

American Pop Frankenstein?

Andy Warhol, Iconic Experience and the Advent of the Pop Society

by

Steve Sherwood
Department of Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

Pop as a cultural phenomenon remains largely underappreciated and undertheorized. This article draws upon the classical work of Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* along with more contemporary theorists such as Jeffrey Alexander in attempting to acknowledge the creative dimension of American pop culture. Cultural critics on both the left and right, such as C. Wright Mills and Daniel Boorstin, saw the rise of the Pop Society as reflecting the trivialization of culture as well as the increasing "dumbing down" of the American public in favor of such things as the "cult of celebrity." Rather than substance, its critics argued that the Pop Society was driven solely by the media and entertainment. While Andy Warhol has been largely viewed as an emblem of the "profane" aspects of American culture, I draw on recent work such as Elizabeth Currid's *The Warhol Economy* to argue that the representation of Warhol, like the Pop Society, also has its "sacred" dimension. Pop and its icons can be both emancipatory and liberating and are a necessary dimension of any healthy civil society. Where critics see Warhol as a kind of Pop "Frankenstein," a deeper appreciation of his work and Pop culture enables us to see him as the iconographer of the symbols that unite us.

Introduction: Discovering the Pop Society

"Once you 'got' Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again." So writes Andy Warhol of his cross-country trip in the back of a station wagon in 1962. Warhol, who was by this time perhaps the most successful commercial artist in New York but had not yet attained recognition as a Pop Artist, didn't know how to drive (he would never learn) and had brought three friends with him on his first excursion to L.A. As he gazed out on upon the landscape of America, he had a revelation: "The farther west we drove, the more Pop everything looked on the highways. Suddenly, we all felt like insiders because even though Pop was everywhere -- that was the thing about it, most people still took it for granted, whereas we were dazzled by it -- to us, it was the new Art." (Warhol 1980, 39)

Warhol continued: "I didn't ever want to live anyplace where you couldn't drive down the road and see drive-ins and giant ice cream cones and walk-in hot dogs and motel signs flashing!" (Warhol 1980, 40). Pop to Americans, Warhol asserted, was what water was to fish: "We were seeing the future and we knew it for sure. We saw people walking

around in it without knowing it, because they were still thinking in the past, in the references of the past. But all you had to do was know you were in the future, and that's what put you there. The mystery was gone, but the amazement was just starting."

Nearly a half century later, it is hard to deny Warhol's cultural prescience or his influence. While "popular culture" remains an often abstract, academic category and "Pop Art" has passed into the annals of art history, Pop as a sensibility, as a way of seeing the world, is still very much with us. Indeed, it isn't too much to say that Warhol was a Pop visionary. Who can deny that he was forecasting the advent of what today is the Pop Society? Warhol was the Christopher Columbus of the image-driven, tech savvy, tabloid-obsessed, fast food, consumer culture we presently inhabit.

Popular culture became "Pop" during the 1960's, i.e., it became aware of itself as a cultural phenomenon. Pop, as a term, indicates a certain reflexivity and self-awareness about mass culture: sensitivity to the fact that our environment is increasingly constituted by commercial products. Where "popular culture" is a rather objective and neutral term which just sits there on the page, Pop has a certain verve or élan to it, a degree of self-confidence. The agent of transformation was Pop Art, a movement which began initially in Britain during the late 1950's and which, like so many contemporary cultural movements (the appreciation of movies as an art form, for example, by the French) begins with the reverence of American mass culture by other cultures. As an art form, Pop Art takes as its subjects the everyday commercial environment in which Americans live and breath, often celebrating the commodities and products sold to them by advertisers and the mass media. The work of the Pop Artists, particularly in the decade spanning 1957 through 1967, transformed popular culture from being merely an academic or intellectual placeholder or a unit of analysis into a legitimate type of action or way of being.

American Pop as we know it really begins in that same year, 1962, with the first public exhibition of Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can. Warhol's soup can has since attained iconic status. It remains a recognizable emblem of American cultural life. I can attest to this directly since I incorporate Warhol and Pop into the sociology courses I teach at UCLA and my students still respond to Warhol's soup can, like the rest of us, with a mixture of disbelief, irony and pleasure. But they all recognize it as a part of their cultural DNA. And they understand that it says something about them and the society of which they are a part. Nor is the significance of Warhol's Soup Can limited to the the Sixties. When *Newsweek* magazine did a cover story on global literacy, entitled "181 Things You Need to Know Now" in its July, 2007 issue, right there on the cover next to Osama Bin Laden, below Hillary Clinton and above Halle Berry, was, yes, you guessed it, Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can.

If the value of the Campbell's Soup Can as a public symbol is clear, so too is its value as a work of art. When they first went on display in a little art gallery on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles (the only place where Warhol could get a public viewing of his new art at the time), Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans canvasses (there were 32, one for each flavor of the soup) were bought by the dealer of the gallery, Irving Blum, as a set for \$1,000. In

May, 2006, one of the original series Campbell Soup Cans sold for \$11.8 million dollars.

Warhol and his Campbell's Soup Can, then, are what Emile Durkheim referred to as "social facts," the question is what do these facts mean? Or, as Durkheim wrote in his late masterwork *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*: "[t]he totem is above all a symbol, a material expression of something else, but of what?" (Durkheim 2001[1915], 154). What does Warhol's Campbell Soup Can say about the culture that not only produced it as a food item but as a work of art, as a reflection upon itself? If it is a totem, an emblem conveying or representing what is sacred to us, then what is the nature of the sacred in the Pop Society?

Christin Mamiya, an art history professor and curator at the University of Nebraska, argues that it is consumerism itself. In her still important book, *Pop Art and Consumer Culture: American Super Market*, she says that in America in the 1960's "[mass]consumption took on overtones of a national religion." (Mamiya 1992, 3) Her essential point, like most of those critical of Warhol and Pop, is that Pop not only drew on consumer culture for its imagery but was itself fostered and promoted as a commodity that reflected the "tremendous expansion of multinational corporations" in America during the Sixties and "contributed to the legitimation of that very system." In other words, Pop collapsed the distinction between art, which traditionally has been a means of critiquing consumer culture, and business, which is seen to exploit art for its own purposes, namely profit. Pop Art was not merely a commentary on "marketing, advertising and the mass media" but a product of them. This was not surprising, Mamiya says, given that "politicians, economic leaders, and business people" were all "preoccupied with strategies to encourage mass consumption." Advertising, too, Mamiya says, was "a form of religion" that promoted mass consumption to the point that it became like a "body of doctrine" (Mamiya 1992, 18).

In characterizing the "religious" quality of consumption, Mamiya addresses a frequent criticism of Pop, which is its "cultic" nature. And yet, according to Durkheim, all social phenomena possess this quality or dimension. "Everything is found in religion," wrote Durkheim in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, published in 1912, (hereafter "EFRL"), arguing that "nearly all great social institutions are born of religion." (Durkheim 2001[1915], 316/314). Even (gasp!) science: "Scientific thought is merely a more perfect form of religious thought." (Durkheim 2001[1915], 324) If every institution in society is born of religious influences, where else could science come from but religion? The social scientist is heir to the witch doctor. This remarkable idea, that the person responsible for founding sociology as a discipline, a true Enlightenment thinker such as Durkheim, should have had such a novel conception of the origins of society and its institutions remains a largely overlooked and underappreciated fact. Durkheim, of course, was not talking about conventional religions (i.e., so-called "big r" religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Hinduism) but rather the "cultic" and often nonrational dimension of everyday social reality, the way in which myths, symbols and rituals can still be found at the heart of "modern" society (i.e., religion with a "small r"). This was the "totemism" of the Australian aboriginals that he undertook to analyze in the EFRL, i.e., a basic set of religious representations and actions that reinforce the identity and

solidarity of the tribe or clan, including notions of the sacred and the profane and the totem itself, an emblem symbolizing the unity of the group. Thus every institution in contemporary society operates on the basis of maintaining what Edward Shils referred to as its "sacred center" and ritually reaffirming what is sacred and what is profane.

The Profane Warhol: American Pop Frankenstein

If 1962 was the year when American Pop really began, 1966 was perhaps its *annus mirabilis*, the year that Pop became "Pop" and went mainstream. In April of that year, a *Newsweek* cover story was the first mass media acknowledgment of the new cultural phenomenon. Sporting a Roy Lichtenstein comic "Pop!" on the cover, the story was entitled "It's What's Happening in Art, Fashion, Entertainment and Business" and authored by future Pop novelist, Peter Benchley ("Jaws"). The article did indeed explore the clear influences of Pop in all of these realms but it focused on one in particular: the then-new *Batman* TV series starring Adam West which was on twice a week, garnering stellar ratings and which had become a national fad. To the public at large, most of whom were not art aficionados, *Batman* was pop and Pop was *Batman*, and this was precisely the American public that stoked the worst fears of pop culture's critics. This "new pop society" is characterized as being driven by the mass contagion of "fads" such as *Batman*, so-called "happenings" and the revival of comic books, all smacking of a national form of tribalism, referred to by *Newsweek* as the "pop cult" and likened to some kind of amorphous monster: "In five years, pop has grown like The Blob, from a label for what appeared to be a minor phase in art history to a mass psyche. It has captivated the Great Society, thrived on its prosperity and exploited its restlessness." (Benchley 1966, 56)

In her chapter on "The Mass Media in the Age of Publicity," Mamiya argues that one of the primary vehicles for this "ideology of consumption" was the media, especially television, with its emphasis on "image" or "surface veneer": "the predominance of television and its ability to communicate and ensure the perpetuation of consumer culture in the 1960's was overwhelming." (Mamiya 1992, 75) And, in the end, Mamiya points out, the foundation of television isn't the programming but the commercials: "the real product of the mass media is not the show or article, but the audience, which they, in essence, sell to advertisers."

At its simplest, Pop can be seen as the triumph of the image or sign over text or the word. The Pop Society, then, is a media-based and therefore image-based society. From its emergence during the febrile 1960's, the Pop Society has grown into the dominant form of culture in the world we inhabit today. So much of the symbolism of Pop drew on science fiction and there is thus something profoundly appropriate that nearly a half century after its inception, the Pop Society has come to characterize we who live in the "future," the 21st century. Mamiya refers to Erik Barnouw's term "the image empire" and, more recently, Christine Rosen has referred to it as the "Image Culture" and, like so many intellectuals and academics, sees in it a kind of dumbing-down, and, with its relentless emphasis on the image over the word, a kind of manic return to a pre-literate mentality (Rosen, 2005). Whether it be the slew of mindless reality TV shows, the equally mindless blockbuster films, the I-phone, the notable decline in Americans'

reading habits, the increasing ability to alter images through virtual technologies such as Photoshop or even the encroachment of Power Point into classroom presentations, Rosen and others charge that the advent and expansion of the Pop Society aims to undermine both the substance and the authenticity of contemporary culture and, with it, our everyday relationships. A musical group from the late 1980's calling itself *Pop Will Eat Itself* included the mantra "television, movies, comics" in one of its songs and it is this troika that is seen at the heart of the Pop Society and the dangerous harbingers it portends.

Of course, it was part of Warhol's provocation to stoke the ire of such cultural critics. "I believe in television," Warhol said in one interview, itself a statement of Pop dogma or "faith." In *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, he likens life itself to television: "A whole day of life is like a whole day of television. TV never goes off the air once it starts for the day and I don't either." (Warhol 1975, 5) Moreover, Warhol says, the "magic" of television for him lies in its ability to numb him to emotions or feelings: "When I got my first TV set, I stopped caring so much about having close relationships with other people." (Warhol 1975, 26) This was in keeping with Warhol's carefully cultivated persona of a kind of an android or a machine. His first serious statement as a Pop artist was "I want to be a machine. I think everyone should be a machine. Don't you?" Later, after he had become as a cultural icon in the 1980's, Warhol published *POPism: The Andy Warhol Sixties* in which he coined the term "popism" in the same way that he elevated the term "superstar" into the popular lexicon during the Sixties, along with his most quoted remark: "In the future everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes."

The most notorious, and perhaps most fundamental, characteristic of the Pop Society is the cult that is still most closely associated with it today: the cult of celebrity. If consumption is one form of "religion" that can be seen to be fostered by Pop, then the other is entertainment. We seemingly live in an era, after all, where celebrity headlines are parsed far more widely and intensively than news from an unpopular war in Iraq and where Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears and Paris Hilton have all become Pop icons. As culture critic Neil Gabler once put it, the Pop culture that Warhol helped foster was one which made soup cans into celebrities and celebrities into soup cans (Gabler 1998).

But if the cult of celebrity seems particularly prevalent today, it is certainly nothing new to American culture. Indeed, the advent of both Warhol and the Pop Society were preceded by powerful and elegant critiques on both the right and left end of the cultural and political spectrum. Pop, as partisans such as Warhol aver, is a kind of imagination or imaginative enterprise. That is, Pop is a way of seeing the world. Sociology, of course, already had a well-established way of seeing the world, the "sociological imagination," a term coined by C. Wright Mills in his book of the same name. In probably his greatest work, *The Power Elite*, Mills takes aim at what he sees as the primary opponent of the sociological imagination, i.e., the "mass society." At the heart of the "mass society" are the mass media, Mills asserts, and the primary standard for the commercial media, he writes, "are the wanting and not having of commodities and of women held to be good looking" (Mills 2000[1956], 318) Here Mills built on the traditional view of popular culture established by those weighty German exiles, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and their colleagues, collectively known as the "Frankfurt School," who summed

up what is the still-current bias of sociology toward popular culture with its pithy maxim: "mass enlightenment as mass deception." Where the mainstream view of popular culture is that it represents a certain democratic attitude or celebration of the individual and his or her everyday environment, Horkheimer, Adorno et al. saw in all of this the powerful forces of a capital-driven economy and a way of life based on greed, profit and exploitation resulting in consumerist conformity. The agent of this destructive process at the mass level, according to the Frankfurt School critique, is none other than popular culture, which increasingly degrades the public mind to the ability where it no longer sees, or cares about, its imprisonment within false consciousness. Mills wrote that "[t]he professional celebrity, male and female, is the crowning result of the star system of a society that makes a fetish of competition. In America, this system is carried to the point where a man who can knock a small white ball into a series of holes in the ground with more efficiency and skill than anyone else thereby gains social access to the President of the United States." (Mills 2000[1956], 74).

For the left, then, popular culture threatened rationality and progressive thinking. But conservative cultural critics, too, were unhappy with popular culture, which they felt had corrosive effects upon morality and tradition. Daniel Boorstin in his 1961 book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. (The original title, tellingly, was *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*), eerily prophesied the coming of the Age of Warhol and even Warhol himself. The essential point that Boorstin made was that Americans found themselves in the thrall of "the image" (by which Boorstin really meant the images purveyed by the mass media) to the point where not only could they no longer distinguish between the original and the copy lies but that they had come to *prefer* the copy -- in this case, the staged, scripted versions of reality, which Boorstin called "pseudo-events" -- to the real thing: "The pseudo-events which flood our consciousness are neither true nor false in the old, familiar senses. The very same advances which have made them possible have also made the images -- however planned, contrived or distorted -- more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself." (Boorstin 1961, 36). Boorstin's book sounds familiar because it was the foundation of what today is known as postmodernism although it was also, of course, echoing the "mass society" argument of sociologists like Mills. But Boorstin didn't have a theoretical or disciplinary agenda, his was a very homespun jeremiad at how American culture had become hijacked by advertising and entertainment not through the machinations of the "culture industry" or the "ruling class" but rather through the "extravagant expectations" of Americans themselves, who had become lazy and bored in their post-World War II affluence.

Like Mills, Boorstin saved his harshest rhetoric for the rise of the celebrity figure, whom he referred to as the "human pseudo-event." The celebrity is to the hero, in this modern, soulless age, Boorstin tells us, as the image or copy is to the true, original reality. Boorstin argued that we manufacture celebrities since the advent of the mass media "suddenly gave us, among other things, the means of fabricating well-knownness." (Boorstin 1961, 47) Celebrity rather than actual heroism is the currency of the media age: "The celebrity is a person who is well known for their well knownness.....His qualities -- or rather his lack of qualities -- illustrate our peculiar problems. He is neither good nor

bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness." (Boorstin 1961, 57). What the celebrity offers is the image not the reality of achievement: "The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name."

Warhol's greatest sin, to many, was precisely this: to transform the figure of the artist from a genuine culture "hero" into a mere "celebrity," from someone who pursued truth and vision into someone who pursued self-promotion. To sum up Warhol's approach to his profession, it would not be James Joyce's canonical "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" but rather "Portrait of the Artist as a Celebrity." Warhol, when asked about art as calling responded: "Art? Isn't that a man's name?" One of the most scathing reviews of Warhol ever written appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in 1982 where the art critic for *Time* magazine, Robert Hughes, described Warhol "as the first American artist to whose career publicity was truly intrinsic." Hughes ripped into Warhol for transforming art from a concern with aesthetics into the pursuit of profit: "...in the Sixties...the art world gradually shed its idealist premises and its sense of outsidership and began to turn into the Art Business...Warhol became the emblem and thus, to no small extent, the instrument of this change...he went after publicity with the voracious single-mindedness of a feeding bluefish" (Hughes 1982, 378).

But Warhol was not the first "art star." That was Jackson Pollock, the darling of Abstract Expressionism, who achieved the feat by appearing in an extensive spread in a 1949 issue of *Life* magazine. Warhol didn't create the idea of the artist as celebrity, he democratized it. "Why do people think artists are special?" Warhol asked in his *Philosophy*, "it's just another job." (Warhol 1975, 178) The idea of Warhol as a liberator or democratizer arises within the theoretical tradition that Warhol and Pop are most often associated with, that of postmodernism. As I said above, the conceptual foundation of postmodernism can be found in Boorstin's 1961 book, where the argument is that the copy has come to replace the original, but it becomes elaborated as a kind of global critique of American cultural imperialism by the French during the 1980's when thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard argued for the death of "grand narratives" and a "simulated" reality in which the "masses" imbibe mere images rather than truth. All of this was put most succinctly (and fittingly enough) in a movie, *The Matrix*, in 1998. Postmodernism as a perspective argues, like Neomarxists such as Mills, that popular culture equates with a society characterized by regressive tribalism. But whereas for Mills and the Frankfurt School popular culture is the cause of such regression, for postmodernism it is merely the effect. Postmodernism argues that, in Bruno Latour's phrase, "we were never modern" and that all great traditions such as Democracy and Science and Progress were merely "stories" society told of itself to obscure the fact that it was merely a "jungle" of dog-eat-dog primitivism. For these French critics, then, the various ideological Americans offered for their national and cultural superiority -- such as "leader of the Free World" --- were just so many examples of "simulation."

The postmodern argument, though, in arguing for the decline of the uniform "metanarrative" sees the creative rise of various multicultural variations, i.e., with

relativism comes freedom. Previously marginalized subcultures and orientations are able to achieve recognition and success. The "camp" sensibility that Susan Sontag articulated in her seminal 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp," was strongly associated with the gay community and from the postmodern perspective Warhol becomes a kind of hero and pioneer of "camp" (as Sontag puts it, "the ultimate camp statement [is] 'it's so good because it's awful..."). In her recent *Pop Art and the Contest Over American Culture*, Sarah Doris argues that Pop's most significant contribution was this elevation of camp to the level of mass culture, as "pop refuted modernist notions of originality and autonomous subjectivity, thus constituting itself as a kind of antimodernism" (Doris 2007, 9). And "Pop's ironic celebration of dated celebrities and styles shows a clear affinity with camp both utilized obsolescence to subversive effect" through the recycling of outmoded or obsolescent culture.

In a sense the postmodernist perspective celebrates Warhol as a destroyer of idols. But for postmodernism idols (i.e., simulations) are all that really exist. What the postmodernist view shares with the Neomarxist perspective offered by Mamiya and Mills is the idea that popular culture serves a passive public. Warhol and Pop become emblematic of this passivity. Whether it be the Warhol of Mamiya who comes to represent the advent of mass consumerism or the Warhol of Hughes who comes to represent the degrading of the artist into a celebrity, Warhol is a symbol of what is wrong with Mill's "mass society." This is the "profane" Warhol. But all of these views, the Marxist, the Weberian, the postmodern, offer a view of Warhol and Pop that see symbols as derivative rather than constitutive. And they offer Warhol as the emblem of an American public that is both unaware and uninterested. In other words, all of these approaches see "effects" but ignore the "uses and gratifications" of Warhol & Pop. If the "profane" Warhol represents the critical views of various sociological perspectives on the Pop Society, it is not the only set of sociological views. The other side of the sociological divide, represented by Durkheim and the so called functional and microsociological traditions also exists, even if it is underrepresented. For the "profane" can only be defined in relation to the "sacred" and so if there is a "profane" Warhol there is also a "sacred" Warhol. In other words, if Warhol can be seen as a regressive "idol," he can also be seen a constructive "icon."

The Sacred Warhol: The Pop Society and Iconic Experience

In the quarter century since Hughes castigated Warhol, Warhol's stature, along with that of Pop, has grown so large that Elizabeth Currid could entitle her recent book on creative culture in New York City *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion Art & Music Drive New York City*. Currid, a young, urban planning professor from USC, argues that cultural creativity, particularly that of fashion, music and art (Pop, by any other name), is the foundation of the economy of New York City and has helped to make and maintain it as a "global creative hub." (Currid 2007, 15) Warhol, Currid writes in her first chapter, "exemplified these dynamics more than anyone....[i]n his work, Warhol translated commodities into art, whether soup cans or dollar bills. But he also understood the inverse that art and culture could be translated into a commodity form -- what he called 'business art,' a central tenet to contemporary creative production." Of course, Currid does not share the premises of critical theory that consumption is in itself bad or that

"commodity" is a perjorative term. Rather these are for her, as they are for most Americans, relatively neutral in their connotations. Currid's book germinated as a dissertation at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and she writes that while she had originally planned on going to the more trendy and prestigious Vassar College her parents decided to send her to Carnegie instead. She says: "I recall that the only thing that even remotely assuaged my general distress of having to attend a nerdy, technical school in grey, cloudy Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was the fact that Andy Warhol had gone there too and so it just couldn't be that bad." (Currid 2007, x) In other words, Warhol, whom she credits as being behind her "initial footsteps into the intellectual world," was both sacred and inspirational to her.

When it comes to Pop, sociology's reception has been, in the terminology of Max Weber, largely "unmusical." The dichotomy that exists between the perception of Warhol and Pop as being either a reflection of what is "wrong" with American society (Mamiya) or as being what is "right" with it (Currid) reflects a long-standing debate that has been occurring since the advent of the Pop Society in 1962. In other words, our perception of Warhol and Pop as being either "sacred" or "profane" has less to do with the empirical reality of either and much more to do with the structure of our discourse and how we perceive them.

It is precisely this point that Jeffrey Alexander, professor of sociology at Yale, made in his now classic essay "The Promise of a Cultural Sociology: Technological Discourse and the Sacred and Profane Information Machine." In addition to Warhol's passing, 1987 also saw the publication of Alexander's seminal and provocative essay which addresses sociology's "tin ear" when it comes to culture, popular and otherwise. In exploring the symbolism of the reception of the personal computer into American life and culture, Alexander argued for the importance of culture as a meaningful -- and meaning-making -- enterprise. Sociologists, he argued, often reduced culture to the role of doing the "dirty work" for political or economic forces, merely being a "stooge" for Big Business or the Power Elite, and ignoring the "relative autonomy" of culture as a real and efficacious dimension of social reality. Alexander challenged this bias by showing how Weber's "rationalization" thesis (the idea that the increasing prevalence of technology means that society is inevitably becoming more disciplined and rule-regulated), is only one end of a symbolic dichotomy (the "profane" computer as a kind of modern "Frankenstein") that also includes a more positive and affirmational alternative (the "sacred" computer as "salvationary"). Alexander shows us that it is not that a positive view of the personal computer didn't exist by drawing on decades of accounts in the popular press to demonstrate that a lively debate existed around the "sacred and profane information machine." Rather, sociology has largely ignored the positive view in favor of the more traditional rationalization thesis, an idea borne out of the cultural response to -- and fear of -- the worst aspects of the Industrial Revolution.

During the past two decades, Alexander has continued to promote what he calls this "strong programme for culture" and broaden the field of cultural sociology, establishing the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale along with Philip Smith and Ron Eyerman. His recent work has continued to build upon his earlier insights as well as Durkheim's EFRL,

which Alexander has long cited as a primary influence upon his work and thought. The core of Durkheim's book is Chapter 7, which deals with the idea that society is the symbols from which it is constituted. Durkheim writes that "social life...in every respect and throughout its history is possible only thanks to a vast body of symbolism." (Durkheim 2001[1915], 176) Durkheim believes that the core of society is solidarity, our interconnectedness with one another, and the symbols that represent or embody this solidarity. These are what Durkheim refers to as "collective representations" and they are what a society's "collective consciousness" is made up of. Therefore, symbols are not secondary, they are absolutely foundational. In studying the Australian aboriginals that he writes of in his book, Durkheim argues that the magical forces or powers which enable their tribes or clans to cohere is "mana," which is another word for solidarity. What is necessary for society, then, is that it constantly generate new symbols or collective representations that embody the sacred and the profane and which ensure common understandings. It is the essence of society to constantly create the sacred out of the profane, and to constantly generate new symbols and occasions for solidarity. The sacred and profane, then, are the parameters of the "religious" consciousness that represents the communal interconnections between members of society. Not only do these symbols generate our solidarity, they also generate our authenticity.

In offering a more robust theory of culture, Alexander addressed Walter Benjamin's argument in the famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that modern society was remorselessly compromising the authenticity of culture by stripping cultural works of both their "tradition" and their "sacred aura" (Benjamin 2001[1936]). Alexander demonstrated that it wasn't that tradition and aura didn't exist, it was rather that sociology didn't have sufficient theoretical tools to recognize them. Critics of Pop argue that all of the representations it generates are false idols (profane) but Alexander and Durkheim enable us to see that Pop also generates genuine icons (sacred). In other words, where the critical perspective argues that Pop constitutes a kind of false consciousness, Alexander enables us to see that it is instead what he refers to as "iconoconsciousness," i.e., an awareness of the iconic dimension of social reality, the symbols and representations that create a social world in the first place. The convergence between popular culture and Pop Art, then, comes through the icons that populate modern consciousness as well as the iconographic experiences we have with them. They come to possess an archetypal significance. The important thing is that they are constantly being created anew. Whereas cultural critics see in Warhol's Soup Can merely a reductive symbol of a materialistic society, from the Pop perspective it is a new symbol by which Americans can recognize and understand themselves, that is exactly what *makes* it "iconic."

"Pop art in Warhol's sense is an art of the church of mass culture," Adam Gopnik wrote in *The New Yorker*, "Everyone who writes about Warhol insists that his repetition is 'numbing' or 'deadening' [in] the way mass reproduction robs images of their aura and their power. In fact, Warhol's repetition does just the opposite: it gives to photographic images some of the ritualistic intensity of folk music and dance." (Gopnik 1989, 112)

At the outset of this essay, I quoted Warhol's "revelation" about discovering a whole new

dimension, that of Pop, that enabled him to see America in an entirely different way. This is the realm that Alexander addresses in his recent paper, "Iconic Experience in Art and Life: Beginning With Giacometti's 'Standing Woman'". Alexander's emphasis on iconicity as a deeper fabric of meaning relies on the idea that there is more to the surface of everyday objects than we normally acknowledge or articulate, things as various as family photos, household and domestic objects, advertisements and commercials, clothing, make up and, yes, even soup cans. "We are drawn into the experience of meaning and emotionality by surface forms. We experience these forms in a tactile way," Alexander writes, "They have an expressive texture that we 'feel' in our unconscious minds and associate with other ideas and things. These ideas and things are simultaneously personal and social." (Alexander 2007, 10) Alexander argues that every "surface" holds a potential "depth" opening out into a totemic significance. Any and every object in our world can possess a primal and primordial power. By "thickening" our understanding of this often taken-for-granted realm of experience, Alexander is asserting, following Durkheim's totemistic meditations, that materialization can, paradoxically, also be a process of idealization as well as one of solidarity and connection: "Can such iconographic experience be at the basis of social life, even in the modern, deracinated, secularized, technological, and materialistic world in which we live today?" Alexander asks, "I think so. Iconographic experience explains how we feel *part* of our social and physical surroundings, how we experience the reality of the ties that bind us to people we know and people we don't know, and how we develop a sense of place, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, our vocation, indeed our very selves." (Alexander 2007, 12) Alexander takes Durkheim's argument for the transformative powers of the totemic principle and applies it to today's society. Our own totems are far more differentiated and complex but no less moving or meaningful.

"The Campbell's Soup Can...thus becomes another self-portrait of the artist. The can, like Warhol's public persona, is cool, machine-made, metallic, a mirror of its surroundings. These qualities, superficial though they are, nevertheless seduce the eye," writes James Romaine, a culture critic, arguing that Warhol's work was in fact much deeper than critics gave it credit for and that Warhol himself was more traditionally religious than generally acknowledged. Romaine believed that Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can reflected the tension between "surface" and "depth" and that the Soup Can partook of this iconic duality: "But what completes this self-portrait are the can's contents; they should be the most significant part but actually have very little in common with the can's exterior. Soup, a warm source of nourishment, is a sensitive element that will not survive long outside of a protective container. Hidden beneath supermarket imagery, Warhol's faith is sealed for protection." (Romaine 2003).

Alexander's contributions, then, enable us to see that while there is certainly the profane Warhol, the unearthly and mechanistic "Frankenstein" of a dumbed-down Pop Society, there is also what art historian John Richardson called the "recording angel," the sacred Warhol who was an iconographer of the symbols by which Americans define themselves for, as the philosopher Arthur Danto puts it "we *are* the images we hold in common with everyone else....We live in an atmosphere of images and these define the reality of our existences."(Danto 1999, 81/83)

Not coincidentally, this was precisely the role of Pop according to art critic Lawrence Alloway, the inventor of the term, who in 1974 defined Pop as an "iconographical art" and as "an affectionate way of referring to mass culture, the whole man-made environment." Pop, Alloway said, is "an art about signs and sign systems....Pop art deals with material that already exists as signs: photographs, brand goods, comics -- that is to say, with precoded material....the communication system of the twentieth century is...Pop Art's subject." (Alloway 1974, 7). Rather than the reductive phenomenon that its critics argue for, Alloway says that Pop actually enhances perception as there are at least two levels of reference: "if Roy Lichtenstein uses Mickey Mouse in his work, Mickey is not the sole subject. The original sign-system of which Mickey is a part is also present as subject."

Pop and its icons are integrators, they are means of democratizing and universalizing the collective consciousness. The fact of the matter is that Pop is a corollary of progressive, multicultural and democratic societies and the enemy of particularistic and regressive regimes. Pop, in other words, is a necessary precondition for a robust, vital and healthy civil society. Critics not only overlook the "uses and gratifications" of Pop, they ignore its rather inspiring history. In their book *"Here, There and Everywhere": The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*, for example, the authors acknowledge the emancipatory effect that American pop culture had for Turks in postwar Germany along with numerous examples from other societies where outgroups were able to conceive of, and press for, a less particularistic and traditional society (Wagnleitner and May 2000). The difference between America and its enemies in World War II or during the Cold War was that these wars were cultural as well as military conflicts and that Pop was part of America's cultural arsenal then as today. The Pop Society is a generator of the kinds of symbols and signs that Durkheim saw as so necessary and constitutive of the collective consciousness. The key aspect of the Pop Society, then, is not necessarily the quality or kind of icons it produces but the fact that it produces them in such great quantity. American pop culture has become a kind of international *lingua franca* which Charles Acland refers to as a "felt internationalism" (Acland 2002). People from practically any culture, any age, and any level of education can engage in common conversations regarding the latest *Spiderman* or *Batman* movies, which are on the one hand childish and cartoonish but also universal and democratic. While the Pop Society can indeed be tribal and preliterate, it can also be totemic and unifying. Where people are talking about movies, TV, fashion and music they are less likely to be disagreeing over religion, politics and ethnicity.

Warhol's love of television was at least partly due to its democratizing effects. As he once wryly put it "[y]ou can be watching TV and see Coca Cola and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good." (Warhol 1975, 100) A colleague of mine who is a very good (and a very successful) sociologist once responded to this quote by asking me to replace "Coke" with "Cadillac" to gauge the real accuracy of what Warhol was saying. I replied that it wasn't

so much accuracy that Warhol was after as sensibility: while our society isn't so perfectly democratic as Warhol (only semi-seriously) implies, neither is lacking a Cadillac as dire as my good friend the sociologist would have it.

To understand this is to be able revisit the apocalyptic views on celebrity culture and the mass media offered by the critical perspective with an eye toward their benefits as as unifying events and solidaristic phenomena. Alexander, for example, asserts that "celebrities are among the most powerful icons of our times" and Currid, in *The Warhol Economy*, argues for the significance of celebrities in terms of the "increasing visibility and commodification of creative individuals," i.e., the celebration of nonconformity and unconventional lifestyles and ideas as well as the celebrity as a conduit for creativity in terms of the widespread public display of fashion and style: "There is a reason why US Weekly, People and other celebrity-centric magazines devote whole sections to what celebrities are wearing, and where to buy it." (Currid 2007, 141/142) Celebrities are often cultural "gatekeepers," Currid argues, and create "a direct line between creative producers, gatekeepers, and consumers." (Currid 2007, 143) Currid uses the example of pop singer Jessica Simpson who "is not a fashion editor at Vogue, but there are thousands of women who follow her style religiously and run to Barney's to buy the jeans she has been photographed wearing." Where the cultural critic will cite Currid's example as an example of a "herd mentality," the point is that jeans are an iconic pleasure that are one of the happy benefits of mass culture and that the "religious" character here is one of communion and affirmation (the primal pleasure inherent in a simple commodity) rather than a judgment upon one's taste or I.Q. scores. Not everything, as the critical sociologist often seems to assume, has the gravity of decisions fated to undermine the fate and fabric of human destiny.

And it is this positive element of religion that Durkheim feels is so fundamental to the idea of society united through its common culture and representations. The "cultic" dimension that academics and intellectuals often deride and see as so threatening is in fact at the heart of a society's meaning and motivation: "Joyous confidence, then, rather than terror or oppression, is at the root of totemism." (Durkheim 2001[1915], 169) In the 1966 *Newsweek* article, Pop is described as "anything that is imaginative, nonserious, rebellious, new or nostalgic: anything basically fun." (Benchley 1966, 56). Could sociology's inability to recognize the positive dimension of the Pop Society be the result of its lack of humor? Sociologists certainly possess a sense of humor but sociology, largely, does not. One is reminded of art critic Harold Rosenberg's charge that sociologists too often indulged in a tragic view of the people and phenomenon they studied such as the "disguises" worn by residents in a small town community study while ignoring the fact that comedy is a dimension of reality, too, including the fact that the sociologist "has been caught in the comedy of sociology with *its* disguises," among them the idea that the sociologist can actually say anything meaningful with methodologies that are essentially "a way of computing human activities as if they were wind velocities or traffic over a fish ladder." (Rosenberg 1973, 151) Instead of concerning itself almost exclusively with the conformity of Pop culture, as sociology almost relentlessly does, perhaps it should be a little more concerned about the conformity within sociology that can only perceive such a robust and multidimensional dimension of society like Pop

Society in so one-dimensional a way.

The "religiosity" of consumption and celebrity, then, are merely subsidiary divisions of the larger "religiosity" of representation itself: "Let a man capture its imagination and seem to embody its principal aspirations as well as the means to fulfill them," Durkheim writes in Chapter 7 of the EFRL, "and this man will be set apart and considered nearly divine." (Durkheim 2001[1915], 160). Andy Warhol is a story told by society, particularly American society. In his "sacred" and in his "profane" representations he exemplifies what is both good and bad about America. Indeed, as journalist and art professor Dave Hickey writes: "Andy Warhol is the most American of artists and the most artistic of Americans....So *American* was Warhol, in fact, that he is virtually invisible to us. We look at him and knowing little of ourselves, learn little of Warhol because he *was* us in all of our innocence, ambition, and insecurity -- a hard working democrat, a churchgoer and businessman, a social climber, empire builder and inveterate consumer." (Hickey 2005, 49)

Conclusion: The Creative Dimensions of the Pop Society

To ignore the creativity and imagination of the Pop Society, then, is to ignore an important dimension of ourselves as a culture since there are few things that American culture does better than Pop. It, too, denies the fact that creativity and imagination are not merely categories of taste, i.e., found only in "high" culture, but are dimensions of all social reality, Durkheim had a high regard for the imaginative capacity of society, asserting that it "wields a creative power that no palpable being can equal" for "we observe society constantly creating new and sacred things" (Durkheim 2001[1915], 342/160). Although sociologists are not typically enamored of what is either "new" or "sacred," the work of Alexander and Currid promise a more comprehensive and sympathetic understanding of this vital dimension of society. Sociologists often make it their work to find the profane in what is sacred but perhaps we should follow the injunction of Mircea Eliade to try and also find what is sacred in what is perceived as profane. If sociologists often lack the will to examine the creative dimensions of the Pop Society, they do not lack the traditions to do so. Where we can see the Durkheimian tradition at work in Alexander's cultural sociology, we can also appreciate Warhol and Pop in terms of a Parsonian emphasis on evolution and "adaptive upgrading": the advent of the Pop Society, for example, has seen a huge democratization of art and the art world where before Warhol it was a much more restricted and particularistic sphere. Pop has made art more universalistic. Moreover, in the interactionist and microsociological tradition, Warhol can be seen as a "performer" par excellence. Indeed, many would argue that it was Warhol's performance of "Andy Warhol" that was his greatest work of art. Rather than being victimized by the media, Warhol was a study in how to cultivate one's image and retain power over the media: "He understood the media brilliantly and he showed how to use them before they used you by consciously developing an image." (Harron 2003[1980], 376). In all of these ways and others, Warhol and Pop represent an important, if underappreciated, part of the American imagination. One way of developing this understanding further is to apply new theoretical insights and these require drawing on classical models such as that of Durkheim and applying them in

innovative ways. While Durkheim's "religious" conception of creativity and imagination could most easily be applied to the Abstract Expressionist movement in art which preceded Pop, with its mystical character, its Jungian influences and its self-proclaimed search for meaning, by considering the seemingly less "spiritual" realm of Pop we can see that while the manifestations differ, what is constant is the imagination. Nearly a half century since its first appearance, Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can continues to stare back at us, reminding us that in the Pop Society, icons and iconicity are part of who we are, collectively and personally. And even if what they represent to us is the vacuousness of the Pop Society itself, they still compel us to reflect and to imagine. For, as the poet Wallace Stevens once put it, "The absence of the imagination had/Itself to be imagined." (Stevens 1990, 382).

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