

A Contribution to "The Method is the Subject" Discussion

A historian is tempted to explain the advent of the "age of communication" (or "Postmodernity") by noting the convergence of four striking developments in the technologically "advanced" nations between, roughly, 1970 and 1989.

1. The Global Triumph of Corporate Capitalism.
2. The Electronic Revolution.
3. The Global Dominion of Commercial Popular Culture.
4. The Postmodernist Turn in the Realm of Thought and Expression.

All four deserve amplification, but of the four the development that is most pertinent to our agenda probably is the third. The eclipse of the formerly privileged, elitist, aesthetically severe, intellectually rigorous, and demanding, print-oriented, Eurocentric "high" culture by a far more widely disseminated, accessible, latitudinarian, oral- and image- and media-oriented, commercial popular culture constitutes (in addition to the dazzling speed of the new communications) a large part of what Batuz calls a "new situation...of complete simultaneity."

The content of the culture industry's product is largely determined by the formats of electronic production for -- and transmission by -- television, cable, film, video, c.d., and cd-rom; by the collaboration of the advertising, marketing, and entertainment industries in generating large global audiences, the greatest possible consumer demand, all designed to satisfy the ruling imperatives of commercial entertainment: to deliver maximum returns on invested capital and celebrate the new world order.

The prevailing discourse of the electronic media is marked -- with a few notable exceptions -- by brevity; discontinuity; low affect; primer level thought; and a paucity of conceptual coherence. The positive aspect of popular culture, from a democratic vantage, is its non-hierarchical character: its products are accessible to all. The negative aspect is that it transforms the realm of culture into a lucrative commodity marketplace. Unlike the older high culture, whose products had relatively little value as commodities, and thus enjoyed the relative freedom conferred by eccentricity and quasi-autonomy, the globally distributed commodities produced by the popular electronic culture earn huge profits, and therefore are subject to varying degrees of market- and state-imposed constraint that is tantamount to an automatic if invisible censorship. All of which intensifies the illusion of global simultaneity.

LEO MARX

-- Leo Marx

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