The Significance of Different Modes
of Consumptions of Popular Culture

THE EXCELLENT ADVENTURE (*)

Nurçay TÜRKOĞ LU (Ph.D.)
Asst. Prof. of Communications
MARMARA UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Communications

The technological progress of mass media in the cultural sphere, is usually evaluated in dichotomies. The newcomers are seemed to abolish the old ones. The tendency to preserve the "good old things" can be seen as disintegration to modernity -modernity is an open question- however it is not easy to celebrate the newcomers always in support of democratic participation which is supposed to be inherent to modernity. As Marshall Berman pointed out, modernity is somehow both subject to progressive and regressive arguments in human condition (Berman,1991, 13-14):

> *"(To be modern) is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and hold on to something real even as everything melts."*

MODERNISTS OF THE PAST AND TODAY

Berman puts into question all the arguments on modernism from the start of the sixteenth century till today. He believes that the twentieth century man suffers with the lack of understanding the modernism of today. There is no point of attacking to modern people for being "caught in the delision" as Weberian intellectuals have done. There must be another way of understanding our experience of modernity rather than the "ignorance of modern history and culture" of mystical post-modernists or structuralists. We have to

catch the liveliness and courage of the modernists of the previous centuries. The modernisms of the past can "illuminate the contradictory forces and needs" that "inspire and torture us" (Berman, 1991, 33-35).

In fact what makes the process of modernity a "maelstorm" is not easy to clarify yet distinctive enough to recognize its sources as: the discoveries in the physical sciences; the industrialization of production; demographic upheavals; urban growth, being out of control; dynamic development of mass communication; bureaucratic structures of powerful national states; unstable equilibrium of the nations with their changing powers in the world history; social movements of economically dependent people; and the world market which is chaotic especially for those who does not have the "privilege" of being in control on it.

Paradoxically, the ever-lasting problems of modernity, indicates the "project" has not been completed yet, despite all the "clear nihilisms" of the post-modernist thinkers . The project of modernity underlines the attempt of the Enlightenment thinkers "to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic." (Harvey, 1992, 12).

The post-modernist critiques shatters the very heart of this uncompleted project: Lyotard does not call the development of techno-sciences "by the old name of progress". This is a process of "complexification"; adventurous and dangerous. He goes on defining our destiny in this techno-scientific world "sometimes too big, sometimes too small, never the right scale" with a reference to Gulliver's overseas stories (Lyotard, 1993, 172).

Now I think Berman is absolutely right, saying that the post-modernists claim everything is just discovered by themselves. Here, Berman refers to Nietzsche for his thoughts on "the right scale" for the modern man: "he needs history because it is the storage closet where all the costumes are kept. He notices that none really fits him, so he keeps trying on more and more" he can never understand the fact that a modern man "can never look well-dressed" (Berman, 1991, 22).

SEARCHING FOR A FACE

The so-called "a major figure in the postmodern movement", Cindy Sherman's photographic art, searches for a thousand faces of modern women

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(Harvey, 1992, 7). Each one represents different types of women, very familiar to contemporary people; they stand for well-known media characters. Sherman's works despite their multi-facet complexity, are strongly subject to the feminist arguments, structured on female identity, she seems seeking strategies to recapture the "female subjectivity" (Saks, 1992, 20-25). It is clear that she has never claimed any attachment with feminist theories. Sherman's photos are all portraits or designs of women because she has been the only model for her own camera. Nevertheless this is another attempt in "searching for scale" and a remarkable example of bringing the creative pop-art of the early 1960's to the bleak atmosphere of 1980's. The emergence of pop-art in the early 1960's had somehow an aggressive movement through breaking down "the barriers between art and other human activities" (Berman, 1991, 31).

This "crossing the borders" experience encouraged people to break down the rigid cultural ambiance of the past. Sometimes the enthusiasm of breaking down the barriers, let people to a violent joy of being limitless in arts, entertainment and even in politics.

Many artists experienced the playfulness of working together on mixed-media productions. The closed doors of art, opened to commercial entertainment; thus the mass media had the most benefit of this association.

INDUSTRY AND THE POPULAR CULTURE

The exchange of the popular culture mediums has its own compromise within the industry. It is possible to name, numerate, and classify the common interests of companies in show business as it has been "shown" in the studies of Mattelart's (1993), as well as Mills (1956), Garnham (1990) and many other researchers have done. Mattelart, studying on the changes in the structure of communications industry, claims that the relations between culture and industry is not just a matter of "neutral" space of technological innovations (Mattelart, 1993, 436-437).

Institutional analysis in media studies helps to understand the relations between the policy makers and the capital owners; but there are still unveiled questions on the audience perception and the content of the mass media, despite of a cumulative number of attempts to find out the audience-text relations within media-culture-society sphere (Corner, 1992, 267-271; Morley, 1990, 163-173).

Once getting familiar with the new media in the society, it becomes unsatisfactory to question its technical restrictions or possibilities; the issues of popular culture is always more complex than it is expected to be (Ang, 1993, 419-420). The pleasure of audience is the promise of the commercial culture industry, and Ang indicates that it is as if; "everyone has the right to his or her own taste and has the freedom to enjoy pleasure in his or her own way."

It would be easy to see, for example the television, as a "phantom factory" which has to be destroyed by following the instructions (Anders, 1964, 358-367). Before being attacked by Rabassiere, Anders was one of the first thinkers (in his essay in Dissent, Winter, 1956) who blames television for the "devil" results of popular culture. Anders believes that capitalism needs unrealistic subjects who live in a "phantom world", and this is achieved by the very help of television. Rabassiere's critique of Anders is more intelligible to highlight the popular culture of the past, long before television. Rabassiere points out the positive aspects of popular culture, on expressing "a yearning for a different world" and reflecting "a search for a different humanity" (Rabassiere, 1964, 368-374).

Now shall we feel empathy with our ghosts as Berman recommends? (not to worry, just remember friendly ghost CASPER or GHOST-BUSTERS!)

I wonder if the large number of options presented by the media can help us to make ourselves at home in this world; or do those options work for nothing but to comfort our pseudo-individuality as Adorno suggests? (Adorno, 1991, 136-153).

FEEL GOOD

Today, "feel good" is the feeling of high technology. Most of the media researchers think that this is the reason why audience love adverts. We are all faced to refined "styles" in adverts. The life-style presented on media becomes more effective when it is not realizable in life. It is a "hard to define...but easy to recognize" element in our daily life of modernity (Ewen, 1988, 20).

Television dramatisation precisely gives a "probabilistic knowledge" enables us to feel good without having the whole information on events, politics, aesthetics, whatsoever.

INDIVIDUAL USE

Here I want to have a close look at some products of popular culture which seem to allow the individual-customer to a more independent consumer of cultural materials such as music and video cassettes. Without being restricted by time and place, the users seem to be freed/liberated from the social ritualistic acts. The radio-cassette player was really fun in the early days of home recording.

Now the popularity of the walkman; as its name indicates somehow independence of place, also helps to be voluntarily deaf; keeps one away from unwanted communications. Having the sound [radio-tape-(telephone?)] or the image (photograph) or both (video cassette) as personal properties; gives the owner his/her own freedom to rearrange the communication channels.

This is no doubt the positive aspect of the argument. What if we think about the author of the work of art, or the producer of the mass product? The impossibility of sending the message properly is inevitable in such uses.

A CROWD FLOWED OVER LONDON BRIDGE

I think there is no great danger for the work of art or say for the "reserve" itself in reproduction. Is it a disaster; to read, therefore see that "A crowd flowed over London Bridge" in T.S.Eliot's Wasteland, then searching for its pictures, for instance facing the records shot by a contemporary newsreel company when it was to be sold to an American oil millionaire in the late 1960's; and being able to see this record of London Bridge as a part of rearranged video series? Within the modern hyper-text or hyper-media promotions, we can also use the archive material as scanned images. These records, ready for use into different modes; as works of art or as reproduced popular culture commodities; although there is nothing to do in favour of their "unique existence" (Benjamin, 1992, 211-244).

The real danger -as Berman keeps on reminding- is not the "loss of a halo" but the loss of a vivid and rich imagination I suppose; one must resist to get accustomed everything that makes people walk around with their "happy slave masks"; flexible enough to face different interpretations in the age of post-modern relations.

Keeping in mind the early warning of Williams (1958), for the

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pseudo-knowledge of the world given via media; we should not expect any kind of totalitarian control on media, even for the "best" purposes of democracy.

The social archivistic precaution to classify the cultural products into genres, so to say into packages doesn't work all the times. The significance of interchange ability of the media (exchange within the characteristics of each medium) is also supported by the nature of different mediums to unfold its own packages. This process does not mean to abolish all the frames but to make them invisible. I do not share Willis's optimistic touch on the carelessness of capitalism (Willis, 1990). Put it in another way, one is able to talk about some uncontrolled areas surviving only within harmony of the rest. Indeed, the self-destructive appearance of today's world in post-modernist theories has such a careless tendency; unwilling to recognize the economical, cultural and many other borders.

In fact, we haven't seen an unlimited version of the slogan "everything is possible" yet. I am not sure about Willis's symbolic creativity, yet, the variations of boundaries is one of the characteristics of today.

AMUSING FOR HISTORY

I want to recall an American comedy film which was shown on television Easter Sunday (11 April 1993) on Channel 4, named Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, brings us to another Baudrillardian example for the charming "spectaculars".

First of all, as a self-conscious television addict, I have to browse my reliable film guide to see that:

> "Bill (Alex Winter) and Ted (Keanu Reeves) are cool dudes, but to their teacher, they are high school no-hoppers. They fantasise about forming a rock band called 'Wyld Stallyns'; one day they will pull themselves together and learn how to play guitar. Unless he achieves the seemingly impossible and passes a history presentation, Ted will be shipped off to military school; end of friendship! A figure from the future (George Carlin) appears in the nick of time, providing a time-travelling phone-booth. The two jump in and out of different epochs, collecting historical

figures (from Socrates to Billy the Kid) and confronting
them with West Coast culture. This is extremely silly, good
natured, superficial stuff; a lot depends on wheter you ta-
ke to Bill and Ted's unique lingo (which contorts surfer'
expressions) and their gormless behaviour. The funniest
scenes involve Napoleon (Terry Camilieri) adrift in Sout-
hern California: pompous and power-hungry, he devours
the menu in an ice-cream parlour and hogs the rides in a
waterslide park." (Maude, 1991, 62)

In this 1987 U.S. product, two "brainless" high school students, some-
how with the help of a representative from the future; begin to time-travel to
try and pass their history exams and meet some historical characters such as
Napoleon, Socrates and Billy the Kid. Being in travel troubles together, tee-
nagers begin to be friends to historical figures, so to understand the history, as
a result they pass their exams. And they become free to make their own rock
music which is shown as they are not good at it either.

Now, briefly, here we have a joyful mixture for the youth: music + for-
mal education + satisfied parents + comic history + helpful future = one of
those amusing movies. Actually, everything is in its own place; the familia-
rity of the mixture (in the example above) is supposed to be just a new way for
boring history education. If you have to get in touch with the history, force yo-
ur powers to handle it; make it your own, bring it into your "toyland"; future is
on your side.

Probably, the heroes of the past find their place in today's cast just as
extras. But time is not the unique distinctive element for constructing the cast
as we all know well, and sometimes powerful character actors emerge from
the extras.

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