


Fighting the multinationals

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socialist future

perspectives

3 Raising the
cultural horizon

price £1



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Raising the cultural horizon

Culture allows people to rise above the day-to-day struggle to survive. The arts can provide much pleasure and indicate reflections of the society in which we live.

Culture also suggests that we need to associate with others, to get away from ourselves as well as reaching deeper into ourselves. Listening to music, following a story whether in a film, a book or the theatre, mirrors back to us our own life and that of other people, real worlds and imagined worlds.

Making and experiencing things that are more than merely functional, whether it is a five-line poem or the Mona Lisa, give us a special appreciation of life. By their very nature, the arts take us beyond the narrow confines of immediate physical need and satisfy mental and emotional needs.

But, under today's conditions, the ultra-commercialisation of culture threatens culture itself.

As the 21st century begins, a few global corporations - at the time of writing, there are just nine to be exact - own and control the mass of cultural production and the means to advertise and distribute it.

The nine are: Disney, AT&T, Sony, General Electric, News Corporation, Seagram-Vivendi, Time Warner AOL, Viacom and Bertelsmann. The process of mega mergers went on apace at the turn of the millennium. It has since intensified as the nature of the corporations themselves takes a quantum leap by coming together with the Internet and communications companies.

In the biggest US corporate merger of all time, creating a conglomerate valued at £220 billion, Time-Warner merged with the Internet provider, America On Line (AOL) in January 2000. This gave rise to the fourth largest company in the world – worth more than the annual output of Russia or the Netherlands. The company now embraces CNN news, Warner Bros films plus *Time* and *People* magazines together with America's leading Internet service provider, AOL.

These big nine media companies do not simply dominate in one type of artistic or creative product. They span a whole variety of media. With the expansion of the Internet, the boundaries between one and the other

are disappearing.

For example, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation media empire embraces 20th Century Fox film studios, US terrestrial TV networks (reaching 40% of the viewing population), cable TV networks Sky (UK) and Star (Asia), Fox Home Entertainment video, plus many newspapers around the world including *The Sun* and *The Times* in the UK. Sky (aka BskyB) has a near monopoly on the UK satellite TV market. NewsCorp has media properties in Asia and Latin America.

Britain's New Labour government, which was helped to office by Murdoch's media empire, sees its role as facilitating the global corporations and their mergers and plays its own role in discouraging creativity. The Millennium Dome scandal sums up New Labour's attitude. The Dome was dreamed up as a showcase for the multinationals with a cultural content that gave dumbing down a bad name. With almost a £1 billion of public and lottery money wasted on the Dome, local libraries and museums are starved of funds, with many shutting their doors.

National Gallery director, Neil MacGregor, attacked the Blair government for refusing to help the poorest cities in Britain to maintain their public collections, saying: "The



JULIE HELD
Ceyx
gouache on
paper, 1998

institutions are in crisis. Central government sees no responsibility for regional museums. It's a great fault . . . Access is one thing, but you've got to know what you're offering access to. Access to ignorance is no great advantage. It's got to be access to knowledge. And someone has got to provide the knowledge. That presupposes that somebody is building the knowledge base about

the objects in a museum. But that is one of the real crises in municipal museums."

MacGregor also slammed the notion of "themed" television channels for arts and learning, proposed by New Labour's appointees. "The notion of specialist channels is a colossal retreat from public education," he said. "Only those already interested would watch them."



Standardisation and the loss of diversity

The drive to make ever greater profits through mass production and consumption of film, music and TV products in particular, has led to a form of cultural standardisation. Selling "cultural products" to a defined market to bring in huge revenues means that risk-taking with new or untried products is damaging for business.

The corporations have responded to a volatile market by creating various market "niches" with certain formulas. These markets are then softened up by long-term advance publicity for a new product. So we have blockbuster action films, trivial comedies, game

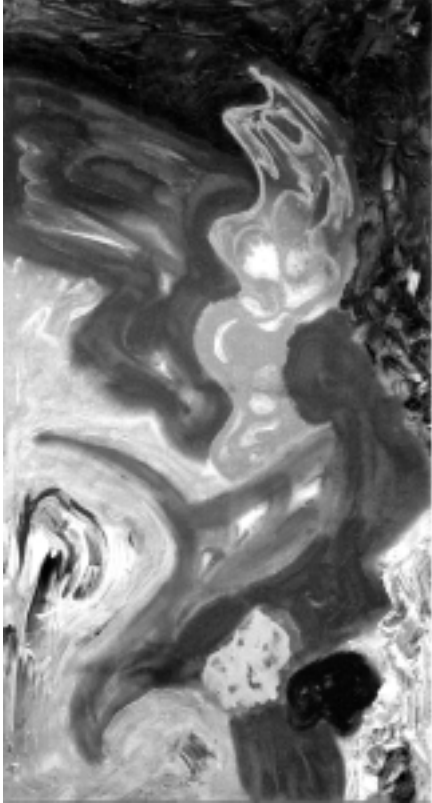
shows, soap opera, pulp fiction, airport novels. and guaranteed crowd-pullers like the Monet show and "shock" exhibitions such as "Sensation" at the Royal Academy.

For a long time, US products tended to dominate the world market. Now that these have lost their gloss, the media corporations have picked up local trends such as salsa music or "international" films like *The Full Monty* and have marketed them globally.

Comedies like *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *Notting Hill* made hundreds of millions of dollars by offering "fun" with anodyne, inoffensive fare. Light, escapist entertainment makes plenty of money. It also provides a useful diversion for the mass of the population from their "sad reality and difficult future", to quote the former billionaire head of Mexico's Televisa company.

What we have under the media giants is not direct censorship, but the need to market goods that they feel confident they can sell. They therefore have a built-in antipathy to artistic productions that threaten the status quo, unless they feel there is a lot of money to be made out of them.

Global media analyst, Professor Robert W. McChesney, notes that ultimately the global commercial media system "is politically



PAUL TONKIN
To-Do
acrylic on
canvas, 1996-7

conservative, because the media giants are significant beneficiaries of the current social structure around the world, and any upheaval in property or social relations – particularly to the extent that it reduces the power of business – is not in their interest”.

Monopoly control affects most areas of artistic production. The global corporations marginalise and sideline non-commercial, international, independent or “art” films. In smaller

and developing countries, national and local arts, languages and age-old crafts are squeezed out, as corporate products take centre stage.

Even in wealthy countries such as Britain, cinemas are dominated by Hollywood blockbusters. Other films are only shown at a few venues, such as the National Film Theatre, clubs, festivals or bodies promoting “foreign” culture.

Hyper-commercialism and growing

corporate control has led to the most effective censorship of all.

“Consumerism, class inequality and individualism tend to be taken as natural and even benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values and anti-market activities are marginalised,” McChesney notes.

Corporate influence and control

In music, global market share by US artists has declined, but the five media multinationals that dominate the world’s music industry are buying into huge local markets. For example, in Brazil, music by the top four recording artists is produced and distributed by Seagram (Canada), Time Warner AOL (US) and Bertelsmann (Germany). Sony Corporation of Japan produces and distributes music by France’s top four. In Poland, the top four are controlled by Sony, Seagram and Bertelsmann. In Russia, EMI and Mute (UK) run the top four. In June 2000, Seagram, which owns the Universal music business (read Boyzone, Elton John and Shania Twain), merged with the French media and utility group Vivendi. Vivendi’s interests stretch from television, mobile phones to water companies as far away as Mauritius.

Seagram, owned by Edgar Bronfman Jr., is the largest recorded-music firm in the world. In 1998 it bought Polygram

for \$10.4 billion. It owns Universal Studios with theme parks in Asia and TV channels throughout Europe and Latin America. It also has a vast library of made-for-TV films.

Visual art

In Britain state-funded art galleries like the Tate and institutions like the Royal Academy increasingly rely on funding from corporate sponsors for special exhibitions and big projects. There is a charmed circle between the Tate (which now has an art empire with four major galleries in London, Liverpool and St Ives) and dealers, who are involved in the global art markets.

Old Master and contemporary art dealers have a vested interest in pushing up their sale prices by trading in works whose prestige and value can be enhanced by museum exhibitions.

The world of patrons, dealers and those experts who are selected to sit on the juries for high-value prizes is close-knit to the point of being incestuous.

Artists who are taken up by this charmed circle receive an incredible amount of publicity and promotion – which of course means that the price of the works bought by their patrons rises on the world art market.

But artists who do not conform to the current “conceptual” trends or who do not make old-fashioned figurative-



SARAH MEDWAY
at work on
Sanctuary,
1997

style nudes and landscapes, tend to be excluded from the main exhibition arenas. No room has been found in the vast Tate Modern for classics from the 20th century, such as the British painter Ben Nicholson and politically-committed Italian Renato Guttuso. They simply do not fit into the new dogma which dominates the current art scene.

Writing and literature

A handful of publishers and book shops control sales and distribution. The publishing industry has seen merger after merger. Book selling is usually a smaller interest belonging to a vast media empire.

The biggest US publisher, Random House, was recently acquired by the German-owned Bertelsmann which

already owned Bantam Doubleday Dell. Altogether this multi-headed monster now controls 34% of the adult book market in the US. Harper Collins US is owned by News Corp, Murdoch's media empire, which owns newspapers around the world.

Every time a new conglomerate is created, the marketing and promotional departments of what were formerly different imprints are combined. Jobs are cut and the tendency is to operate a single marketing strategy, which reduces diversity.

While Bertelsmann's annual revenues are \$16.4 billion (in 1998), including non-German sales amounting to 72% of its income, the majority of writers, in Britain for example, live below subsistence level.

The Society of Authors surveyed its members in 1999 to find out what they earned. While a handful of best-selling authors earn over £100,000 per year and a further 8% earned over £75,000 per year, 75% earned under £20,000. A further 14% earned under £5,000, with no other source of income. In round figures, two-thirds earned less than half the national average wage and half less than an employee on the national minimum wage.

In the US, economic and legal systems prevent authors from realising the full value of their written work. The

National Endowment for the Arts which provides state funding, has had its budget cut by more than 50%.

The rise of chain superstores has hit independent booksellers and authors equally hard. The American Bookseller Association estimates that the market share of independently-owned bookstores has fallen by 40% since 1991. Many independent shops in the US as well as Britain have closed down for good. The gulf between best-seller contenders and books with a smaller readership is widening and the income for serious writers' projects is decreasing.

The performing arts

Producers, actors, playwrights, musicians, dancers and visual artists are often forced to search for corporate sponsors every time they want to stage a new production, or simply to keep their venues open. Huge amounts of time and energy are devoted to keeping the wolf from the door. If the requisite number of visitors do not turn up or a sponsor drops out, all the time and energy put into a production can go to waste, whatever its value and excellence.

Talented students who win scholarships for drama and dance training suffer from ongoing poverty, are forced to write begging letters and take part-time jobs to continue their



The film industry should be controlled by its workers

courses. "A better way to strangle the great British tradition of team acting at birth would be hard to imagine," says the author of a recent report about the funding of drama student training.

Television broadcasting

A drive towards tabloid-type news is gathering momentum as the BBC competes with the ratings of commercial television. Its director of television, Mark Thompson, says that Channels 1 and 2 should become "genre" based. BBC1 is to become, in his words, "an entertainment-driven channel". Meanwhile the BBC's new director Greg Dyke is floating ideas which sound like privatisation through the back door.

In July 2000, a team of Westminster University researchers studied broadcasting patterns on British

television and concluded that "there has undoubtedly been a shift towards a more tabloid domestic agenda". The trend is even more marked on ITV than on the BBC.

Rules designed to prevent monopoly control of the media are being waived by New Labour's Trade Secretary, Stephen Byers as well as Culture Secretary Chris Smith. The latest moves to relax ownership of digital television have been welcomed by Murdoch's BskyB.

The result of more mergers will be more low-grade "tabloid" viewing on both commercial and BBC channels. "Market-driven" broadcasting means that less money is spent on quality programming such as documentaries and well-made films. The masses are to have more "genre" while smaller, middle-class viewing audiences of

BBC2 get what is left of in-depth news reporting.

Internationally respected for its non-commercial nature, British television is increasingly reducing its main channel to non-stop game shows and soaps, interspersed with "high points" such as the National Lottery draw. Dyke, who contributed to New Labour's election funds, has dismissed "élite culture" as merely a "marketing niche".

In the words of former head of the BBC World Service, John Tusa (presently head of the Barbican Arts Centre in London): "For the BBC to dismiss the entire European tradition of thought, creativity and imagination as part of a dead museum culture that exists only in a small marketing niche is a landmark of its kind." Tusa writes that "culture" is "clearly a dirty word in BBC strategy circles".

The plan is to shunt off quality programmes into the "distant regions of the unwatched BBC digital channels". Digital homes, those 4 million families who have digital TV, already use the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG) a hand held device which lets viewers select programmes by genre, offering similar fare to BBC1's diet of pap.

Mass popular culture

Today millions of people use Walkmans, audio and video cassette

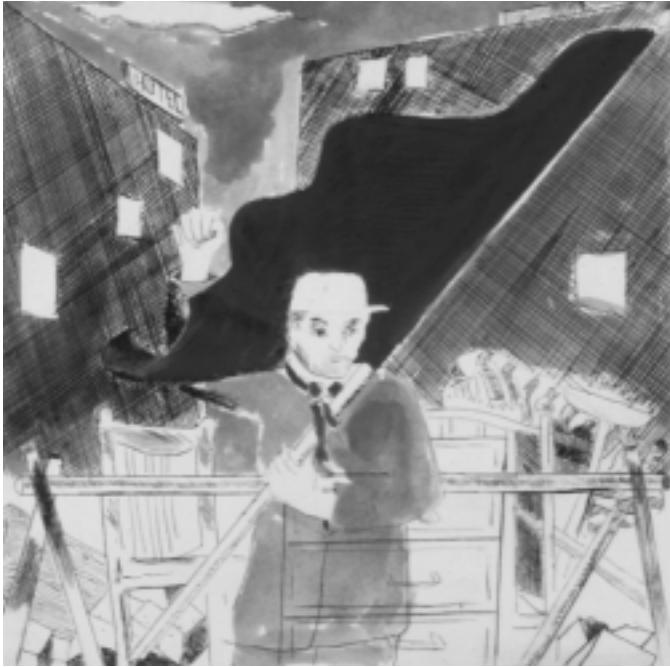
players, personal computers, compact discs, mobile phones, televisions with digital connections, plus the Internet for work and play. The hunger for various forms of entertainment and distraction has no limits. Videos have made a large variety of films more accessible while cinema going booms, especially as television programmes deteriorate.

The Movement for a Socialist Future is not against mass popular culture. On the contrary, without the mass of people having access to all forms of culture, socialism is actually impossible.

Mass diffusion of "culture", be it "high" or "low", creates favourable conditions for a social change. The involvement of more people, including those with few resources, in making music and other forms of art is a precious expression of human creativity. The popularisation of art and cultural products does not make "better" or "worse" art, but rather allows millions more to experience it and form their own judgements

Under the present system, however, culture plays a double role. On the one hand, it gives people the chance to get out of life, to relax and enjoy themselves. On the other hand, it can act as a form of social control over their more rebellious, adventurous and more worthwhile side.

The conflict and contradictions



ANDY PARSONS
Daumiers' breakfast
hand-tinted
drypoint

within today's mass culture can be seen in the personalities and products of the Hollywood system. Hollywood superstar Warren Beatty, for example, made *Reds*, a true story about two American Communists who took part in the Russian socialist revolution, using his own money.

Steven Spielberg, after the runaway success of his space-age fairy tale *ET*,

went on to make the highly political *Schindler's List*. In 1995 he set up his own company Dreamworks which co-produced *Chicken Run*, a tale of a feathered revolution against the capitalist chicken farmers.

But even popular entertainment has become exclusive. Football, once a working class sport, is now extremely expensive, with tickets starting at £20



A model of Tatlin's Monument to the 3rd International on a May Day parade, 1925, as avant garde art reaches the masses

for a basic ticket to a premiership match. To see a film in London's West End costs nearly £20 for two. Opera, ballet or a concert going costs from £8 to £40 or even more for one person. A visit to a special exhibition at the Tate or Royal Academy is now between £8 and £10. Transport and refreshments can double this. Tickets for a recent Tina Turner concert cost £55 each plus £15 for three hours' parking. You had to cough up £35 to hear the Buena Vista Social Club play in London's Hyde Park, while a weekend at the last Glastonbury Festival cost £85.

Artists in revolt

Artists have always rebelled against exploitation, either financial or attempts to incorporate their work into the system. Art by its very nature, to remain art, must overthrow its own limits.

As capitalism became the predominant social system in the 19th century, several "counter-cultures" arose. The Romantic movement in northern Europe was the first of many in which artists aligned themselves with political revolt against the existing order. The Impressionist painters, Naturalist and Realist writers in France, Pre-Raphaelites in Britain, the Art Nouveau movement in design and architecture, De Stijl, the Bauhaus,

Constructivism, Surrealism – to name only a few art movements – consisted of artists, playwrights, musicians and architects challenging the capitalist social order, often at the same time creating an image of the future.

Cultural critics of Victorian capitalism, like John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde and William Morris condemned the demeaning of art, crafts and skills by capitalism and looked forward to a time when the mass of the people could enjoy "high" culture. Oscar Wilde was outspokenly socialist.

In the 20th century, many creative people throughout the world associated themselves with the 1917 October Socialist Revolution. Revolutionary Russia saw a great flowering in all the arts, as artists tried out experimental ideas and took charge of the art colleges. Theatre, music, visual arts and design hit the streets and influenced the masses. The rise of Stalinism crushed this development which, however, continued in other forms, mainly outside the Soviet Union.

A significant group of poets, writers and artists, including the poet and leader of the Surrealist movement André Breton and the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, associated themselves with the Left Opposition to Stalinism led by Trotsky, issuing a call to the world's artists in 1938.



Culture and the socialist future

The arts' association with rebellion and revolution is not an accident of history. It lies in the nature of art itself. It is only through culture and art that human beings can aspire to and visualise a different kind of life than the existing order.

In artistic activity, which is not primarily for the purpose of making money, the possibility of such a life is shown. Instead of working simply to live, an artist works to recreate life through the exercise of all his or her skills and five senses.

This is real human wealth. In a socialist society all human beings could live in this way. "The transcendence of private property," as Karl Marx wrote,

"is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes."

The music counter-culture

Art today can combine with information technology and new forms of mass communication to realise the potential to make things – art, music, writing, performance – which go beyond the profit motive.

Music, perhaps more openly than the other arts, is a powerful indicator of the potential for change and a forum for new ideas. Music events are attended by millions of young people all over the world and changing patterns of music are often a sign of social change.

This mass desire to make and hear many kinds of music is particularly exploited by the global corporations, especially the record companies. Only a few highly successful performers, such as George Michael, are able to take on such companies. Michael challenged Sony's control over his music in court and won.

Defying the control of the corporations, a music counter-culture has arisen, where young people create groups and collectives to compose, play and sell their own music. Collectives of painters and sculptors also demonstrate that a few people with some initial resources and talent

can organise to create together, outside of commercial constraints. A network of contacts is built up and people get a chance to make their lives more interesting and be happy. They feel encouraged to work on their own initiative, free from overbearing authority.

Music lovers worked out a way of defying the laws of capitalism through a new type of Internet search system called "Napster". Developed by a 19-year-old, for a friend, it had over 20 million users sharing MP3 music files.

"Yet", as one science journalist writes, "there is no business involved in Napster: no money changes hands, not even for the program, which is free. So what's the lesson? It is this: on the Internet, if you can find something which lets consumers communicate with each other without mediation, it will explode."

The global record companies are in hot pursuit of Napster as they are panicking about their royalties. But for young musicians who want to reach a big audience and those who want to hear a wide range of new music, it is a perfect system – at least until the corporate Goliaths catch up.

Culture and the MSF

As culture is commercialised it becomes the opposite of itself. It is downgraded into anti-culture. The

erosion of culture is shown by the abuse of the word itself. "Culture" is now used to describe social exchanges which are the opposite of culture. For example, we hear of "police canteen culture" and "yob culture" or even "the firm's culture".

As financial success becomes the main criterion of the "value" of a piece of creative work, its essential role is impoverished. This is because art is a special kind of commodity. Its "value" is precisely that it has a non-commercial, non-consumable side, which makes it different from most other commodities. If a cultural work is no longer a skill or a craft which allows the artist to say something about the human condition or human emotions, it turns into an empty shell.

In music, the popularity of the rave scene and music festivals, show how much people want to enjoy various kinds of culture. They want a social framework which allows them to break free of their isolation and be stimulated and excited.

The Tate Modern has attracted well over a million people in a couple of months, a clear sign of the thirst for art which has something to say. The dramatic rise in cinema audiences over the past months shows that people want better things than dumbed-down television.

The MSF recognises the unique role

of those advancing the frontiers of human creativity. Cultural workers give expression to the oppressed in society, as well as constantly exploring new areas of knowledge and perception.

The Movement for a Socialist Future:

- opposes all cuts in arts funding; rejects the cutbacks in, or closure of theatres, libraries, art galleries, museums, historic sites, concert halls, art colleges and educational establishments; is for free access to cultural events.
- supports art, theatre and music co-operative enterprises, which seek to operate independently of the corporations and state institutions.
- supports all artists who want to break free from the commercial rat race and make their work available to a wider audience. Artists must retain rights over their work and how it is reproduced.
- is for the independence of art from all censorship and control, both at present and in any future society.
- campaigns for the social ownership of all the global media and culture corporations; media workers themselves should help determine cultural production.
- believes that a socialist society will create the economic and social environment where cultural achievement will rise to new heights. We do not advocate or denigrate

any type of style in artistic creation. No one should dictate what an artist should say or how it should be said. For culture to be exciting and challenging it needs to challenge itself, not repeat a "successful" formula over and over again. Art can only be free when it exists independently of all forms of oppression.

The Movement for a Socialist Future seeks to provide a platform for creative work through its Website and a variety of activities aimed at demonstrating in practice that an alternative to global capitalism is necessary and possible. Art proves that human relations can rise above the calculations of naked profit. The cultural heritage of humanity is the property of all ■

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alternative

perspectives

from the



Raising the Cultural Horizon is the third of a series of pamphlets produced by the Movement for a Socialist Future.



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