BACKGROUND BOOKS

POPULAR CULTURE

Books on "popular" or "mass" culture are nearly as numerous as the formula novels, movies, TV shows, comic strips, popular songs, "pop" paintings, and other manifestations of 20th-century life with which they deal. Some are excellent studies. Others are themselves a kind of "pop" scholarship; these are written according to formula, aimed at the college campus. Sometimes they make good reading, but they often are no more nourishing than spun-sugar candy.

Moreover, few broad theoretical studies of the United States' constantly refurbished, repackaged, and recycled mythology are available. Hence, academic specialists often recommend French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's brilliant but difficult analysis of the mythology and ethnography of South American Indian tribes as background reading.

To date, only two of the four volumes that make up his *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* are available in English translation. (A third is forthcoming.) In the first volume, **The Raw and the Cooked** (Harper, 1969, cloth & paper), Lévi-Strauss writes: "Apart from the fact that the science of myths is still in its infancy, so that its practitioners must consider themselves fortunate to obtain even a few preliminary results ... there does not exist, nor ever will exist, any community or group of communities whose mythology and ethnography ... can be known in their entirety."

The second volume, **From Honey to Ashes** (Harper, 1973, cloth & paper), includes various versions of several myths that recur among different Indian communities. One tells of a "Girl Mad About Honey, Her Base Seducer, and Her Timid Husband." In all of its local variations, this tale of woe underlines the high price paid for nondeferred gratification; suitably modified, the story would do very well for North American daytime TV.

Something slightly akin to Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic scholarship applied to contemporary culture is available in **Mythologies** by Roland Barthes (Hill & Wang, 1972, cloth & paper). But Barthes, a witty Marxist, argues that popular or mass culture does not simply arise out of a community. He sees it as imposed by the Right on the rest of society. His ideological critique covers recent films and literature, wrestling matches, and the (already outdated) art of the striptease.

Popular culture's best ethnography (defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as "the social anthropology of primitive tribes") to date may be that offered by Tom Wolfe in **The Pump House Gang** (Farrar, 1968, cloth; Bantam, 1969–77, paper). The people who attract his interest are not passive audiences but members of the media-incited communities that grow up around popular culture fads or celebrities.

In this collection, Wolfe writes vividly about the rituals and codes of *Playboy* creator Hugh Hefner's followers, about the adolescent shop clerks who blossomed into style setters in London's rock-and-clothes-

oriented "noonday underground" of the late 1960s, about the symbiotic relationship between the makers and buyers of "pop art," and much more. His psychedelic style is, of course, characteristic of the New Journalism (itself sometimes regarded as a form of popular culture), which he helped to create.

Arguments rage among academics over the terms "mass" versus "popular" culture. Some writers use the phrases interchangeably. Others more or less define the mass-produced - distributed - consumed product of 20th-century movies, paperbacks, the press, and TV as constituting mass culture. They reserve the term popular culture for folklore and the kind of phenomenon that country music used to be when Appalachian mountain people made it for themselves, long before it spread across all of America and Europe.

Herbert Gans, in **Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste** (Basic Books, 1975, cloth; 1977, paper), has a term of his own. The Columbia University sociologist lumps the mass, the popular, and the high under what he calls "taste cultures," which he defines as encompassing both "values" and "cultural forms": everything from music, art, design, literature, news, "and the media in which they are expressed" to consumer goods "that express aesthetic values or functions, such as furnishings, clothes, appliances."

Many other theoretical (or polemical) books on particular forms of mass and/or popular culture have been published over the past decade. TV is a favorite subject, and Martin Mayer's **About Television** (Harper, 1972) is a good survey, although inevitably some of the shows whose content he discusses, including "That Was the Week That Was," are now off the air.

Studies of popular culture are often packaged in glossy picture books of coffee-table size. A new one is **TV Book: The Ultimate Television Book** edited by Judy Fireman (Workman, 1977, cloth & paper). Not meant to be a critical assessment, it offers a fine photographic history of the medium and an assortment of personal essays, some thoughtful, some entertaining, by such contributors as sportscasters Eleanor Riger and Heywood Hale Broun, talk show host Larry Angelo, critic Michael Arlen, CBS President Richard S. Salant, former FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson, and Peter Lubalin, the advertising man who went to Soviet Georgia to film the long-lived elders of Abkhazia eating Dannon yogurt. (He says they loved it.)

In the same format is **The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics** edited by Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams (Smithsonian Press/Abrams, 1978, cloth & paper). It is a parade, in black and white and color, of strips from American newspapers, 1896–1976. The characters range from the Katzenjammer Kids (1897) to the Wizard of Id (1964).

A definitive 785-page illustrated reference book is **The World Encyclopedia of Comics** edited by Maurice Horn (Chelsea House, 1976, cloth; Avon, 1970, paper). It includes a short history of world comics, starting with the publication of William Hogarth's **A Harlot's Progress** in 1734, and a brief analytical summary. Horn concludes that "with the comics' growing cultural acceptance," cartoonists, "no longer dismissed as grubby purveyors of mindless entertainment," and their employers "must expect to be called

into account on aesthetic and ethical grounds" like novelists, publishers, playwrights, and filmmakers.

Among the best of the serious studies of the movies are James Monaco's **How To Read A Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media** (Oxford, 1977, cloth & paper). Monaco delivers exactly what his title promises, with specifics on everything from lenses to the lingo of the film industry. (A "McGuffin" is Alfred Hitchcock's term for the device or plot element that catches the viewer's attention or "drives the logic of the plot," especially in suspense movies.)

Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Oxford, 1974, cloth & paper) is widely used in college courses. Its well-chosen essays and the editors' commentary are exceptionally readable and recommended for a general audience. A brand-new course book is **Great Film Directors: A Critical Anthology** edited by Leo Braudy and Morris Dickstein (Oxford, 1978, paper). No comparable work is available. It covers 23 major directors. They include Sweden's Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal,* 1959, as seen by Andrew Sarris and *Persona,* 1965, as seen by Stanley Kauffmann and Susan Sontag); the Spaniard Luis Buñuel (his films from *An Andalusian Dog,* 1928, to *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,* 1972, as analyzed by Carlos Fuentes); Vienna-born Fritz Lang (his American films as seen by Graham Greene, Peter Bogdanovich, and François Truffaut).

Jazz, a special form of popular culture, has inspired an enormous literature. The writer always mentioned first among buffs and scholars is Gunther Schuller; his **Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development** (Oxford, 1968) is a basic book. The Jazz Masters series, published by Macmillan under the general editorship of Martin Williams, director of the Smithsonian Jazz Program, includes one volume by Williams, **Jazz Masters of New Orleans** (Macmillan, 1967), that traces the history and relative importance of the tunes, the bands, and the records. It also evokes a strong sense of what the first jazz capital was like in the years when Jelly Roll Morton, who once asserted that he had invented jazz, was a slim young pianist yet to make his first recording (1923) and Louis Armstrong was still known only as "Little Louie."

All in all, the flood of "pop" culture books shows no signs of abating. "Pop" sculpture, 20th-century musical comedies and country music, 19th-century vaudeville, showboat melodramas, penny postcards, and Valentines—all have their interpreters who continue to get into print.

EDITOR'S NOTE. *Help in choosing some of these titles came from Wilson Center Fellows Frank D. McConnell and James J. Lang and former Fellow Thomas Cripps.*

"Living up to our responsibilities" was the caption under this widely reprinted St. Louis Post-Dispatch *cartoon by Fitzpatrick on President Truman's June 1950 decision to send U.S. troops to fight the Communists in Korea.*