AMERICAN CULTURE

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George Lipsitz

Time Passages

Collective Memory and American Popular Culture

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Popular Culture:
This Ain’t No Sideshow

In this great future, you can't forget your past.
Bob Marley

The late jazz musician Rahsaan Roland Kirk used to preface his performances with an unusual word of advice for the audience. A burly black man who often wore a stovepipe hat with a feather in it, and who frequently carried two saxophones (which he sometimes played simultaneously), Kirk would peer out at the crowd through dark sunglasses and growl, “This ain’t no sideshow.” Invariably people would laugh at the incongruity of this consummately theatrical individual denying his theatricality. Yet once Kirk began to play, discerning listeners grasped his point.

There was a show going on when Roland Kirk played music, but it was not a sideshow. Nearly everything that Kirk did and said, nearly everything that he played and sang called attention to his role as a black musician in a society controlled by whites. With bitingly satiric renditions of hymns like “The Old Rugged Cross,” Kirk related the forms and conventions of popular music to their origins within the historical struggles of the Afro-American past. With mischievous wordplay his song “Blacknuss” called attention to the unequal relationship between the black keys and the white keys on the piano. Kirk’s attire and stage behavior subverted conventional expectations about performance, and his aggressive humor exposed the tension between music as a commodity and music as an expression of lived experience.

What distinguished Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s “show” from a “side-
show” was history. All his eccentricities called attention to his identity as a historical subject, a descendant of slaves and a victim of white racism, a human being forced to disguise his pain and anger within the outward appearances of a sideshow. In songs like “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Blacknuss,” Kirk translated his experiences and aspirations into art, just as his ancestors had done when they fashioned spirituals, blues, and jazz out of the clash between Afro-American values and Euro-American racism. His stage antics played against the expectations of the audience because they revealed a sedimented layer of historical knowledge and historical critique beneath the surface appearance of novelty and performance. Within the commercial context of commodified mass culture, Rahsaan Roland Kirk created a history that could be hummed, a story of the past that relied on sharps and flats instead of on footnotes, and one that testified to the historicity of experience even while avoiding the linearity and teleology generally associated with historical narratives.

The elements of historical inquiry and explanation encapsulated in Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s stage performance present both possibilities and problems. They testify to the importance of historical thinking as an organic and necessary way of understanding human experience, a mode of organizing ideas and interpretations that is as indispensable in everyday life as it is in scholarly research. Yet its location within popular culture gives Kirk’s “history” an impressionistic, interpretive, and allegorical aspect. His art contained multilayered and heavily coded covert messages about the past, but for a large part of his audience, Kirk’s music inevitably appeared as just another novelty and diversion within the seemingly autonomous realms of commercialized leisure.

Kirk’s problem is our problem. The powerful apparatuses of contemporary commercial electronic mass communications dominate discourse in the modern world. They supply us with endless diversion and distraction mobilized to direct our minds toward advertising messages. They colonize the most intimate and personal aspects of our lives, seizing upon every possible flaw in our bodies, minds, and psyches to increase our anxieties and augment our appetites for consumer goods. Culture itself comes to us as a commodity. The artistry and historical consciousness of a Rahsaan Roland Kirk becomes obscured by our contexts of reception. We buy records and attend concerts, watch films and television commercials as a matter of course. Rarely do we ask about the origins and intentions of the messages we encounter through the mass media; sometimes we forget that artists have origins or intentions at all, so pervasive are the stimuli around us.

Yet mass communications also embody some of our deepest hopes and engage some of our most profound sympathies. People ingeniously enter those discourses to which they have access; the saxophone or the guitar, the stage or the camera can offer precious and unique opportunities for expression. For some populations at some times, commercialized leisure is history — a repository of collective memory that places immediate experience in the context of change over time. The very same media that trivialize and distort culture, that turn art into commodities, and that obscure the origins and intentions of artists also provide meaningful connection to our own pasts and to the pasts of others. But they do so only indirectly, constrained by the nonlinear biases of the electronic media as well as by a commercial matrix hostile to the kinds of empathy, inquiry, and analysis basic to historical thinking.

The presence of sedimented historical currents within popular culture illumines the paradoxical relationship between history and commercialized leisure. Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection. This capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present.

History and commercialized leisure appear to be polar opposites — the former concerned with continuities that unite the totality of human experience, the latter with immediate sense gratifications that divide society into atomized consumers. But both the variants of history and the forms of commercialized leisure familiar to us originated at the same time and for the same reasons. Both developed in the nineteenth century in response to extraordinary technological and social changes. Recognition of the common origins of history and commercialized leisure can explain the seemingly paradoxical
tensions within Roland Kirk’s music, while also helping to explain how the “remembering” of history and the “forgetting” of commercialized leisure form parts of a dialectical totality.

Commercialized Leisure and the Crisis of History

As literary critic Richard Terridman has demonstrated, nineteenth-century industrialization and state-building entailed a massive disruption of traditional forms of memory. The instrumental mentality capable of building the political and industrial machines of that century had to countenance the destruction of tradition—the enclosure of farm lands, massive migrations to industrial cities, the construction of an interchangeable work force, and a consumer market free from the constraints of tradition. A sense of disconnection from the past united an otherwise fragmented and stratified polity, and consequently the study of the past took on new meaning. Terridman notes that “history became the discipline of memory,” whose task was to uncover “the crisis which inevitably entailed disconnection with the past as a referent.”

Michel, Dihley, Bancroft, and the other great historians of the nineteenth century emerged to provide a sense of continuity and connection with the past in societies riddled with the ruptures and dislocations of modernity.

The beginnings of the electronic mass media in the form of the telegraph exacerbated the nineteenth-century crisis of memory. The telegraph enabled simultaneous communication for the first time, dissolving previous barriers of time and space. But that very simultaneity favored the agenda of ascendant industrial capitalism. The telegraph innately privileged the transmission of isolated facts like prices or recent events; it did little to convey context or continuity. Newspapers took on a new role with the stimulus of the telegraph, but it was a role geared toward commerce and change rather than to the preservation of cultural memory. The daily newspaper naturalized a kind of confusion in which the world seemed structured by isolated and discrete events; news became synonymous with change and more important than tradition.

A new kind of commercialized leisure emerged as a corollary to the telegraph in the United States during the late nineteenth century. Previously, churches, lodge halls, and community centers had served as sites for theatrical productions designed to mark festive occasions like weddings and holidays. But urban taverns, dance halls, amusement parks, and theaters brought new meanings to culture. The new commercial theaters, and later variety, vaudeville, and motion-picture halls, needed no special occasions and no association with ritualized activities to justify plays, skits, and music. They carved away a new kind of social space for working-class people—buildings devoted exclusively to leisure activities. Theatrical performances became commodities sold to strangers for an agreed-upon price rather than collective creations by communities enacting rituals essential to group identity and solidarity.

Of course, commercialized theater had existed since the sixteenth century in Europe. Jean-Christophe Agnew, among others, has delineated the complicated connections between the assumptions of theater and the values central to the capitalist marketplace, but in nineteenth-century America, theater, medicine shows, circuses, taverns, dance halls, amusement parks, and vaudeville-variety houses intervened in culture and society in especially important ways. They helped Americans make a decisive break with Victorian restraints, while at the same time blending an ethnically diverse working class into an “audience” with a unified language and sign-system.

The success of popular theater in nineteenth-century America aggraved the crisis of historical memory by further detaching culture from tradition. It institutionalized a kind of dissembling, one feared by philosophers as far back as Plato. To speak someone else’s words or to wear someone else’s clothes meant hiding one’s own identity. In a world where ancestry, locality, and vocation determined social status and identity, the inherent disguise of acting threatened core values. Role playing in the theater suggested that identities could be changed, that one was not bound by bloodlines, nationality, or occupation. This contained the essence of egalitarian and utopian thought by challenging the legitimacy of static identities inherited from the past, but it also threatened a sense of authentic self-knowledge and created the psychic preconditions for the needy narcissism of consumer desire. On stage, actors deliberately speak and act inauthentically, off-stage every-everyone learns to act, because everyone needs to take on ever-changing roles as a consumer and worker. As literary scholar Michael Bristol points out about the cultural crises posed by theater in Elizabethan England, “An actor is not just someone whose speech
is 'dissembling'; the deeper problem is that he is most valued for his ability to dissemble convincingly.\textsuperscript{5} As commercialized theaters in nineteenth-century America helped destroy connections to the past, historical tableaux and dramas became common features within them, offering a fictive representation of what was being destroyed in reality. Thus the contents of theatrical productions sometimes ministered to the very wounds that their forms had helped to open.

Along with the telegraph and the daily newspaper, the theater helped reshape cultural memory and consciousness. Its role on behalf of the emergent industrial order helped mold a diverse population into a unified working and consuming force, but it also raised anxieties about the moral costs of disconnection from the past. To many critics, the "dissembling" of theater presented a challenge to established order and morality. These critics feared that nothing genuine or refined could come from a sphere of activity devoted to false representations and masked identities. Furthermore, they recognized that theatrical "time" presented an alternative to work time, pitting the pleasures of leisure against the responsibilities of labor. Theater attendance enabled individuals to play out fictive scenarios of changed identities, to escape from the surveillance and supervision of moral authorities and institutions. The fantasy world of the theatrical stage encouraged audiences to pursue personal desires and passions at the expense of their socially prescribed responsibilities.

Yet audiences embraced the new possibilities presented by commercial theater with enthusiasm. Unlike the wedding celebration or the community festival, the theater assembled an audience with no shared history, with no reciprocal responsibilities and obligations. Theatergoers in nineteenth-century America shared intimate and personal cultural moments with strangers. The unfamiliarity of the crowd with each other provided a kind of protective cover—a "privacy in public" whereby personal feelings and emotions could be aired without explanation or apology.\textsuperscript{4} Women especially utilized the new popular culture as a way of escaping parental surveillance and patriarchal domination.\textsuperscript{5} Using the borrowed legitimacy of theater's status as a form of cultural refinement, audiences flocked to the melodramas, vaudeville and variety shows, and later to motion pictures for decidedly unrefined productions and performances. In the theater, they encountered a world momentarily liberated from the sexual and emotional repressions of the nineteenth century. Theatrical performances provided an outlet for expression of the needs and desires for pleasure long suppressed by the normative constraints of Victorian America.\textsuperscript{6}

The sexual repressions of the Victorian era created powerful anxieties and tensions that could not be confronted directly by "respectable" citizens. But theater productions offered audiences an opportunity to view the forbidden and to contemplate the unthinkable. This "freedom" came less in the form of true sexual emancipation, however, than through a redirection of frustrations. The unfilled desires and unconsummated lusts of theater audiences made them good customers for sexually suggestive images, no matter how coded, coy, or indirect. The theater offered immediate but transitory gratification. It turned sexual impulses and desires into symbolic commodities to be purchased from others. One bought a theater ticket to see a performance that depicted happiness and pleasures missing from one's own life. Pleasure itself could not be purchased as a commodity—at least not legally—but the image of pleasure represented in the theater could be obtained for a small price. Similarly, theatrical productions evoked other desires—for intimacy, for recognition, for connection to the past. But the very forms of commercial theater aggravated rather than salved the wounds they pretended to heal.

Yet the theater did encompass a kind of free space for the imagination—an arena liberated from old restraints and repressions, a place where desire did not have to be justified or explained. By establishing commodity purchases as symbolic answers to real problems, the theater also helped lay the groundwork for the consumer-commodity culture of our own day wherein advertisers and entrepreneurs offer products that promise to bring pleasure and fulfillment. The nineteenth-century theater may have emerged in part as a rebellion against sexual repression, but its greatest long-term significance lay in shaping the psychic and material preconditions for Americans to shift from a Victorian industrial economy to a hedonistic consumer-commodity economy. It would not be the last time that the commercial matrix in which popular culture was embedded worked to undermine its potential for educational or social transcendence.
Melodramas, vaudeville and variety shows, and motion pictures taught Americans to make a break with the discipline, sobriety, thrift, and sexual repression that formed the core of Victorian culture. Appropriate to an industrializing economy, Victorian values provided necessary preconditions for economic growth during the nineteenth century. They stressed the work ethic, personal responsibility, punctuality, and willingness to defer gratification necessary for life as an industrial worker. But by the 1890s, it appeared that Victorian culture had done its work all too well. The hard-working Americans who internalized Victorian values helped build a powerful industrial economy that produced more products than the domestic market could consume. Overproduction and underconsumption threatened the very survival of industrial capitalism in the 1880s and 1890s, as business failures led to massive unemployment and repeated financial panics. The “false promise” of the Victorian code, that sober self-management would lead to upward mobility, helped provoke general strikes and other forms of “aggressive festivity” among workers. To solve their many problems, business leaders had to move away from the production of capital goods like railroads and locomotives and start producing consumer goods for the domestic market. But as long as Victorian repressions inhibited desires for immediate gratification, consumers lacked the psychological makeup necessary for an economy oriented around ever-increasing purchases of commodities by individuals.

Commercialized leisure evolved out of the contradictions in late nineteenth-century capitalism. As I. C. Jarvie notes, motion pictures not only served as renewable commodities in themselves, but they also helped legitimate the consciousness necessary for purchasing other renewable commodities. The specialization of industrial capitalism requires individuals “detachable from tradition, family, and ascription.” Jarvie argues that motion pictures encouraged people to see themselves as detached and autonomous consumers by replacing ritualistic community celebrations with leisure that could be purchased as a commodity and shared with strangers. Between 1890 and 1930 American society underwent extraordinary changes, from a Victorian culture of thrift to a consumer-oriented culture of spending. By the 1920s, production of renewable commodities like automobiles and appliances played a more important role in the U.S. economy than production of nonrenewable capital goods like heavy equipment and machinery. Economic historians have long understood the logic of this change for the interests of capital; building factories and locomotive engines brought enormous immediate profits, but the market for them became saturated rather quickly. Consumer goods did not need to last—indeed advertisers worked very diligently to see to it that considerations of fashion and style would render old goods obsolete and engender a demand for new ones.

Scholars examining the transition from Victorianism to consumerism in the U.S. have concentrated on the idea of leisure as contested terrain. Drawing upon the research of E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, they have emphasized the ways in which the transition from agrarian to industrial life gave new meanings to work and play. In pre-industrial society, agrarian labor could be done at one’s own pace and for one’s own benefit. In the industrial workplace, factory time replaced natural time, and unremitting labor measured by the time-clock replaced the task-oriented work of the farm. No longer could leisure be mixed in with work, and work itself became a more prominent and a more alienating part of human existence. Just as the centralized industrial work site replaced home labor, so commercial establishments devoted to leisure-time pursuits replicated in the arena of play the capitalist division of labor. Intense resistance against these practices fueled strikes, sabotage, and other forms of working-class self-activity throughout the era of industrialization, but religious, medical, and legal authorities attempted to prevent revolt by inculcating Victorian values within the character structure of the work force, values championing repression, denial, thrift, chastity, sobriety, and hard work. But like most forms of ideological legitimation, they contained severe internal contradictions. When workers internalized Victorian norms, their labor produced a surplus of goods that could not be consumed by a domestic market filled with poorly paid thrifty self-denying individuals like themselves. When workers resisted Victorian norms, their repressions and anger drove them toward the only available source of pleasure—the illicit vices offered for sale by the underworld.

Thus commercialized leisure both facilitated the triumphs of industrial capitalism and focused attention on their psychic and emotional costs. Commercial culture sought credibility with its audiences by promising at least the illusion of connection with the past. But the gap between lived experience and the false promises of popular cul-
ture always created the possibility for counter-memories, for ethnic, class, and regional music, art, speech, and theater. Culture itself contributed to retraining and reshaping the masses to serve the interests of capital, but also to articulating unfulfilled desires and expressing disconnection from the past. British cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall notes the contradictions in this process as well as the centrality of tradition as a contested category in the nineteenth century.

Capital had a stake in the culture of the popular classes because the constitution of a whole new social order around capital required a more or less continuous, if intermittent, process of re-education. And one of the principal sites of resistance to the forms through which this ‘reform’ of the people was pursued lay in popular tradition. That is why popular culture is linked, for so long, to questions of tradition, of traditional forms of life—and why its ‘traditionalism’ has been so often misinterpreted as a product of a merely conservative impulse, backward looking and anachronistic.\(^8\)

The transformations in behavior and collective memory fueled by the contradictions of the nineteenth century have passed through three major stages in the United States. The first involved the establishment and codification of commercialized leisure from the invention of the telegraph to the 1890s. The second involved the transition from Victorian to consumer-hedonist values between 1890 and 1945. The third and most important stage, from World War II to the present, involved extraordinary expansion in both the distribution of consumer purchasing power and in the reach and scope of the electronic mass media. The dislocations of urban renewal, suburbanization, and deindustrialization accelerated the demise of tradition in America, while the worldwide pace of change undermined stability elsewhere. The period from World War II to the present marks the final triumph of commercialized leisure, and with it an augmented crisis over the loss of connection to the past. Popular culture has played an important role in creating this crisis of memory, but it has also been one of the main vehicles for the expression of loss and the projection of hopes for reconnection to the past.

**What Is Popular Culture?**

As historian Ramon Gutierrez observes, the term “popular culture” is a description crafted exclusively from the outside. The creators of popular culture do not think of themselves as operating within an endeavor called “popular culture”; they see themselves merely creating signs and symbols appropriate to their audiences and to themselves. It is only from the vantage point of Enlightenment ideals of “high culture” that something called popular culture can be seen to exist. In recent years, scholars have increasingly challenged the divisions between “high” and popular culture, and rightly so. Yet it is also clear that what we call popular culture differs markedly in its aims and intentions from the Enlightenment culture of “beauty and truth” idealized in the nineteenth century by Matthew Arnold, as well as from the isolated “folk” cultures studied by anthropologists and folklorists. In general, we have a better idea of what commercial culture is not (high art and folklore) than what it is. But we can identify some aspects of commercialized leisure that have come to define its conditions of possibility.\(^9\)

Popular culture has no fixed forms: the historical circumstances of reception and appropriation determine whether novels or motion pictures or videos belong to a sphere called popular culture. Similarly, individual artifacts of popular culture have no fixed meanings: it is impossible to say whether any one combination of sounds or set of images or grouping of words innately expresses one unified political position. Images and icons compete for dominance within a multiplicity of discourses; consumers of popular culture move in and out of subject positions in a way that allows the same message to have widely varying meanings at the point of reception. Although cultural products generally reflect the dominant ideology of any given period, no cultural moment exists within a hermetically sealed cultural present; all cultural expressions speak to both residual memories of the past and emergent hopes for the future.

Rather than looking for innately emancipatory or hegemonic forms and meanings within popular culture, we would do better to study its “transformations,” which Stuart Hall defines as

> “the active work on existing traditions and activities, their active re-working so that they come out a different way: they appear to ‘persist’—yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to the ‘others’ and to the conditions of life.”\(^10\)
In the United States since World War II, these transformations have coalesced around identifiable conditions of possibility. These conditions are not an "aesthetic," or a finite set of rules guiding artistic production and reception; they are not inherently "progressive" practices guaranteed to advance struggles against exploitation and hierarchy wherever they appear; they are not pure, authentic, or transcendent by themselves. They are historically specific elements within commercial culture that allow for the expression of collective popular memory and the reworking of tradition. Participation and investment, carnival, and a struggle for hegemony have provided significant conditions of possibility within American commercial culture since World War II. At times, all of these have created frames of reception consistent with dominant ideology, but they have also worked to hone and sharpen collective popular memory.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's categories of participation and investment accurately characterize audience expectations from American popular culture since World War II. Unlike "high culture" where a dogmatic formalism privileges abstraction over experience, the effectiveness of popular culture depends on its ability to engage audiences in active and familiar processes. Tania Modleski has demonstrated how television soap operas and game shows win credibility with viewers by turning into play the everyday work of nurturing families and making purchases, much as rodeo events or car customizing do for cowboys and mechanics. Frederic Jameson describes popular songs as copies for which there exist no originals, texts whose popularity depends less on innovation or imagination than upon a sense of familiarity conducive to immediate audience appropriation.

Traditions of participation and investment, combined with the internal biases of electronic mass media, tend to privilege forms of communication emanating from aggrieved and marginal communities. Sociologists Basil Bernstein, Leonard Schatzman, and Anselm Strauss have identified empathy, immediacy, and emotion as core components of working-class speech, and they have demonstrated how working-class speakers subordinate linear, individualistic, and analytic ways of speaking to stress nonlinear effects and collective emotions. Rhetorician Kathleen Hall Jamieson points out that television favors a style of speaking that historically has been associated with women—an unself-conscious sense of self-disclosure about one's private self and an ability to integrate others into one's discussions—and that, conversely, the medium works against speech styles traditionally associated with men, which favor projection of the self against the environment. The ever changing meanings and deliberate indeterminacies of subcultural slang undercut the authority of the word, replacing it with an appreciation of the inevitable metaphoricity of language. Such usage entails a break with the logocentric world of the Enlightenment in which univocal utterances and precise descriptions serve to fix final meanings and identities; at the same time it foregrounds a sense of language so new that it resembles postmodern poetry and so old that it echoes the ancient Nahua poet who insisted that "no one among us truly and finally speaks here."

Melodrama presents a particularly significant form of participation and investment within American commercial culture since World War II. Melodrama emerged out of the same nineteenth-century dislocations responsible for the problem of historical memory and the rise of popular culture itself. It emerged as an expression of the inadequacies of Enlightenment language and art, displacing conventional narratives and reasoned discourse with broad physical gestures, tableaux, simple binary oppositions between good and evil, and plots resolved more by fate and sudden reverses than by human action. A precursor to film noir, the gothic romance, and the television night-time serial, melodrama established important subtexts within American popular culture. Television critic Jane Feuer points out that melodrama's unsatisfying endings resist the unproblematic closures of dominant narratives, while cinema scholar Laura Mulvey demonstrates how melodrama contains a critique of the cinematic apparatus itself by subjecting its protagonists to "the curious and prurient gaze of intrusive community, neighbors, friends, and family so that the spectator's own look becomes self-conscious and awkward."

Carnival traditions have provided another important frame of reception for American popular culture since World War II. Bourdieu speaks of popular forms that "satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the free speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties." Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin identifies these sensibilities as the essence of carnival—ritualized celebrations oriented around the passions of plentitude, inversions of the social order, and
mocking laughter designed to “uncrown power.” The dangerous “dissembling” that so troubled nineteenth-century opponents of popular theater, the anarchic anti-authoritarianism of the Marx Brothers, and the sense of entitlement to the good life enshrined in popular music and television all build upon the oppositional possibilities of carnival. Practices within popular culture like constituting the body as a site for decoration and style, valorizing the street as a locus of sociality and creativity, and inverting dominant icons to affirm a prestige from below also resonate with the legacy of carnival. For Bakhtin, retentions of carnival laughter and display evidence a “materials memory,” by which words themselves contain ideological traces from the past that take on renewed significance when they are appropriated in the present.

Like participation and investment, carnival privileges certain social dispositions, but it has no intrinsic political meaning. Only in the context of a struggle for hegemony can the latent possibilities of collective memory be activated. The idea of “a struggle for hegemony” originates with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who maintains that elites rule not merely by force but by “managed consent” as well, that they form “historical blocs” with other groups that make existing power relations appear natural and just. Some scholars emphasize the ways in which Gramsci’s formulations explain how elites impose their will on society and turn potential rebels into unwitting accomplices in their own victimization. But hegemony is not just imposed on society from the top; it is struggled for from below, and no terrain is a more important part of that struggle than popular culture.

Cultural forms create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future; but they also engender accommodation with prevailing power realities, separating art from life, and internalizing the dominant culture’s norms and values as necessary and inevitable. Politics and culture maintain a paradoxical relationship in which only effective political action can win breathing room for a new culture, but only a revolution in culture can make people capable of political action. Culture can seem like a substitute for politics, a way of posing only imaginary solutions to real problems, but under other circumstances culture can become a rehearsal for politics, trying out values and beliefs permissible in art but forbidden in social life. Most often, however, culture exists as a form of politics, as a means of reshaping individual and collective practice for specified interests, and as long as individuals perceive their interests as unfilled, culture retains an oppositional potential. Fredric Jameson argues that the dominant culture can only presume to ease anxieties like disconnection from the past by calling attention to them in the first place, thereby running the risk of re-opening the very ruptures it seeks to close. For Jameson, the best cultural creations present contemporary social contradictions in such a way as to suggest eventual resolutions of them, but even works that fall short of that goal retain the potential to play a role in the struggle for hegemony.

The complicated relationship between historical memory and commercial culture, between the texts of popular culture and their contexts of creation and reception, resist conventional forms of cultural criticism. The coded, indirect, and allegorical aspects of popular culture, its inversions of speech and ideology, and its refusal to isolate art from lived experience (a source of corruption as well as social connection) baffle and frustrate critics trained in traditional Western aesthetics and criticism. Neil Postman indicts television as a force debasing public discourse in America because its claims are made with images rather than language. For Postman, the eclipse of language renders empirical tests and logical analysis “impotent.”

In a similar vein, Allan Bloom assures us that rock and roll music’s entire meaning rests in its rhythm (as if there were only one), which he confidently explains is the “rhythm of sexual intercourse” (as if here, too, there were only one). The equally uninformed Robert Pattison contends that rock music represents the “triumph of vulgarity,” through mindless celebration of a debased primitivism. The nadir of Pattison’s slipshtod argument comes in his dismissal of the Silhouettes’ 1958 hit record “Get a Job” as solipsism rejoicing “in the conclusion that language is meaningless.” In actuality, the record became a hit during the recession of 1958, and the song’s lyrics described the anxieties of looking for work when there are no jobs available. The scat singing of “nonsense” syllables that leads Pattison to see the song as meaningless plays upon well understood conventions within black music of imitating musical instruments with the human voice, a tactic that Louis Armstrong (to use just one example) employed brilliantly to punctuate some of the lyrics in his songs. In fact, Afro-American poets and writers including Bob Kaufman and Ishmael Reed have long drawn on the creative wordplay of scat sing-
ing as a vital source for their poetry and prose. Like the anthropologist some years back who decided that the penitente cults of New Mexico were “mired in webs of iconographic confusion” because their iconography made no sense to her, Pattison assumes that “Get a Job” has no meaning because it is not expressed in language that he understands. But like the many other errors of fact and interpretation in Pattison’s and Bloom’s criticisms, these are beside the point because they stem from a larger conceptual error. Like Postman, Pattison and Bloom are so eager to tell us what popular culture does not do (advance the agenda of the Enlightenment) that they fail to tell us what popular culture actually does or how it is shaped by the economic and social matrix in which it is embedded.

Television provides an important test case for critics of popular culture. As David Marc quips, the number of people who condemn television are exceeded only by the number of people who watch it, but it is difficult to understand or evaluate television’s popularity from most of the critical literature about the medium. This is not to call for uncritical approval of everything or anything within popular culture; it is merely to say that questions of connoisseurship and aesthetics need to follow rather than precede an understanding of how the medium does its work within larger social contexts. Even if we could safely dismiss every program on television as artistically worthless, we would still need to understand the ways in which television presents the illusion of intimacy, how it intervenes in family relations, how it serves the consumer economy, and how it holds on the viewing audience relates to the disintegration of public resources, the aggravations of work, and the fragility of interpersonal relations that characterize our lives. Furthermore, to function as a mechanism of escape, television and other forms of popular culture often recuperate the very history that their content appears to erase. Certainly the reach and content of commercial television provide ample grounds for criticism. Television is both an advertising mechanism and the primary discursive medium of our culture; it irreparably inscribes consumer desire and commercialism into the fabric of entertainment, news, and sports. Television colonizes intimate areas of human sexuality and personality, exacerbating anxieties and fears to sell more products. Its penetration into the home helps order domestic space, leisure time, and family identity, while its seemingly endless flow reduces complex ideas and images to a melange of distraction and trivialization. By addressing viewers as atomized consumers, the medium obscures experiences of race, region, class, and gender. By turning politics into entertainment, television transforms citizens into spectators and turns politicians into performers. Television critic Arthur Kroker may be unique in describing Ronald Reagan’s State of the Union addresses as more like “Presidential holograms,” than political speeches, but Kroker is hardly alone in noticing the ways in which artistic “representation” defined as the depiction of images has superseded political “representation” defined in relation to the distribution of power and resources.

Yet responding to television’s popularity with blanket condemnation of its content misses the point; questions of connoisseurship focus too much on how television fails to meet critical expectations at the expense of understanding how television succeeds at intervening in the everyday life of the society it addresses. Like many popular music critics, television’s detractors condemn the medium because they feel it debases an otherwise successfully functioning society. Without discounting the shallow vulgarity of the medium, it is important to note that television also reflects an already ongoing unraveling of social relations in society; its needy narcissism serves as a salve for the wounds of everyday life.

Guided by emotion and empathy, working through ritual and repetition, television’s core vocabulary reflects its role as a therapeutic voice ministering to the open wounds of the psyche. As a “close-up” medium whose dramatic and social locus is the home, television addresses the inner life by minimizing the heroic while maximizing the private and personal aspects of existence. Where motion pictures favor the panoramic shot, television privileges the zoom shot, looking in rather than out. To represent conversation, film directors use the “shot-counter-shot” effect while television directors employ the tightly constructed “two faces east.” Thus motion-picture conversation emphasizes the separations between people, while television depicts people as closely linked to one another. This vocabulary of television lends itself to certain kinds of representation—the empathetic nurturing of others that viewers feel while watching a soap opera or a game show, the nonlinear quick cuts and distractions of action/adventure and comedy programs, and the situation comedy’s fixation on stars mugging for the camera which stresses individual moments rather than teleological closure. These all focus attention inward and
undermine the psychic prerequisites for a public life, but they also reflect a society already turned inward by the rise of consumerism and the demise of a healthy public life.

For all of their triviality and frivolity, the messages of popular culture circulate in a network of production and reception that is quite serious. At their worst, they perform the dirty work of the economy and the state. At their best, they retain memories of the past and contain hopes for the future that rebuke the injustices and inequities of the present. It might be thought a measure of the inescapable irony of our time that the most profound intellectual questions emerge out of what seem to be ordinary and commonplace objects of study. It may well be that such a paradox exposes the decline of intellectual work and the eclipse of historical reason. But there is another possibility. Perhaps the most important facts about people and about societies have always been encoded within the ordinary and the commonplace. Rahsaan Roland Kirk had an eminently serious agenda, but little access to the arenas in which "serious" decisions about power and resources are contested. However, every time he picked up the saxophone (or saxophones), he made a statement about the past, present, and future. By examining the relationship between collective popular memory and commercial culture, we may be on the threshold of a new kind of knowledge, one sensitive to contestations over meaning and capable of teaching us that a sideshow can sometimes be the main event.

2

Precious and Communicable: History in an Age of Popular Culture

At the end of her wonderful novel *My Antonia*, Willa Cather speaks about "the precious and incommunicable past.” Her formulation identifies historical work as necessary and indispensable, but always incomplete. We need to understand the past in order to make informed moral choices about the present, to connect our personal histories to a larger collective history. But that larger history can never be fully comprehended; the complexities and pluralities of the past always resist definitive evaluation and summary. Reconstructing the infinitely complex experiences of the past through the paltry bits of evidence about it available to historians inevitably renders some aspects of the past as incommunicable.

Those of us who teach history rarely think about history as "precious and incommunicable" in the sense that Cather means. Perhaps we walk into the classroom believing that history is precious, but find our students’ disinterest in the subject so thorough that we despairingly conclude that it is incommunicable. Too often, we think of history as neither precious nor incommunicable, but rather as an inert body of facts to be retrieved by diligent scholarship and to be learned by rote memorization. Even historical methodologies that try to do justice to the pluralities of the past, that hone the necessary skills of empathy, imagination, and analysis basic to historical thinking confront resistant audiences. History as an academic subject and as a way of understanding the world appears increasingly in jeopardy, regarded inside and outside academia as exceedingly "incommunicable" but scarcely "precious."