5. The Debate on Mass Culture

It is perhaps premature to envisage a collapse of values, a transvaluation by which popular taste replaces trained discrimination. Yet commercialism has done stranger things: we have not yet fathomed the more sinister potentialities of the cinema and the loud-speaker . . .

If the new criticism established a specific role in American culture for literary analysis, it also provided one of the co-ordinates for a view of the quality and nature of the mass culture of press, radio, cinema and television. Paul Lazarsfeld, a pioneer of the debate on mass culture and its effects, has commented on the fact that the role of mass culture and its relationship to other cultural forces such as those of high culture was a major preoccupation of intellectual life from 1935: ‘In this country we attained a peak of discussions about mass culture between 1935 and 1955’. The purpose of this chapter and several of those that follow it is to describe the development of this debate in the work of a number of literary, cultural and sociological investigators of the impact of mass culture on American society. One emphasis will be on the proponents of the conservative critique of mass culture which stressed the low level of aesthetic complexity and intellectual content in mass culture. The work of this group, from T. S. Eliot to Dwight Macdonald, proceeded by a comparative method in which the products of mass culture were evaluated in a balance against those of high or avant-garde culture. The balance invariably tilted in favour of the latter. This conservative critique intersects at a number of points with the Marxist critique of the Frankfurt School of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse who, in the 1930s, took up residence in the USA as a result of the rise of Nazism. This group produced a damning critique of the agencies and effects of what they
described in a famous essay as ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’.

Both these traditions see mass culture as transmitting distorted consciousness through the use of repetitive stereotypes and mechanical narrative formulae. The effects of mass culture are to induce passive alienation and anomie into the mass audience, and to exclude the majority of people from active participation by manipulating an artificial consensus of beliefs. Implicit in both the conservative and Marxist critiques is the assessment that the joint processes of industrialisation and mass democracy, of which mass culture is a product, reinforce a rationalisation and dehumanisation of all forms of social and personal being into systems that destroy the autonomy of the majority while allowing a degree of individuality to privileged groups. For the Frankfurt School theoreticians this process of rationalisation begins at an earlier stage of world history than the onset of industrialisation and mass democracy in the nineteenth century which is the favoured moment of cultural decline for T. S. Eliot and Dwight Macdonald.

T. S. Eliot’s Notes Towards the Definition of Culture locates the cultural fall of the USA as ‘a consequence of the Civil War; after which arose a plutocratic elite; after which the expansion and material development of the country was accelerated; after which was swollen that stream of mixed immigration, bringing (or rather multiplying) the danger of development into a caste system which has not yet been quite dispelled’. Dwight Macdonald’s version of the grand moment of decline is similar: ‘The turning point in our culture was the civil war, whose aftermath destroyed the New England tradition almost as completely as the October Revolution broke the continuity of Russian culture’. Macdonald’s account includes a note of liberal despair at what might have been:

New England culture dwindled to provincial gentility and there was no other to take its place; it was smothered by the growth of mass industry, by westward expansion, and above all by the massive immigration from non-English-speaking countries. The great metaphor of the period was the melting pot; the tragedy was that it melted so thoroughly. A pluralistic culture might have developed enriched by the contributions of Poles, Italians, Serbs, Greeks, Jews, Finns, Croats, Germans, Swedes, Hungarians and all the other peoples that came here from 1870 to 1910.