

EMILIA NOWAK

Wrocław

LITERATURE AND MASS CULTURE

AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE MASS CULTURE THROUGH THE STRUCTURE
OF LITERARY WORK

The problem of mass literature is topical in the modern world in view of the necessity of directing the cultural processes in contemporary societies. It is widely discussed in the press, but scientific publications devoted solely to the problem of mass literature are still very rare. Even there the problem receives only casual treatment, purely literary problems being left untouched. The present article approaches some theoretical and literary aspects of mass literature, hitherto neglected by the literature on the subject.

Mass literature is one of the manifestations of mass culture, and mass culture is a part of culture as a whole. In order to define the notion of mass literature, we shall first determine the place of literature in culture, and then proceed to distinguish mass culture from culture. Next, we shall define the place of literature in mass culture as well as the boundaries of mass literature within literature. Finally we shall draw a dividing line between on the one hand fiction for the masses and on the other popular and scientific literature for the masses. Fiction for the masses is the subject of our analysis.

The definition of culture is quoted after A. Kłoskowska¹: "Culture is the comparatively integrated whole, embracing the mores of people, following certain patterns, common to a given community, patterns created and accepted during interaction, and containing the products of these mores". Four categories of phenomena are distinguished: overt instrumental, overt realizatory, symbolic instrumental and symbolic realizatory. To the sphere of symbolic realizatory culture are assigned those cultural activities which are in themselves the aim of action (e.g. art). The sphere of symbolic instrumental activities embraces everything that

¹ A. Kłoskowska, *Kultura masowa — krytyka i obrona* (*Mass Culture — Critical Approach and Defence*), Warszawa 1964, p. 18 (quotation translated by T. R.).

makes cultural activities possible and which belong to symbolic realizatory culture (e.g. the means of conveying cultural values, popularization of science etc.).

We regard as literature all information about facts, relations and needs, transmitted from generation to generation through written or oral language. The term "literature" is intended here to cover also what is known as "objective literature" (e.g. concerning research), folk literature, oral legends etc. Literature thus conceived can for the most part be assigned to the sphere of symbolically instrumental culture while fiction for the masses, as all like artistic activities, belong to symbolic realizatory culture.

Mass culture belongs to symbolic culture, and is defined by O. Friedman² as "[...] the sum total of cultural consumer goods which are available to the public in the broadest meaning of the word [...], with the help of mass communication within the framework of technical civilizations". Mass culture develops on the basis of means of mass communication developed by mass society, and is based on common meanings and values. It is a result of overcoming the differentiation and atomization of that society, and an instrument of its integration. It is also the result of progressing urbanization and industrialization. Industrialization is indirectly responsible for the problem of leisure time and what to do with it³. This leisure time must be filled by mass culture. The expression "the sum total of cultural consumer goods" determines the place of mass culture in the formerly cited division of phenomena of culture. Mass culture is to be attributed in general to symbolic realizatory culture, but some of the phenomena of mass culture do not fit into this category — e.g., mass information, which belongs to symbolic instrumental culture, or sport and mobile games, which belong to overt realizatory culture.

On the basis of the definition of mass culture and the broad definition of literature already cited, we shall assign to mass culture as literature whatever is distributed by print.

Thus we shall consider as mass literature all material distributed in printed form, free from coercion, and reflecting the cultural requirements of wide circles of society, ideologically and notionally close to the masses, within the grasp of their experience, intellectual abilities and material situation — material, in fact, which they seek.

² Cited after the Polish edition: G. Friedman, *Maszyna i człowiek*, Warszawa 1960, p. 112 (quotation in English translation by T. R.).

³ There exists a pretty considerable literature on the subject. More important Polish works: Kłóskowska, *op. cit.*, chapter: *Czas wolny w socjologicznej perspektywie*, pp. 150–170; A. Kamiński, *Czas wolny i jego problematyka społeczno-wychowawcza (Leisure Time and Its Social and Educative Problematics)*, Wrocław 1965. Among works published in languages other than Polish, considered to be of special interest, are: J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London 1949; T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York 1899; J. Duménil, *Vers une civilisation du loisir?*, Paris 1962; *Mass Leisure*, ed. A. Larrabee, M. Meyersohn, Glencoe 1958; G. Friedman, P. Naville, *Traité de sociologie du travail*, Paris 1962.

Mass literature which performs the function of information and concerning popularization of science will belong to the sphere of symbolic instrumental culture. It must be observed, however, that popular science has lately been gravitating towards mass literature of the symbolic realizatory type. Popular science, then, is literature contained in symbolic instrumental culture, and in literature on the borderline between the symbolic instrumental and realizatory cultures.

Mass literature is therefore that part of literature which, owing to the structure of its material and form, satisfies the basic psychological needs of the reading public.

Literature is an art which gives aesthetic satisfaction through creating and forming in the mind of the reader certain images, in the same way as "visual arts" create impressions in viewers through forms of physical material, and music through a combination of forms.

Though everybody is capable of creating mental images and of understanding certain happenings, inner states of the self and others, it does not necessarily follow that this ability is identical in all individuals. This ability depends on individual psychological features and on the degree of individual development, and remains in direct connection with the cultural standards of the community in which the given individual lives. Therefore, to mass literature can be assigned only a work of fiction the material of which can be grasped by the imagination of the reading public. A literary work must enrich the reader's imagination, while not being removed from his inner experience. Moreover, it must be gripping. The meaning of that word "gripping" has been formulated by J. Trzynadlowski⁴, who maintains that one of conditions of "being gripping" is what he calls "realization of the impossible". Here belong such phenomena as participation in unusual events or existence, accomplished through literature, in an inaccessible world. As the second condition of being gripping, Trzynadlowski regards the description of danger. The reader becomes indifferent, if characters are exposed to no danger.

Let us broaden the notion with one more element — the generalization of our own experience. The reader finds here his own "ego", and confirmation of his own attitude towards reality and of his own judgements.

Similar elements are to be found in the expression "gripping" in relation to the mass reader. There, too, content must be in a sense utilitarian, common to all members of the community, which has suffered atomization to such a degree that there has arisen a necessity for integration with the help and within a scope of cultural action. Works of mass literature must as regards content fulfill three basic postulates:

⁴ Quoted after a script of a discussion between representatives of various branches of science about modern problems in the popularization of science. Cf. "Odra" — the Wrocław social and cultural monthly, no 4 (39), 1964, pp. 16–17.

1. present a realization of the impossible (as understood by the mass reader);
2. expose a universal danger;
3. generalize the mass reader's experience.

These postulates are realized in mass literary works through the plot systems, since literature of this kind is virtually "a collection of myths", sought after by readers in order to compensate for shortcomings in their own existence.

The primary branch of literature which describes danger, and which fulfills all that is required of mass literature, is a detective story⁵. Z. Kubikowski maintains that this literature propagates the fundamental ethic principles, treating crime as the violation of natural law, and presenting the operation of the organs of justice as ruthless and inevitable. This literature has become so highly conventionalized that this process has come to influence even the language stereotypes. Thus if the writer does not vary the stereotypes and material, he must in each case present the plot in a different way, and show the maximum of ingenuity in ascertaining the relations between the various elements⁶. The world of a detective story is devoid of tragic conflicts, contains no choices, it is a world of marked contrast — justice versus cynicism, where justice is always victorious, punishment fits the crime, and the plot is an interesting game, worth of study, though the result is known in advance⁷.

Another condition of "becoming gripping" — the realization of the impossible is fulfilled by works belonging to historical literature and to literature of travel and adventure (science fiction included). The world presented here, like that in the detective story, is devoid of moral or ethical complications, though ethics are often involved in the problems of this world. Evil is easily distinguished from good since this literature has no ambition to create great and complicated problems⁸.

⁵ Here it is necessary to add some remarks. The expression "mass literature" is closely linked with the fact of "mass edition" as provided in the Polish Writers' Convention. "Mass editions" are those which are from 2,5 to 5 times as large as a basic edition, and that in addition to two normal editions. Mass editions should not be confused with large editions. For example, school textbooks and literature for schools appear usually in large editions, but they do not fulfill the basic postulate of mass literature — i.e. freedom from the forms of coercion contained in a set of regulations inseparable from every didactic system. These remarks can be supplemented by researches on the book market and the popularity of given books among readers in public libraries.

⁶ Z. Kubikowski, *Bezpieczne, male mity (Safe Little Myths)*, Wrocław 1965. Note, incidentally, that the essence of a detective story is not (contrary to all appearances) concerned with moral problems. That misunderstanding repeatedly occurs in world literature on the subject, but this is not the place to discuss the matter exhaustively. Therefore we have used the term "world devoid of tragic conflicts" (in the philosophical sense).

⁷ Praxeologists and mathematicians draw attention to the fact that a detective story is constructed in the manner of a game or puzzle (cf. mathematical theory of games devised by H. Steinhaus).

⁸ As regards the problems of ethics and history see H. Lefebvre, *Reflections sur le structuralisme et l'histoire*, Paris 1963.

Literature of the realization of the impossible has three principle aspects:

1. it presents unusual and fascinating facts;
2. it presents simple characters;
3. it has complete control over the situation arising from rich experience and the knowledge possessed.

Participation in unusual happenings is in the first place a contact with new environment, a satisfying of the aspiration to success and the providing of new experience. Material of this type is realized in travel literature, which gives reality to dreams of distant travels and glamorous adventures, and by the historical novel which presents the romance of war and a full masculine life, in which energy can be spent usefully and to universal applause. In both cases certain aesthetic requirements typical of a given culture are being satisfied. Depending on a given culture, the myth of a full and effective life is realized in literature of that type⁹.

Heroes who appear in literature as fulfilling the second aspect of the realization of the impossible are motivated in their actions by an easily appreciated principle, criterium of values. On the basis of that principle, it is possible to distinguish positive and negative types. Positive types are those who behave according to certain principles, and negative — those who work in opposition to such principles. Neither in life nor in literature which seeks important and difficult solutions does such a differentiation occur. Material of that type is therefore most desirable in literature concerned with realization of the impossible — such as westerns or sentimental romance.

The appearance of simple characters and the mastery over the situation, resulting from the knowledge and experience possessed, accounts for the popularity among adults of literature for young people¹⁰.

Literature which “generalizes the experiences of the mass reader” is represented for the most part by modern novels dealing with contemporary problems. This literature discusses problems which are known to readers from their own experiences. The role of the novel is simply to confirm their belief that such experience is shared by wide circles of social groups. Here is to be found the cause of the popularity of war memoirs and of works connected with the post-war period. With the generalization of the reader’s own experience in literature is also connected the popularity of humorous and satirical literature, which caricatures or casts doubt upon such experience.

In each of the three types of mass literature referred to above, literary material is formed according to different principles, though in each case it is essential for the writer to make the action as quick and lively as possible. As a determinant

⁹ In French literature, e.g. A. Dumas-père (the best known example).

¹⁰ Thus a thorough study would be required of such literary works as fables by J. Ch. Andersen or the Grimm Brothers, aimed at the mass readers, or works addressed to both adults and young people (Beecher-Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, or J. Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*).

of liveliness of action can be regarded the relation of dynamic to static motives. In detective stories this relation is at least 2 : 1. This figure may change, but only in favour of dynamic motives. In literature realizing the impossible (historical, adventure and travel, science fiction) this relation is from 2 : 1 in literature of travel and adventure and in batallistic novels to 1 : 1 in historical literature and in science fiction. A relation of about 1 : 1 is typical of literature which generalizes our experience. Static motives have a slight edge in works which follow chronological order — e.g., memoirs of humorous sketches in which the description of situation is of equal importance with events.

Dynamic motives which present events to the reader are basic elements of action in the types of literature discussed above. Such elements constitute in detective stories a fairly large proportion of dynamic motives. But notably the richest is the literature which realizes the second condition of mass literature. In novels of adventure and travel, historical novels and in love stories these elements are taking on the appearance of peripeteia. Thus in novels of that type, as nowhere else in mass literature, there may appear a very large number of motives, subject to the reservation that each of them must possess some points convergent with the others¹¹.

In batallistic novels and in the science fiction the elements are slightly different. They are far less in number, and in themselves are considerably attenuated. They do not pursue the whole course of action, but only a part of it, and they possess some defined end. The most drastic reduction of elements is to be seen in detective stories. Secondary motives are of little significance here, and in this they resemble even certain better developed elements in the main plot. These complete elements are replaced by new ones, equally rapid and with a similarly defined end. This seems to be a result of the fact that there are fewer events described in literature of that kind than is the case in literature of adventure and in historical novels. These phenomena are very notable in humorous and satirical literature¹².

The notion of "mass literature" is very close to another notion, very well known, to the notion of "pop literature". The former notion refers to the scope of such literature, the latter to the degree of its accessibility to readers. Mass literature must be accessible to very wide circles of readers¹³.

And now for some concluding remarks. In the same way as every manifestation of culture is or should be a part of mass culture, all literary work is or may become an element of mass literature. In order to become mass literature, it must possess a specific structure, easily accessible to mass readers, without the factor of "coercion". The basic element in that structure is an ability to operate with systems of material

¹¹ Cf. P. C. Neumair, *Der Typus des Abenteuers in der neuesten deutschen Dichtung*, Limburg 1933; H. Gmelin, *Der französische Zyklusroman*, Heidelberg 1950.

¹² See G. Baum, *Humor und Satire in der bürgerlichen Aesthetik. Zur Kritik ihres apologetischen Charakters*, Berlin 1959.

¹³ L. Rosten, *The Intellectual and the Mass Media*, "Daedalus" 1960.

which grasp the imagination and emotions of the reader and which dynamize the conscience of the reading public. It is up to the writer — and this should be required of him — that such material be socially creative and positive¹⁴.

Translated by *Tadeusz Rybowski*

¹⁴ *Mass Culture*, ed. B. Rosenberg and D. M. White, Glencoe 1958; R. Escarpit, *La Révolution du livre*, Paris 1965. Unesco et Presses Universitaires de France; S. Żółkiewski, *Zagadnienia stylu. Szkice o kulturze współczesnej (The Problems of Style. Sketches in Modern Culture)*, Warszawa 1965.