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STUDYING AND TEACHING POPULAR CULTURE *

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In view of the relatively recent recognition of popular
culture as a possible concern for American and English Studies,
it comes as no surprise that a methodology for dealing with pop-
ular culture is only gradually emerging. Underlying the uncer-
tainty about how to approach the newly-discovered media is a
continuing and yet unresolved discussion of their role within
society. Much of what I have to offer in this introductory sur-
vey of where the discipline stands will therefore center around
the crucial question of why popular culture should be studied
and taught at all. In my opinion, it is this question with which
all practical considerations necessarily have to start, since
our prevailing assumptions about the function of popular culture
are the key to all further teaching practice. Our ways of deal-
ing with popular culture in class clearly depend on what we wish
to point out with it. Whatever use it is that we want to make of
popular culture educationally will determine the material we use
and the practical advice we need. It is, consequently, more than
a matter of merely academic importance to deal with a few con-
tending approaches towards popular culture. This paper begins by
discussing three of the most commonly held attitudes - together
with the practical consequences for teaching which they contain.
A second part presents some observations on what I consider to
be shortcomings of these approaches. The paper will conclude
with a few suggestions about dealing with the subject in class
and by sketching possibilities of obtaining material for class
use. The practical usefulness of the paper will be increased, I
hope, by a bibliography which contains introductory references
to all the important media.

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* Vortrag gehalten im Rahmen eines Fortbildungsseminars für
Englischlehrer, das vom 10.2. - 12.2.1975 vom Berliner
Amerika-Haus in Verbindung mit dem Senator für Schulwesen
durchgeführt wurde.

Let us begin by defining terms. Usually, the category "pop-
ular culture" is used to mean those cultural phenomena that are
"widely diffused, generally accepted, approved by the majority"
of the lower and middle classes.[1] On the other hand, popular
culture was often regarded with hostility by the cultural elite
on either aesthetic or political grounds and to some extent this
attitude still persists today. The increasing cultural influence
of popular culture was experienced as a threat to their own val-
ues. The term "mass culture," often used interchangeably with
"popular culture," carried the connotation of an inarticulate
mob which prefers primitive sensations and thrills. By critical
sociologists and conservative literary critics alike, although
for opposite reasons, popular culture was commonly regarded as
dangerous trash whose influence was to be feared.

For a long time, this fear of political and cultural decay
remained the prevailing cultural attitude among an influential
segment of educational professionals. Although many of their
apocalyptic visions seem obsolete today and are no longer ten-
able in the light of more recent research, it would be too easy
to merely ridicule this attitude in retrospect. Many of the cul-
tural pessimists, notably those of the Frankfurt School, were
guided by a genuine concern about the loss of democratic values.
Originally, under the immediate impact of the rise of Fascism
and Stalinism and in view of the propagandistic use which those
two movements made of culture, it made perfect sense to be
afraid of the enormous cultural impact of popular culture. It is
not so much the fact that dangers of popular culture exist which
has to be questioned today but the crucial social role which was
assigned to them, as if our political future were to depend ex-
clusively on what was being done against the mass media.

If our guiding question "What is the use of teaching popular
culture?" is put to those who fear that the assault of popular
culture may lead to the unconditional surrender of critical fac-
ulties and subsequently to the downfall of our social order, the
answer is plain indeed: there is no use whatsoever, only danger.
The practical consequence of this attitude for teaching has been
to keep popular culture out of the class room completely. The

idea has been to bring students into as much contact as possible
with the first-rate in art and literature in order to provide
them with standards "against which the offerings of the mass
media will appear cut down to size."[2] Although not as prominent
today as in the fifties and sixties, this traditional answer to
the challenge of popular culture is not necessarily outdated.
Until recently, no self-respecting English or American Studies
department would include the study of popular culture within its
curriculum. At best, popular culture was believed to be light
entertainment and nothing more. At worst, it was considered a
damaging and dehumanizing influence which should be ignored at
all cost.

Such a strategy of ignoring popular culture has one basic
drawback: it does not work. Most certainly it achieves nothing in
countering the danger believed to be at hand. The contrary might
be true. The resistance of students to works of art and their
lack of interest in them should not be considered as mere igno-
rance on their part. It also reveals that many of the classical
expressions of culture no longer correspond to their own social
and psychological reality. Popular culture, on the other hand,
often does. As a result, education as an official agent of socia-
lization has to compete continually with such unofficial, but
nevertheless influential socializing influences as the media. If
popular culture continues to be ignored, it is anybody's guess
whose position will be further weakened. In the United States
    the average American between his second and his sixty-fifth
    year spends three thousand entire days, almost nine years of
    his life, watching television; by the time the average five-
    year-old enters kindergarten, he has spent more time before
    the family television set than the average college student
    has spent in classrooms over a four-year span.[3]
These figures underline how powerful a socializing agent - at
least in terms of sheer quantity - popular culture has become.
It is, moreover, a development which should be of special inter-
est to those who are concerned with teaching American Studies,
since a disproportionally high amount of that material has been
produced in the United States - so much, in fact, that for a time
the rise of popular culture seemed synonymous with what used to
be called the Americanization of culture. To be sure, popular

culture is one of the areas in which students are most decisively influenced by American culture. So obvious is this fact that of all the possible reactions the attitude of ignoring the increasing cultural significance of the popular media is clearly by far the least desirable strategy. Without falling prey to overly enthusiastic expectations and without claiming any priority for the subject-matter, one should therefore insist on the necessity of dealing with popular culture within the broader field of American Culture Studies. The socializing influence of the popular media must be recognized as a cultural reality. Popular culture has become socially and culturally too all-pervasive to be ignored either in research or in teaching.

In recognition of this development, the approach towards popular culture has gradually begun to change since the forties and fifties. Especially in the past ten years, a significant shift in the attitude of academics has taken place. Partly, it may be explained by the increased sophistication and vitality which some of the new media have gradually assumed: Russel B. Nye's reliance on eye-catching examples in his "Introduction to a Discussion of Popular Culture" is indicative of this influence of a new type of popular culture:

> People who know Beethoven and Bartok listen to the Beatles. Time and Newsweek and Leonard Bernstein have approved California and Liverpool rock...Peanuts is written about by theologians and philosophers; there are articles on Marvel Comics and horror movies; John Lennon and Leonard Cohen are studied the way graduate students used to study Eliot and Pound... painters use soup cans and highway signs and hamburgers. Clearly, things are not what they used to be.[4]

Partly, it was this kind of enthusiastic discovery of aesthetically pleasing popular material which led to the emergence of a new discipline within the American Studies movement, called Popular Culture Studies. At the same time, a scholarly society, the Popular Culture Association, was established. Its official publication, the Journal of Popular Culture, is published four times a year, and in addition two specialized journals of popular music and on popular film have appeared.

In his essay Nye runs through a number of possible explanations for this new wave of interest:

> ...I think we are seeing the results of having lived for two generations with mass culture. We are not afraid of it any more, and we know how to find meaning and value in it. The dire predictions of the thirties and forties about the social disintegration and cultural decay that would inevitably follow movies, radio, comic strips, television, and jazz have simply not come true. The Canadian National Film Board calculates (and the figures no doubt hold true for the United States) that today's average 18-year-old has seen 500 feature films and 15,000 hours of television, plus heaven knows how many commercials, advertisements, comics, or hours of disc-jockey music he has heard on his transistor. Yet he seems to be able to handle it with considerable sophistication and to respond to it in a number of interesting, subtle, and imaginative ways. We have lived for three-quarters of a century with mass culture, and we are culturally no worse off than before; in fact, there is reason to believe we may be better off. [5]

Nye's rather impressionist assessment of the effects of mass communication has found some solid scientific support in the results of mass media research. On the whole, this research has revealed serious limitations in the old concept of society as composed of a naive mass which is easily manipulated. Although it has been realized that the undefined aggressiveness of disturbed children can be given shape by popular culture, social scientists have found that audiences resist manipulation in ways not previously suspected. Generally speaking, popular culture is

> more likely to reinforce the existing opinion of its audience than it is to change such opinions...People tend to expose themselves selectively to communication in accord with their existing views and to avoid exposure to unsympathetic communications.

If they cannot avoid it, they "often distort its meaning so as to bring it into accord with their own existing views." In other words, audiences tend to perceive what they want to see or believe and they do not look at what they don't like. They also "tend selectively to retain sympathetic material better than unsympathetic material...Predispositions which reflect norms of groups to which the audience member belongs" and which are consequently relevant to his social identity, "seem especially resistant to change..."[6]

However valid Nye's observations may be, his argument is obviously a defensive one. It does not help to answer the question why popular culture should be studied at all. If this question

is put to the new popular culture movement, the most common response is usually an enthusiastic reference to the newly discovered aesthetic qualities of popular culture. The following passage by Robert Warshow manages to express this attitude quite adequately:

> And it must be that I go to the movies for the same reason that the "others" go: because I am attracted to Humphrey Bogart or Shelley Winters or Greta Garbo; because I require the absorbing immediacy of the screen; because in some way I take all that nonsense seriously. For I must make one confession: I have seen a great many bad movies, and I know when a movie is bad, but I have rarely been bored at the movies; and when I have been bored, it has usually been at a "good" movie. [7]

These lines were published in 1952 - in a book appropriately entitled The Immediate Experience. Very likely, the experience Warshow talked about was not meant to embrace all of popular culture in total. His reference to typical cult actors such as Humphrey Bogart and Greta Garbo supports this impression. What he tried to argue against, and justly so, was the general dismissal of the whole medium of film simply because it had been categorized as one of the "popular arts." Yet in the sixties, Warshow's title assumed a new significance. It pointed to the specific aesthetic criteria of sensual intensity and immediacy which were rediscovered by the youth movement of the sixties in the new media. Where teachers, especially those belonging to the younger generation which grew up with popular culture, have shared this experience, their teaching has come dangerously close to merely celebrating the newer media by "rapping" about films or bringing records to school and listening to them in class. Because students who might be difficult to motivate otherwise have responded sympathetically or even enthusiastically, the mere introduction of popular culture material into class has glibly been described as "revitalizing the English classroom." [8]

To a certain, but limited extent, the discovery of the aesthetic values of popular culture has had a healthy and liberating impact. It has led to many revaluations and rediscoveries. It has also shaped our awareness of how relative and timely our aesthetic judgments can occasionally be. What we believe to be

inherently and ever-lastingly good may soon lose its significance for the next generation. Critics suddenly remembered that the novel itself - today a highly respected part of high culture - started out as a strictly middle-brow phenomenon. As Raymond Williams has reminded us, it is only now that the bad novels of the past are out of print and the good ones are among our classics, that the novel itself has become an art form. [9]

Such insights may have a certain usefulness in paving the way for an inclusion of the newer media in cultural studies. On the other hand, they are in constant danger of achieving this by a questionable intellectualization of popular culture, as pointed out by Serge Denisoff:

> students still treat the "high cult" aspects of popular culture. English professors who did venture past the safe moorings of Shakespeare and Marlowe quickly used their training to do similar analyses to Lennon, McCartney, and especially Bob Dylan. All the while ignoring the likes of The Monkees, Led Zeppelin, and numerous other popular bands. In the visual arts, films such as Easy Rider, Joe, Clockwork Orange, and M*A S*H have generated pages of analyses. Films of wider appeal, such as those by John Wayne, the Disney studios, receive little attention. [10]

Occasionally, this trend has led to remarkably ludicrous results - especially when the new pop music was celebrated in glowing terms:

> America's single greatest contribution to the world has been her Pop...
> ...So shove over, Norman Mailer, Edward Albee, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Lowell - make room for the Electric Prunes. [11]

For a critically balanced understanding it is obviously not sufficient to deal with a few examples of popular culture which might be appreciated aesthetically. Much, in fact most, of the daily-consumed popular culture which is highly standardized and stereotyped is clearly left out by such a principally apologetic approach, and it would be a poor kind of education indeed that would uncritically accept this type of entertainment as nothing but immediate experience.

Such considerations have led to a third characteristic approach towards popular culture. In contrast to the two attitudes mentioned before, it is not primarily concerned with the aes-

thetic qualities of popular culture but with the social role it plays. There can hardly be any doubt that many socially hazardous value orientations and models of behavior are constantly put forward by popular culture. Social problems, if mentioned at all, are often explained in exclusively individual terms. Minorities, women, and national characters seem doomed to a stereotyped existence. One obvious example which may concern a German observer especially is the image of Germans in parts of American popular culture where they still appear as unsympathetic heavies shouting "Heil Hitler" with a guttural German accent. As has been pointed out numerous times by now, popular culture often carries many dubious value implications, such as "Love will solve all problems," "War is an exciting adventure," or "The good life is the consumer's life."[12] We may conclude that what superficially appears as "mere" entertainment has a negative social function in distorting reality and in reinforcing stereotypes.

The obvious implication for school and university curricula, then, is not to ignore popular culture, but instead to deal with it extensively, to point out where reality is distorted and to correct stereotypes where necessary. Such an approach would also have to include a description of the ways in which popular culture is produced and distributed. Undoubtedly, this type of critical analysis can claim to be the most socially responsible of the three attitudes described. However, this should not keep us from acknowledging a few of the shortcomings it can easily assume whenever it is reduced to an approach which looks for nothing else but stereotypes and examples of distorted reality. To begin with, there is the danger of being certain, in advance, that the images of minorities and women, for example, are stereotyped, which in turn can leave me quite helpless in analyzing material where this is not the case. In exclusively focusing on recurrent stereotypes one can also easily fail to perceive other value implications. American television and, above all, the film industry of the late sixties and early seventies have rapidly reacted to this type of criticism and in many of their offerings they have

succeeded in eliminating well-known stereotypes. They have even managed to appear more 'realistic.' Nevertheless, this has hardly changed the basic value orientations of their productions; it has just provided them with new forms of expression. Fictions, in other words, cannot be appropriately dealt with solely by measuring them against reality. The basic confusion in that attempt lies in the mechanical equation of fantasy-oriented material with a distorted view of reality: the assumption that "realistic" material is by definition useful, fantasy-oriented material is not.

However, it is not sufficient to analyze popular culture only in terms of how realistically it has presented life and then expect the student to reject all unrealistic material. Most likely, he will not do that, nor am I convinced that he should do it. Very likely, he would only develop a double standard between 'official' school-opinion and leisure time behavior - something, by the way, which the critical teacher may have developed already. Although the student may realize that a Western movie or a detective story distorts reality, he may still be drawn to it for reasons which have to be sought in his daily reality and in the function of aesthetic phenomena in general. What such a critical approach to the media often fails to realize is that, although popular culture may not be realistic on the surface, it is nevertheless closely connected with the social and psychological reality of the audience. While one should be careful not to celebrate popular culture uncritically as mere 'voice of the people,' the question remains what it is essentially, in terms of human needs and purposes, which sustains popular culture.

Let me give one example. In a study of lower-class Americans, Herbert J. Gans has pointed out some interesting aspects of media use.[13] He asserts that the members of the community he studied accept themes that mirror their own values and reject other offerings:

> The choice of media content is restricted to a few
> favorite types of programs and these differ between
> the sexes. Among the men, the favorite movies or

television programs are those which contain "action" - the mysteries, adventure stories, and westerns that emphasize plot and minimize dialogue.

The value of Gans' observations lies in his connection between this preference and the social position of the audience member: "The action story usually centers on the adventures of a hero - the epitome of maleness - fighting and conquering the forces of evil." Very often, he is a tough and handsome man who is proud of his virility and dresses well.

While his class background is usually not defined, many of the norms and methods he uses to produce social benefits and to achieve personal success are those of the working-class culture.

Action programs, then, are popular because in a specific sense they are closely related to the lives of the people who view them. Since the male of the lower class sees himself at the bottom of the social structure, since he can only provide modest wages, his status as man and provider of the family is constantly threatened. As a result, he is in constant need of reassurance of his maleness, and the tough hero who fights his way through a hostile world with his physical strength and his bare hands reflects those qualities which he needs most in his daily work. Thus, seeing the hero succeed provides him with a deep satisfaction and a reaffirmation of those skills and values on which his own identity is based.

This model can be applied to all popular culture, if not to all culture. The values may be different, but it is always the same process of reaffirming basic social and psychological needs which are connected with our socialization and - through it - with the larger social structure in which socialization takes place. This may serve to explain why our understanding of how people react to the media cannot simply be based on expectations of 'rational' attitudes. The values and attitudes reaffirmed by popular culture are not accidental, nor are they the result of a conscious conspiracy or manipulation of the industry, although the industry certainly does not hesitate to financially exploit the needs created in the socialization process. Consequently, it would be of little use, for instance, trying to persuade a lower class male to drop his idea of male-

ness, as long as his own daily reality continually asks for such an attitude. At the same time, this type of maleness can be reaffirmed in many different ways, and this is where teaching popular culture assumes a most important function.

None of the attitudes sketched here are completely unfounded, yet all of them, I feel, need to be modified. The difficulty, then, in dealing with popular culture lies in decoding it critically in view of the reality it presents and yet trying to understand why this view of reality appeals to the audience or the student. To be sure, such an approach faces a basic dilemma: it has to acknowledge that there is nothing wrong with watching fantasy-oriented detective stories on television, and yet this should not keep us from having a closer look at how such a need for fantasy is served by the media. On the one hand, therefore, it should not simply denounce stereotyped value orientations, on the other hand, it should also enable the student to recognize that these models are not "natural," self-evident forms of social interaction and help him to develop a critical distance toward the specific presentations of certain values. Such an insight could then perhaps be used for a socially productive reflection on how the audience's value orientations might be confirmed differently.

The most promising models developed for educational practice on the basis of such considerations are those which lead the student to self-experience[14] - for example, by encouraging the student to produce his own comics, his own song lyrics or shot scripts. Such models may lead to a self-awareness of the basic values the student himself expects to be reaffirmed by the media. It may also lead to interesting discrepancies between what the student wants to see confirmed and how the media serve that need. Such models are especially appropriate for students up to the age of fourteen and sixteen who have not yet established a conscious attitude toward the media. Interesting starting points are provided by English text books, once one realizes that the stories in these books are typical, although relatively tame, examples of popular culture. They should therefore be treated not only as sources of vocabulary but also

as descriptions of desirable attitudes and values (father sits
in his chair smoking his pipe, mother does the dishes in the
kitchen, etc.). What problems are depicted, what solutions are
offered? What are the social roles assigned to the various ages,
ethnic groups, and sexes? One way to cast doubt on the seeming-
ly self-evident is to ask the students to rewrite the stories
and in doing so, to reverse roles (or, another possibility, lo-
cations). Later the rewritten stories can be presented to an-
other class which will then be confronted with the unusual and
unexpected. Another helpful device for using the principle of
self-experience for insights is to have a student tell his ver-
sion of a text, program, or film. If it is a text, he may be
asked to tell what each character looks like and what the pre-
dominant traits of his personality are. In each case, a few of
his basic value orientations will be revealed, and the contend-
ing images of the students might then be discussed. Somewhere
around the age of fourteen and sixteen the attitude towards pop-
ular culture becomes more self-conscious and enables a more
articulate approach. For example, the student at that age will
already identify with a certain cultural area such as popular
music. He may already look down on other forms of cultural ex-
pression, so that a confrontation of value orientations can be
provoked by asking him to justify his own media preferences and
to criticize those he dislikes. In doing this, he may discover
that much of what he criticizes in other forms of popular cul-
ture can also be found in the one he likes.

Let me conclude by dealing briefly with the question of
obtaining materials for teaching popular culture. Especially
for the teaching of English, it is a most difficult problem
which has not been solved to our satisfaction so far. Just be-
cause popular culture seems to be all around us, nobody thinks
of collecting it. For the study of popular writing, a first
and extensive anthology has been published which is useful for
school purposes.[15] There have also been three or four paper-
back re-editions of a few Horatio Alger stories (at about $2
a copy) which I think are worthwhile to purchase as school
texts because of the centrality of the rags-to-riches theme for

an understanding of American culture. Detective and science
fiction stories do, of course, present no special problem of
material. Dealing with popular music is quite attractive for
certain age groups and you will most likely have no problems in
motivating them to bring their records. Yet, if you want to do
more than just listen, an anthology of lyrics is indispensable.
The bibliography mentions three of them, of which the anthology
on blues is in many respects the most useful. Rock lyrics can
be a very mixed blessing, sometimes even a source of despair.
Either, as in the cases of Bob Dylan or many of the Beatles
songs, they are as inaccessible to students as much of modern
poetry is, or they are so trivial that one could use them in
kindergarten. It is useful in dealing with the phenomenon of
popular music to buy one of the leading trade papers, such as
Melody Maker or Rolling Stone, and to analyze pictures, inter-
views, and record reviews in order to grasp the social connota-
tion of the music.

As for comics, it is probably most advisable to reproduce
copies from existing collections. The best solution for present-
ing film and television seems to be the video-system, if there
is one available at your school. To obtain a copy of a film
through regular distributors is far too expensive for school
use. It might be possible to arrange a showing through the
Amerika-Haus, yet experience in teaching popular culture has
shown that it is hardly satisfactory to base the discussion of
visual material on the impressions gained through only one
screening.[16] If a video-system is used and the school is in the
vicinity of the American sector, you might be able to tape Amer-
ican programs through AFTV. A quite ambitious project would be
a comparison of German and American television or at least a
comparison of certain types of programs (such as Tatort and
American detective series). A little less ambitious, but still
of project-size, would be an analysis and comparison of radio
programs, such as BFBS, AFN, and SFB, focusing on the program
structure, the prevalent types of programs, and analyzing pop-
ular program preferences. Such an analysis could also be used
for a critical comparison of our government-controlled media

and the purely commercially-oriented American media - an example
of how the study of popular culture can contribute to the pri-
mary goal of Popular Culture Studies in the teaching of English:
the understanding and critical evaluation of American culture
and society through its most widely distributed fictions.

Footnotes

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[2]Denys Thompson. "Introduction" to Discrimination and Popular
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[3]Russel B. Nye. The Unembarrassed Muse. The Popular Arts in
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[5]Ibid., 1034.

[6]Joseph T. Klapper. The Effects of Mass Communication. New
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[7]Robert Warshow. The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics,
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[10]R. Serge Denisoff. "A Short Note on Studying Popular Culture,"
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[11]Richard Goldstein, ed. The Poetry of Rock. New York: Ban-
tam, 1969, p. xii, 1f.

[2]cf. Ruth Inglis. "The Social Role of the Screen," in:
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[3]Herbert J. Gans. The Urban Villagers. Group and Class in the
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[4]cf. Gerhard Büttenbender / Christian Rittelmeyer. "Selbster-
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1973, pp. 31-100. Although primarily concerned with political
education, many of its practical suggestions can be transferred
to media education.

[15]Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan, eds. Popular Writing in Amer-
ica. New York, 1974. Materials can also be found in David
Burner, Robert D. Marcus and Jorj Tilson, eds. America Through
the Looking Glass. A Historical Reader in Popular Culture,
2 vols. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974.

[16]Recently a new series has offered shot-by-shot breakdowns of
famous American films, among them John Ford's Stagecoach,
Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, John Huston's The Maltese Falcon,
Michael Curtiz' Casablanca, Buster Keaton's The General and
Billy Wilder's Ninotchka: The Film Classics Library, New York.
Frame blow-up photos are shown sequentially and are coupled
with the complete dialogue of the film. Issued as paperback
editions, they are surprisingly cheap (less than 20 DM per
copy). In addition, editions of screenplays or recreated sce-
narios of films appear continually, but unsystematically. Of
well-known current films there are versions available of
Easy Rider, New York: Signet Books, 1969,
American Graffiti, New York: Ballantine Books, 1973, and
Nashville, New York: Bantam Books, 1976,
all in very cheap paperback editions.

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