

In his book, One-Dimensional Man, Herbert Marcuse addresses the annihilation of individual transcendence that results from Western technological totalitarianism. This totalitarianism in modern societies subjugates all members of society to the domination of technology and its economic prospects. “Economic-technical coordination” structures society and manipulates the desires of all individuals to coincide with the advancement of the political-economic state (Marcuse, 3). The individual disappears and is operationalized as a part of the economic machine. Driven by “false” needs, imposed by the economy, the mass media, and a purely quantitative view of the world, the individual lacks the transcendence and analytical awareness to critique the world around him/her. Thus, the individual atrophies into a one-dimensional thinker. The most recent episode of “Gossip Girl” depicts three aspects of Western technological society’s totalitarianism: the eradication of the individual due to a superimposed identification with the whole of society, the desublimation of the arts, and the desublimation of sexuality.

In “Gossip Girl”, the character Juliet embodies Western technological society’s totalitarian imposition of “false” needs on the individual and the consequent eradication of the individual. Marcuse maintains when a person incorporates himself/herself into a society by subscribing to the prescribed norms and behaviors (which define “needs”), s/he stabilizes the society. Juliet is driven by “false” needs that are superimposed on her by a level of consumption idealized by the contemporary industrial society in which she lives. Unlike her socialite peers at Columbia, Juliet is not wealthy. Her cousin pays her tuition, and she cannot afford to live in a penthouse on the prestigious “upper-east side” of Manhattan. Juliet’s self-validation, however, depends upon her ability to identify with the wealthy. Even though Juliet does not have the financial means to support the decadent lifestyle her peers sustain, she pretends she does. For

example, she buys expensive clothes, keeps the tags on them, and returns the clothes after she wears them. Furthermore, Juliet lies about her real address because she fears her peers will discover she actually lives in a small studio apartment in a less affluent neighborhood.

Marcuse distinguishes between “true” and “false” needs. “True” needs emerge as those necessary for the realization of all other needs, “nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture” (Marcuse, 5) “True” needs beyond food, clothes, and shelter, must be determined by the individual. Juliet’s fundamental needs are satisfied, but she lacks the “consciousness of servitude” to independently determine her other “true” needs (Marcuse, 7). Technological society blinds the individual to his/her servitude by providing entertainment, opportunities, and mass-produced items that people from all social levels can purchase and enjoy,

If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer... then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population. (Marcuse, 8)

Juliet attends the same school, the same ballet and social events as the wealthier members of her college class. Juliet deludes herself into believing the class distinction between her and her wealthy peers will vanish if she possesses the same objects and attends the same events they do. She exemplifies Marcuse’s “mimesis”, “an immediate identification of the individual with his [her] society, and through it, with the society as a whole” (Marcuse, 10). If Juliet recognizes her servitude to the “economic-technical coordination” of society, she can escape one-dimensional thought and can determine her own true needs. Juliet, however, unconsciously pursues values that continue her repression, values that “perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice” (Marcuse, 5).

When Juliet does not work to acquire a position in the “elite”, her humiliation at being rejected fuels her attempts to undermine wealthy students’ positions of privilege. Juliet suspects Serena, one of the rich Columbia students, is having an affair with her professor. Juliet obtains pictures of Serena with the professor and attempts to expose Serena in the foyer at the ballet in front of Columbia University’s dean. Blaire thwarts Juliet and openly tells her she will never be one of them. And so, the unattainable false needs Juliet deems to be important insure her continued repression. To escape one-dimensional thought and her servitude, Juliet would have to use reason to question existing norms and social practices. Instead, she remains trapped in her “euphoria in unhappiness” (Marcuse, 5).

“Gossip Girl” also depicts two forms of Marcuse’s concept of repressive desublimation, desublimation of the arts and desublimation of sexuality. Desublimation of the arts manifests itself in both the mere existence of “Gossip Girl” and in the way that television show portrays cultural events such as the ballet. In pre-technological society, the arts represented a “higher culture” and that conflicted with society (Marcuse, 56). Although higher culture was primarily available to the wealthy, its artistic works created an awareness of the oppressive social reality in which most people existed. The sublimation of the arts redirected oppression in society, and the arts emerged as an acceptable medium through which the alienated artist could critique society. Sublimation of the arts gave rise to hope. Thus, the artist negated sordid social reality.

“Gossip Girl”, however, reflects what Marcuse calls technological society’s “flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality” (Marcuse, 57). The television show that might be seen as a contemporary play, does not offer another aspect of reality, nor does it reject exploitative social values, it actually celebrates them. “Gossip Girl” is a fictional reality show which incorporates repressive social values and uses them as a form of cohesion with its

audience.

One would like to believe “Gossip Girl” stimulates critical thinking so that viewers step back from their society and see the show as a critique of existing norms. The majority of “Gossip Girl” viewers, however, watch the show to emulate the characters’ behavior and fashion. Thus, the show reflects and furthers uncritical thinking or one-dimensional thinking about cultural values. “Gossip Girl” illustrates how technological society desublimates the arts. It negates artistic criticism by integrating cultural values that give rise to societal oppression in the economic and technological world. Marcuse states,

The absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents. In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference. (Marcuse, 61)

In “Gossip Girl” socio-economic pluralism with its potential for class competition is presented to an economically diverse audience which identifies with the characters without reference to its own social reality. Culture and social reality become indistinguishable in this television “art” form that is mass-produced and distributed to all levels of society in a quantitative light reflective of the technological world.

This particular “Gossip Girl” episode also demonstrates Marcuse’s desublimation of the arts when the characters attend the ballet. The ballet represents a social event for characters. Those who attend the ballet pretend to share the same economic level for example, Vanessa and Juliet rub shoulders with Serena and Blaire. Juliet also tries to use the setting of the ballet to publicly humiliate Serena. Finally, Serena and Blaire worry about which men they should bring as dates to the ballet. None of the characters consider the potentially transcendental realm, the sublimated art, of the ballet or of the composer’s, the choreographer’s, and the dancers’ artistic

messages to the audience. One-dimensional thought superimposes itself on the ballet. The ballet is desublimated so the artistic form is relevant only to maintaining the socio-economic cultural norms of the technological world. The characters on “Gossip Girl” fail to experience the ballet in more than one dimension and this message is passed to the television audience. The characters and their viewers emerge as subject to a totalitarianism that “has coordinated the means of expression to the point where communication of transcending contents becomes technically impossible” (Marcuse, 68).

Just as “Gossip Girl” portrays the desublimation of the arts in modern technical society, it also depicts the desublimation of sexuality. According to Marcuse, sexuality encompasses more than mere sexual satisfaction. Libido refers to “the energy of the Life Instincts”, thus it is more than sexual drive (Marcuse, 72). In the pre-technological world, oppression led to the sublimation of eroticism and this provided a level of libido, “a medium of libidinal experience” (Marcuse, 73). The recognition of oppression provided a framework for pleasure that contrasted with everyday life, and the sublimation of life instincts in everyday life led to increased eroticism in sexuality. Thus, the backdrop of “libidinal experience” served as both the recognition of and the release from the misery of everyday life. Sublimation mediated sexuality.

In the contemporary technological society represented in “Gossip Girl”, sexuality appears liberated and omnipresent. Marcuse points out, however, Western totalitarianism encourages greater sexual freedom to “promote cohesion and contentment” (Marcuse, 72). Contemporary society desublimates sexuality to convince people they are happy. “The Pleasure Principle absorbs the Reality Principle” and desublimation “extends liberty while intensifying domination” (Marcuse, 72). The increased sexual freedom of desublimated sexuality, however, renders sexuality as nothing more than a number of instantly gratifying sexual acts and reduces the

multi-faceted libido to a single dimension. People and sex become one-dimensional. One-dimensional thinkers lose the ability to analytically examine the technological culture because they are absorbed by it. Instant sexual gratification deludes people into believing they are happy in the culture that grants them their new erotic “freedom”.

“Gossip Girl”, both as a television show and in its story line, exemplifies the desublimation of sexuality. Society’s view of sexuality appears liberalized. The television show depicts a world of love triangles and casual sex to entertain the viewer and promote sex as the end of sexuality. Media, supported by advertising, provides the viewer with a presumed freedom of sexual choice. Marcuse appraises the modern media, “It is part and parcel of the society in which it happens, but nowhere is negation. What happens is surely wild and obscene, virile and tasty, quite immoral-and, precisely because of that, perfectly harmless” (Marcuse, 77). Thus, “Gossip Girl” demonstrates the media’s role in desublimating sex to fuel consumerism and to bolster technological society.

“Gossip Girl’s” storyline also relies on sexual desublimation to attract and control an audience. Blaire and Chuck, who are enemies, nevertheless engage in a sexual affair. They hate one another but are compelled to have sex whenever they run into one another. Sex is a means of instant gratification. Chuck and Blaire do not enjoy libidinal transcendence during sex to escape the oppression of daily life. Instead they engage in repetitive meaningless sex over which they have no control. Blaire refers to Chuck and herself as “enemies with benefits” (“Gossip Girl”). Like their audience, Chuck and Blaire mistake sexual freedom for true societal freedom. In fact, technological society uses sexual freedom to lull “Gossip Girl’s” characters and audience into complacency so they will not question or analyze society’s overwhelming commitment to consumption and goods. Pleasure masks reality, “The Happy Consciousness – the belief that the

real is rational and the system delivers the goods – reflects the new conformism which is a facet of technological rationality translated into social behavior” (Marcuse, 84).

And so, “Gossip Girl” exhibits several aspects of Marcuse’s Western technological totalitarianism. Juliet reflects the eradication of the individual in technological society as she uncritically pursues superimposed “false” needs that increase her repression by industrial society. Both “Gossip Girl” as a “dramatic art form” and the television show’s rendition of the ballet as a mere social event exemplify the desublimation of the arts. Finally, “Gossip Girl” desublimates sexuality both in the way it depicts sex in its story line and because the television show itself is an expression of technological society’s mass media and advertising. Pursuit of “false” needs, desublimation of art, and desublimation of sex all limit a person’s freedom in society by providing short-run pleasures that blind the person to technological society’s increased domination. The individual, like “Gossip Girl’s” characters and audience, succumbs to one-dimensional thought.