observation that the headlong slide of the work of intellectuals into mediocrity is further accelerated by university departments that favour social connections above the merits of individual intellectual achievement:

...interpersonal skill and charm outweighed scholarship, even intelligence,...where one went to school and whom one knows, not what one does, are critical...There are no guarantees of automatic awards; yet an examination of academic careers indicates a decisive tilt toward the well-connected.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, the social environment of the university adversely affects the quality of intellectual work that is performed. But is the experience of that environment now something that a young man or woman can entirely forgo and still maintain realistic intellectual aspirations? As things now stand, people may well take it for granted that the university is the normative setting for the intellectual, that either is inconceivable without the other. Jacoby's analysis points to the fallacy of the academic as a professional intellectual and makes note of the cost at which this professional identity has been exacted, particularly among the left: "professionalization leads to privatization or depoliticization, a withdrawal of intellectual identity from a larger domain to a narrower

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 141.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 145.

discipline. Leftists who entered the university hardly invented this process, but they accepted, and even accelerated it."<sup>52</sup>

While the majority of those intellectuals Jacoby appears to take seriously suggests a fundamentally liberal outlook, overtly he maintains that New Left intellectuals were entirely complicit in their absorption by academia:

...if left intellectuals have succumbed to the imperatives that herded them into the universities, they are not innocent victims. Left intellectuals did not naively or unwillingly accept the academic regimen; they also embraced the university themselves. The critique of academicization by a university left is curiously muted—softer than a conservative critique.<sup>53</sup>

Magically enough, Jacoby manages to distinguish between this 'embracing of the university' and a characterization of New Left and radical intellectuals as having 'sold out' their principles. Perhaps if only to avoid a clichéd understanding that he otherwise indicates Jacoby states:

...the migration of left intellectuals into the university... was hardly a question of "selling out". Rather, radical intellectuals were not inherent opponents of institutional power, and when the possibility emerged to enter, perhaps to utilize, these institutions, they did so. If quick to record violations to academia, and sometimes racial and sexual, freedoms, they typically proved oblivious to the costs of institutionalization.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, Jacoby seems quite willing to accredit these intellectuals with every cerebral faculty short of self-awareness. It remains unclear whether the conflict between insisting that 'left intellectuals are not innocent victims' and yet were 'oblivious to the costs of institutionalization' is a subtle paradox or an outright contradiction. In either case, Jacoby maintains that the process continues to this day: "The influx of left scholars

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 182.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 184.

has not changed the picture; reluctantly or enthusiastically they gain respectability at the cost of identity."<sup>55</sup> In this instance the Faustian constituent of Jacoby's argument appears self-evident. What Jacoby's statements in this regard point to is how the deinstitutionalization of the avant-garde and the disappearance of the socialist left into 'texts' lead to a knowledge formation that becomes the basis of university identity at all costs.

Jacoby gives a nod of recognition to the idea that the authority rank and role of public intellectuals has, in part, been usurped by journalists when he observes that

Apart from the academics, the work situation of only one other group requires public writing: journalists. Outside the university and partly against it, journalists keep alive a tradition of writing on public issues in a public language...Increasingly, journalists have sustained—more in their books than in their daily writing—the general culture; society has responded, almost in gratitude, by mythologizing them. As academic life and writing have grown wan, journalism has expanded, appearing bigger than life: vigorous, committed, public. Journalists have been romanticized in countless movies from *All the President's Men* to *The Killing Fields* and *Under Fire*. Journalists search for truth, for which they risk their lives or careers; they are unswervingly devoted to a public. They are everything professors are not.<sup>56</sup>

Of course, in this case, Jacoby is referring to the idealization of journalists, an idealization he is quick to debunk:

The reality is somewhat different. "Journalists is a catch-all term; it includes those working in television and radio and those in the "print" media, which further subdivide into staff (full time) writers and part-timers or free-lancers. Television journalists of the major networks and opinion shows constitute their own breed; few in number, they command high salaries and sometimes much attention. Like everything about television, the sins (and virtues) of its journalists spread across the land."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 190.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

For all the well-supported arguments that Jacoby presents, the extent to which the depletion of 'intellectual energy' from the public sphere makes its effect on the general culture—his initial thesis—is something that receives little more elaboration than his conclusion that “literary theory expands as literature dwindles. The theory of fetishism, which Marx set forth, turns into its opposite, the fetishism of theory.”<sup>58</sup> In *The Last Intellectuals* Jacoby’s proclivity toward concepts such as intellectual energy, visibility and invisibility, disappearance and presence—as in the case of the presence of earlier intellectuals like Dwight MacDonald and C. Wright Mills, all point to the fact that Jacoby supports belief in an ineffable, essentially mystifying relationship between intellectuals and culture.

### **How Much is that Dogma in the Window?**

In *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America* (1994) the follow-up book to *The Last Intellectuals*, Jacoby narrows the scope of his analysis to focus on what he deems to be the crisis facing contemporary higher education in America. Critical of a more pronounced teleology of higher learning toward utilitarianism and professionalization, Jacoby assiduously defends the value of a sound liberal arts education for its own sake and minces no words when it comes to articulating its decline: “To reflect on liberal education today is to consider not only its demise but the reason for its demise, an illiberal society.”<sup>59</sup> Although he does not engage in any particulars regarding mass culture, like Adorno, Jacoby perceives what is quite possibly a global movement toward homogeneity that is essentially cultural:

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>59</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom* (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1994) xviii.

A monochromatic affluence, or desire for it, renders false the claims of vast cultural differences among students, and indeed among the American population. Inasmuch as this encroaches upon complex issues of cultural identity, the proposition is not something that can be dispatched in a paragraph or a book. It is striking, however, that amidst the barrage about diversity on and off campus, few bother—or dare—to argue the reverse: that American society, perhaps the world, is not becoming more diverse, but more uniform. This does not simply mean that in Tokyo, Chicago, Rio, and Prague people buy the same goods and dress the same, which they do; it means that cultural differences are weakening, not intensifying.

Cultural homogeneity coexists with economic stratification, and doesn't lessen it. With its equalitarian garb America has long deceived visitors, and some inhabitants. Both rich and poor wear Levi's, but live in different neighborhoods and attend different colleges. With important exceptions, the curricula of the schools they attend are similar; they testify to a blaring mercantilism that leaves a liberal education pinched and gasping.<sup>60</sup>

With *Dogmatic Wisdom* Jacoby appears to be back-peddalling from the more dire implications of *The Last Intellectuals*, most significantly with respect to the issue of the dissolution of authentic intellectual activity. I suspect that the reason for this is an obvious one. It would seem as though there was no place else he could go other than returning to an expanded critique of higher education. Having established the existence of a cultural vacancy, what was there left for him to say about it? As with *The Last Intellectuals*, aspects of Jacoby's reasoning in *Dogmatic Wisdom* make vague allusions to a kind of metaphysical contingency:

Anyone who challenges the narrow practicality that dominates education will be suspected of elitist or aristocratic pretensions. The risk should be run. For if a liberal education is to regain its vitality, it must recapture its *nonutilitarian dimension*. Thinking, reading, and art require a *cultural space*, a zone free from the angst of moneymaking and practicality.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

Without a certain repose or leisure, a liberal education shrivels.<sup>61</sup> (italics mine)

That for thought, reading and art to flourish should require their partial emancipation from utilitarianism hardly seems contestable. It is Jacoby's diction here, his call for a "cultural space," that harkens back to his characterization of the Beat Generation in *The Last Intellectuals*. While he does not say so in so many words, there exists in this formulation the trace of the idea wherein Jacoby correlates, in part, the disappearance of bohemia with the exhaustion of a type of "cultural space." It is difficult to ascertain Jacoby's precise meaning here other than to suppose that he equates artistic and intellectual freedom with a generalized social freedom that stems from the metaphysical maxim that man is, by definition, free. Here Jacoby may be somewhat out of his element. In his discussion of the art of the Ancient Oriental epoch, for example, Arnold Hauser makes a contrary argument, pointing out that there is no appreciable equivocation between social freedom and either the quantity or quality of aesthetic production:

The compulsion under which the artist has to work in this society [that of the Ancient Oriental epoch] is so relentless that, according to the theories of modern liberal aesthetics, all genuine cultural achievement should have been fundamentally impossible from the outset. And yet some of the most magnificent works of art originated precisely here in the Ancient Orient under the most dire pressure imaginable. They prove that *there is no direct relationship between the personal freedom of the artist and the aesthetic quality of his works*...Even in the most liberal democracy the artist does not move with perfect freedom and unrestraint; even there he is restricted by innumerable considerations foreign to his art. The different measure of freedom may be of the greatest importance to him personally, but in principle there is no difference between the dictates of a despot and the conventions of even the most liberal social order. If force in itself were contrary to the spirit of art, perfect works of art could arise only in a state

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

of complete anarchy. But in reality the presuppositions which the aesthetic quality of a work depends lie beyond the alternative presented by political freedom and compulsion.<sup>62</sup> (*italics mine*)

In faulting Jacoby by citing this passage from Hauser it should be noted that aesthetic production is not necessarily the equivalent of intellectual labour. Rather, aesthetic production exists in an often unbroken continuum with intellectual labour. In citing Hauser I only mean to point out that there is no magic recipe for quality aesthetic production. In *Dogmatic Wisdom* Jacoby surveys the rise of speech codes in post secondary education, as well as the history of problems associated with attempts to define and enact specific university curricula. The scope of his analysis is impressive; he points out that although pluralism as an ideal has persisted, even triumphed:

Today everyone is a pluralist. In principle no one opposes tolerance, diversity and multiculturalism. Heated adversaries challenge its exact dimensions, but not the pluralism framework. The widespread concurrence should stir a suspicion that the words "diversity" and "pluralism" have surrendered all precision. A general agreement rests on a general confusion.<sup>63</sup>

This confusion regarding the meaning of pluralism and diversity might be a logical outgrowth of the ascendancy of relativism. The fear of making value judgements for the sake of safeguarding a pluralistic framework and thereby presumably sparing some people's feelings is one and the same with a framework that permits virtually any rubbish to be passed off as the truth. In the following passage Jacoby acknowledges some of the merits and shortcomings of relativism:

As critics have argued, relativism may be logically inconsistent. How does relativism avoid relativism? The principle that all perceptions and values

<sup>62</sup> Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 1, trans. Arnold Hauser and Stanley Godman (New York: Vintage Books, 1951) 29-30.

<sup>63</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom* (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1994) 144.

are relative is offered as a universal truth, but how does this truth escape the spell of relativism?...Yet a relativism that undermines fixed beliefs is not all bad. Inasmuch as it recognizes diversity, a version of relativism is probably inseparable from civilization, it acknowledges that one's own family town, religion, country, culture do not fill the globe. It admits that other customs and beliefs exist. The process is hardly complex...<sup>64</sup>

In *Dogmatic Wisdom* Jacoby's pronouncements concerning intellectual life in relation to academia seemed to soften somewhat in comparison to those he made in *The Last Intellectuals*. Common sense dictates that if only by virtue of its sheer enormity, Jacoby must concede that higher education still produces lucid, original thinkers, and that the construct of the ivory tower intellectual is, or has become, largely mythical. With *Dogmatic Wisdom* Jacoby seems to have backtracked from the more radical thesis of *The Last Intellectuals*. The notion of the disappearance of the "public intellectual" is undermined, in Jacoby's own words, by the fact that "now colleges and universities reflect and partake of public life and its discontents." That this "partaking" should appear to Jacoby as a novelty only further substantiates the fact that he is unwilling to give the 1960s activism on behalf of colleges and universities their proper due. From reading *Dogmatic Wisdom* one may gather that newer intellectuals are at once lucid, original and weak. Which is it, are they lucid and original or weak? Jacoby's hypothesis that leftist intellectuals have failed to respond adequately to conservative critiques dovetails neatly with his characterization of present day intellectuals as those who never left campus. Yet the real reason for this lack of a vigorous counterattack on behalf of a liberal intelligentsia may be decidedly more simple. As adherents to what has become the dominant sensibility in university faculties, liberal academics are, for the larger part,

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. pp. 126-27.



behaving no differently than proponents of most any other ideology once they have attained power. They appear reluctant to engage in the issues of conservative critiques not because they cannot but because they need not. To do so would also mean giving more credence and more attention to their detractors. Additionally, it is a telling flaw in Jacoby's reasoning *Dogmatic Wisdom* collapses all left-leaning intellectuals into the designation of "professors." This observation might seem petty but it also raises the question of whether or not it's Jacoby who's been spending too much time on campus. Whereas in *The Last Intellectuals* Jacoby appears to be well aware of this collapse as a false equivocation, in *Dogmatic Wisdom* he appears to accept it as a *fait accompli*. By the time of *Dogmatic Wisdom*, to someone unfamiliar with his oeuvre he might be mistaken for a liberal, given his more accepting attitude toward essentially bourgeois issues and willingness to subscribe to the fundamental liberal tenet of liberalism that virtually every idea is worthy of a fair hearing. The sheer breadth of his sources of references bears this out unquestionably. However, as such he may be particularly well-qualified to point out some of the deficiencies of left-leaning intellectuals:

Leftist intellectuals no longer pretend they are peasants or workers or guerrillas. Yet they slide from an old to a new illusion; they are not outsiders heaving dynamite, but insiders cracking codes. They become cheerleaders with a difference. When they laud campus progress, professionalism, and scholarship, they are advancing a radical agenda. They justify an insular academicism in the name of revolution.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 178.

## There's No Place Like Utopia

Jacoby has not adhered strictly to any single definition of the intellectual. To map the trajectory of his sense of what constitutes an intellectual is to follow an evolution of contextual contingencies, one in which the intellectual metamorphoses from critical theorist and defender of the atomized individual to Marxian activist, from those who mastered and often published an insightful, lucid prose to keepers of the utopian flame.

Having concluded *Dogmatic Wisdom*, his wide-ranging critique of higher education as the site of the contemporary intellectual's endgame, perhaps Jacoby felt he had reached an impasse. The solution he arrived at as to where to go next as a writer and historian of intellectual activity was a bold one. With *The End of Utopia, politics and culture in an age of apathy* (1999) Jacoby opted to examine what is arguably the most ambitious intellectual project of all: the nature and philosophy of utopia. For him, the loss of a utopian vision could have been regarded as a substantive footnote to add to those factors that led to the disappearance of the public intellectual and left at that. But utopian thought, Jacoby would go on to contend, was the essential fuel that powered the engines of many of history's greatest intellectual and creative achievements.

At the onset of *The End of Utopia* Jacoby places modest constraints on his topic:

...A utopian spirit—a sense that the future could transcend the present—has vanished...I am using *utopian* in its widest and least threatening meaning: a belief that the future could fundamentally surpass the present. I am referring to the notion that the future texture of life, work and even love might little resemble that now familiar to us. I am alluding to the idea that history contains possibilities of freedom and pleasure hardly tapped...This belief is stone dead.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) XI-XII.

Jacoby's diction suggests a dualism that is prescient with regard to his most recent work which will be discussed a little further on. His familiar pessimism is clearly visible, that he is examining something he claims is now obsolete. Yet at the same time he states that the subject at hand is a matter of *belief*. Also more novel to his approach is a more generous estimation of the 1960s: "...A fairer account might credit the 1960s with ending the war in Vietnam and creating a new awareness of racial and social inequalities."<sup>67</sup> When referring to John Stuart Mill's contribution to utopian thought, Jacoby writes a biographical blurb that might have been culled from the *The Last Intellectuals*:

To put it crudely, page for page, sentence for sentence, Mill's writings delivered a kick that contemporary liberals never match. The new liberals have adopted an idiom that is uplifting without being transcendental, profound without being deep. The emergence of a watery liberalism not simply from a lack of talent or genius. Rather, Mill partook of a socialist world; he was drawn to utopian socialism and wrote sympathetically about socialism.<sup>68</sup>

A bit further on Jacoby restates the theme of his initial utopian tome as follows:

The issue is the decline of a utopian vision that once imbued leftists and liberals. The point is hardly that improved air, enhanced welfare or a broader democracy is bad. The question, rather, is the extent a commitment to reasonable measures supplants a commitment to unreasonable ones—those more subversive and visionary.<sup>69</sup>

Having established his topic, in like manner to his investigation into the causes behind the disappearance of public intellectuals and a liberal education, Jacoby rounds up a few suspects deemed responsible for the decline of utopian thought. He begins with multiculturalism: "The rise of multiculturalism correlates with the decline of utopia, an

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

index of the exhaustion of political thinking," and today's watered down definition of culture:

The anthropological notion of culture exuded a liberal and egalitarian ethos; this is its appeal and its truth. Yet *culture* also lost any specificity, becoming everything and anything. When *culture* is defined as an "ensemble of tools, codes, rituals, behaviors," not simply every people, but every group and subgroup has a "culture". The shift toward symbolic perspectives by anthropologists further flattened and extended the turf; no longer is culture restricted to the "ensemble" of activities of a people, but *any activity of any group* might form a culture or subculture. Everything is culture.<sup>70</sup>

To borrow from an argument Jacoby makes a bit further on, if everything is culture, nothing is—or at least nothing is any more culture than anything else.<sup>71</sup> His most concise objections to multiculturalism are as follows: "...multiculturalism relies on an intellectual rout, the refusal or inability to address what makes up culture,"<sup>72</sup> and a bit further on: "The secret of cultural diversity is its political and economic uniformity. The future looks like the present with more options. Multiculturalism spells the demise of utopia."<sup>73</sup>

Jacoby lays much of the blame for the decline of utopia at the doorstep of liberalism, (as he does in his most recent book *Picture Imperfect*): "...it would be difficult to find a utopianism within Nazism. Yet the liberal consensus successfully established a rough equivalence of utopianism and totalitarianism, setting both against liberal pluralism. Damning totalitarianism meant damning utopianism."<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 40: "Yet when everything is political, nothing is—or at least nothing is more political than anything else."

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

Rounding out the list of suspects in the downfall of utopian thought is pluralism, something which Jacoby does not condemn wholeheartedly but seems to regard as an unsatisfactory compromise:

Pluralism, the ideology of the market and the individual, becomes the bedrock principle for liberals and leftists. Pluralism returns as radicalism ebbs. Nor is this wholly objectionable. Not every age spawns bold ideas about society. In its various forms, perhaps pluralism is the best our era has to offer. Yet the retreat is presented as an astounding advance. A familiar if not a banal idea, pluralism is dubbed cutting edge. Painted with "culture" or christened multiculturalism, it becomes a mythology of our time.<sup>75</sup>

Possibly even more germane to this thesis is Jacoby's claim that the absence of utopian thought has had significant consequences for the critique of mass culture:

These approaches [of the newer critics] open doors to studying topics from jazz to comic books that earlier scholars ignored. This is all for the good. Yet in casting aside as elitist truth, individuality and perfection— notions that animated [Matthew] Arnold and Mill—today's critics also close the door to a different future; they ratify the status quo in the name of democracy. Despite their claims of subversion, they subvert the effort to go beyond the existing society; they block the utopian impulse that pervaded the critique of mass culture.<sup>76</sup>

With *The End of Utopia* Jacoby makes explicit his rationale behind having a more restrictive definition of what constitutes an intellectual than, say, Andrew Ross or Richard A. Posner whose work I discuss later in this chapter:

If [intellectuals] are defined simply as the educated, intellectuals have existed for millennia as priests, scribes and clerks; they will continue as teachers, specialists and technicians...The expansive definition may mislead, however. The issue may be less how long scholars and clerks have existed than when they coalesced as a group and gained self-awareness—and a name.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

Jacoby points to Europe and Russia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, during which the term 'intelligentsia' was coined in Russia and the Dreyfuss affair took place in France. This was a critical period during which intellectuals gained self-awareness and an identity as intellectuals. Jacoby's observation is an important one, because it refers to the historical identity of the intellectual, something that did not simply fall from the sky. Moreover, this observation also properly aligns that historical identity as emerging from the specific ideological context of dissent. What Jacoby grapples with throughout much of *The End of Utopia* is something he cannot be specific about. He attempts to sanitize utopian thought of its unwarranted associations of violence and naïvety:

In the twentieth century utopia has had bad press, often for good reasons. The traditional criticism that utopias lack any pertinence has not abated. If anything, it has intensified...To call individuals utopian suggests they possess no sense of reality; their projects or ideas must fail for ignoring the concrete possibilities...The criticism of utopia hardly stops here. The notion, first advanced by conservatives, has nowadays been accepted by virtually everyone: armed with blueprints and floorplans, utopians would wreak havoc to establish their private vision—and they have: the horrors of the modern world can be attributed to utopians. The statement seems plausible but misses the mark. The bloodbaths of the twentieth century can be as much attributed to anti-utopians—to bureaucrats, technicians, nationalists and religious sectarians with a narrow vision of the future.<sup>78</sup>

*The End of Utopia* also includes a penetrating critique of Cultural Studies that I will refer to in my discussion of the writings of Andrew Ross. The book contains themes that are a worthy continuation of Jacoby's examination of intellectual life and higher education. Yet for reasons he does not elaborate on, at least not until his follow-up book *Picture Imperfect* he offers no ideas as to what form utopia ought to take. With *Picture*

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 166.

*Imperfect: Utopian thought for an anti-utopian age* Jacoby provides a more focussed, richer analysis of utopian thought. At the same time, he provides a more than adequate response to potential criticisms as to why he refrains from being prescriptive with regard to what a utopian society ought to look like. It should be emphasized that with his change in subject matter from intellectual history to the history of utopian thought, he has to some extent moved from being a historian of *reason* to being a historian of *belief*. With *Picture Imperfect* Jacoby's argumentative agenda, which may have wavered somewhat in *End of Utopia*, appears more refined, his radical spirit revitalized:

I seek to outline the history of the modern anti-utopian animus...To the extent that [the critique of the liberal anti-utopians] fits totalitarianism or Marxism or its deformations, I have no argument with them. To the extent that their critique blackens all of utopian thought I object.<sup>79</sup>

In a rhetorical style reminiscent of his strategies in *Social Amnesia* and *Dialectic of Defeat*, Jacoby sets about on another 'salvage operation':

I wish to save the spirit, but not the letter, of utopianism. I am drawing a distinction between two currents of utopian thought: the blueprint tradition and the iconoclastic tradition. The blueprint utopians map out the future in inches and minutes...In the same way that God could not be depicted for the Jews, the future could not be described for the iconoclastic utopians; it could only be approached through hints and parables.<sup>80</sup>

Has Jacoby 'found religion'? If so it has not caused him to take leave of his senses. If anything it has refined them. He goes on to contend for the constructive influence of utopian thought:

...the choice we have is not between reasonable proposals and unreasonable utopianism. Utopian thinking does not undermine or discount real reforms. Indeed, it is almost the opposite: practical reforms

<sup>79</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) xiii.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* pp. xiv-xv.

depend on utopian dreaming—or at least utopian thinking drives incremental improvements.<sup>81</sup>

Jacoby diagnoses the causes for the decline in utopian thought thusly:

I offer at least three reasons for the fate of utopian thought: the collapse of the communist states beginning in 1989; the widespread belief that nothing distinguishes utopians and totalitarians; and something more difficult to pinpoint, but essential: an incremental impoverishment of what might be called Western imagination.<sup>82</sup>

Of these three factors it is the latter, Western imagination, which should be of most concern for the purposes of my discussion. Jacoby approaches somewhat indirectly the extent to which imagination should be regarded as a vital component of the intellect and therefore an indispensable property of the intellectual. He asks the rhetorical question “If imagination sustains utopian thinking, what sustains imagination?”<sup>83</sup> and raises the issue of “...imagination as a historical entity,”<sup>84</sup> claiming that critics have tended to gloss over these issues—if they consider them at all.

Subsequently, Jacoby is led to evaluate the role of boredom in fostering imagination:

Does boredom, an unstructured zone of inactivity and purposelessness, allow imagination to develop? And is boredom itself a product of time and place?...boredom was fairly common among the intellectual elite in early modern Europe; in their villas and life the elite sought to pass the time to escape from tedium. Of course it is possible to go back to the Greeks, Roman, and early Christians. Acedia, or sloth, is as old as the Greeks, although it is not until the early Christian Fathers that it becomes a major concern. Sloth threatened pious souls, especially monks, but also marked stages in spiritual growth. To attain oneness with God, it might be necessary to risk acedia.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 27.



Quite possibly, in addition to the Protestant work ethic, it has been the disdain for boredom that led to the fetishism of business. As an adjunct to this, Jacoby questions whether or not structured childhood has inhibited utopian thought: "If unstructured childhood sustains imagination, and imagination sustains utopian thinking, then the eclipse of the first entails the weakening of the last—utopian thinking."<sup>86</sup> Jacoby defines those who he is contending for as follows:

...Less noticed and less easily defined are the anti-blueprint utopians, who could be called the iconoclastic utopians. Rather than elaborate the future in precise detail, they longed, waited, or worked for utopia but did not visualize it. The iconoclastic utopians tapped ideas traditionally associated with utopia—harmony, leisure, peace, and pleasure—but rather than spelling out what could be, they kept, as it were, their ears open toward it. Ears and eyes are apposite, for insofar as they did not visualize the future, they listened for it. They did not privilege the eye, but the ear. Many of these thinkers were Jews, and explicitly or implicitly, they obeyed the commandment prohibiting graven images. God, the absolute and the future defied visual representation. Like the future, God could be heard but not seen. "Hear, O Israel!" begin the Jewish prayers.<sup>87</sup>

In examining iconoclastic utopianism Jacoby's ranges skilfully from the ideas and biographies of Thomas More, Karl Popper, Mathew Arnold, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Martin Buber and others. Jacoby probes the nature of evil and totalitarianism, contending vociferously against those who would align such things with genuine utopianism, explaining that:

The anti-utopian ethos has swept all intellectual quarters. Utopia has lost its ties with alluring visions of harmony and has turned into a threat. Conventional and scholarly wisdom associates utopian ideas with violence and dictatorship. The historical validity of this linkage, however, is dubious. Already with [Thomas] More, though, utopianism spawned an

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

angry anti-utopianism. This may be prototypical. The newly converted are haunted by their past sins; they seek to slay their past selves.<sup>88</sup>

It is worth noting, in support of this observation that the emphasis of Jacoby's thought has shifted from secular intellectual history to intellectual history as it bears on issues of faith, that his choice of diction is the language of religious conversion. For Jacoby this religious tendency is thoroughly underwritten by assertions of ethnic identity, assertions that border on being repetitive in places. Compare the following:

...The Jewish tradition gave rise to what might be called an iconoclastic utopianism—an anti-utopian utopianism that resisted blueprints. This iconoclastic utopianism was “anti-utopian” to the extent that it refused to map out the future; it was utopian in its commitment to a very different future of harmony and happiness. The iconoclastic utopians inclined toward the future, but unlike the blueprint utopians, they abstained from depicting it.<sup>89</sup>

Jacoby situates several Jewish utopian thinkers within this schema:

[Gustav] Landauer's mistrust of language did not diminish his mysticism or utopianism. Rather, Landauer's utopian esprit, linguistic skepticism, and mysticism went hand in hand. In his suspicion of the written language and his reticence about the future, Landauer exemplified a Jewish iconoclastic utopianism stamped by loyalty to the biblical commandment forbidding graven images. From Marx to Landauer and Max Horkheimer, this commandment hovers over Jewish utopianism. For much of their history, the taboo on graven images barred Jews from depicting the absolute and, by inference the future, which could at best be sought and felt abstractly.<sup>90</sup>

Such is Jacoby's enthusiasm for his subject matter that he even quotes scripture more or less approvingly, from Deuteronomy to Isaiah, handling issues of Jewish theology with no small degree of deftness. Jacoby concludes the main body of his

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

argument with what appears to be an expression of spiritual yearning, not just his own but that of society's as well: "If the name of God is unpronounceable and the portrait of God unpaintable, a future of peace and happiness—a world without anxiety—may not be describable. We hear of it in parables and hints. It speaks to us, perhaps more urgently than ever."<sup>91</sup>

In the epilogue of *Picture Imperfect* Jacoby summarizes what is perhaps his strongest argument for siding with the iconoclastic, non-blueprint utopians:

To indicate what is possible requires entering the terrain of political options. Almost by definition, however, utopian thought keeps a distance from the daily to-and-fro of political life. It does not take up the issues of the day, be they elections, national health care, or war and peace in the middle East. If it did, it would forfeit its own commitment to a realm beyond the immediate choices. Which plan solves urban gridlock? Endemic unemployment? World pollution? Civil war in the horn of Africa? To the extent that utopian thought directly speaks to these crises, it betrays its heart and soul.<sup>92</sup>

Observing Jacoby's evolution from chronicler of the disappearance of public intellectuals and the erosion of higher education to a propagator of utopian values, one might at first be sceptical, thinking that perhaps this lucid and original thinker had run out of ideas. Yet Jacoby's logic remains sound, the scope of his literacy formidable. One might contemplate utopianism in light of Jesus Christ, who exhorts each of us to everyday ask God "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."<sup>93</sup> What could possibly be more radical than to see this brought to fruition? What could be more utopian?

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 144.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 145.

<sup>93</sup> Matthew 6:10, *The Holy Bible*, King James Version.

## The Debate between Critical Theory and Cultural Studies

One of the branches of investigation into mass culture known as cultural studies is, to my mind, something of an antithesis to the sensibility advocated by Critical Theory. By now my intellectual sympathies in regard to Critical Theory should be well established to the reader. Hence, the following continuation of the discussion may at times appear quite polemical.

In the chapter of *The End of Utopia* entitled "Mass Culture and Anarchy," Russell Jacoby turns his critical gaze on cultural studies. He finds the following:

...*Cultural studies* defies a brief description; very broadly it denotes an academic field spanning several specialties that has moved away from studying past works of high culture to analyzing contemporary popular culture from pornography to sports. A democratic and populist impulse permeates the field.<sup>94</sup>

Jacoby sketches the historical genesis of cultural studies thusly:

Herein lies a revealing irony: Contemporary cultural studies, with its sympathetic interpretations of mass culture, largely derives from a British socialism that sought to keep mass culture at bay. The British radicals wanted to salvage a distinct class-based culture. They subscribed to the idea of a working-class culture, which they saw endangered by mass culture. "The threat to ...traditional working-class life," writes one account, was "crucial for the early development of cultural studies."<sup>95</sup>

He goes on to discuss the socialist origins of cultural studies:

The British education group, itself the successor to a working-class education movement, gave rise to cultural studies. Tom Steele, who has written a history of its origins, observes that cultural studies "began as a political project of popular education amongst adults." However, he continues, few traces of these allegiances surface in contemporary cultural studies. Students now think that it "sprang fully-armed from the side of a university department of English." Practitioners of cultural

<sup>94</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) 71.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

studies do not know, forget or cast aside the original cause and motivation.<sup>96</sup>

As Jacoby's account of cultural studies progresses he becomes decidedly less charitable toward it:

What happens to cultural studies when its original object, working-class culture, vaporizes? If nature does not abhor a vacuum, intellectuals do. Knock-off French theories and instant Gramsci fill up the spaces. The orientation of cultural studies changes from criticizing to interpreting, reading, deconstructing and, increasingly, championing mass culture.<sup>97</sup>

Not ten pages later, Jacoby moves in for the kill:

The inability of cultural studies scholars to write a sentence is by now a familiar observation; it bears repeating for at least one reason. Half the hoopla about cultural studies derives from its claim to be writing on behalf of the people; its practitioners are breaking with an old elitism that dismissed popular culture. Yet the old elitists like [Dwight] MacDonald wrote in crisp and lucid sentences that any educated person could read. The cultural studies exponents, in general, offer fractured English, jargon and sentences that could bring tears to the eyes of a tenth-grade English teacher. They trample the culture they supposedly love.<sup>98</sup>

I have quoted Jacoby at such length respective to cultural studies because there is scarcely a word of his estimation of the subject that is not applicable to the writings of Andrew Ross, a proponent of cultural studies whose ideas I will now examine. In a 1990 article on Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* movie and Spike Lee's 1989 movie *Do the Right Thing*, Ross stated the role of cultural studies to be as follows:

The task of cultural studies is to know something about the links between social formations and cultural symbols-in-action, and to show how and to what extent textual mediation between the two is both continuous and, to some extent—transforming—especially where the socializing links are made, in cases like the Batman–Africa logos, by the logics of the

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 78.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. pp. 88-89.

entertainment industry, on the one hand, and youth subcultures, on the other.<sup>99</sup>

Whatever might be said of Ross' above statement, it would be something of a stretch to call it working-class criticism. Rather, in Jacoby's view it is more evocative of the rhetoric of someone who has spent too much time trying to wrap his brain around the more esoteric reaches of post-structuralism and, perhaps, the sociology of knowledge.

With Ross's *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* it is perhaps best to start with the most rudimentary question. Specifically, exactly what does Ross mean by the term 'popular culture'? The difficulty of answering this question becomes evident when one pauses to ask what *doesn't* Ross mean by popular culture? When confronted by a work that treats as popular culture the death row correspondence between alleged espionage agents Julius and Ethel Rosenberg definitions become elusive. Where Ross does get explicit, his definition of popular culture is bound up with a discussion of a *Time* magazine article about popular culture and mass consumption:

The *Time* article is exclusively about the "American century", in which consumerism, driven along by the heady dream of Fordist production and mass consumption of culture, was established as the organizing feature of advanced capitalism. Popular culture as it is described in this book, is understood within this socio-economic context; the term covers a vast range of technologically advanced cultural products, industrially produced for profit, and consumed and used for a variety of purposes by a broad range of audiences. But the status of popular culture—what is popular and what is not—is also an unstable political definition, variably fixed by intellectuals and tastemakers, and in this respect, is often seen as constituting, if not representing, a political identity for the "popular classes."<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Andrew Ross, "Ballots, bullets, or Batman: can Cultural Studies Do the Right Thing?," *Screen*, Spring 1990: 26.

<sup>100</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 9.

Although the term sneaks into his discourse periodically, Ross is disdainful of the term 'mass culture' favouring the term 'popular culture' instead:

...I agree that the need to challenge the general use of "mass culture" is part of a struggle against cultural pessimism, and is not necessarily tied to beliefs in the "end of ideology". On the other hand, this usage, along with that of "pop" and "popular culture" often had, and still has, specific local meanings, in relation to production, consumption, philosophy and so on, and I have found it useful at times in this book to retain these terms in order to reflect particular historical moments and discourses.<sup>101</sup>

Hence, it is not so much the term 'mass culture' in itself that Ross objects to but rather to 'cultural pessimism', to those twinges of bad conscience that have an irritating way of impinging on having a good time. He adds to this—what is basically code for a dismissal of a Frankfurt School line of analysis—by summarizing them as follows:

The influence of cultural theories of totalitarianism, imported by German intellectuals in exile, like Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Leo Lowenthal was strong among intellectuals particularly attracted by the Frankfurt School's combination of a trenchant critique of capitalism with the traditionally mandarin prejudices of high Germanic culture, the picture of mass culture as a profitable opiate, synthetically prepared for consumption for a society of automatons...<sup>102</sup>

What gets unfairly glossed over here, among other things, is the fact that the Frankfurt School approach is not such a purely materialist critique of mass culture as Ross supposes. Absent from Ross's reckoning is the Hegelian dimension of what has often been referred to as the Hegelianized Marxism and psychoanalytic dimension of the Frankfurt School. Failure to incorporate Critical Theory's attempt to account for the role of mind, of spirit, of *Geist* in both the subject and object of the critique misses the point. In the place of a 'trenchant critique of capitalism' Ross serves up a class analysis

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 234.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

determined by the allegedly empirical intersubjectivity of taste. This ersatz empiricism manifests itself in such aspects of his reasoning as the following:

Social distinctions...are signified through a complex intertextual display of cultural choices or preferences and the often unorthodox or creative uses made of these choices...the exercise of taste not only *presupposes* distinctive social categories; it also helps to *create* them, in the shape of apparently "natural" cultural classes.<sup>103</sup>

According to Ross, not only can taste be personified, it appears to have the messianic power to dissolve social inequalities. If, as Ross contends, taste "legitimizes social differences between people as if they were differences of nature,"<sup>104</sup> all he is really doing is bequeathing to taste one of the central rationales of capitalism. Capitalism constantly endeavours to posit its own machinations as being part of nature because nature is irrefutable. Should one accept Ross's personification of taste and its subsequent identification with nature, we can no more question Ross's ridiculous 'legitimization of social differences' than argue with a bear for defecating in the woods.

Even the most superficial perusal of *No Respect* should alert anyone tutored in an Adornonian sensibility that there is far more to object to about Ross as an exemplar of what Jacoby would describe as one of the "new breed" of intellectuals. When the application of the term "popular culture" is used outside of the context of empirical research, such as that which was conducted by Frankfurt School sociologist Leo Lowenthal, the focus of the discussion is shifted from particulars about the cultural products or events being surveyed to mere speculation about how mass audiences might be said to *feel* about specific cultural phenomena and becomes a kind of

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 59.



authoritarian subjectivity. Who are we to say how Andrew Ross should *feel* about Jay Leno or Bart Simpson? Alternatively, by what authority can Ross say anything definitive about intellectuals and mass culture if his approach to the subject at hand relies upon a criteria for evaluation as nebulous and amorphous as “taste,” a pre-constructed concept based on mediated experience? Ross does manage to provide a breezy, largely readable history of ‘hip’; something he defines as follows:

To be hip...always involves *outhipping* others with similar claims to make about taste. Hip is the site of a chain reaction of taste generating minute distinctions which negate and transcend each other at an intuitive rate of fission that is virtually impossible to record. It is entirely inconsistent with the idea of a settled or enduring commitment to a fixed set of choices.<sup>105</sup>

Therefore, the two constant properties of hip are that it must remain fluid, constantly changing, and that it exist in a constant state of competition, always ‘outhipping’ others; it is committed to nothing outside of its own governing dynamics of perpetual transformation and Brinkmanship. Hip functions in a way that is comparable to fashion, fashion as a kind of unofficial and promiscuous orthodoxy. Relating hip to his ‘taste’ criterion, Ross asserts that “Hip is a mobile taste formation that closely registers shifts in respect/disrespect towards popular taste.”<sup>106</sup> Cultural manifestations that Ross includes as having been exemplary of hip include bebop jazz, the Beats, rhythm and blues, funk and soul music as well as the comedy of Lenny Bruce.

As a cultural historian Ross is an antiquarian. He chronicles much but passes critical judgement on precious little. His is the sensibility of postmodern affirmation, a sensibility lacking discernment; it is a sensibility that piles up reference upon reference

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

thinking that is sufficient in itself to posit meaning. His is a voice that has forgotten how to say no. In the hands of Andrew Ross the idealization of taste becomes the method by which historical forms of domination are justified, one of the most fundamental processes that Critical Theory stands in opposition to.

Ross tackles the subject of television, commencing his history of the tube with an account of the 'rigged' quiz show scandals of the 1950s, something that, according to Ross, has given the medium a taint that it has never been able to entirely rid itself of. In the intervening years since the initial publication of *No Respect* its author has become subject to a taint of his own. Ross is a contributing editor for the journal *Social Text*. In the spring of 1996 *Social Text* published an article entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." Following publication its author, physicist Alan Sokal, revealed that the article was a hoax, a far-flung satirical treatise citing numerous postmodern thinkers and their dubious employment of scientific terminology within a larger text of equally high-flying scientific rhetoric. Concerning their own verdict on Ross, Sokal and fellow physicist Jean Bricmont state:

...Such epistemological agnosticism won't suffice, at least not for people who aspire to make social change. Deny that non-context-dependent assertions can be true, and you don't just throw out quantum mechanics and molecular biology: you also throw out the Nazi gas chambers, the American enslavement of Africans, and the fact that today in New York it's raining. [British historian Eric] Hobsbawm is right: facts do matter, and some facts (like the first two cited here) matter a great deal.<sup>107</sup>

In the July/August 1996 issue of *Lingua Franca* Ross and *Social Text* co-editor Bruce Robbins mounted a defence of their publication of Sokal's article. They reject the

<sup>107</sup> Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998) 275.

assumption that the affair in any way undermined the legitimacy of cultural studies:

“Indeed, [Sokal’s] claim—that our publication of his article proves that something is rotten in the state of cultural studies—is as wobbly as the article itself.”<sup>108</sup> Ross and Robbins claim to have greeted the article with scepticism:

From the first, we considered Sokal’s unsolicited article to be a little hokey...plausibly symptomatic of how someone like Sokal might approach the field of postmodern epistemology, i.e., awkwardly but assertively trying to capture the “feel” of the professional language of this field...we read it more as an act of good faith of the sort that might be worth encouraging than as a set of arguments with which we agreed.<sup>109</sup>

Ross and Robbins go on to state:

...the editors considered it of interest to readers as a “document” of that time-honored tradition in which modern physicists have discovered harmonic resonances with their own reasoning in the field of philosophy and metaphysics. Consequently, the article met one of the several criteria for publication which *Social Text* recognizes... *Social Text* has always seen its lineage in the “little magazine” tradition of the independent Left...<sup>110</sup>

Perhaps in an attempt to garner sympathy for their vulnerability and gullibility when confronted with the work, albeit quite acataleptic work, of a fellow traveller (Sokal identifies himself as a Leftist) and, rather than admit they know nothing about science, Ross and Robbins contend for the value of Sokal’s hoax as serious intellectual work: “Its status as parody does not alter substantially our interest in the piece itself as a symptomatic document. Indeed, Sokal’s conduct has quickly become an object of study for those who analyze the behavior of scientists.”<sup>111</sup> Perhaps the conduct of Ross and

<sup>108</sup> Andrew Ross and Bruce Robbins, “Mystery Science Theater,” *Lingua Franca*, New York, July/August 1996, p. 54.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

Robbins may become an object of study for those who analyze the behaviour of dupes.

One of *Lingua Franca's* letters to the editor stated:

...I also want to know why its opacity didn't bother them. Even if the physics of the article had been right, the editors should have refused it because it made no effort to be understood. The value of interdisciplinary work is precisely that it allows us to see something new—and this rests on the premise that it allows us to see, period.<sup>112</sup>

As if responding to this criticism, Ross later stated in *Social Text*:

...There is no excuse for obscurantism, just as there are no critical insights that cannot be phrased in a readily intelligible manner, without causing eyes to glaze over...but I also suspect that the most significant resistance to cultural studies stems from its intellectual activism—its challenges to specialist turf and the disciplinary carve-up of the field of knowledge...While I do not think the Sokal affair proved anything (it was an anomaly in almost every respect), it did expose a landscape of resentments and suspicions that may have to be negotiated.<sup>113</sup>

Ross goes on to say that the Sokal affair generated more mistrust of scientific authority, rather than more mistrust of cultural studies, and that the “mutual embarrassment—for scientists and non-scientific commentators alike—will generate new and unforeseen kinds of dialogue.”<sup>114</sup> One can glean many things from Sokal's writing on the matter in both the book *Fashionable Nonsense* and his article in *Lingua Franca* but embarrassment isn't one of them. If, as Ross repeatedly contends, *Social Text* is “a non-refereed journal,” why has he been so zealous to don the black and white vertically-striped jersey? Is this part of what he means by ‘knowing something about the links between social formations and cultural symbols-in-action’?

<sup>112</sup> Teri Reynolds, “A Forum,” *Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996: 62.

<sup>113</sup> Andrew Ross, “Reflections on the Sokal Affair”, *Social Text*, Spring 1997: 152.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 152.

How much credibility then ought we ascribe to Ross as a cultural historian? In his chapter entitled "The Uses of Camp" the discussion commences with a description of what he calls "four iconic moments from the sixties."<sup>115</sup> Why does Ross resist relating these 'moments' as part of a narrative structure, opting instead to enshrine them in iconic status? Here it is helpful to consider a footnote from one of the essays of Russian literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. In his essay "Forms of Time and the Chronotope [literally 'time place'] in the Novel; Notes toward a Historical Poetics," Bakhtin cites the work of Immanuel Kant in pointing out the necessity of time to cognition:

In his "Transcendental Aesthetics" (one of the main sections of his *Critique of Pure Reason*) Kant defines space and time as indispensable forms of any cognition, beginning with elementary perceptions and representations. Here we employ the Kantian evaluation of the importance of these forms in the cognitive process, but differ from Kant in taking them not as "transcendental" but as forms of the most immediate reality.<sup>116</sup>

How could this relate to Ross's 'four iconic moments'? Simply put, the iconic is atemporal; while it occupies a place in history, a place in time and space, and while it is subject to historical and subjective contextualization; it remains essentially ahistorical. The iconic has the capacity to take historical particulars and condense them into a sign, such as the cross, which above all has come to signify sacrifice and redemption, or more notoriously, the swastika, which above all else has come to signify hatred, fear and terror. Having achieved this condensation, the iconic sign transcends its historical particulars and realizes its meaning in a kind of stasis and permanence that is no longer limited to specific temporal relations.

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 135.

<sup>116</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981) 85n.

The four historical instances that Ross attempts to establish as iconic are: (1) A horrific scene from the ghoulish 1961 melodrama *Whatever happened to Baby Jane?*; (2) The 1964 New York birthday party for then 24-year-old female celebrity Baby Jane Holzer, covered by emergent scribbler Tom Wolfe and attended by the Rolling Stones; (3) The 1969 riot at the Stonewall Inn in New York where the Vice Squad clashed with lesbians and gays—some of them in drag; (4) The infamous 1969 Rolling Stones concert at Altamont where one of the band's security force comprised of members of the Hell's Angels murdered a member of the audience. Of these examples it might be argued that Betty Davis and Joan Crawford have or had an iconic presence but movies, which unfold in time, can't be icons. One might say that the 'mod versus rocker' theme of the Baby Jane Holzer birthday party had iconic significance, but Ross is mistaken in attributing this 'melting pot, classless' party as new to a 1964 New York publicity event; this kind of 'happening' had been going on for years in England under the direction of Screaming Lord Sutch<sup>117</sup> whose aristocratic social events for rock stars clearly embody Ross's recognition that "The pseudo-aristocratic patrilineage of camp can hardly be understated."<sup>118</sup> It might be argued somewhat more successfully that the 1969 Stonewall Riot and the Rolling Stones' Altamont concert were, respectively, the beginning of the Gay Liberation Front and the end of the free open air rock concert, but that doesn't make

<sup>117</sup> Screaming Lord Sutch, a.k.a. (1940-1999) achieved notoriety in 1960 as the first longhaired pop star. Sutch associated with and recorded with such rock star luminaries as Ritchie Blackmore, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and Keith Moon. Sutch also gained national attention as leader of the Monster Raving Loony Party and ran unsuccessfully for British parliament in over 40 elections. The pseudo-aristocratic Sutch's antics pre-date Baby Jane Holzer's party with the Rolling Stones by several years. *Fuller Up: The Dead Musician Directory*. "David Edward Sutch, Screaming Lord Sutch, June 16, 1999, Age 58," 14 November 1997, 1 December 2005 <http://elvispelvis.com/lordsutch.htm>.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 145.

them iconic. The insurmountable flaw in Ross's account is the notion of an 'iconic moment', an irreconcilable contradiction insofar as it bespeaks a 'timeless unit of time'.

Citing Bakhtin is instructive here because it makes emphatic the fact that as both a discipline and a genre, history is made intelligible to us through narrative, and narrative is only intelligible to us through the passage of time. What does Ross claim to be making intelligible?

The purpose which [these examples] will serve here is to introduce particular aspects of the history of camp, that category of cultural taste, which shaped, defined and negotiated the way in which sixties intellectuals were able to "pass" as subscribers to the throwaway Pop aesthetic, and thus as patrons of the unattractive world of immediacy and disposability created by the culture industries in the postwar boom years.<sup>119</sup>

It is not only Ross's 'iconic moments' that are predominantly violent. What he is doing amounts to a kind of violence to cognition. Ross instructs the reader to divorce these events and pseudo-events from their contextual realities and subsequently remove them from being evaluated by sound critical judgement. Insofar as it is possible, and according to Bakhtin and Kant it isn't, Ross would have his examples of sixties' camp belong to a specific decade yet exist outside of time. Not only, as Sokal and Bricmont observe, does Ross deny that non-contextual dependant assertions can be true; he also appears to deny the necessity of acknowledging the primacy of narrative form in making history coherent. The criteria for his choice of 'iconic moments' seem to be grounded not so much in illumination as titillation.

As for Ross's selection of sixties intellectuals, he "includes, among others, Lenny Bruce, Ethel Rosenberg, Andy Warhol, John Waters, and Grace Jones, just as [he]

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

includes Dwight MacDonalD, Susan Sontag, Marshall McLuhan, Amiri Baraka, and Andrea Dworkin."<sup>120</sup> Of course, by the time of the sixties Ethel Rosenberg was in no shape to subscribe to anything. Ross appears to say less about his subject matter—most receiving nothing approaching the kind of biographical treatment Jacoby gave his subjects in *The Last Intellectuals*—than presenting an implicit self-portrait defined by a series of cultural tastes and political sympathies. Ross's statement here brings to mind an observation made by comedian/director Mike Nichols: "These days you can be an intellectual just by saying certain names: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Dostoyevsky, Kafka. Intellectual used to mean a process of thinking, or a body of knowledge. For some nutty reason, it doesn't anymore."<sup>121</sup>

Ross seems willing to consider just about every aspect of pornography aside from the possibility that it might be immoral. In his chapter entitled "The popularity of pornography" after presenting an obligatory, politically correct nod toward the feminist antiporn critique he asserts:

...A politics of sexuality that is relatively autonomous from categories of gender may be needed to achieve and guarantee the full rights of sexual minorities....Such a politics is the domain of what I will call the *liberatory imagination*. Unlike the liberal imagination, which exercises and defends autonomous rights and privileges already achieved and possessed, the liberatory is *pragmatically* linked to the doctrine of "positive liberty", which entails the fresh creation of legal duties to ensure that individuals will have the means that they require in order to pursue liberty and equality. But it is also this liberatory imagination which sets the agenda of radical democracy beyond liberal pragmatism in pursuit of claims, actions, desires, pleasures, and thoughts that are considered too illegitimate to be recognized as political. Such claims, actions, rights, etc., invariably do not arise out of the *universal* rights of individuals. Instead, they spring from expressions of difference, from the differentiated needs and interests

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>121</sup> Mike Nichols, quoted by Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) 348.



of individuals and groups who make up the full spectrum of democratic movements today. These differences do not necessarily converge, and they can rarely be posed in relation to rights that would concern or embrace all individuals.<sup>122</sup>

If, by guaranteeing “the full rights of sexual minorities,” Ross means the right of homosexuals and lesbians to live in and contribute to society and be free from violence and persecution, the compassionate individual would have to concur. Yet Ross’s concept of a “liberatory imagination” is prescriptive of a political consciousness for the production and reception of pornography. An ideologically determined imagination is not an imagination at all; it is a political function. Through the use of the appeal to hedonistic fantasy and by couching his argument in an ambiguous rhetoric of human rights, Ross attempts to dictate how we are to think and feel about that which our consciences should tell us is morally repugnant. Pornography reduces the human subject to a medium for communicating sexual excitation. There is nothing in Ross’s discussion that would counter this definition. It is the zenith of hypocrisy for Ross to justify the enjoyment of pornography within the context of the advocacy of universal human rights precisely because the production of pornography is frequently rooted in the trampling of those rights; it reduces its subjects to mere means. Again, the problem of the category of the popular emerges. Ross implies that because pornography is popular it is somehow democratic and good:

...in these conditions under which the less privileged are obliged to consume, pleasure is concretely tied to the necessity of exchanging small amounts of petty cash, a necessity spared the wealthier consumer for whom the transactional act of exchange—a “dirty” act for the non-needy generally—can be distanced from the pleasures of consumption. For the consumer on the street, then, his pleasure is tied to what he can afford

<sup>122</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect, Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 177.

there and then, on the pornographer's premises. This does not make his pleasure qualitatively or quantitatively inferior to that of the wealthier consumer who can pay for the conditions under which he may choose to use pornography which he has either bought or rented. It does, however, explain the particular narrative form exhibited by certain kinds of pornography made to be consumed in specific contexts and under specific conditions.<sup>123</sup>

In essence, what Ross is demonstrating here is an adherence to a psychology derived from the co-mingling of hedonism and market forces. What is being reified in the preceding passage, that is to say that which involves a kind of 'liberatory' forgetting, is the false equivocation between democracy and capitalism. This reification is rooted in the unsustainable contradiction of positing the democratic ideal of equal rights for all compatible with the Darwinian/survival of the fittest model that drives and justifies capitalist laissez-faire economics. The democratization of the kind of "pleasure," and, not insignificantly the kind of oppression, facilitated by pornography, its denigration of the erotic potential of humanity to a use value, is morally sanitized by being deemed simply one more function of the free market system. Equality is posited as the availability of that pleasure to the less wealthy consumer that is neither 'qualitatively (nor) quantitatively inferior to that of the wealthy consumer.'

Ross's seeming inability to consider the significance of the effects of pornography at the level of reception, his appraisal of pornography as a legitimate function of the free market system, and his incomplete critique of pornography that affirms it in terms of having a valid use value, is perhaps best exemplified in the following:

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p. 195.

Pornography, for the most part, provides a stimulus, base, or foundation for individual fantasies to be built upon and elaborated. It *merely* provides the conditions—stock, generic, eroticizable [sic] components such as poses, clothing, and sounds—under which the pleasure of fantasizing, a pleasure unto itself, can be pursued.<sup>124</sup> (emphasis mine)

Ross fails to take these observations to their proper conclusion, that they lead to the estrangement of the consumers of pornography from a healthy sexual sensibility and a 'sane' eroticism. It is a telling weakness of his analysis that he falsely reduces pornography to *mere* "stock, generic, eroticizable components such as poses, clothing and sounds." In so doing, Ross suggest the alienation of human sexual response proper from itself and toward the fetishism of "stock, generic, eroticizable (sic) components." Because pornography propagates fantasizing for its own sake, it engenders in its consumers an auto-eroticism congruent with a kind of inwardness that does not, and perhaps cannot, take into account the legitimate humanity of the other. And exactly where do intellectuals fit into this discussion? Ross elaborates:

This is not to say, of course, that pornography is anti-realist in the same way as the non-narrative avant-garde film, which deliberately sets out to disrupt the linear narratives of realism. The avant-garde film is addressed, for the most part, to intellectuals who are generally not tied, in their everyday lives, to the fixed narrative of the weekly work patterns that govern and demarcate the leisure activities of a working population. An audience of intellectuals has the time and the training to "work" at its response to avant-garde film, while an audience of non-intellectuals is more likely to view the cultural work demanded by non-narrative film either as an unwanted imposition of overtime labor or as an obstacle in the way of emotional gratification provided by the realist narrative....As for the workplace itself, traditional pornography presents a special case...beyond the possible experience of that group of men and women.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. pp. 196-197.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p. 197.

Here Ross's snobbery is on clear display. As he would have it, intellectuals do not constitute a working class. Even the term "work" itself is used in quotation marks as if to signify that whatever it is that intellectuals do, it certainly isn't work. Moreover, the preceding passage from Ross is indicative of the denial of the intellectual identity of those whom he deems the working class proper. His differentiation of pornography from avant-garde works within the context of shock value epitomizes the fact that despite the breadth of erudition he displays in *No Respect*, from his analysis of the trial of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case to his valorization of Noam Chomsky: "...he is the most vociferous critic of the expert and professional specialist whose knowledge and opinion is everywhere compromised by its links with credentialist institutions and foundations,"<sup>126</sup> Ross's sensibilities are blunted. The preceding quote from Ross exemplifies a philistinism that reduces avant-garde works to mere shock value; it is a forgetting of their genuine aesthetic qualities. Ross appears to imply that avant-garde film is pornography for intellectuals; it is the "stimulus, base, or foundation" from which their labour is derived. Moreover, according to Ross, the activities of intellectuals are of parallel value to the mere fantasies of those he regards as performing real work. He suggests that the moral stance of intellectuals is irrelevant when he claims that in the workplace "traditional pornography presents a special case because of its widespread use there."<sup>127</sup> Ross recognizes that pornography "represents a realm of experience" that is somehow foreign to the observer; yet he fails to make the connection between that alien aspect of the experience of viewing pornography and the role that it plays in lulling the viewer into an inwardness of unreality. Ross also misses the other half of the dialectic of

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p. 223.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p. 197.

pornography in the workplace. While pornography in the workplace may assert male privilege there, it is also indicative of male bondage to a carnality which, as per Marx's critique of the commodity, confronts him as a power he cannot comprehend. As such, pornography in the workplace asserts sheer domination—the tasks of the workplace require the engagement of the exterior man while pornography is a claim on his interior life.

Ross's affirmation of pornography does not stop with his ambivalence towards it in the workplace or his apparent promotion of 'safe sex':

What, then, is so different about pornography that it can be considered a respectful way to think about educating the popular body? One possible answer to that question is that the education of desire through pornography, however it is conceived and practiced, would have to involve *producing* pleasure, rather than *reducing* or combating pleasure. Reform through pornography cannot proceed, at least with any hope of success, at expense of pleasure, and, least of all, if it takes a militant path of anti-pleasure. Even the most carefully planned attempts are at pains to avoid any intrusive didacticism.<sup>128</sup>

The very phrase "reform through pornography" does not deserve reasoned rebuttal. His tell-tale use of the phrase 'producing pleasure' reveals that Ross regards sexual gratification as a commodity with no more exceptional status than any other commodity. Exactly who or what Ross means by "the popular body" is mystifying. Clearly, however, he is proposing yet another contradiction, that of a "moral pornography." How this might be accomplished is, of course, unanswerable. Determining his defence of pornography as a viable constituent in the "education of desire" is a blanket endorsement of laissez-faire capitalism. It is the aim of the so-called free market to keep consumers in a state of

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p. 199.

perpetual desire, a condition which heightens lack of self-acceptance and thereby steals any semblance of peace.

Even at his most cautionary, Ross can only go so far as to state that “a large part of pornography’s appeal lies in its *refusal* to be educated...Surely there is a warning here for intellectuals who are committed today, as always, to ‘improving’ the sentimental education of the populace.”<sup>129</sup> Ross seems to acknowledge that pornography is an enemy to the life of the mind. Yet this only leads him to more cynicism as is apparent in his use of quotation marks around the word “improving,” as if he actually doesn’t believe that intellectuals are really capable of changing anything. It is worth noting that at the core of this cynical attitude is his uncritical embracing of the stereotype of the intellectual as being essentially powerless.

Not surprisingly, Ross’s opinion about pornography extends to a liberal acceptance of prostitution as part of the logical fruition of the pornographic imagination: “Increasingly...we have heard the voices of women who often find sex work, however exploitative, to be more acceptable, even liberating, than other forms of labor that may be available to them.”<sup>130</sup> One might well ask Ross to consider how many drug-addicted and H.I.V. positive prostitutes who sell their bodies to support their habits and how many child sex workers find their labour “liberating.” How is it that their voices are not being heard? Without a doubt, Ross is either both blind and deaf to the moral and spiritual devastation wrought from the sex industry and its attendant evils or perhaps he simply regards such considerations as a “turn-off.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p. 201.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p. 204.

In my analysis of *No Respect*, I have sought to make apparent the fundamentally anti-intellectual quality of a critique that claims justification on the grounds of taste. Why then, is Adorno's critique more valid than Ross's? Aside from Adorno's superior rationality, Ross presents no critique of the culture industry. Adorno's arguments derive from aesthetic literacy whereas Ross's derive more from evaluating matters in terms of their capacity to function as conduits for self-gratification.

There doesn't appear to be any love lost between Jacoby and Ross. While Ross does not specifically cite Jacoby or *The Last Intellectuals* by name in the following passage, who else could he be referring to when he states:

Humanists and social critics, especially, have always been loath to share the term "intellectual" with less *bona fide* word-brokers, and with number workers. Increasingly positioned by the contractual discourses of their institutions and professions, they have had to forsake the high ground and recognize the professional conditions that they are [sic] share for the most part, with millions of other knowledge workers. The loss of this high ground has been much lamented, especially when linked to romantic left narratives about the "decline of the public intellectual," who, in the classical version, is an heroicized white male, and who, if he is like C. Wright Mills, still rides a Harley Davidson to his university workplace.<sup>131</sup>

Of course, the most obvious reason for Jacoby's disdain for Ross is the fact that Jacoby's works are "narratives of decline." Meanwhile, Jacoby cites Andrew Ross as exemplary of a contemporary intellectual who functions within the context of "the new illusion"; he is a self-professed 'insider cracking codes', 'a cheerleader with a difference', lauding campus progress, professionalism and scholarship,' advancing a radical agenda, and justifying insular academicism in the name of revolution'.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p. 229.

<sup>132</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom* (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1994) 178.

Ross hits all the right buttons; the new academics are the new radicals; departmental corridors are the new means of warfare; and the combatants, the “recent generation of poststructuralist thinkers” surpass their dotty predecessors. Old fogies committed to “narratives of decline” fail to see the brighter future. In one way or another, the new academics repeat, and revel in these themes.<sup>133</sup>

### **Assessing Chomsky: One Anarchist’s Perspective**

Compared to the attitudinizing of Andrew Ross, reading the cold, matter-of-fact, almost clinical prose of Noam Chomsky is indeed sobering. Chomsky is no culture critic. Nor does he pretend to be. While I am not in full agreement with his politics (he is a self-confessed “libertarian socialist” with a strong affinity for anarchism) his strong commitment to social justice and his unflinching perspective on both the complicity and proper responsibility of intellectuals in politically activist roles is too emphatic a voice to be ignored. In a candid interview with John Peck he does allude to the interweaving of the work of intellectuals and propaganda. This is worth pointing out here because, as I pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, propaganda is a primary function of the culture industry:

JP: There seem to be in your thinking certain insights about society and intellectuals that span the course of your adult life. So much so that you are not surprised by what often seems to shock others. You are not shocked when intellectuals perform certain ideological functions—you expect this of them. You are not surprised when American power operates by cloaking itself in an idealistic garb to conceal its pursuit of various interests—you expect it of such power. And so on. Your insights seem less derived initially from prolonged historical observation than a sense of how things can be expected to operate.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 178.



NC: I guess I just always assumed it. It seems to me to follow from the most simple and uncontroversial assumptions about motivation and interests and the structure of power.

JP: And yet in some ways those assumptions are at the heart of what outrages individuals about your thoughts and writing. They have to be dismissed because if people were to confront them, they'd have to write differently about the United States.

NC: Well, it's interesting that it doesn't enrage anyone when I say this about the enemies of the United States. Then it's obvious. What outrages them is when I try to show how these patterns also are exhibited in our own society, as they are. If I were talking to a group of Russian intellectuals, they would be outraged that I failed to see the idealism and commitment to peace and brotherhood of the Russian state. That's the way propaganda systems function.<sup>134</sup>

Here Chomsky points out what is likely to be a frequent response to the observations of intellectuals when they are functioning as they should, one of outrage. The uncompromising culture critic may also find himself on the receiving end of a similar response when he shares his insights into mass culture with others. That which interferes with the operation of what Freud termed the pleasure principle is often met with instant, irrational hostility. Many if not most people don't care to reflect on the exact nature of what gives them pleasure. They may well possess at least a tacit understanding that much of what gives them pleasure may be at odds with what they know to be right. The will of mass audiences to obfuscate their own consciences is to a large extent predicated on the false ideal of the audience as occupying a mythically ideal space exempt from moral judgement regardless of what rubbish is presented to them. Moreover, the formal properties of mass culture, its aggressiveness and the speed of its dissemination are bent upon deflecting any serious critical reflection.

<sup>134</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987) 12-13.

When Chomsky is asked "In an anarchist society [presumably what would be for Chomsky an ideal society] what would the intellectual's role be?," Chomsky diverges sharply from Ross's reticence to so much as acknowledge the work of intellectuals as genuine labour:

NC: [The role of the intellectual would be] That of intellectual worker. A person whose work happens to be more with the mind than with the hands. Although I would think that in a decent society there ought to be a mixture in the kind of work that one does. Marx would agree in principle. An anarchist picture of society, or anarchist tendencies in society, offer no privileged role to the organized intelligentsia or to the professional intellectuals. And, in fact, it would tend to blur the distinctions between intellectual and worker, so that workers should take a direct, active role in the mental aspects of whatever work they're doing, its organization and planning, formation of its purposes, and so on. The people whose major professional concern is knowledge and the application of knowledge would have no special opportunity to manage the society, to gain any position of power and prestige by virtue of this special training and talent. And that's not a point of view that the intelligentsia are naturally drawn to...

I think Bakunin's remarks on this subject are perceptive: that the intelligentsia tend to associate themselves with the state-socialist and state-capitalist visions which would assign them a managerial role...including the role of ideological managers of "the engineering of consent," as democratic theorists call it. And, of course, modern societies have often offered intellectuals a good deal of just plain privilege as well.<sup>135</sup>

In such a condition Ross, because of his unwillingness to grant intellectuals legitimate status as workers, an unwillingness that conceals an aristocratic insistence on the *functionlessness* of intellectuals, would be left all dressed up with no place to go. De-privileging intellectuals would also mean, ideally, the true democratization of intellectual activity. Hence, much of the work of the culture critic might become redundant. People would be likely to be far more discerning about their cultural options. Reformation of the

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

culture industry would be an inevitable consequence. There would be no need to get misty-eyed when discussing the bygone days of “public intellectuals” because intellectual life would be more fully integrated into everyone's everyday life and, hence, more vibrant than ever. Nor would there be any need to waste any time on ill-conceived notions like “the education of desire” as forwarded by Ross. The triumph of reason among the broader public would totally incapacitate “the popularity of pornography”:

... It's their role [the role of “the intellectual elite] as a secular priesthood to really believe the nonsense they put forth. Other people can repeat it, but it's not that crucial that they really believe it. But for the intellectual elite themselves, it's crucial that they really believe it because, after all, they are the guardians of the faith.<sup>136</sup>

While Jacoby and Ross have nothing but praise to heap on Chomsky, it is doubtful that Chomsky has much use for the cultural narratives of either one of them:

JP: ...I am struck by how seldom you mention literature, culture, culture in the sense of a struggle to find alternative forms of life through artistic means; rarely a novel that has influenced you. Why is this so? Were there some works that did influence you?

NC: Of course there have been, but it is true that I rarely write about these matters. I am not writing about myself, and these matters don't seem particularly pertinent to the topics I am addressing. There are things that I resonate to when I read, but I have a feeling that my feelings and attitudes were largely formed prior to reading literature. In fact, I've been always resistant consciously to allowing literature to influence my beliefs and attitudes with regard to society and history.

JP: You once said, “It is not unlikely that literature will forever give far deeper insight into what is sometimes called ‘the full human person’ than any modes of scientific inquiry may hope to do.”

NC: That's perfectly true and I believe that. I would go on to say it's not only not unlikely, but it's almost certain. But still, if I want to understand, let's say, the nature of China and its revolution, I ought to be cautious

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

about literary renditions. Look, there's no question that as a child, when I read about China, this influenced my attitudes—*Rickshaw Boy*, for example. That had a powerful effect when I read it. It was so long ago I don't remember a thing about it, except the impact. And I don't doubt that, for me, personally, like anybody, lots of my perceptions were heightened and attitudes changed by literature over a broad range—Hebrew literature, Russian literature, and so on. But ultimately, you have to face the world as it is on the basis of other sources of evidence that you can evaluate. Literature can heighten your imagination and insight and understanding, but it surely doesn't provide the evidence that you need to draw conclusions and substantiate conclusions.<sup>137</sup>

The preceding passage suggests that Chomsky is a victim of a kind of *deformation professional*, an unwillingness to perceive things outside the constraints of his own chosen disciplines. Chomsky acknowledges “that literature will forever give far deeper insight into what is sometimes called ‘the full human person’ than any modes of scientific inquiry may hope to do.” Yet almost willfully, he maintains that “you have to face the world as it is on the basis of other forms of evidence that you can evaluate”. This suggests a peculiar brand of positivist formalism. “The world as it is” does not exist in some sort of vacuum clearly separated from culture. Consciousness as well as political and social structures are all culturally mediated phenomena. Because Chomsky appears to place no premium on the role of culture and aesthetics in shaping the thoughts and actions of individuals everywhere, opting instead for a kind of positivist empiricism, his work can be seen as evidence of an outwardly directed pathology that radically devalues the individual. While his arguments are formidable insofar as the range of research and raw facts they contain, the arguments tend to minimize the significance of individuals in favour of speculation as to the workings of mass movements and other constellations of political power populated by governmental

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. pp. 3–4.

villains and media-based intellectual skills. Here it might prove instructive to consider Nietzsche's characterization of the three basic approaches to history: the *antiquarian* approach, an essentially academic pursuit concerned solely with the mere gathering of historical facts, the *critical* approach which evaluates and passes judgement on those facts, and the *monumental* approach, the study of world historical beings, that which Nietzsche deemed the most worthwhile activity. Chomsky's writings fall into the middle category, that of critical history; they are virtually anti-monumental insofar as the lives of individuals seem to dissolve into the grand historical sweep of the political tendencies he documents. By contrast, Jacoby's writings, with their frequent use of mini-biographies suggest a far more humanistic approach, one that honours the achievements of individuals and in so doing provide a more relevant basis for identification and inspiration.

On a more affirmative note, Chomsky's essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" (1966) does provide some valuable insights into the social significance and duty of intellectuals:

...Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what Macdonald calls the "responsibility of the peoples", given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

Chomsky's exhortation to intellectuals that they have the resources "to seek the truth lying behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us," can also be seen, despite his lack of interest in culture criticism, as a strong endorsement of the intellectual life of the culture critic. The culture industry is the most pervasive "veil of distortion and misrepresentation" that the world has ever seen. Because most mass culture exists at the terminus where culture becomes ideology it is fertile ground for the study and exposition of ideology and class interest. Insofar as the knowledge gained from such studies and expositions can be brought to a larger, resistant public, the culture critic would do well to bear in mind Chomsky's assertion that "...There is no body of theory or significant body of relevant information, beyond the comprehension of the layman, which makes policy immune from criticism."<sup>139</sup> This holds equally true for the "good feelings" derived from mass culture, "...To anyone who has any familiarity with the social and behavioural sciences (or the 'policy sciences') the claim that there are certain considerations and principles too deep for the outsider to comprehend is simply an absurdity, unworthy of comment."<sup>140</sup>

Chomsky also anticipated—and perhaps influenced Jacoby's complaint about the academicization of intellectuals—when he observed that: "The scholar-expert replaces the free-floating intellectual who felt that the wrong values were being honored and rejected the society, and who has now lost his political role (now, that is, that the right values are being honored)."<sup>141</sup> Chomsky states that "...the cult of the expert is both self-

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. pp. 73-74.

...serving...and fraudulent.”<sup>142</sup> This might hold true for more exclusively political issues but the problem of analyzing culture might be an exception precisely because it is concerned with those aforementioned “far deeper insights into the ‘full human person’ ” and because it calls for the refinement of aesthetic sensitivity. Hence, we are fully justified in resorting to the inclusion of ‘experts’ like Adorno, whose writings, while they may constitute a significant challenge to the layman, furnish those willing to work at understanding them with a level of understanding more commensurate to the study at hand. Jacoby would concur that the key to avoiding excessive academicization must be the vigilant maintenance of a lucid prose style.

Concerning the need for a historically grounded sensibility and the rationale behind American foreign policy, Chomsky asserts that:

If it is the responsibility of the intellectual to insist upon the truth, it is also his duty to see events in their historical perspective...Recent history shows that it makes little difference to us what form of government a country has as long as it remains an “open society”, in our peculiar sense of this term—a society, that is, which remains open to American economic penetration or political control. If it is necessary to approach genocide in Vietnam to achieve this objective, then this is the price we must pay in defense of freedom and the rights of man.<sup>143</sup>

Chomsky's discussion of the responsibilities of intellectuals was defined within the context of intellectuals in relation to America's war in Vietnam. Indeed, Chomsky's own identity was galvanized by that war. This development suggests a newer, more hopeful formulation of the responsible intellectual, that of both peacemaker and warrior for the cause of what he hopes to be true.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. p. 78-79.

## A View from the Right: Richard A. Posner

More recently the issue of public intellectuals has been taken up by Richard A. Posner, an American appellate court judge who writes prolifically. In *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2003) Posner acknowledges Jacoby for coining the term 'public intellectual'<sup>144</sup> but broadens the scope of the discussion considerably, going back as far as Socrates whom he terms "the patron saint of public intellectuals."<sup>145</sup> Identifying his methodological criteria in his introduction, Posner asserts "Public intellectuals work could be seen as constituting a market and a career and could be analyzed in economic and sociological terms and compared with other markets and other careers."<sup>146</sup> Hence, what Posner presents, at least in part, is the public intellectual as a kind of fiscal identity or, to employ an adjective that Posner appears to be particularly fond of, the public intellectual as a kind of *pecuniary* identity. More significantly, *Public Intellectuals* is, by Posner's own admission, less about public intellectuals than the market for their work. In the preface to the 2003 edition Posner asserts "The [new] Epilogue recapitulates, with some refinements and enrichment, the basic argument of the book, which concerns the market for public intellectuals."<sup>147</sup> And what exactly is the basic argument of Posner's book? There appear to be several. One is that the work of public intellectuals lacks quality control:

...public intellectual work indeed has a structure, has patterns and conventions, is coherent and intelligible—yet part of that structure turns out

<sup>144</sup> Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 26.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* p. vii.



to be an absence of the quality controls that one finds in other markets for goods and services, including the market for academic scholarship.<sup>148</sup>

Adding to this problem of an absence of quality control, Posner tells us, is an absence of accountability: "At least when conceived of as someone who is attempting to make a serious consideration to the improvement of public understanding, the public intellectual lacks accountability, an essential attribute of sellers in a well-functioning market."<sup>149</sup> Posner's solution is downright Orwellian. It may strike the reader as ironic if not hypocritical that Posner, someone with little more than laudatory things to say about George Orwell in general and his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular, should advocate "fuller disclosure of academic's public-intellectual activities and earnings."<sup>150</sup> Fundamental to Orwell's dystopian vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is ubiquitous surveillance, a condition that Posner appears to endorse, at least insofar as the lives of 'academic public-intellectuals' are concerned. When it comes to the question of who are or who were academic public intellectuals, Posner establishes himself as quite a name dropper in his own right. However, distinct from Jacoby and like Andrew Ross, in most cases Posner writes scantily to not at all when it comes to biographical facts:

Think of the leading twentieth-century literary critics who wrote about literature under the aspect of politics, ethics, or ideology. Some were academics writing primarily for an academic audience, like Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye, Kenneth Burke, F.R. Leavis, and R.P. Blackmur. Some were academics writing for both academic and nonacademic audiences, like C.S. Lewis, Lionel Trilling, Edward Said, Frank Kermode, Robert Alter, Harold Bloom, and George Steiner. Some, like Edmund Wilson, Allan Tate, Randall Jarrell and Walter Benjamin were nonacademics writing for both an academic and a nonacademic audience. And some were nonacademics writing primarily for a

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. p. 7-8.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

nonacademic audience though happy to be read by academics ...T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, and George Orwell. Likewise in the moral and political philosophy of the twentieth century...writers such as Renford Bambrough, Christine Korsgaard, Onora O'Neill, and Derek Parfit; crossover types such as Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Heidegger, Sartre, Arendt, Sidney Hook, Isaiah Berlin, Richard Rorty, Thomas Nagel, Peter Singer, and Martha Nussbaum.<sup>151</sup>

As a literary critic Posner errs by characterizing Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a satire: "Yet I shall argue that the public intellectual aspect of Orwell's greatest novel, political satire though it is, is not the most interesting."<sup>152</sup> One of the irreducible qualities that a work must possess in order to be deemed satire is that it at least attempts to be *funny*. As M.H. Abrams defines it, "Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn."<sup>153</sup> One wonders which part of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* elicited more amusement for Posner, the chapter where the protagonist Winston Smith is tortured by live rats or the ending of the novel where Smith gets his brains blown out. Posner repeatedly claims that public intellectuals often seek to function prophetically, something they rarely achieve any success at. He even makes a prophetic pronouncement of his own: "Few Americans have much interest in literature but everyone is interested in where the United States is headed. Along with the rest of the world it *seems* to be headed toward ever greater freedom both personal and economic."<sup>154</sup> Perhaps the aforementioned passage escaped Posner's scrutiny when he was revising the book for its second printing. In any event it appears as a curious shortcoming that an appellate court judge

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. p. 27-28.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>153</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) 153.

<sup>154</sup> Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 9.

like Posner, someone who, as it becomes evident in later chapters, regards himself as an expert in American constitutional law, should have failed to consider the ramifications of the post September 11, 2001 Patriot Act, a bill that threatens to drastically curtail individual rights and freedoms with the sweeping powers of arrest and detainment that it grants law enforcement agencies, as well as to deny individuals the right to due legal process.

Posner's criteria for who qualifies to be termed a public intellectual is far broader than Jacoby's. One reason for this dissonance is that Posner believes that there is such a thing as an *academic* public intellectual. Jacoby is nothing if not a good sport about Posner's appropriation of his terminology, but it is with his signatory cheekiness that Jacoby evaluates Posner's methodology:

Posner seeks to substantiate [one of his] proposition[s] by case studies illustrating the defective quality of contributions of public intellectuals and by a series of tables, graphs and equations demonstrating an inverse relation between public attention and real scholarship. Pos-ner [sic] (or his assistants) have counted up the number of media "hits" and scholarly citations for more than 500 intellectuals to show that intellectuals pay for public attention by diminished professional legitimacy. In the service of this argument, he has collected a dizzying amount of miscellaneous data. Wannabe public intellectuals can pick up career tips. To gain media attention, "other things being equal" it is better to be alive than dead. Take note, students: Being Dead can reduce your media attention by a whopping 30%.<sup>155</sup>

In what should strike the reader as an even-handed approach—at least more even-handed than what Posner inspires in me—Jacoby addresses Posner's book as follows:

Posner is a smart man bewitched by two ideas, specialization and the free market. Together, he believes, they can clean up intellectual

<sup>155</sup> Russell Jacoby, "Cornering the Market in Chutzpah," *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Richard A. Posner, *Los Angeles Times*, 27 January 2002: R5.

pollution. For Posner intellectual specialization is next to godliness. It would be nice if he ducked into an academic department to check out what its excellent specialists are up to. On occasion he gets a glimpse and recoils. He takes up Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum as two public intellectuals delivering imperfect wares. Yet by their lucidity and range, he notes, they are “not in the mainstream of contemporary literary studies” which is generally composed of opaque and unappetizing fields like subaltern studies and deconstruction that “largely disable the practitioners...from communicating outside their immediate circle”. Posner, who prides himself on his rigor, fails to draw the conclusion. He does not recognize here his own ideal, insular specialists who have lost touch with English.<sup>156</sup>

It is as if, respective to criticizing academia, Jacoby is saying to Posner: it's all right for me to put down my family but don't *you* put down my family.

Posner ascribes a series of general tendencies to public intellectuals, tendencies that characterize them as being “generalists, rather than specialists.”<sup>157</sup> This characterization is presented as the chief grounds for Posner's continual complaint of public intellectuals being insufficiently qualified to address most of the issues that they take on in public forums. Virtually ignoring Jacoby's claim that public intellectuals were publicists, Posner says of public intellectuals that they “are often careless with facts and rash predictions”<sup>158</sup> and that “public intellectuality is a celebrity phenomenon.”<sup>159</sup>

Public intellectuals could hardly be said to have a market identity apart from furnishing specific commodities, those commodities being their own ideas and opinions. Here Posner introduces a classification for the commodities produced by public intellectuals, “inspection” versus “credence” goods; he defines them as follows:

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. p. R5.

<sup>157</sup> Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 18.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

A good whose quality the consumer can determine by inspection (as by squeezing a melon to determine its ripeness) is unproblematic. But many goods have to be taken on faith, because their quality cannot be determined in advance of purchase or, what often amounts to the same thing, in normal use—cannot in fact be determined until it is too late for the consumer to avert a substantial loss. Examples are education in private school, a chemical designed to make a house termite-proof, and a face lift designed to last a lifetime.<sup>160</sup>

The most consistent theme that underlies *Public Intellectuals* is Posner's frequent insistence that no one ought to publicly address matters outside of his or her area of expertise. On the face of it this sounds reasonable enough. When taken to its logical conclusion, however, this insistence becomes a form of censorship, censorship that would prohibit, for example, a linguistic expert like Chomsky from speaking out on American foreign policy. Posner's rationale is an intriguing one:

...the public gives more weight to credentials than it should when an academic is opining outside the area of his expertise. One reason is the tendency to exaggerate the degree to which a human being is a unity—a single consistent self whose behavior follows a predictable pattern. He is “good” or “bad”, “kind” or “cruel”, “wise” or “foolish”, a “genius” or an “intellectual lightweight”, and so forth. The tendency is fostered by literature and the other arts, both popular and elite, which tend to depict “characters”, the fictional counterparts of people, as unities, as types, consistent with Aristotle's thesis in the *Poetics* that fiction shows us what is probable and history what is actual. Most people, including most academics, are confusing mixtures. They are moral and immoral, kind and cruel, smart *and* stupid...if the compartmentalization of competence, and the underlying disunity of the self, are not widely recognized—and they are not—a successful academic may be able to use his success to reach the general public on matters about which he is an idiot.<sup>161</sup>

*Public Intellectuals* might well be regarded as exemplary of the very disunity of the self that its author refers to. In the case of his commentary on the Clinton impeachment and the 2000 American presidential election deadlock Posner displays

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. pp. 50-51.

considerable legal acumen. Elsewhere, in the field of literary criticism, Posner's discussion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as satire is less than compelling.

As a self-styled conservative, Posner offers a credible explanation for the popularity of communism among twentieth century intellectuals and why fascism failed to achieve comparable popularity among intellectuals:

The charm that novelty holds for intellectuals helps to explain why so many of them were mesmerized by communism for so long, and thus illustrates the danger that a hankering after originality poses for the socially responsible performance of the public-intellectual role. It is true that fascism, the equal and opposite extreme of communism, attracted fewer intellectuals than communism did. But the main reason, apart from the strong antisemitic vein in most versions of fascism, which is pertinent because of the high proportion of Jewish public intellectuals, is that fascism is anti-intellectual while communism is based on "scientific" theories. Communism, and Marxism more generally, is a book-based creed, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It provides rich opportunities, therefore, for exegesis and learned elaboration.<sup>162</sup>

What Posner misses here is that, novelty aside, capitalism is far from perfect and that the 'book-based creed' of Marxism was, and in many respects still remains, a coherent and comprehensive critique of capitalism. Moreover, novelty and the fetishism of newness are among the primary driving forces behind the machinations of capitalism. Hence, for Posner to cite the novelty of communism as the foundation for its appeal to intellectuals is, to resort to a euphemism that is anything but novel, clearly an instance of the pot calling the kettle black. Nor does Posner consider that, anti-intellectualism aside, more intellectuals may have avoided fascism because they were smart enough to recognize its blatant evils. This appears to reveal in Posner's reasoning a fundamental weakness along the lines of his own observation that "They (most people) are

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. pp. 72-73.

particularly likely to be both smart and stupid in an era of specialization."<sup>163</sup> For a judge like Posner, who in virtually every other case in *Public Intellectuals* never fails to flex his *juris prudential* muscles, the failure to make a moral pronouncement on the character of fascism—or lack of it—seems not only stupid but grossly negligent as well. Does this make Posner a fascist? Hardly. It is, however, a rhetorical situation that once again reveals the Achilles' heel of those who occupy the ideological right, an apparent inability to mete out an adequate defence against fascism.

Following his aforementioned pronouncements on communism and fascism Posner opines in a direction that any disciple of Chomsky and indeed many liberals would find disquieting: "Public intellectuals in the United States and other democratic nations incur no risk in abusing politicians, and do not realize that politicians have their own truths, truths without which nothing can be accomplished in the political world."<sup>164</sup> What is not clear here, nor anywhere else in the 450 pages of *Public Intellectuals* is if by "truths" Posner means official state secrets or something approaching a general code of conduct. The statement is sufficiently ambiguous to place Posner in fundamental agreement with those who would deny Chomsky and others the right to be publicly critical of foreign policy on the grounds that those matters are too complex or too important to be addressed by laymen. Even more disturbing is the danger inherent in advocating, as does Posner, the idea that those who are among the most powerful in society are somehow not subject to the same rules that apply to the rest of us. Does this make Posner a fascist? May it suffice to say that as with many neo-conservatives, he

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

seems to be someone with a keen appreciation of what it takes to make the trains run on time.

Elsewhere Posner refers to the Right as if he were somehow not ideologically indebted to it. Consider the following:

One reason intellectuals fooled by communism have gotten off so easily is that conservative intellectuals, the natural people to throw stones at the duped fellow travelers, were themselves deceived about the communist system. Not about its cruelty, hypocrisy, and squalor, but about its brittleness. That is why no one on the Right could imagine the system's [sic] collapsing of its own weight.<sup>165</sup>

The preceding may contribute something toward explaining why 'no one on the right could imagine (communism) collapsing of its own weight'. Eventually, Posner moves closer to declaring his political leaning when he states that: "Purely aesthetic criticism, even if written for a general audience, does not fit my definition of public-intellectual work, as it does not contribute to public discourse on political or ideological matters."<sup>166</sup>

Here Posner seems to be taking a stand for the purity of art and the ideology-free status of the aesthetic. Such a stance is often the province of right wing conservatism.

Ironically, the foremost proponent of this sensibility was a homosexual, Oscar Wilde. As such, Wilde belongs to a minority that has historically found little support or compassion from right wing conservatives. Predictably enough, Posner drags Wilde out of the ideology-free closet to justify himself. Conservatives aren't prone to cite Wilde as a cultural authority because they approve of him or what he created but because his aestheticism implies a prohibition on the capacity of art to function critically. Aestheticism with a capital "A" castrates art and artists alike through its insistence that both require

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. p. 150.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. p. 226.



the critic to tell the public what they mean while denying them the right to comment on political or ideological matters. The narrow ideological formalism to which Posner aligns himself is a hypocrisy that negates the power of art while posturing as being its truest devotee.

It is not until after 363 pages that Posner openly admits to being a neo-conservative (p. 364) one who owes his standing as an appellate court judge to the so-called Reagan Revolution as well: "During the Reagan and Bush administrations several conservative academics (myself included) were appointed to federal courts of appeals in the hope of correcting a perceived liberal ideological tilt in those courts."<sup>167</sup> By this point in his analysis Posner has taken the gloves off, not hesitating to brand most 'academic public intellectuals' liars and perjurers, a rather unwarranted pronouncement given the overriding superficiality with which he treats their lives:

That he [the academic public intellectual] may be bending, or even knowingly violating, the oath he swore when he took the witness stand is unlikely to bother him or his academic peers. Oath-taking is not among the rules of the academic game...my point is only that the academic norm of truth telling, insofar as it exists, is not expressed in or enforced by oaths.<sup>168</sup>

Posner offers no pretext toward improving the lot of public intellectuals. Rather, he opts for advocating what he deems improvements to what is to him the be-all and end-all bastion of unimpeachable goodness: the market. To help ensure that the quality of the market and keep public intellectuals honest Posner proposes "Disclosure of all sources

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 364.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. p. 366.

of a public intellectual's earned income...."<sup>169</sup> Perhaps the real reason for Posner's interest in Orwell is his own fondness for Big Brother.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 394.

## **CHAPTER 3: Take My Critical Theory...*Please*: A Class Conscious Discussion of Stereotypes, Intellectuals and Television Comedy**

### **From Music to Laughter**

In the climate of regressive listening discussed in chapter one, Adorno states that something comedic begins to emerge in the political cultural landscape:

In the face of regressive listening, music begins to take on a comic aspect...Music has become comic in the present phase primarily because something so completely useless is carried on with all the visible signs of the strain of serious work. By being alien to solid people, music reveals their alienation from one another, and the consciousness of alienation vents itself in laughter. In music—or similarly in lyric poetry—the society which judged them comic becomes comic. But involved in this laughter is the decay of the sacral spirit of reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

If these claims hold true, if alienation really does vent itself in laughter, it should then be possible to extrapolate a vision of contemporary alienation through a critical examination of comedy in mass culture. Just as what passes for music today reveals something about the present state of intellectual life, so too does that which evokes laughter. Bearing that in mind, in what follows I will expand my analysis with a consideration of that by now most familiar arbiter of the comedic, television.

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Adorno, "On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening," *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993) 51.

Adorno went comparatively easy on television. In his essay "How to look at television," he commences his discussion by stating outright that standard evaluative criteria ought to be avoided when assessing television in favour of a perspective afforded by depth psychology:

The effect of television cannot be adequately expressed in terms of success or failure, likes or dislikes, approval or disapproval. Rather, an attempt should be made, with the aid of depth-psychological categories and previous knowledge of mass media, to crystallize a number of theoretical concepts by which the potential effect of television—its impact upon various layers of the spectator's personality—could be studied.<sup>2</sup>

What Adorno is really advocating here is a theory of the reception of television that is grounded in psychoanalysis and a critique of ideology. As with other psychological approaches to understanding the aesthetic, even the aesthetics of television, we should consider this technique with caution, bearing in mind that if we adhere to it too closely we may be less likely to arrive at an authentic critique than a dubious diagnosis of the subject at hand. Adorno himself appeared to acknowledge this danger when he states "To study television shows in terms of the psychology of the authors would be almost tantamount to studying Ford cars in terms of the psychology of the late Mr. Ford."<sup>3</sup>

Stressing the formulaic nature of television shows, Adorno points out that: "the archetypes of present popular culture were set comparatively early in the development of middle-class society—at or about the turn of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries in England."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> T.W. Adorno, "How to look at television", *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993) 136.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 137.

The amalgamation of these archetypes or formulas may be said to constitute a system, a “rigid institutionalization (that) transforms modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control.”<sup>5</sup> Adorno credits the general loss of being spiritually centred, what I would call being attuned to the needs of one’s own soul, due to an increased antagonism on behalf of mass culture toward subjectivity or ‘inwardness’: “As the profound influence of the basic tenets of Protestantism has gradually receded, the cultural pattern has become more and more opposed to the ‘introvert’.”<sup>6</sup> Adorno observes that contemporary society has shifted from being ‘inner directed’, internalizing adult authority, to being ‘outer directed’, more influenced by peer group authority: “Middle-class requirements bound up with internalization—such as concentration, intellectual effort and erudition—have to be continuously lowered.”<sup>7</sup> If we are to take Adorno at his word then what he is in part claiming is that television is engaged in an ever-increasing stultification of its audiences, a process that is relentlessly reinforced by the medium’s mediation of socialization: “The ideals of conformity and conventionalism were inherent in popular novels from the very beginning. Now, however, these ideals have been translated into rather clear-cut prescriptions of what to do and what not to do.”<sup>8</sup>

Adorno points to the “multilayered structure”<sup>9</sup> of television. Television creates the conditions for the use of depth psychology in order to be properly understood. In championing psychoanalysis as the most fruitful means by which we are to understand

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 138.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 139-40.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 140-41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 141.

television, Adorno makes frequent references to the “overt” and “hidden” levels on which television functions, levels that address themselves to the conscious and unconscious minds of the viewers respectively. He emphasizes that “Probably all the various levels in mass media involve *all* the mechanisms of consciousness and unconsciousness stressed by psychoanalysis.”<sup>10</sup> Again, the teleology of the depth psychology process in its application to television is not so much a critique of specific programs here. Rather, it should yield insight into the dynamics, or as Adorno would have it, the *psychodynamics* of the highly complex relationship between television and its audience:

All this interaction on various levels...points in some direction: the tendency to channelize audience reaction. This falls in line with the suspicion widely shared, though hard to corroborate by exact data, that the majority of television shows today aim at producing the very smugness, intellectual passivity and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds, even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be anti-totalitarian.<sup>11</sup>

If Adorno is correct in this assessment, it would hardly be stretching the point to suggest that watching television is the very antithesis of intellectual activity and that totalitarian agendas may progress to the extent that intellectual activity recedes. These comments further suggest that a given television program is capable of indoctrinating audiences at an unconscious level with the very opposite of what they purport to be about at an overt level. Adorno’s psychoanalytic formulations on the relationship between television and its audiences are helpful because they provide a language, critical tools, with which to gain insights into what is precisely that, a *relationship* between a medium and those who subject themselves to that medium. Today it would

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

be more difficult than ever before to side with Adorno's arguments in their entirety. Presently, television programming has become far too diversified to be governed by the kind of monomaniacal conspiracy that Adorno indicates in his "How to look at television" essay (published in 1972). Yet what still stands as a disturbing testimony to Adorno's credibility is the extent to which so much of what is broadcast verifies the principles he identifies despite surface differences. The possibility of television shows operating on the unconscious of the viewer in a way that is directly contrary to its overt meaning is something we will explore later in this chapter.

Central to the attacks on the intellectual by the culture industry is the use of stereotypes. The social and cognitive function of a stereotype is to serve as a means of orienting us toward that which we do not understand, merely *think* we understand or to function as a kind of mental shorthand for what we actually do understand. And at the heart of every stereotype is a joke. Commercial television ruthlessly insists that that which we cannot understand must be treated as a joke. Adorno himself acknowledged the partial necessity of employing stereotypes. He seemed equally aware, however, that the result of an entire mode of communication determined by stereotypes results in the reification of consciousness itself:

Since stereotypes are an indispensable element of the organization and anticipation of experience, preventing us from falling into mental disorganization and chaos, no art can entirely dispense with them. Again, the functional change is what concerns us. The more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present set-up of cultural industry, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés which seem to bring some order to the otherwise ununderstandable.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

The stereotype, while it may owe much of its popularity to its success as a form of mental shorthand, has eroded into a form of codification which, at one and the same time, codifies a perception while encoding a value judgement into that perception. Often that value judgement is a negative one or, as in the following case of a television stereotype cited by Adorno, a compensatory one:

The character of the underpaid, maltreated schoolteacher is an attempt to reach a compromise between prevailing scorn for the intellectual and equally conventionalized respect for 'culture'. The heroine shows such an intellectual superiority and high spiritedness that identification with her is invited, and compensation is offered for the inferiority of her position and that of her ilk in the social set-up. Not only is the central character supposed to be very charming, but she wisecracks constantly. In terms of a set pattern of identification, the script implies: 'If you are as humourous, good-natured, quick-witted and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. You can cope with your frustration in a humourous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but also above the rest of mankind.'<sup>13</sup>

Adorno doesn't cite the specific show he's discussing here but it sounds like the 1950s sitcom *Our Miss Brooks*. Mass culture affirms Adorno's observation in his "Taboos on the Teaching Vocation" (1998) that "Compared with other academic vocations such as law or medicine, the teacher's profession unmistakably smacks of something society does not take seriously."<sup>14</sup> Adorno provides this explanation for the phenomena:

You might ask why archaic taboo and archaic ambivalence were transferred onto the teacher while other intellectual professions were spared. To explain why something is *not* the case always entails great epistemological difficulties. I would like to offer only a *common sense* remark. Lawyers and doctors, equally intellectual professions, are not subject to this taboo. However, today they are *independent* professions. They are subject to the mechanism of competition; indeed; they enjoy better material opportunities, but they are not walled within an

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>14</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Taboos on the Teaching Vocation," *Critical Models* (New York: Columbia Press, 1998) 178.



administrative hierarchy that affords them security, and because they are not so constrained they are more highly esteemed.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, it is then likely that the taboo on the teaching profession is rooted, at least in part, in the premium that Enlightenment reasoning places on independence.

Melodramatic, heroic and comedic examples of the teacher are abundant, from *The Blackboard Jungle*, *Goodbye Mister Chips*, *The Browning Version*, *To Sir with Love*, *Up the Down Staircase*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody*, *Teachers*, *Dead Poets Society* and *Mona Lisa Smile* in the cinema, to *Room 222*, *Welcome Back Kotter*, *Head of the Class* and *Boston Public* on television. The list is nowhere near exhaustive. In Adorno's description of the teacher on television at least three qualities stand out as being of particular importance toward a methodological understanding of the depiction of the intellectual in mass culture. First, television must endeavour to balance the tension between, and to obfuscate the hypocrisy of, an animosity toward intellectuals and a begrudging recognition of the necessity of having teachers. This is the ideological critique, identifying the embellishment and glorification of a social contradiction. Here it should be pointed out that not all teachers are intellectuals. However, in the mental shorthand of the mass cultural landscape, pedagogy tends to be equated with some kind of intellectual superiority. Second, with this example of teachers on television, Adorno demonstrates the compensatory nature of the situation being examined. The audience is compensated through a bond of identification with the protagonist who may be said to transcend the boundaries of her station in life by means of her charm and wit. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the aforementioned example demonstrates how a television

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 180.

show can realize its didactic function of engendering intellectual passivity by means of catering to the fundamental narcissism of the audience, vicariously placing them above 'material privations' and 'the rest of mankind'. The importance of this insight will become even more important when applied to the television show *Seinfeld* later in this chapter.

Mass culture identifies the intellectual as 'Other' and in so doing addresses itself to a fundamentally petit-bourgeois class-consciousness. Roland Barthes theorized that the petit-bourgeois mentality is incapable of understanding the 'Other' as anything other than an object of ridicule or a clown:

The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself...In the petit-bourgeois universe, all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. The spectacle or tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors. This is because the Other is a scandal which threatens his essence...Sometimes—rarely—the Other is revealed as irreducible...There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown.<sup>16</sup>

Here we can amend Barthes somewhat. The petit-bourgeois is not simply unable to imagine the Other; mass culture prohibits him from doing so. Where the principle of identification is involved in viewing stereotypes of the intellectual or the creative individual, the audience is being admonished not to take refuge in their own intellectual or creative capacities. Therefore, television stereotyping does not simply target victims; it also serves to estrange the audience from the cultivation of their own intellects and imaginations. The 'scandal' which threatens the audience is the impoverishment of their own inner lives. The persistence of 'exotic' stereotyping in mass culture suggests that

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 151-52.

the culture industry reacts to the audience as though in a state of constant 'emergency'.

Adorno clarifies this emergency condition further:

The constant plugging of conventional values seems to mean that these values have lost their substance, and that it is feared that people would really follow their instinctual urges and conscious insights unless continuously reassured from outside that they must not do so. The less the message is really believed and the less it is in harmony with the actual existence of the spectators, the more categorically it is maintained in modern culture. One may speculate whether its inevitable hypocrisy is concomitant with punitiveness and sadistic sternness.<sup>17</sup>

It is intriguing to note how little the stereotype of the intellectual differs from that of the artist, or, to extrapolate from Adorno, the degree to which they appear to be brutalized by the same 'punitiveness and sadistic sternness':

There is the extremely popular idea that the artist is not only maladjusted, introverted and *a priori* somewhat funny; but that he is really an 'aesthete', a weakling, and a 'sissy'. In other words, modern synthetic folklore tends to identify the artist with the homosexual and to respect only the 'man of action' as a real, strong man.<sup>18</sup>

Like artists, intellectuals tend to be portrayed as weak and ineffectual, if not malcontents. The information age has given birth to a slightly new rendition of intellectual identity, that of the computer 'nerd', such as the characters of the 'the lone gunmen' on the popular television series of the 1990s *The X Files*. However, the basic formula in this instance remains basically unaltered. The nerd is shown to be every bit as unattractive and ineffectual as the geeks who have gone before him. Whatever efficacy he might be said to have he owes solely to technology. Between 'nerd' and 'geek' the term 'nerd' is probably the more organic of the two. The nerd has always been identified as a type of academic or as someone not far removed from academia, Occasionally the nerd puts in

<sup>17</sup> T.W. Adorno, "How to look at television", *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993) 141.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 150.

an appearance as the mad scientist, a trope that embodies, as Andrew Ross might have it, a *popular resentment* towards the figure of enlightenment reason. Alternatively, the 'geek' was an epithet appropriated from the circus or carnival. The original geeks entertained carnival goers by biting the heads off chickens or demonstrating other, similarly bizarre behaviour. Freaks of nature, both nerd and geek as they later evolved into common parlance combine the traits of intellectual superiority and physical unattractiveness.

In recalling the culture industry's characterization of the intellectual as being essentially powerless, one is reminded of that paragon of logical positivism, the Professor on *Gilligan's Island*. With dazzling ingenuity, the Professor is able to replicate most of the conveniences of modern civilization. Yet for reasons never made clear, he can never bring himself to fix a hole in a boat. Possibly even more derogatory toward intellectuals is the half-human, half extra-terrestrial character of Mr. Spock on the original *Star Trek* series and movie franchise. Spock propagates the attitude that those who govern themselves in accordance with reason and logic are emotionally unavailable, while his Mephistopheles-like physical features accentuate the idea of the intellectual as being both freakish and demonic. His foils are the passionate Captain James T. Kirk and the even more passionate medicine man Doctor "Bones" McCoy who, in retrospect, seems to have made a career out of the line "He's dead Jim."

Indeed, the commonality between the depiction of artists and the depiction of intellectuals can readily be traced back to the same historical origins. As Arnold Hauser has observed:

The increased demands for works of art in the Renaissance leads to the ascent of the artist from the level of petty bourgeois artisan to that of the free intellectual worker, a class which had previously never had any roots

but which now began to develop into an economically secure and socially consolidated, even though by no means uniform, group.<sup>19</sup>

What is widely regarded in Western Civilization as the historical emancipation of the intellectual from scholar for the theocracy to someone who could devote the mainstay of his time to matters not strictly theological was something that developed concurrently with the emancipation of the artist. Today, the equal degree of contempt that is poured out by the culture industry on the occupational identities of artist and intellectual alike may well be indicative of the fanciful self-deification on behalf of the culture industry and those whose interests they serve. Like that of the artist, the presence of the intellectual suggests the prospect of a richer inner life than that which is offered by society, a lifestyle that still retains the vestiges of the idealism of the search for truth, and a generally critical outlook toward the world. The emancipation of artists and intellectuals that began in the Renaissance was essentially an emancipation from being limited to what the theocracy deemed sacral subject matter. This does not mean, however, that artists and intellectuals ceased to be seen as religious figures in society. At the very least they still retained the *aura* of religious individuals, an aura that can be traced back to prehistoric times when they occupied the roles of shamans, priests, prophets, wise men and seers. Bearing in mind that the culture industry's animosity toward intellectuals is of an essentially petit-bourgeois character, rooted in a strata of society that in part owed its ascendancy to the usurpation of sacral authority, this animosity may stem from the materialist resentment of the secular mentality toward God and religious impulses in general.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 2, trans. Arnold Hauser and Stanley Godman (New York: Vintage Books, 1951) 52.

## The Comedian as Intellectual

In the span since the disappearance of what Jacoby calls "the public intellectual," someone who thinks for and writes to an educated but non-academic audience, the entertainment industry has continued to thrive. One figure that has ascended greatly during this period has been that of the stand-up comedian. Unlike the public intellectual, the voice of the stand-up comic is more attitudinal than cognitive. He may assume the stance of the clown, someone who destroys his own dignity, or the wit, someone who destroys the dignity of other people, places or things. In either case, the cumulative effect of this siege against dignity is not just the indictment of the false dignity of deserving targets, but an inducement to dismiss all dignity as a sham. To digress into synonyms for a moment, the unrestrained assault on all forms of dignity signifies the total abandonment of honour, good reputation, calm self-possession, self-respect and principle.

Whether he is a clown, a wit or straddling the fence somewhere in between, the television stand-up comedian tends to be conservative in nature. Often he is no stranger to the business suit. This standardization of presentation is not a device of convenience. Rather, the business suit serves to underscore the fact that the stand-up can operate as a spokesman for official state and commercial ideology. Among our earliest rhetorical strategies is the invocation of humour as a means of making an audience well-disposed toward the speaker's point of view. Having robbed this strategy from the cradle of civilization, the stand-up comedian is the last visible remnant of public oratorical tradition outside of the overtly political arena. The allegedly apolitical nature of most stand-up comedy today leaves one to wonder precisely what point of view we are being

encouraged to have should one reject the idea of an oratory of pure amusement. In fact, such an oratory is only possible to the extent that it is possible to speak without saying anything. Before permitting the subject to disappear into the deconstructionist ether we might do well to examine a few of the particulars. From an examination of particulars it might then be possible to assess to what measure 'the sacral spirit of reconciliation' that Adorno claimed was decaying when the musical gives way to the comical<sup>20</sup>—as well as that of intellectual life—is at stake.

For some time now, and in a variety of ways, the stand-up comedian has been engaged in an ongoing jockeying for position within the upper echelons of mass culture. Once the promulgator of tastelessness, he has come a long way from the days of providing filler material for the mediation of burlesque shows. The first respectable generation of stand-up comedians, men like Milton Berle, Bob Hope and George Burns usually bought or stole their jokes. First through radio and then via television, they retained the aura of masters of ceremonies and were fully utilized by the media as such; they made the humour their own by imbuing it with their own individual styles of delivery that was honed over decades. On the cusp of the emergence 'the rebel comedians of the 1950s and 1960s', according to Gerald Nachman the situation was as follows:

It all started with [Mort] Sahl, whose entire act, demeanor, language, look, and wardrobe warred against almost everything that had come before. Pre-Sahl was a time in which comedians, clad like band leaders in spats and tuxes, sporting cap-and-bells names like Joey, Jackie, or Jerry, announced themselves by their brash, anything-for-a-laugh, charred-earth policy and by-the-jokebook gags. Catskill refugees, they were *tumblers* and *shpritzers* incubated in resorts, supper clubs, and casinos—mainly members of the comic Jewish Mafia, whose capos included Milton Berle (the Godfather), Henny Youngman, Myron Cohen, Jack Carter, Alan King,

<sup>20</sup> T.W. Adorno, "On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening", *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2004) 59.

Jack E. Leonard, Joe E. Lewis, and Joey Adams, with the occasional non-Jewish ethnic outsider—Danny Thomas, Pat Cooper, Nipsey Russell. It was an exclusive society. Few WASPs or women were allowed entrance, apart from nonthreatening curiosities like Herb Shriner and Orson Bean. The Friars Club was the meeting hall of comedy's made men....Sahl challenged and changed all that, simply by the unheard of comic device of being himself and speaking his mind onstage. Everything followed from him.<sup>21</sup>

Sahl's style of satire was not entirely without precedent, however: "Of all the comedians of that time, (Mort Sahl's) closest ancestor—and influence—was the bitter and acidic Henry Morgan, the iconoclastic radio satirist."<sup>22</sup> Concurrent with what may have been the last great flourishing of a tradition American public intellectuals, the 1950s saw the emergence of Mort Sahl, Ernie Kovacs and Bob and Ray, comedians who were not content with being mere chuckle mongers but were astute social satirists as well. The 1960s gave rise to the singer-songwriter in mass culture, people such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Linda Ronstadt, Judy Collins, Carly Simon, Cat Stevens, Gordon Lightfoot, Carole King, James Taylor, Paul Simon, Van Morrison, Harry Chapin, Jim Croce, Donovan, John Lennon and Paul McCartney. This partial eradication of the division of labour between writers and performers was not only in keeping with the 'do-it-yourself' *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s; it capitalized on a bourgeois cultural appetite predicated on the myth that there is no separation between art and artist. The culture that was subsequently produced suggested, at least in principle, a new immediacy, while catering to a generalized yearning among audiences for greater authenticity. Like singers, comedians such as Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen and Richard Pryor *lived* their material.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: Pantheon Books, 2003) 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.



It is a telling indication of the conservative and even misogynistic nature of mainstream stand-up comedy that with very few exceptions it was a largely male preserve. There was Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, both of whom used the concept of failed glamour and failed allure as their comic bedrock. Aside from the delightful aberration of Lucille Ball, it was not until the success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the 1970s that it became all right to be an *attractive* woman, reasonably intelligent and funny all at the same time. In addition to Moore and her male foils it was more often her television friend Rhoda (Valerie Harper) neighbour Phyllis (Cloris Leachman) or the Happy Homemaker Sue Anne (Betty White) who garnered most of the laughs. Prior to the Mary Tyler Moore Show, Elaine May of Nichols and May was the beautiful exception who proved the rule.

Having thoroughly trampled the boundaries of all previously taboo subjects, most stand-up comedians, or at least those who want to make a career on television, now look to what has been termed observational humour to make a living. Observational humour takes the supposed banalities of everyday life and holds them up as objects of ridicule. Whereas Woody Allen's comedic capital appeared to have been mined from his own personal neuroses, the heydays of Lenny Bruce, the somewhat later 'blue' George Carlin and Richard Pryor signalled the arrival of a generation of comics who sought to emancipate language from the hypocrisies of a reified Puritanism. Yet this emancipation came at a great cost, nothing less than the surrender of what had long been unquestionably private domains, the expanded erosion of the individual and the trivialization of the subjective. The making public of previously personal subject matter into fodder for public amusement through coarse but clever monologues quickly lost its freshness. It is not nearly so distant from observational humour as it may at first appear.

As with the obscene erosion of the personal, the real target of the constant barrage of *ad homonym* is the already much beleaguered self. Regardless of the punchline, the bottom line is always the same, that life and society are basically absurd. After all the barbs have been launched at the officially marginalized groups one wonders if there's anyone left to ridicule. The counterfeit wholesomeness of so much observational humour with its continual assault on the boundaries of legitimate respectability appears bent on proclaiming that there is nothing in life outside the realm of public mockery.

### **The Tragedy of *Seinfeld***

Following from Adorno's assertion that "television shows aim at producing, or at least reproducing the very smugness, intellectual passivity and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds, even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be anti-totalitarian,"<sup>23</sup> I would now like to forward what might at first appear as somewhat audacious, a critique of the situation comedy *Seinfeld* as a modern day tragedy.

Originally slated to air as *The Seinfeld Chronicles*, at its heart, *Seinfeld* depicts the life of the assimilated Jewish wit in the big city. As such, the character of Jerry Seinfeld bears the historical mantle of the largely Jewish community of New York intellectuals. Debuting in 1989, *Seinfeld* was hailed as "not merely a funny show but one of the most important shows in history"<sup>24</sup> and reviled as "the worst, last gasp of Reaganite, grasping, materialistic, narcissistic, banal self-absorption."<sup>25</sup> Although the

<sup>23</sup> T.W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television," *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2004) 165-66.

<sup>24</sup> An unnamed spokesman from *Business Week*, quoted by Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times," *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 12.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Wieseltier, *The New Republic*, quoted by Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times," *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 12.

show ceased production in 1998, it persists in widely accessible syndicated reruns, DVDs and internet legend and will probably continue to do so for quite some time to come. Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, critic Geoffrey O'Brien asserts that *Seinfeld* owes its popularity to the following:

People watch it for reasons as varied as its uncannily precise analysis of miserable but inescapable relationships, its evocation of the bizarre randomness of urban life, its pratfalls and grimaces, its original contributions to the language (the "glossary of terms" to which Mike Myers refers, evolving out of an almost Elizabethan fondness for protracted quibbles), its affinity with the fantastically mutating formalism of Edmund Spenser...<sup>26</sup>

In the show's primary narcissistic twist, Jerry Seinfeld plays himself, a successful stand-up comedian. Having made his comedic bones in suit and tie, the observational comedian Seinfeld has described his humour as the "rigorous analysis of something that doesn't even deserve a second look."<sup>27</sup> This used to be called *pettiness*. On the surface, *Seinfeld* the show usually appears to be about as little as possible despite the fact that the plots are often quite intricate. The show thrives on chronicling the interpersonal relations of its characters. This is a lesson that situation comedy producers have learned from soap operas. Situation comedy audiences may laugh with and at the characters presented not necessarily because anything really funny is going on. They have been lulled into a vicarious sense of belonging among the characters. The laugh track provides them with cues as to when to laugh. In *Seinfeld* the emotional bonding between television characters and the audience is achieved through at least two distinct strategies. The first of these strategies is the fact that Seinfeld himself lives in a state of

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 13.

<sup>27</sup> *The Late, Late Show with Tom Snyder*, CBS, 7 June 1996.

the ongoing sacrifice of his personal space. With little or no mediation provided by an intercom, friends and strangers alike walk in and out of Seinfeld's apartment at will; it exists as a quasi-public space. Jerry Seinfeld appears to possess no personal boundaries. He has been presented as the emcee and often the straight man in life. Generating a bond between viewer and characters is the fact that these characters seem to willingly expose every facet of their private lives. The second of these two strategies is that every secret, every foible, set in angst-ridden New York City, is on open display for all to see.

Situation comedies have tended to be comedies of manners where laughter is provoked through failed protocol as well as "failed practical jokes, embarrassing household mishaps, doomed get-rich-quick schemes, ceaseless unsuccessful attempts to get the better of one's neighbor, misinterpreted telephone calls (and) misdirected packages."<sup>28</sup> Steeped in the minefields of political correctness, *Seinfeld* wallows through a myriad of neo-orthodoxies and ersatz psychology. How can a man express admiration or affection for another man without appearing to be a homosexual? How does one confront the seeming impossibility of authentic communication with people of another generation? What is the proper and most effective way to lie? These are but a few of the issues routinely raised on *Seinfeld*.

The true protagonist on *Seinfeld* is rarely Seinfeld himself but a latter-day American rendition of the little man, George Costanza (played by Jason Alexander) the perennially excluded butt of the joke. The tradition of the little man can be traced through the literature of Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Kafka and others. Perhaps it was only a matter of

<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 12.

time before the nothingness, banality of deprivation and godlessness found in the work of Beckett made its way into a television series. After the wit and the clown, the little man often constitutes a third category of comedian, that of the individual whose dignity is destroyed from without. The little man can often occupy the role of a minor bureaucrat, deprived of significant purpose as a seemingly small and insignificant part of a much larger institutional apparatus. The destruction of his dignity is achieved through the introduction of elements that bring about his radical disempowerment. In the case of George, he is a man in his mid-thirties who exists in a rarely alleviated state of comedic torment over how to relate to and apply the orthodox values of the age in which he lives to whom Seinfeld serves as a more well-adjusted foil or straight man. The fact that Jerry's relationship to George resonates with an affinity to Abbot and Costello was not lost on the NBC network executives who persuaded Seinfeld to host a prime time special on the late comedy duo:

Seinfeld's manner, so understated as to make his lines seem thrown away, works beautifully against the relentlessly, operatically whining style of Jason Alexander's George...in whom the classic Woody Allen neurotic persona is cranked to a far more grating level of cringing self-abasement and equally monstrous self-serving.<sup>29</sup>

In one of the more inspired episodes of *Seinfeld*, George assumes the identity of a visiting V.I.P. in order to procure a limousine ride with Jerry to what they believe will be a basketball game at Madison Square Garden. It is gradually revealed that the limousine is really headed toward a neo-Nazi rally near the Garden and that the man's identity whom George has assumed in order to commandeer the ride is slated to be the featured speaker. Meanwhile, an angry mob has assembled to violently protest George's arrival,

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

believing him to be the featured speaker, a notorious but as yet anonymous neo-Nazi spokesman. The episode concludes with a terrified George, amid an agitated crowd of protesters, trying hopelessly to explain the misunderstanding on a news broadcast that falsely identifies him as the infamous hate-monger known only through his writings. Here the operational axis of the little man is reversed. The little man briefly enjoys a sense of power and prestige only to discover that it is through having inadvertently assumed the identity of a vilified, would-be despot. The episode speaks to what is consistently depicted through the character of George rather than Jerry. Circumstances perennially tempt George to enact a pretence. And just as George cannot resist the temptation, rarely is he successful in maintaining the pretence.

In another episode "sexual abstinence enables George to become an absurd polymath effortlessly soaking up Portuguese and advanced physics."<sup>30</sup> The stereotype of the intellectual in that instance seems obvious, that intellectual power derives from sexual repression. Intellectuals therefore are thought to be sexually repressed. Just as the term "intellectual" is used to designate someone more exclusively devoted to the life of the intellect and thereby suggests a disembodied mind, here we encounter the notion that the intellectual is somehow not a whole person and that whatever mental prowess he might be thought to have derives from the same laws of equivalence and exchange that capitalist economies seek to apply to everything.

Sex on *Seinfeld* has been characterized as "merely...a relentless necessity and an endless source of complications, and the intrigues that surround it have a detached,

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

businesslike tone.”<sup>31</sup> At a glance, the characters do not seem particularly promiscuous although they all pursue relatively indiscriminate sexual relations and appear completely oblivious to the possibility of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. The chief characteristic of their romantic liaisons is transience. This unwritten code of sexual irresponsibility among the show’s regulars is in keeping with the fact that as a comedic exegesis on contemporary angst, *Seinfeld* is basically counterfeit, revealing no more than the extreme shallowness of its characters in equally shallow relationships.

*Seinfeld*’s former lover in the show, Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), presents the female side of the problem. While some viewers might tune into *Seinfeld* to glimpse “the fantastically mutating eyes and eyebrows and mouth of Julia Louis-Dreyfus...[a] brand of facial comedy that has evolved into a distinct art form,”<sup>32</sup> Elaine also shows how the woman who pursues sexual adventures in a manner comparable to many men is not to be regarded as a ‘loose woman’ or a slut but rather as one of the fellows. While she is frequently shown to be quite cunning in exploiting her feminine attributes, the success of her friendships with Jerry and George appears to be predicated on the sublimated denial of her gender identity thereby ‘freeing’ her to socialize as ‘one of the gang’. Insofar as her relationship with Jerry is concerned, Elaine helps to demonstrate the apparent ease with which those who were once physically intimate can readily revert to a strictly Platonic relationship. The apparent liberalism and seeming liberation of this proposition relies upon a radically devalued regard for sexuality. One episode of *Seinfeld* did address this issue but in the morally disjunctive context of how to be in a relationship that is Platonic while retaining sexual interaction as non-committed recreation. Jerry and

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

Elaine resume sexual relation in the form of casual sex. They make up a few ground rules like 'spending the night is optional'. This episode did bespeak an attempt to make a moral point if only inasmuch as it suggested that such a situation would be virtually impossible to maintain. It is the nature of comedy to trivialize things. *Seinfeld* provides a brilliant demonstration of what happens when what is being trivialized is trivial to begin with. Apparently however, unlike just about everything else in the world of *Seinfeld*, sex cannot be completely trivialized.

The germ for the series was discovered when Jerry Seinfeld and his friend, fellow comedian, Larry David, walked into a Korean grocery store in New York City. They commenced amusing each other by making wisecracks about everything they encountered and were sufficiently entertained to believe that this sort of banter could be the basis for a television show.<sup>33</sup> As such, the genesis of *Seinfeld* resides in a comical critique of the commodity.

The series often appears as an existentialist comedy of sorts wherein the characters are maligned by the encroachment of a kind of nothingness into their everyday experience. Yet it is a situational confrontation that is of a decidedly different orientation toward the possibility of the void than the more prolific philosophers on the artificial problem of nothingness have suggested, writers such as Sartre, Beckett and Pinter. *Seinfeld* has at times sought to amuse by exploiting the social and, as the episodes where Jerry and George try to sell a show about nothing to a television network exhibited, the commercial implications of nothingness. Nothingness in *Seinfeld* remains fundamentally non-threatening; it seems to alternate between asking and

<sup>33</sup> *The Seinfeld Story*, NBC, 25 November 2004.



explicating what we might possibly have to fear from nothing. In this moral limbo where no one's actions have any real consequences for good or bad beyond the particular episode in which they occur, people exist at what may be, subliminally at least, a kind of horrific stasis: "the characters do not learn from experience and never move beyond what they intrinsically and eternally are."<sup>34</sup>

Seinfeld's next-door neighbour, Cosmo Kramer (played by Michael Richards, an actor who excels in physical comedy) is a man for our times. He is a trickster or shape-shifter character placed in an urban setting:

Kramer as a character embodies all the expansive and ecstatic impulses which are curtailed in others, creating an opportunity for the mercurial transformations in which Richards adopts by rapid turns the masks of Machiavellian intrigue, righteous anger, infant rapture, jaded worldliness, Buddhistic detachment, down-home bonhomie.<sup>35</sup>

Kramer launched unsuccessful lawsuits in at least two different episodes, episodes that suggested that in America frivolous lawsuits have become the new entrepreneurialism. Kramer is a force of affirmative abandon incarnate and, as a result, is usually shown to be thoroughly happier than his fellow characters. It has been through the character of Kramer that the theme of mistaken identity has been most inventively explored. During the run of the series Kramer's bizarre ventures into entrepreneurialism have included inventing a coffee table book that functions as a coffee table, harnessing the homeless to drive a rickshaw, training and managing a rooster for a cockfight and posing as a billboard underwear model. He has also been either mistaken for, likened to or appropriated the identity of a fireman, a proctologist, a television talk show host, an

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

opium addict, a police detective, a Mafia Godfather, a Tony award winner, a golf pro, Frankenstein's monster, a pimp, a serial killer, a stand-up comedian, a Shakespeare scholar, a corpse, a dog and a roasted turkey. Psychologically, Kramer is a clown without inhibitions. Aside from the occasional episodic flirtation with entrepreneurialism, Kramer does nothing yet remains fundamentally happy and seemingly well-adjusted. With no apparent means of economic support, Kramer manages to maintain a comfortable apartment dwelling in Manhattan. In fact, Kramer's' periodic forays into the marketplace, from selling the idea of a coffee table book *about* coffee tables to turning up as a supporting player on the situation comedy, *Murphy Brown*, appear as a sly satire on the American Dream, the implication being that one might do well to be a fool in order to succeed in America. Kramer's rootlessness is comparable to Julien Sorel, the protagonist of Stendahl's *The Red and the Black*, wherein Julien's metaphysical homelessness propels him, along with his classlessness, toward being assimilated by a very diverse range of social circumstances. Kramer's overt purpose seems to be to assume the role of bomolochos or self-deceived buffoon with one important distinction. Kramer's self-deception is shown to be well-warranted and at times rewarded under contemporary social conditions.

As Jerry Seinfeld's next-door neighbour, Kramer both carries on and is a satiric commentary on the sitcom next-door neighbour. As comedic subject he attains a kind of modernist self-critical autonomy much more successfully than the inclusion of bits of Seinfeld's monologues that punctuated the early episodes. Kramer represents the perfection of the Mertz Principle. Named for Fred and Ethel Mertz of *I Love Lucy* fame, the Mertz Principle is a consistent principle of operation in situation comedies. Simply put, the Mertz Principle dictates that the person or people next door are laughably

inferior. They serve to establish the normalcy and empathetic nature of the central character. The didactic function of the Mertz Principle is to encourage social fragmentation by catering to the narcissistic tendencies of the audience. The people of one's own community, the people to whom one is closest, geographically at least, are invariably beneath the dignity and intelligence of the viewer who lives vicariously through the central character.

*Seinfeld* critiques its audience by implicitly asking how cruel or outrageous it can be and still be a comedy. For instance, consider the episode where George, concerned only with his own safety, stampedes through a group of small children when he mistakenly suspects the apartment is on fire. Or consider the example of Kramer and George giving a faulty electric wheelchair to a young paraplegic woman who is later shown careening uncontrollably down a steep hill. Such subversive cruelty is not new to mass culture. Nor is this form of critiquing the mass audience—as in how far can we go and still be funny—new to mass culture. From the late 1940s until almost 1990 the comedy of Bob (Eliot) and Ray (Goulding) went from radio to television and back again:

One of the myths about Bob & Ray is that their humor was nice, which it isn't. Bob and Ray were nasty. They did parodies of *Strike It Rich*, where somebody needed an iron lung and they gave them a wardrobe from Fredrick's of Hollywood. They were your basic liberals, but they were very anticapitalistic. Wally Ballou visiting the paper-clip factory is about as anticapitalistic as you can get. The employees are bending them by hand, earning fourteen cents a week. There was a real tinge of bitterness.<sup>36</sup>

The primary factors that seem to motivate character interaction on *Seinfeld* are the problems and challenges of how to 'read' the real meaning of other people's speech and behaviour. Linguistic and behavioural nuances open up whole worlds of potential

<sup>36</sup> American public radio producer Larry Josephson, quoted by Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, (Toronto: Pantheon Books, 2003) 290.

meaning and leave an equally wide berth for misreadings; this is the comedic crux of *Seinfeld*, what Professor Jerry Zaslove has called “the urban topography of modernism in an epoch of identity-mongering.”<sup>37</sup> It is a world in sharp focus (rendered with an obsessive concern for surface realism of speech and clothing and furniture) in which everyone, friend and stranger alike, undergoes permanent uncomfortable scrutiny.”<sup>38</sup>

In *Seinfeld's* comedic universe the governing epistemology seems to be that anything, nothing and all points in between are legitimate targets for ridicule. In this vein, Groucho Marx also functioned as an intellectual. Some of *Seinfeld's* more inspired story lines, such as when Jerry and George attempt to sell a show about nothing to NBC, suggest a self-critical tendency resonant of a more literalized playing with emptiness in the tradition of the Marx Brothers. What is more specific to *Seinfeld*, what is thematically operant in the world of *Seinfeld*, is yet another splintering of deconstructionist epistemology falsely trumpeting the dissolution of the textual. Hence, humanity itself becomes the repository for the textual and the cognitive inclination to read. The teleology toward nothingness in structuralism and post-structuralism as well as the positing of nothingness as the primary quandary for the metaphysics of existentialism holds the secret promise of a much hoped for idealism of non-accountability.

Taking its cues from this intellectual atmosphere, *Seinfeld* instructs viewers on the new literacy of behavioural amorality. It is in this respect that *Seinfeld* parts company with existentialism, shunning the responsibility of developing a new, personal set of ethics for the sake of identity mongering and, as the character of Elaine put it in one

<sup>37</sup> Professor Zaslove shared this observation with me during a meeting held earlier this millennium.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, “Sein of the Times”, *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 14.

episode, "Havin' a good time." Even Kramer, despite all his various guises and self re-inventions, rarely if ever refrains from being his deliriously affirmative self.

While the psychology of reading humanity in *Seinfeld* may resonate from the radically delusional fog of post structuralism, its roots go deeper than either post structuralism or Freudianism. This "reading" of humanity is the psychology of capitalism itself as explicated by Balzac in the nineteenth century. Before the Freudian slip there was in the nineteenth century the concept of unintentional disclosure, a concept frequently posited in the novels of Balzac through his use of metonymy. The notion that the most minute of details or nuances can reveal the deepest of meanings if properly scrutinized is the basis for the symbolic device of metonymy that parallels the capitalist machinations of abstraction and exchange. As in the works of Balzac, the characters on *Seinfeld* conditioned by capitalism are essentially calculating in nature. But whereas Balzac is a novelist, *Seinfeld* is anecdote. *Seinfeld* chiefly differs from Balzac's works in that all the characters have often been stripped of their masks. Their calculating orientation toward humanity is usually on open display for most if not all to see. As the would-be new home of the textual, *Seinfeld's* characters exalt the alleged victory of television—and subsequently of capitalism itself—over literacy grounded in the authentically textual, the intellectual and "interpretation."

To posit the problem in Seinfeldian terms, what's the deal with Jerry Seinfeld? The content of Seinfeld's stand up is of the newer, observational style, a kind of sanitized George Carlin. However, to judge by his show business posture it is as if the comedy revolution of the 1950s and early 1960s never happened. At least one episode suggested that Jerry Seinfeld the stand up identified with the old school of comedy, not just by virtue of his name and Jewish ancestry but because of his vital concern for his

Friars Club jacket. During the first few seasons of *Seinfeld*, Jerry Seinfeld's personae acknowledged his comedic debt to this tradition by appearing as a kind of master of ceremonies on his own show. As such his show obfuscates or forgets an enormous comedic history that Nachman describes:

Nearly every major comedian who broke through in the 1950s and early 1960s was a cultural harbinger: Sahl, of a new political cynicism; Lenny Bruce, of the sexual, pharmaceutical, and linguistic revolution (and the anything-goes nature of comedy itself); Dick Gregory, of racial unrest; Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge, of racial harmony; Phyllis Diller, of housewifely complaint; Mike Nichols & Elaine May and Woody Allen, of self-analytical angst and a rearrangement of male-female relations; Stan Freberg and Bob Newhart, of the encroaching, pervasive manipulation by the advertising and public relations; Mel Brooks, of the Yiddishization of American comedy; Sid Caesar, of a new awareness of the satirical possibilities of TV; Joan Rivers, of the obsessive catty craving for celebrity gossip and of a latent bitchy gay sensibility; Tom Lehrer, of the inane, hypocritical (and, in Jean Shepherd's case, melancholy) nature of hallowed Americana and nostalgia, and in the instances of Allan Sherman and the Smothers Brothers, of its overly revered folk songs and folklore; Steve Allen, of the late-night talk show as a force in comedy and of the reliance on wit over verbal pratfalls; Shelly Berman, of a generation of obsessively self-confessional humor; Jonathan Winters, of the possibilities of free-form improvisational comedy and of a sardonically updated view of midwestern archetypes; and Ernie Kovacs of surreal visual effects and the unbounded vistas of video.

Taken together, they made up the faculty of a new school of vigorous, socially aware satire, a dazzling group of voices that reined roughly from 1953 to 1965, or from Sahl to Rivers.<sup>39</sup>

As such Seinfeld's stand up is basically anti-historical and regressive in nature.

But the show endeavours to externalize our resistance to this reactionary tendency with the recurring joke that despite his success, many people don't find him funny, including a woman who dated him briefly but had to break up with him because his act was "just so much fluff," his parents' neighbours at their retirement home who assume there's no way

<sup>39</sup> Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny* (Toronto: Pantheon Books, 2003) 5-6.

a comedian that had could afford to buy his father a Cadillac, and his fellow prison inmates in front of whom he is shown bombing at the conclusion of the final episode. Seinfeld is usually neither the protagonist nor the central character on his own show. He is at once himself and a fictional picaresque agent who together with the audience binds together the otherwise unrelated subplots. Concerning his comedic personae Nachman states: "In the late eighties, Jerry Seinfeld emerged as the anti-Woody [Allen]: a secure, non-neurotic, totally assimilated Jewish guy with no self-esteem issues who was attractive to, cool about, and adept with women."<sup>40</sup> Seinfeld's hygiene related neurosis occurred in a relatively later development in the show's and the character's history.

As both a fictional character and himself at the same time, Seinfeld maintains a transcendental quality in relation to the situations in which his character is placed; he is simultaneously *within and beyond* the confines of the situation comedy format. In the show's initial seasons his television personae acknowledged his comedic debt to the likes of George Burns and Jack Benny by appearing as a kind of master of ceremonies on his own show. This device was eventually jettisoned as was the device of leaving Jerry unscathed at the end of each episode. Seinfeld projects the safe oasis of soft cynicism amid the complexities of attempting to construct personalized morality in the absence of authentic intellectual values. Adorno's description of 'the alienation that vents itself in laughter' is not, in the case of *Seinfeld* an alienation that stems from the audience's awareness of social conditions. Rather, the alienation that provokes laughter in this case is man's alienation from his own spirituality. *Seinfeld* presents us with the stand-up comedian as the intellectual of our age who lives both on and above the

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 534.

periphery of generalized personal and social confusion as a glib, editorializing figure. All of life's adversities from infertility to suicide seem to transpire for the sole reason of providing the philosopher of our age with excuses to expiate his smugness. Here we are reminded of Adorno's characterization of the wisecracking schoolteacher insofar as Seinfeld's persona makes it abundantly clear that his 'superior wit and cleverness' places him, and the viewers who live through him, 'above the rest of mankind'. If we are to consider Jerry Seinfeld as a tragic hero, his tragic flaws are commonplace enough: superficiality, plasticity and compulsive neatness. He only "gradually reveals himself as the *homme moyen obsessionnel*, whose mania for neatness keeps incipient panic at bay."<sup>41</sup> Most of the time he is shown to be a success both in his career as a comedian and in his polygamous sex life. Yet at no time are we given the impression that his career has ever required any effort from him. A successful committed relationship with any one woman seems not just something he is incapable of but also something that is usually completely alien to his personal aspirations. Therefore, next to his wit, his greatest defect of character functions as his greatest defence. The tragedy we are engaged in when watching *Seinfeld* is that of existing in a society that has lost the capacity to have any real sense of tragedy.

The true key to understanding Jerry Seinfeld's character on his show appears only in intermittent episodes. That key is Jerry's other neighbour and arch nemesis, Newman (played by Wayne Knight). Obese, gluttonous, sweaty and a cigarette smoker, Newman is rarely acknowledged by Jerry as anything more respectable than a contemptible, fatty slug. It is no small coincidence that Newman is employed as a

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 13.



mailman, a blue collar worker—albeit a very lazy one. It is through Newman that Seinfeld's attitude toward the proletariat is laid bare. This is where we can observe the character of Jerry Seinfeld at his most didactic. Unlike comedian Jerry, sometime baseball entertainment middle management employee George, advertising copywriter Elaine and virtuoso identity monger Kramer, Newman possesses no share in the bohemian legacy. Due to electronic mail, the internet and cordless phones, Newman's occupation is perched on the verge of obsolescence like an occupational counterpart to one of Marcel Duchamp's readymade objects. In the Seinfeldian bohemia manual labour is the activity that corresponds to Dada's invention of the useless. One episode of *Seinfeld* featured a plot that portrayed the mail system as a shadowy Kafkaesque organization dedicated to preserving their place in society despite having become totally redundant. Seinfeld's antipathy toward Newman reflects a hostility to manual labour of any kind. This hostility is at the root of Jerry Seinfeld's character; an emerging, successful celebrity comedian, functions as an agency of enchantment. Each episode featuring Newman invites the audience to view the worker as an object of scorn and ridicule from the perspective of celebrity, America's version of aristocracy. Each episode that features Newman invites white-collar workers to look down upon blue-collar workers while inviting blue-collar workers to submit to a hysteria of self-loathing. This is how *Seinfeld* coddles the slave mentality of its audience. Seen in this context *Seinfeld* is a comedy predicated on the utter failure of class struggle to arrive at an equitable, judicious conclusion. This is the Mertz Principle with a vengeance.

Despite all the show's deficiencies, its failure to coalesce into a program of enduring social insight, and perhaps in part because of those deficiencies and that failure, *Seinfeld* works as a comedy because it presents us with the wit, Jerry Seinfeld,

the clown, Kramer, the little man, George Costanza, and the denatured woman Elaine Benes in an anarchic and frequently quite clever rhapsody of characterological interactions and situational overlays. A strong case might be made for the idea that the character of Elaine rarely rises above the level of tokenism toward the feminine viewpoint in such scenarios, an example of how the producers of the show (including Jerry Seinfeld) are every bit as subject to the demands of political correctness they often ridicule. As it was first conceived, *Seinfeld* did not include an ongoing female character. When Seinfeld and co-creator Larry David pitched the show to the network the network executives insisted that the show have a regular female character to make the show “more real.”<sup>42</sup> Larry David has since gone on to star in his own show on American cable television, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where his character, himself, has been mistaken for, among other things, an adulterer, a child molester and a self-loathing Jew. Of his concept for *Seinfeld* episodes to be as complex as they often are he states, “Usually, there’s the A story, the B story—no, let’s have five stories! And all the characters’ stories intersect in some sort of weirdly organic way, and you just see what happens. It was like—oh my God. It was like finding the cure for cancer.”<sup>43</sup>

What *Seinfeld* lacks is the teleology of authentic cynicism, “To speak of cynicism means to expose a moral scandal to critique; following that, the conditions for the possibility of the scandalous are unraveled.”<sup>44</sup> As the fifth and final critical model of this thesis, it is my contention that Seinfeldian cynicism is counterfeit insofar as it is a

<sup>42</sup> *The Seinfeld Story*, NBC, 25 November 2004.

<sup>43</sup> James Kaplan, “Angry Middle-Aged Man,” *The New Yorker*, 19 January 2004: 69.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Slöterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) xxxii.

reversal of the origins of cynicism.<sup>45</sup> True, it is probably not by chance that *Seinfeld* is set in Manhattan: "Only in the city, as its negative profile, can the figure of the cynic crystallize in its full sharpness, under the pressure of public gossip and universal love-hate."<sup>46</sup> While few regular viewers of *Seinfeld* would have difficulty accepting the idea that the show exposes the scandalous, serious reflection makes plain the fact that the scandalous is not unravelled but revelled in. The cynics were originally a sect of ancient Greek philosophers who espoused that that which is virtuous is the only good. They were ascetics who emphasized independence from worldly needs and pleasures and were critical of both society and materialism. This emphasis on moral praxis placed the cynics closer to Hebraism than Hellenism. The bogus cynicism of *Seinfeld* the show and *Seinfeld* the comic primarily targets mankind. Like the ancient math comedies, the entertaining sarcasm on *Seinfeld* encourages cynicism toward the viability of human relationships and thereby redirects the audience to continue to place more importance on material interests.

In our present culture of distraction, the hollow roars of simulated laughter arise from the ashes of dignity of the fictive tropes through which so many of us all too often live. Mass culture's reification of humour strives to illicit the giddy dismissal of all that is inherent to true humanity that resists its goals with little more than a well-timed raising of a single eyebrow. With the ongoing wreckage of all standards of human decency continually being cleared by non-critical discourses of pure affirmation, successful

<sup>45</sup> Professor Zaslove has described 'Seinfeldian cynicism' as being one wherein "characters struggle against the resentment they feel toward the 'others' who expose them—the hosts of characters who don't inhabit their closely formed, incestuous, lives." I am inclined to agree with this estimation, particularly as it applies to George Costanza, who is perennially guarding himself from such exposure or recovering from having been exposed.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Slöterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 4.

comedy realizes its aims with the same ease with which a dog may be conditioned to salivate. We should always be wary about that which makes demands on our time while purporting to be about nothing. While it may be unreasonable to expect television comedy to provide us with efficacious theology, as with any other cultural manifestation we can look to what we are encouraged to perceive as funny as a barometer of sorts, a barometer that provides clues as to our spiritual well-being or spiritual bankruptcy. Adorno's notion that laughter in mass culture proceeds from "the decay of the sacral spirit of reconciliation" raises the question as to whether or not spirit, sacral or otherwise, actually can decay. However, something about our collective spiritual condition as a society is revealed here.

Whereas today's anti-psychology of passive, non-critical spectatorship occupies a mythically utopian space, the presumed moral neutrality of which is held to be self-evident, the examination of contemporary humour in mass culture reveals that our laughter, frequently wrought in part by the inducement to become one with a simulated audience, proceeds from a state of collective desperation. As with the prevailing stereotypes of intellectual life to be found elsewhere in mass culture, the characters on *Seinfeld* are routinely displayed as being, in essence, unteachable. As such they have no true intellectual being. What we are presented with as a surrogate intellectual identity is the cult of the wise-guy by way of the character of Jerry Seinfeld. Reinforcing this surrogate identity is his setting, New York City, the international home of the smart aleck. Most significantly, as a comedian Seinfeld is also a writer; Adorno points out "...the

teacher is the heir of the *scriba*, the scribe."<sup>47</sup> Following this line of reasoning leads to a disturbing conclusion. Jerry Seinfeld's intellectual identity is a sham because the only reading his character is purported to do is of *Superman* comic books. Perhaps this was in part what O'Brien meant when he referred to the perception of *Seinfeld* as embodiment of "...the erosion of Jewish identity...a supreme and troubling example of the assimilation of Jewish cultural style into the mainstream."<sup>48</sup> If only by virtue of his name, location and livelihood as writer and wisecracking pedagogue, Jerry Seinfeld is the latter day embodiment of the New York Jewish intellectual. That this should be the basis for one of the most successful comedies in television history is one of the tragedies of our time.

What in *Seinfeld* is at one and the same time the realism and the comedic crux is the self-mocking banality. In the years since production of *Seinfeld* ceased, aside from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Seinfeld* appears to have had little *direct* influence on subsequent television programming, comedic or otherwise. Rather, it has been eclipsed by the wild success of so-called reality television. As per the quasi-Balzacian world of *Seinfeld* in which a world of obsessively self-interested characters carry on without masks, the reality show usually pits 'unmasked' characters against each other in real competitions; it is narcissist television where first place usually goes to the most ravenously self-involved. Examples are abundant: *Survivor*, *The Mole*, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Fear Factor*, *The Real Gilligan's Island*, *The Apprentice*, *Last Comic Standing*, *Big Brother*, *The*

<sup>47</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Taboos on the Teaching Vocation," *Critical Models* (New York: Columbia Press 1998) 179.

<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, "Sein of the Times", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1997: 12.

*Osbournes, Growing Up Gotti, Top Model, The Rebel Billionaire: Branson's Quest for the Best, My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé, Temptation Island, Wife Swap and Who's Your Daddy?*. This list is nowhere near exhaustive. Shows like *The Osbournes* and *Growing up Gotti* do not document the same exhibition of competition. What all of these shows share, however, is the totalitarian motif of constant surveillance as entertainment. As with *Seinfeld* every foible of the participants is on open display for all to see. The architects of these programs specialize in putting a price on human dignity. With many of these shows the entire proceedings transpire wholly to reveal individual and collective acts of treachery and self-abasement. Correspondingly, mistrust and humiliation become the entertainment values and thereby appeal to the popularization of demoralization, paranoia and the alleged superiority of the non-degraded audience. What is at work here is the simultaneous exacerbating and coddling of the ego-weak viewer: "This was expressed felicitously by Leo Lowenthal when he coined the term 'psychoanalysis in reverse'."<sup>49</sup> Commercial television does most of its business by persuading the viewer of his or her inadequacy in order to sell viewers that which is supposed to make them more than adequate. As an ego defence, the potential for paranoia among ego weak viewers finds its justification by vicariously living in an environment in which paranoid ideation is completely justified. The 'coddling' of the viewer resides in the fact that he is always in on the humiliating task at hand but is always spared the degradation of having to perform it. As with the characters on *Seinfeld*, the 'winners' of reality show competitions demonstrate that the key to success resides in being the most superficial, the most selfish and, in some instances, the fastest to sell out a loyalty.

<sup>49</sup> T.W. Adorno, "How to look at television", *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2004) 143.

## Conclusion

Inherent to this sojourn into the relationship between intellectuals and the culture industry has been an attempt to rescue critical subjectivity from factors that actively endeavour to suppress it. From the writings of Theodor Adorno I have sought to appropriate a critical outlook with which to evaluate mass culture and a range of arguments as to the nature of the public intellectual. I trust that I have done Adorno no great disservice by over-simplifying his ideas. Adorno's morality and its attendant intolerance of the manipulative character of the culture industry is the other half of the dialectical equation that defines art in terms of its capacity to redeem human experience. His unyielding scrutiny of the counterfeit qualities of regressive musical tendencies and their logical extension into all branches of the culture industry is at once didactic, disturbing and inspirational. Adorno's critique of mass culture characterizes the masses in general and intellectuals in particular as intensely alienated bodies of people. Yet there is a duality to this alienation that may serve to beckon some toward an emancipation of sorts. The profile of the alienated individual implied in Adorno's critique may sow seeds of dissatisfaction for a few, in turn prompting a self-critical awareness of resistance toward a culture of delusion.

For most of us today we can only grope at what a more authentic musical experience meant for someone like Adorno. Correspondingly, we can only imagine—with the help of a passionate trail of writings—how repugnant contemporary popular music must have sounded to him. As Harold Rosenberg and others have suggested, the

proper attitude of the intellectual toward mass culture ought to be one of condescension. What I have in part tried to demonstrate is that such an attitude cannot help but miss valid insights into our society as they are revealed by some of the throwaway elements of our culture. The issues dealt with in this thesis, from the jeremiads of Jacoby, through the ramblings of Ross, the charms of Chomsky and the pontifications of Posner have little in common in terms of what they have to say about either intellectuals or culture. For adults of early middle age or younger to read and agree with Jacoby is to regard oneself as someone who has missed out on a golden age. What distinguishes Ross from the majority of his postmodern counterparts is that there is no overarching crisis that he is trying to normalize; to take him seriously is to capitulate to the thralldom of camp, kitsch, shlock and pornography. It seems a striking shortcoming that Chomsky should have such a keen appreciation of how some propaganda systems operate as well as the complicity of intellectuals in their operation; yet he is virtually silent on the subject of how mass culture as a propaganda system works. Meanwhile, Posner's assertions that political leaders are not subject to the same laws that we lesser mortals are obliged to obey and that the incomes of public intellectuals ought to be made public to keep them honest are suggestions that are all but completely beneath reasoned rebuttal.

In *The Last Intellectuals* Russell Jacoby devotes much of his analysis to the idea of the university as a place for the containment of intellectual life. Less despairing of this situation is Andrew Ross for whom the issue of cultural decline scarcely appears to enter his thinking. Chomsky remains particularly sceptical of 'academic intellectuals' but culture, for good or ill, seems to remain outside the realm of his reckoning. Elsewhere, Richard A. Posner appears to be pretty much contemptuous of his own construct of the



'academic public intellectual' while remaining a zealous believer in 'the cult of the expert', a cult that Chomsky calls fraudulent and self-serving. Whereas Jacoby regards public intellectuals as a forgotten cultural formation, Ross and Posner dilute the terms of its specificity to such an extent that they see public intellectuals practically everywhere.

To suggest, as does Jacoby in his account of intellectuals and bohemia, that the health and well-being of one sub-grouping in society is ineffably dependent on the health and well-being of another, points to a metaphysical contingency that I have sought to demystify. Because his analysis in *The Last Intellectuals* lacks a spiritual centre, it at times seems suggestive of a literary determinism, that of *Faust*, and resonates with the fundamental processes of consumer capitalism. Did Jacoby have *Faust* in mind when he was constructing his argument? I doubt it. Yet as I believe I have made explicit, the influence exerted by that trope, particularly as it seeks to indict the scholar-intellectual, seems too important to be overlooked. While this is not a dissertation in Jungian psychoanalysis, the potent admixture of economics and archetypes in shaping emergent rhetorical forms has its own implications regardless of authorial intentions.

By way of discussing utopia, Jacoby has seen fit to bring the God of the Bible into the discussion. For that I am grateful. Contrary to Posner's characterization, it no longer seems legitimate to call Jacoby's outlook 'jaundiced'.<sup>1</sup> Jacoby might not yet be ready to take a seat at a revival meeting, but clearly, despite living in times that tempt many to despair, he has found a wellspring of optimism and strength. Following the trajectory of Jacoby's thought has led to the rediscovery of a rich intellectual tradition.

<sup>1</sup> Posner addresses the writings of Jacoby thusly: "There is nothing new about casting a jaundiced eye on the modern public intellectual." Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 3.

The fact that criticism is a moral action is a premise that Adorno accepted with the utmost seriousness. As a result, his writings continue to exert a powerful influence on artists and intellectuals to this day. Alternatively, I have cited the writings of Andrew Ross as exemplary of the failure of critical thinking when it neglects its moral imperatives. If the category of taste as a criteria for judgement is to retain relevance it must proceed from a morally realized consciousness. The unwitting affirmation of all that is wrong with the culture industry in the name of an exegesis on the 'popular' is based on a submission to a falsified social relation between individuals and mass culture, a culture in the guise of being something for everyone while in reality belonging to no one. Pseudo-critiques, such as those forwarded by Ross, are tainted from the outset by the fact that they are, first and last, emotional affirmations of that which they pretend to criticize. Ross's championing of an ideologically determined consciousness in order to make the production and consumption of pornography something that can be done in good conscience is an outright contradiction of the most basic understanding of legitimate cultural experience as that which engenders self-critical awareness.

When I first viewed an episode of *Seinfeld*, my initial reaction was one of amusement. When I sought to reflect on the nature of that amusement I was drawn toward more disturbing feelings. I was struck by the contingency of that amusement upon the absence of any spiritual dimension. I deduced that insofar as most television shows forward an agenda of one sort or another, *Seinfeld's* agenda was to make demonstrable the how's and why's of determining a personal morality apart from God. Admittedly, this assessment was somewhat hyperbolic and the critical viewer would likely see that not every episode of *Seinfeld* supports this conclusion; as with most initial theoretical descriptions it might have overshot its target. However, I would still maintain

and hope to have adequately demonstrated that *Seinfeld* often exhibits a glib take on personal morality when utterly displaced from spiritual values. Lest the reader think that I am being excessively or gratuitously theistic here I ask that he or she consider the plot of the very last episode of the show. Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine are arrested when stranded in a small town for violating 'The Good Samaritan Act'; they refused to offer assistance to an obese citizen who was being robbed and made wisecracks while it was happening. At their trial the courtroom is populated by all the minor characters they managed to offend during the entire run of the series, many of whom testify as to how they were wronged by the gang. Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine are found guilty and sentenced to one year in prison. It is as if the writers of the show passed judgement on their characters misdeeds and deficient personal moralities and knew that the only just closure for the series was to punish them according to a law named for a passage in the New Testament.

To have suggested at the time of television's arrival as a dominant entertainment medium that one of its most successful comedies would have as its recurring themes a world populated by the pathologically self-seeking, the 'rules' of promiscuity and lessons on how to effectively tell lies would have been unthinkable. The fact that *Seinfeld* epistemologically harmonizes with tendencies found in poststructuralism serves to register the fact that present day philosophical enterprises and the postmodern penetration of disparate cultural strata, in this instance the mass culture amusement of situation comedy and sensibilities of a literary theory, can precipitate a popularized demoralization. If reality television is the indirect legacy of *Seinfeld* then so too is popularized demoralization. Of course, reality television is not likely to be preferred culture for intellectuals. Yet it does provide clues as to the values and psychological

constitution of the mass audience. It would be premature to suggest that with reality television shows television has finally hit bottom, that it cannot possibly stoop any lower. Television may well be the first vista of mass culture to become so irrational that no amount of Critical Theory will be able to plumb the depths of its madness. And it is precisely for that reason, to gauge when average men, women and children will no longer tolerate sound doctrine that television will continue to warrant the attention of rational, thinking human beings. Insofar as it is possible, one additional responsibility of intellectuals is that they must never permit culture to become impervious to reason.

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