

The Mass Audience Lives! (Or Does It?)

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Publics and The Mass Audience

The concept of “the mass audience” provokes fear. To be clear, I'm talking about my own fear, but, judging from Cold War era texts that brandish the term, I'm not alone on this. Cultural critics such as Dwight MacDonald and William H. Whyte famously decried mass culture and its oppressively numerous consumers, arguing that production for the country's masses had debased Americans' intellectual and artistic standards, leading to a society of homogenized, standardized and organization-minded thinkers. A lonely crowd of mass men, the audience for television, movies, radio and other mass entertainments polluted what was left of the country's avantgarde and individualist geniuses, its cacophonous ubiquity overwhelming the elites to the point that art had become indistinguishable from entertainment. The mass audience, in these texts, was ever hungry and undiscerning, only too eager to consume the latest formulaic output from New York and Hollywood factories. Re-reading them, my mind insistently returns to a scene from *Ghostbusters* (1984), the one featuring a green and non-verbal Slimer, greedily tossing back plates of hotel food while Dan Akroyd and Bill Murray look on with distate. It's not of the same period, but his rapacious consumption seems like an apt visualization of these alarmist takes on the consumers of mass-produced entertainment.

Figured as a desensitized, inept, yet dangerous blob, the mass audience was, in these cultural debates, threatening because of its size. In other words, it is the sheer quantity of people for which culture is produced that inevitably leads to a debasement in quality. In contrast to these “mass”-centric fears, my own apprehensiveness is concentrated on the implications of the term's two other words: “the” and “audience.” The definite article evokes a sense of totality that I would be hard-pressed to substantiate. Is there a television show that *the* audience – all of us, whoever and wherever we may be – has seen? The term “mass audiences,” emphasis on plural, provides a sense of multiplicity and widespread dissemination, but *The Mass Audience* is a unified body, acting in concert. How could this singular, cohesive, and imposing figure be divorced from the connotations of standardization and homogeneity? That definite article is a problem. Similarly the word “audience” seems ill-suited as description for television viewing. It connotes a coordination of experience in either spatial or temporal terms that fails to evoke the embodied isolation a viewer might favor. Yet, “audience” also fails to convey the intimacy and activity that television enables between disparate viewers, providing a shared cultural experience and discourse.

Given the meanings that the term has accumulated through its circulation in scientific and cultural discourse, as well as the connotations of conformity and passivity it continues to evoke, the mass audience is a problematic concept. While television studies could benefit from a renewed emphasis on the mass distribution of cultural texts, particularly an attention to how a cultural product such as a television show enables individual viewers to *feel* like participants in a larger, shared, cultural experience, there are other, more nimble concepts to draw on. Specifically, I am thinking of the concept of a public and the use to which it has been put in recent cultural theory. In contrast to *the* audience, a public is one of many. A product of discourse, a public is constituted by those paying attention to its address, implying a greater degree of activity among its participants than that conveyed by the notion of audience. Finally, a public presumes some commonality between participants, but rather than the weighty conformity of the mass audience, it enables a more ephemeral tie that depends on continued activity and attention. Providing a sense of both the intimacy and distance among viewers of mass-disseminated cultural texts, the concept of a public helpfully tempers the emphasis on individual

reception practices in contemporary cultural studies, yet retains a sense of the collective and, potentially, political possibilities afforded by mass media.