

THE WORLD AS PHANTOM AND AS MATRIX

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Modern mass consumption is a sum of solo performances; each consumer, an unpaid homemaker employed in the production of the mass man.

In the days before the cultural faucets of radio and television had become standard equipment in each home, the Smiths and Millers used to throng the motion picture theaters where they collectively consumed the stereotyped mass products manufactured for them. One might be tempted to regard it as peculiarly appropriate that the mass product should be thus consumed by a compact mass. Such a view, however, would be mistaken. Nothing contradicts the essential purpose of mass production more completely than a situation in which a single specimen of a commodity is simultaneously enjoyed by several, let alone by numerous, consumers. Whether this consumption is a "genuine communal experience" or merely the sum of many individual experiences, is a matter of indifference to the mass producer. What he needs is not the compact mass as such, but a mass broken up or atomized into the largest possible number of customers; he does not want all of his customers to consume one and the same product, he wants all of his customers to buy identical products on the basis of an identical demand which has also to be produced.

In countless industries this ideal has more or less been achieved. Whether the motion picture industry can ever achieve it seems doubtful, because this industry continues the tradition of the theater: the commodity it produces is a spectacle designed for simultaneous consumption by a large number of spectators. Such a situation is obsolete. No wonder that the radio and television industries could enter into competition with the motion picture despite the latter's tremendous development: for the two newer industries benefited from the possibility of marketing, in addition to the commodity to be consumed, the

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