

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Paul R. Gorman. *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 242 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4556-1; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2248-7.

Reviewed by Dale Schmitt (East Tennessee State University)  
Published on H-Film (March, 1998)



## Largest Audience

Most of us are familiar with the claims that motion pictures are produced with “nothing but the dollar in sight” and that they are full of “the realism of bloodshed, crime, and brutality.” What might surprise us is that this observation was delivered by a movie industry critic in 1908. Paul Gorman acknowledges that the condemnation of popular entertainment has been a constant in modern American history. His focus, however, is not to rework that chestnut, but rather to deal with what he considers one of this century’s most fascinating paradoxes. Why did vigorous popular culture criticism come from leftist intellectuals and liberals, those persons we would have expected to be in tune with the common people and optimistic about the future of a democratic society?

Gorman explores this subject in *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture* by first establishing the historical context. Beginning with the attacks of conservatives at the close of the nineteenth century, he follows the criticism through the progressives, the cultural radicals of the 1920’s, the professional social scientists of the inter-war period, the communists and leftists of the 1940’s and 1950’s, and concludes with an in-depth study of Dwight McDonald’s theories.

Within each of these categories, Gorman delineates new threads of criticism and locates sources by relying heavily on the published work of the critics themselves, especially articles appearing in various elite journals and reviews. Because of his approach, Gorman’s book is much more an exercise in intellectual history

than a study of popular culture. He is particularly effective showing how views of mass entertainment—such as the efforts to regulate dance halls—fit into the larger context of the progressive movement. Often, however, this sort of focus is lacking and Gorman is forced to deal with individual critics without clearly showing their connections to a larger intellectual society. His contention, for instance, that Dwight McDonald was the logical culmination of earlier leftist critics is not altogether convincing.

According to Gorman, the one underlying theme that connected all these critics was their firm belief in the passive acceptance of “mass entertainment” by the public. Whether it is the progressive view of a public victimized by a greedy entertainment industry, the communist view of an unenlightened proletariat, or the sociological belief in the destruction of folk community by urban mass society, all assumed that the public consumed entertainment but did not produce or influence it. Gorman believes that this situation changed in 1960’s when some intellectuals “stopped criticizing and started explaining” popular culture. He also contends, rather convincingly, that criticism of popular culture “was shaped more by the social concerns of intellectuals than by their observations of entertainments.” Mass entertainment became the scapegoat that intellectuals loaded with all their personal uneasiness about the dramatic and often frightening events going on around them. In particular, Gorman argues that this approach allowed them to maintain their connection with the “people” by assuming an elitist and paternalistic role in culture. It became their duty to save society from

exploitation, to lead ordinary people to higher cultural forms, or to transform folk culture into true art.

Early on Gorman makes an important distinction. Popular culture, he avers, attracts the largest audiences while mass culture is created specifically for transmission through the mass media. While these are useful definitions, they are meaningful in art and literature where intellectuals at least could make a clear distinction between what was popular and what was “good.” In media—such as motion pictures and radio—the differences become much less clear.

The movies were particularly threatening—according to the critics—because powerful visual images were easily absorbed by a passive audience and hence likely to provoke unthinking imitation of action. Other than some discussion of communist criticism of Soviet films and an occasional reference to Charlie Chaplin, little is mentioned about motion pictures. Since, during the time period covered, movies were both the most popular and the most “mass” form of entertainment, it would have been enlightening to hear criticisms of the industry. It is in-

triguing, for instance, to learn that Dwight McDonald exempted Walt Disney’s early cartoons from his mass culture condemnation. Gorman’s explanation that McDonald “liked” them seems to beg the question.

In writing *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Gorman has explored an intriguing facet of modern culture by surveying a wide range of sociologists and critics. This is not a book about popular culture, nor does it purport to be. Within his narrowly defined area, Gorman does a good job of outlining and analyzing the leftist intellectual response to United States mass culture during the first half of the twentieth century.

This review is copyrighted by Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies and the Historians Film Committee, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~filmhis/>. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Film & History reserves print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: [Rollinspc@aol.com](mailto:Rollinspc@aol.com)).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-film>

**Citation:** Dale Schmitt. Review of Gorman, Paul R., *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America*. H-Film, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1843>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).